

One – Benedict's Full Hand

“All right, Benedict, what have you got?”

“Pardon?”

“I said what are you holdin’, dammit, I’m callin’.”

Duke Benedict grinned as he came back to earth and spread his cards face-up on the green baize.

“Full house.”

It was yet another winning hand and faces darkened around the table. To be good-looking, well-dressed and a smooth talker all in one stranger was enough to rile the Bird Cage’s hardcase poker players anytime, without him starting in on a lucky streak to boot. Worse, he was still able to win with his mind plainly on other things, like a pair of silk-stockinged legs across the room. It was enough to make a saint start cursing.

Liveryman Buck Tanner was no saint, but he knew how to curse. He gave a lurid demonstration, then snapped:

“You sure we ain’t borin’ you, Benedict?” Buck’s rough voice was heavily laced with sarcasm. He was down fifty bucks.

“Yeah, we ain’t keepin’ you from nothin’, are we?” cowboy Flory Rand chimed in, eighty dollars behind, and already on the Bird Cage’s slate for drinks.

Duke Benedict heard the voices but not the words—a picture of lazy grace as he absently raked in the latest pot. He went on gazing across the room, with a sparkle in his clear gray eyes. Those legs were enough to make a man forget his religion if he was still lucky enough to have any religion left in him in Daybreak, Kansas, he reflected.

The feet were very small, he noted with an expert eye. He’d heard that small feet indicated fine breeding. Was she highly bred? He seriously doubted it. Nobody of breeding would be found dead in the Bird Cage Saloon—except himself of course, and he was anything but dead.

His eyes left the ankles and moved upwards. The crossed, silky-smooth calves were so perfect that they immediately reminded him of Glory LaRue and the Golden Gate Gambling Hall, Dallas, Texas.

He and Glory had had a fine old time down there in Dallas before the War of the States had ripped America apart, and just thinking of Glory and how she kicked those long slim legs

set his mind to wandering. Leaning back in his chair, he puffed reflectively on his black cigar and a small smile played at the corners of his handsome mouth.

That smile clinched it for Big Henry Peck, heaviest loser of the three, and as Daybreak's rugged blacksmith, the least charmed by the gambling man's looks, manners, and winning ways.

"Goddamn tinhorn," the big man muttered as he picked up his fresh cards. Then, emboldened by Benedict's absent gaze, he added, "Yankee son-of-a-bitch."

Any way you looked at it, it was Big Henry's unlucky day all around. Not only had he lost the best part of twenty-five dollars, but Benedict heard him. The cigar swung to point at the blacksmith like a gun barrel. Behind it, Benedict was smiling, but the smile was anything but friendly.

"How's that again, blacksmith?"

"You heard."

"I'd like you to repeat it."

Big Henry glared. The big blacksmith was a brawler of wide repute and to him, Duke Benedict was just a dude who'd ridden into Daybreak two days ago and since then had alternated his time between playing cards at the Bird Cage or the Shotgun, and visiting Belle Shilleen's sporting house on the corner of Piute and Johnny Streets.

Benedict had caused plenty of interest around Daybreak, particularly among the womenfolk, but nobody knew how he rated, if he rated at all.

Maybe now was the time to find out, Big Henry decided, glancing about him. Tanner and Rand were bound to back him, he figured, and just a couple of tables away saloonkeeper Harp Moody and his bouncers Beecher and Quade were drinking together. Over by the west wall, Joe Crook sat in his permanent place on the high stool six feet above the Bird Cage's customers, with his double-barreled Richardson shotgun lying across his knees. Big Henry grinned. He and Joe Crook were good pards.

Yeah, maybe now was the right time to find out what the gambling man was made of.

The smith flexed his huge muscles and his lips twisted into a sneer.

"What I said, Benedict, is that you're a son-of-a-bitch."

Benedict's smile widened. The gray eyes went over Tanner and Rand, then to Moody's table, then up to the shotgun. The gambler wondered just how far Joe Crook would leave a ruckus go before cutting loose.

The saloon quietened suddenly as Benedict rose to his feet. Henry Peck immediately jumped up, knocking over his chair. Benedict inhaled deeply on his cigar, then carefully stubbed it out.

