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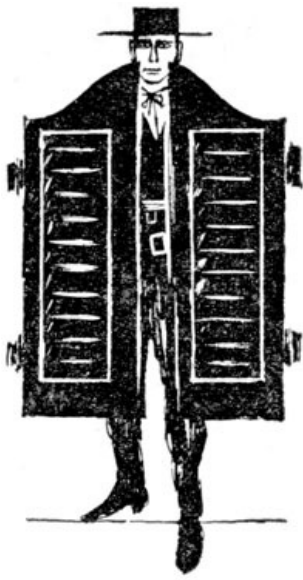
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THE DRAW

BY JEROME BIXBY

Illustrator: Wm. Ashman



Stories of the old West were filled with bad men who lived by the speed of their gun hand. Well, meet Buck Tarrant, who could outdraw them all. His secret: he didn't even have to reach for his weapon....

Joe Doolin's my name. Cowhand—work for old Farrel over at Lazy F beyond the Pass. Never had much of anything exciting happen to me—just punched cows and lit up on payday—until the day I happened to ride through the Pass on my way to town and saw young Buck Tarrant's draw.

Now, Buck'd always been a damn good shot. Once he got his gun in his hand he could put a bullet right where he wanted it up to twenty paces, and within an inch of his aim up to a hundred feet. But Lord God, he couldn't draw to save his life—I'd seen him a couple of times before in the Pass, trying to. He'd face a tree and go into a crouch, and I'd know he was pretending the tree was Billy the Kid or somebody, and then he'd slap leather—and his clumsy hand would wallop his gunbutt, he'd yank like hell, his old Peacemaker would come staggering out of his holster like a bear in heat, and finally he'd line on his target and plug it dead center. But the whole business took about a second and a half, and by the time he'd ever finished his fumbling in a real fight, Billy the Kid or Sheriff Ben Randolph over in town or even me, Joe Doolin, could have cut him in half.

So this time, when I was riding along through the Pass, I saw Buck upslope from me under the trees, and I just grinned and didn't pay too much attention.

He stood facing an old elm tree, and I could see he'd tacked a playing card about four feet up the trunk, about where a man's heart would be.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him go into his gunman's crouch. He was about sixty feet away from me, and, like I said, I wasn't paying much mind to him.

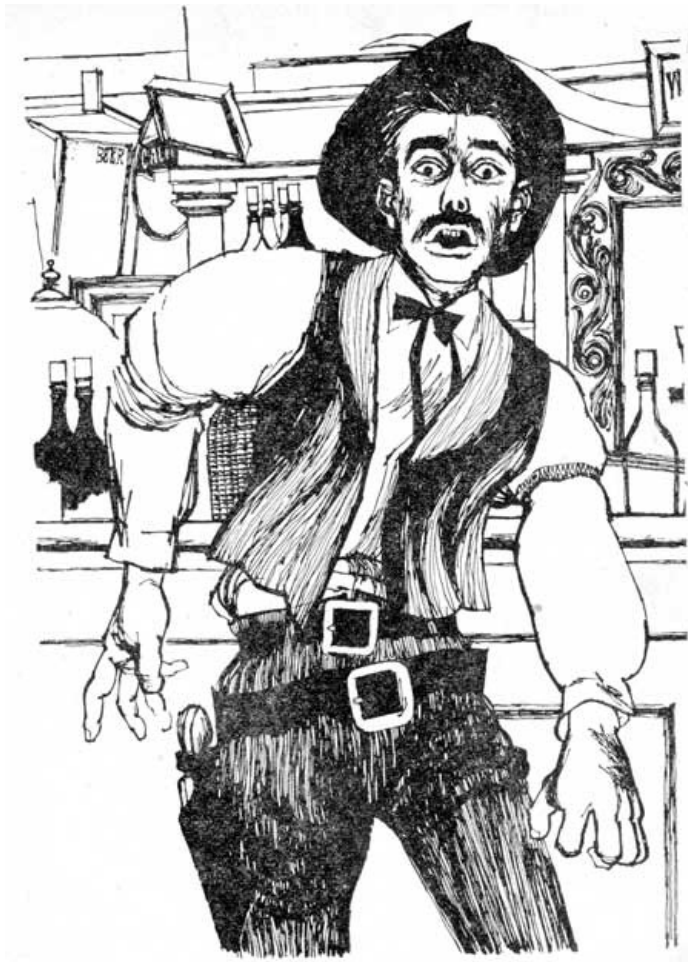
I heard the shot, flat down the rocky slope that separated us. I grinned again, picturing that fumbly draw of his, the wild slap at leather, the gun coming out drunklike, maybe even him dropping it—I'd seen him do that once or twice.

