

# WAY STATION TO HELL

By Johnston McCulley



**They all warned Jeff Carvick that a piano-player, here, was a sure candidate for a coffin, for Hank Larch took special pleasure in shooting down piano-players!**

**A**T THE CREST of the grade, Walt Simms, the veteran reinsman, stopped the stagecoach to give his four horses a blowing spell. Bert Vernon, the shotgun guard who rode beside Walt on the box, told the passengers they had time to stretch their legs.

Only three passengers were riding the stage this trip—a middle-aged rancher and his wife, and Jeff Carvick. The latter was a stranger to the driver and guard; all Simms and Vernon knew of him was his name on the passenger list.

The two on the box eyed Carvick as he stood near the horses and looked across

the timbered canyon with its floor of jagged boulders. They decided he was about thirty. He was tall and slender and white-faced. He wore a black suit with a Prince Albert coat, a white shirt and black string tie. His boots were of good leather and highly polished, and his broad-brimmed black hat sat at a jaunty angle on his head and revealed curly black hair. He also wore yellow chamois gloves.

Simms and Vernon eyed each other. Simms winked and pointed ahead to where the land was level at the mouth of a wild valley which sloped down to a tumbling stream.

"There she is—Thunder Gulch!" Simms announced, so Carvick could hear easily. "A way station on the road to hell! Mines up the canyon; big ranches in the valley; loggin' operations in the woods, and a small sawmill in camp. The worst miners and cowpokes, and the toughest loggin' and timber men in the state, all mixed together in Thunder Gulch. A way station to hell—and sometimes hell itself."

Simms discharged a stream of tobacco juice over the wheel, wiped his thick lips with the back of his left hand, eyed Vernon again and then glanced at Carvick.

"A gent like him," he whispered to Vernon, "will get himself skinned alive in Thunder Gulch. What you reckon is his main aim in life?"

"One look at him tells that," the guard whispered in reply. "Look at his clothes, and the gloves he's wearin'. He's a tinhorn gambler. Them clothes are a uniform for such; the gloves keep his white hands smooth for clever card-dealin'."

"You're prob'ly right," Simms agreed.

He gathered the reins, and Vernon called, and the passengers got into the stage. Simms released the long foot-brake, and the four horses gathered themselves, sprang forward at his word of command; the stagecoach lurched and teetered on its thoroughbraces as the horses drew it around a curve, then down a gentle slope toward the camp of Thunder Gulch.

"This camp is gettin' tougher daily," Simms said to Vernon. "A dull day when there ain't a cuttin' or shootin'. The sheriff's marked the place off his office map at the county seat, so he can pretend there ain't any such camp."

"This dude gambler we're carryin' may think he's slick," Vernon suggested. "One hour in Thunder Gulch, and he'll decide he ain't nothin' but a babe in a den of hungry wolves."

"He won't last more'n five minutes

after Hank Larch gets a sight of him," the reinsman declared.

JEFF CARVICK watched the passing scenery through a window of the coach. He did not attempt conversation with the rancher and his wife. His black eyes, the sort to emit darting venomous glances, were at the moment expressionless. He was traveling light; his only luggage was a carpetbag in the stage boot.

As they neared the camp, the horses put on a burst of speed, as if they could smell the stable. Carvick was viewing Thunder Gulch as the stage rolled toward it, wondering if he was looking at what was to be the scene of his death. Along a curve of the tumbling stream were cabins of logs and stones. A small sawmill was on the bank of the stream, with a boom of logs anchored in front of it. The street was lined with the usual business establishments.

Carvick knew something of the place. The mining claims up in the gulch were rich in free gold, owned by men who worked them and spent dust and nuggets in the camp. The two big ranches had large bunkhouse crews of hard-living men. The logging camps back in the forest boasted tough crews; and the sawmill workers were the kind to use calked boots on a fallen foe.

The stage stopped in front of the principal store, also the postoffice. The rancher got out and helped his wife alight, and Jeff followed; he waited to claim his carpetbag.

