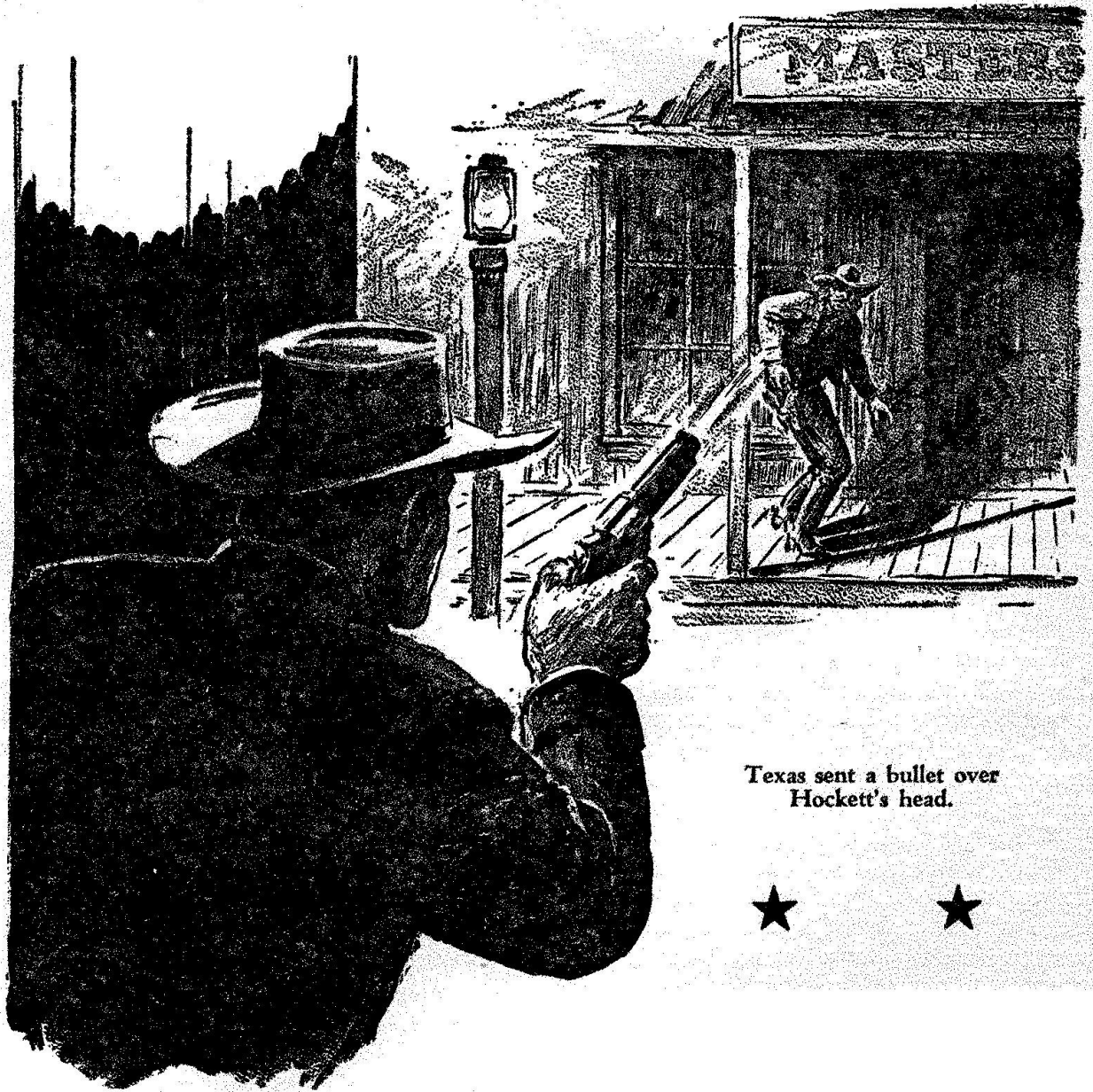


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BULLET DUST

By H. A. DeROSSO



Texas sent a bullet over
Hockett's head.



When gambler Calvin Rowell deserted an embittered wife, his young and bewildered son had to buck the scorn of Llano City—alone.

BECAUSE his grandfather had fallen with Bowie and Crockett at the Alamo, he was named Texas—Texas Rowell. That had all been in the old days when the Calvin Rowells had been a family, in the days before his father, Calvin Rowell, had gone off one stormy night, leaving behind him an embittered wife and a bewildered boy.

That was about all that Texas Rowell could remember, about all he wanted to remember, for he had, unlike so many, no memories that he liked to think about. There were times, too, when Texas Rowell longed to shut the present from him and live only in dreams of the future.