It got me to thinking about him, as I rode closer.

He was a bad one. Nobody said any different than that. Just bad. He was a bony runt of about eighteen, with bulging eyes and a wide mouth that was always turned down at the corners. He got his nickname Buck because he had buck teeth, not because he was heap man. He was some handy with his fists, and he liked to pick ruckuses with kids he was sure he could lick. But the tipoff on Buck is that he'd bleat like a two-day calf to get out of mixing with somebody he was scared of—which meant somebody his own size or bigger. He'd jaw his way out of it, or just turn and slink away with his tail along his belly. His dad had died a couple years before, and he lived with his ma on a small ranch out near the Pass. The place was falling to pieces, because Buck wouldn't lift a hand to do any work around—his ma just couldn't handle him at all. Fences were down, and the yard was all weedgrown, and the house needed some repairs—but all Buck ever did was hang around town, trying to rub up against some of the tough customers who drank in the Once Again Saloon, or else he'd ride up and lie around under the trees along the top of the Pass and just think—or, like he was today, he'd practise drawing and throwing down on trees and rocks.

Guess he always wanted to be tough. Really tough. He tried to walk with tough men, and, as we found out later, just about all he ever thought about while he was lying around was how he could be tougher than the next two guys. Maybe you've known characters like that—for some damfool reason they just got to be able to whup anybody who comes along, and they feel low and mean when they can't, as if the size of a man's fist was the size of the man.

So that's Buck Tarrant—a halfsized, poisonous, no-good kid who wanted to be a hardcase.



But he'd never be, not in a million years. That's what made it funny—and kind of pitiful too. There wasn't no real strength in him, only a scared hate. It takes guts as well as speed to be tough with a gun, and Buck was just a nasty little rat of a kid who'd probably always counterpunch his way through life when he punched at all. He'd kite for cover if you lifted a lip.

I heard another shot, and looked up the slope. I was near enough now to see that the card he was shooting at was a ten of diamonds—and that he was plugging the pips one by one. Always could shoot, like I said.

Then he heard me coming, and whirled away from the tree, his gun holstered, his hand held out in front of him like he must have imagined Hickock or somebody held it when he was ready to draw.

I stopped my horse about ten feet away and just stared at him. He looked real funny in his baggy old levis and dirty checkered shirt and that big gun low on his hip, and me knowing he couldn't handle it worth a damn.

"Who you trying to scare, Buck?" I said. I looked him up and down and snickered. "You look about as dangerous as a sheepherder's wife."

"And you're a son of a bitch," he said.

I stiffened and shoved out my jaw. "Watch that, runt, or I'll get off and put my foot in your mouth and pull you on like a boot!"

"Will you now," he said nastily, "you son of a bitch?"

And he drew on me ... and I goddam near fell backwards off my saddle!

I swear, I hadn't even seen his hand move, he'd drawn so fast! That gun just practically *appeared* in his hand!

"Will you now?" he said again, and the bore of his gun looked like a greased gate to hell.

I sat in my saddle scared spitless, wondering if this was when I was going to die. I moved my hands out away from my body, and tried to look friendlylike—actually, I'd never tangled with Buck, just razzed him a little now and then like everybody did; and I couldn't see much reason why he'd want to kill me.

But the expression on his face was full of gloating, full of wildness, full of damn-you recklessness—exactly the expression you'd look to find on a kid like Buck who suddenly found out he was the deadliest gunman alive.

And that's just what he was, believe me.

Once I saw Bat Masterson draw—and he was right up there with the very best. Could draw and shoot accurately in maybe half a second or so—you could hardly see his hand move; you just heard the slap of hand on gunbutt, and a split-second later the shot. It takes a lot of practise to be able to get a gun out and on target in that space of time, and that's what makes gunmen. Practise, and a knack to begin with. And, I guess, the yen to be a gunman, like Buck Tarrant'd always had.

