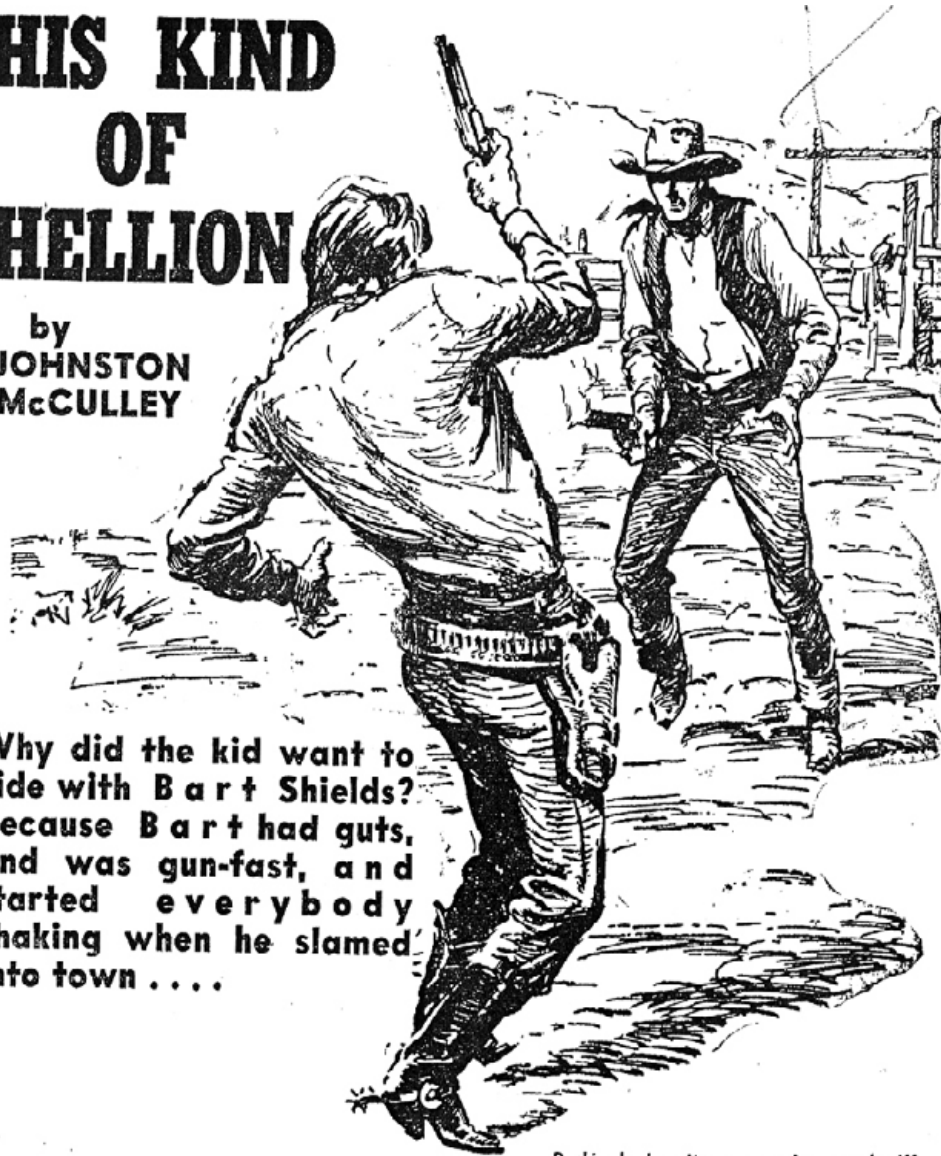


# HIS KIND OF HELLION

by  
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Why did the kid want to ride with Bart Shields? Because Bart had guts, and was gun-fast, and started everybody shaking when he slamed into town . . . .

Ruskin had quite a record as a sheriff.

**E**ARLY THAT morning a rider strange to the locality emerged from the swirls of mist lifting over the wasteland, loped into the sleepy little community known as Desert Edge. Nobody showed along the town's one street, and the hitchrails were empty. Old Pop Hopper, always an early riser, was just opening the front door of his store.

