

MAX BRAND

**Peter Blue,
One-Gun Man**

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Title: Peter Blue, One-Gun Man

Date of first publication: 1927

Author: Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand) (1892-1944)

Date first posted: Dec. 20, 2018

Date last updated: Dec. 20, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20181233

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

LEFT DEFENSELESS

His right hand could never recover. He had been told so by a doctor who never missed in his judgments any more than Peter Blue, in the old days, had missed with a gun. Nothing but the left remained to him, and with that left he knew that he could never attain the old heights of skill.

He mastered himself with a great effort, but, as he walked out through the hills, he wondered what he could do. In a wave of weakness, he wished to let the world know of his stricken condition. Very shame might then hold back his enemies. No, the hundred faces looked suddenly in upon his mind—dark eyes, sneering lips, keen, cruel faces, as merciless as the faces of wolves. They would never forget and they would never forgive, and they would pity him no more than the wolves pitied a failing moose, caught in the snow.

—From “Peter Blue, One-Gun Man”

Other books by Max Brand:

MORE TALES OF THE WILD WEST

FLAMING FORTUNE

THE RUNAWAYS

BLUE KINGDOM

JOKERS EXTRA WILD

CRUSADER

SMOKING GUNS

THE LONE RIDER

THE UNTAMED WEST (Anthology)

THE TYRANT

THE WELDING QUIRT

THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER

DON DIABLO

THE OUTLAW REDEEMER

THE GOLD TRAIL

THE PERIL TREK

THE MASTERMAN

TIMBER LINE

THE OVERLAND KID

THE HOUSE OF GOLD

THE GERALDI TRAIL

GUNMAN'S GOAL

CHINOOK

IN THE HILLS OF MONTEREY

THE LOST VALLEY

THE FUGITIVE'S MISSION

THE SURVIVAL OF JUAN ORO

THE GAUNTLET

STOLEN GOLD

THE WOLF STRAIN

MEN BEYOND THE LAW

BEYOND THE OUTPOSTS

THE STONE THAT SHINES

THE OATH OF OFFICE

DUST ACROSS THE RANGE/THE CROSS BRAND

THE ROCK OF KIEVER

SOFT METAL

THUNDER MOON AND THE SKY PEOPLE

RED WIND AND THUNDER MOON

THE LEGEND OF THUNDER MOON

THE QUEST OF LEE GARRISON

SAFETY McTEE

TWO SIXES

SIXTEEN IN NOME

MAX
BRAND

PETER BLUE

“Peter Blue, One-Gun Man” by Max Brand first appeared in Street & Smith’s *Far West Illustrated* (6/27). Copyright © 1927 by Street & Smith Publications, Inc.

Peter Blue, One-Gun Man

Although the majority of Frederick Faust's Western stories were published in Street & Smith's *Western Story Magazine*, "Peter Blue, One-Gun Man" appeared in Street & Smith's *Far West Illustrated*, in the issue dated June, 1927. Two of Faust's serials for that year were also published in *Far West Illustrated*. It was Faust's intention for the story to be titled "Barnegat, Barnegat", after the song sung by various characters, but it was changed by the magazine to the name of the story's protagonist, Peter Blue, the infamous gunman. The storyline reflects one of Faust's favorite themes, the redeemed outlaw.

I

In every sunny day, there is one golden moment which lasts just long enough to fill a man's heart. One cannot find the proper instant on the clock, and it will never come at all if one remains indoors, but, if you go out in the late afternoon with no purpose except to live and breathe and see, certainly with no expectation of magic, the golden moment will come upon you by surprise. It may be any instant after the sun has lost its burning force, when it may be looked on without blindness in the west, and it will be before the face of the sun turns red and his cheeks are blown out as he enters the horizon mists. It may be that you walk through the town and suddenly come on a street down which flows a river of yellow glory, and then one cannot help turning toward the light, for it seems a probable thing that heaven lies at the end of that street, and, if one hurries a little, one may pass through the open gates.

It was not through the narrow vista of any street that Sheriff Newton Dunkirk and his daughter saw the perfect moment on this day. They had before them the great bald sweep of the Chirrimunk Hills—to what lofty spirits of the old days were those grand summits merely hills?—and, as their horses cantered on around a bend, suddenly they saw the Chirrimunk River running gold, and all the west before them was blended with golden haze, and above the haze was a golden sun hanging out of a dark blue sky.

Horses can understand, I think, and that pair of mustangs slowed to a walk that there might be no disturbing creak of saddle leather or clatter of hoofs, while father and daughter lifted their heads and smiled first at the beauty of this world and then at one another as their hearts overflowed.

But when the mustangs had climbed to the top of the next rise, the golden moment had passed. There was lavender, green, and rolling fire in the west; the sun was half in shadow and half in flames. But the magic was gone, and Sheriff Dunkirk looked across the foothills and pointed.

“Who’s in the Truman shack?” he asked.

“Nick and August, perhaps,” said Mary Dunkirk. “They live there when they’re trapping along the river, you know.”

“It ain’t time for Nick and August,” the sheriff contradicted. “It’s some tramp, more likely. I’ll have a look.”

Mary, with a shadow in her eyes, looked again at the smoke that lolled out of the crooked smokestack above the Truman shanty. All manner of danger to her father might wait under that sign of habitation, but she had learned her lesson long ago and never allowed her protests to reach her lips. The folly of her mother had taught her this wisdom.

She caught the reins that Dunkirk threw to her as he dismounted near the hut, and, as her father neared the shack, she saw a tall man step into the doorway, but whether he were young or old she could not guess, only by the darkness of his face she knew that he was long unshaven. She saw her father pause to speak, then pass inside, and the doorway was left black and empty. Perhaps he never would come out again alive—and only a moment before they had been so happy.

Inside the shack the sheriff was saying: “I’m Sheriff Dunkirk of this county. What’s your name, stranger?”

“My name is Tom Morris.”

“Ah! Are you Tom Morris from over Lindsay way?”

“Did you know him?”

“Did I? Well, that’s right . . . he died last year. And what are you doing here, Morris?”

“I’m looking around.”

“For what? Work? There’s plenty on the range. Old man Bristol wants hands. I know he needs two ‘punchers. Have you tried him?”

“No,” the tall man said slowly. “I haven’t tried him.”

“And you don’t expect to?” suggested the sheriff curtly. His eyes wandered around the shack, touched on the patched and sagging stove, and the table that was kept on its feet by being wedged tightly into a corner. “No traps,” resumed the sheriff. “Not a trapper, then. You’re only looking? Enjoying the view, I suppose?”

A horse snorted in the adjoining shed, and Dunkirk pushed open the connecting door. He saw two blood horses, big, magnificently made, that threw up their heads and stared at him with a childish brightness. One was a deep bay, and one a black chestnut with a long white stocking on the near foreleg.

The sheriff whirled sharply around, a frightened but determined man.

“You’re Peter Blue!” he said. “You’re Peter Blue, and that’s your horse Christopher . . . that black one.”

“Not black,” corrected Peter Blue. “Black chestnut. Step in and look at him more closely, if you wish. Then you’ll see the leopard dapplings.”

The sheriff looked into the inscrutable eyes of Peter Blue and remembered that the horse shed was very narrow and crowded, and the arms of Peter Blue were very long. He shook his head with decision. “I’ve seen enough,” he said. “We don’t want you in this

county and we won't have you, Blue. You needn't talk. I know you."

"Very well," said the other patiently. "Tell me first what law I have broken?"

"Law? I understand. You're a slick operator, Blue, and you've never done anything wrong in your life . . . only had to defend yourself quite often. But I can find the law to fit you. Vagrancy. We have a vagrancy ruling in this county, and I enforce it when it needs enforcing. Is that clear?"

"Dunkirk," Peter Blue said, "I've heard that you're a straight man and a fair man. I intend to make no trouble here, but I want a few weeks of quiet."

"You've always wanted quiet," said the sheriff. "I've known a good many of your kind and they've always wanted peace and rest, but trouble comes and hunts them out, at last. Come, come, man. I've spent years in this county and those years have turned me gray . . . you're not talking to a fool. I'll be riding this way tomorrow, and I'll expect to find the Truman shanty vacant. That's final." He paused in the doorway. "I'd like to know a thing, though. You're a smart fellow, Blue, whatever else they may say about you. Then why the devil don't you drop your horse, Christopher, and get another just as good? You're always spotted through that nag. Is he your good luck, maybe?"

"No," Peter Blue replied, touching the bolstered gun on his hip. "He's not my good luck, but I keep him because there would be a difference between Christopher and another just as good."

"Yes," said the sheriff grimly. "It would be hard for any man to get away from that long-legged devil, I suppose."

"Or," the other picked up, "to put it another way, it would be hard for a man to catch that long-legged devil. Besides, Christopher was made for the bearing of burdens . . . and I'm a heavyweight, as you can see for yourself." As he said this, his eyes seemed deeper and darker than ever, and the sheriff frowned.

"You're mocking me, somehow, Mister Blue," Dunkirk declared, "but that don't bother me. All I want is to see this shack empty tomorrow. So long. But wait a minute. If you wanted to sell that Christopher, I might find you a buyer. Would you sell him?"

"Oh, yes," said Peter Blue. "I'd sell him, of course. But," he added rather dreamily, "not for money. No, no, not for money."

"For what, then?"

"I don't want to keep you here too long," said Peter Blue.

The sheriff frowned again, hesitated again, and his face lighted beautifully. "I understand," he said. "You love 'im, eh? Well, so long, and good luck to you, Blue."

He held out his hand and the other made a gesture to meet it, but the sheriff stepped back with a little muttered oath.

"I've never taken the left hand of a man in my life," he said, "and I don't intend to begin with you, my friend." So saying, he backed slowly down the steps, and into the path, and walked sidling toward his horse, looking back. He even kept his eye on the blank doorway while he was mounting, and, as he spurred away, Mary saw him shudder strongly, like a child who has escaped from darkness into the light of another room.

"What is it, Dad?"

“I don’t know,” murmured the sheriff. “Nothing, I guess.”

She was glad to change the subject by pointing toward a meadow near the river edge, where an old man held the staggering handles of a plow that was drawn slowly by two oxen.

“There’s Uncle Harry. He puts in a long day, doesn’t he? Poor old man.” She added: “Who takes care of him?”

The sheriff turned a little and cast another glance down the road, as though to make sure that he was not being followed. Then he answered rather briefly: “Uncle Harry? Those old codgers don’t need care. The more they wither up, the tougher they get.”

The oxen were drawing their furrow up the hill, and the sheriff drew rein a moment to await the plowman. For, after all, men never are too old to vote. But Uncle Harry turned the corner of his land with deliberation before he stopped his team and saluted the two with a formal lifting of his hat. His long white hair flashed in the evening light.

“How are you, Uncle Harry?”

“Never no better, folks. And how’s yourself?”

“What do you hear from Judy and Dick?”

“Well, you and Judy was right fond of each other, Mary, wasn’t you? I got a letter from her last month. Her boy has had the chicken pox, but they’re getting on pretty good. I ain’t heard from Dick for a spell. Not since he headed for Utah.”

“Why, Uncle Harry, wasn’t that six months ago?”

“Let the young ’uns rove and ramble, and, when they get slowed up a mite, then they’ll remember the old ’uns, I always say.”

“Dear Uncle Harry, you never come over any more.”

“Well, honey, when I go to your place now, I miss your grandpa a tolerable lot. I dunno but your front porch looks sort of empty without him setting there with his pipe.”

“I’m going to bake you a big mince pie, one of these days, and bring it over.”

“You jes’ bring yourself, dearie, and don’t you bother about no pie!”

They turned their horses down the road again, for it was growing late, and, glancing back to Uncle Harry, the girl saw him reeling at the handles of the plow as he ran furrow.

“Poor old fellow! How does he manage?”

“Don’t you go getting sad about him, Mary. Those old ones, they don’t have the same feelings young folks do. When they sit quiet, they ain’t thinking so deep as you guess. They ain’t thinking at all. When they smoke their pipe, all they’re seein’ is the white curling of the smoke. They get like babies.”

“I wonder,” said the girl.

II

In the Truman shanty, as the sheriff rode away, Peter Blue went back to his interrupted work. At that rickety corner table, on which the last western light was falling, he placed a

little square mirror against the wall and sat down before it with a paper and pencil. He began to write with intensely knitted brows, and there was reason for his clumsiness, for he was looking not at the paper but into the mirror, guiding his pencil by the image that he saw. What made the matter worse was that he was using his left hand. He worked until the sweat stood on his forehead, and he stopped only when the fading light made the image in the mirror a blur.

Even though he knew what the sentence should be, he could hardly decipher this crazy scrawling: **The quick redfox jumps over the lazy brown dog. The quick red fox jumps over the lazy. . . .**

Then, with an impatient exclamation, he shifted the pencil to his right hand and attempted to write. He made but a single stroke, a wobbling, jerking, unmanageable stroke that ran off the side of the paper, and, with that effort at nervous concentration, his entire right arm began to quiver and jump. He dropped the pencil with a faint exclamation and with his left hand gripped the other wrist hard as though by sheer strength he would crush the senselessness out of his right hand and restore its old cunning.

However, it was only the petulance of a moment, which he mastered with a grim effort and went to the door to breathe the crisp night air. He could see the blurred outlines of two oxen and a man coming up from the river toward another shack, not half a mile away, and Blue sighed and turned thoughtful. For in the old days he would have scorned a spirit so pedestrian that it enabled a man to work at the plow behind oxen from dawn to dark. He felt no scorn now, but only a profound, sick envy of all in this world who suffered under a lesser curse than that which weighed him down.

A rabbit, bound home for the warren late, scampered across the trail—a tidy bit of fresh meat for his supper—and the old instinct made him sweep the Colt from its holster. It came clear of the leather, but slipped through his nerveless fingers and crashed upon the floor; the frightened rabbit turned into a dim streak across the field. It was a moment before he picked up the gun—with his left hand, and, reaching clumsily across his body, he dropped the weapon back in its sheath, but he remained a little longer leaning against the doorjamb, for a deeper darkness than that of the night was spinning across his brain.

At length, however, he went to the stove and made a great rattling in shaking down the ashes and freshening the fire, for the blaze was cheerful and gave him heart to fry bacon for his supper, boil strong coffee, and complete his meal with heavy, soggy pone. After that, all of the evening was before him, and he prepared for it by taking a candle from the pack that lay open on the floor and lighting it so that he could resume his work.

But before he began, he opened again the little book that he had read so many times before. The leaves parted at a well-thumbed place, and he read: . . . **but the chief requirement is great patience, endless patience. From the cradle a man lives by his right hand. It wields the hammer, draws the knife, strikes the blow, swings the racket, and above all it performs the cunning intricacies of writing. Man's forceful gestures are made with his right hand; by his right hand he lives; and by it we may almost say that he thinks, for thought, after all, is sometimes executed by the mechanical movements of the body, and sometimes it is inspired by the sense of physical power and craft. Therefore, it is apparent that he who has performed the most delicate work will be robbed most vitally by the loss of the right hand, and,**

although it is the purpose of this book to teach the series of mechanical exercises through which the left hand may be taught to do the work of the right, nevertheless, in all honesty, it must be confessed that in the end something may be lacking. One may learn to work with the left hand, to write with it, etc. But the cabinetmaker, the draftsman, and others will find it difficult to *think* with the left hand, as they have been accustomed to think with the right. But for rougher labor, and for those whose livelihood does not depend upon a delicate craft of hand. . . .

Peter Blue raised his eyes from the book. Not his livelihood, but his life was concerned, and the book said nothing of such men as he. Then, as his habit was, he laid on the table before him his naked Colt, picked up the pencil, and returned to the dreary labor of forcing his hand to trail out the letters by staring at the image in the mirror.

His attention began to flag. He had worked many long hours this day, and now in spite of himself his thoughts began to slip away into dreams—right-handed dreams. He saw himself as he had been before that fatal bullet tore through his right forearm, and, whether with cards or dice or guns, it was always his right hand that played and always the right hand that won. It had made him famous up and down the range, that good right hand. He had the fame still. The awe of other men surrounded him wherever he went, but he no longer had the skill to maintain his reputation. The day must come when he would be challenged by the friend of some enemy of the old days, and, when that challenge came, he must go down unless he could transfer to this childish, awkward, blundering, laggard left hand a moiety of the skill that had lived in its mate. He was almost tempted to let the world know the truth, that the old Peter Blue was dead. But he knew that the instant his weakness was revealed, there would be a host of bullies and cowards to find and kill. So one of them might wrap himself in the ghost of a reputation.