That was the driving reason for his crossing the railroad tracks to that other part of Llano City where yellow lights out of saloon windows lighted the street as though it were day and where those myriad sounds of revelry and carousal lifted upward. Where he could walk with his head thrown back and a flame in his eyes and a song in his blood that he could not explain.

He could walk down the pine board sidewalks in the first chill of evening, elbowing his way among

the roughly clothed miners and booted and spurred cowboys.

In his ears there would be harsh laughter and the shrillness of women's voices and the tinny jangling of pianos. He could walk in another world and forget for a while the stiffness and artificiality of that other world he hated.

Above all he could forget Elizabeth Rowell.

She'd surprised him when he had tried to slip out through the kitchen. He could still see her, standing there stiffly straight and her face so pale and rebuking.

"Well, Texas?" she had asked.

He stopped with his hand on the door knob. All his life he had known rebellion against her yet he'd always kept those 'rebel thoughts inside him for he owed her something. She had raised him and was sending him to college.

"I'm going out," he said.

"Out?" she asked, arching her eyebrows and her fingers drummed the gold head of her cane. She had on a high necked dress with a lot of lace at the throat. "Doesn't the front door work?"

He didn't say anything to that. He could feel her eyes probing at him and if her face hadn't always been so wooden he would have expected a sneer to frame her lips. He stood about six feet and he still had the skinny leanness of a teen-age boy. His face was long with a sharp chin and a narrow, stubborn mouth.

Elizabeth Rowell tapped the floor a couple of times with her cane. "It's your father's blood in you. That no-good blood of his. I've tried to keep it from coming out in you, Texas. But it's starting to show."

"What's wrong with his blood?" he asked hotly.

"Wrong?" she murmured and he was surprised to see a twisted smile come to her lips though the mirth did not reach her eyes. "Don't you know, Texas? Your stealing away at night, your mingling with all that trash down on Panhandle Street. That's what's wrong."

"I'm no child," he told her flatly. "I'm twenty. I've listened to you as long as I intend. I've always done my best to obey you, to be what you want me to be, but I'm not that kind of a man. If it's my father's blood coming out in me, then I'm proud of it!"

"You've been seeing him," she said.

"Yes."

That was all. He knew that she knew he'd been stealing away at night for almost a month now, ever since Calvin Rowell had drifted into Llano City. Texas expected her to say something, some words of inquiry about Calvin Rowell, but if she'd been of a mind to ask such things she'd have done so long ago.

"I won't stop you then," she said quietly. "I trust you know better than to follow his ways. Perhaps it's a good thing. This way you might come to see him for what he really is and so you'll never have any regrets or any reproach for what I've done... ."

HE WALKED along under the stars and he lifted a hand and removed the tie from his shirt and unbuttoned the collar. His face lost its tightness and the wrinkles smoothed away from the edges of his eyes and his mouth lengthened with a slight smile.

The clapping of his heels on the walk was lost among all the other noises. He brushed past two drunken, reeling cowboys and turned into the Palace.

Texas Rowell scarcely noticed the long mahogany bar and its brass rail, shiny from countless boot scrapings. Nor the high mirror that ran the length of the wall behind the bar nor the glitter of the lamplight on the bottles and glasses stacked on the backbar.

He passed through the arch that led to the dance hall and there he met Calvin Rowell. There was no music or dancing for it was almost time for the first show of the evening. The dance floor was crowded with people, many of them standing but others had brought in chairs from the barroom.

It was a motley crowd—miners with the stain of their calling showing in the creases of their hands, bow-legged and spurred cowboys in their wide-brimmed, flat crowned hats, and in the boxes along the wall the more substantial citizens.

Calvin Rowell was leaning against the wall. He was a thick man and none too tall. He had a noble profile with his straight nose and the soft curve of his mustache and the graying goatee. He had on a long black coat and his thumbs were hooked in the pockets of his gaudy, flowered vest.

There was warmth in Texas Rowell's face when he stepped up and said, "Hello, Calvin."

Calvin Rowell turned his head and his eyes softened when he saw his son, "Oh, hello, boy. You're just in time. Cherokee will be on in a few minutes."

Texas Rowell leaned against the wall beside his father, feeling a vast pride for the man. Calvin Rowell was so capable, so strong. For all his fine manners and soft speech there was nevertheless a hardness to him that softened other men's voices respectfully when they addressed Calvin Rowell. Perhaps it was his uncompromising gray-green eyes or the way he had of thinning his lips when displeasure was in him.