Pop glanced up quickly when he heard the sound of hoofbeats. He squinted at the rider over the tops of his steel-rimmed spectacles, giving him a swift but keen appraisal. In Desert Edge, strangers were

few and generally of the same sort. And it was Pop's quick guess that this one would follow the usual pattern.

For the rider began the customary routine. He dismounted stiffly with all the symptoms of saddle fatigue and drowsiness, and tied his jaded pony to the hitchrail, using the standard quick-getaway knot. And he gave a searching look at his back-trail as if expecting to see signs of pursuit.

Pop mused, *Well, here's another of 'm hot on the dodge and hittin' for the hills with a lawman in pursuit. Ridin' the bitter*

*road at the end of which a hombre finds either a bullet or a rope.*

Pop guessed the newcomer was in his late teens or early twenties. He had a hefty body moved with youthful awkwardness but here was a mere kid believing himself to be a grown man, Pop thought. Didn't know a man has to grow in mind as well as in body. Probably had the idea he could bluff the whole world and all the folks in it. Hated honest work, no doubt. Thought he could blaze a path of glory through life with a gun.

Pop noticed that the lower portion of the newcomer's attire was as would be expected—fairly new overalls and spurred high-heeled boots a little scuffed. But the upper part was certainly dude stuff. Pop observed a shirt of bright hues adorned with heavy hand embroidery, a coat with a fancy collar, and a peaked sombrero with a carved leather chin strap and a wide band decorated with Indian beads. Some little Mexican sweetheart had been left behind to cry her pretty eyes out, Pop decided.

The rider wore the regulation gunbelt, however, with cartridge loops filled and a .45 sagging his holster. And his mount was a dappled sorrel and gray: at a distance of a quarter mile that pony would blend into a parched open country background and a simply disappear—a good sort of pony for a hill rider with a posse after him.

Pop thought, now here's a snappy young squirt who has an idea he's real bad. Might be at that—some of them are. And others are just startin' to ride the hill trail and might be turned aside in time to save them. This is Sam Ruskin's day to come to town; he'll size up this young buddy quick enough.

Sam Ruskin was a man with a history. He had the biggest ranch in the district, where he had settled down after years of an adventurous life. Desert Edge citizens looked to him for advice and guidance. He

was the arbiter in their disputes and the guardian of their peace and morals.

Pop continued to watch the newcomer as he stretched to relieve his body of saddle weariness. He slapped dust from his shoulders and shook it out of the folds of his neckcloth. He tilted his sombrero at a rakish angle, hitched up his overalls, adjusted his gunbelt and holster, removed his riding gloves and tucked them under his belt on the left side, strode over to Pop and asked, "Is this place Desert Edge?"

"What there is of it," Pop confirmed.

He straightened his stooped shoulders slightly, shoved his spectacles up on his nose, retreated into the store and went behind the counter. The stranger followed, sagged wearily against a convenient sugar barrel, and began building a cigarette.

"Tired?" Pop inquired.

"I'm tired and sleepy and hungry, all three. Can you have your wife rustle me up a mess of hot grub?"

"Nope. Just now I'm wifeless. But I can stoke up the stove and cook a mess of breakfast for us both."

"Well, that'll be fine. Get busy!"

"Why are you in such a fiery hurry? You ridin' straight through?" Pop probed.

The boyish stranger eyed him belligerently. "I don't like questions except when I ask 'm myself. How about a little eye-opener? My flask is dry."

"Gus Swartz runs that saloon across the street, hasn't unlocked his door for the day yet. But I can give you a little taste from my own private bottle."

Pop put the bottle and a tumbler on the counter, and turned to the stove. He scratched a match on the seat of his pants and lit the laid fire. Meanwhile, the stranger filled the tumbler and half emptied it with a great gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said:

"You can call me Lon Bell and you'll be naming me correct. And, since you

appear so anxious to know, I'm not riding straight through. Where can I put up my pony?"

"In the little corral right behind the store. Just stack your saddle and hang your bridle on the fence. Pump some water into the trough, and toss over a jag of hay. Everything free 'cept the hay, which'll be two bits a day."

