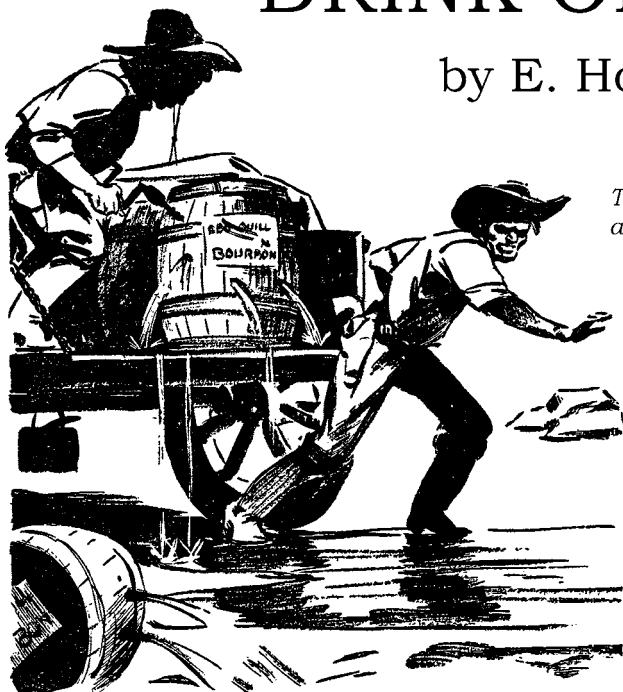
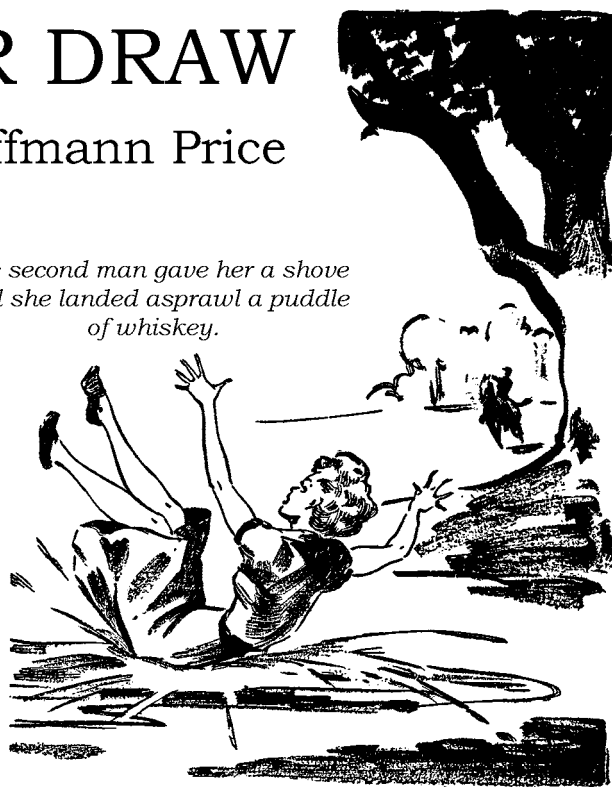


DRINK OR DRAW

by E. Hoffmann Price



The second man gave her a shove and she landed asprawl a puddle of whiskey.



The Stinking Springs region was the orneriest in Texas, but Simon Bolivar Grimes had a habit of sizing up the country – which had often kept him from being bushwhacked. Also if called upon, Simon could be as ornery as anybody from Montana to the Rio Grande

WEARINESS made Simon Bolivar Grimes' coffin-shaped face seem longer than ever. Spitting alkali dust, he muttered, "Another dang sign, DRINK RED QUILL BOURBON. Gosh, I wisht I was a hoss, they don't git thirsty for nothing but water."

Mile after mile along the wagon trail to Stinking Springs, Red Quill billboards had tantalized him by suggesting a bar, a free lunch counter, hard likker, and cool beer.

Some distance ahead, a freight wagon lumbered along. Instinctively, the kid from Georgia had sized up the country, a habit which had often kept him from being bushwhacked, and thus he noted a twinkle in the clump of post oak at the crest of a knoll. It was as though binoculars mirrored the blazing sun. Someone was spying on travelers.

The Stinking Springs region was the orneriest in Texas. Simon had a poke of gold pieces, the proceeds of the sale of some cow critters. If he were robbed, Uncle Jason would whale him with a wagon spoke; he'd claim that Grimes had spent the money on women and liquor.

"Dunno what in tunket else a man'd spend

money for," Grimes grumbled, as he pulled over to the whiskey sign.

Though the country was too open for ambush, nevertheless he wanted a look-see, so he peered through a knothole. "Ain't noticed me, they're still studying the wagon," he decided, as the flickering continued.

He had brought Uncle Jason's binoculars in his saddle bags. Grimes had barely focused the powerful glasses for a bit of counter espionage when two riders came pelting out of the clump of post oak, their guns blazing.

The wagon pulled up. The men dismounted. They tore into the tarpaulin at the back, exposing a cargo of barrels. A sharp faced man came toward them from the wagon. He was unarmed, and he made gestures, as if begging them to be reasonable.

One of the raiders smacked him with a pistol barrel, knocking him down.

The taller of the pair, who had a brace and bitt, began drilling at the keg. By now Grimes had read the lettering on the head: OLD VICKERY BOURBON, NELSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY.

THEN a girl, apparently having remained on the driver's seat until indignation overcame her alarm, came racing toward the tail gate. She was blonde, golden blonde like a palomino filly. She bounded toward the man with the brace and bitt, and caught his arm.

He spat, grinned, thrust her aside. She recovered and smacked him. The other yanked her away; she tripped, landing asprawl in a puddle of whiskey. Liquor drenched her blouse and skirt.

Whatever was behind this insane business of letting whiskey run into the dust, Grimes decided that when people began slapping old men, and girls, it was time to investigate. He mounted up and raced for the wagon. And then came the final horror: one of the ruffians touched a match to the whiskey, and flames began to lick the tarpaulin.

At the sound of his approach, the two whirled about, but seeing just one rider, they hooked their thumbs on their belts and waited. And when Grimes dismounted, they began to grin.

He looked as if he were about to fall over his own feet. Tall, gangling, with a straw colored cowlick reaching down to his china-blue eye, he did not look any too bright.

"What in tarnation you mean, burning good liquor?" he demanded. "And mauling that there lady?"

They chuckled tolerantly. The one with the brace and bitt explained, "Ain't allowed to haul nothing into Stinking Springs but Red Quill, bub. That's Colonel Delevan's orders. And we carry them out."