He glanced up and down the street at the buildings and the people who crowded the plank walks, listened to the chorus of raucous and strident voices, the hysterical laughter of a woman in the dance hall, the drunken bellow of a man in a saloon, the discordant music of a tinpan piano coming

from somewhere.

"You're a stranger hereabouts, huh?" Walt Simms asked Carvick as he handed him the carpetbag. "Just a tip—keep your eyes peeled and don't run afoul of a gent named Hank Larch. He's ornery."

"Why should I fear him particularly?" Carvick asked.

"Hank don't like dudes—or gamblers."

Carvick smiled and turned away. Simms almost shivered—it had been an ice-cold smile. And the black eyes above the smiling lips were keen and pinpointed—the eyes of a killer.

CARVICK ATTRACTED some attention as he got upon the plank walk and started through, the crowd. Down the street a short distance was the largest building in town. Over the entrance was a faded canvas sign which read: *Pleasure Palace*. It was a combination saloon, gambling den and dance hall. Carvick knew it was operated by a certain John Rennold.

The batwing doors of the saloon were fastened back, and the warm afternoon sun streamed into the place to mitigate the sour liquor odors and the reek of stale tobacco smoke. Carvick entered and went to the head of the bar. It was too early for the usual roistering crowd, but a score of men were in the place.

"Is Mr. Rennold around?" Carvick asked the barman.

The bartender thumbed a gesture. "Back room; knock hard."

Carrying his carpetbag, Carvick walked along the bar. Every man in the place watched him, speculating about his identity, character and intentions. Carvick knocked heavily on the door the bartender had indicated, and a man's gruff voice called to him to enter.

John Rennold, the proprietor of the resort, sat behind a battered oak desk—a

huge man roughly dressed, with a big hat on the back of his head and a fat cigar between his teeth. He gave Carvick a swift glance. "Well?" he asked.

"My name's Jeff Carvick. I'm looking for a job."

"Dealer?"

"If it's necessary; but I'm best as a piano player."

Rennold sat up straight, took his cigar from his mouth, and betrayed interest. "I could use a piano player in my dance hall: I'm fresh out of piano players just now."

"Your last one a boozer? I'm not." Carvick stated.

"I didn't fire the last one for boozin'. He was pretty good as a piano player; the girls said they could sing to his music easy. Hank Larch shot him."

"Drunken quarrel?" Carvick questioned.

"Not exactly. Larch is our tough man around here. He's a timber cruiser, half crazy from bein' alone so much out in the thick woods. For some reason, he's got a heavy dislike agin dudes and gamblers and piano players. I'm not a man to hide things, so I'm warnin' you. Larch should be back in camp in about three weeks. The way you're dressed—he might take a notion to pick a quarrel and plug you."

"I'll manage to get along somehow," Carvick told him.

"It's you and not me who'll be takin' an everlasting lease on a spot in Boothill," Rennold replied. "If you can play the piano well enough, I'll hire you. Keep out of sight when Larch comes into camp. He never stays long—makes out his report to the company and mails it, and goes out again to cruise more timber. The usual pay for you, and a room in the back of the buildin'. Free meals, and free drinks within reason. I've got three girls who sing."

"I'll play for them," Carvick said, "as

well as for the dancing.”

“Two of my singin’ girls—well, they’re the usual sort, bar girls who work on percentage when they ain’t singin’. The third singin’ girl is Annie Blaine. Maybe you’d better understand about her.”

“Tell me,” Carvick suggested.

“She’s a nice girl. Kept cabin for her widower father. He got killed in a sawmill accident last season, and left her nothin’ except the cabin and his week’s wages. She had to live, so I gave her a singin’ job. She sings some old-fashioned songs, the kind that make men cry into their beer.”

Carvick smiled. “I know the kind, and can play them.”

“All Annie does is sing; she doesn’t drink with men at the bar. Every decent man in camp would fight to protect her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Rennold.”

“She shouldn’t be here, but she hasn’t anywhere else to go. No relatives. Wouldn’t get along among strangers. I’ll take you into the dance hall now and listen to you play, and see what my singin’ girls think about it. If you suit them, you get the job.”