Who was it, in the end, that would be able to say: “I killed Peter Blue!” Would it be some gay cavalier of the range, bent on adventure? Would it be some swelling braggart and badman? Would it be some cool-headed old fox? He had known many of all these kinds, and now he let their portraits pace swiftly across the eye of his mind.

A rising of the wind called him out of his musings. He found the room was cold, and, when he went to the open door, he saw the night sky was crystal clear, so flooded with moonlight that only a scattering of stars showed faint and small. The Chirrimunk curved through the hollow in a broad sweep of polished silver with the trees along its banks raising their dark heads against the brightness.

On such a night as this he had stood under a certain window in Juárez and played his guitar and sang. . . . Was there music in a left hand? On such a night as this, he and Christopher had descended upon Lindley Crossing. . . .

He went hastily into the shed, and the two horses stood up in the darkness and whinnied anxiously to him and reached for him with their soft muzzles. He took Christopher into the open and threw a saddle on his back, and on the back of the stallion he was almost a king again. The wind of that wild gallop blew some of his melancholy away, and so he came past the neighboring shack with a sweep and a rush.

A little distance past it, he reined in and looked back. No smoke rose from the chimney into the glistening moonlight, and yet the night was so cold that his gloved fingers were turning numb on the reins. One faint light had been burning in the cabin,

which proved that the dweller was in the place. Then why not a fire?

That small thing turned Peter Blue back. He left Christopher with thrown reins fifty yards from the cabin and went to investigate. Not a sound, not a sound from within, so he knocked at the door.

The voice of an old man called: "Hey, hey, who's there?"

Peter Blue pushed the door open and looked in at a neat little one-room cabin, swept and dusted with a scrupulous care, and all in good order. On the table stood a lantern, turned low, and near it were scattered a few fragments of hardtack, and a tin cup half filled with . . . water. No soiled pans stood on the stove. Yonder on the table lay the remains of the supper that had been eaten in this shack. All these details were seen in a single flicking glance that steadied on the old man, who sat by the table with a blanket huddled around his shoulders. In spite of that, his lean face was lined and shadowed with the blue of cold. Yet he smiled at Peter Blue.

"Come in, stranger," he said. "Come in and rest yourself. You're in the Truman house, I reckon?"

"How did you guess that?" asked Peter Blue.

"Well, when you get old, you get long-distance eyes. Your hand may miss its hold on something right under your nose, but far off things you can see pretty well, y'understand? Besides," he added with a deliberate and admiring survey, "it ain't so many that have your outline ag'in' the sky, even a half mile off. Sit down, won't you?"

Peter Blue sat down.

"Sheriff Dunkirk knows you, don't he? I seen him stop at the Truman house for quite a spell this evening. Now I ask you, ain't he an honest man . . . young Newt Dunkirk? But you know him, don't you?"

"Yes. I know him."

"He's give us a quiet county," said the old man. "There ain't been a man stuck up or a gunfight for close onto six months now. By the way, what might your name be?"

"My name," said the visitor, looking instantly at Uncle Harry, "is Peter Blue."

The other started and blinked at his guest.

"Peter Blue? Peter Blue?" he said. "I know that name . . . somehow . . . I've met up with it somewhere. It's streaked across my mind sometime as bright as lightning. But I disremember. When your eyes get long distance, your memory gets long distance, too. The nearby things, you fumble at them and forget them, and they slip through your fingers like your brain was numb with cold. But the far away things . . . you see them like looking through the small end of a field glass . . . small but clear. All drawn together with distance. So's you can hold ten of the old years in the palm of your hand and talk about 'em. And if I'd known you in those times, I sort of reckon that you would have been pretty big in my eye. Reach yourself that jug behind the door, will you? It's old stuff. Good, too. The pure quill. Help yourself, Mister Blue . . . it's a mighty cold night!"

Peter Blue took the big earthenware jug and tilted it to his lips by bending it over the crook of his left arm. As he put it down—"Left-handed, and what a hand!"—said the old man. "Marty McVey, he was left-handed. And even Marty couldn't have handled that jug more easy."

"Will you have some? You haven't told me your name."

"I won't have any, thank you. I'm Uncle Harry Barnes. I only keep that liquor for friends, when they drop in. But me . . . it addles my head and sets it singing . . . plumb foolish. Hold on, have you had your supper?"

"Have you had yours?" asked Peter Blue.

"Oh, yes. My stummick was a-ragin' lion, once. Oh, I could eat for two. But the lion has turned into a lamb. A few crackers do me as good as a steak and onions, just. Which is an advantage of bein' withered up and light, like I am now. But at your age, I was always hungry."

"I've had my supper," said the younger man. "But I can see that you're able to save a pretty penny, working your farm, and living so carefully. The bank must be glad to have your account."

"There's my bank." Uncle Harry laughed, pointing to an old boot that hung on the wall. "I turn my money into silver and dump it into that old boot. As long as there's money in the heel of it, I know that I can get through the winter easy. But when I got to reach into the toe, then I know that I'm getting low. But having my coin in the boot bests a bank all hollow. It's more fun."

"Yes." Peter Blue nodded. "But sometimes your silver must overflow from the boot. When you get the crop from that piece of land by the Chirrimunk, for instance. . . ."

"If it was all for me, yes. But my girl Judy didn't marry money, and I have to help them along."

"Her husband is sick, perhaps," suggested Peter Blue.

"Not him. But he's young, and one of the boys. Pay day means a party to him. But what's a grandfather good for? If I didn't have my Judy to work for, I might settle down to trapping and hunting, same as Nick and August. Just plain lazy. You look cold, Peter Blue. Wait a jiffy while I fix up a fire."

"Not for me."

"Are you sure now?"

"Yes, I'm warm enough. But I might say you look a little chilly yourself, Uncle Harry."

"Do I, now? Cold is good for an old man. I've seen some huggin' the fire and drowzin', but I say . . . live like a man, and not like a house cat. Besides, I got to save my strength. Time was when I thought nothing of laying in a store of wood and everything needful. But now it's different, and I got to put in my handwork where it will count most. Suppose I was to build the most ragingest fire that ever you seen. Would it warm Judy and her children away off beyond the mountains? But the work that I use in that ground, it comes back to me in dollars, and dollars put a fire in Judy's stove, and pays the doctor, and helps for clothes, and such. Here, son, you ain't sat down. By the Lord, you *are* cold."

Here . . . I'll start a fire snorting. . . .”

“Let me do it,” said Peter Blue. “You sit quiet.”

He went out to his horse and galloped back to the Truman shack. There he took bacon, coffee, and pone and returned to the other house. In the moonlight, he saw the axe by the pile of lot wood, and he dismounted there and commenced to labor mightily. They were awkward strokes that seldom found the mark, but even in the left hand of Peter Blue there was more power than in all the body of most men. Presently he carried a vast armful into the shack.

“Ha!” cried the old man. “That was what the ringin’ of that axe meant, then? No, no, Peter Blue. You keep that wood for yourself in your own shack. If you’re in my house, you got to burn my wood. Why, what would folks be sayin’ of me? Man, man, drop that wood right there. . . .” He started from his chair, filled with excitement and trouble, but Peter pushed him firmly back.

“Now, you keep in your place, Uncle Harry. Tush! You think only of yourself.”

“Now what might you mean by that?” Uncle Harry asked coldly.

“You’d have me strip the clothes off the backs of Judy’s children, and take the food out of their mouths. Not a bit of it. Sit there . . . and watch this fire roar, will you?”

Roar it did, in another moment, with all the drafts open and the flame hurtling up the chimney in such masses that the whole shack trembled a little. A glow crept across the cabin and the pain left the face of the old man. Then the sizzling of bacon sang in his ears.

“Hold on, Peter Blue!” he cried. “Lord, Lord, what are you doin’, man, to shame me? Cookin’ your own food in my house?”

“Did you ask me to supper?” Peter Blue said.

“Yes, yes, lad.”

“Is there a bit of bacon in this house?”

“I could fix you up . . . ,” began Uncle Harry.

“Tush!” said Peter Blue. “You’ve asked me to supper, and here I am. It’s my right to bring what I want.”

“It’s wrong,” said Uncle Harry, grasping futilely at the great shoulder of his guest, rubbery with muscles. But then the delicate fragrance of coffee reached the nostrils of the old man and he sighed and shook his head. “It ain’t hospitality, Peter,” he said.

“No,” Peter Blue said, “it’s food and friendship. Shall I eat bacon up there in my lonely shack? And you stay down here and eat crackers in yours? Nonsense! You’re an old, wise, and dangerously crafty man, Uncle Harry, but you can’t drift me against the wind like that.”

“Besides,” said the other, “you’ve ate already, Peter.”

“I? I haven’t touched a thing since morning.”

“You was lying, then?”

“Smaller lies than some you’ve been telling. Sit down at that table and look some of this pone and bacon in the face . . . and here’s the coffee.”

“I got no appetite,” said Uncle Harry. “I’ve ate already.”

“Like a parrot or a hen,” said Peter Blue. “But now you can eat like a man.”

“Son,” said the veteran, “it’s kind of you, but enough is enough, and I can’t touch a bite. Lord, Lord! Your food and in my own house.”

The forefinger of the giant leveled like a gun. “Then,” he said, “I’ll write to Judy and tell her that you’re starving yourself to put clothes on the backs of her youngsters.”

“Not that, Peter! You wouldn’t be doing that. Then I see you’re going to bully me into it, so I’ll take a mite.”

They faced one another at the table, and presently, as he ate, the eyes of the old man were going up and down, from the loaded plate to the face of his guest. “Ah, Peter,” he said, “you’re a good lad.”

“If you won’t eat any more,” said Peter, “why not tune up that old guitar and give me a song while I do the dishes?”

“Me sing? My throat has forgot all my songs, boy. The singin’ muscles have forgot their business complete.” But he picked up the guitar. “What shall it be?”

“You know McVey?”

“Yes.”

“Sing that one of McVey’s fight with Barnegat.”

“Lemme think. Now I remember. Hey . . . how it rolls back the years!” He leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed, a smile on his lips, and he sang in an infirm but pleasant tenor voice:

**Barnegat, Barnegat, belt on your gun,
For Marty McVey is a-comin’,
He’s ridin’ to hell or to heaven for fun
And the wind in his hair is hummin’.**

The bass of Peter Blue, softened that it might not drown the leader, chimed in with the chorus:

**Marty McVey, Marty McVey,
Barnegat’s gun will talk today.
Barnegat, Barnegat, gimme your hand,
For he’s galloping up the river.
Barnegat, Barnegat, take your stand,
For I feel the ground a-quiver.**

**Marty McVey, Marty McVey,
Barnegat’s gun will talk today.
Barnegat, Barnegat, that’s my name,
And who the hell are you, sir?
Barnegat, Barnegat, you’re to blame
When I . . .**

The voice of the singer died away.

“Go on, Uncle Harry.”

“It’s clean popped out of my mind.”

“Wait a minute and it’ll pop in again.”

“No, not tonight. You can’t force an old man’s mind. It’s like a young horse. Whipping only makes it balk all the more. Now, I could tell you about that fight, though.”

“The devil you could! You’ve heard about it?”

“I saw it.”

“The fight between Barnegat and McVey? I thought it was only a story.”

“No, sir. I seen McVey come ragin’ into the town with the wind blowin’ through his long, bright hair. And I seen Barnegat take his stand in the middle of the street, with a gun in each hand. McVey had a big Colt poised with its nose in the air, and he rode straight down the street. Barnegat, he dropped one gun level and fired, but McVey come right on. Barnegat dropped his other gun level and fired, but still McVey galloped at him with his own Colt hanging in the air, ready to shoot. Barnegat was a crack shot, y’understand? But I suppose that shooting at McVey was too much for him. It whittled the manhood out of him. He give a yell, dropped his guns, and turned and ran for it. McVey rode right on down that street, just laughing. Seems McVey had bet that he would make Barnegat run without firing a shot. One of them two bullets slipped right straight through the body of McVey, but that didn’t keep him from laughing. He’d won his bet.”

“Ah,” Peter Blue said, his head raised and a smile on his lips, “there was a man, that McVey.”

“Not a man, but a lion. They don’t make his kind any more. Big and foolish, and simple and wild, and kind and cruel . . . they don’t make his kind any more.” Here his eyes narrowed at the younger man and he added thoughtfully: “Except now and then, maybe.”

IV

The sheriff had two guns newly oiled and freshly loaded when he walked up to the door of the Truman shack the next day. In the doorway he paused to look in at big Peter Blue, who was seated studiously at a table, facing a little mirror, with a gun before him. The sheriff paused abruptly. In such a mirror, so placed, Peter Blue might be able to see the open doorway. At his hand lay the ready revolver. For such a trickster with weapons, such an uncanny marksman, would think nothing of snatching up his Colt and taking a snap shot over his shoulder.

The sheriff forgot his own two guns. “You’re still here, Blue?” he said.

The other turned sidling in his chair. “Still here, Sheriff. Have they traced any rustled cows my way, as yet?”

“Set and grin,” said the sheriff coldly. “This day is your trick, because I ain’t going to arrest you. I’m here in this county to enforce the law, and not to commit suicide. But I’m coming back with enough to handle you. Mark that, Blue.”

He backed away, regained his horse, and galloped for the town. A little shame mixed with his anger, and, accordingly, his horse dripped with black sweat before Dunkirk gained the town. Then he let his mustang fall into a dog-trot that dusted him and his rider with white. The sheriff took no heed of a little dirt, however, for, as he jogged the horse down the long, winding main street, his glances were busy prying at the houses on either side and making mental notes.

He wanted picked men. He could have a hundred rough-and-ready riders, rough-and-ready fighters, in five minutes, but what chance would they have on the trail of Peter Blue and Christopher? No, for such work as this he needed the finest horses and the keenest men, so he dismissed the inhabitants of each house as he swept by. In front of the hotel he drew rein, for here he must find someone.

Suddenly he cried out and waved a violent hand. For he saw a tall man leaning against one of the wooden pillars, rolling a cigarette—a tall man with nobly developed shoulders and a long pair of sandy mustaches, grown after an outworn fashion. “Livernash! Livernash!” he called. He fairly flung himself from his horse and ran to the hotel steps. There he checked himself under the stare of a pair of cold blue eyes.

“What’s on me?” Livernash asked calmly. “What you want of me, Dunkirk?”

The sheriff laughed. “You’re wrong this time, Steve,” he said. “I want to use you, not to jail you.”

Livernash breathed a long sigh. “Have the makings,” he proffered kindly.

“I’m talking, not smoking, Steve. I’ll finish the job today,” he continued rather wildly. “God or the devil must have planted you on this porch just in time for me.” He added abruptly: “Is that your horse?” He pointed to a down-headed mustang that stood in front of the porch near the watering trough.

“That’s mine,” Livernash said, nodding.

“Not good enough. Not half good enough,” said the sheriff. “But you can have the pick of my string. For this job, it will be more important to mount you well than to have me on a racer.”

“And what’s the game?” Livernash asked.

“I’ll tell you later. Wait here. I want to collect half a dozen more. Be back here in a few minutes. . . .”

“I ain’t making a long stop,” Livernash advised. “I got important business. You better tell me now.”

“No matter what your business is, it’s not as important as this.”

“What’s important to you and me might be a speck different, Dunkirk.”

“Today, my business is yours. Trust me for that.”

He started down the hotel steps but Livernash called: “Sorry, Sheriff! I can’t wait. My job is pressing.”

So Dunkirk unwillingly turned and frowned at this interruption. “Every minute that you hold up the posse,” he said, “the rascal will be putting miles behind him. I give you my word that you want to do this job even more than I do, Steve.”

“Who is it, then?”

“The first man in my life that I didn’t try to arrest single-handed,” said the sheriff. “Told him yesterday to leave the county. Came back today and found him in the same place . . . and he simply smiled at me, but I swallowed that and came to town.” He repeated what he had said before on this day: “I’m here on the range to enforce the law, not to commit suicide.”

“Ah,” Livernash said, more and more interested, “I got a funny idea that maybe your trail is mine, old-timer.”

“I tell you it is! Take my word for it. How many times have you fought, Livernash? Never mind. I know. And you were beaten only once.”

“Wait, wait,” said the tall man. “I know the time you mean. Ain’t the whole world been grinding that one time in on me? But I swear to God that what beat me was a new gun. I hadn’t had a chance to file off the sights. And it stuck in the leather . . . it stuck in the leather. I didn’t even fill my hand that day.”

“I believe it,” said the sheriff, “and I know that you want to get at Blue again.”

“Want it?” Livernash said, drawing in his breath as though the air were wine. “Want it? I’ll tell a man I want it, Dunkirk.”

“You’ll have your chance, then, if our horses can bring us up with him today. That’s why I don’t want to waste any more time. I’ll round up a party in ten minutes, Steve, and. . . .”