The other was rolling a smoke, and his amusement at Grimes was competing with his interest in the blonde, who wept in futile fury as *she* straightened her drenched garments. The old man, still dazed, was struggling to his feet. And all this, was too much for Grimes.

"Hist 'em!" he commanded, and went for his guns.

The man with the brace and bitt yelled, The other dropped hid Durham and slapped leather. He was quick, but his Colt had not half cleared the holster when Grimes drilled him between the eyes.

Though the man with the brace and bitt made good time, his first shot went wild; and then, shifting, Grimes sprayed him with lead. He jerked one more shot, kicking up rocks. He lurched, fell across his gun.

The girl's scream made Grimes whirl. "Oh,

they hit dad!"

The old man was clutching his side. "Ain't nothing, Melba, never you mind me, you help this young feller put out the fire."

Then he sat down.

SO GRIMES and Melba got blankets and whipped out the flames. That done, she gave him strips torn from her skirt, so that he could stop the flow of whiskey while he whittled plugs.

The old freighter said, "I'm mighty grateful, son. I'm Amos Hanford, and this here is my daughter, Melba. Baby, you get the jug for this gent, don't you fuss with me, I ain't more'n scratched."

Grimes started to protest, but Hanford's glance silenced him. As the girl hurried to the front of the wagon, the freighter said, "I don't feel none too spry, but it's no use scaring her, I can turn around and go back to Cold Deck instead of trying to get to a doctor in Stinking Springs; I'd probably get murdered there."

"Not if I go with you," Grimes countered.

"Bub, I never seen a draw like youn and never heard of any like it," Hanford countered. "Fust one gets it betwixt the eyes, and the second musta had most of his heart shot out with them three slugs. But whilst you're watching me, who'd watch the whiskey?"

"Gosh, that's right," Grimes agreed.

Melba came back with the jug. Grimes hoisted a long one. "Is this here what you got in them kegs?"

"It is. You have jest drunk OLD VICKERY," Hanford said, proudly. "The Finest Bourbon made at Bourbon Springs, Kentucky, ever since 1833. Drink up, suh!"

Grimes hoisted another. Melba, who had impulsively put an arm around his shoulders, became more beautiful than ever. Her voice sounded like angels playing harps, and even the landscape was no longer repulsive. "This is sure larruping whiskey," Grimes said, and wiped his lips. "Anywhere but a downright warped and perverted town, it'd be welcomed with —"

And then, he saw that Hanford had fooled him as well as Melba. Grimes caught the old man just in time. "Honey, it looks like that chaw of tobacco he stuffed into that wound ain't plugging it enough."

"Oh, why did you have to start shooting?" she cried, panic again gripping her. "I'd rather lose all

the liquor in the world—”

Grimes tipped the jug and gave Hanford a swig.

“M’am, they was banging away at me, and it is downright unreasonable, blaming me for someone else’s bad shooting. If you can prod them oxen, I’ll make your pappy comfortable and do what I can.”

“Oh, what can *you* do?”

“He’s jest weak, he’ll come outen it. And as soon as your pappy’s took care of, I’m going to run Red Quill and Colonel Delevan out of that ornery town, and when I’m through, they’ll be drinking Old Vickery in every bar in Stinking Springs.

“Baby,” Hanford said to his daughter, “I’m all right, and Simon looks like the man that can do it.”

CHAPTER II

Recipe 309

STINKING SPRINGS got its name from the hot Sulphur spring which made the air reek with a rotten egg bouquet; and the town itself, a sprawl of frame shacks and dobes centering about a plaza, looked pretty much like it smelled. Grimes dismounted at the Cozy Corner Saloon, which was between the Eldorado Hotel and Wing Lee’s Restaurant.

Bellying up to the bar, he called for whiskey. The sour-faced barkeep set out a bottle of Red Quill. The stuff made Grimes choke and cough. “Gosh, this here tastes like soldering acid and sheep dip, ain’t you got any good liquor?”

“Son,” the professor retorted, “there ain’t no other kind sold in this man’s town. Look-ee here, bad liquor makes you shiver like a dog swallowing peach seeds; this here just sort of chokes you a bit.”

The half dozen cowpokes who were watching, looked as if this was an old and amusing story to them. One said, “Stranger, it ain’t no use belly-aching about Red Quill. Mrs. Hopkins, she’s a widow-woman, and the daughter of the Injun fighter that saved the hull dang settlement from the Comanches, and all she’s got to live on is dividends from Red Quill shares, and there ain’t a man in town low enough to drink any other kind of likker.”

This was bad. While one might outpoint Colonel Delevan, the widowed daughter of a local

hero was something else. Grimes bought a round for the house, and went out, muttering, “Hell, they are all heroes in this town, I’d ruther fight a passel of Comanches than a bottle of that rot-gut.” Once on the board walk, he decided to head for Wing Lee’s; the only civilized person in Stinking Springs would be the Chinaman. And then he saw that even this ornery town had its good points.

A redheaded girl was stepping out of Lem Bigg’s General Store with an armful of packages cuddled against her bosom. She was an exquisite creature, slim-legged as a race horse; she wore silk stockings and store clothes. The group of small boys who sat on the curbing playing stud poker and chewing tobacco quit their game and stopped cursing. They chorused, “Evening, Mis’ Hopkins.”

The smile and voice which acknowledged the greeting were smooth and lovely, and as heart-warming as Old Vickery. For a moment, Grimes forgot that Doreen Hopkins, the Red Quill heiress, was a stumbling block in the pathway of good liquor.

She tick-tacked along on high heels which flattered her trim ankles, but a knothole in the tricky boardwalk played the devil with her alluring footgear. She snagged a heel. Her stride broke, and her ankle twisted.

Grimes lunged. Eggs poured from one of the paper bags, but he got an armful of the widow, and managed to keep her clear of the uncooked omelette and coffee on the boards.

Regretfully, he let her slide to her feet as he straightened up. Then, as she clung to him for a moment to steady herself, he asked, “You ain’t sprained your ankle, I hope?”

“Thanks, no!”. After the full impact of dazzling smile and greenish gray eyes, he helped her salvage the groceries, and stow them in the rubber-tired buggy. Doreen waved, smile, drove down the dusty street. No dang wonder that Colonel Delevan was looking out for her interests!

Grimes stepped into Wing Lee’s restaurant, ordered a steak, six eggs, and a slab of apple pie, and settled down to studying it out. Finally he asked, “Wing, can you get me a couple. empty whiskey bottles with the labels washed off?”

