

MUDDY WATER GAMBLING MAN



The night Cord Stanton risked his rep as a square-shooting tinhorn, Death had the cards stacked against him

By Norman A. Fox

I

THE last of the cargo had been loaded here in St. Louis, and this Fort Benton-bound packet, the *Pegasus*, had built its steam for the up-river run, when Cord Stanton, making his stand on the saloon deck, saw the girl climb the gangplank, a pert and pretty figure in the steady stream of boarding passengers.

Two rules of conduct made Cord Stanton a man apart among Missouri River gamblers; he never carried a gun and he never took a drink. But now he passed a hand before his eyes, made a right turn into the ornamented saloon, came to the deserted bar where burly Mike Robin presided, and said hoarsely: "Whiskey, Mike. Pour me a drink of whiskey!"

Mike Robin shook his balding head

and obeyed. He had worked with Stanton on many a run, listening to the liquored talk of saloon-deck passengers and steering the poker-and-blackjack-minded ones to Stanton's table and collecting a percentage of the winnings for such a service. He came as near to knowing Stanton as any man did, this Mike Robin. But he never probed into the mystery that was Cord Stanton, gambling man, and he didn't now.

There were tall and varied tales told of Cord Stanton along the serpentine length of the Big Muddy. They said he had been a Confederate blockade runner in the recent war between the States; they said he had worn the blue of a cavalry captain and had served the Union well in Pennsylvania. They claimed he had yet to see thirty; they swore he had grandchildren in New Orleans and that the black of his hair came out of a dye bottle.

They whispered that he wore no gun because he was smoke-shy; they whispered that he wore no gun because he was death with one. They said many things; most of them contradictory. But they knew him as a straight gambler. That, in itself, was the sum of Mike Robin's knowledge, too. But he gave Cord Stanton loyalty, and with it went responsibility, so he said: "You look like you'd seen a ghost, boss."

Stanton tilted the bottle and let the liquor run, then wiped his chin with a bandanna he took from his breast pocket. He was no flash-and-fooforaw gambler with a frilled

handkerchief up his sleeve. He wore black that made the six foot of him seem longer and leaner, and he kept a mask for a face.

"A ghost, Mike?" he said. "Maybe I have." And he fell to speculating on the fact that a door to memory, left ever so slightly ajar, could be kicked wide open in an instant.

Ran Beauchamp came catfooting up to the bar, and Stanton got a glimpse of the man in the long mirror, seeing Beauchamp's familiar smile which was all teeth and no heart.

"You drinking, Stanton?" Beauchamp said. "Now I've seen everything, friend."

He was a gambler who'd cut his first deck on the old Mississippi show boats, this Beauchamp, and the stamp of that school was upon him. His vests ran to color, his trousers were made of doeskin, and he wore a brown beaver tilted at the proper rakish angle. He'd worked the *Pegasus* before and so had Stanton, and because they'd taken each other's measure in the past, Stanton frowned.

"I'm drinking alone, Ran," he said pointedly.

"I've been looking for you, friend," Beauchamp said. "But it was to be a business call, not a social one. Have you seen the passenger list? The deck is loaded with a patched-pants outfit heading for the Montana diggings to break their fool backs. But the cabin passengers include quite a few miners who are on their way back to good claims—muckers who had enough left in their

pokes to buy first-class tickets and have something to spare. And there's a lot of broadcloth aboard, besides. The pickings should be good."

A tremor ran through the packet, the whistle cried again, the huge paddle wheels beginning their sloshing as the boat slowly backed into midstream.

"What is it that you're trying to say, Beauchamp?" Stanton asked impatiently.

Beauchamp's smile faded. "You don't like me, friend; and I don't like you. You don't care for the way I deal my cards; and I don't cater to having a gambler aboard with your rep for straight dealing. It makes the passengers choosey. But the boat's always been big enough for the pair of us. Up till now. There's a name on the passenger list: Thomas J. Hardwick, of Fort Benton. Remember it, friend. And remember that he's my private bear meat. That's all."

Stanton shrugged. "I play with any man who comes to my table reasonably sober and asks to be dealt in. I'm not interested in names."

Beauchamp skinned back his long-tailed black coat, the movement giving a glimpse of a walnut-handled revolver in an armpit holster. "I'm not *asking* a favor, friend," he said. "I'm *telling* you what I want. A man who doesn't carry a gun can't be very good with one."

One of Mike Robin's pudgy hands dropped out of sight below the bar, but Stanton shook his head and the

wary stiffness went out of the barkeep's hunched shoulders.