A long arm shot out and a lean-fingered hand fell on the shoulder of the sheriff.

“Us?” he said. “Party?” he echoed.

“To get Pete Blue.”

“No, old-timer. Not me. I’m not in no party to get Peter Blue.”

At this, Dunkirk bit his lip. “That other time made you a little down-hearted, Steve,” he suggested coldly. “But I thought that just now you was raving to get at him.”

“Not with a posse,” said the other. “What posse did Blue have behind him when he dropped me that day in Juárez?”

“Ah,” said the sheriff, able to smile suddenly. “You mean you want to play a lone hand?”

Livernash brushed his long mustaches with painful care and then spoke with deliberation. “Five months ago I started north,” he said. “I missed him by a week in Phoenix.” He checked off the item on one finger. “I was two weeks behind him at the Colorado. He left Carson one day before me. But then he put on one of his damned bursts of speed and I was eight days late at Butte. I bought two new horses and twisted back south on his heels. I dodged him into Idaho and back to Montana. I trailed him to Kansas City when he took a fling East. I doubled back on his heels, one train late, and nearly nailed him in Denver. Then two weeks out in the mountains. I had him in the circle of my glass once when he was going up one divide while I was on the top of the next one. I was out of range. Damned if that didn’t near break my heart. Then I came down here, and you tell me that he’s in reach. And you want me to join up with a posse . . . a posse!” He parted his mustaches and spat far into the street.

The sheriff, in the meantime, had grown darkly thoughtful. "I know you, Steve," he said. "I got a lot of trust and faith in you."

"Leave that be," interrupted Livernash harshly, "and tell me where this hound might be."

"Just a moment, Steve. I say that I have a load of faith in you. But now we're talking about Peter Blue."

"Bullets won't sink into him, maybe?" Livernash asked with a sneer.

"Sometimes these fellows don't like to face the same man twice," declared Dunkirk. "If you've followed him so long . . . why, man, it almost looks as though he was running away, doesn't it?"

"Running away? If I knowed that he was in front of me, didn't he know that I was behind him? Why did he slide from Carson to Montana as fast as those long-legged horses of his could snake him along?"

"I never heard of fear in Peter Blue," declared the sheriff thoughtfully.

"There ain't any use for talk," Livernash said. "Lemme do something besides wag my jaw, will you? Where does he camp?"

Dunkirk made up his mind. "After all," he admitted, "he would run away from more than one or two. And if he ran, what can catch Christopher? Follow this road straight out of town. Never leave it. When you cross the first creek, there's a big trail bearing to the left. Don't take it. Head straight, leaning always toward the river, when you're in doubt. Finally you'll come in sight of the Truman shack, standing on a hill, without no trees around it . . . so's he can keep on watching the road, I suppose. You'll find him there, living quiet and studying up some sort of hell-fire. So long, Livernash. Good luck to you and. . ."

He let his words die away, for Steve Livernash had flung himself on the back of his mustang and rushed down the street. He disappeared; the muffled beat of hoofs trailed rapidly into a faint pulse of sound and a great cloud of dust floated in the windless air.

"It's wrong! It's wrong!" the sheriff cried suddenly, as his second thought came strongly home to him. He hurried to his own pony and was about to put foot in the stirrup when he saw the beaten condition of the mustang. Before he could change mounts, Livernash would be far out of reach. So Sheriff Dunkirk came wearily back toward the verandah steps. "Maybe he'll have the luck, though," said the sheriff. "You never can tell. Sooner or later they all get theirs. Sooner or later the greatest of 'em go down." He sank into a chair and tilted it back against the wall of the hotel, but although his body was at rest, his brow was still furrowed. "Hey, Dunkirk,"—came a voice from the hotel door—"have you heard about Christy's new house he's gonna build?"

"But not Peter Blue," said the sheriff.

"What's that?"

Dunkirk pushed a hand across his knotted forehead. "Don't talk, man. My brain's overcrowded now!"

It was not more than an hour after the sheriff brought his warning to Peter Blue that his daughter rode on the same trail, but with a different destination, for she turned in at the shack of the old man which, as has been said, stood about half a mile from the Truman house.

There she found Uncle Harry busily sweeping out the cabin with a broom made of a thick twist of straw fastened on a stick. Some dried apples were stewing on the stove and filling the place with a delicate fragrance as though a sort of faded spring had been restored to the world. Uncle Harry's pipe was in his teeth, however, and he was puffing forth clouds of strong tobacco smoke that usually drowned the perfume of the fruit entirely. Through the back door of the cabin, the girl saw a deer hung up on the branch of a tree.

"Ah, Uncle Harry," she said, "what a jolly place you keep here, and you have everything so comfortable that I'm almost ashamed to bring you this bit of cake." She laid it on the table, a fine fruit cake, the brown-baked crust of which was raised or broken here and there by the crowding nuts and raisins that filled it.

"Hey," cried Uncle Harry, "he'll be glad of that now! God bless you, dearie, but he'll be glad to put a tooth in that cake."

"Who will?" asked the girl rather anxiously.

"Who but Peter Blue, of course? I ain't got any other neighbors that I know of."

"Ah," the sheriff's daughter said. "I've come to talk to you about him."

"Nothin' I'm gladder to talk about," said Uncle Harry. "Excepting my Judy, of course, and my boy," he added with a rather guilty afterthought. "What you going to say, Mary dear?"

She was rather abashed by this enthusiasm on the part of the old man. But she went on gravely: "Do you mean to say that he'll come here and eat with you?"

"Why not?" said Uncle Harry. "Ain't it his right to come here and have a meal . . . him and me both being lone men?" He added: "Hold on a minute!" He hurried to the door of the oven and opened it, pulled out a broad roasting pan, and basted several big grouse that were browning beautifully. The steam and the delicious aroma of the roast poured into the room, and he said as he slammed the oven door again: "Peter'll be set for those by noon, I reckon."

"Peter?" she cried. "Peter Blue, do you mean?"

"Aye, Peter Blue."

"Oh, the rascal! To live on the charity of a . . ."

"Tut, tut, honey. No charity. Except on his side. He shot these here birds."

She stopped, the next words dying on her lips. "He shot them?" she said more faintly.

"Aye, he did. He shot them. Left-handed, Mary. And them on the wing. I seen it. We walked out in the dawn, him and me. He's learning to shoot left-handed, y'understand? God knows how fine he could shoot with his right, but he says that everybody had ought to have two hands, instead of just one. So he's going to forget that he has a right hand, and

try to train his left hand until it catches up with his right. Now, ain't that a rum idea, Mary darlin'? Them kind of ideas, he's full of. He won't touch his right hand to nothing. He eats and sews and rolls cigarettes and sweeps and shoots, all left-handed. Only been doing it a short time, he says, but, girl, it's a wonderful thing to see how good he manages. Now and then he spills things, of course. He missed the first deer that we spotted. But he got the second one." He pointed exultantly through the open door. "Look at it hanging there, Mary."

She looked, and shook her head. "Uncle Harry, I see that you're fond of him."

"Fond of him? I have roved and ranged up and down this here world for nigh onto seventy-five year or more, honey, and I never before seen young man or old, or boy or woman, that ever fitted into my mind as fine and quick and snug as Peter Blue does. I ain't knowed him hardly at all. Not a day, hardly, but if my own son was to stand here in the shack beside him, dog-gone me if I would know which I loved the most of the pair of them."

The sheriff's daughter bowed her head a little.

"Are you doubting me, Mary?"

"Oh, no, Uncle Harry, but I'm only wondering whether it's right for me to tell you what I know about him? If you like him so well. . . ."

"Oh, well," said Uncle Harry, "I suppose that a gent has got to hear gossip about a friend, now and then. I might as well hear it from you, Mary, as from somebody else."

"Not gossip . . . but facts," she said.

"Everything that's living is changing," said the old man. "Peter is tolerable much alive. There ain't no facts but dead ones, my dear. You ain't going to poison my mind ag'in' Peter."

"Look," said the girl, "you are setting yourself hard against me, and yet I can tell you things that will simply tear your faith in Peter Blue to pieces."

"Try it," Uncle Harry said with a faint smile. "You jes' sit down and try it, honey."

She said earnestly: "He's dangerous company for you or for any man, Uncle Harry."

"Tut, tut. I'm too old to worry about danger, Mary."

"Do you know why he's learning to do everything with his left hand?"

"Well, you can tell me."

"Because he isn't satisfied with the number of murders that he's done with his right alone, and he wants to be able to slaughter with two guns at once!"

She said it with fire and seriousness, and Uncle Harry blinked at her a little.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that Peter is a gunfighter?"

"Oh, Uncle Harry, the most low, despicable sort of a gunfighter, a true safety killer."

"One of them that shoots from behind a hedge, maybe?"

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean a man who has so much skill with a gun that no other person has a chance against him. He picks fights, and lets the other fellow grab for a gun first . . . and Peter Blue always gets in the first shot, and the first shot always kills."

“A gunfighter. A gunfighter,” Uncle Harry said, blinking a little again. “I dunno that I like that idea. I seen old Tom Leicester killed by a crooked gunman from El Paso. I always hated the professional gunfighters ever since that day. Because what chance does an ordinary gent stand against them? What chance?”

“None at all,” said the girl. “Not a bit of chance. While you’re here cooking and getting a meal ready for that scoundrel, he’s probably up in that other shack, practicing with guns and getting ready for more murders. Oh, Dad has told me all about that sort of a person.”

“Practicing murders? I dunno.” Uncle Harry grinned. “Except that my old Dan and Dandy would sometimes get a gent pretty mean and ornery in disposition. But, otherwise, it don’t look like the preparings for a murder, do it?” He stepped to the front door and pointed across the trail and down the long, soft slope toward the river where the slow oxen were running the furrow—and a man held the handles of the plow behind them.

“I don’t understand,” Mary said, staring.

“Peter Blue,” said Uncle Harry. “Is that murder, my dear?”

She turned around and faced the old man with a frown. “It’s very odd,” she said, her voice fainter than before.

“Ain’t it?” Uncle Harry said. He took out a tobacco pouch and refilled his pipe.

“What a beautiful bit of old pigskin,” Mary observed. “Like amber . . . but so rich and dark.”

“It ain’t bad,” admitted Uncle Harry. “It would have to be pretty good, because Peter give it to me . . . along with the tobacco in it. And Peter, he don’t give away no cheap things. Not him.”

She half closed her eyes. “I was going to warn you to have nothing to do with that terrible man-killer, Uncle Harry. Why, he’s famous for the list of men he has killed. But it seems to me as though . . . as though . . . well, as though I must be wrong.” She opened her eyes and looked rather wildly about her, at the steaming apples on the stove, at the deer that hung on the tree outside, and listened to the sizzling of the baking birds in the oven. Although she no longer faced the fields, across the back of the brain she could feel the two patient oxen toiling, and the hands of the warrior gripping the handles of the plow.

“Shooting of men,” Uncle Harry stated, “is a pretty bad thing, though I suppose that the reason that more of it ain’t done is that there ain’t many folks with the courage to take the chance. Besides, honey, suppose that a horse has the knack of running extra fast, are you going to blame that horse for liking races . . . and are you going to blame him for winning the races when he starts?”

She sighed, hunted for words, and found that she could do nothing but stare. That lonely little cabin on the roadside was always a burden on the minds of the sheriff’s entire family. In the old days, when Uncle Harry came over to visit Grandpa Dunkirk, they could feed the visitor well, and take his socks for patching, and send him back equipped with anything from an old coat to a side of bacon. But since he no longer visited, it was hard to know how to handle him. He was not a beggar, and rank charity could not be offered to him. So, each time they passed the shack, the sheriff and his people bit their lips, and felt a burden fall upon their consciences. And here was the cabin converted by a magic touch

and filled with such warmth of good cheer that her heart was melted.

She heard Uncle Harry saying: "He's coming up from the field for lunch right now. You'll have a chance to see him."

"I don't want to," said the girl. "I wouldn't look into the face of that brutal. . . ."

"Brutal fiddlesticks!" Uncle Harry laughed. "I'll tell you what, Mary darlin', now that I look at you close and hard, I can see that you're pretty near good enough to stand up beside him. You're almost nice-looking enough to be Missus Peter Blue."

"What a *silly* way to talk," the girl said, crimson.

"Ain't it?" The old man grinned. "Tolerable silly and tolerable true."

"Do you think," she asked, "that I would ever look at a vagabond assassin who . . . ?"

"Look at him?" He laughed softly. "When you see Peter Blue, you're just gonna ask yourself . . . 'Could God please make this here man love me?'"

"Uncle Harry, you almost make me mad . . . you do."

"When you see Peter, you'll forget all about me, dearie. When you see him standin' up there, fillin' that doorway, big and grand and a sort of a sad look in his eye, honey . . . a sad look, because I suppose that it grieves him considerable that there ain't any more men in the world that will stand up to him and give him a fight . . . I say, when you see him standing up there, you'll just get weak in the knees."

"As if I haven't seen men before," Mary cried, rosy and laughing.

"No," he said, "you ain't. You've seen folks, that's all. But here's your chance to see a man, if you'll stay to lunch with us. You'll see your first real man, my dear. It will sort of scare you, but it'll make you terrible glad that you stayed."

"I must go, Uncle Harry. I really must. . . ."

"Hey? If you start now, it'll be plain that you're runnin' away from him. Would you be doin' that? Listen! He's takin' pot shots with his Colt as he comes up from the field. Left-handed pot shots at birds or rocks or twigs . . . he don't care what. And . . . well, you'll stay, I see. There's the sparkle in your eye, dearie, and I know that you're thinkin' of him."

VI

Mary Dunkirk stayed for lunch. She felt a vague excitement, and a peculiar sense of guilt, and a delicious sting of delight, because, before Uncle Harry finished his talk, she had never wanted to see any man as she wanted to see this same Peter Blue. She saw him take the span of oxen to the watering trough. She saw him place them at the feed rack. She saw these things by glimpses, so she flew here and there about the cabin, opening the stove, putting in more fuel, examining and basting the roasting birds, but now and then she could catch a glance through a window and see a stalwart back or a vaguely distant form.

"You keep fussin' around and workin', honey," said Uncle Harry, "and he'll never figger you got excited about seein' him. He'll just take it for granted that you been all heated up by the cookin'. You keep right on, Mary, because I'll tell you that there ain't

nothin' that opens up the heart of a man so quick as to see a pretty girl in a kitchen . . . if I only had a white apron to tie around you, I'd just about guarantee you to fetch him. Dog-gone me if you ain't a lovely girl today, Mary Dunkirk."

"Uncle Harry . . . you're simply maddening! Why, he's going up the hill."

"Now, now . . . don't you worry and fret . . . he'll come back."

"Nonsense. How you *will* talk. I don't worry or fret about him. I never even think of him."

"If Iyin' was shootin'," said the old man, "you'd sure leave more dead behind you than ever Peter Blue done. Peter's gone up the hill to fetch his horses out to water. And you watch him come rarin' down the hill with 'em."

"Ah," said the girl, "I hear that he has two fast horses . . . and nothing else to call his own. Who but robbers and thieves need such fast horses, Uncle Harry?"

"He has two legs and two arms and two hands that will break other men in two . . . look at this bare piece of firewood, honey, and see how he slashed it with one cut of the axe. He's got the finest head that was ever set on a pair of shoulders, and the grandest heart that ever beat in a man's breast. That's what he's got, and what has any man got more? As for his fast horses . . . well, he wants 'em for the glory of ridin' fast and far. Besides, would any common nag match him, I ask you? Wait . . . listen! Now you come look."

He caught her by the arm and dragged her to a window so forcibly that she could afford to hold back and pretend that she did not wish to go. There from the window she saw Peter Blue come out of the Truman shack with a span of horses, and she saw him throw himself on what seemed a black horse with a white foreleg. . . .

"It's Christopher!" she cried.

They galloped madly down the slope, Christopher leading in spite of the weight of his rider, and the bay racing a close second. They flashed into a closer sweep of her eyes. She saw Peter Blue for the first time as he was in action.

"Look at him racin' and tearin' along!" cried Uncle Harry. "Oh, see if God ever made another like him. Nothin' so fine, so wild, so careless, so free, so plumb beautiful. Nothin' so big, so strong, so terrible fierce and so brave!"

"Oh, they'll crash into the fence!" Mary worried.

"Not them. No, open your eyes."

She opened her eyes, and she saw Peter Blue and Christopher hanging in the sky—so it seemed—then shooting forward across the fence. The bay followed. So they rushed to the watering trough, and Mary hurried back to the oven.

"Come back here," said the old man. "He won't notice that you're spyin' on him. He wouldn't care if he did. There ain't nothin' spoiled or mean or low about him. He must have had admiration around him all of the days of his life. So you come and look again, honey, and don't you fear that he'll notice."

