NO DRAMATIS PERSONAE

By J. Frank Davis

Lure of Gambling, Lore of the Old Texas, Love of Women, and Luck of Cowboy.

THIS story was told me by Shutter Snell, who dresses like a retired evangelist and used to deal faro for Nelse Kincaid when San Antonio was wide open and the killings averaged one a night. He said it had some kind of interesting things in it, but he didn't see how I could make any use of it in my trade, because it didn't have no dramatis personae.

Shutter amplified this. Unless he was mistaken—in which case I could correct him, but he knew he wasn't—dramatis personae meant characters in a drama. A drama had to have a hero and a heroine and a villain and probably some comedians. Maybe you could get along without a hero or a heroine, but not without both of them, and the fact that there were two or three villains wouldn't make up for it. And in this yarn about the time June Kincaid helped her father go after Cole Gurney's roll the leading man was a fool cow puncher who drank too much and the only woman in the whole cast was a hell cat, and, dammit, you couldn't make that kind of material into heroes and heroines, could you? He left it to me, straight.

While admitting the probability that his point was well taken, I encouraged Shutter to proceed with his reminiscence. It is not often or easily that he speaks of the ancient days, and when he does, although he sometimes rambles and has queer ideas of what are the important and unimportant parts of his stories, his speech frequently drips precious jewels of information.

"Was this daughter of Kincaid's the hell cat?" I asked, to get him going smoothly.

If I wasn't mistaken, it was the sight of a bunch of pretty girls who had just arrived there where we sat on the roof garden of the Hotel Bonham that had started him. There were four of them, all aged somewhere around 20, all dainty and vivacious and bubbling over with youth. One of them in particular, a brown-haired, brown-eyed maid with a mischevious mouth and a delicious creamy coloring of skin that was all her unartificial own, especially held my eye. They were in filmy summer frocks fresh from some dinner party, perhaps, and with a quartet of clean-looking boys and a plump chaperon had come to dance.

I had gushed a trifle over their attractiveness as they arrived, and Shutter had surveyed them in silence, fallen into a reverie, and come out of it to say:

"I never told you, did I, about how Nelse Kincaid planted three cards cold at the bottom of the box and had his girl tip Cole Gurney to 'em—crooked?" Following this came his dissertation as to the absence of value to a writing man of a story without hero or heroine.

"Hell cat was right," he agreed, to my query. "She was sure bad—and she wasn't. You get me, don't you? One of those girls that raise hell with a man and always stop short of paying for it. There didn't anybody use this here word 'vamp' in those days. If they had, that was June Kincaid. She didn't have any mother and she didn't have any principles to speak of, and her father was a bad hombre with a pair of hands that could do things to a deck of cards old Hermann the Card King never even dreamed of, and the luck never to get caught at it. Cold steel nerve, too. Would take a chance and pull a thing right under the noses of a whole houseful of gamblers that were wise to all the tricks and looking for them; wait till I tell you. But knowing when to take his medicine and call it a day; you'll see that, too."

It became apparent, now, that Shutter Snell was going to speak of matters regarding which, ordinarily, he is to say the least noncommittal.

He is not accustomed to admit that in the period when he was connected with temples of chance he ever was concerned with any of the tricks of his profession not recognized as legitimate; indeed, I have many times heard him assert that it had been his principle never to be employed by any gambler who was not strictly on the level.

Shutter has been respectable for more than 20 years, having possessed the foresight to buy centrally located land in San Antonio at a time when it could be had for a song, and, as he once confidentially informed me, not such a darn musical song at that. He has intimate friends among the best people of the older cattle set. Not every one among his acquaintances knows that in youth he was a gambler, and those who are told it are given to understand that he was invariably a square gambler, which I have found usually to mean one who does not cheat unless the other fellow starts it. Thus this almost admiring comment of his relative to the dexterity of Nelse Kincaid was an unexpected admission.

"So she went vamping along, and getting away with it," he said, "and by and by along comes this Cole Gurney."