"Don't go to worrying about your two bits. I pay my way. I got into a right stiff poker game not long ago, and my money belt is stuffed. I had to gun down an ornery cuss who accused me of cheat work, before I hit my saddle."

Pop nodded. He was thinking: Here we go! Bluffin' and braggin'. It's time for me to take this brash youngster down a peg. So, "How are things shapin' up these days down Mex border way?" Pop asked, gently.

Lon Bell gave a quick start and whirled toward him. "How's that? Who says I came from down Mex border way?"

"It's plain enough. Your shirt, coat and hat say it. And I know you came here from the south."

"How could you know so much?"

"Well, it's like this—a rider can't get into Desert Edge from that direction 'thout comin' across Mineral Creek. It's named that 'cause it flows through a canyon where the ground's filled with minerals that turn the water reddish and make red mud."

"What of it?"

"Your pony's legs are plastered with dried red mud from the knees down."

"You seem to notice things right well."

"A man can learn a lot that way," Pop replied.

"Sometimes he can learn so much it gets dangerous. To save you from wearing your hair thinner than it is already by doing a lot of guessing work, I'll explain a few things to you. I'm not on the run, like

maybe you s'pose. I came here to meet up with a man, and probably got here ahead of him. His name is Bart Shields. You ever hear of him?"

Pop gulped suddenly like a man with a parched throat. He was bending over the stove at the moment, poking at the firebox, otherwise his countenance might have betrayed to the newcomer that his words had caused a slight shock.

"I've heard the name," Pop confessed, without turning around as he spoke. "Bart Shields got sent to prison for armed robbery. Held up a mine paymaster. He rode the hills with a couple of other bandits. They ran posses ragged for a time, but finally got nabbed. So Bart Shields is out of prison, is he?"

"He got out about two months ago," Lon Bell explained. "It's guessed that he had plenty of loot cached away somewhere. He bought for cash a good pony and gear, and guns and shells and supplies."

"And you've come here to meet him?"

"That's right."

"Please do me a favor," Pop begged the young newcomer. "If you're aimin' to gunfight him, do it in the street. I don't yearn to have my store shot up. And Gus Swartz wouldn't want his saloon mirror and bottles and glasses smashed. 'Tain't neighborly to come ridin' into a town and ruinin' people's property."

Lon Bell laughed. "You needn't worry about that. It'll be a friendly meeting between me and Bart Shields. We planned to meet here. We've got business to talk about."

"As far as I ever heard, the only business Bart Shields ever had was bein' a bandit. How come you're meetin' him here?"

"Maybe I'd better not talk too much about Bart's affairs; he might not like it," Lon Ben said. "How about that food?"

Pop already had the coffee started, and was busy slicing salt pork and cold boiled potatoes into a huge skillet. "You'll have just time enough to turn your pony into the corral," he replied.

Lon Bell hurried out of the store.

He unhitched his pony with a single jerk of the reins and led him around to the corral. When he returned, he helped Pop devour the meal. Then he asked:

"Where'll it be safe for me to flop for a couple of hours to catch up on sleep?"

"There's a cot in the shack behind the store. You're welcome to use it."

"Thanks. If anybody gets inquisitive about me, you tell'm I always sleep light and wake easy, and my hardware is always close to my hand."

"I'll tell them that."

"If Bart rides in, tell him to wake me, but be careful how. Tell him to yell loud before he gets too near, or I may come up half awake and with my gun smoking. I'd sure hate to kill Bart by mistake."

Pop showed him the shack and cot and returned to the store. He glanced through a window and saw Gus Swartz opening his saloon. Pop crossed the street and told Swartz the entire story.

"It's plain to me," Swartz decided. "Bart Shields is planning to ride the hills again, and he's recruited this brassy youngster to side him."

"Could be like that," Pop agreed.

"Maybe Shields plans to make Desert Edge his headquarters, and come here for supplies and to have his sprees. That'd make this place look like a badman's hangout. Shields would expect us to help and hide him at times. We don't want that."

"We don't," Pop agreed again. "I ain't hungerin' to step outside the law even an inch. Sam Ruskin is the man to handle this. He should be in town today. We'll put it up to him."