When I saw Masterson draw against Jeff Steward in Abilene, it was that way—slap, crash, and Steward was three-eyed. Just a blur of motion.

But when Buck Tarrant drew on me, right now in the Pass, I didn't see any motion *atall*. He just crouched, and then his gun was on me. Must have done it in a millionth of a second, if a second has millionths.

It was the fastest draw I'd ever seen. It was, I reckoned, the fastest draw anybody's ever seen. It was an impossibly fast draw—a man's hand just couldn't move to his holster that fast, and grab and drag a heavy Peacemaker up in a two foot arc that fast.

It was plain damn impossible—but there it was.

And there I was.

I didn't say a word. I just sat and thought about things, and my horse wandered a little farther up the slope and then stopped to chomp grass. All the time, Buck Tarrant was standing there, poised, that wild gloating look in his eyes, knowing he could kill me anytime and knowing I knew it.

When he spoke, his voice was shaky—it sounded like he wanted to bust out laughing, and not a nice laugh either.

"Nothing to say, Doolin?" he said. "Pretty fast, huh?"

I said, "Yeah, Buck. Pretty fast." And my voice was shaky too, but not because I felt like laughing any.

He spat, eying me arrogantly. The ground rose to where he stood, and our heads were about on a level. But I felt he was looking down.

"Pretty fast!" he sneered. "Faster'n anybody!"

"I reckon it is, at that," I said.

"Know how I do it?"

"No."

"I *think*, Doolin. I *think* my gun into my hand. How d'you like that?"

"It's awful fast, Buck."

"I just *think*, and my gun is there in my hand. Some draw, huh!"

"Sure is."

"You're damn right it is, Doolin. Faster'n anybody!"

I didn't know what his gabbling about "thinking his gun into his hand" meant—at least not then, I didn't—but I sure wasn't minded to question him on it. He looked wild-eyed enough right now to start taking bites out of the nearest tree.

He spat again and looked me up and down. "You know, you can go to hell, Joe Doolin. You're a lousy, God damn, white-livered son of a bitch." He grinned coldly.

Not an insult, I knew now, but a deliberate taunt. I'd broken jaws for a lot less—I'm no runt, and I'm quick enough to hand back crap if some lands on me. But now I wasn't interested.

He saw I was mad, though, and stood waiting.

"You're fast enough, Buck," I said, "so I got no idea of trying you. You want to murder me, I guess I can't stop you—but I ain't drawing. No, sir, that's for sure."

"And a coward to boot," he jeered.

"Maybe," I said. "Put yourself in my place, and ask yourself why in hell I should kill myself?"

"Yellow!" he snarled, looking at me with his bulging eyes full of meanness and confidence.

My shoulders got tight, and it ran down along my gun arm. I never took that from a man before.

"I won't draw," I said. "Reckon I'll move on instead, if you'll let me."

And I picked up my reins, moving my hands real careful-like, and turned my horse around and started down the slope. I could feel his eyes on me, and I was half-waiting for a bullet in the back. But it didn't come. Instead Buck Tarrant called, "Doolin!"

I turned my head. "Yeah?"

He was standing there in the same position. Somehow he reminded me of a crazy, runt wolf—his eyes were almost yellowish, and when he talked he moved his lips too much, mouthing his words, and his big crooked teeth flashed in the sun. I guess all the hankering for toughness in him was coming out—he was acting now like he'd always wanted to—cocky, unafraid, mean—because now he wore a bigger gun than anybody. It showed all over him, like poison coming out of his skin.

"Doolin," he called. "I'll be in town around three this afternoon. Tell Ben Randolph for me that he's a son of a bitch. Tell him he's a dunghead sheriff. Tell him he'd better look me up when I get there, or else get outa town and stay out. You got that?"

"I got it, Buck."

"Call me Mr. Tarrant, you Irish bastard."

"Okay ... Mr. Tarrant," I said, and reached the bottom of the slope and turned my horse along the road through the Pass. About a hundred yards farther on, I hipped around in the saddle and looked back. He was practising again—the crouch, the fantastic draw, the shot.

I rode on toward town, to tell Ben Randolph he'd either have to run or die.

Ben was a lanky, slab-sided Texan who'd come up north on a drive ten years before and liked the Arizona climate and stayed. He was a good sheriff—tough enough to handle most men, and smart enough to handle the rest. Fourteen years of it had kept him lean and fast.