**C**ARVICK WENT with him. A few girls were at the bar trying to coax men to buy drinks, but there was no activity in the dance hall, reached through an arched doorway. Carvick sat at the piano, removed his gloves, flexed his fingers and tried the instrument. He flinched as he ran scales.

“Terrible piano, needs tuning,” he told Rennold.

“I know; just play it loud,” Rennold suggested.

Carvick played. The three singing girls drew near the piano, at one end of a rickety stage. They began humming as he played. Carvick asked for their favorite songs, and played them offhand.

Annie Blaine was a small girl who

looked as if she did not have any more spirit than a mouse. She was as much out of place in Rennold’s dance hall as it was possible for a person to be. She was timid at first, but smiled at Carvick shyly after he had talked to her and played some of her songs.

“You’ve got a job,” Rennold told Carvick, finally. “Hope you like it here; good piano players are hard to get in Thunder Gulch, and just as hard to keep.”

So it appeared that Jeff Carvick wore his chamois gloves not to keep his hands soft and sensitive for the clever manipulation of cards, but to keep them in condition for good piano playing.

When he was not playing for one of the girls to sing, or for dancing, he played haunting music that had been written by some old master. In his gambler-like attire, he sat on an old piano stool, bent slightly over the keyboard, half closed his eyes, and played.

**B**EFORE MANY days had passed, it was Annie Blaine who came whenever she could to lean against the piano and listen. She seldom spoke to him, but she gave Carvick a quick little smile at times as he finished playing something she liked particularly.

Annie, a lonesome girl who had known trouble and sorrow in her young life, seemed to have the feeling that Carvick was a kindred spirit. He never spoke to her of his personal affairs, but she got the idea he had his own troubles and sorrows, and felt akin to him for that reason.

Life in Thunder Gulch went on as usual. . . hard work; hard play; drunken quarrels; drinking and gambling and dancing, and other things not so pretty. There was an occasional shooting or cutting affray, and fist fights were common. It was nothing new for Carvick; he had seen the same in other towns and

camps.

Carvick kept aloof from others in the camp; he made no effort to develop friendships. He seemed to like little Annie better than any of the others, and she him—yet, between them was only a bond of sympathy that did not lead to words.

Rennold watched Carvick closely. At the end of the second week, as he was handing Carvick his pay, Rennold said: "I thought I could read and understand men a little, Jeff, but you've got me puzzled. What's a man like you doin' in a hell-hole like Thunder Gulch? Not that it's any of my business, and you can tell me so 'thout me gettin' mad."

"I'm waiting here because I think I can meet up with a certain man," Carvick explained. "I thought he might drift through here. I lost his trail a few months ago, but think I'm back on it again."

"Serious matter, Jeff?"

"Yes. I had a twin sister, Rennold. Our parents were dead, and we clung to each other, thought a lot of each other. No relatives in the world. She married a mining man and went to Arizona with him. Her husband was a good man. But the man I'm eager to meet . . . he picked a quarrel with my sister's husband and shot him down; he had friends around ready to swear my sister's husband had started to draw and that he shot in self defense."

"Tough," Rennold sympathized.

"The toughest part is that my sister grieved herself to death over it. That wrecked me, Rennold. I was on my way to becoming a concert pianist; I'd saved money and gone East to study. But I forgot all that and took his trail. I wanted to find the man and kill him. In my mind, he's guilty of double murder—my sister's husband, and my sister through the grief he caused her."

"I understand, Jeff. You never caught up with the man?"

"I caught up with him, and he laughed and put a bullet into my chest. I was a long time getting well and strong again. But finally I took up the trail again."

"What'll you do if you meet the man? You don't pack a gun."

"A gunbelt is an invitation for another man to start trouble."

"I see. You go unarmed so he doesn't dare shoot you down at sight, and work the self-defense dodge as he did before."

"You'll see what I mean if he shows up in Thunder Gulch," Carvick promised. "Meanwhile, I'm content to play your piano."