The show began. Texas Rowell had scant attention for that. A couple of blackface comedians and two jugglers. They all got laughs and cheers and jeers and noisy demonstrations. So did the half dozen chorus girls. But a respectful hush settled over the spectators when Cherokee appeared.

She was small with a piquantly beautiful face and a poignant sadness in her voice. She was about the prettiest thing Texas Rowell had ever

seen. She sang a couple of ballads and you could tell the crowd liked her but there was a restraint and a respect in the applause.

After she was through, she stepped down from the stage and the spectators made a lane for her to pass on her way to Calvin Rowell. It wasn't her beauty or her sweetness that made these uninhibited men act thus, Texas knew. It was the presence of Calvin Rowell for Cherokee was his daughter by his second wife.

Cherokee had on a red, high-necked dress and her hand was cool in Texas' grasp. They exchanged amenities and then she said to Calvin:

"Have you asked Texas yet?"

"I was going to ask him now," said Calvin Rowell. He turned to his son. "Cherokee wants to go to the ball Saturday night. She's never been to one like that. Would you take her, Texas?"

"Sure," he grinned. "I'll be glad to. I'll be the envy of them all."

* * *

There was a thinness to Calvin Rowell's lips as he said, "If anything happens, Texas, you tell me. If they

don't treat Cherokee right, you tell me, hey?"

They were outside Cherokee's hotel room and Texas was all dressed up in his best, feeling the irritating rasp of the starched, stiff collar against his tender neck.

"I can't see why they shouldn't treat her right, Calvin," he said slowly. "They might not approve of you, but she can't be held to blame for that. I don't think there will be anything wrong,"

"I hope not but if there is, you tell me."

Cherokee came out of her room then and both men smiled on her. She was dressed all in white with a single strand of pearls around her neck.

"All right?" she asked Texas, smiling happily.

"You bet," he grinned.

"Have a good time," Calvin Rowell said and then he was gone. Cherokee and Texas went down the stairs and through the lobby and out into the night. Dimly they could hear the noise from Panhandle Street as they turned into that part of Llano City where the night knew a quiet stillness broken only by the clapping

of footsteps on the walks and the rustling of the leaves in the breeze.

Texas looked down at Cherokee and saw that she was trembling a little. "Cold?" he asked. "You're shaking."

"No, no," she laughed shakily. "Excitement, I guess. You know, Texas, I've never been to one of these balls. Where everything is nice and orderly and there is no loud, drunken talk and the music is soft and they ask you to dance in a polite way and they don't paw you. Do you think they'll like me, Texas?"

"Sure," he grinned. "Why shouldn't they?"

She stared fixedly at the darkness ahead of her. "Calvin," she said.

"Oh, that. They won't mind. You're going with me. You're my sister. They won't mind."

"He's a fine man, Texas."

"None better."

"Why did it turn out like this? About your mother, I mean."

"They just didn't fit together. Like cattle and sheep on the same range, I guess. Mother had money and she was out West on a vacation, Calvin swept her off her feet. Mother came from a proud family. They couldn't forgive her for marrying a gambler.

She was from another world. While everything was new she was happy, but when the novelty wore off she couldn't stand living with a gambler. They just didn't fit together, that's all, Cherokee, and Calvin walked off. Mother got a divorce and stayed on out here, hating the land and its people, too proud to go back East and admit she was wrong and others right. . . ."

The Saturday night ball was being held in the Silas Fetterman home this week. Fetterman was the biggest real estate man in Llano City and he had the largest and most luxurious dwelling in town. There were several carriages drawn up on the side lawn and all the windows of the house were ablaze with lamplight.

There was pride in Texas Rowell as he escorted the girl up the steps and into the place, but afterwards it all seemed like a bad dream. He knew that he could never shake that scene from him. The way everyone had cut him cold, the stares at Cherokee and the frigidness of the whole situation that left him standing there, feeling the whole world crumbling about him and suddenly hating everyone in this room and everything they stood for.

He'd seen the flush of shame mount Cherokee's cheeks and in the midst of all that silence he'd cried out harshly, "Dirty, foul scum!"

He'd never known such a sudden and complete anger that enveloped every inch of him and Elizabeth Rowell's words came pounding back into his memory—*It's your father's blood coming out in you. . . .*

He took Cherokee's arm tenderly and led her outside and it wasn't until they were out on the walk that she began to cry. He took her to her room and then Texas went to the Palace. When Calvin Rowell saw his son's face the gambler left his table. "So they did it," he said, his lips very thin.

"They cut her cold, Calvin," Texas said.

"I expected it," Calvin said stiffly. "I knew they'd do it to her. But I couldn't say no to her. She had her heart set on going. Damn their ugly, dirty minds. They come down here, all of them, many a night. . . . Then they'll cut the heart out of a poor, innocent girl!"