"You've had your say, Beauchamp," Stanton observed. "I've listened to you. Good day."

Beauchamp began to frown and ended by shrugging. "The name is Hardwick—Thomas J. Hardwick," he repeated and catfooted out of the saloon.

Mike Robin sucked in a long breath. "I saw a bullwhacker cross him once in Yankton," he said reminiscently. "Beauchamp used one bullet to cut the whip out of the man's hand, another to split his heart. Maybe I'd better spot this Hardwick gent so we'll know him when we see him."

But Cord Stanton, deep in his own dark thoughts again, picked the bottle from the bar with no sign that he had heard. "I'm going to my cabin," he said. "I'll see you tonight, Mike."

II

The cabin deck was crowded as Cord came along it. Passengers lined the rail to watch St. Louis fade into the distance, others harrying the colored deck crew with frantic questions about staterooms and luggage. All this made an old and familiar pattern that Stanton had witnessed many times before, and he elbowed his way through the chaos of the deck and came to his own reserved stateroom near the bow.

Cord had left the door unlocked, and when he entered he kicked the door shut behind him and set the whiskey bottle on the stand beside

his bunk. Then he spun about, drawn by a sound that was no more than the shadow of a sob, and stood facing the girl who'd been hidden behind the door. She had a pearl-handled, fancy-inlaid .45 in her hand, the barrel tilted to the height of Cord's heart.

He said: "Easy! That gun has a hair trigger!"

"So you remember it!" she cried. "That makes you Cord Stanton, for sure. I'm wondering if you know who I am."

Cord had a better look at her now than he'd gotten as she walked up the gangplank. She was tall enough to come to his armpit, and she wore silk as if she'd been born to it. Her eyes were brown and so was her hair, and her ways were quick ways that brought thrusting memories.

He said: "You were about fourteen when I last saw you, though you didn't know about that. You're nineteen now. The years have turned you from a girl into a woman, Libby. But I'd know you anywhere. You're Althea Libby all over again. How did you find me?"

"From the passenger list. It was just by chance. I was looking over the names to see if I happened to have friends aboard."

"And now you're going to kill me," he judged. "But before you pull that trigger, there's one thing I've got to know. When Lucky Dan Larrimore was found dead in Memphis with my gun on the floor beside him, why didn't your mother turn that gun over to the police right then and tell them who owned it?"

"I don't know," the girl answered. "She's told me all of the story but that part of it. Yes, I know that you and my father were once partners—a pair of gamblers working the Mississippi boats. I know that you both fell in love with the same girl—my mother—and that one of you stood as good a chance as the other of winning her. I even know that the two of you finally cut cards to see which one was to have his try, which one was to fade from the picture. My father won that cut; they didn't call him Lucky Dan for nothing."

She had tears in her eyes, but she kept them out of her voice. "For fifteen years neither my mother nor my father ever saw you, and then you chose to come back into their lives. My mother and I came back from a visit up river to find dad dead and your gun beside him. Yet mother kept the truth from the police. Maybe she felt that your punishment would overtake you anyway. Maybe she's always been half in love with you. That's the part I don't know. But I've kept this gun of yours, and I've waited and hoped. I'm her daughter, but I'm also the daughter of Lucky Dan Larrimore."

There was no note of hope in Cord's voice as he said: "Will you hear my side of it?"

Libby made a quick gesture that was like her mother. "My father was a straight gambler. He made a gamble with you, and you proved yourself a poor loser fifteen years afterwards. There's nothing you

could say now that I'd want to hear."

The steel went out of Cord Stanton's spine, and he looked the years that some men claimed he had known. "Then get it over with," he said.

She laughed, a thin sound with a hysterical edge to it. "I can't!" she cried. "I need you alive. Can't you see how funny that is? For five years I watched every face that passed me, hoping it would be yours, hoping I'd recognize you somehow. And now I have to bargain with you."

"Bargain?"

"I was married a week ago today," she explained. "My husband and I are on our way to Fort Benton where his father runs the Missouri Freight-ing Co. My husband came down river to raise funds his company needs badly. He's carrying ten thousand dollars to his father—not as much as he'd hoped to get, but enough to bolster the company until they can beat the price-cutting schedules of Montana Transportation, a rival outfit. My husband is desperate, and I know the thought that's in the back of his head. He has a weakness for cards, and he intends raising more money by gambling. I've got to see that he doesn't lose what he's carrying."

"Meaning?"