When I told him about Buck, I could see he didn't know whether he was tough or smart or fast enough to get out of this one.

He leaned back in his chair and started to light his pipe, and then stared at the match until it burned his fingers without touching it to the tobacco.

"You sure, Joe?" he said.

"Ben, I saw it four times. At first I just couldn't believe my eyes—but I tell you, he's fast. He's faster'n you or me or Hickock or anybody. God knows where he got it, but he's got the speed."

"But," Ben Randolph said, lighting another match, "it just don't happen that way." His voice was almost mildly complaining. "Not overnight. Gunspeed's something you work on—it comes slow, mighty slow. You know that. How in hell could Buck Tarrant turn into a fire-eating gunslinger in a few days?" He paused and puffed. "You sure, Joe?" he asked again, through a cloud of smoke.

"Yes."

"And he wants me."

"That's what he said."

Ben Randolph sighed. "He's a bad kid, Joe—just a bad kid. If his father hadn't died, I reckon he might have turned out better. But his mother ain't big enough to wallop his butt the way it needs."

"You took his gun away from him a couple times, didn't you, Ben?"

"Yeah. And ran him outa town too, when he got too pestiferous. Told him to get the hell home and help his ma."

"Guess that's why he wants you."

"That. And because I'm sheriff. I'm the biggest gun around here, and he don't want to start at the bottom, not him. He's gonna show the world right away."

"He can do it, Ben."

He sighed again. "I know. If what you say's true, he can sure show *me* anyhow. Still, I got to take him up on it. You know that. I can't leave town."

I looked at his hand lying on his leg—the fingers were trembling. He curled them into a fist, and the fist trembled.

"You ought to, Ben," I said.

"Of course I ought to," he said, a little savagely. "But I can't. Why, what'd happen to this town if I was to cut and run? Is there anyone else who could handle him? Hell, no."

"A crazy galoot like that," I said slowly, "if he gets too damn nasty, is bound to get kilt." I hesitated. "Even in the back, if he's too good to take from the front."

"Sure," Ben Randolph said. "Sooner or later. But what about meantime?... how many people will he have to kill before somebody gets angry or nervy enough to kill *him*? That's my job, Joe—to take care of this kind of thing. Those people he'd kill are depending on me to get between him and them. Don't you see?"

I got up. "Sure, Ben, I see. I just wish *you* didn't."

He let out another mouthful of smoke. "You got any idea what he meant about thinking his gun into his hand?"

"Not the slightest. Some crazy explanation he made up to account for his sudden speed, I reckon."

Another puff. "You figure I'm a dead man, Joe, huh?"

"It looks kind of that way."

"Yeah, it kind of does, don't it?"

At four that afternoon Buck Tarrant came riding into town like he owned it. He sat his battered old saddle like a rajah on an elephant, and he held his right hand low beside his hip in an exaggerated gunman's stance. With his floppy hat over at a cocky angle, and his big eyes and scrawny frame, he'd have looked funny as hell trying to look like a tough hombre—except that he *was* tough now, and everybody in town knew it because I'd warned them. Otherwise somebody might have jibed him, and the way things were now, that could lead to a sudden grave.

Nobody said a word all along the street as he rode to the hitchrail in front of the Once Again and dismounted. There wasn't many people around *to* say anything—most everybody was inside, and all you could see of them was a shadow of movement behind a window there, the flutter of a curtain there.

Only a few men sat in chairs along the boardwalks under the porches, or leaned against the porchposts, and they just sort of stared around, looking at Buck for a second and then looking off again if he turned toward them.

I was standing near to where Buck hitched up. He swaggered up the steps of the saloon, his right hand poised, his bulging eyes full of hell.

"You tell him?" he asked.

I nodded. "He'll look you up, like you said."

Buck laughed shortly. "I'll be waiting. I don't like that lanky bastard. I reckon I got some scores to settle with him." He looked at me, and his face twisted into what he thought was a tough snarl. Funny—you could see he really wasn't tough down inside. There wasn't any hard core of confidence and strength. His toughness was in his holster, and all the rest of him was acting to match up to it.

"You know," he said, "I don't like you either, Irish. Maybe I oughta kill you. Hell, why not?"