"I wouldn't have come the first time," she said angrily, "if you hadn't pulled me to the window."

"But I didn't hold you there," he said, cackling. "Oh, Mary, you young beauties was

made to fool the boys, but never to fool the old fellows. You could fool maybe even Solomon, when he was young. Maybe when Peter comes in, he'll think that I got an angel in here cooking for me. I'll tell you what, honey, if you're real good, I'll keep you here to wash the dishes, and make Peter stay, so's you can see something more of him."

"I won't listen to another word!" she cried. But she felt a little dizzy, and her hand fumbled twice as she burned the tips of her fingers before she found the knob of the oven door.

Then someone was whistling in the distance, and coming closer. It was he! Aye, and a grand bass voice suddenly struck up:

**Barnegat, Barnegat, belt on your gun,
For Marty McVey is a-comin' . . .**

It seemed to the girl that it was a marvelous organ music that reached to her heart of hearts.

A moment later, the shrill treble of the old man joined the chorus:

**Marty McVey, Marty McVey,
Barnegat's gun will talk today.**

**Barnegat, Barnegat, gimme your hand,
For he's galloping up from the river,
Barnegat, Barnegat, take your stand. . . .**

Into the doorway came the lofty form of Peter Blue, his lips still parted with his singing and his great voice thronging through the cabin and throwing strong, sharp echoes back from the walls, so that Mary Dunkirk felt as though the very ground were trembling under her feet. Then he saw her and took off his hat, and his grave, dark eyes looked straight into hers.

She had expected someone boisterous, gay, wild, ignorant—and, as she met him, at last, she felt quite at sea. She was glad, for the first time, of the chattering of old Uncle Harry, as he made the big man welcome, and talked of the plowing, and asked how the oxen had pulled through the tough ground farthest from the riverbank, and how the blackbirds had followed the plow.

Then the men were at the table, and she served them with her own hands, and she heard old Uncle Harry saying: "Now look at the brown of them birds, Pete, will you? It takes a woman, to cook like that! Just slice into 'em and see the juice run, will you? That's Mary's touch. Now, dog-gone me if she ain't going to make a wife for a king, one of these days. Then why not for you, Peter?"

She felt as shamed and as helpless as a child, and stamped her foot. "Uncle Harry!" But then she met the mild, amused eyes of Peter Blue. He was not in the least embarrassed.

"He's old enough to talk like that," Peter Blue said to her. "Don't let it bother you. Aren't you going to sit here? Do you know that Uncle Harry hasn't told me your name?"

“I’m Mary Dunkirk.”

“You’re the sheriff’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

Once more those dark, keen eyes looked at her with quiet understanding, but without malice or scorn or amusement. Even more than when she had seen him sweeping down the hill on the back of Christopher, she knew that he was a very strong man.

She really dared not sit down. For she felt that, if she did, she would be foolishly aware of her feet and her hands, and that she would never be able to meet the eyes of this tall fellow about whom she had come to warn Uncle Harry. So she made it her business to wait on the table, and always found something to do.

“She’s her mother’s daughter,” Uncle Harry said when Peter protested. “Let her wait on the men, if she wants to.”

But, after a time, she grew a little more comfortable and more at ease; she could look at them both; she could enjoy the merry eye of Uncle Harry and the handsome face and the prodigious appetite of Peter Blue. All the time a great happiness was growing in her—greater than could be believed, almost. It swelled her heart and made her smile. She felt a strange sense of possession and kindness, which enveloped the entire world of her knowledge.

Then, as the smile grew out on her lips, she heard the rapid hoofs of a horse in the distance, the beating, insistent, hurrying hoofs of a horse driven up the trail by some hardhanded rider. She listened, and the smile went out, for she felt that calamity was drawing close, and the charm that held this circle in such an enchanted happiness would suddenly be snapped.

VII

She turned at last from the stove to the window, in time to see a flying horseman rush up the trail and drive straight at the door of the Barnes shack. The wind of his gallop furred the brim of his hat above his eyes and parted his streaming, pale mustaches. He was out of the saddle the instant the pony he rode came to a halt, and, as it stood with hanging head, the tall fellow strode into the doorway of the shack, saying: “Is there anybody here that knows where I can find a hound by the name of Peter Blue that has been living up the road in the . . . ?”

Here he stopped himself and finished his sentence with a sweep of the hand that brought out a revolver. He covered Peter Blue, where the latter sat at the table, half turned toward the newcomer.

“And here you are, Steve?” Peter murmured to the tall stranger.

“Fill your hand, you low skunk!” bellowed Steve Livernash. “You ain’t gonna talk yourself out of this hole, Blue. Fill your hand and lemme see you fight, if you can.”

Mary Dunkirk had shrunk to the corner of the room, but now she sprang into action, for she knew that the process of “filling a hand” was a most perfunctory matter. It was a little flaw in the code of Western honor, which declared that it was quite permissible in a

pinch to kill any man, so long as that man had a gun in his hand and was facing the enemy. It mattered not if the victor covered a victim with a steady rifle on a rest and bade the other grasp a weapon. As long as the hand was “filled”, shooting became legitimate. So, knowing this, Mary Dunkirk sprang straight back into the line of fire between Livernash and Peter Blue. As she came between them, she felt as though death were already reaching for her.

“Fair play!” cried Mary Dunkirk, and she faced the stranger magnificently with her head high.

“Get out of the way!” yelled Livernash, and he sprang to get to one side of her.

She moved on the inside of the arc, and still cut him off, and the next instant he found himself facing a double-barreled shotgun, securely gripped in the withered hands of Uncle Harry, whose old eye squinted down the sights.

“I’ll take a hand in this,” said Uncle Harry. “Mary dear, you’ve done real fine. But now you go sit down and cry, because I know that you must feel like it. You go over there and sit down. Now, stranger, if you got any talking to do, I’ll talk to you. What is it that you want to say?”

Mary Dunkirk turned and threw a frightened glance at Peter Blue.

He had not yet filled his hand. No, this lightning gunman had not swept a weapon from his holster, but he was rising slowly from his place, and then he took her arm.

“You’d better do as Uncle Harry says,” he suggested. “You’re a tremendously brave girl, Mary Dunkirk. If your father could have seen you do that, he would wish that you were a boy.”

“Oh, oh!” gasped Mary. “Is it all over?”

“Yes,” he said.

“There’s no more danger . . . you’re not going to be murdered?”

“Certainly not . . . thanks to you.”

She would always feel that it was chiefly because Uncle Harry had suggested tears that she began to weep bitterly. Peter Blue brought her to a chair and kneeled beside her and dried her tears with his handkerchief.

“I’m ashamed,” said Mary, choking.

“You’re a dear,” Peter Blue insisted. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You’ll despise me,” said Mary.

“No, I shall not.”

There was so much honesty in his voice that she began to control herself. It was hard to lift her eyes from the floor to his face, but, when she managed to do so and saw him smiling faintly, she could not help breaking into laughter.

“I’ve been a perfect idiot,” Mary Dunkirk announced.

In the meantime, the would-be assassin had been backed out the door and held with his hands above his head by old Uncle Harry Barnes.

“You step right out there in the open,” said Uncle Harry. “I ain’t going to get you killed there on my floor. I been working for a week whitening up that floor, and here

you'd be spoiling all my work for me. If you got your heart right set on dying, why, Peter'll kill you right here. And we'll bury you wherever you say, stranger."

"You damned old fool," Livernash said, his hands in the air, but his eye was bright and as dangerous as ever, "I'll have the pleasure of twisting your neck for this, one day."

"Son," said the old man, "don't you go talkin' foolish. You better be sayin' any prayers that you can remember. Think about the friends that might be needin' messages from you. Because I would jot them down and send them through the mails."

"You be damned, will you?" Livernash yelled.

"Hey and hello," said Uncle Harry. "Ain't the man wild, though. No friends? No religion? No nothin'? Leastwise, you might be thinking over where you would like to have us put you away. I'd suggest that rise, yonder. It faces south and gets the winter sun. And the first flowers, they come out there in the spring. What would you say to that, Steve? Or then, there's the bank of the river, down there. If you're special fond of rivers and such, we could bury you there in the shade and that would keep you cool. Or right out there in the garden patch, maybe you'd rather be planted for fertilizer, because there's some that likes to be useful, living or dead. I reckon that you're that kind, Steve."

Steve exploded in a violent assortment of curses.

"Hushaby, honey," old Harry said. "The girl'll be hearin' you and she ain't old enough to quite appreciate such language as you got in your deck. Just tie up that tongue and leave it behind you when you come to call again, Steve. Well, here's Peter come to settle you."

"Aye," said Livernash, half hysterical with fury. "By God, I've run him over half the continent in the last six months, and now I'm double-crossed and murdered by an old thug and a damned cowardly. . . ."

"Steady, steady," Peter Blue said, and smiled. "Have you really been chasing me for six months, Steve?"

"You know it!" cried Steve.

"I know it?"

"Aye, and you've been sneaking through the mountain like a whipped puppy."

"Steve," said Peter Blue, "I understand why you felt like this. You've never got over the last time we met. After that, you had enough time to think things over in the hospital, and you should have learned some sense. But it seems that you haven't. Go back to town, Steve, and think this over. Afterwards, I'll meet you wherever you wish . . . with people to see what's happening. But I don't want to kill you today. Uncle Harry, just see that he gets away down the road, will you?"

He turned deliberately back into the house, while Uncle Harry said: "Climb onto your hoss, young feller. It seems that you ain't going to be planted today, after all. Now, I'd call that downright generous of Pete. But I'll tell you something more, on my own part. If I see anybody skulkin' around here, I got such poor eyes that I might take 'em for a coyote sneakin' around, and then I'd be apt to take a pot shot. And I don't often miss with a rifle, old son!"

The other had remounted his horse with his mind in a whirl. He did not speak again, but favored Uncle Harry with one murderous glance, and then rode down the trail toward

town as slowly and with as little spirit as he had come with speed and fire.

Uncle Harry went back into the cabin and found the girl putting on her hat. She was excited and trembling and felt that she should go home at once.

“And after not touching a bit of nothing,” said Uncle Harry. “Well, if you got to go, I suppose that you’ll be seein’ her home, Peter.”

“No, no,” Mary said.

“Yes, yes!” said Uncle Harry.

Peter left the room.

“I don’t want an escort,” she insisted. “And . . . I can’t wait.”

“But you will, though.” Uncle Harry grinned. “Hey, it ain’t every day that a girl has Peter Blue to ride across the hills with her. Oh, you’ll wait for him, Mary. I was proud to know a girl like you this day. Dog-gone me it was a fine thing to see you come sashayin’ in between the murderin’ gun of that varmint and my Peter! Another split part of a second, and there would have been a killing.”

She covered her eyes with her hands. “He would have murdered Peter Blue,” she said.

“Him? Him?” snorted the old man. “Don’t you fool yourself, honey. Peter didn’t have no gun in his hand, but what’s that to Peter? Quicker than a wink he would have filled his hand and finished off that gent. And then what would’ve happened? Why, he would have had to ride out of the county, and maybe I would never have laid eyes on him again. That was why I got my gun and marched that Steve gent out of the shack. But, Lord, wasn’t our Peter fine and easy and grand?”

“Yes,” Mary agreed, smiling faintly as she looked back on the memory of all that had happened. “Wasn’t he?”

“You could see that he had the thing in hand all the time. He wasn’t bothered none. Oh, I tell you what, you could lay ten men together end to end and six deep, and they wouldn’t make up the bigness of Peter Blue. ‘Go back to town and think it over, Steve,’ he says. ‘I don’t want to kill you today!’ Well, think of it, Mary. Think of havin’ the life of a man in your hand like that. Think of bein’ insulted the way that our Peter was, and then bein’ calm and cool and forgivin’ the way that he was. Don’t it warm your heart, honey?”

They heard the distant tramp of a horse.

“I must go!” cried Mary.

“Aye,” said the old man, “you hurry along, now, so’s you won’t keep Peter waiting, because here he comes.”

The color rushed into her pale face at that. “I had no such idea, Uncle Harry, and you know it,” she declared.

He wagged a forefinger at her. “You go fix your hat,” he said, “and make yourself pretty. Dog-gone me if you ain’t almost got him already. And if you let him see you smile a couple of times on the way home, who can tell if you won’t have him landed before you see your house? Hurry, honey, and I’ll go out and talk to him.”

He rambled from the door of the house to where Peter waited, holding his tall

Christopher and the pony of the girl.

“Ain’t she wonderful, Pete?” he asked. “Ain’t she a girl in a million? Aye, you don’t have to answer me. Your pride, it don’t fool no one. Because I know the kind of a girl that fits into the heart of a man as snug as a nut into its shell. And, hey, Peter, lean down your ear, will you?” When he had been obeyed, he whispered: “I got an idea that she likes you a little, son. Just a mite. Be kind to her. And keep her smiling. Who knows but you might land her before even you see her house today.”

Mary came out and was given a hand into her saddle. Then off they went, side-by-side, with Mary looking back, at last, and waving with a sudden joyous laugh to Uncle Harry.

“Oh, Lord,” said Uncle Harry, “ain’t they a picture, now? Ain’t they a picture, I ask you?” He went back to the door of the shack and watched them out of sight. He began to laugh a little, and rubbed his thin hands together. “What a day’s work for me,” he said. “What a bang-up, full day’s work. I dunno that I’ll waste time plowin’ this afternoon.”

All the time that he was washing the dishes and the tins, his high, uncertain tenor was never still, but wavered through one after another of the old ballads of his youth.

Now and again, too, he would step to window or door and scan the skyline with a careful glance, but that skyline showed no threatening form. Steve Livernash had not come back as yet.

VIII

The gloom with which Livernash started on his disappointed way back to town lasted all the way to the village. Not once did he lift his head, not even when a stag broke cover out of a little copse and dashed across the trail just fifty yards before him. The killing of a deer meant nothing to Livernash now, because his heart was filled with much greater concerns.

He knew not who to reproach. As for himself, he felt that his work had been flawless. He had found his man and taken him by surprise and secured the drop on him. Then what had happened? Two perfectly negligible quantities began to operate on him. A girl sprang before his gun, and then an octogenarian covered him with a shotgun. Such things could not be foreseen, and therefore Steve began to feel rather grimly comforted, and decided that he would place the blame with fate.

He was troubled, too, by something more than his mere failure, for the manner in which he had failed was of great importance. He had had victory within his grasp. But he could not understand the sluggishness of big Peter Blue. There had been no move on the part of Blue to defend himself, and Steve felt that this could be explained in only one of two ways. Either Blue had been frightened out of his wits, or else he despised the danger too greatly to give it the slightest attention.

In spite of himself, Livernash felt that the latter explanation was apt to be the more accurate one, and, although he gritted his teeth with rage at the thought that he had been merely despised, yet he made sure that this had been the case. He vowed, of course, that one day he would teach Peter Blue to respect him thoroughly. But in the meantime, it would pay him to practice with his guns every day. For he felt more assured than ever

before that Peter was no common man.

This was the humor of Livernash, partially chastened, partially infuriated, and wholly sulky, by the time that he reached the village. There he rode down the main street and encountered the sheriff before he met another soul. Dunkirk drew up with an exclamation.

“You didn’t find him!”

“The hell I didn’t,” Livernash snapped, and he rode straight on.

“Wait a moment.”

He turned grimly and faced the sheriff. “Why didn’t you tell me that he was out there livin’ with an old fool and his granddaughter?”

“Hello?”

“I say, a withered old goat. . . .”

“Uncle Harry Barnes, you mean? But Harry has no granddaughter.”

“There was a girl there. That’s all I know. A damned pretty one. Well, Blue always had his way with the women. The rattleheads. A solid man, he ain’t got no attraction for the skirts. But a damn’ good-for-nothin’ like Blue. . . .”

“Steve, tell me what happened.”

“I missed him in the first shack. I seen the other place up the trail and headed for it, and, when I got there to ask if Blue was around, there he sat havin’ lunch. I had him covered like that.”

“My God, man!” breathed the excited sheriff.

“Don’t count up the money before it’s paid,” the other said. “Fact was Blue knew that he was a goner, and he didn’t make a move, not even when I told him to fill his hand.”

“That’s hard to believe, old fellow.”

“Don’t call me a liar, Sheriff. I’ve stood for a good deal today. But I won’t stand for that. Just as I was about to drive a bullet through the gizzard of that crook and end my long trail, a bit of calico stepped in between me and my target. . . .”

“You mean that the girl jumped between?”

“Quick as a wink. Blue gets all the girls so crazy about him that they’re all glad to die for him. This little fool, she was no different from the rest. She stood there lookin’ like it would please her a good deal if I was to send a bullet through her heart.”