The gun sagged in Libby's hand. "You've got to see that he plays at your table," she insisted. "You've got to see that, whether he wins or loses, he breaks even in the end. He can't jeopardize that money, do you understand! Make sure he reaches Fort Benton with it, and I'll

give you this gun and you can drop it overboard. Refuse to help me, and I'll have no choice. I'll either shoot you down, or I'll turn this gun over to the Memphis authorities and tell them who once owned it. Lucky Dan had friends in Memphis, Mr. Stanton, influential friends. The wilderness won't be big enough to hide you if I put the law on your trail."

"Who is this man who thinks a deck of cards is the way to easy money?" Stanton asked curiously.

"Hardwick," she said. "Tom Hardwick. I'm Libby Hardwick now. I'm not sure that your word is worth any more than a Confederate shin-plaster, but I want your promise that you'll keep him from being trimmed."

"Hardwick," he repeated. Ran Beauchamp's talk, and that quick gesture by which Beauchamp had revealed his gun, and the tale of a bullwhacker who had died suddenly and violently in Yankton all came back to Cord. But, more than that, he saw a vista of possibility for himself that had grown dim through the marching years, the misty outline of a hope long faded. Cuffing the whiskey bottle off the stand to smash on the floor, he made his most sweeping bow to Libby Hardwick.

"Lady," he said, "you've just made yourself a deal."

III

Cord Stanton had struck a bargain, but many days were to pass before he had his chance to keep his part of it—days in which the sloshing pad-

dle wheels of the *Pegasus* put many watery miles behind, Kansas City and St. Joseph and Council Bluffs vanishing in the frothy wake of the packet.

Spring rains had lifted the tawny river, and spring breezes brought the aroma of budding flowers and the song of nesting birds. Luck smiled upon this run, and there was laughter from the main deck at the water's edge to the cupolalike pilot-house perched atop the texas, passengers and crew alike finding enjoyment in the trip.

They had an everchanging panorama of scenery to watch; there was the excitement of wooding the boat and shooting at game from the hurricane deck, and racing with other upriver-bound packets, and thus varied events broke the monotony of the watery way. All was well aboard the *Pegasus*—but not for Cord Stanton.

He did his work by night, when the pilot, wary of the changing channel, ordered the packet tied up to some timbered bank. Then men thronged the saloon to test the fickleness of Dame Fortune. Cord slept by day while the engines throbbed and the boat nosed upstream, "grasshopping" over sandbars, but he found hours for pacing the deck and thinking, and his brooding judgment was that there were passengers aboard not listed by the steward: Greed and Avarice, Love and Loyalty, Hope and Futility. And some night these would show themselves and demand their due. It had to be, and he who hoped for a reckoning wondered what he

would do when the reckoning came.

There was Libby Hardwick, who bore her mother's maiden name and who looked as her mother had looked when Cord Stanton and Lucky Dan Larrimore had cut cards for her hand. There was Ran Beauchamp who wanted a corner on Hardwick money, and there was Tom Hardwick who knew a desperate need to run ten thousand dollars into a larger sum. And there was himself, Cord Stanton, who had passed his word to stand between Tom Hardwick and men like Ran Beauchamp.

So far the bargain had entailed no effort; Tom Hardwick had kept out of the saloon, and Stanton wondered how Libby had managed that. But this run was far from over, and on a night when the packet was tied up below Yankton, on the fringe of Dakota Territory, Hardwick stalked into the gilt and glitter of the *Pegasus*' saloon.

Mike Robin saw him first. The bartender's eyes passed a signal and a warning to Stanton, proof that Robin had marked this man beforehand. Stanton had his look at Hardwick then, seeing a tall, blond youngster in broadcloth, neither man nor boy but possessed of the responsibility of the one and the wildness of the other. Ran Beauchamp, at his corner table, saw Hardwick too and was smiling his toothy smile as Stanton came from behind his crescent-shaped table to saunter to the bar.

"Send him to my table," Cord said low-voiced when he'd gotten Robin's ear.

"But, boss—" Mike protested.

"Send him to my table," Stanton repeated and, turning his back to the bar, returned to his table.

After the third drink, Tom Hardwick came. He smiled a quick and charming smile as he faced Stanton, and the gambler could understand why Libby Larrimore had been won by this man.

"They tell it that you deal 'em straight, gambler," Hardwick said.

Stanton lifted his shoulders, a gesture that held no commitment. "What is your pleasure?" he asked. "I fancy blackjack. Have you got a stomach for strong betting?"