Now, the only reason I'd stayed out of doors that afternoon was I figured Buck had already had one chance to kill me and hadn't done it, so I must be safe. That's what I figured—he had nothing against me, so I was safe. And I had an idea that maybe, when the showdown came, I might be able to help out Ben Randolph somehow—if anything on God's Earth *could* help him.

Now, though, I wished to hell I hadn't stayed outside. I wished I was behind one of them windows, looking out at somebody else get told by Buck Tarrant that maybe he oughta kill him.

"But I won't," Buck said, grinning nastily. "Because you done me a favor. You run off and told the sheriff just like I told you—just like the goddam white-livered Irish sheepherder you are. Ain't that so?"

I nodded, my jaw set so hard with anger that the flesh felt stretched.

He waited for me to move against him. When I didn't, he laughed and swaggered to the door of the saloon. "Come on, Irish," he said over his shoulder. "I'll buy you a drink of the best."

I followed him in, and he went over to the bar, walking heavy, and looked old Menner right in the eye and said, "Give me a bottle of the best stuff you got in the house."

Menner looked at the kid he'd kicked out of his place a dozen times, and his face was white. He reached behind him and got a bottle and put it on the bar.

"Two glasses," said Buck Tarrant.

Menner carefully put two glasses on the bar.

"*Clean* glasses."

Menner polished two other glasses on his apron and set them down.

"You don't want no money for this likker, do you, Menner?" Buck asked.

"No, sir."

"You'd just take it home and spend it on that fat heifer of a wife you got, and on them two little halfwit brats, wouldn't you?"

Menner nodded.

"Hell, they really ain't worth the trouble, are they?"

"No, sir."

Buck snickered and poured two shots and handed me one. He looked around the saloon and saw that it was almost empty—just Menner behind the bar, and a drunk asleep with his head on his arms at a table near the back, and a little gent in fancy town clothes fingering his drink at a table near the front window and not even looking at us.

"Where is everybody?" he asked Menner.

"Why, sir, I reckon they're home, most of them," Menner said. "It being a hot day and all—"

"Bet it'll get hotter," Buck said, hard.

"Yes, sir."

"I guess they didn't want to really feel the heat, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's going to get so hot, you old bastard, that everybody'll feel it. You know that?"

"If you say so, sir."

"It might even get hot for you. Right now even. What do you think of that, huh?"

"I—I—"

"You thrun me outa here a couple times, remember?"

"Y-yes ... but I—"

"Look at this!" Buck said—and his gun was in his hand, and he didn't seem to have moved at all, not an inch. I was looking right at him when he did it—his hand was on the bar, resting beside his shotglass, and then suddenly his gun was in it and pointing right at old Menner's belly.

"You know," Buck said, grinning at how Menner's fear was crawling all over his face, "I can put a bullet right where I want to. Wanta see me do it?"

His gun crashed, and flame leaped across the bar, and the mirror behind the bar had a spiderweb of cracks radiating from a round black hole.

Menner stood there, blood leaking down his neck from a split earlobe.

Buck's gun went off again, and the other earlobe was a red tatter.

And Buck's gun was back in its holster with the same speed it had come out—I just couldn't see his hand move.

"That's enough for now," he told Menner. "This is right good likker, and I guess I got to have somebody around to push it across the bar for me, and you're as good as anybody to do jackass jobs like that."

He didn't ever look at Menner again. The old man leaned back against the shelf behind the bar, trembling, two trickles of red running down his neck and staining his shirt collar—I could see he wanted to touch the places where he'd been shot, to see how bad they were or just to rub at the pain, but he was afraid to raise a hand. He just stood there, looking sick.

Buck was staring at the little man in town clothes, over by the window. The little man had reared back at the shots, and now he was sitting up in his chair, his eyes straight on Buck. The table in front of him was wet where he'd spilled his drink when he'd jumped.

Buck looked at the little guy's fancy clothes and small mustache and grinned. "Come on," he said to me, and picked up his drink and started across the floor. "Find out who the dude is."

He pulled out a chair and sat down—and I saw he was careful to sit facing the front door, and also where he could see out the window.

I pulled out another chair and sat.

"Good shooting, huh?" Buck asked the little guy.

"Yes," said the little guy. "Very fine shooting. I confess, it quite startled me."