So Desert Edge began another day. Aside from Lon Bell's arrival and the rumors it caused, there was no unusual activity.

The community, where the wasteland met the hills, had only about a score of regular inhabitants, mostly old timers waiting for their last sun to go down. They did odd jobs when they found any and lived frugally on the proceeds. Trade came from ranches on the slopes of the hills, and kept alive Pop's store, Gus Swartz's saloon, and a blacksmith shop.

An hour after Lon Bell had retired to the shack, Bart Shields rode into town and stopped at the hitchrail in front of the store. Pop watched his arrival through a window. He recognized the outlaw at once, having seen Shields before when the latter had been in the custody of the sheriff.

Shields was middle-aged, stocky in body, wore a heavy black beard, rumbled when he talked, and glared at everybody and everything. Two guns dangled from his belt with holsters tied down, and a rifle was in his saddle boot. His pony was a tough-looking roan.

Pop thought, prison didn't change this hellion much, or tame him either. It's more than likely he'll take up his outlawin' again, like Gus said. Prob'ly feels he should get square with other folks of the world for givin' him his just deserts.

Bart Shields had come to town from the hills, and was riding light. No pack mare lumbered along behind his pony, so he hadn't come to get any great quantity of supplies, Pop decided. The outlaw tied his pony, glanced up and down the street, and swaggered into the store.

He fixed Pop with a squint-eyed glare, and his voice was a deep rumble when he announced, "I'm to meet a young hombre named Lon Bell here."

"He's arrived," Pop reported. "Had his

breakfast, put his pony in the corral, and is sleepin' in my shack. Said he expected to be joined by a man."

"I'm the man—Bart Shields. Maybe you know about me. Got out of prison a few weeks ago. You needn't be scared. I'm not here to make trouble. If the folks here treat me right, I'll treat them right. If they don't—" He left the threat hanging unvoiced.

"I aim to treat everyone right," Pop told him.

"That's a good way to keep on living. Where's this shack Lon Bell is sleeping in?"

"Rear of the store. He said to warn whoever asked for him to yell loud and wake him 'fore they got too near. Said otherwise he might wake up startled and with his gun smokin' and make a mistake."

"He'll make a sad mistake if he does that with me," Bart Shields rumbled.

"Maybe you'd better be a mite careful," Pop suggested. "From what he told me, he's one of them young border hellions. Always shootin' folks for the fun of it. Said he had to gun down a man and hit his saddle after a hot poker game."

"Him a border hellion?" Shields' laugh was raucous. "I heard about that poker game. They caught him with an ace in his cuff. Instead of slinging lead when they started after him, he fired one shot, hit a man in the arm, and rode."

"Maybe I got a wrong idea from his talk."

"You sure did. He's only a young squirt who wants to hit the hill trail, and wants to side me. I told him to meet me here and we'd talk it over. Thought maybe I can use him as a sort of chore boy."

"My, my! It's sure easy to be mistaken in a hombre. I thought he was a reckless young hellion."

"Show me where he is," Bart Shields ordered.

Pop showed him the shack, and Shields yelled until Lon Bell came to the doorway. Pop watched Shields go into the shack and close the door, and heard the rumble of voices.

Passing through the store, Pop went into the street and looked along the west trail. No rider was in sight; Sam Ruskin already was behind schedule. Pop wished he would hurry to town.

Pop muttered, "in a case like this I s'pose a man's entitled to do things he maybe wouldn't do otherwise, considerin' he's the right kind of man. 'Tain't polite to eavesdrop on private talk. But it might be all right when it's for the general good. . ."

He went to his living quarters in the rear of the store, and got into a closet. The shack was attached to the main building at that point, and the walls were thin. Pop could hear bits of conversation.

"I might decide to take you with me, Lon," Bart Shields was saying. "But you'll have a lot to learn. I wouldn't want you to fail me in a tight corner."

"I'd never do that, Bart," Lon Bell promised.

"You'd never do it more than once," was Shields' rumbled threat. "Why do you want to ride with me?"