Now blackjack is a game in which a man tries to get cards of varying face values totaling twenty-one, drawing as many as he wishes from the dealer but losing if he exceeds twenty-one. It was a game to Cord Stanton's liking for it depended upon luck, the law of averages insuring a gambler a fair percentage of returns. So he said: "I can stand strong betting, if you can," a remark pointed enough to put a shadow across Tom Hardwick's smile. And then the game was on.

They started with ten-dollar bets, and Hardwick had a run of luck that moved him to raise the ante to twenty-five, and then to fifty dollars.

After three hundred dollars had crossed the table from Stanton to Hardwick, some of the money began to dribble back. But Tom Hardwick was having a run of luck that had no changing, often standing pat on a pitifully poor hand and watching Stanton deal himself out, and when

it was time to close the table, Hardwick was some four hundred dollars richer than he'd been.

"I'll see you tomorrow night, gambler," he said.

Ran Beauchamp had been playing poker with a government agent en route to Benton, and a hog-hairy miner returning to an Alder Gulch claim, the three holding down Beauchamp's table until closing time. But Beauchamp's anger was a sword unsheathed in his eyes whenever he'd glanced Stanton's way, and on the deck Stanton found the other gambler waiting for him.

"Maybe you didn't know it, friend," Beauchamp said, his voice brittle, "but you were playing with Hardwick tonight."

Stanton shrugged. "Did you see the run of my cards? All I did was fatten the pot for you."

But that placated Beauchamp not at all, and by such a token Stanton saw the faint outline of the other's real purpose. "I've told you what I want, friend, and you've chosen to ignore it," Beauchamp said. "Don't make me force a fight. Just see that it doesn't happen again."

Stanton realized then that there'd be a showdown between him and this man before the deal was played out, and he fell to wondering if this wasn't as good a time for it as any. Then: "Good night," he said and brushed past Beauchamp to head for his cabin.

IV

He found another awaiting him there, and somehow he was not sur-

prised. Shapeless beneath a cloak, Libby Hardwick stood by the railing, faintly etched by the slanting rays of the last moonlight.

When she saw Cord she said breathlessly: "I kept him in line all this time, showing him that he might win a greater stake for Missouri Freighting, but that more likely he'd lose what he had and doom the company's chances for good. But tonight he went to the saloon."

"I know," said Stanton. "To my table."

"You let him win?"

"The cards fell that way."

Libby's sigh was one of relief. "Half the trip to Benton is behind us now. Perhaps you'll win your money back. All I want is that he has his ten thousand when he walks down the gangplank. And . . . and thank you, Mr. Stanton."

Cord found his reward in the smil-

ing evidence of her relief, and it suited his fancy to pretend for the moment that she was Althea and that he had banished the shadows from her mother's eyes instead of her own.

But after she had gone, the glow died in him as the run of his thoughts brought a frown to his face. For he had seen the one flaw in Libby's careful scheming. Fort Benton was supposed to bring an end to her worries, but he knew it would be only the beginning of them.

Tom Hardwick must not lose his money; therefore he had to win or break even. Tonight Hardwick had had a phenomenal run of luck, the kind of luck that put gambling in a man's blood. This Cord Stanton knew, for his own beginning had come from such hands as Hardwick had drawn tonight, and Lucky Dan Larrimore and a score of other gam-

Beauchamp already had his iron raised when Cord aimed with the ill-fated gun that had sent Lucky Dan to his death.



blers of Stanton's acquaintance could tell a like tale.

You won where other men lost, and you grew to scorn the toil of hands and back and brain when money could be gotten so easily, and you greased the skids to hell with every pot you took. Thus there was a certain irony in the fact that Tom Hardwick, protected at the green table, might become Tom Hardwick, slave to the green table.



Such was the way Cord Stanton saw it, and when he'd got the lamp to burning in his cabin, he opened his cowhide trunk in the corner and delved deep until he found a certain deck of cards, an unsealed deck, but with the sheen of newness on it. Shuffling the deck, he dealt himself cards face down, studying the intricately-etched design of the backs

and seeing in the scrollwork certain minute variations that would have escaped a casual eye. Then he turned the cards over, making sure the faces were as he'd read them from the back.

Most of the following day Cord spent with that deck, studying, studying, studying, dealing the cards, then turning them over for verification, and he had the deck in his pocket when he headed for the saloon that night. But Ran Beauchamp was waiting at the railing just beyond the saloon's door, and before Stanton could enter, Beauchamp put his hand on Stanton's arm, a brusque, beligerent gesture.