“Catchee quick,” the pigtailed proprietor said, and shuffled to the rear.

DARKNESS had fallen. After wiping the egg from his chin, Grimes went to the hitching

rack, and got his jug. Then, back in the restaurant, he said, "Look here, folks tell me that all Chinamen are honest fellows."

"Thass light, Clistian Chinaman, watchee want now?"

Grimes stepped into the kitchen. As he filled the bottles, whose Red Quill labels had been soaked off, he said, "You keep what's left in the jug, don't tell no one, and I'll give you five bucks."

"My savvee plenty, Missee Glime. Allee-time, lynch whiskey sell-man, allee time thlow blicks in my window. Town no damn' good."

Wing chuckled gleefully. Grimes demanded, "What in tunket is so funny about getting bricks flung through your window?"

"I gettee even, I spit in coffee."

"Someone oughta spit in their whiskey. Wing, have a drink."

He offered one of the quarts. The Chinaman poured a shot into a tiny teacup, and downed it. "Vellee nice. You take dlink, Missee Glime. *Ng ka pay*, China whiskey.

He dug out a stone jug and poured a shot of reddish and syrupy liquor. The stuff tasted like kerosene and orange shellac. It was almost as bad as Red Quill. But Grimes, having met the only civilized man in Stinking Springs, downed it and said, "Mighty good."

Wing wagged his head. "You velly nice man. Evly-one else thlowee locks when I give *Ng ka pay*."

"How long ago was this?"

"Mebbe-so five, ten yeah."

That was odd. Today, they drank something worse, and didn't even blink.

"Wing, who hauls whiskey to town? Where do they keep it? Who dishes it out to the saloons?"

"Wagon tlain bling-ee Led Quill. Keep-ee in big house by jail. Ev-ly-body catch-ee whiskey flom Colonel Delevan."

"How about Mrs. Hopkins?"

"Velly nice lady. Colonel Delevan fix-ee all business, him savvee plenty."

Grimes went back to the Cozy Corner Saloon, after taking his horse to the livery stable. The same bunch of cowpunchers were playing poker in the corner. They dropped their cards, and eyed him as he went to the bar.

Grimes said, "Belly up, gents! I'm buying!"

There was a whoop and a jingle of spurs. The sour-faced professor set out glasses and Red Quill.

Grimes pulled a quart from his hip pocket. "Gents," he said, and slapped a gold piece on the bar, "I'm buying the local likker. Only, I am gal-danged if I can drink the stuff, try some of this."

He filled the glasses with Old Vickery.

The cowpunchers blinked, eyed each other; one said, "Stranger, you're violating a local ordinance, Colonel Delevan had the mayor pass a law agin foreign liquor."

"Ain't I paid for Red Quill? Ain't I doing right by the widder-woman?"

"Pardner, that's gospel."

They thrust out their grimy paws to grab the glasses.

The swinging doors slammed open. A stern voice shook the house: "Drop that, right now!"

Two men had entered. The foremost wore a star. He had a sawed off shotgun leveled at the group. The man beside him was tall, distinguished; slouch hat, frock coat, a pique vest, and flowing tie; drooping mustaches, and a neatly trimmed beard, an Imperial, perfectly tailored. And just for emphasis, he had a Colt .45 pointed at Grimes.

THE looked as if he could shoot. Grimes demanded, "What's this, suh, breaking into some sociable drinking?"

"I am Colonel Delevan," the man in the frock coat answered. "And my companion with the shotgun is Mr. Frost, the marshal. Selling liquor – without a license –"

"I am giving it away."

The colonel fingered his silky beard. "Ha! That also is in violation of a city ordinance. Giving or selling, or causing to be given away or sold, without first having it tested for wholesomeness and purity, is a violation of the law. Mr. Frost, be pleased to seize the evidence. Young man –"

Grimes shouted, "This here is good whiskey, the finest dang whiskey I ever drunk, that Red Quill is sheepdip, it's poison, it ain't fit for human consumption."

"If you were not a beardless boy," the colonel retorted, "I would challenge you to a duel. Mrs. Hopkins, the daughter of a local hero, sponsors Red Quill."

Mr. Frost seized the bottle of Old Vickery. Grimes saw no chance of shooting it out; and as Amos Hanford had observed, shooting a customer doesn't improve sales.

Late that night, Grimes decided to get to the bottom of things. If everything else failed, he'd set



Grimes lunged, and eggs poured from the paper bag. But he managed to get an armful of the widow.

the Red Quill warehouse afire.

"Arson," he told himself, "is genrully agin the law, but this here is an extenuating circumstance, every time you take a drink of that stuff, it's committing arson on your gizzard."

Wing's description made it easy for him to find the warehouse. The place was of dobe, thick walled, with small windows high up and barred. Ceiling beams projected far out, and supported the eaves whose overhang kept the rains from cutting into the dobe. Grimes had brought his lariat; it was simple enough, roping the end of a ceiling beam. Then, in the gloom at the rear of the dobe, he went up, hand over hand, and in a moment, he was on the roof.

As he had expected, this was of clay tamped over bundles of cottonwood saplings which had been laid athwart the massive ceiling beams. Such a roof, unless constantly maintained, deteriorates, and this one had been neglected; thus Grimes had less work than he had anticipated. He found a patch of bare saplings, and very quickly worked them right and left, until he could, being lean and lanky, wriggle through.

His lariat, let down into the whiskey-scented darkness, was as good as a portable stairway. In a moment, Grimes was down in the stockroom.

He struck a match, lighted a candle stump, and with hat and bandanna, shaded the flame. Along the wall furthest from the door was a row of barrels which were marked "proof spirits." On a table was a plane, some paint, and a stencil which read, "RED QUILL BOURBON." There were several empties, freshly stenciled. But what most interested Grimes was the cabinet in the corner.

There he found a bucket of stewed prunes, some one-pound plugs of chewing tobacco, and a jug of wine vinegar. Also, there was a pail of beef blood. Hanging from a nail was a paper bound book entitled, AMERICAN BARTENDER'S GUIDE. A glance at this last item confirmed his suspicions; he read, "To one hundred gallons of proof spirit, add four ounces of pear oil, two ounces of pelargonic ether, thirteen drachms oil of wintergreen, and one gallon of wine vinegar; color with burnt sugar."