“Who could that girl be?” Dunkirk exclaimed, biting his mustache. “How did she look, Steve?”

“Too damned pretty to be good, was how she looked. But to hell with her. I’m talkin’ about Blue. I say, I was about to yank that fool of a kid out of the way and ram a yard of lead down the throat of Blue, when the old goat that was there . . . Barnes did you call him? . . . he brought down a shotgun, and took a bead on me, and walked me out of the shack.”

“Uncle Harry did that, eh?” murmured the sheriff. “Well, he was always an old fire-eater and a grand old chap.”

“A grand old chap, eh?”

“Go on, man. What did Blue do?”

“He stayed behind to tell the girl that it was lucky she didn’t get killed, and to hear her say that he was worth dyin’ for, I suppose. Anyway, he finally come out and he says that he didn’t want to kill me today . . . was how he put it . . . and so he would wait for a better time, and would I please to let him know when I wanted to die, because then he would be glad to oblige me.”

Livernash, in the excess of his fury, quirted his own horse heavily across the shoulders, and then sat the beast with gritted teeth and wrenched at its jaw as it bucked. When it was quiet again, he said: “So I’m gonna wait, and maybe you would like to name the time and the place where I’m to kill Blue?”

“No,” Dunkirk responded, “he’ll be on his way out of this county even now, Steve. And you’ll have another six months of trails to find him.”

“Do you think that?”

“I know it.”

Livernash considered, and then he shook his head. “It’s plain that you ain’t seen this kid that’s so sweet on Blue,” he said.

“Eh?”

“Because she’s a beauty, old fellow. A plain beauty. I tell you, she’s a girl that could make a whole town fall in love with her in ten seconds. That there girl, Dunkirk, heard Blue promise that he’d meet me when I was ready. No, he’ll never run out on me. If she was a mite less of a corker, he might beat it, but I figger that even a varmint like Blue had rather die than to have this here girl turn up her nose at him.”

“Who could it be?” the sheriff wondered with a grunt, and he frowned at the ground. Then he added: “The important thing, Steve, is that I cannot wait until you’re ready to polish off Blue. I simply can’t wait. It’s a matter of honor with me.”

Livernash gaped. “It’s a matter of honor with you, eh?”

“It is.”

“Why, hell, man, and what is it to me? Ain’t I swore that I’d find him and kill him?”

“Tell me how you’ll go about it, Livernash?”

“If I can’t think of a better way,” he responded, “I’ll write out and invite him to come into town and settle this here deal with me in the main street.”

“Would he do that?”

“The girl’d shame him into it. And the old man . . . what was his name?”

“Barnes.”

“Barnes? I’m familiar with that.”

“You may have met his son.”

“Aye, maybe I did. What’s Barnes to Blue?”

“God knows how Blue wormed himself into the confidence of the old man, but he seems to be there. So far as I know, they’re strangers to one another.”

“Barnes?” the gunfighter said to himself, and he frowned at the sky, heedless of the

voice of the sheriff, who was stating: "I'll tell you what, Steve. If you think that you have a ghost of a chance with Blue . . . a ghost of a chance to make him fight it out with you, I mean . . . I'll wait for you, because I know that you've set your heart on that meeting. But my duty really is to run him out of the county *pronto*. I'll think it over."

Dunkirk turned his horse and started off, and still the other remained in the saddle, staring at the sky. Finally Livernash started on slowly down the street, lost in his brown study, and, when he arrived at the hotel and had put up his horse, he said to the proprietor: "You know old man Barnes down the road, yonder?"

"Uncle Harry, you mean?"

"Yes. He has a son, eh?"

"Yep."

"By name of what?"

"By name of Dick."

"Ah," Livernash murmured, a glint in his eye. But he went on slowly: "A sort of an ornery-lookin' gent, eh?"

"Sort of."

"With a scar in the holler of his cheek?"

"Oh, that's him, all right."

"By God, then," said Livernash, "it fits in, after all."

"Fits into what?" asked the hotelkeeper.

But Livernash was already striding off.

IX

Altogether, the sheriff felt that it might be as well to let this complicated affair rest as it was. If he directly rode out with a posse to catch the gunman, Peter Blue would range swiftly away on his matchless horses. If he went alone to make the arrest, he would fall under the bullets of the man of battle. But if he left the matter in the hands of Livernash, the latter would be sure to execute his revenge or else die in the attempt.

Absolute insistence upon the course of duty was not in the heart of the sheriff. He was accustomed to handling each affair as it arose and in a special manner. All that he cared about was to finish off the career of Peter Blue, so far as that county was concerned. But if in addition the life of Blue were actually ended, the sheriff had not the slightest doubt that it would be for the good of society. He wanted no government warrant to encourage Livernash in the latter's earnestness for revenge.

His heart was now lighter than it had been for some days, and he rode home that evening, singing softly to himself. As he drew closer to his house, he heard the sweet voice of Mary singing the very song that was on his lips, and the sheriff reined in his mustang and listened. She sang well. To the sheriff, it seemed that she sang perfectly. Above all, because he could remember the day, long years ago, when he had taught her that same song.

He put up his horse and went into the little house through the kitchen door, where his wife was busy with her cookery. "Mary's fair busting with song tonight," he observed with much satisfaction.

"I wish that she'd bust songs, instead of dishes," said his wife. "She's smashed a plate and two glasses, setting the table tonight."

"Aw, let her be, let her be," Newton Dunkirk murmured. "What's a dish or two in a girl's life?"

"Me?" the housewife cried sharply. "Are you going to marry her off to a millionaire, maybe?"

"Ain't she worthy of it?" asked Dunkirk.

"A fine chance she has to take up with one," Mrs. Dunkirk replied, heated with the stove and her work. "A fine, fair chance that girl has, after we've spread ourselves on her education and all. No, but she'll be picking up with some lowdown, ignorant, good-for-nothin' cowpuncher, and then slave the rest of her life away the same as other women have done . . . that I could tell you about!"

The sheriff felt the imputation and bit his lip. But he never struggled against the will of his better half when he found her in such a humor. Instead, he went obediently out of the room and found his daughter in the dining room putting the last touches to the table in the form of a bunch of wildflowers in a flat glass dish.

"Hey and what?" the sheriff grunted, grinning broadly. "What young gent is comin' for dinner tonight, honey? Is it maybe Jeff Dixon?"

"Stuff!" said the girl. "Jeff Dixon is hardly more than a baby."

"It's Bud Loomis, then," he declared.

"Bud? Poor Bud. He's just a youngster."

"Look here, Mary, those boys were your best friends just around the corner of yesterday, and what's made you grown up past them, so quick?"

"Shall I tell you, Dad?"

"By the Lord," the father said, "I think that you're going to tell me something worth hearing."

"I am! Something that'll surprise you a lot. I've met a man."

The sheriff looked deeply into her shining eyes and felt a chilly sense of loss. But, after all, every daughter must marry someday. So he braced himself and smiled back at her. "An honest-Injun hundred percent man, Mary?"

"An honest-Injun one. Really! There's only one trouble."

"And what's that?"

"He's a man that you don't like."

"Ah, I got the pleasure of knowing this gent before, have I?"

"Yes, you have. It makes it rather hard to talk to you about him. Because you've seen him in the wrong way."

"Going or coming, do you mean?"

"I mean he's the man that you've always written down as a rascal and a bad fellow. But he isn't at all."

"I'm glad to know that," the sheriff stated more grimly. "Well, I'll guess who it is."

"No, you never could."

"It's that spindling, squint-eyed, hard-headed Casey Langhorne!"

"No, no, no! How horrible."

"Horrible, eh? Why do you say that? Is this man you're talking about the one that you're going to marry?"

"Yes, if he'll have me."

"If?"

"He hasn't asked me."

"Hold on, now, Mary. Are you makin' a joke of me?"

"No, not a bit."

"Have you been losin' your heart to a gent that ain't even looked at you favorable?"

"I have."

"My God, honey, what do you know about him?"

"Nothing at all. I never saw him before today."

The sheriff sat down suddenly. He felt weak and rather old and useless in this dizzy world of youth.

"You never seen him before today?" he echoed.

"Never." And she laughed at him joyously.

"But you know that you love him, of course?"

"Of course I do."

"So much that you put flowers on the table in honor of him, even though he ain't coming to dinner?"

"Exactly."

"Maybe he's a married man, honey?"

"Maybe he is."

"Confound it, Mary, doesn't that make any difference?"

"Not a bit, really."

"Hey?"

"I couldn't help it if he were married, could I?"

"You could forget about it if you had to, though."

"No, I couldn't."

"Then you tell me what you could do, young lady!"

"Why, I'd just take him away from his wife, of course. I mean, I would if I could."

"You would, eh? You'd run off with a married man?"

“I would in a minute.”

“With a wife and kids at home?”

“I’d never give them a thought.”

“Mary, if I didn’t know that you’re lyin’ to me, this here would make me pretty sick.”

“I can’t help laughing, because I’m so happy,” said Mary. “But as a matter of fact, I’m terribly serious.”

“I believe you,” Dunkirk said gravely. “So now you go ahead and tell me something more about this gent that you’re going to run away with, and leave his wife and his babies at home. How long is he gonna keep on loving you?”

“Forever, I hope. But if not, it’s worthwhile to have him even for a day or a week. . . .”

“Dog-gone me if I’m not paralyzed the way you talk, Mary. It ain’t because it’s so indecent, but because it don’t sound like you. Your voice has changed, even. If I was in the other room and overheard you, I wouldn’t recognize that it was my own girl talking to me.”

“I *have* changed, Dad. He changed me in two minutes.”

“I’d like to find out the name and the address of this here philanderin’ married man,” the sheriff hissed through his teeth. “Because if he’s got a temporary home, maybe I could give him a permanent address.”

“Do you mean in town?”

“I mean in hell!”

She merely laughed again. “Dear Dad,” she said, “he’s not that kind of a man.”

“What?”

“I mean he’s such a wonderful man that no one would ever dare to stand up to him.”

“Where did you meet this here wonderful lion?” asked the sheriff with a sneer.

“In old Uncle Harry’s house today.”

The sheriff leaped from his chair and caught his daughter by the arms. “Lovin’ God!” said the sheriff. “You ain’t meaning what you say, Mary?”

“Why do you act like this, Dad? Why shouldn’t I go to poor old Uncle Harry’s house?”

“It was you!” the sheriff cried hoarsely.

“I who did what?”

“Who jumped in front of the gun of Livernash and saved the life of Pete Blue.”

“Oh, that? I’d almost forgotten. Yes, I did stop that big, ugly man. Not that Peter needed saving. He could have blown Mister Livernash off the face of the earth, if he hadn’t been so kind-hearted.”

“Mary, Mary, stop babblin’ and laughin’, will you, and listen to me, before I go mad!”

“Of course, I’ll listen, but I simply can’t stop laughing. Only tell me . . . is Peter really married?”

“Damn Peter! Eternally damn and blast him! How do I know? But I do know that he’s

a renegade man-killer, a professional life-taker, and a butcherin' . . .”

“Dear old Dad, you just don’t understand. Why, you should see the way Uncle Harry loves him, and he’s just like a son to Harry. You’ve said yourself that Uncle Harry never makes a mistake about a man.”

“The miserable blind old idiot is in his second childhood. *Knows?* He knows nothing. Mary, Mary, Mary, are you meanin’ what you say? You ain’t jokin’ with me? You ain’t laughin’ at me to make me mad? But for God’s sake tell me that you don’t mean that you’ve fallen in love with that devil of a man, Peter Blue.”

“Sit down again, and I’ll tell you everything, of how I rode over to warn Uncle Harry against him, and of how I first saw Peter, and how I came to know him, and how he rode home with me, and how I loved him, and how he didn’t so much as speak to me, hardly, all the way here . . . and yet I’m so happy that I hardly know myself!”

X

Newton Dunkirk was not a man to be overthrown by a single shock, and, although he had never before been so staggered as he was now by the outburst of his daughter, he listened gravely to all that she had to say. Not that he changed his opinion of Peter Blue, but because it was important for him to understand the exact viewpoint of Mary. As he listened, he felt that he could understand why Peter Blue might have tried to fascinate the girl. He, the sheriff, had threatened to drive the gunman from the county, and was it not more than probable that, with malicious craft, Blue was striving to wound the man of the law in his most vulnerable spot?

The problem of Dunkirk grew more and more complicated, for now he must adjust his plans in another fashion. Merely to drive Peter Blue from the county would be worse than useless, from his own point of view, because the girl would continue to worship this new idol at a great distance. Death is an ugly word, but the sheriff felt that it might be the only one that could supply the solution for this difficulty. He had thought of meeting the gunfighter with foul play, but he was determined to overwhelm Peter Blue by the force of the law.

That night, after dinner, he wrote a batch of telegrams directed far and near and confided them to one of his ranch hands to carry to the telegraph office. Those telegrams were inquiries directed north and south and east and west to officers of the law who would be apt to know something concerning the past life of Peter Blue. Not about the crimes of Blue did the sheriff ask, but concerning the record of the famous gunfighter with women. For on that score he hoped to dig up a scandal or two that might daunt Mary in spite of her professed carelessness.

When he had dispatched these telegrams, he felt more at his ease, and, coming into the sitting room, there he found his wife with her knitting. Her resolute thriftiness forbade her to keep a servant, and the one quiet hour in her day was this just before bedtime, when she sat with her lap filled with knitting, crooning a little song and oblivious of the world.

The sheriff, looking at her time-marked face, wondered how she could be the mother of Mary Dunkirk, whose gay song was floating from her room, dimmed by distance but

not made less joyous. Yet he was fond of his wife. Her pressure had turned him from a careless, rollicking youngster into a settled man of middle age, with a prosperous ranch, and a chance to take out his restless love of adventure in the work of his paid office as sheriff. He admired her foresight. He respected her courage. But his affection was tempered a good deal by fear. Yes, if the truth must be known, the sheriff was afraid of his better half.

He picked up a paper, tried to read it, and then crumpled and tossed it to one side.

“Sally.”

The humming continued from the knitter.

“Sally?”

“Aye, Newt.”

“Do you know what you’re singing?”

“I don’t know. Was I singing?”

“You was. You are now.”

“Newt.”

“Well?”

“Mister Fitzgerald came back today to have another look at that stack of barley hay.”

“Did he?”

“I told you that he’d be back. He looked it all over. ‘I’ll give you fourteen and a half a ton,’ he said. ‘Don’t you talk to me,’ I said back. ‘I’d let you have that hay in a minute, but my husband, he holds out steady for sixteen.’ ”

“I don’t, Sally. Fourteen and a half is a grand price! Twelve would be good enough for that unbaled stuff. Why should you make a Jew out of me?”

“Because you’ll get the pleasure of the money, and why shouldn’t you take the blame for the bargaining, can you tell me?”

“Did he leave then?”

“He offered fifteen, told me to tell you about it. I know he’ll be back to give the sixteen, though, before the week’s out. He wants it bad. I told him that the Marshall brothers had sent out a man to look at the hay.”

“But they didn’t!”

“What difference does that make? If the Marshall brothers was real businessmen, they *would’ve* sent out a man.”

Another pause.

“Sally, will you stop that damn’ singin’?”

“Was I singin’, Newt?”

“You was. What song . . . d’you know?”

“I can’t guess. It was in my throat, but not in my head, Newt.”

“ ‘Little Brown Jug’. Dog-gone me if I ain’t listened to that song every evening for these twenty years . . . and still you will keep on with it to drive a man mad. Sally! You’re

at it ag'in."

She made a slight pause in her knitting and looked at him over the rim of her glasses. "What's on your conscience, Newt?"

"On my conscience? Nothin'."

"Oh, yes, there is. There's always something on a man's conscience when he acts the way that you're acting. Come out with it."

He glared at her. He felt bitterly triumphant to find her wrong, for this once. "My conscience is as clean as the palm of my hand," he said.

"Soap and water is good for the skin, an' repentin's for the conscience," she advised.

"But I ain't got nothin' on my conscience, woman!"

"Lord, Lord," said his better half, "the more a man talks, the more he gives himself away."

There was a pause. Then: "Damn it, Sally, will you stop that singin' or do you want me to leave the room?"

"It's a tolerable bright, soft night, out," Mrs. Dunkirk commented. "Mary's happy, tonight, ain't she?"

The voice lilted in the distance, and the music flowed softly through the house.

"And d'you know why?" he barked.

"Why, then?"

"She's found a man."

"She's comin' to the age," Mrs. Dunkirk said.

"Woman," cried the indignant sheriff, "you ain't got no nacheral feelin' in your heart for your girl! You don't even care who the man is."