"Hardwick's inside," Beauchamp said. "I tried to interest him in cards, but he prefers to wait for you. It's too bad that a headache is keeping you to your cabin tonight, friend."

This had all the shape of a show-down, and because Beauchamp's insistence was all out of proportion to the money involved, Stanton guessed the whole truth then.

"A man hears many things, and sometimes he can put them together," Stanton said. "Could it be, Beauchamp, that you have a reason for not wanting the Missouri Freighting Co., up in Benton, to get its needings?"

Beauchamp skinned back his lips in that toothy smile of his. "Missouri takes trade away from Montana Transportation," he said. "Montana's boss is a shirt-tail relative of mine. More than that, I own

a little stock in the outfit. How did you guess, friend?"

"If it was only Hardwick's money you were after, you wouldn't have cared if I lost to him. But you want him broke, and you want him at your table so you can be sure he's broke."

"You catch on quick, friend. Now hadn't you better go and take care of that headache?"

Cord Stanton brought the crooked deck from his pocket and, fanning out the cards face down, held the hand in a splash of saffron light from the saloon's doorway.

"You're a gambling man, Beauchamp," he said. "Put it this way. You want to skin Hardwick and do it proper. I want a chance to get back four hundred dollars that I dropped last night. How about cutting cards with me? Draw the high one, and I'll keep out of Hardwick's way from here to Benton. But if I get top card, I'm to have my chance at him tonight, and no trouble with you. Is it a deal?"

Beauchamp brushed back his coat to give a glimpse of his armpit gun. "I don't have to cut cards, friend," he reminded.

"No," Stanton conceded. "You don't. But you can't shoot me till you goad me into getting a gun. There's some law on the river, and you'd have to make our ruckus look like an even break. And before I went for a gun, I could go to young Hardwick and tell him about the stock you own in Montana Transportation. Will you take a card?"

For the length of time it takes a paddle wheel to turn, these two men

measured each other. Then: "Oh, the devil," Beauchamp muttered and drew a card, his eyes lighting as he turned it over and found it to be the queen of hearts.

But Cord Stanton, known up and down the river as a straight gambler, couldn't miss, and after he'd given the backs of the cards his quick but careful attention, he made his choice.

"A king!" Beauchamp ejaculated, anger choking him for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Your man's waiting," he said.

V

One was a man old in the ways of the green cloth; one was a youngster with a fever in need of curing, and they staged a game in the saloon of the *Pegasus* that night that was to have rivermen talking through the years to come.

They began by betting one hundred dollars on each hand. That was Cord Stanton's suggestion, and Tom Hardwick, flushed with his luck of the night before, was quick to accept. Within an hour one thousand dollars had crossed the cloth to Stanton, and the other games were forgotten as gamblers and players left the tables and men deserted the bar to form a breathless semi-circle at Tom Hardwick's back.

It wasn't a one-sided game; Cord Stanton was seeing to that. And that was what gave it spice. With the crooked deck he was using tonight, Stanton could read every card that was dealt, and he knew when to pass himself another pasteboard and when not to. He could have broken

Tom Hardwick as fast as the cards fell, making a quick and certain game of it, but he didn't. He was playing for this boy's soul tonight, the greatest gamble of them all. He had to give Tom Hardwick the heady taste of victory time and again, so that the dregs of defeat would be twice as bitter.

By ten o'clock Hardwick had won back a few hundred dollars, but slowly and inexorably the cash was once again piling up in Stanton's box, and a thin line of sweat etched itself along Hardwick's upper lip as the cards continued to go against him.

He had hooked a finger under his collar and torn it open, and he'd taken to sending to the bar for whiskey, but liquor couldn't make the cards different. There was this to be said for the man of Libby Larimore's choice, though; he could take it—and he did.

At eleven o'clock Stanton said: "Last night you made talk of strong betting, and you gave me my chance to get my money back when you had the luck. Can you stand thousand dollar hands, mister?"

A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd. This was a golden era of easy money, a day when a man's digging between suns might net him a fortune he'd turn around and lose before the moon rose. But it takes only a few moments to deal a black-jack hand, a thousand dollars is a thousand dollars, and there was a chance of seeing gambling history made this night. Tom Hardwick, a strained, desperate look about him,

drew a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Yes, damn it!" he said.

A hand went to him then, and another; Stanton deliberately drawing past twenty-one and dealing himself out twice in succession. But after that the cards were all Stanton's. In fifteen minutes by the banjo clock above the bar, he took four thousand dollars away from Tom Hardwick.