But what prodded Grimes to a high *fury was "Recipe 309; Bead for Liquor. For every ten gallons of spirit, add forty drops sulphuric acid and sixty drops of olive oil previously mixed in a glass vessel."*

"There ain't no Red Quill Distillery," he said

to himself. "There ain't any likker hauled to Stinking Springs. That sculpin makes it right here, outen chemicals and acids."

Such being the case, how could the daughter of a local hero be dependent on dividends from Red Quill shares? Instead of setting the warehouse afire, it would be far better to expose the fraud, and drive Red Quill forever from the market.

CHAPTER III *A Risk To Be Taken*

THERE was a lot of excitement in Stinking Springs when two horses came into town without riders. Grimes, going from bar to bar, drank Red Quill and listened to the news. Dusty and Pecos, gunslingers protecting the whiskey market, had heard that a rash freighter was heading for Stinking Springs, and they had gone to meet him.

And now this.

Most of the population galloped out to investigate. They found, after chasing away the buzzards, enough odds and ends to identify beyond any doubt, the remains of Dusty and Pecos.

Thereafter, when Colonel Delevan appeared in public, he had Buckshot Frost at his heels. Grimes, barging into a saloon, caught a snatch of conversation: "That long lanky galoot that don't look like he had sense enough to come in outen the rain...."

Silence. Dripping silence. Then the boys began whooping it up again. They could not believe that he had cut down the two gunslingers, and yet, there was something odd about it all. So Grimes began to cat-walk about town. People were wondering about his protests on the whiskey question.

Stinking Springs got another sensation when a shapely blonde came driving down the main street in a rattling buggy. She looked sweet and helpless. Her somber mourning accented the pallor of her face, and the pale gilt of her lovely hair. Grimes, sitting with the hotel lobby wall at his back, heard her say to the cowpoke who carried her carpet-bag, "Thank you so much! Never mind the things in the buggy, it's just a sewing machine, would you mind taking the rig to the livery stable?"

She signed the register. Then, to the clerk, "Oh, what is that *horrible* smell?"

Grimes chimed in, "M'am, that there is Red

Quill Bourbon.”

The girl was Melba Hanford. Her dainty nose rose a degree or two, and she sniffed. The clerk said, “M’am, that there is the hot sulphur spring, it ain’t bad when you get used to it.”

THE hours dragged. Grimes watched Melba come down the stairs, and sweep past him, head high. He watched her return from the restaurant. He heard the muttered speculations of the cowpunchers who lounged on the board walk.

“Widder-woman... Sure looks like a lady... proud as a queen... hell no, she ain’t fixing to work in the dance hall, not that gal...”

That night, Grimes went to bed with his boots on. But the real novelty was that he did not sleep. He was on edge, alert, and at the first faint scratch at the panel, he was on his feet. Just for luck, he had a gun ready.

Melba edged in when he opened the door. “Simon, it’s the craziest thing, I nearly died when I came to town, with everyone eyeing me.”

“How’s your pappy?”

“He’ll pull through, though I hated to leave him. What have you found out?”

Once Melba had found the settee in the darkness, he seated himself on the floor at her feet. “Honey, it’s thissaway —”

He told her everything, and concluded, “The hull dang town’s against us, I’d figgered a gal like you might have a chanct pertending you was a orphan or widder, but that there Doreen Hopkins is mighty purty for a old woman dang nigh thirty; these jaspers worship the ground she walks on, account her pappy, and I fest don’t know what to do next.”

“You mean, if you did prove that Red Quill is just chemicals and acids, you’d be casting reflections on a hero’s daughter, and that would not help us?”

“Correct, honey.” Grimes sighed gustily. “But there’s suthin salty about it all. That Mis’ Hopkins looks like a honest woman. She don’t look like the kind that’d have cowpunchers drinking sheep dip and soldering acid and sech-like. This here Red Quill musta once been fitten to drink, account they nearly lynched Wing Lee for offering them *ng ka pay* on Chinese New Year.

“And this Colonel Delevan, you call on him, tearful-like, and whilst he’s listening to you sobbing, I’ll sort of make a *pasear* around the house, he’s a bachelor.”

THE following evening, Grimes lurked in the shelter of a weeping willow until Melba drove up to Colonel Delevan’s big white house. He came from cover when the colonel went to admit his lovely visitor.

“Good evening, m’am. What is your pleasure, Miss Hanford? You had scarcely arrived in town when I took the liberty of ah... inquiring at the hotel.”

“You’re very kind, colonel. I hardly know where to begin —

Grimes crept to the window. Delevan was stamping down the hallway and bawling, “You, Tomas! Paca! Where are you?”

The only answer was echoes; then, returning, he said to Melba, “I had hoped to have one of the servants offer you refreshments, m’am, but the scoundrels have, so to speak, folded their tents like the Arabs. But I make a very tolerable mint julep.”

Grimes grinned. Delevan had merely made a loud show of assuring Melba that they could have a cozy chat. And when he went to the rear to prepare juleps, Grimes tapped gently at the window, and whispered, “Do your best, and if he gits familiar, I’ll pistol-whip him.”

Delevan lost surprisingly little time in coming back with a silver bowl and tall glasses.

Melba said, hesitantly, “Colonel, I hope I don’t seem rude, but I don’t drink strong liquor. I might take a sip of Madeira, though I really shouldn’t —” She dabbed her eyes with a lace edged handkerchief. “Not so soon — after — poor father’s death.”

As he poured Bourbon, and added sprigs of mint to garnish his tall glass, Delevan said, solicitously, “M’am, it was all too evident from your mourning — ahem, if you’ll forgive my saying so, it is most becoming — you remind me of the late Mrs. Delevan, when her distinguished father passed away.”

He sighed gustily. “I am a very lonesome man, and have been, for many years, now. Pray accept my heartfelt sympathy, m’am, for I also have been bereaved.”

The man was magnetic. Grimes’ trigger finger began to itch. He said to himself, “That goat-bearded sculp-in’s got a routine for widder-women and orphans, I low he ain’t ever asked Mis’ Hopkins to marry him, not with them notions for preying on bereaved gals.”

The colonel was on the sofa beside Melba. He barely touched her further shoulder with his

fingertips; he was waiting for her grief to get out of control before he offered consolation.

"You're so kind, colonel. I almost hate to bring up a matter of business —"

"Consider me your servant, m'am."

"It's about — *whiskey*."

"Whiskey, m'am?"