Gently I reminded him that this was hardly the place for a talc to begin. He hadn't told me how she vamped and why.

June Kincaid, he went back to say, was something like 18 or 19 years old then, and as pretty as they made them. And nobody had ever had much of anything to do with bringing her up except old Nelse, who had his own ideas as to how a pretty daughter should be helpful to the proprietor of a notorious gambling house.

Nelse would have killed the man that wronged her in a minute, and he kept strict track of her comings and goings and saw to it that she kept straight, although it was no more than fair to say that she never showed any inclination to be otherwise; but there are morals and morals, and the kind that June Kincaid had would have fitted those young ladies that sat on the bench and combed their hair and sang songs that induced sailors, according to that old story, to steer their boats plumb on the rocks. Yes, that's the word. Sirens.

She never associated with the dance hall girls; in fact, it was seldom that she went on to the floor and danced—never, unless there was a victim in tow. Her activities were in the gambling room and at the bar, when the crowd lined along it was not too rough, where she had a sort of private personal place at the end nearest the gambling room at which she held court, as you might say, greeting her friends and encouraging them to believe this was the night when luck would break their way at the tables. Especially favored friends she drank with, but a certain monotony distinguished her orders. Invariably she called for a little gin, and was served out of a special bottle with a third of a whisky glass of excellent spring water. On occasion she showed the effect of her potations mildly; she had a most convincing cough that sometimes followed tossing the fiery stuff into her throat.

Young men off the range, known to have a desirable quantity of cash on hand and to be careless with their savings when illuminated, found her an affable person. Nelse selected them. After they had drunk freely—out of no bottle of innocuous spring water—and her ingenuous brown eyes had worked havoc with their sense of values, tolling them over to one of the roulette wheels or up against a faro bank was really no feat at all. Especially if, their choice running to faro, June offered it as a special favor to bring them luck by keeping cases for a deal or two.

They played at Shutter's bank, usually, because that was the one behind which Nelse Kincaid himself commonly sat high in the lookout chair, with a sharp eye on the whole room, but more especially on the play at that particular table, and also because stakes ordinarily ran higher at that table than elsewhere, and the size of stakes is often a contagious thing; a boy with a roll in his pocket is unlikely to pike if the other players in his game are betting freely. Especially unlikely if the prettiest girl in the southwest is keeping cases for the game and occasionally looking across at him with expressive eyes. His tendency, under such circumstances, is to be at least reckless and probably careless.

Shutter made it quite clear, without putting the matter into definite words, that these games, at which the girl kept track of the cards as they slid out of the deal box and her admirers were encouraged to make their bets high, wide, and handsome, were not customarily crooked. He implied that when he dealt they were never crooked. Sometimes luck would get to running seriously against the house, June's friend would begin to win and to bet still more heavily, and old Nelse, up there in the lookout, would slip Shutter the signal to say that his eyes were beginning to ache and that he would like to skip a deal or two, whereupon Nelse would climb down and relieve him.

Luck was pretty likely to turn against the plunging player soon after. When he was broke June would surrender the case rack to one of the professional casekeepers, laughingly assure the victim that his turn would surely come next time, and flit away with him to the end of the bar to join him in a consoling drink on the house.

It was a boy who went plumb broke, so that he couldn't come back to play any more, who gave her the name. He and she had been chummy for more than a fortnight, so that his pals had all been jealous and he had got positively cocky about it, and then when his money was gone she let him down suddenly, due to another man in the offing that Nelse had picked to be his successor.

He came in one night and bought a drink or two and piked with $5 or $10 at the wheel, and went over to start one of his old joyous talks with her, and found her chilly as a January norther. Some of his friends—they were a roughish bunch—gave him the laugh. "A lot I care!" he cried defiantly, being young. Shutter was getting himself a sandwich during his half hour layoff period at midnight, not far from where they stood at the bar, and heard him. "A lot I care! Damn little hell cat!" Which showed how terribly much he did care, because it wasn't customary in those days to call young ladies names, not even young ladies who assisted their fathers in the profitable conduct of a gambling house. If Nelse Kincaid had heard him say it he might have come a'smoking.