"What're you going to do, Calvin?"

Calvin Rowell laughed coldly. He reached under his arm and took out

his gun. He went over to the bar and handed the weapon to a bartender. "Keep this for me, Mike."

Then Calvin Rowell clapped his son on the back. "I won't do anything rash, Texas. I just want to tell those smug sons what I think of them."

Texas accompanied his father to the Fetterman home. When they turned into the gate Texas dropped a few steps behind. There were several men outside the door, their cigars glowing redly in the darkness.

They spied Calvin Rowell and they moved over in front of the door, blocking his entrance.

"I want in," Calvin said flatly. "I have something to say, something I want everyone to hear."

One of the men detached himself from the group and caught Calvin Rowell's arm. This was a tall man and even in the night Texas could see that the man had long, blond hair reaching down to his shoulders in the frontier style. He was loose-jointed and gaunt, but there was an air of litheness, treacherous litheness about him.



This was Brand Hockett, marshal of Llano City.

"They expected you," Hockett was saying. "So they sent for me. Come along, Rowell. You're not wanted here. You nor your kind."

"Don't stand in my way, Hockett!"

"Come on, come on," said Hockett heatedly, pulling at Calvin's arm. Suddenly Calvin Rowell twisted and drove a blow into the marshal's face. Hockett stumbled backward and even as he was falling he whipped out a gun.

The orange flames licked twice at the darkness and Calvin Rowell fell to his knees. He knelt there, holding

up his head with an effort and his voice was strangely loud:

"Damn you, Hockett, Damn you for the sneaking murderer that you are."

"Once more Hockett fired and Calvin Rowell collapsed the rest of the way.

Texas Rowell's held-up breath exploded in a ringing cry and he threw himself at Brand Hockett. The marshal was just getting to his feet and he turned abruptly, his teeth showing white as Texas drove in. Hockett's gun leveled.

But the watchers closed in and grabbed Texas and went sprawling with him to the grass of the lawn. Others had hold of Hockett and he was fighting their restraining hands and cursing.

One of the men said angrily, "You've done enough this night, Hockett. Rowell didn't have a gun."

"How was I to know. He was always heeled."

Texas was on his feet. "This isn't the first time for Hockett," he cried. "You'll find all his killings like this. In Abilene and Hays City and Ellsworth. He's never given a man an even break. That's your marshal!"

“Hold your tongue, kid!” Hockett shouted.

“Yeah, I’ll hold it,” Texas said brokenly. “Talking don’t do any good. Next time we meet, Hockett, I’ll hold my tongue and a gun!”

He saw them gathering around Calvin Rowell’s body, all of the men out of the house and in the background some of the women. There was a choking pain in Texas’ breast and he cried out, unashamed of his tears.

“Go away. All of you. You never wanted anything to do with him while he was alive, why do you stand here staring now that he’s dead? Go back inside and start your music and dance the whole damn night. I’ll take care of him. I’ll take him away. Only go and leave me alone with my father.”

AFTER Calvin Rowell had been lowered into his grave, Texas Rowell took Cherokee’s arm and led her away. There weren’t many who had followed Calvin Rowell on his last journey. Texas and Cherokee and a half dozen gamblers and the employees of the Palace.

Texas took Cherokee to her hotel and then he went uptown, to

Elizabeth Rowell’s house. She was seated in the living room, an open book in her lap. Texas Rowell stood there stiffly, his hands clenched.

She was as he had always remembered her. Her face, deathly pale and as immovable of expression as the features of a wooden image. Deliberately he selected the cruelest thing he could think of to say:

“You can’t forgive even death.”

She was patient in answering and if his remark had hurt she did not show it. “No, Texas, I can’t.”

“You could have showed yourself,” he cried angrily. “You could have gone to his funeral.”

“He had his mourners. He had his son. What more could he ask?”

Texas took a step forward, his hand raised, the anger and anguish raging behind his eyes. For once he saw something like fear and horror in her eyes and he remembered himself and dropped his hand.

“He had his daughter, too. My sister. She’s the only precious thing I have left. All my life I’ve been alone, brought up to scorn others as being below my station, never knowing or even suspecting that there was love and companionship in the world.

“For years he’s been seeing me secretly. While I was away at school, here in Llano City. Him and Cherokee. It was like another world when they were around. They talked and laughed and made you feel like you were somebody. They were real people, not—not wooden images!”

She dropped her gaze from him and her face softened and there was an immeasurable sadness in her tone. “Even in death, I envy him.”