The lovely blonde head inclined in a nod. "My poor father, practically ruined by railroad competition, was freighting a number of barrels of OLD VICKERY BOURBON into new territory, and — and —"

Her voice broke. He patted her shoulder. Melba went on, "Bandits — road agents — held us up. There were two of them — I begged him not to resist — but he fought like a lion — he killed them both — but his wounds — he succumbed, and here I am, trying to sell — that whiskey — and I've been told — that nothing but Red Quill is allowed in Stinking Springs."

"They gave me to understand, Colonel Delevan, that you are a stockholder in the Red Quill distillery, and that this ban on other liquors is to — well — protect your interests."

SHE eyed him reproachfully; but the colonel's glance did not waver. "M'am, I have been put into a false position. Pray let me convince you. The truth is, I am protecting the interests of a widow, the daughter of that gallant hero, the late Cyrus Barlow."

Melba rose. "Colonel Delevan, it is not gallant to put the blame on a widow!"

The colonel's face became red. "Madam, I have been put in a false light! I shall challenge the dastard who put me in such false light! Pray let me convince you."

The colonel stalked out, and in a moment came back with a tin box which he unlocked. He took from it various papers, and began, "M'am, this should convince you that years ago, as a gesture of gratitude, I conveyed to Mrs. Hopkins' gallant father every share of my Red Quill whiskey stock."

"I know so little about business —" Melba wavered, her knees buckled; she would have fallen had he not caught her. "Oh — I'm sorry — I'm dizzy — I think I'm about to faint —"

The colonel scooped her up in his arms. "Let me make you comfortable in the late Mrs. Delevan's room — there are some smelling salts —"

Melba protested feebly, but the masterful

colonel insisted that nothing was too much trouble. And he had barely started up the stairs when Grimes tiptoed into the living room.

Melba's voice filtered down from the upper darkness: "Oh, colonel, I'm so confused and worried and lonely ... I don't know whom to believe ... I'll be all right in a moment —"

Grimes scooped up the papers. The first one seemed to bear out Delevan's contention, but as he riffled his way through the file, Grimes found a letter of earlier date, on the stationery of the Red Quill Distilleries. The colonel's thousand shares were to be assessed \$5 each, and in return he would get one thousand new shares. Grimes muttered, "Participating preferred, gosh it sounds worsen the time Uncle Jason got hornswoggled outen that mine in Arizony."

Another paper: a notice of bankruptcy, dated a year after the assessment. Grimes, listening to the murmuring upstairs, was assured that Melba was holding her own. Delevan, while a scheming scoundrel, was in his own way a gentleman. And so Grimes hurried out to make a move which neither he nor Melba had planned.

There wasn't and there had not been any Red Quill whiskey for some years, except in Stinking Springs. Bit by bit, Delevan had cut the stock of Bourbon, so that the local cowpunchers had gradually become accustomed to rotgut bearing the label of a once drinkable brand. And he had used Doreen Hopkins as a front.

Exposing Doreen as a crook would be tough work. It might end in an all around shooting scrape which would not help the sale of Old Vickery. But Grimes had to risk it.

CHAPTER IV

Challenge!

WHEN Doreen Hopkins came to the door, the lamplight put a flame-gold halo about her red hair; it played tricks with her white robe, which had been made out of an embroidered Chinese shawl.

"I rarely have visitors — if I'd been expecting you —"

"M'am you look scrumptious thatta-way. And if you ain't too busy with your embroidering, I'd admire to talk business with you."

He thumped a buckskin poke of gold pieces into the heap of embroidery silk. "It's about your

pappy's Red Quill shares. The Old Vickery Distillery craves to buy your interest and good will."

"It's paid such splendid dividends, I'd have to consult Colonel Delevan. He's advised me ever since father died."

"How many shares you got?"

She shrugged. "Good heaven, I don't know! But wait a moment."

When she returned, she had a thousand-share certificate made out in her father's name. The date was prior to the dates of the letters announcing the assessments. Grimes, scrutinizing the late hero's name, saw what only a keen eye could have noted: there had been an erasure, and *Cyrus Barlow* had been written, letters widely spaced, in the space once occupied by, as a good guess, *Worthington Delevan*.

"M'am, when'd you know your pappy had it?"

"Colonel Delevan found it among father's papers, after the estate was settled. I guess it hadn't paid dividends for some time, but soon after the colonel found it, I began getting checks, in my own name, he said he'd written the company that I'd inherited the stock."

Grimes picked up the poke of gold. "Thank you kindly, m'am, but that there certificate ain't wuth the paper it's printed on."

"How can you say that?" she flared up, "when the dividends have kept me in comfort? I'd never believed you to be a slicker, trying to cheat a widow out of her legacy, trying to tell me it's worthless, so I'd accept an absurd offer."

"Ma'am," he persisted, "there ain't no distillery, it's jest a fraud Colonel Delevan's worked up to palm off pizen likker on poor, honest cowpunchers, keeping good whiskey like Old Vickery out of town. I come here to see you account of a orphan lady whose pappy was, shot down by gun-slingers the colonel sent out to keep him from bringing honest Bourbon into Stinking Springs. "If you got any conscience, let it guide you, m'am."

"You wait till I get dressed, I'll see if you dare repeat that statement to Colonel Delevan!"

That was just what Grimes wanted. Catching Colonel Delevan consoling Melba would drive a wedge into Doreen's trust and admiration. Hearing Melba's story of her father's death would finish the job.

"That there stock is wuthless," he repeated.

"It's been keeping me in comfort!"

"What you mean is, Colonel Delevan's been keeping you in comfort," Grimes retorted.

"You dare say such a thing!"

She slapped him, one-two-three. And as he recoiled before her stinging blows, he tried to amplify the statement she had interrupted. "M'am, what I meant —"

THEN the door slammed open. Colonel Delevan, with several peculiar and long scratches on his handsome face, stamped into the room. "I heard my name bandied about, and fortunately I did not enter until I heard the atrocious reflection you cast on Mrs. Hopkins! Please stand aside, m'am, do not sully your hands, I'll shoot him down like a dog!"

Grimes yelled, "Go for your guns when this lady's outen the way. Or keep your hands in sight whilst I tell you what I was aiming to say when she started slapping my teeth loose!"

"That vicious slander can't be explained! Doreen —"

Then Doreen, who now clung to Grimes with both arms, cried over her shoulder, "Colonel Delevan, I am surprised that you would want a gun fight in my house! Need I remind you of the light in which that would put me?"

Delevan bowed. "M'am, my indignation made me forget myself. Mr. Grimes, if you have any manhood left, you will not precipitate a shooting array in this house."

"I'm agreeable."

Flushed and breathless, Doreen broke away.