Cole Gurney was a big chap about 23 or 24 years old, with blue eyes, a lot of thick wavy hair, and a manner, some ways, that was even younger than his age. He had been working a year or two for the Circle Lazy D outfit, and somebody up north somewhere had died and left him $10,000 or $15,000, and he was going to get him a bunch of cows of his own. That is what brought him into San Antonio. Before he had been in Nelse's place three times Nelse knew all about the $10,000 or $15,000, and that he had it on deposit over in the McCluskey bank.

The next evening June let Gurney buy her a drink.

It developed that the boy had a failing and a virtue. It was easy for him to drink too much. When he began to get under the influence he developed an amazing streak of stinginess. Nelse Kincaid, no doubt, listed these traits reversely.

Well organized, with seven or eight drinks disposed of, Gurney's idea of financial recklessness was to buy one $20 stack of chips at a roulette table and put them all down at once, win or lose, and then quit. From the player's standpoint, Shutter conceded in telling this, there might be a lot ways less indicative of wisdom in bucking a game where the percentage in favor of the house is as devastating as in roulette. Cole esteemed faro to be lacking in sufficiently brisk action, but he played it occasionally. Especially when June offered to keep cases. He played $2 chips, mostly, with perhaps $5 or $10 on the turn, when the bank pays four for one if the player guesses the correct order in which the last three cards came out of the box, and limited his losses to $50 or so.

Nelse, with his mind on that $10,000 or $15,000 over in the McCluskey bank, was plumb disgusted.

June never for a minute let it affect her work. Drunk or sober, play high or play low, she smiled her sweetest on Gurney. Her eyes had never beamed liking on one of his predecessors more convincingly, or more effectively. If ever she owned a slave it was Cole. He spent all his evenings in the place, and when he couldn't be with her—and naturally she wasn't foolish enough to let any one customer monopolize her smiles—he never left off looking at her.

He got, one night, to talking big brother stuff.

"Nothing," she told Nelse, when he asked her the next day what all the confidential conversation had been about. "Nothing. Except he said I didn't fit with the other girls in the place."

"Who the hell ever dares to say you do?" Nelse demanded. "He's got a nerve coupling you up with them."

"And gave me a dare," she said, laughing a little, but a laugh without any great amount of amusement in it. "He said he kind of didn't like to see a nice young lady drinking."

"Damn critical, ain't he?" said Nelse, grinning at the thought of the special gin bottle of spring water. "What was the dare?"

"He said he'd swear off drinking, cold, if I would."

Nelse was irritated, but encouraged, too. "He might almost as well be a teetotaler, at that," he grumbled, "the way he plays 'em up against his chest when he's lit. Stick to him, June; we'll find a way to make him loosen, yet. But don't give him too many chances to spout this confidential stuff."

June patted him. "Little June can take care of herself, daddy," she said.

"Bet your life she can," he responded proudly. He had a tremendous admiration for the girl, had Nelse. And affection, too. In a way. Some warped in his ideas as to how a father ought to bring up a daughter, to be sure, but what could you expect? He was what he was, and she was his. If he wasn't proud of his business, he wasn't ashamed of it, and he didn't know any reason why he should be.

It was a week or so after this that he heard about how badly Cole Gurney wished he had two or three times as much capital as laid over there in the McCluskey bank to his credit waiting to be checked out. It was really a chance of a lifetime. A ranch, with a fair acreage under fence and some 3,000 head of stock there and on the range, easily worth $50,000, which could be had for $35,000—perhaps $30,000—because old Slim Tarrant, who owned it, had got bumped off in a little ruckus about a waterhole, and his widow wanted to clean up and go back to her folks in Illinois. But which had to be paid for absolutely in cash; old Miz Tarrant didn't want recollection or reminder of Texas once she left; vendor's lien notes, even at 10 per cent, did not interest her at all.