Rand and Tanner remained seated, but their expressions left no doubt whose side they were on.

Duke Benedict shot his cuffs, straightened his hat and glanced to his right. The owner of the lovely legs was watching him with lively interest. That was all the encouragement Duke Benedict needed.

Things were going too slowly for Big Henry. "All right, tinhorn," he challenged, flexing some more. "I called you a son-of-a-bitch. So what are you goin' to do about it?"

Benedict quickly showed him. With one flashing motion he seized the poker table and slammed Big Henry in the face with it, chips, money and glassware spilling in wild confusion.

Tanner and Rand jumped from their chairs as Benedict came around the wrecked table with six-guns leaping into his hands as if by some gambler's sleight-of-hand trick. A gun blurred and the bloody-nosed Big Henry buckled and fell. Benedict stepped lightly past the crumpling big figure and hit Buck Tanner with all his force, splitting his forehead from eyebrow to hairline and knocking him a full six feet to crash into Harp Moody's table and send it flying.

Startled by the speed of the attack, young cowboy Flory Rand nevertheless had his six-gun half clear by the time Benedict swung his attention to him. A highly-polished boot flashed out. Rand's gun was spilled to the floor and then a venomous whack from Benedict's pearl-handled six-gun sent him after it.

It was all over in seconds. Stepping back from the scene of carnage, Benedict twirled his six-guns on his fingers and put a big smile on his face for the benefit of choleric Harp Moody as he let the Colts drop back into their holsters. Moody, advancing menacingly with Beecher and Quade, saw the guns go back to leather and halted uncertainly in the face of that smile.

"No hard feelings, Moody," Benedict said, friendly as hell. "Just a friendly argument." He looked reproachfully down at the sleeping Peck. "He hard-named my mother." A murmur of approval went around the saloon. All of the Bird Cage's customers had mothers. One or two could even remember them.

Harp Moody reflected the general feeling. "That just wasn't perlite. Beecher, Quade, toss a bucket of water over these boys."

The bouncers obeyed smartly, voices rose again and the tension washed away. Harp Moody signaled to Joe Crook to take the shotgun off the cock, then crossed to the bar and

stood with a drink in his fist, looking speculatively across the room at the man who'd whipped Peck and the others, yet still didn't have a hair out of place.

The stares of a hundred Harp Moodys would have had less than no effect on Duke Benedict at that moment, for he was now seated with the owner of the legs at her table. If the gambler had a real weakness you could put a finger on, it was a weakness for the opposite sex, and this was as stirring a representative of that fair gender as he'd encountered in Daybreak. She was small and dark, with a pert high-breasted figure, rounded hips, and a way of fluttering her long dark eyelashes that gave Benedict the old familiar tingling under the skin.

She told him she thought he was very brave and masterful, the way he'd handled Peck and company who by now had been dragged out back to recuperate. Benedict didn't argue. Nor did she when he told her that she had eyes like a Spanish queen. They were getting along marvelously.

Things eventually came down to earth a little however when Benedict noticed the rings on her left hand. Yes, she admitted a little glumly, she was married. Her name was Honey Smith and she was married to one Surprising Smith. They'd arrived in Daybreak just that morning.

"Surprising Smith?" said Benedict. "That's some name, Honey. Tell me, what brings you to Daybreak?" Honey sighed, the deep breath doing interesting things to the low-cut front of her dress. "My husband is a bounty-hunter. He has been hired by the Daybreak town council to assist the deputy run down some local badmen." She pulled a pretty face. "Now I suppose you won't want to sit with me?"

"I wouldn't say that," Benedict said staunchly, though privately wondering why all the most desirable ones seemed to have the most formidable husbands. Then curiously, "But where did he get that handle? What's surprising about him?"

Honey Smith's pout suggested that she found her husband a rather boring topic of conversation. "Oh, it's some silly name the outlaws gave him because he is always taking them by surprise. He's very successful at his work," she added grudgingly, leaving no doubt in Benedict's mind that she disapproved of her husband's occupation. Then she brightened and dimpled charmingly. "But let's talk about something more interesting, Duke. Let's talk about you."