Grimes went on, "M'am, what I was starting to say wasn't a reflection on you, if'n I'd said all of it."

"Silence!" the colonel thundered. "My seconds will wait on you. We shall arrange this so that I can demand satisfaction, and without any slurs on a lady's name. Your remarks, made in several bars, casting aspersions on the integrity of Red Quill Bourbon, are ample cause. Good evening, sir."

On his return to the hotel, Melba was waiting for Grimes in the door — way of her room. "I couldn't help it, darling," she said, "but I simply had to claw him cross-eyed, the old reprobate!"

"And then he come over to the widder-woman's house, and we had words.

"Melba's eyes narrowed. "Simon, someone has been clawing *your* face," she said, coldly. "Am

I to understand that you were making love to that middle-aged creature.”

“Honey, when I kiss ’em, they don’t kick and claw.”

Melba rose. “You do take things for granted! I didn’t claw or slap you, did I, which makes me – oh, get out! You and your fool ideas, putting me in such a humiliating position.”

She flung herself face down on the sofa and began to sob. When he patted her hair, she cried, “Get out, or I’ll scream!”

So he got.

HE WAS ready to shake the dust of Stinking Springs from his boots. “Every dang time I open my mouth, I put my mouth in it,” he muttered, as he stamped his way down the hall. “The gent that said silence is golden was speaking gospel.”

After having risked his life in a gun fight, after having defied an entire town, he’d been misunderstood by the very girl he was trying to help. And with an impending challenge, he could not run out.

That challenge would settle everything. Smoking out the colonel would only confirm Doreen’s grudge; Delevan’s cronies would continue making Red Quill, using the lovely widow as a front. One remark with an unintended double-meaning had killed his chance of appealing to the widow’s better nature. Then he remembered the bottle of Old Vickery which the marshal had seized for testing. He went down the backstairs and down the alley.

Half an hour afterward, when he had finished the rounds of the saloons, he went to the jailhouse, where the turnkey asked, “What you looking for?”

“Back up, pappy! I know jest where to find what I want.”

He walked to the door marked, “Town Marshal,” and kicked it open.

Frost jumped up. His sawed off shotgun was well out of reach. In one hand, he had the confiscated bottle, and judging from the level, he had been testing it. “Marshal, that there’s my likker, get your hooks offen it.”

Frost went for his belt gun; but the gesture froze before it was half completed. He was looking into the muzzle of Grime’s .45, and it was entirely beyond his imagining how such a thing could have happened. His color changed, and he raised his hands.

“Bub,” he stuttered, “that jest wasn’t possible.”

Grimes replaced the gun, and with a move little slower than his draw. “Marshal,” he said, softly, “what you seen don’t prove I can hit anything when I come out smoking, does it?”

“I ain’t craving proof. Look-ee here; your name’s Grimes?”

“I ain’t denying it.”

“I mean Simon Bolivar Grimes.”

“I ain’t saying I am, I ain’t saying I ain’t.”

“Help yourself to the whiskey.”

Grimes reached for the bottle. Edging about as a guard against surprises from the doorway, he took a quick snort. The gaping turnkey, who had seen the draw, made no effort at trickery.

“This here,” Grimes said, as he lowered the quart, “ain’t been tampered with. How you like it?”

“It’s sorta nice.”

“Get busy and drink.”

The marshal took a shot.

“When I say drink, I mean, drink deep.”

Another hefty one.

“Take more.”

“Bub, Colonel Delevan told me to save him some.”

“Drink or draw!”

Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle. Finally Frost said, still gulping, “Uh – um – I’ll get plumb plastered, hogging it down thissaway, and I’m a lawman, it ain’t right –”

“Come up,” Grimes commanded, “with a drink or with a gun.”

There was still an ounce left when the marshal fell forward on his face. Grimes handed the remainder to the turnkey. “Down it!” he commanded.

“I ain’t a drinking man, I ain’t touched a drop since –”

“Since how long?”

“Nigh unto seven year. When I start, I jest can’t stop, I dassent, so

I took a pledge.”

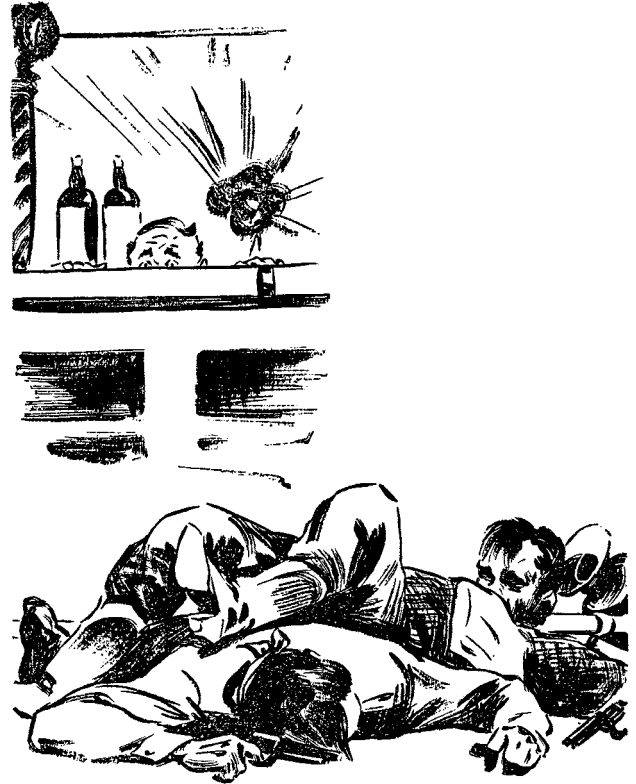
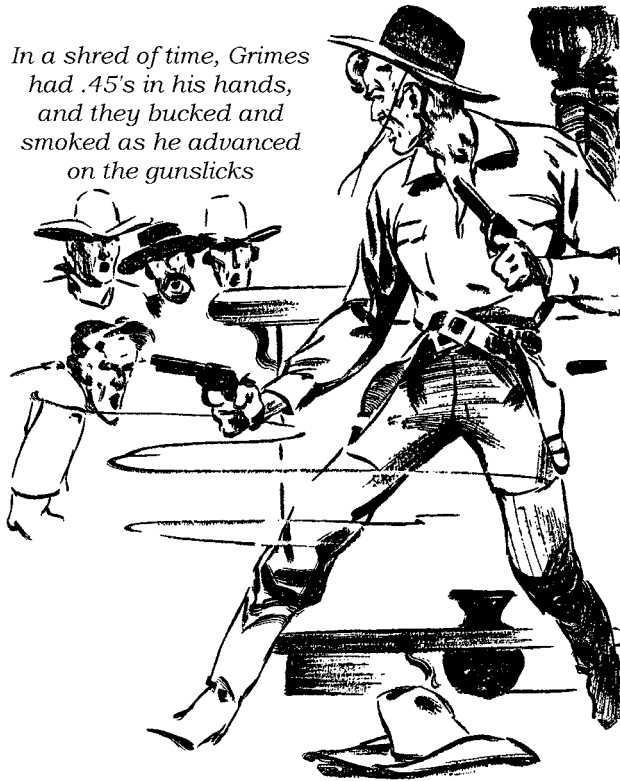
“You ain’t teched a drop for seven years? *Drink up!*”