He could only stare at her uncomprehendingly and so she raised her eyes once more and her lips moved stiffly. “The last thing in the world I wanted to yield to him he still has even in death.”

He started to turn away and she asked, “Where are you going, Texas?”

He faced her and showed her a mirthless grin. “I’m going to kill a man,” he said,

“No, Texas,” she said, and for a moment he thought she’d get up from her chair and try to reach out a hand to hold him back, but she remained seated. “No. He wasn’t worth it, Texas.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But even if it was only a dog I’d never seen in my life that I saw shot down for no

reason at all, I’d take it up with the killer. And Calvin, he—he was my father.”

“You’ll be hurt, Texas.”

He stared at her a long while and then he said, “Is there some feeling in you after all?” And as the color mounted to her face, he walked away. . . .

It was along toward evening and the first shadows were enveloping Llano City. Texas Rowell crossed the railroad tracks to Panhandle street and made for the Palace. He found Mike behind the bar.

“I want Calvin’s gun,” said Texas.

Mike stared at him a while and then Texas put out his hand, palm up, Mike comprehended the glint in the boy’s eyes and bent and slid the sixshooter across the bar.

“It’s your funeral, kid,” Mike said.

Texas laughed shortly and then he picked up the gun and inspected the cylinder. All six chambers were loaded and he laughed again without humor and shoved the long barrel down his waistband. He walked out without another word.

The darkness was complete and he glanced up and saw the stars in the sky. The wind was a cold slap against his face and he raised a hand and

buttoned his collar. He left Panhandle Street and all its teeming, roaring life behind him and struck out for that other part of Llano City.

He paused on the corner of Mesa and Denver streets and there, with his back against the wall of the Mercantile, he waited. Brand Hockett would be along soon, crossing over to Panhandle Street on his nightly rounds.

In Texas' ears there were the jumbled sounds from Panhandle, dim with distance, but vibrant with life. From up Mesa Street, came the soft strains of a melody played on a piano.

HE STOOD there waiting, the gun pressing against his middle, one ear cocked to the many sounds of Panhandle Street, the other tuned to the piano. Someone began singing, a soft, feminine voice singing.

And then he was conscious only of the figure coming down the walk. Texas dropped his fingers to gun handle and it was very cold in his grip. Slowly he pulled out the weapon and thumbed back the hammer. Hockett came swinging along down the other side of the street.

Somewhere off in the night a coyote howled and the song was still in Texas' ears.

He tipped his gun barrel up and sent a bullet over Brand Hockett's head. The man was a swirling movement in the shadows as he ducked into the doorway of Masterson's shoe store. Texas waited, shrinking as far back as he could into the shadows.

"Let's have it over with, Hockett!" he shouted.

Gunfire answered him and bullets slapped into the board wall above him. He had the gun flashes to guide his aim and he took his time and sent five bullets into Masterson's doorway.

The echoes were still ringing when the shadows trembled and erupted a coughing, weaving figure that stumbled forward and collapsed in the dust.

The song continued unbroken in Texas' ears. Gunfire from Panhandle Street was common enough at night and the good citizens of Llano City paid no heed to the ruckus.

He returned home and found Elizabeth Rowell in the parlor. If there was turmoil within her, she gave no sign. So he told her bluntly:

“I killed Hockett and I’m leaving. I’ll be a hunted man now for Hockett wore a badge. They won’t judge whether I was justified in killing him. They’ll consider only that Hockett wore a badge and I killed him. Me, the son of no-good Calvin Rowell.”

He did not go on to tell her that from now on he was a marked man. Marked as fair game for all those men who lived by the gun. Fair game for any man who, if successful, could brag, “I killed Texas Rowell who killed Brand Hockett who killed Kid Bisbee who killed—” He did not tell her for he felt that she was not interested.

“You’re leaving?” she asked.

“Yes, but I thought I’d come and tell you. You know how I feel about you, yet I owe you something. Not much perhaps, but still I owe you something. I’m not running out on you. But I’m going away. And when

I’m settled I’ll send for Cherokee and I’ll take care of her until she finds herself a man. If you want to come —”

She shook her head. “No, Texas. I’ll stay here in this house.”

“Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand. You see, Texas, all my life I wanted you only for myself. I never wanted half-a-son. I didn’t want to share you with him. But now I know I can’t even have half-a-son.”

“I’ll go then,” he said, but at the door he paused. “I’m sorry it had to turn out like this.”

“It’s all right, Texas. Thanks for seeing me before you left—”

And when he took his leave of Cherokee and she saw the look on his face, she said, “You look so happy, Texas.”

“I’m free,” he told her. “For the first time in my life I’m free.”