"You mean this last one?" said Sally Dunkirk.

"Yes."

"Peter Blue?"

"Hey? Has she told you?"

"Of course. First thing."

"And you don't care?"

"What good does carin' do?"

"You'd let her go off and marry that scoundrel?" the sheriff asked bitterly. "You wouldn't be bothered none?"

"I ain't even thought about it."

"After her sayin' that she's in love?"

"What good does lovin' do?" she asked. "Marryin' is what counts."

"Suppose he's married already, I ask you?"

"Time and tide take care of all things, Newt."

"Damn the time and damn the tide! Double damn it! D'you know what kind of a man

Peter Blue is?”

“I’ve heard tell of him, I think.”

“A gunfightin’, man-killin’ hound!”

“Them things,” Mrs. Dunkirk said, “will sort of bring a girl’s eyes on a man.”

“Will you stop that knitting and talk sense?”

“I don’t think very good unless I got my hands busy,” she said.

“You’re gonna throw your girl away on him, are you?”

“Is he so bad?”

“I’ve told you what he is!”

“Man-killin’?”

“Ain’t that bad enough?”

“What counts,” she said, “ain’t what he is to men, but what he’s gonna be to his wife? Has he got no eddication?”

“Maybe he can read and write, I dunno. He can shoot, that’s what the world knows about him.”

“Read, write, and shoot,” murmured Mrs. Dunkirk. “What more could you do when I married you, Newt?”

He leaped from his chair. “Badgerin’ me is always what you’re keen on,” he declared. “Mary, she don’t count.”

The knitting ceased. The hands of the knitter folded one on top of the other.

“Do you know something, Newt?”

“Not according to you!”

“I tell you, all our talkin’ and strivin’ wouldn’t change that girl no more than it would keep the wind from blowin’.”

“I’ll see about that. I’m her father.”

“Don’t you go tryin’ it. She’s different from us. She’s plumb different from us, and she always was, and she always will be.”

“Ain’t she our flesh and blood?”

“I was a pretty girl,” said her mother, “but I never had the eye that Mary has. And you’re a strong man, Newt, but you never had the strength of our Mary.”

“I dunno about that.”

“I’ve seen her put you down a hundred thousand times. If she don’t handle you with a frown, she’ll handle you with a smile. But she’s always got something left that you and me can’t guess at. The best plow in the world can’t follow a racer, Newt.”

“So you’re gonna fold your hands and let her go?”

“I am.”

“And take no care for her? Woman, ain’t you got no shame?”

“I can pray for her,” said the other. “But handle her I can’t. Nor can you.”

“We’ll see what happens!” the sheriff hissed, more and more savage.

“What will you do?”

“All that a gun *can* do!”

“Aye,” said the mother, “but a six-shot brain ain’t enough to handle Mary.”

XI

In the faint light of the early dawn, Peter Blue left the Truman shack and stood with a Colt fifty paces from a slender sapling. He fired three shots in one minute—three deliberate careful shots—and then he walked closer to investigate. He had chosen as a bull’s-eye a little lump on the side of the tree, and he saw that it was quite blown away, and a treble hole, the inner edges of which almost touched, driven through the heart of the sapling. He stood back with a smile.

That was not bad. Even right-handed shooting could not surpass this very greatly. As he walked back to his distance again, he told himself that the painful hours he had spent working before the little mirror with pencil and paper had not been wasted. They had keyed up his motor senses in the fingers of that hand and made it closer to a real organ for action.

But such slow target work was, of course, useful for hunting but very little use, indeed, for fighting. Fights with men, according to his experience, did not happen after that fashion. Two men did not face each other and take deliberate aim. Instead, it was a chance encounter as one swung around a corner, or it was a single angry word of insult that caused the explosion, or it was the slamming of a door—and one turned to face a foe. Or perhaps one wakened in the night and heard a stealthy stir through the darkness, or it might be that a quiet foot stole up behind one—then, with tensed nerves, to whirl and fire from the hip. Not in a third of a minute. Not even in a second. But to move so that one’s movement almost overtook one’s thought, to think the bullet home, and actually to drive it to the spot. That was what a man might do, and without that power for action, accuracy was nothing whatever. Particularly to Peter Blue, surrounded as he was in this quarter of the world with enemies of the heartiest fashion.

So you may understand that his lips were tight as he stood with his back to the sapling, the gun in its holster—on his *left* hip. He tensed body and nerves, then, at a mental signal, he whirled and snatched at the revolver and fired. . . .

Fast enough, you would say. And look! the bullet has clipped the rim of the sapling. But Peter Blue beat his numb right hand against his forehead.

“Dead, dead, dead!” he said aloud with a groan. “Dead as I turned. Dead before the gun was clear of the leather . . . and even in the finish, I missed the heart.”

He nerved himself once more. Again, again, and again he fired before he gave the thing up with a groan. He had not touched the sapling with any of the last three shots, and in addition each shot had been got off more clumsily than all that preceded.

He went back slowly to the shack. The early morning darkness in the little house was too much for him, and he went into the horse shed and leaned his head against the mighty

shoulder of Christopher. There he was sure of consolation, no matter what else. So he stayed until the day was brighter outside, but although the day grew brighter, his heart did not grow more bright, you may be sure. He had failed, and he knew that his failure was practically complete.

Shoot left-handed he could, but he knew that he could never think with the sinister hand, and that was what he needed. To forget that he had such a thing as a right hand when the time came for critical action, that was what he needed. He pondered this gravely, steadily, meeting the truth with open eyes. His right hand could never recover. He had been told so by a doctor who never missed in his judgments any more than Peter, in the old days, had missed with a gun. Nothing but the left remained to him, and with that left he knew that he could never attain to the old heights of skill.

He mastered himself with a great effort, but, as he walked out through the hills, he wondered what he could do. In a wave of weakness, he wished to let the world know of his stricken condition. Very shame might then hold back his enemies. No, the hundred faces looked suddenly in upon his mind—dark eyes, sneering lips, keen, cruel faces, as merciless as the faces of wolves. They would never forget and they would never forgive, and they would pity him no more than the wolves pitied a failing moose, caught in the snow.

When he had come to this decision, he discovered a rabbit flying across the hillside before him, and he downed it, not from the hip as his old custom had been, but with one of these deliberate, careful shots. The rabbit fell, but it had been almost out of effective shooting distance before he could pull the trigger, and he told himself with a bitter smile that a human fugitive could have filled him with lead during the interval.

Such was the conclusion of Peter as he turned down the hill again and saw the smoke rising above the roof of Uncle Harry's cabin. He stopped and smiled in a different fashion. Ah, if he could change some of the old wild days and ways for a little of the quiet happiness that might be had in that same shack with that same old man—but he shrugged the idea behind him. What is impossible is impossible, and he determined that he would say farewell to Uncle Harry that same morning.

So down he marched to the cabin with the rabbit for breakfast, and he found the stove shimmering with heat, the floor freshly swept, and Uncle Harry busily skimming a thick, stiff layer of cream from a pan of milk that stood in the window.

“Hey, Peter!” cried the old man, “come look at this, will you? Never seen cream standing so thick in my life. The old cow, she must be comin' into good days again!”

He turned and gestured with the dripping skimmer. Peter could hardly recognize him as the wan old meager-faced man who he had first seen only a few days before. There was color in that face, and there was life in the eyes, and the body was held straighter, and the hand trembled no longer. So much meat and drink had done for him, and, more than that, happiness which fills the heart of old age as well as ever it filled the heart of youth. He examined the cream and praised it. It was due, perhaps, to the change of the cow from the long grass to the short. Long grass always made thin cream, said Uncle Harry.

“Or maybe it's due to you, Peter. You bring so much luck along with you.”

They had breakfast shortly afterward, facing one another across the old table, which Peter had braced until it stood strongly on its legs as in the times of its youth.

“Are you plowin’ or studyin’ this morning?” asked Uncle Harry.

Now was the time to break the news, but as Peter hesitated before answering, old Uncle Harry broke in: “No, no, lad . . . there’s no plowin’ for you, unless you want to do it. For me, I’m never happier than when I see the loam turnin’ before the share. I want to tell you something that I been turning over in my head, the same as the grass turns before the plow. Peter, look out the window, and you tell me what you can see.”

“I can see the river, on the right,” Peter said patiently. “And then the meadows between us, with the strip of the plowed ground . . . how that strip’s growing! And then the rolling ground that goes up from the meadows toward the hills.”

“You see all of that?”

“Yes.”

“Anything on that ground?”

“Some good oak . . . and some fine pine groves up on the hillside.”

“Now I’ll tell you something, lad. All of that ground that you see there, it belongs to me. Every peg and leg and stitch of it belongs to me.”

“Hello!” said Peter. “Then you’re a rich man.”

“Someday I will be,” the veteran agreed with fiery eyes rolling over the landscape, “if I could get anyone to go in with me and help at the work and bring some of that land under cultivation. Why, man, there’s five thousand acres of farm land out there . . . and fifteen hundred acres that could be irrigated from the river in a dry spell.”

“Yes,” Peter said. “I believe that.”

“I wanted my boy to stay,” said old Uncle Harry. “If he had stayed here to work the ground with me, we could have got in a little the first year, and a little the next, and every year sunk back the profits in buying more tools, more horses to work the ground . . . and finally we would have been working the whole lay of the land. But he wouldn’t do it. I tried to get the sheriff interested, but he thinks I’m too old to have sense. And nobody believes that anything will grow on this land, except by the edge of the river. But I’ve tried. I’ve dug up bits of ground all the way to the ridge of the hill and planted the spots with grain and everything . . . and it all prospered fine. Though not like a garden, the way that it is in the hollows. I tried to tell my boy all of this, but he was always lookin’ away across the hills. Boys is like that. They figure that a happy day is waiting for them . . . maybe tomorrow. If they only shift scenes often enough, they’ll get to a paradise where everybody is rich, including themselves. They always raise their eyes fixed far off. But as a matter of fact, you can’t see so far toward the skyline. Stand anywhere on the face of the earth, Peter, and the longest distance you can look is straight up over your head. It’s all the same. Why should you travel? The gents that you meet is no different from your neighbors at home. They ain’t any kinder, braver, meaner, or wickedder. They’re just men. If I’d seen that myself before I was past sixty-five, I would’ve had all of this here land blossoming around me. D’you believe that?”

“I believe that,” Peter answered gravely. He felt that he would have to postpone his departure until the afternoon. He could not break in upon this rosy dream.

“But you and me, Peter, could do wonders. I know that the bank would start me with a

loan, if they was sure that I had a good partner . . . and, with that, we'd begin ripping the ground open . . . now, Peter, what do you think of the idea?"

"Why," Peter said, "it might be a wonderful thing."

"In two years," said Uncle Harry, "we'd have a fine big house built there on the hill. Dam the creek beside it and make a fine little lake, and then you and Mary could live up there like a king and a queen, and, every Sunday morning, you could come down here and have a breakfast of broiled trout. Now tell me if that ain't practical, son?"

"Why . . .," began Peter.

"A half interest to each of us, y'understand?"

"Uncle Harry . . . take a half interest in your land?"

"The only question is . . . could you settle down? Could you be content to live right here . . . with Mary to keep you sort of entertained, say?"

"Could I be happy?" Peter Blue closed his eyes. "God . . . yes!" he said at last. "Couldn't I . . . just!"

XII

The imagination of the old man flowed fast and free, after this. He saw the fences built, the ground enclosed, the timber cleared, the soil plowed and seeded. With a few sentences he crowded the rich pastures along the hills with fine cattle and with blooded horses, and with a few more he built corrals and barns and sheds. But it required some time for him to pour forth his fancy upon the subject of the house on the hill, in all its wide-armed magnificence and to describe Peter Blue riding forth on his Thoroughbreds, with his children on ponies beside him.

"And what of your son?" Peter asked, willing to humor the old man in his daydreaming.

"He'll come back," Uncle Harry announced. "The finest lad that ever laid a foot in a stirrup, my boy! You'll know him and you'll love him. Goes six months without writing a letter, but that doesn't matter. Some of these days he'll turn up . . . pray God."

He added the last two words with a sudden wistfulness, and Peter Blue could tell that this was the most weighty sorrow of Uncle Harry's life. He had his doubts about the career and the reappearance of that young man. But he would not for this world discourage his older companion.

Uncle Harry went out to the plow, and Peter, waving good bye to him, knew that he had not enough courage to say farewell to him face to face. Instead, he would write a little note.

He washed the breakfast dishes first, smiling at the conscience that urged him on. Then he sat down to write, but words would not trickle swiftly from the end of his pencil. He sat for some time chewing the base of the pencil, and he looked up from the meditation to see a horseman clattering toward the door of the cabin.

"Uncle Harry!" called the stranger. "Hey, this is for Uncle Harry," he continued when

he saw that Peter was alone in the shack. "I brung it up from the mail box for him."

Peter followed to the open door and squinted hard at the letter. Letters were not over-frequent in the days of Uncle Harry, he knew, and, if this were word from the son or the daughter of the old man, he would want to have the news at once.

However, it was a great distance from the shack to the farther corner of the meadow beside the river, and Peter raised the letter to the sun, squinting shamelessly into it, in the hope of descrying some telltale word through the envelope. Like all Western horsemen, he hated a long walk. He could make out several words at once, for the envelope was thin and the writing was in a powerful, broad, heavy hand. But the words that interested him most came at the bottom of the sheet. They were the signature: **Stephen Livernash.**

All indecision left Peter Blue, at that. He held the envelope in the dense cloud of steam that issued steadily from the spout of the kettle on the stove until the mucilage of the flap was softened. Then he pulled the flap open and extracted the contents, twisted them open, and read:

Dear Mr. Barnes,

I was out at your place the other day, I didn't have the chance to look things over very well, so you may remember that I was kind of hustled away before I could do much talking . . . or shooting. But when I come back to town, I found out that you're the father of Dick Barnes, which made me kind of wonder how come that you are still the friend of Peter Blue. But then I asked around, and I found out that nobody out this way has got the news, yet, about the death of Dick, which I thought that it was only right I should sit down and write to you about it. I was personally myself in the room in Eutaw Corners when your boy Dick Barnes come into the place and I seen Peter Blue pull out a gun and shoot him down. Dick died without having no chance to defend himself. He didn't even have a chance to get his gun out.

I ain't going to say nothing to nobody about this, but, just the same, I would like to know what you figure on, and how Peter Blue comes to be a friend in your house? It looks to me as though the explanation must be that you ain't ever heard the facts about what happened that day in Eutaw Corners.

If that's the case, then maybe you'll be aiming at some sort of a revenge, when you get a chance. I suggest that you keep Blue on quietly in your shack without letting him know nothing, and then the rest of us, maybe a dozen or so, will go out and arrange a little necktie party and string him up for the murdering of your boy. Let me know what you think.

Stephen Livernash

When Blue had finished with the letter, he tapped his fingers thoughtfully on it for a long moment. It was almost as much of a shock to him as it would be to Uncle Harry. He could remember that evening in Eutaw Corners when the raw-boned youth, heated with liquor, had entered the room where he was sitting at cards. Perhaps moonshine whiskey had crazed the brain of Dick Barnes—if that was his name. At any rate, he certainly had

not tried to fight fair, and probably he might have killed Peter Blue on that night had it not been for the fire in the eyes of the youth when he looked at Blue on entering. That glance had been warning enough, and, like a cat, Peter had watched the other stride down the room until he was at the side in a most effective position. There the voice of the youth had bellowed—"Blue, you devil!"—and a gun had gleamed in his hand.

Only a snap shot from the hip from beneath the table enabled Peter Blue to drop the would-be assassin. Barnes pitched on his face and was dead when they picked him up. What had caused him to make the attempt was a mystery, for Peter had never seen him before, but there are many reasons why ambitious youngsters should strive to sink a bullet in Peter Blue. Just as there were reasons, in the old days, why young men often picked quarrels with famous duelists in the hope that some of the settled fame of the older fighters might be inherited by their slayers.

At any rate, that was the true story of the killing of the young man at Eutaw Corners, an attempt so exceedingly rank that Peter had not been even questioned by the sheriff. Now Livernash was striving to falsify the facts enough to poison the mind of the old man against him.

The hot blood rushed into the brain of Peter Blue and a temporary madness seized him. He controlled himself with a great effort and forced his mind to clear. After all, he could no longer surrender to the old, wild, fighting impulses. His deadly tools were blunted. But what a dastardly thing it was! He had not realized, before this, how much Uncle Harry meant to him. To others, he was the reckless, bloodthirsty desperado, Blue. To Uncle Harry, he was all that was desired or desirable in human character. Now, with a single lie, Livernash could blast his good name and leave him an object of eternal hatred to the old fellow.