And so it went through the long evening, the air turning blue with tobacco smoke, the crowd staying silent under the spell of this epic game, the world reduced for Cord Stanton to the crescent-shaped table and the boy across from him.

By the time midnight came Tom Hardwick had an empty wallet, and ten thousand dollars of his money belonged to Cord Stanton when the last hand was faced.

"More?" Stanton asked. "Your I. O. U.'s will be good with me."

Tom Hardwick passed a hand through his rumpled blond hair, a mighty sober man for all the whiskey he'd drunk. "No," he said, "I've played my last hand. My last hand, do you understand! I'm not crying, gambler. They say you're straight, and I believe it. And maybe I should thank you—for teaching me a lesson I'll remember for a lifetime."

So it was over, finished, and the aftermath left Cord Stanton weary, the taste of his triumph tempered by the sobering realization that to-

night he had ceased to be a straight gambler.

And there was Ran Beauchamp to think about. Beauchamp had watched Tom Hardwick go broke, and that must have been to the gambler's liking. But Beauchamp might have wanted that ten thousand dollars as well as the chance to blast Missouri Freighting Co.'s hopes. There was no telling how Beauchamp would react to tonight's doings.

Mike Robin's eyes beckoned Stanton to the bar, and when he crossed over, the gambler dipped under the mahogany and brought an old, serviceable-looking gun to view.

"I've been watching Beauchamp's face all through the play, boss," Robin said. "He's been thinking the kind of thoughts that lead to trouble. Better slip this iron into your pocket."

For a moment Stanton toyed with the suggestion. Then he shook his head. "No, Mike. I could have gotten a gun any time, if I'd thought it was best. But a gun brought me more trouble than it ever brought me good, and I'll use one only when there's nothing else left to use."

He half-expected he'd have Beauchamp at his heels at once, but the other gambler didn't follow when Stanton closed his table and, leaving the saloon, went about a certain piece of business on the texas above.

After that Stanton headed for his cabin. With the lamp aglow, he stretched out on the bunk fully clothed. He was lying there neither

sleeping nor thinking, but listening to the lap of the water along the packet's side, when the door opened and Libby Hardwick stepped in. They had made a bargain, these two, and she was to deliver a gun to him when it was finished. She had the gun with her, but once again it was pointed at Cord Stanton's heart.

"Tom's told me," she said, and it was the very evenness of her voice that stirred Cord to a realization of how near to death he was. "Tom's told me everything. You worked it with regular tinhorn finesse, didn't you, Mr. Stanton? First you let him win last night, enough to make him reckless. And tonight you cleaned him to his last dollar: Did you really suppose you could get away with it? You thought I was bluffing because I cornered you once and then bargained with you. Do you still think I'm bluffing, Mr. Stanton?"

Coming to his feet, he said: "That gun's got a hair trigger, remember. Before you pull it, I suggest you climb to the captain's cabin on the texas and ask for a look in his safe. I left a package there with your name—a package that's to be turned over to you at Fort Benton. You'll find Tom's ten thousand dollars in it."

He could tell by the expression on her face that this was beyond her understanding. The gun sagged in her hand, but only for an instant.

"You're bluffing!" she said. "You're bluffing again. Why did you win the money if you meant to return it? That isn't what I asked you to do!"

"When Tom wanted more money,

he turned to cards," Stanton said patiently. "Do I have to tell Lucky Dan Larrimore's daughter what a taste for gambling can do? But Tom found the pickings weren't so easy, and he got cured. He'll live in hell from here to Fort Benton, and every time he thinks of the excuse he'll have to give his father, who is waiting for that money, the more he'll hate gambling. And all you'll have to do, my dear, is to let him sweat until he reaches the gangplank. Now do you understand?"

It took a little time for Libby Hardwick to make her answer, and when she did she was all humbleness and contrition.

"I married him, knowing he had this weakness," she said. "And maybe because it was my father's own weakness, I loved Tom for it. All I could see was the need to get him to Benton with that money. You saved Missouri Freighting Co. tonight, Mr. Stanton, but you did much more than that. You saved Tom for me."

She laid the gun on the stand beside the bunk, and she lifted her eyes to his again. "Maybe I'm beginning to understand why my mother was always half in love with you," she said. "It's small pay I'm giving you for your work, but there's the gun."

"It wasn't the gun I wanted," Stanton told her. "I was hoping for something much more than that. Once I asked you to listen to my side of the story of how Lucky Dan

Larrimore died. You wouldn't do it —then."

She said: "I'll listen to anything you have to say, Mr. Stanton. And what's more, I'll believe you."