Nelse worked out a characteristic scheme of temptation.

It was the sight of a bevy of pretty girls that started him. One of them in particular held my eye.

At this point in his story, Shutter Snell, recounting the tale across the table while the orchestra jazzed and the shuffle and swing of sliding feet beat rhythmically about the dance floor beside us, became somewhat vague in several respects. It was not clear, for example, how, he, who never participated in ways that were dark, came to be taken into his employer's confidence, nor was he able apparently, to go into any details regarding the technique planned by Nelse Kincaid whereby June should get Cole Gurney to risk his bankroll on her unsupported promise that she would see he didn't lose. I take it Nelse saw how serious the affair was getting with Cole, and sensed that the boy might even be thinking of asking June to marry him, and that he staged some mock quarrel with the girl, so that she could go to Cole for sympathy and seem to be at odds with her father, which would make plausible her confession.

This confession—Shutter did not know how it was worded, or what led up to it, of course—involved the old man's probity, and June's. At times, when there was a big game, a faro deck might be partially stacked, to affect the three cards in the last turn, and June might tip a victim as to how the cards were to come out, and tip him falsely. She was to imply that her father wanted her to do this, but that she would not. If Cole wanted to gamble $5,000 or $10,000 on one turn, she would undertake with Nelse to double-cross him—and would double-cross Nelse himself.

There was some sort of revenge motif as an excuse, Shutter said, and also there was the ingenious use of an old rumor—quite nonsensical—which Cole doubtless would have heard in the gossip of the place, that June wasn't Nelse's daughter. All in all, it was a plot that older and wiser infatuated men than Cole Gurney might have succumbed to.

Then, just on the eve of it, June balked.

She said—and again, if Shutter had no active part in these things, I do not understand how it came about that the conversation was in his hearing—that Cole was a nice kid and that it was a shame. Nelse Kincaid thereupon flared.

"I suppose," he sneered, "the young idiot has been telling you if you was away from the bad influence of your daddy, he'd be half inclined to marry you."

"He didn't say 'half,'" she retorted.

"I thought so. Well, there's two reasons that I know of why he wouldn't."

He amplified, at her look of inquiry:

"One is that he ain't the marrying kind. But if he was, I'd see he didn't. When you get married, which won't be for many a day yet, we'll pick more of a man than he is."

"I'm sort of curious to know just how you'd stop it, daddy," she said, and something in the way she drawled it—some inherited quality of his own cold, sneering speech when he was angered—made him reply, nastily:

"Suppose he was tipped that somebody had a prior lien—that if you married anybody, it ought by all rights to be somebody else."

She went white at the underlying significance and brutality of the threat. "Such a lie," she choked.

"He wouldn't know it was, would he? It would fit in quite plausible with the bar, and the dance hall, and the associates that he wished you wouldn't keep, wouldn't it? At that, would it be so much of a lie? It's Bible truth that any time you get married, it will be to somebody else than him—the curly-headed fool!"

Juno bit her lip and got control of herself, for she had an intimate acquaintance with the old man's temper and vindictiveness.

"I didn't know," she said slowly, "that you had anything against him—personal."

"O, you didn't!' he growled. "You think I admired to have the smirking idiot tell you, in your own father's place, that your own father wasn't man enough to look out for you."

"When did he?"

"Didn't he? Didn't he say you oughtn't to be around her where these other girls are? Didn't he kick at your taking a drink—as if I don't know whether you ought to drink or not? As if I ain't competent to 'tend to you?"

She opened her mouth as if to contradict or protest, and closed it. Her lips set in a straight line, Then she began over again, saying: "He meant well."

"Hell's paved with 'em!" Nelse snapped. "Well, life's too short to use it all up talking. Do we pull the play as set up, or don't we—tonight? Because, one way or the other, this pup Gurney is going to be sent about his business. He can be chased back onto the range by the need of replenishing a busted roll and disappointment in love, or he can be chased back by disappoint in love all by itself—you're the one to say which. But one thing I'll tell you straight, young lady. We ain't running the house for our health. You've made unprofitable eyes at him as long as you're going to".