Buck laughed harshly. "Startled the old guy too...." He raised his voice. "Ain't that right, Menner? Wasn't you startled?"

"Yes, sir," came Menner's pain-filled voice from the bar.

Buck looked back at the little man—let his insolent gaze travel up and down the fancy waistcoat, the string tie, the sharp face with its mustache and narrow mouth and black eyes. He looked longest at the eyes, because they didn't seem to be scared.

He looked at the little guy, and the little guy looked at Buck, and finally Buck looked away. He tried to look wary as he did it, as if he was just fixing to make sure that nobody was around to sneak-shoot him—but you could see he'd been stared down.

When he looked back at the little guy, he was scowling. "Who're you, mister?" he said. "I never seen you before."

"My name is Jacob Pratt, sir. I'm just traveling through to San Francisco. I'm waiting for the evening stage."

"Drummer?"

"Excuse me?"

For a second Buck's face got ugly. "You heard me, mister. You a drummer?"

"I heard you, young man, but I don't quite understand. Do you mean, am I a musician? A performer upon the drums?"

"No, you goddam fool—I mean, what're you selling? Snake-bite medicine? Likker? Soap?"

"Why—I'm not selling anything. I'm a professor, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned." Buck looked at him a little more carefully. "A pefessor, huh? Of what?"

"Of psychology, sir."

"What's that?"

"It's the study of man's behavior—of the reasons why we act as we do."

Buck laughed again, and it was more of a snarl. "Well, pefessor, you just stick around here then, and I'll show you some *real* reasons for people acting as they do! From now on, I'm the big reason in this town ... they'll jump when I yell frog, or else!"

His hand was flat on the table in front of him—and suddenly his Peacemaker was in it, pointing at the professor's fourth vest button. "See what I mean huh?"

The little man blinked. "Indeed I do," he said, and stared at the gun as if hypnotized. Funny, though—he still didn't seem scared—just a lot interested.

Sitting there and just listening, I thought about something else funny—how they were both just about of a size, Buck and the professor, and so strong in different ways: with the professor, you felt he was strong inside—a man who knew a lot, about things and about himself—while with Buck it was all on the outside, on the surface: he was just a milksop kid with a deadly sting.

Buck was still looking at the professor, as carefully as he had before. He seemed to hesitate for a second, his mouth twisting. Then he said, "You're an eddicated man, ain't you? I mean, you studied a lot. Ain't that right?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well...." Again Buck seemed to hesitate. The gun in his hand lowered until the end of the barrel rested on the table. "Look," he said slowly, "maybe you can tell me how in hell...."

When he didn't go on, the professor said, "Yes?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say—?"

Buck looked at him, his bulging eyes narrowed, the gunman's smirk on his lips again. "Are you telling me what's true and what ain't," he said softly, "with my gun on you?"

"Does the gun change anything?"

Buck tapped the heavy barrel on the table. "I say it changes a hell of a lot of things." *Tap* went the barrel. "You wanta argue?"

"Not with the gun," the professor said calmly. "It always wins. I'll talk with you, however, if you'll talk with your mouth instead of with the gun."

By this time I was filled with admiration for the professor's guts, and fear that he'd get a bullet in them ... I was all set to duck, in case Buck should lose his temper and start throwing lead.

But suddenly Buck's gun was back in his holster. I saw the professor blink again in astonishment.

"You know," Buck said, grinning loosely, "you got a lotta nerve, professor. Maybe you *can* tell me what I wanta know."

He didn't look at the little man while he talked—he was glancing around, being "wary" again. And grinning that grin at the same time. You could see he was off-balance—he was acting like everything was going on just like he wanted it; but actually the professor had beaten him again, words against the gun, eyes against eyes.

The professor's dark eyes were level on Buck's right now. "What is it you want to know?"

"This—" Buck said, and his gun was in his hand again, and it was the first time when he did it that his face stayed sober and kind of stupid-looking, his normal expression, instead of getting wild and dangerous. "How—do you know how do I do it?"

"Well," the professor said, "suppose you give me your answer first, if you have one. It might be the right one."