But Cord didn't begin his say, for suddenly Ran Beauchamp was in the open doorway, that toothy smile upon his face.

"You'll pardon my eavesdropping, friend," Beauchamp said smoothly, "but I had a riddle to solve and I was anxious to get the answer. When you closed your table tonight, you accidentally dropped a card to the floor, Stanton. I have it here. And I've used too many marked decks in my time not to recognize one when I get a chance to study a card closely. You tricked me with that deck, and you tricked young Hardwick. And it seems, friend, that the time has come for the payoff."

VI

Beauchamp eased into the state-room as he spoke, closing the door behind him and putting his back to it, and Stanton said softly to the girl: "He's a part owner of Montana Transportation, Libby. He hoped to hit at your father-in-law's outfit by fleecing Tom out of that money, and he's failed."

"Failed, friend?" queried Beauchamp. "Have you forgotten? I listened in on this little midnight tête-à-tête. You spoke of a package in the captain's safe. You put it there, Stanton, and you can get it out." He peeled back his coat in

that old gesture of his. "I'll give you five minutes by my watch to be back here with it."

Libby looked from one man to the other, hope and desperation in her eyes, but Stanton took a moment for deliberation and then shrugged. "I've taken every hand but the last one," he observed and touched the girl's elbow. "I'm sorry, my dear."

"You can't—" she protested. But Stanton was edging her toward the door. Ran Beauchamp mockingly stepped aside and made a great flourish of hauling open the door, and then Cord Stanton did two things almost simultaneously.

First he gave the girl a violent shove that sent her lurching out onto the deck. And at the same time he spun on his heel and sent his fist lashing at Beauchamp's chin. That blow had all of Stanton's shoulder behind it, and it might have turned the trick, but Beauchamp saw it coming in time to swerve aside. Stanton's fist grazed the other's shoulder, sending Beauchamp slithering along the wall till his long legs tangled and he went down in a sprawling heap.

Instantly Stanton hurled himself toward Beauchamp, but Beauchamp, drawing up his knees, kicked forward, his boots catching Stanton in the chest and driving him backward to the far wall. Stanton went down sobbing for breath, went down to see the other gambler clawing for that gun in his armpit holster. And Beauchamp got the gun out too, and triggered, the explosion thunderous

in the close confines of this cabin.

The bullet might have torn off the top of Stanton's head, if he hadn't swerved. But Stanton made a wild lunge to the side, grasping for the gun Libby Hardwick had laid on the stand beside the bunk, and Beauchamp's bullet thunked into the wall behind him.

Stanton felt the burn of Beauchamp's second bullet along his neck, another bullet numbed his left arm, and he lost count of his hurts then as nausea swept him through a swirling sea with a dozen grimacing Ran Beauchamps always before him. But his fingers had closed on the fancy handle of the gun that had killed Lucky Dan Larrimore, and then Stanton was swinging that gun, firing blindly, firing again and again until at last the gun clicked empty.

After that Libby's face took the place of Beauchamp's in Cord's chaotic vision, and he saw her through a welter of smoke. He realized dimly that she was in the cabin again and that boots were thundering along the deck as men came running, drawn by the sound of gunfire.

"Get out of here!" Cord mumbled. "Get out of here, you little fool!" And he kept repeating it over and over again until the babble of her voice began to make sense to him and he realized the truth she was trying to tell him: that Ran Beauchamp was dead and the danger was over. . . .

They held an inquest of sorts aboard the *Pegasus* that night, the

packet's officers sitting in solemn judgment in the captain's cabin. They decided that when a man was found dead with a smoking gun in his hand, the facts made it justifiable homicide. Their language was that of St. Louis, but they reasoned in the way of the West, for this was Dakota Territory.

They dug one more grave along that river of graves, the Big Muddy, and they lowered Ran Beauchamp into it. And Tom Hardwick, who witnessed that funeral and who had heard all the story from Libby's lips, said:

"That means the end of the trouble dad has been having with Montana Transportation. I didn't know this fellow was the same Beauchamp until tonight, but I do happen to know that he was more than a stockholder in Montana Transportation. He had all the money behind the outfit, and he worked the river boats just to keep his crooked company going."

The ship's doctor had gone to work on Cord Stanton, and there wasn't much to what the medico had to do. They put the gambler in his bunk afterwards, but he was too restless to sleep and the darkness before dawn found him pacing the deck. He was still there when the great engines began to throb and the packet pushed on upstream for the new day's run toward Fort Benton.