June looked straight into her father's face and saw he meant it, and she squared her shoulders and threw her chin up. "All right," she said shortly. "We'll pull the play tonight. What are the three cards?"

"That's sense!" cried Nelse. "It will be the first deal after Shutter goes to eat, at 12. The turn will be ace, king, and some little card. The little one is immaterial; it will be at the bottom. They will come out king, ace."

"And I tell him they are fixed to come out ace, king."

"Right. You tell him to play 'em ace, king."

"He won't have it all in cash, of course."

"I'll take his check, if he guarantees it. You know how I stand with McCluskey."

"Afterwards, if he makes a disturbance and tells how he thought it was planted—"

"He won't make any great disturbance here," Nelse promised. "As to telling, he'll be drunk, won't he? Laugh at him. I don't think there'll be any scene, though. I ain't figuring he'll blab that he's been made a monkey of. You'll keep out of his way afterwards, natchully, but if you and him ever should meet up and he should corner you alone, you tell him I threw 'em out different from what I said I was going to, or that you misunderstood the lay, or, if he is drunk enough tonight so you think maybe you can get away with it, that you told him to play king, ace, and you never was more shocked in your life than when you saw him lay the bet down different from what you had said."

Kincaid rolled himself a cigaret. "But I don't guess you'll ever see him in our place again," he concluded.

"I believe you are right, father," June agreed. Which ought to have set Nelse to thinking. Not a dozen times in her life had she called him anything but daddy.

So at about midnight, just before it was time for Shutter to take his half-hour off for lunch, June, who had talked long and earnestly with him in a booth at the side of the dance hall, tolled Gurney to the faro table, laughingly told the case keeper to go and smoke a cigarette or two, and took charge of the case rack.

A good many drinks had been served to the curtained booth during their conversation, and it was plain to be seen that Gurney was more than ordinarily jingled. He got a seat at the high card end of the table, and bought his customary $50 worth of chips. Thus he was directly to the left of June, who sat between him and the dealer. He looked at her more than he did the layout, and put his little bets down haphazard and without judgment, ignoring the record of case cards and taking reckless chances on "splits."

It calls for concentrated attention to the business in hand for a case keeper to make accurate record of all the cards as they leave the deal box, and June looked up at him only occasionally, but when she did he got the benefit of one of her dazzling smiles and laughed fatuously in return. He lost his $50 before the deal was finished and bought another $50 stack. During the following deal he bought again. Seldom, theretofore, had he ever been willing to lose more than $100 at one sitting.

Now, as to just when the deck was fixed for the slaughter I am not clear, because Shutter wasn't. He implied that, of course, it was done after Kincaid took charge, and I am inclined to think it was. At any rate, the sleight of hand which placed a king, an ace, and a trey at the bottom of the box, notwithstanding the ostentatious shuffling and cutting, came at some time during the comparative confusion attendant upon the change of dealers.

When a deal came to its end soon after 12 o'clock Shutter pushed back his green eyeshade, half turned in his chair toward where Nelse sat in the high lookout seat, and remarked "Time to feed, cap'n." Kincaid glanced in the direction of the clock, nodded, and climbed down to slide into the place Shutter vacated, being careful, as they always were, not to disturb with his knee the pistol that hung suspended under the table edge, its butt handy for a sudden clutch.

"It's sure a slow night," he commented good naturedly as he settled himself and looked about the table, while the players prepared to put down their initial bets. "Here it is tomorrow and nobody loses much. Come get the old man! Why don't somebody sting the house good?"

"Gimme 50 more," said Gurney, stiff lipped. "Going to take you up on that. No chance to sting the house with only 15."

This won a thin, impersonal smile from some of the players, $65 not being an amount with which a bank of the caliber and capacity of Kincaid's would be likely to suffer. The table fell into a tense quietness characteristic of faro, and the deal proceeded.