"And a good job you do of it. All the girls like you, Jeff. And I notice that Annie Blaine seems to have taken a special likin' to you."

"I've taken a liking to her, too. She's a fine girl who's had a smash in her life, like me; I don't wonder that all decent men in camp stand ready to fight to protect her."

Rennold's face clouded. "They have so far. But this Hank Larch I've told you about—he has his eyes on her; he pesters her whenever he's in camp. He's about due back from a trip into the woods, and I'll have Annie quit singin' and stay out of sight when Larch shows up. He swore he'd make her marry him when he got back from this trip."

"Surely that can be stopped."

"Yes, but maybe only after bad trouble. That reminds me, Jeff—you'd better keep out of sight also until Larch is over his home-comin' spree. He hates everybody who wears a clean shirt. Hates tin horns and piano players—"

"I'll try to take care of myself," Carvick replied.

"You do that. Don't know where I'd find another piano player if anything bad happened to you."

EARLY IN the afternoon three days later, a panting excited man rushed into the Pleasure Palace and stopped at the head of the bar. He was a miner from up the gulch, and bore news.

"Hank Larch is back from the woods!" he announced. "I saw him goin' into his cabin with his pack on his back. He'll take a hot bath and put on fresh clothes, then hit for the street to start his spree."

Carvick was lounging at the end of the bar talking to Rennold when the announcement was made. The news seemed to upset everybody. Some men slipped out and away immediately. The two bartenders looked worried, and Rennold frowned.

"Larch will prob'ly be on a rampage for a couple of days," Rennold said. "He always takes a hot bath, writes a report of the work he's done and mails it, then starts his wildness."

Carvick strolled through the archway and into the dance hall. The girls, except the hardened ones who got drink percentages at the bar and danced with any man who would spend money or dust, were looking frightened. Rennold followed Carvick into the dance hall and beckoned Annie Blaine.

"Don't go to your cabin, Annie, 'less there's a couple of the right men to guard you," Rennold warned her. "Go to the room behind mine, and stay in it. I'll see that you get grub. Keep out of sight until Larch is through with his spree."

"I—I'm not afraid." She glanced at Carvick.

"Perhaps it'll be best, Annie, for you to do as Mr. Rennold says," Carvick advised her.

"Whatever you say, Jeff. But—you?" she questioned, looking alarmed. "He may make trouble for you, Jeff. He hates piano players—"

"I'll take care of myself, Annie," Carvick interrupted.

As she turned to leave him, he strolled through another archway and into the big gambling room. A few men were playing poker. The other games were not running.

CARVICK saw Walt Simms watching one of the poker games, and beside the old reinsman stood Vernon, the shotgun guard. Carvick got them aside and spoke in low tones.

"Simms, you drive out early tomorrow morning as usual, don't you?" Carvick asked.

"That's right."

"Will there be room in the stage?"

Simms and Vernon exchanged swift glances.

"Plenty of room," Simms replied. "Only one passenger registered so far. We'll start about an hour after daylight. The road's bad, and we want to get on our way, so's not to miss the mail train at the county seat."

Carvick nodded and turned aside. He returned to the dance hall and stood at the piano, letting his fingers run over the keys. Annie came back to him.

"Jeff, I'm afraid—"

"Don't be afraid, Annie; you go to the room Rennold told you about, and stay there."

"If anything happened to you, Jeff—"

Carvick rested a hand on her shoulder and smiled at her. Then she hurried away. Carvick went back to the saloon room. It was quieter than usual there. He passed through a rear door and went to the room where he had been living.

An hour later, as he was stretched on his cot, he heard a sudden tumult. Through the open window came the roaring voice of a man singing with all his lung power. He heard boisterous laughter, wild

shouting in the saloon, bottles thumping the bar and glasses being smashed.

A little later he heard the shrill, half-hysterical laughter of some of the girls. Boots thumped the plank walks as men came into camp from their claims up the gulch, from the sawmill and in from the woods.