"You're my kind of man, Bart. I guess you're what I'd call my idol. Not afraid of anyone nor afraid to do anything you want to do. Make other men step around. The way you ride into a town, hold up a bank or saloon or store, spray some lead and hit your saddle! Everyone afraid of you. You laugh at 'm and dare 'm to draw. I want to be like that, Bart."

"You're an untested boy, Lon. Never killed a man. Never even held up a man."

"I'll prove I can side you anywhere, Bart."

“There’ll be no turning back once you start. Only two of us, and scores watching to get us. You can kill twenty law officers in a row, and always there’ll be another to pop up. We’ll be fair game for their guns.”

“I know that, Bart.”

“I’ve got a neat hideaway ’bout ten miles up in the hills. Toted plenty of supplies there. I’m going to ride the trails on the other side of the ridge. Mine paymasters travel it, and there’re small towns to be looted. I had plenty of time in prison to make plans. I’ll make folks pay for the time I spent behind walls!”

Inside the closet, Pop Hopper shivered at the vehemence in Bart Shields’ voice. He heard the outlaw continue:

“I’ll give you a try, Lon. Listen, now! My pony cast a shoe. Take him to the blacksmith shop and leave him to get shod. Came back to the saloon and get us a jug of good liquor. Don’t forget to take my rifle out of the boot and fetch it. We’ll drink and talk and rest, and ride at dusk.”

“I’ll ’tend to it all, Bart.”

“This town’ll be my headquarters for grub and ammunition, and we’ll come here when we want to talk to other folks or have a spree. These people are tame; they’ll eat outen our hands. If lawmen get hot after us, the folks here will know better than to tell anything they’ve learned about us. Get goin’!”

Pop heard the door of the shack being opened and closed. He got out of the closet quickly and hurried to the front of the store to watch. Lon Bell appeared, took Shields’ rifle from the saddle boot, untied the pony and led the animal down the street toward the blacksmith shop.

Outside the door, Pop looked up and down the street. No resident of Desert Edge was in sight. Pop skipped across the street to the saloon, where Gus Swartz was alone at the moment. He told Gus what he had heard by listening in the closet.

“Sam Ruskin always comes to the saloon first,” Pop concluded. “You tell him all about this. Sam will come over to the store when he leaves here and tell me what he thinks of it.”

Back in the store, Pop continued watching. He saw Lon Bell return and enter the saloon, emerge soon with a jug and pass along the side of the store to the shack. Pop went out again and looked toward the west trail. He almost gave a shout of excitement when he saw Sam Ruskin loping into the end of the street.

Pop watched Ruskin stop his pony in front of the saloon and dismount. He was a huge man with square shoulders and silvery hair, and his manner was that of a man quick to assume command and responsibility. Gus Swartz greeted him at the saloon door and ushered him inside.

Pop knew Ruskin would stay there a short time, then cross to the store for his mail—Pop being the postmaster at Desert Edge. Hurrying back to the closet, Pop listened without shame to what was being said in the shack.

“We’ll rest and talk and gulp a few drinks until almost sunset,” Bart Shields was saying. “I’ll go to the blacksmith shop myself to get my pony—want to be sure the smith does a good job. I’ll make friends with him. As I do that, you go to the saloon and buy drinks around, and try to make these folks like you. Understand?”

“I see what you mean, Bart.”

Pop listened a little longer, and was disgusted when he finally left the closet and went to the front of the store again. He was muttering, “Same old braggin’ and bluffin’! Feedin’ that youngster big lies and makin’ him like it.”

Through the window, Pop saw that Desert Edge had come to life suddenly. Sam Ruskin’s arrival had caused that. Being a man of substance, Ruskin always bought drinks, and sometimes hired town

men to do odd jobs at his ranch, a form of charity which salved their pride.

But, more than that, the town men felt his prestige and power. They acted like timid children gathering around a father they trusted and knew would protect them. They accepted without question his judgment in local matters.

Within fifteen minutes, Sam Ruskin crossed the street and greeted Pop.

"Gus has told me about Bart Shields and this youngster," he said. "You tell me what you know."

Ruskin listened calmly and without speaking as Pop gave him a long and complete recital of the day's events so far. When Pop had finished, Sam Ruskin paced the floor a little.