Shutter did not get any lunch, but swallowed a hasty drink and came back into the room, where he remained over by the door. The quiet group at the faro game was picked up sharply by the wide-shaded hanging lamp overhead. In that illumination, striking down across his wavy hair, Cole Gurney looked more like Buck than ever.

I had to interrupt Shutter at this point, with all the chance it necessitated of throwing him off his stride with the real dramatics of the yarn presumably impending, but he had not previously mentioned any person of the name of Buck.

Hadn't he? He sure thought he had. He had noticed the resemblance first time Cole Gurney ever came into Kincaid's. Just about the same size. Same kind of hair and eyes. Same jolly sort of reckless laugh. About the same age, he was, as Buck the last time Shutter saw him, when he left home up there in Kentucky to come to Texas. A powerful lot Shutter had always thought of Buck. Kind of wild, too, the boy was. Mother used to worry a right smart about him. Younger brother? Of course. Sure. Thought he said so.

June looked up from her case keeping presently and announced:

"Last turn!"

She ran her eye down the undisturbed buttons on their little wires, like a Chinese abacus, and called the remaining cards:

"Ace, trey, king."

"Last turn," monotonously chanted Kincaid, following the customary dealer's routine, "and four to one if you call the order."

He sat back to await the final readjustment of bets.

"I great mind," said Gurney, with drunken solemnity, "I great mind t' make you a real bet."

"Go as far as you like," Nelse told him cheerfully.

"What you mean? How big a limit?"

Kincaid's reply was a little contemptuous. There would seem to the encircling players and spectators small chance that an habitually modest player like Gurney would want to stake anything spectacular.

"To you," he said, "the roof is off. The blue, blue sky."

"D'you mean that?" Gurney ogled. "D'you mean it?"

"The higher you stack 'em the better we like it," Kincaid told him, still smiling.

Gurney got out a little wad of bills and surveyed them. There couldn't have been more than $200. "I'd have to write a check," he said. "I don't s'pose you'd take a check."

"I would if you guarantee, on your word, there'll be enough in the bank in the mawnin' to cover it if you lose." Nelse was still half smiling provocatively. Gurney dug a checkbook out of his pocket and muttered something about a pen.

"Go get a pen and bottle of ink,' Nelse commanded Ricard Doyle, a half-Mexican attache of the place, who stood not far behind Gurney. When the man had brought it Cole spread his checkbook before him, dipped the pen, and looked up into Kincaid's face.

"'F I made this as much as $5,000 would you take it?"

Nelse stopped smiling and his face set to the emotionless inscrutability behind which a gambler hides his thoughts when high plays are afoot.

"I'll take whatever you guarantee in the presence of these witnesses will be good in the mawnin'," he replied coldly.

"But if I made it $10,000?" leered the youth with alcoholic persistence. "'F I made it $10,000 and she come out, four for one, I reckon I'd bust the ol' bank."

"It would be bent, but it'd take more than a $40,000 losing to plumb bust it," Nelse assured him.

"Damn 'f I don't!" cried Gurney, and scrawled the check. "Gimme big chips."

Nelse picked up the paper and read its figures aloud. "Ten thousand. You guarantee there will be enough in the mawnin' to cover it.?"

"Word of honor," mumbled Gurney.

Kincaid opened the drawer and dropped the check in. From a corner of his chip-rack he selected counters of a color and design used only on special occasions. He smoothly slid them in front of Gurney—10 of them. "One thousand apiece," he declared.

Word rustled about the room that big play was in progress at Kincaid's bank, and men who were mere spectators of the games moved in that direction. Shutter edged in fairly close, so that he was against the wall off at Kincaid's right, directly facing Gurney. The boy, he said, sat fingering the little stack of checks half-stupidly, as though now that he had them he didn't know what to do with them.

"And things got to moving kind o' fast." Shutter said. "One thing come after another so it was darned hard afterwards, to recollect just how it all happened. I don't suppose it was more'n four or five minutes from then until the excitement was all over, but the time was sure crowded."