At the usual time, Carvick got up from the cot. He donned his Prince Albert coat, brushed his hair and adjusted his black string tie. He left his little room, closing the door behind him, yawned a couple of times and drank deeply of the pine-scented air. A moment later, he opened the rear door of the dance hall and entered it as usual.

A glance told him Annie Blaine was not there. But the other two singing girls were, and the rest of the girls were in the barroom earning their drink percentages. The eyes of the two singing girls bulged when they saw Carvick; they had thought he would keep out of sight.

**I**T WAS the usual hour for starting the entertainment in the dance hall. Carvick always began playing, a girl sang, and then he played dance music and men and girls strolled in from the bar for their fun. It cost a pinch of gold dust to have a long dance with one of the girls.

Carvick sat on the piano stool and fingered the keys in his usual manner, revealing no trace of nervousness. One of the girls approached him.

"Give me a chance, Jeff," she begged. "Let me sing first. Hank Larch always tosses money around when he comes in from the woods and starts his spree, and I could use some."

"All right. Sing first," Carvick said.

The girl went upon the stage, and Carvick began playing. She sang badly, but with power. Her voice penetrated the din in the barroom and seemed to bounce

back from the walls in chaotic echoes. A couple of the girls appeared, clinging to the arms of men they had snagged at the bar—the girls got a percentage of the dance money, too.

Carvick continued playing, and men and girls danced, and at intervals one of the other girls sang. And then, as he bent over the keyboard to start another dance number, he heard a raspy stentorian voice, and knew it was that of Hank Larch: "Everybody have fun! I wanna dance! Where's Annie? Where's my little sweetheart?"

"Annie? Oh—she's around somewhere," one of the girls hastened to tell him. "She may be here a little later. Come on and dance with me, Hank."

But Larch suddenly yelled: "Hey! What's all this?"

Instant quiet came to the room, except for nervous whimpering of a girl suddenly afraid. Carvick could hear boots shuffling as some of the men left the room. He began playing softly, waiting for the next girl to appear on the stage to sing.

"Sufferin' polecats! A tinhorn playin' the piano!" Larch yelled. "A little runt all dressed up fancy. Ain't he just too purty to live!"

Nobody else spoke. Carvick continued playing. A gun barked, a bullet plowed into the pine plank floor within a yard of Carvick's polished boots, a swirl of pungent smoke drifted across the room. Carvick had not flinched at the shot; he had been expecting it.

"On your feet, you piano-playin' skunk!" Larch yelled at Carvick. "Turn and face me, you pimply-faced rat! Get your hands up, and keep 'em there as you move!"

Somewhere near, one of the girls began whimpering again. Another ran out of the dance hall screaming. The men in the bar door seemed frozen there. Carvick

deliberately finished what he was playing, put his hands up even with his shoulders shifted his arms in the sleeves of his coat, whirled around on the piano stool and stood up. Hank Larch was not more than ten feet from him.

LARCH WAS tall and massive in body, a brute of a man. His heavy shoulders were hunched forward and his feet were planted far apart. His face was white where he had shaved off the whiskers he had grown in the woods while cruising timber. He had put on clean shirt and overalls, and his boots were greased. Carvick noticed all that in his first rapid glance.

The watchers were gulping, and their eyes were wide with anticipation. They expected a profane denunciation from Larch now, an attempt to get the piano player to make some slight move that could be construed as hostile by anyone with a flexible mind. Then Larch's gun would roar again, and Carvick be shot down.

The watchers saw Larch's eyes widen. His gun was gripped in his right hand as his arm hung at his side.

"So we meet again, Larch," Jeff Carvick said.

The voice was almost gentle. The watchers saw Larch's start of surprise. "You . . . you . . . Carvick . . ." Larch stammered.

"Yes, you murdering swine!" Carvick said, his voice tense now. "I finally got on your trail again, Larch. Why don't you raise your gun and shoot me?"

The watchers were wondering that. Carvick already had said more than they believed Larch would take from any man. 'But Larch seemed frozen; his gun hand did not move. Yet the watchers could see that his first shock of surprise was over, and that now rage was commencing to

suffuse his face.