"Bart Shields must be driven from this district," was Ruskin's verdict. "We don't want an outlaw making his headquarters hereabouts. And I think, from what you've told me, that maybe the youngster is worth saving. I'll handle this thing when the boy comes to the saloon and Shields goes to the smithy to get his pony."

"Lon Bell has the idea that Bart's the salt of the earth," Pop remarked.

"Kid hero worship, that's what it is. Hope so at least, for the boy's sake. Every youngster passes through that stage. You come to the saloon when you see Shields go to the smithy. Get where you can dodge quick if there's trouble. If I happen to ask you a couple of questions over there, just answer the plain truth. I'll get my mail later."

Pop watched Ruskin cross the street again, and enter the saloon. And Pop noticed that, before entering Gus Swartz' place, Ruskin extracted a .45 from its holster and examined it methodically, then returned it to its leather holster.

During the next couple of hours, Pop retreated to the closet twice. The first time he heard more of Bart Shields' bragging.

He waited on a couple of town men who bought carefully on credit based on promise of a few days' work at Ruskin's ranch. He made a packet of Ruskin's mail, and went to the closet again.

"Saddle your pony, Lon, and tie him in front of the saloon," Shields was saying. "Go in as I said, and make friends. I'll get my pony at the blacksmith's shop and come there and join you. Better get at it now."

Pop heard Lon Bell leave the shack, and hurried back into the store. When he saw Shields pass the door and go toward the smithy, and Lon Bell lead his pony into the street, he went out, closed the store door, and crossed to the saloon. There would be no customers now, he knew; and he didn't lock the door—no thieves resided in Desert Edge.

Pop entered the saloon as Lon Bell was hitching his pony, exchanged glances with Ruskin, and went to the foot of the bar. Gus Swartz put out bottle and glass, and Pop poured a drink. He saw Lon Bell swagger in from the street, his sombrero on the back of his head and his thumbs hooked into his belt.

"Howdy, stranger!" Ruskin greeted the youngster. "Hit the bar and have a drink on me."

"And who're you?" Lon Bell asked.

"Name's Sam Ruskin. Own a big ranch a few miles out of town. If you're looking for work, I've got a peg in my bunkhouse where you can hang your hat. Work not too hard, pay and grub above the average."

"I'm not looking for a cowpoke's job."

"Turn in here and have a drink on me, anyhow. Gus, serve our young friend."

Mindful of Shields' injunction to make friends, Lon Bell stood beside Ruskin at the bar and poured his drink. In a lower voice, Ruskin told him:

"You're traveling in bad company,

son. Bart Shields, I mean. Got out of prison recent. He'll be in trouble again before long, you can bet. Want to be pulled into bad trouble along with him?"

"I pick my own friends, mister. And who are you to run down a man like Bart Shields?"

"If he's a man, the breed is getting worse every day," Ruskin commented drily.

"He's my idea of a man. Not afraid of anything. Kicks over the traces and runs wild in the world. Shoots his way out of tight corners, takes a whatever he wants, laughs at the lawmen who chase him."

"He didn't laugh when they caught him and sent him to prison."

"He explained that to me—a punk who sided him gave him a cross," Lon Bell declared.

"No doubt he told you a lot of a stuff, son. Now listen to the truth. It's on the record that Bart never shot but one man, and he was another outlaw arguing with Bart about a division of loot. Bart Shields wasn't even arrested, because the Law was glad he shot the other man and saved the state the expense of a hanging. That's the truth."

"It is, huh?"

"And here's some more of the truth, son. Bart Shields is no hero, like you seem to think. He never faced a man and gave him an even chance. He's always sneaked up on his man, holding a gun on him. A common, cowardly holdup man."

"You seem to know a lot," Lon sneered at him.

"I do know a lot, boy. I run a big ranch now, but I haven't done that always. I lived plenty of excitement before I got wise to myself and life. I've killed men, and I spent eight years behind prison walls—two terms." He glanced along the bar. "Pop!" he called. "Tell this youngster how many men I've killed."