Shutter Snell turned his head and looked out across the gay dance floor with its swirling crowd, its bright summer dresses, its laughter, and its swift-beating rhythm and rattle of syncopated harmony. There was a slight reminiscent smile on his lips, from my side, as he turned, it seemed drowsy and absent. He was looking far beyond the modern dance floor, across 25 years and more of flying time, to a day when some men were honest and some were knaves in this old city that was the country's last frontier, but most men had courage. He was standing there against the gambling house wall again, his gaze intent on the cold-eyed Kincaid, the drunken boy, and the provoking, alluring, infatuating June.

I had to call him back.

"And Gurney didn't seem to know how he wanted to bet," I prodded.

"He didn't seem to know what he wanted to do with them, or whether he wanted to do anything with them," Shutter resumed, turning to face me again. "Everybody waited and let him take his time; a player that was going to lay a bet that size was entitled to think it over as much as he wanted to without anybody getting impatient. There was noise enough in the background—the click of the marbles at the wheels, loud talking and laughing out at the bar, and the music from the dance hall—but over in our corner everything was still and sort of breathless. Then Gurney looked up; he was pale and his face had lines in it, like he was just sensing that this was most of his fortune he was planning to gamble on the turn of two cards. He asked:

"'What are they, again?'

"'Ace, trey, king,' Kincaid told him.

"He stared a minute at the painted ace and king on the layout, almost under his hands, the ace on his right and the king on his left. Then he pushed his stack onto the edge of the ace, tipping it in the direction of the king.

"'Playing ace, king,' said Nelse, clearly, for the benefit of all witnesses.

"Bets go as they lay, don't they?' demanded the kid, all on edge and nervous.

"'Right," agreed Nelse. 'Bets always go as they lay.' His fingers moved toward the deal box. 'Are we all set?'

"A little $2 bet that a player had made on the nine to win — the nine had just come out in the losing pile and Nelse, with the big play in his mind, had failed to see the lonesome chip—still lay where it had been placed, and June's eyes fell upon it.

"'You overlooked a sleeper, dad,' she said and reached across the layout to gather it in. Her body came between Nelse's eyes and Gurney's stack of chips and in the two seconds while she was leaning over, gathering in the little chip, and settling back into her chair, the boy reached forward lightning fast, and moved his stack across to the king tipping it toward the ace. He threw himself far back in his chair, his hands off the table.

"'Here we go,' announced Nelse, and shoved off the top card. The one beneath it was the king. His eyes darted to the left, a hand already moving in that direction to gather in Gurney's bet, and narrowed into slits as he realized the change and what it meant.

"'That bet was ace, king,' he said, harshly.

"'It was,' the boy said, just as hard and cold. 'Bets go as they lay.'"

He was sitting up straight now, his face white, but his eyes looking square into Kincaid's. I'd seen men sober up quick under a strain, but never as quick or as complete as he had.

"Let's see the next card," he demanded.

Nelse made a movement as though he would reach forward and turn the box face down, signifying that the house refused to go on with the deal—then hesitated. Deals ain't broken in the middle of the last turn. And it would be the same as confessing that he knew what the next card was going to be. The chances in a square deal were still even that the next card would be the trey.

"'You shifted the bet after I began the turn,' he said.

"'I did not,' said Gurney. 'Throw out the next card.'

"'Meaning to call me a liar," Nelse murmured, soft voiced and deadly, and his right hand began to move toward the edge of the table where the holster hung. At which Cole came to his feet like a cat, kicking his chair back and reaching for a gun.

"'O, don't shoot!" cried June to Gurney, and threw herself across her father. This knocked his hand to one side before it got to the pistol under the table, and at the impact his chair topped backward and his knee came up sharp against the swinging holster, and I heard the gun slip out of it and go thumping to the floor.