All of this Peter Blue considered. But what was he to do? If he fled and destroyed the letter, Livernash would simply write another, and the news would be believed because Peter had fled in the meanwhile. What possessed Livernash, however, to use such underhanded means? He had never been a coward. No man in the world had more ample confidence in himself than had Steve Livernash, and yet now he was working with the craft of a lowly, secret poisoner. The only explanation, in the eyes of Peter, was that Livernash felt his enemy was entrenched among friends in the shack of Uncle Harry. He wished to blast Peter out of the trenches with this letter as with a bomb, then he would catch and fight his foe in the open. Perhaps that was the way that Livernash had worked the thing out, which did not diminish the dastardly nature of the lie in that letter.

Peter sat down by the window and looked across the pleasant slope, misted with brightness of the morning sun, and, as he sat there humming "Barnegat, Barnegat!" to himself, he turned the letter back and forth in his mind. He might slip away from this snare. But other snares awaited him. Sooner or later, they would corner him and they would down him. Why not now, then, as well as later? Suppose that Livernash kept his word and said nothing to anyone until he heard from Uncle Harry . . . suppose that his lie was kept to himself . . . why, then, if he, Peter Blue, could kill the liar, the tale would never reach the lips of Uncle Harry. Could he not kill the man? He would have to die himself in order to do the trick. For he could never shoot straight enough with that left hand to down Livernash before Steve fired, and, when he fired, Steve fired straight. Yet, even with two or three bullets in his body, a man could still maintain a battle. Or, at least,

a man could rouse himself for a single death effort.

So said Peter Blue to himself, his eyes glaring out the window and the muscles of his jaw tense. Time to concentrate on the firing of one shot was all that he asked. Given the time, he did not doubt that even his left hand could shoot straight enough. He would pay for that time with a dozen death wounds, if necessary.

That plan was vaguely forming before the eye of his mind, and yet he paused again and again to shake his head and sigh. Suppose the very first bullet from the gun of Livernash should be through head or heart. . . .

A rattle of hoofs outside the door—and there was Mary Dunkirk leaning far off to glance inside, calling from the saddle: “Uncle Harry! Uncle Harry!”

Peter walked out to her.

“Hello!” she said. “Where’s Uncle Harry?”

“In the field, plowing,” Peter answered. It seemed to him rather odd that she should have ridden down the road without noticing the old fellow at the plow, so clearly in view even at this distance.

“Oh, well, then,” she said. “I’ll just leave this with you for him.” She gave him a basket from her arm.

Peter sniffed at it, and then smiled up at her. “An apple pie . . . by the Lord,” he said.

Her eyes had widened a little under his smile. “I was going to town,” she explained, very rosy of cheek. “I thought that I might as well leave a pie here on the way.”

“There’s no place where one will be more appreciated.”

“Tell me,” she said, abruptly getting on to another point, “are you helping Uncle Harry to put in that ground?” She turned and waved toward the river meadow.

“Do you know what he wants me to do?” he quavered.

“Well?”

“Stay with him permanently, and become his partner.”

“Ah, ah!” cried the girl. “What a wonderful idea. Will you do it? Will you?”

XIII

It seemed a bit off to Peter that she should have said it in the manner of one making an appeal for herself rather than asking a mere question. In spite of himself he could not help remembering a certain thing that old Uncle Harry had said to him before.

“I don’t know,” Peter Blue said carefully. “I’ve thought of some such thing. But I don’t know. You see, he has very sweeping ideas for fencing in the whole range to the crest of the hills, yonder, and putting all of the lowlands under cultivation . . . and ranging cattle through the hills themselves. Up yonder,” he went on, watching her face cautiously, “he would have a house for me. A big house. For he says that, of course, I must marry at once.”

Her face was crimson, and then white, and then rosy red once more. “It seems to me a

beautiful idea,” Mary said.

“If it could be done,” Peter mused. “Do you think that a girl would be happy, living out here so far from town . . . such a very lonely place for a house?”

She answered hastily: “I think it would be a glorious place for a house. I can’t imagine a better one.”

“There would be a lake beside it, Uncle Harry says. He would dam the creek and make a little lake beside the house.”

“The very thing, of course,” said Mary Dunkirk.

“All that southern slope would be a lawn, perhaps, with spots of flowers.”

“Why has no one ever thought of it before?” Mary asked.

“And the hollow behind would be the barns and sheds and such things.”

“To keep them from the northers, yes!”

“I suppose a yellow house with a red roof would look rather well.”

“That’s the finest color, of course.”

“And it would be Spanish style, don’t you think?”

“Anything else would be silly. Oh, of course, you’ll stay and do it?”

“It’s tempting, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never heard of anything so perfect. I can see it all so clearly. I’ll never be able to rub the picture out of my mind. That’s a *happy* place for a home, Peter Blue.”

All at once Peter, in turn, saw the picture that he had been describing—the yellow walls, and the glowing red of the roof above the oak trees, and the terraced lawn going down the hills, and the dim red roses growing there. It came breathlessly on him, and, looking from the hill to the girl, it seemed almost as though they had built the place together, out of their two minds, with thought and with love. He closed his eyes for an instant, and his face turned gray.

The girl was heedless of him, now, for her head was high, and she faced the proposed site of the house with eyes misted with delight. As she stared, she was singing softly: “Barnegat, Barnegat, take your stand. . . .”

“You know that old song?” he asked her abruptly.

“Uncle Harry is always singing it.”

“Will you wait one moment while I write a note that I’d like to send to town?”

“Oh, of course.”

It took him more than a moment. With painful care, sitting at the table in the kitchen, he scrawled the letters. It was amazing to see how his skill in the management of that left hand had grown. This is what he wrote:

Dear Livernash,

I promised to meet you, and now I’ll give you the time and the place of the meeting. I didn’t want to make too much of a disturbance out here; or else I should have finished you off the other day when you came. However, I’ll come in tomorrow at noon and kill you in front of the hotel, where the

rest of the town can see what's happening.

I want to give you a fair chance, Livernash. And since I've seen that you can't stand up against my right hand, I'll promise to use my gun in my left.

In case I don't have a chance to speak to you again except with a gun, I wish you a pleasant journey into the long night.

**Faithfully yours,
Peter Blue**

When he signed it, he smiled a little. He knew that bluff counts a great deal in this world. He had tried it many a time before, but he had not the slightest expectation that it would affect Livernash, except to make him thoroughly furious. But that was another way of gaining his point. For anger is almost as helpless as fear. He, Peter Blue, was always cold as steel when he went into a battle.

He went out and gave his missive to the girl.

"And," she said, taking it, "Mother wants to know if you can't come over to dinner . . . with Uncle Harry!"

He smiled faintly. "I don't think that your father would like that very well."

"Oh, don't you mind Dad. He's noisy and blustering. But he's a heart of gold. When he first came across you in the county . . . he . . . he didn't understand. But I'm sure that he does now."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes. I told him that he was completely wrong."

"Ah?" said Peter Blue. "Thank you for that."

"But will you come?"

"Yes, of course. That is, I hope so."

"Then tell me when. Tonight?"

"Tomorrow night would be better."

"Tomorrow night, then. Mother . . . will be awfully pleased. So will Dad, I know. Good bye."

She whirled her horse away, and, as the mustang galloped furiously away, Peter heard the thin, sweet voice whistling down the wind.

**Marty McVey, Marty McVey,
Barnegat's gun will talk today!**

As Mary Dunkirk rode into town, her head was high as the head of a flower, and her smile never died all the dusty way, until she drew up at the hotel verandah.

Half a dozen cowpunchers rushed to take the little envelope that she extended.

"It's for Stephen Livernash," she said. "Do you know him, any of you? Is he here?"

"He ain't a man not to know," said the brown youth who had got the envelope by sleight-of-hand. "Sure he's here. I'll see that he gets this, *pronto*. And . . . are you gonna

be at the dance Saturday, Mary?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” Mary replied, and rode on down the street, singing as she went.

So up the stairs went the messenger and gave the letter to Stephen Livernash, who lolled in his room, industriously practicing with dice, rolling them on a blanket. He was averse to work, was Livernash, and he studied the easy ways of extracting coin from the pockets of absent-minded men. He took the letter and turned it twice over in his hand. He did not recognize the writing. It was big, sprawling, heavy, and the letters were formed with a curious clumsiness, a troubling clumsiness, like the handwriting of a child. Yet there was something about the character of the letters that was not the touch of a child. He opened it, and, with almost the first word that he read, he began to curse heavily. When he came to the conclusion, he balled the paper in his hand. Dashing it to the floor, he ground his heel into it. Then he picked up a gun and ran to the window, as though he half expected to see this hated enemy charging into view at that moment. But the street was empty, and then, with a second impulse, he went to the crushed letter, unfolded it carefully, and read it through a second time.

His face burned. It seemed impossible that any man would so dare to talk down to Stephen Livernash. As for the threat of fighting him with the left hand, that, of course, was the purest bluff. A bluff tried on Stephen Livernash! He had grown so furious with anger that he could not contain his wrath. With the letter in his hand, he went down the stairs into the lobby of the hotel.

“Hello, Steve,” said the proprietor. “What’s up, old man?”

“Hell’s up!” said Livernash. “A damned fool is trying to drive us crazy. Look at this! Look at this!” He thrust the paper under the eyes of the hotelkeeper, then snatched it away and pinned it up on the bulletin board.

“Who brought that letter?” he called loudly. “Who fetched that letter in to me?”

“Why, young Mary Dunkirk done it.”

“The sheriff’s daughter? You don’t mean her?”

“I do, though. There’s only one Mary Dunkirk.”

“Has the sheriff got a finger in this? Well, damn the sheriff and everybody else, and here’s for Blue’s letter!” He whipped out a pair of guns, and, firing from the hip, he blew a double succession of shots into the letter and the bulletin board behind it. Twelve liberal punctures tore through the paper. But when he had ended his shooting without a miss, the writing still could be made out by guessing a little at a missing word, here and there. A crowd came to stare and whisper. Livernash went out on the front verandah, gritting his teeth.

“Left-handed?” he heard somebody say behind him. “That’ll be a fight. Blue is a cold-blooded devil, I guess.”

“I’ll left-hand him into hell,” vowed Livernash, whirling on the speakers. As he turned back, he saw a pretty girl galloping briskly up the street.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“That’s the sheriff’s daughter. She must have some good news. Listen to her singing.”

By she swept, and her song trailed behind her:

**Barnegat, Barnegat, belt on your gun,
For Marty McVey is a-coming. . . .**

Livernash, suffused with wonder and with rage, felt as though the girl had deliberately flung the threat at him as she swept past the hotel. She knew about the challenge and she was mocking him.

XIV

It was not very wonderful that Livernash was extremely excited, and after a moment he left the hotel and hurried across the first hill behind it. There, in the little hollow, he got his hand in practice by blowing fifty rounds of .45-caliber lead slugs at the stump of a tree. At thirty paces, he walked up and down, emptying his guns, and whirling about and trying snap shots, and, when he had finished, he walked up to the trunk and examined it. Some of the holes were blurred together, as many of the bullets had pierced the wood near the center, but, on the whole, the marksmanship had been excellent. He could count or guess at the marks that forty-five bullets had made. Only five had gone astray, and, when one remembers that the distance was nearly a hundred feet, the target five inches in diameter, and the shooting done when on the constant move, one can see that it was a startling bit of work. You who doubt, take a kicking, snorting, rearing, bucking Colt in either hand and try it out at a target of any size while you're walking up and down, to say nothing of whirling about and trying snap shots from the hip.

When Livernash had finished examining the state of his target, he grinned a little. In his heart of hearts, he felt that he was the greatest pistol shot in the world. There were others who could do better on a stage before an audience, but he felt that he stood on a stage by himself so far as man-to-man duels were concerned. There was only the one serious blot upon his record, and that was the day that he had failed to beat Peter Blue. But he swore that was an accident, and, with all the fervor in his heart, he had taken up the trail of Peter Blue as soon as his wound permitted him to do so.

Today, looking at his target work, he assured himself that there would be another story for the world to tell if he could make Peter Blue live up to his word the following day. His hatred of Peter was not based upon that single encounter. He had felt for many years that Blue had usurped a reputation to which he had no legitimate claim. He had always felt that his own record was more impressive. Certainly it was far more bloody. From Alaska to Argentina he had left his trail of dead men; what were the exploits of Peter Blue compared with this odyssey of crime? But men did not talk about his exploits so freely. They knew him as a hard fighter and a straight and quick shooter. But even the youngsters would take a chance against him, a thing that they would never dream of doing against Peter Blue, unless they were maddened with a hunger for fame or with a quantity of moonshine. Long and bitterly Livernash had brooded upon the thing. There was a real fame to be had in the working of an accurate Colt. Men got into books. Men were pointed out among their fellows. Men were hailed as immortals of the frontier because of their skill with weapons.

Why, then, did they not write books about Stephen Livernash? Why did they not hail him as one of the immortals?

There was only one explanation, so far as he could see. It was not enough to do things. Performance was only a portion of the battle. It was apparent that two and two did not make four, humanly speaking. Otherwise, the great badmen would be rated according to the list of their killings, and that was not the case. No one said that Tucker, who had killed seven men, was as terrible a warrior as Chuck Moffit, who had killed only three. No one really compared Stephen Livernash, in spite of all his mighty deeds, with Peter Blue.

Why not? The burden of this injustice weighed terribly upon the brain of Livernash. It had kept him awake at night. It haunted him. Perhaps one will simply say that it was because Blue had met and beaten him. No, before he actually met Blue, the repute of Livernash was even lower than it was at present. After he had met, fought, and been dropped by Peter Blue, Livernash gained more fame through this defeat than he ever had possessed before. Was it a great wonder that the problem maddened him? For, indeed, the men who dared to stand before Peter Blue in a fair fight instantly became celebrities.

Why? cried Livernash to himself. He received no answer. It simply was the fact.

He wandered back to the hotel, warmed and comforted within by the knowledge that his skill never had had a finer edge than at present, but bruised and sullen as he reflected upon the injustice of the world and the capriciousness of fame. And there, in the street beside the hotel, he met the sheriff passing with his usual quick, nervous step. He stopped instantly and caught Livernash by the arm.

“What’s all this nonsense, Steve?” said the sheriff. “What’s all this tom-foolery? Blue to ride in here and fight a duel with you in front of the hotel at noon?”

“According to the word that he sent in,” said Livernash, “that’s about what’s gonna happen.”

“It can’t happen at all!” cried the sheriff in great excitement. “I never heard of such confounded folderol. Am I the sheriff of this county or not?”

“I reckon that you are.”

“Well, then, is the sheriff gonna let a pair of gents meet by appointment and try to murder one another?”

Livernash made a thoughtful pause, after hearing this, and stroked his mustaches. Then a glimmer of amusement came into his eyes and he said gently: “I see how it stands with you, Sheriff. But I would like to ask you a couple of little questions.”

“Go on, then. Ask them. Fire away with them.”

“What I want to know is . . . have I got the reputation of a gent that’s too damn’ good to associate with the rough ones? When I come into a town, does everybody breathe easy and feel safe and secure?”

“I dunno what you mean, Steve. You got a rough enough name, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

“I mean,” said Livernash, “if I was to be bumped off in a fight, would there be a lot of wailing and carrying on and weeping and gnashing the teeth, and what not? Would there or wouldn’t there?”

“Maybe there wouldn’t,” Dunkirk answered. “You’ve done a tolerable lot of harm to one man or another. You can’t talk with a Colt, and talk straight, and still keep yourself loved by everybody. I dunno that you’ve ever put up the dough to run an asylum for the widows and orphans that you’ve made, Steve.”

“Tell me straight, then. Would the county and the town, and the whole damn’ state sort of breathe a sigh of relief if I was to be dropped dead right here in the street right in front of the hotel?”

The sheriff was silent, frowning, and the other continued: “Then take up the case of Peter Blue. Is he so damn’ holy that the state is glad to spend money chasing him? Or has he killed enough folks to make the state hanker to drape a rope around his neck?”

“Blue is a sneaking scoundrel,” said the sheriff, filled with his own grievance against the gunfighter.

“Aye!” cried Livernash, “that’s a true thing that you’ve just said. He’s a sneaking scoundrel. Then, I say, let him and me meet and shoot it out, and, if we both drop, it’s a good thing for everybody. No matter how it turns out, nothing is lost to the state. Am I right or am I wrong?”

“Maybe folks would see it that way,” the sheriff answered, musing.

“More than that,” said Livernash, “if you was to try to stop this here fight, maybe you’d find it a tolerable dangerous job. Besides, who would thank you? This here town is set to see that fight, and they would call you partly a damn’ fool for spoiling the fun, and partly a blockhead for not letting them die that need killing. You smoke a pipe on that and you’ll see that I’m right. And when Blue comes prancing into the town, let us have our little party.”