"I know about some of them," Pop admitted. "There's the time those five had you cornered in Mesaville. Had their hardware out, too. You drew and started shootin'. Killed three with a single shot each, and wounded the other two. Still had one slug left in your gun. And you only got a shoulder scratch."

"That's right," Ruskin agreed.

"Then when that ornery cuss tried to ambush you. You dodged behind a rock when he missed, stalked him, faced him and dared him to draw and killed him when he did. I know of maybe three others—"

"That's enough," Ruskin interrupted. He faced Lon Bell again. "Then I learned a man could have excitement even while running a ranch. I've got fifteen men in my bunkhouse. If an outlaw gets busy around these parts, we make ourselves into a posse and go after him. Then we're riding the hills and risking death and doing things outlaws do—but on the side of the law. That's neater, boy."

Lon Bell laughed a little. "You think I'm swallowing all this stuff. Bart Shields could walk in here now and make you stick up your hands and shove you around."

"You think so. If Bart Shields walked in here now, I'd make *him* step around. Still think he's a hero, do you? Bart Shields is only a cowardly sneak. Sticks a gun in a man's back and robs him, then hits his saddle and rides. A braggart and a liar as well!"

The town men suddenly quit the bar and dashed across to the opposite wall. Pop blinked at what he saw in the doorway. And he knew Sam Ruskin had seen the same thing in the mirror behind the bar.

From the doorway came a stentorian roar: "Who's callin' Bart Shields a sneak and liar?"



Ruskin did not go for his gun, did not whirl around. To Lon Bell, he said quietly, "Step aside out of harm's way, boy." Then he turned slowly, deliberately, and faced the advancing Bart Shields.

Those who watched saw Bart Shields come to a dead stop. He gulped, his eyes bulged.

"You—Sam Ruskin!" he said.

"Did you come here looking for me, Bart?" Ruskin asked.

"Why—why, no. I don't feel any ire against you. I—I was just passing through."

"That's a right good idea, Bart. Just pass through—and keep going! Get out of these hills and stay out, or I'll come after you with my riders! You won't make Desert Edge your hangout while I'm around here. Trying to pick up a youngster and turn him bad, are you? Planning to leave him holding the bag if you get in a jam.

"He thinks you're a hero. Been swallowing your lies. You're cowardly crowbait, Bart. You're a stinking, double-crossing loud-mouth. My gun's in its holster, Bart. If you don't like the names I'm calling you, draw and start something. Go ahead—draw!"

Bart Shields stood rigid. His hands made no move toward his holsters. He gulped again. "I didn't come here to have any trouble with you," he mouthed.

"Get in your saddle then and travel! And use your spurs! If I learn you ever come to these parts again, I'll look you up."

"I—I'll ride, Mr. Ruskin. I won't bother anybody around here." He started backing toward the door. "Let's go, Lon."

Lon Bell looked at him open-mouthed. "I don't think I want to side you, Bart," he said. "You go on."

Ruskin took a step forward. "And if you feel inclined to draw and open up after you're in the saddle, Bart, just go ahead and do it. I'll be out on the walk, giving you a chance."

With fists against his hips, Ruskin stood in the doorway. Bart Shields unhitched his pony, got into the saddle, and turned and rode up the street toward the hills. He did not look back.

Ruskin turned back, into the saloon. "Serve everyone, Gus," he ordered Swartz. "And you, youngster—that peg in my bunkhouse wall is still empty, if you want to hang your hat on it. You'll have plenty of excitement riding for me."

"I'll take the job, sir."

"Good! Finish your drink, then go with Pop to his store and get my mail and a big sack of hard candy for the bunkhouse boys. Then water my pony at the blacksmith's trough. By that time, I'll be ready to ride."

Lon Bell nodded. He walked with Pop out of the saloon and across the street to the store. As Pop got the mail and sacked the candy, Lon Bell said:

"He's some man, this Mr. Ruskin. He really kill all those men the way you said?"

"Them and a few more."

"And served time in prison, then turned honest, huh?"

"Let's get it right, boy," Pop said. "He killed all those men when he was deputy sheriff and afterward, sheriff. And sure, he spent eight years behind prison walls. Two terms, like he said—he was the warden."

END