"All during the play, ever since he brought the pen and ink, this Ricardo Doyle had been standing right back of Gurney. Now, when the boy was reaching back to his hip, the half-breed grabbed his arm. Cole swung a short left hand punch to his jaw, which landed glancing and didn't damage Ricardo none, but it made him let go, and Gurney got to his pistol, swinging, around to face Kincaid again. Whereupon Ricardo, behind him now, whipped out a knife.

"So there was where, of course, I had to get into it, my boss being unarmed and a player starting trouble, and I got out my gun as fast as I knew how and took a shot at Gurney."

Shutter paused, wagging his head regretfully.

"You shot Gurney!" I exclaimed.

"I shot at Gurney," Shutter corrected me. "I never was more ashamed in my life. It wasn't more'n seven or eight yards, and I missed him."

Again Shutter shook his head, and the note in his voice was rueful and apologetic:

"Missed him by a plumb foot. And the bullet happens to get Ricardo square in the wrist—of the hand that's holding the knife. So he's out of it. And, being flustered at missing thataway, I suppose, I fumble my gun getting ready to shoot again, and before I can do it somebody has my shooting arm, and I'm out of it, too. And there is Gurney, with his back up against the wall to the left of the bank, swinging a gun so it covers Nelse, and Nelse's assistants that are coming a-running from one place and another, and whomever else it may concern, and Nelse, who has pushed June to one side, puts his hands up over his head just as he might if robbers had got the drop on his house.

"'So it's a holdup, is it?' he says. 'All right. Come get what's in the drawer.'

"'It's no holdup, Mr. Kincaid,' Cole told him. 'These gentlemen are witnesses that I didn't make a move until after you had begun to reach under the table. I don't want what's in the drawer unless it belongs to me, and I won't know whether it belongs to me or not until you throw out another card. All I want is to see whether the ace or the trey is under that king,'

"So Nelse sees, of course, that the game is played out. He's got to turn that card—or go out of business in San 'Ntonio. He takes his eyes off Gurney and looks around at the players and spectators, all rigid, waiting developments.

"'Gentlemen,' he said. 'You know the rules. If this man moved his bet after I began to turn the cards his money's mine. If he didn't he's got a right to have it lay where it is until we see what the next card is. I believed he shifted his chips after I touched the box. I still believe so—but men have been wrong. Mr. Apgate.' He spoke to a man that had been looking on, not far from Gurney. Did you see the play?"

"'Yes, but this isn't my business,' Apgate said.

"Kincaid nodded agreement with this. I sure admired the man's nerve. He had lost, and he knew he'd lost, and here he was getting himself into a position to stand right with the crowd when the thing was over, as cool as though the money involved was a Mexican dollar.

"'Not unless both sides ask you to settle it,' he said. 'That's right, of course.' He looked about at the crowd again. 'I'm willing,' he told everybody, 'to leave this to Mr. Apgate. He's a square man; everybody knows it. Whatever's right is right. If he decides against me the bet lays and we go on with the turn.' He shifted his eyes to Gurney, his thumb on the hammer of his six-shooter, alert, standing there against the wall.

"Gurney knew Apgate. Everybody did. There wasn't an old cattleman in town had a better reputation for being absolutely on the level.

"'I'll leave it to Mr. Apgate,' the boy agreed shortly. 'He'll be doing me a favor if he will settle it.'

"'We both ask you,' said Kincaid.

"Apgate spoke to the players. 'Does any other man with a bet down object?' he asked. 'I won't horn in on this unless everybody interested wants me to.'

"Two or three spoke up and told him to go ahead and be the umpire, and nobody had anything to say to the contrary.

"'Gurney had finished moving his bet and got his hands clear before you touched the box,' Apgate told Nelse.

"Nelse shrugged his shoulders. The expression of his face didn't change. 'You can put that pistol up,' he said to Cole. 'The bet goes as she lays, and we'll look at the next card.' With fingers that never trembled he slid the king out of the box, and it sounded as though everybody in that end of the room let out a sigh he'd been holding back for five minutes as they saw the ace lying underneath it.

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