“With his left hand!” exclaimed the sheriff. “Confound him, I wonder if he really means to fight you with his left hand?”

“Pure bunk and blood!” bellowed Livernash. “He knows damn’ well, down in his heart, that I’m a better man than he ever dreamed of bein’. I know it, and he knows it, and he’s gonna use his right hand. You can lay to that.”

“I don’t know,” Sheriff Dunkirk said, shaking his head. “I understand that he’s been working to make himself ambidextrous. Working day and night to make his left hand as good as his right. And perhaps he’s managed to do it.”

“It can’t be done,” said Livernash. “One hand has got to lead. One hand has got to do the brain work. No, he’ll fight with his right, and wish to God that he had two right hands instead of one, before I’m through with him. And now you tell me this, Sheriff. How come that Peter Blue has got such a name, anyway?”

“Why, man, he’s fought for the name that he enjoys, I suppose that you’ll admit.”

“Fought? Fought? Well, who’s he fought, then?”

“Why, Livernash, what are you talking about? Everyone knows how he killed Don King and young Lomax, for instance, when they went up Snyder Cañon to get him.”

“Oh, hell, man, but I’m tired of that yarn! Is he the only man that ever faced two and killed ’em? Ain’t I held my own ag’in’ four and dropped two of ’em and made the other two ride like hell to get where they could tie up their wounds?”

“Ah.” The sheriff smiled suddenly. “I understand what you mean, Livernash. You want to know why it is that he has such a great reputation, isn’t that it? And here you are . . . as good a man as he . . . as you and I and some of the wise ones know . . . but without half as much fame. That’s what you want to know?”

“Sheriff,” said the tall gunman, “I sure do crave to know that from you. Can you explain?”

“I’ll tell you how it is, old-timer,” said the sheriff. “It ain’t what a man does. It’s the way of doing it that counts so much. When two gents is working hard, it’s the one that don’t seem to be trying that gets the applause. And that’s the way with our friend Peter Blue. He handles himself so plumb graceful that folks worship the way that he does things.”

Livernash gritted his teeth. “Let him handle himself plumb graceful tomorrow, then, because graceful dyin’ is all that he’s gonna have a chance to do!”

“Are you dead sure of yourself, Steve?”

“Am I? I’m gonna plaster that second-rate thug, and you can lay to that! Only, you tell me first how come that your girl works with Blue? Have you give him a chance to smile at her?”

“Works? For him? What in hell d’you mean?”

“She brung me his letter. And then she rode by singin’ me a sassy song about beltin’ on my gun, because somebody was comin’ . . .”

“I understand,” said Dunkirk. “She’s always singing ‘Barnegat’, you see. She couldn’t have meant you any harm, and there isn’t a chance that she knew anything about the challenge that was in that letter. But that Barnegat song she’s always singing. Uncle Harry taught her.”

“What Barnegat song is that?”

“The yarn about how Barnegat and McVey met, y’understand?”

“I’ve heard something about it. I forget what.”

“McVey comes up to fight Barnegat, you see? Barnegat gets his guns and stands in the middle of the street, and McVey comes tearing in on him, riding a horse. And Barnegat fires a couple of times, then he gets scared, and turns and heels it to get away.”

“Hold on! It ain’t possible, Sheriff. No man would do a thing like that with a crowd standing by and looking on.”

“No man? Barnegat was quite a man, as some will tell you. But he done just that. He got nervous. And nerves is hell, Steve. Nerves is hell!”

Livernash spat, and turned on his heel. “You get a good place to look on at this here fight yourself,” he advised, “because there ain’t going to be no holding of me.”

So saying, he swaggered off down the street, and the sheriff watched him go with concern and yet with pleasure. He began to feel reasonably sure that Livernash would win, after all. For in all the sheriffs life, he could not recall a man who had approached a grave battle with such a boiling confidence in himself. And is not self-confidence half the fight?

XV

You may be sure that there was no self-confidence in the heart of Peter Blue the following morning. He knew that he had come to the last day of his life, unless a miracle saved him. As he looked across the hillsides, he told himself that he never again would see the glimmer of the early sun.

He did not go down to the shack of Uncle Harry. He had walked behind the ox-plow all of the preceding afternoon; he had wrung the hand of the old fellow when he said good night after supper the evening before. Although that might serve for a farewell, he decided that now he must leave some other note.

He sat down to write it, and scrawled out the letters with an odd swiftness and ease. Certainly that left hand was gaining a greater mastery every day, and he told himself that, if the battle with Livernash could only be postponed for another month, he might have a ghost of a chance to win. But as it was, he had to fight and die.

He wrote his letter, and then he waited until it was nearly eleven o'clock. It would take the greater part of an hour to ride into town. Dimly in the distance he could see Uncle Harry pursuing his way behind the plow, by the river, as he rode down the slope to the shack.

He entered, placed the sheet of scrawled-over paper on the table, and for a paperweight he laid his wallet upon it. Then he remounted and rode away, only pausing at the top of the rise to look back toward the shack where he had come to know the old man.

But when he rode on, the swarm of pictures remained clearly in his mind's eye. Uncle Harry, and the glowing stove, and the smell of comfortable cookery, and the lovely face of Mary Dunkirk smiling at him tenderly. . . .

Where was Mary herself on this morning? The sheriff himself had given her no word, not a syllable of the thing that was to happen on this day. But he had left the house late to ride in, and he had gone off carelessly, as if there were nothing of importance before him. Not even to his wife had he breathed a word.

But he was not well out of sight before a young cowpuncher galloped up to the house and sang out at the kitchen door: "Hello! Sheriff! Are you in?"

Mrs. Dunkirk thrust open the door.

"He ain't here. Hello, Tommy. What you wantin'? No more cattle rustlers, I hope?"

" 'Mornin', Missus Dunkirk. No more cattle rustlers. But I just wanted to know . . . is the sheriff gonna let the fight come today? Or is he gonna shut it off?"

"Shut it off?"

"I mean, is it gonna be worthwhile for us boys to ride in to see the fun, or is the sheriff gonna keep the game from coming off?"

"What game are you talkin' about, Tommy?"

Mary Dunkirk at her open window listened and waited, vaguely apprehensive.

"Why, I mean Blue and Livernash, of course. What else? I mean, are they gonna be

allowed to fight it out, the same as Blue wants to do?”

“Fight it out?” echoed Mrs. Dunkirk. “The two of them wild men to meet?”

“Aye, at noon . . . if Blue can have his way. But if you don’t know . . . maybe the sheriff is going to let them have their whirl . . . and if that’s the way . . . I’m gonna be there.”

He turned his horse in such excitement that he forgot to say good bye.

Before the rattle of hoofs died in the distance, Mary Dunkirk was down the stairs and rushing through the kitchen to the back door.

“Hey, Mary!” cried her mother. “Mary, darlin’. Mary, dear, where are you going? You can’t do any good . . . it’s the wild, wicked way of men . . . a woman can’t stop them. Mary! Mar-y-y!”

But Mary was gone to the corrals, and a moment later, on her fleetest mare, she was dashing past the house, so that her mother had sight of only a set, pale face. And she knew that further protestation would do no good.

“Love and misery! Love and misery!” said the mother. “They always come together. Poor Mary. Poor dear.”

But Mary was now far, far down the road. She did not check the gallop of her horse until she saw Uncle Harry toiling behind his plow close to the road. To him she went like a streak.

“Wait, girl, what’s wrong? House on fire?”

“Where’s Peter? Where’s Peter Blue?”

“Pete? He’s up at the Truman shack studyin’, I suppose. No, hold on a minute. I seen him ride down to my shack a while back. Maybe he’s still there.”

She waited for not another word, but swept from the field and rushed for Uncle Harry’s house. She swung from the saddle and rushed in. No Peter was there, but on the table she saw the time-stained pigskin of the wallet and the paper beneath. She snatched it up, and read:

Dear Uncle Harry,

Saying good bye to you is the hardest thing that I’ve ever done. But I couldn’t say good bye and make a clean breast of everything face to face, so I’m doing it now in writing.

I’m about to ride into town and meet Livernash. He’s hounded me into it, and I have to go. Besides, even if I dodge Livernash today, I’d soon have to meet some other gunfighter that’s on my trail, and I’d go down. I’ve had my luck. Now I’m due for my bad time. It won’t be long, because Livernash shoots straight.

You’ll wonder why I’ve given up hope before even meeting him. I’ll explain. You know that I’ve been playing a game about the left hand, Uncle Harry. Training it and working away with it. But as a matter of fact, it hasn’t been for fun. A bullet tore through my right hand and arm less than a year ago, and, when the wound healed, it left the right hand and arm good for nothing. I can’t even write with it, let alone handle a gun. And

that's why Livernash is sure to kill me.

Keep this a secret, though. I've written to him that I'll come and fight with him with my left hand. And when I go down, I want people to think that I went down trying to do a foolish thing, but taking a good chance. I don't want the world to know that my back is against the wall.

So much for that. Now for another thing.

Your boy will never come back to you. He lies in Eutaw Corners, buried in the churchyard. He walked into the saloon in that town, saw me in the gambling room, and drew a gun on me without warning. I shot him, and he died without speaking.

God knows that I wish that I could call that bullet back to me. But it's done, and can't be undone.

Go to Eutaw Corners and ask for the true story of what happened there that night. Your boy must have been nearly drunk. I know he was a clean lad, but the drink must have maddened him.

Try to remember me kindly in spite of that unlucky bullet I fired in Eutaw Corners.

I have no one to whom I care to leave whatever I have. I want you to have the bay horse. You'll find him sound and fit in every way. He cost me twelve hundred dollars, and after the education I've given him, he's worth something more than that today. He's a clean-bred one. Sell him and buy a plow team of horses. Besides, I have something in cash. You'll find about eighteen hundred in this wallet. It's yours.

In exchange, I want you to keep Christopher if he lives through the fight. I almost hope that one of the bullets of Livernash knocks over Christopher. Because he and I have lived through so much together that we ought to die together, too. But if he lives, I know that you'll take good care of him. Let Mary ride him, if she pleases, but no other soul on earth. Let him have the run of a good pasture, and God bless you for any kindness you show him.

When Mary has married and her first child has come to her, I want you to tell her that I loved her. You can tell her then that I wanted to say good bye to her, but that I can't find the right words to put on the paper.

The best of fine luck to you.

Peter Blue

Twice and again she had to brush her eyes clear of moisture before she could go on with the reading. Now she crumpled the paper in her hand and rushed back to her horse. Her mind was whirling as she swung into the saddle. But there was no help for her except the speed of her horse. And how could she get to town before noon struck?

There was one possible way—the short cut across the unused trail over the hills.

That was the way that Mary Dunkirk galloped, leaning into the wind, her teeth set, and her face white, straining the good mare staunchly onward in that wild race against time, to

tell Livernash and all the rest that a helpless man was coming that day to attempt a madman's battle. . . .

She dared not look at her watch. But with an upward glance, now and again, she saw the sun nearing the zenith, and the heart swelled in her breast.

XVI

Outside the town, Peter Blue dismounted.

He took from the saddlebag a little whisk broom, and with this he went carefully over his clothes. He untied his bandanna from around his neck and shook the dust out of it. From another pouch he produced a small stiff brush and with that he groomed Christopher until the great horse shone like a glossy panther, and all the little leopard dappling showed dimly in the sun. The boots of Peter received an extra polish, now, and then he climbed into the saddle and viewed himself in a small hand mirror.

It is a pity that one must write down such unfortunate details of one who was riding in toward danger of death. But the fact is that Peter Blue wished to die handsome in act and in person, also. He was not above that smallness, and therefore it must be chronicled. In fact, he had never been the free-swinging, careless type of the range. There was something fastidious in his deviltry, from the very beginning.

Now, with all in place, neat, well-brushed, spotless as though from a bandbox, Peter Blue rode into the town. As he journeyed on, he saw that the houses on either side of him gaped forth at the street with open, empty door and windows. Everyone had deserted those houses, and he knew instantly what had happened. The news had been spread. Every soul in the countryside must have gathered there in front of the hotel to see the duel fought.

Well, that was as he would have had it. There was only one drawback—it was he who must fall in the encounter.

How, then, should he carry himself, so as to be ready for the critical moment, and how should he die with the utmost gallantry—in the eyes of the audience?

Vain Peter Blue! Even then he was thinking of his audience. Even then he was upon a stage! As he went slowly on, thinking, a song rose lightly in his throat. "Barnegat, Barnegat!"

Ah, what an apt song for this day! Except that McVey had not come softly in on a walking horse. He had come in thunder, with a flash and a rush.

Suddenly the thought took Peter by the throat. That was the way for him to die!

He touched Christopher, and a long, panther-like bound answered him. He spoke, and the stallion was instantly in full racing stride. It flared up the brim of Peter's hat. It whistled the wind into his face. And even as he rode in to meet death, he was filled with the joy of Christopher's matchless gallop. Did not Christopher himself know that a great moment was at hand? For what other reason would he have pricked his ears so joyously?

The street widened—he turned a corner, and saw the hotel not far away, and every window thronged with faces. And a wild cry went tingling up, and swept down the street and crashed against his ears!

“Peter Blue’s coming!”

There were enough to make that death scene worthwhile! In front of the hotel he saw the tall form of Livernash, with the sun glistening on his long, saber-shaped mustaches. In either hand of Livernash glimmered a long, blue-barreled revolver. For answer, Peter caught out his own Colt, and poised it high in his left hand.

That left hand felt clumsy and thick in the wrist, and weak. He knew that he could never drive home a bullet true to the mark from the back of a galloping horse. But forward he rushed.

Then he saw those two long guns raised. A puff of smoke from the barrel of one, and a hornet singing at his ear. A miss.

A smoke puff from the other gun, and a heavy blow struck Peter over the chest. But he leaned resolutely forward. There was no pain. There was only a sense of numbness in his chest. He knew that he would be able to ride in to close quarters and there, perhaps, fire the finishing shot!

Calling to the stallion, he felt such a wave of joy rise in him that he could not help laughing, and as he laughed a cry of wonder and fear came from the throng of the hotel. For it seemed more than human that a man should ride down on a deadly marksman in this fashion with a laugh on his lips.

Then Peter saw a horse swerve into the street through an alley-mouth farther on, and, through the cloud of the dust, he saw that it was Mary Dunkirk.

Well, then, let Mary see how her lover could die! And with an unconquerable joy, he laughed still as he rode.

Again and again the guns spoke before him, but he did not hear so much as the sound of the bullets whirring past. He saw now that the legs of Livernash were braced far apart, as though to withstand a shock, and his mouth had sagged open, and there was in his face the horror of a man who sees a ghost walking at midnight.

Still the gun was poised stiffly in the left hand of Peter Blue. For suddenly he knew. It came upon him like a revealed prophecy. As with Barnegat in the song, so with Livernash this day. Yes, for suddenly the tall man in the street dropped his guns with a hoarse cry and bolted blindly toward the door of the hotel, flinging out his hands before him like a child running out of the terror of the dark toward a light. And Christopher flashed past like a meteor.

A mild uproar sounded in the ears of Peter Blue; Christopher was coming to a stop. He could not tell whether it was the roaring of a sea behind him, or the sound of many voices. And then, through a mist, a sweating mare flashed up to him, and he saw the face of Mary Dunkirk.

“Peter, has he killed you? Has he killed you?”

“Killed me, Mary? There aren’t enough guns in the world to kill me today.”

“Your whole coat is turning crimson . . . it’s dripping with blood. Peter, Peter, come down to me, dear.”

She was standing by the mighty shoulder of Christopher, and Peter leaned from the saddle, his foot slipped, he crashed headlong in the street.

But he did not die. Not all the guns in the world, he had said, could kill him. Not even that bullet, so terribly close the heart, could end his days.

In that hotel, in the best first-floor room, he came back to life, and to the white-faced smiling Mary Dunkirk, leaning above him.

“How could you dare to be so brave, Peter?” she asked him, another day.

“It was not I. It was a song that did the thing for me, Mary.”

“Tell that to Uncle Harry. He’s waiting to see you.”

His face turned gray with sorrow.

“Hush!” said the girl. “He never read that letter. But *I* read it. And he shall never know. And who would dare to tell him . . . ever?” So she went for Uncle Harry.

“Hello, Peter,” said the thin voice from the door.

“Hello, partner,” said the sick man.

“You see, Mary?” Uncle Harry said, chuckling. “I told you that him and me was to start business together. And I dunno but that we’ll have to take you in for a third member of the firm.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Peter Blue, One-Gun Man* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand)]