Benedict was only too ready to oblige. Ordering drinks, he launched into an engaging, if not particularly truthful account of his life. Honey was fascinated and within a mere matter of minutes Mr. Surprising Smith was totally forgotten by both and might have remained so indefinitely, if the batwings hadn't suddenly squeaked open causing Honey to stiffen and interrupt Benedict's monologue with a startled cry.

“My husband!”

To Duke Benedict, it seemed that many of the best moments of his life had been ruined by somebody suddenly saying: “My husband!”

He sighed, tugged down the lapels of his immaculate coat, then rose as Surprising Smith advanced, looking surprisingly menacing.

Pretty Honey’s husband was a slender man of less than average height who held himself stiffly erect to appear taller. He was dressed entirely in black with a gun thonged low on each lean thigh. His sour face was darkly narrow, ornamented by a black dash of a moustache, the eyes pale. As he drew up at the table, he had, for Benedict, all the appeal of a copperhead.

“Get up!” Surprising Smith said to his wife.

Honey got up. Quickly.

“Now, darlin’, don’t go jumping to conclusions. I was only—”

“Half-an-hour is all I leave you for, and that’s all the lousy time it takes for you to get up to your old tricks, pickin’ up the first thing in pants you meet.”

“No, no that’s not at all the way it is, Mr. er ... Surprising sir,” Benedict smiled. He put everything into that smile for the little gunfighter looked touchy as a teased snake. “You see, your lady wife and I were simply enjoying a sociable.

“You just ain’t to be trusted,” Smith went on to his wife as if Benedict hadn’t spoken. He seized her wrist and jerked her roughly to him, upsetting her chair. “You flighty little vixen. How many times I got to hammer you to ...”

“Take it easy, Smith,” Benedict cut in, no longer smiling.

“... teach you that you ain’t to drink with other men? You ain’t to talk to ’em, you ain’t even to—”

Benedict’s right boot flashed and Surprising Smith jolted from head to toe as the kick connected with his backside.

“You need a lesson in manners, friend,” Benedict snapped as the little man released his wife and spun to face him squarely, his face now an ugly mask. “This might be a rough old town, but it’s not that rough.”

Surprising Smith sucked in a ragged breath, his fingers wriggling over his gun butts like little snakes.

“You shouldn’t have done that—now go for iron, you philanderin’, white-fingered, pantywaist tinhorn!”

Honey Smith gave a little shriek of dismay. Duke Benedict's face went cold and hard, but before he could speak, the explosive quiet was broken by the unmistakable click of a shotgun hammer going back.

"All right, boys," Joe Crook said from his high chair, peering down at them over the sights of the Richardson. "Jest you back up there, 'less you want a load of buckshot apiece."

Neither man moved; a man would have to be six kinds of a fool to do otherwise. Harp Moody came across from the bar. Moody, who'd signaled to Crook to get the drop as soon as he smelt gunplay, had his hands in his pockets so they wouldn't see them trembling. But his voice was firm enough.

Slowly Smith let his hands drop to his sides. Benedict eased his pent-up breath slowly out. Then Harp Moody was standing between him and Surprising Smith.

"All right, Benedict, out!"

Benedict looked indignant. "Who, me? Why not him?"

"On account it ain't him that's been bustin' up my saloon and it ain't him that's been shinin' up to other fellers' wives," Moody explained. He snapped his fingers and immediately Beecher and Quade moved in and grabbed the gambler's arms.

"Shotgun's on you, Benedict," warned Moody. "Go peaceable or you're daid."

Benedict sighed but didn't argue. Not with that riot gun on him. With a regretful look at Honey he let them walk him fast to the doors.

Benedict went so peaceable, his handlers mistook caution for cowardice and put a little extra muscle into their work for the benefit of the spectators as they neared the batwings. Benedict retaliated by slamming a heel into big Beecher's shinbone, then saw a whole flock of stars as Beecher bounced a jackrabbit jolt off the back of his neck.

Benedict wasn't given the chance to recover. With a skill born of much practice, the boys broke into a little trot over the last couple of yards and sent him rocketing out through the batwings. Stumbling to keep balance, he had no chance in the world of avoiding the big man who was coming up the steps. They came together with a crash, then in a wild confusion of arms, legs and hard language, pitched off the high gallery into the street.