Tremblingly, the turnkey obeyed. He licked his lips. He hitched his pants. He cocked his hat at a rakish, angle. “You went and done it! Now I’m a-going on a bender, I’ll be staying drunk for three-four weeks, and gosh, it’s going to be fun!”

“How’d it taste?”

“Finest Bourbon I ever wrapped around my

In a shred of time, Grimes had .45's in his hands, and they bucked and smoked as he advanced on the gunslicks



tonsils, and I been drinking, man and boy, for thirty year afore I took a pledge.”

He headed for the door. “Where you going?”

“Aiming to get dead-drunk quick as I can.”

“You ain’t going to like it, not if you ain’t used to Red Quill,” Grimes solemnly promised.

He went from bar to bar, to size things up before he forced some group” of cowpunchers to drink Old Vickery.

This would be his revenge, and let the results be what they might; since Melba had turned against him, nothing mattered.

PRESENTLY, he stepped into a place just as the turnkey, already roaring and stuttering, staggered to the street. Grimes could feel a difference between the guarded looks, which now searched him, and the open stares of only an hour previous.

The turnkey, it seemed, had babbled between drinks. When the tin piano’s jangle stopped, and the silence caught some speaker off guard, he heard, from a far corner, the voice of a man who had an instant earlier been talking against the jangling music: “— I’m betting he kilt Pecos and Dusty.”

Two men marched in, shoulder to shoulder. Both were hard cases. Their eyes restlessly covered

the entire saloon; though in home territory, instinct kept them on guard. One said, “Mr. Grimes, we are speaking direct to you for Colonel Delevan. Being as how you’re a stranger, you ain’t got seconds to repercent you.”

“That’s right, gents, I repercent myself.”

The spokesman went on, “The colonel challenges you to a duel, and wants to know whether you aim to fight, or get hoss-whipped outa town account of saying Red Quill ain’t fit for man or beast.”

Grimes set his quart bottle on the bar. “My compliments to Colonel Delevan, and say that I am tickled silly to fight. And is he game to let me pick the weepins?”

“On hoss or on foot, shooting or cutting. What style do you take?”

The whispered debates as to whether this was or was not the original Grimes had ceased. The answer seemed very loud: “Gents, tell the colonel that it’ll be drink and shoot.”

“What’s that? You aiming to be funny?”

“That’s up to the colonel. What I aim is a duel like Clay Allison fit with Wild Bill Hickok. I low the old marshal can explain.”

“Drink-and-shoot,” they muttered, still puzzled.

“Speaking of drinking,” Grimes went on, “this

here bottle is the only one in town with likker in it that's fitten to drink. Belly-up, gents."

"We ain't drinking with anyone that's insulted the – uh – tastes of Stinking Springs."

"You are drinking," Grimes asserted, "or I'll be taking my own answer to the colonel."

He held his hands well away from his sides. "Take your choice, gents, grab that bottle or slap leather."

The two exchanged a side glance. One said, "Slim, this fool is asking for trouble, and if we give it to him, there won't be anyone for the colonel to duel with."

SLIM went stubborn. He sidestepped toward the bar. "You suit yourself, Top Rail."

And Top Rail crossed from his pardner's right to get the bottle, passing in front of him. He was in no position to draw, and Slim was blocked. They had backed down, and they had covered themselves by saying that they had to save the victim for the colonel.

Or so it seemed to the cowpunchers in the corner, until guns blazed.

Slim, sidestepping from the bar as his pardner moved toward it, had drawn during the split second in which he was masked; but during that same shred of time, Grimes had gone for his .45s. They smoked and bucked as he advanced on the gun slicks.

Slim stumbled, tried to level his weapon again, but a third slug knocked him down. And Top Rail, whirling when he sensed that something had gone wrong with the whipsaw play, barely reached his holster.

His vest jerked three times from impacts before he doubled up, and dropped in a heap against the brass rail.

Grimes turned in his cloud of smoke, and faced the customers. "Gents, two agin one, and they aimed to whipsaw me. Anyone here see it any other way?" There was no answer. "Being as how Colonel Delevan's fust second and second second ain't talking, I'd admire to have someone tell him we'll fight a drink-and-shoot duel, unless he's leaving town."

He picked up the bottle, took a swig, set it down. "That there is real Bourbon, it ain't Red Quill rotgut. Help yourselves, gents."

Then he went to Wing Lee's restaurant. Half-emptied plates showed how the sound of gun fire had cleared the counter. And Wing Lee's face

showed that he was not surprised to see that Grimes, while waiting for half a dozen scrambled eggs, jacked expended cartridges first from one Colt, and then the other.

The Chinaman said, "You gettee flee-glub, Missee Glime."

"Slim and Top Rail used to throw rocks at you?"

"You savvee plenty."

Grimes could not positively assume that the dueling colonel, unable to back down in issuing his challenge, had planned for his seconds to settle the matter, yet the whipsaw trick which the gun slicks had attempted did indicate that the turnkey's account of Grimes' dealing with the marshal had left its marks on the town.

Whether Melba deserved it or not, old man Hanford deserved a break, Grimes was going to make one final attempt to pave the way for honest whiskey in general, and Old Vickery in particular. He said to Wing, "I'm giving a barbecue the day of the duel. You fix everything. Exactly like I tell you."

"Me savvee plenty," the Chinaman answered, and Grimes settled down to explaining.

CHAPTER V

Doctored

FOR the next three days, Grimes camped on the open range. Some thought he was taking precautions against being bushwhacked before the duel; others, hearing the pistol blasts, checked up with field glasses, said that he was practicing his draw, and popping the heads from quail and rattlesnakes.

But his campfire, each night, assured the curious town that he had not run out. And then Stinking Springs became interested in the Chinaman's preparation for a barbecue out in the plaza.