Libby found him at the railing, and she said: "We've talked away most of the night, Tom and I. He knows his money is safe and he won't

have to do any sweating on the rest of the run. But he's learned his lesson just the same. What one gambler did to help him, another might do to fleece him. He's played his last card."

"Good," said Cord Stanton warmly.

Libby put her hands on the rail and watched the bank take shape in the first light. "There was something you were going to tell me when Ran Beauchamp walked into your cabin last night," she reminded him gently.

Cord nodded. "It's a story that goes back to before you were born—back to the days when both Lucky Dan Larrimore and I were courting your mother. You know we cut cards to see who would have the chance to win her, but you don't know what it cost me to draw the low card that night.

"After they were married, I stayed clear of them. I didn't want to see them—and yet I did, for she was the only woman I ever looked at twice, and he was the best friend I ever had, regardless of everything that had happened.

"It took me fifteen years to get up my nerve, and then I came to your home in Memphis, came to spy on the three of you, for I didn't have the courage to face Althea. And when I did come to your door, I came at a time when I knew that only Lucky Dan was at home. But I came with peace in my heart, and with a gift in my hand. It was something of mine that Lucky Dan

had always admired in the days when we were partners—the fancy gun you found beside him when he was discovered dead.”

“You quarreled that day?” Libby asked gently.

Stanton shook his head. “We parted as friends, and I left the gun with him. But it had a hair trigger, as I’ve told you. When I read in the Memphis papers that he’d been found shot, I knew it could mean only one thing. He’d been examining the gun and it had gone off—an accident. But I knew what Althea might think when the police showed her that gun and recognized it as mine.

“That first week I waited, expecting the police every hour. When they never came, I supposed Althea must have realized the one truth that was in my favor. If I’d gone there and shot Dan Larrimore, I’d never have left such a telltale gun behind me.”

“I should have known that, too,” said Libby humbly. “But now I can understand many things that I couldn’t understand before I met you.”

“I’ve learned too,” he told her. “I’ve always been a straight gambler. Once I wondered how any gambler could want anything so badly that he’d cheat at cards to get it. But for five years I’ve wanted the chance to tell the story I’ve just told you, and I even cheated to get that chance.”

“Now I know why nothing ever

shook my mother’s faith in you, not even finding that gun beside dad,” said Libby. “Mother is still living in Memphis. The house is big, and I know that she is lonely now that I have left. Will you go and see her. Mr. Stanton, and tell her all that you’ve told me?”

He nodded, and the spreading light of the new day gave her a better look at him. “Your cheeks are wet!” she cried.

“But not from sadness,” Stanton assured her. “All that is behind me now.”

Libby left him then, but long afterwards he still stood at the railing. Finally he took a deck of cards from his pocket, a deck with an intricately patterned back, and he looked at the cards long and silently, remembering the night that Lucky Dan Larrimore had produced it and proposed a gamble.

Lucky Dan had won the cut of the cards that night, and Cord Stanton had pocketed the deck and kept it since, never knowing that there’d be an hour when he’d find a need for it. He’d learned the truth about that deck too late, but he’d lived to learn, also, that even the straightest of gamblers might be forced to cheat at times.

Cord Stanton let the cards slip from his fingers into the river, and as he watched the churning wake of the packet catch them and swirl them away, his thoughts were of Memphis and the woman who waited there, and the new life that beckoned.

THE END

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CIMARRON

By S. Omar Barker

Of western rivers fame has known,
 Hardest is the Cimarrón.
 Along its course from mouth to head
 Horseback men have fought and bled.
 Kit Carson and his mountain men
 Knew it in the rough days when,
 Against Apache red and Ute,
 Pioneering first took root.

From hoarded snow amid tall peaks
 Gush a dozen clear, cold creeks,
 Quick to rush past cliffs of stone
 Down to form the Cimarrón.
 Down and down through dwindling hills
 Out across the plains it spills,
 By its deep-washed gullies tanned,
 Water for a thirsty land.

Through its mighty canyons passed
 Wagon trains that came at last
 To a new-found western loam
 Fitted for a landman's home.
 Up the long trails to its bank
 Came the longhorns, lean of shank
 Driven by a horseback breed
 Born of rawhide Texas seed.

Friendly with its waters low,
 Still old-timers live who know
 How young cowboys dared and died
 Swimming the herd at its flood tide.
 Men were rawhide to the bone
 On the old-time Cimarrón:
 Trapper, cowboy, long-haired-scout—
 Men whose code was "Fight it out!"

Cimarrón! The river born
 Out of rawhide, hoofs and horn!

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