"Why don't you murder me as you did my sister's husband?" Carvick continued. "Maybe you can get some of these men to swear afterward that I started to draw, and that you shot in self defense, as your friends swore the other time."

Larch's eyes narrowed and glittered, and his huge chest expanded as he inhaled slowly. He was nearing the explosion point, those who watched thought.

"My twin sister died of a broken heart, Larch," Carvick continued. "And when I called you to account, you put a bullet into my chest. Maybe you thought I'd die. But I didn't, Larch; I kept alive to take up your trail again. Why don't you finish the whole thing by shooting me now?"

Larch spoke for the first time. "You ain't got a gunbelt on; I can't shoot an unarmed man."

"You mean you couldn't yell afterward that it was self-defense?" Carvick was sneering at him now, like a man taunting another to fight. "And I couldn't kill you unless you made a bad move, Larch, for that'd be murder."

"Why did you follow me here?" Larch asked. "And since you did, why did you come at me 'thout a gun on?"

"I came here to kill you, Larch."

Hank Larch's eyelids flickered. "I reckon all these gents and girls heard you say that, Carvick—heard you threaten to kill me. 'Cordin' to law, I could shoot you down right now, since you said that."

"But you're afraid to raise your gun and shoot, Larch. That's it. Standing here like this, with my hands up, I've got you bluffed. You're afraid to shoot, Larch. You're a bully and a coward—"

"That's enough, Carvick! You threatened to kill me—"

Larch took a step forward and crouched. His eyes were ablaze now. His lower jaw was shaking with rage. The gun

he held flashed up. . . .

JEFF CARVICK sidestepped swiftly as Larch's gun blazed and roared. The bullet from it burned a lock of black hair from Carvick's head. Before the infuriated Larch could fire again, those who watched saw a move so swift they scarcely could explain it afterward.

Carvick dropped both his arms as Hank Larch started to lift his gun. From right and left sleeves of his Prince Albert coat two deadly little derringer pistols slipped down into his waiting hands.

His wrists flicked upward, and he fired a shot from each derringer. One bullet struck Larch in the breast and hurled him half way around by the force of its shock. The second tore through Larch's shoulder as he dropped his gun and started to fall to the floor.

Tense men expelled their pent-up breath in a chorus of gusts. Some of them started to surge forward. Holding the derringers, Carvick went swiftly the few feet intervening to stand over the prostrate man.

"If you can still hear. Larch, consider this. . . would I have come after you again without being prepared?" Carvick said. "I spent months learning that trick after I got over the gunshot wound you gave me, Larch. I've settled the score for my sister and her husband. You're come to the end of the trail of violence you've led through life."

Carvick turned away, and men bent over Larch, and one called for somebody

to get the camp sawbones, and another shook his head.

"No question about this bein' a case of self-defense," Walt Simms, the stage driver, was telling men near him. "Larch had his gun out and had been threatenin' and he shot first. Nobody's goin' to bother Mr. Carvick about this."

Carvick had hidden the derringers in the pockets of his coat, and was back at the piano. "Somebody please carry Larch out of here," he suggested. "Let's get on with the show. I'm paid by Mr. Rennold to play the piano here."

Four men prepared to carry the dying Hank Larch out of the room and the bar swamper came with bucket and mop to clean the floor as Carvick played on softly.

"One of you girls go and get Annie, so she can sing," he directed. "And you gentlemen—listen to her well. It's the last time she'll sing for you. She's leaving with me on the morning stage. We'll be married by a preacher at the county seat."

He began fingering the keys and playing softly again as he waited for Annie. In a corner of the room, Walt Simms touched Vernon's arm.

"Well, now!" Simms said. "Him hintin' about room on the mornin' stage—thought he was scared of Hank Larch and wanted to get outen the camp. We'll be witnesses to a weddin'. We shouldn't be surprised though. Anything can happen here. This is Thunder Gulch—way station on the road to hell. Maybe on the road to heaven, too, in this case."

Vernon grinned at him. "You're gettin' mushy," he accused.