When Grimes rode back to town, Melba pushed her way through the crowd which lined one edge of the plaza, and ran to meet him as he dismounted.

"Simon," she cried, catching him with both arms. "I was worried to death, thinking you'd be dry-gulched."

"Honey," he answered, "I was purty sure they wouldn't, account they wanted to see a drink-and-shoot duel."

"But that fire!"

He whispered, "That there was so the Chinaman could find me."

The marshal advanced to the center of the plaza and began, "His Honor, the Mayor, asks me to announce to all and sundry that this here drink-and-shoot duel concerns itself entirely with the aspersions Simon Bolivar Grimes has cast on the good name of Red Quill Bourbon, and that Colonel Delevan is defending the liquor he has sponsored. And anyone claiming a lady is involved is a liar and a skunk. Is that clear?"

A shout of assent answered him.

He went on, "Colonel Delevan, you got anything to say?"

The colonel bowed ceremoniously, raised his hat, and answered, "Suh, I am ready to defend my honor."

"Mr. Grimes, you got any statements?"

"I'm buying a keg of Red Quill for the public. Jest to show I ain't got any hard feelings. Instead of each one drinking outen his own bottle, me and the colonel share the same keg."

The colonel's handsome face tightened a little. "I cannot drink with a man I am about to meet on the field of honor."

Grimes grinned amiably. "Colonel, you can make that right by giving me back half of what I paid out for the keg. Thataway, we are both contributing alike to the cheer of our feller citizens. Me, I got some Old Vickery, but I'm meeting you half way, taking your brand. Or mebbe them bottles in that basket your hired man has got ain't got Red Quill in 'em?"

The colonel had no argument left. The marshal cut in, "If you gents are ready, get to your posts."

Grimes and the colonel marched toward each other, arms folded, until they were within three paces of each other, with a whitewash line separating them. Two cowpunchers rolled the little keg to the line, and drove in a spigot, and gave the combatants tin cups. The marshal went on, "Ladies and gents! This here duel is a test of skill and endurance. Onct I pass the side lines, taking away the empty cups, they can draw without warning, any time till I come back with a fresh drink, and then all shooting's cut until I get over the side line again. The idee is, who can shoot the straightest when he's drunk the mostest."

The only one who paid no attention was Wing Lee. He shuffled about the barbecue pit, and

monkeyed with a pot of sauce.

Grimes raised his drink, and when the marshal had backed away, he said, "Colonel Delevan, your good health, suh! Beef blood, prune juice, plug terbaccer, chemicals, and acids."

The colonel gulped his cup, shuddered, lowered it, glanced about him. Grimes, lips barely moving, said, "Your choice, colonel. Drink, or draw?"

"Fill them up, marshal!" Delevan demanded, loud and strong.

SILENCE ringed the square. Then, in the dusty sand deserted main street, they heard the turnkey whooping it up. "Gimme more likker! Put rattlesnakes and trantlers in it, I want it hot and strong! *Wheeeee!*"

After seven years, he was making up for lost time.

Grimes whispered, "Colonel, this here ain't what you use in your juleps. You know what they'll do if I ever tell 'em what you put in them barrels?"

Delevan did not answer. Straight as a ramrod, he accepted his cup of Red Quill. Each eyeing the other over the rim, they downed their poison.

"Suh, you can't stand this here likker much longer, and if you fall on your face, I'm telling 'em why."

The colonel raised his voice. "That was delicious, marshal. Fill them up again."

Arms folded, they faced each other; once the marshal crossed the side line, each had the option of a quick draw, or else, waiting until the other had faced another jolt of forty-rod.

Grimes' cargo of Red Quill was raising ructions. He was beginning to wonder how long he could endure his own contest. He had no qualms about his gunnery. As long as he stayed on his feet, his trigger finger would work by instinct. But winning an exchange of lead, shooting down the widow's sponsor would gain him and the Hanfords nothing at all, for the town would forgive the dead, and coddle the Indian fighter's daughter.

Gun to gun, he had the colonel bluffed. It had worked just too well. Delevan would not draw, and if Grimes was the first to collapse, the duel was lost.

Already, the plaza began to weave a little. Grimes was sweating from the effort to keep his attention focused against the instant when he could make his play.

Finally, he caught the first sign of the colonel's wavering, and Grimes risked letting himself go a little. He sagged, his legs went wobbly.

Delevan's draw, considering all, was very good. But Grimes' was better.

His gun blazed as it cleared the holster. The slug smashed against the cylinder of Delevan's heavy Colt, and lead fragments tore his hand. The weapon was useless, and so were the gunner's fingers. And then Grimes yelled through the smoke, "Knock 'er loose!"

The Chinaman swung the axe with which he had been chopping fuel for the pot of sauce. The whiskey barrel's hoops burst. They had been filled almost to the breaking point, the night before the duel. Wing Lee had seen to that.

Grimes pointed at the scattered staves. When the crowd saw what came out on the flood of liquor, they howled, "Putting trantlers and rattlesnakes in it!"

The colonel saw, and turned a sickly pea green. He doubled up. Doreen Hopkins rushed from the sidelines and cried, "Oh, you scoundrel, poisoning all these people! I'd rather starve than take dividends for such filthy liquor!"

Delevan was too sick to protest, and the shock of a bullet torn hand did not help him. Doreen

clawed and slapped him, ripped his flowing tie and his fine shirt. "I hope they lynch you – putting snakes and tarantulas into their liquor, just to make more profit!"

There was talk of lynching, but Grimes and the marshal won Delevan a chance to get to his house to pack up for a trip. And then Grimes went to get the bottles of whiskey which Melba had concealed in the rig. "Drink up, gents; it's this lady's treat. Old Vickery, the best dang Bourbon ever come outen Kentucky, and no chemicals and acids in it. Jest repeal that ordinance, and her pappy'll haul in a wagon load of it."

Outraged citizens smashed all the other barrels of Red Quill. And an hour later, when Grimes and Melba drove back toward Cold Deck, to tell old man Hanford the news, the blonde pillowed her head on his shoulder and asked, "Simon, how did you stand it, knowing Wing Lee had put rattlers and tarantulas into every barrel in the warehouse?"

She shuddered. He drew in the reins, and his arm closed about her. "Honey, when I was in Arizony, I et rattlers. They ain't bad when you get used to the idee, and, the trantlers was some Wing Lee made up outen black darning cotton, they sure looked good enough to turn the colonel's stomach more inside out than if'n I'd shot him there. "