"I—" Buck shook his head—"Well, it's like I *think* the gun into my hand. It happened the first time this morning. I was standing out in the Pass where I always practise drawing, and I was wishing I could draw faster'n anybody who ever lived—I was wishing I could just get my gun outa leather in no time at all. And—" the gun was back in his holster in the blink of an eye—"that's how it happened. My gun was in my hand. Just like that. I didn't even reach for it—I was just getting set to draw, and had my hand out in front of me ... and my gun was in my hand before I knew what'd happened. God, I was so surprised I almost fell over!"

"I see," said the professor slowly. "You *think* it into your hand?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Would you do it now, please?" And the professor leaned forward so he could see Buck's holster, eyes intent.

Buck's gun appeared in his hand.

The professor let out a long breath. "Now think it back into its holster."

It was there.

"You did not move your arm either time," said the professor.

"That's right," said Buck.

"The gun was just suddenly in your hand instead of in your holster. And then it was back in the holster."

"Right."

"Telekinesis," said the professor, almost reverently.

"Telewhat?"

"Telekinesis—the moving of material objects by mental force." The professor leaned back and studied the holstered gun. "It *must* be that. I hardly dared think if at first—the first time you did it. But the thought did occur to me. And now I'm virtually certain!"

"How do you say it?"

"T-e-l-e-k-i-n-e-s-i-s."

"Well, how do I *do* it?"

"I can't answer that. Nobody knows. It's been the subject of many experiments, and there are many reported happenings—but I've never heard of any instance even remotely as impressive as this." The professor leaned across the table again. "Can you do it with other things, young man?"

"What other things?"

"That bottle on the bar, for example."

"Never tried."

"Try."

Buck stared at the bottle.

It wavered. Just a little. Rocked, and settled back.

Buck stared harder, eyes bulging.

The bottle shivered. That was all.

"Hell," Buck said. "I can't seem to—to get ahold of it with my mind, like I can with my gun."

"Try moving this glass on the table," the professor said, "It's smaller, and closer."

Buck stared at the glass. It moved a fraction of an inch across the tabletop. No more.

Buck snarled like a dog and swatted the glass with his hand, knocking it halfway across the room.

"Possibly," the professor said, after a moment, "you can do it with your gun because you want to so very badly. The strength of your desire releases—or creates—whatever psychic forces are necessary to perform the act." He paused, looking thoughtful. "Young man, suppose you try to transport your gun to—say, to the top of the bar."

"Why?" Buck asked suspiciously.

"I want to see whether distance is a factor where the gun is concerned. Whether you can place the gun that far away from you, or whether the power operates only when you want your gun in your hand."

"No," Buck said in an ugly voice. "Damn if I will. I'd maybe get my gun over, there and not be able to get it back, and then you'd jump me—the two of you. I ain't minded to experiment around too much, thank you."

"All right," the professor said, as if he didn't care. "The suggestion was purely in the scientific spirit—"

"Sure," said Buck. "Sure. Just don't get any more scientific, or I'll experiment on how many holes you can get in you before you die."

The professor sat back in his chair and looked Buck right in the eye. After a second, Buck looked away, scowling.

Me, I hadn't said a word the whole while, and I wasn't talking now.

"Wonder where that goddam yellow-bellied sheriff is?" Buck said. He looked out the window, then glanced sharply at me. "He said he'd come, huh?"

"Yeah." When I was asked, I'd talk.

We sat in silence for a few moments.

The professor said, "Young man, you wouldn't care to come with me to San Francisco, would you? I and my colleagues would be very grateful for the opportunity to investigate this strange gift of yours—we would even be willing to pay you for your time and—"

Buck laughed. "Why, hell, I reckon I got bigger ideas'n that, mister! *Real* big ideas. There's no man alive I can't beat with a gun! I'm going to take Billy the Kid ... Hickock ... all of them! I'm going to get myself a rep bigger'n all theirs put together. Why, when I walk into a saloon, they'll hand me likker. I walk into a bank, they'll give me the place. No lawman from Canada to Mexico will even stay in the same town with me! Hell, what could *you* give me, you goddam little dude?"

The professor shrugged. "Nothing that would satisfy you."

"That's right." Suddenly Buck stiffened, looking out the window. He got up, his bulging blue eyes staring down at us. "Randolph's coming down the street! You two just stay put, and maybe—just maybe—I'll let you live. Professor, I wanta talk to you some more about this telekinesis stuff. Maybe I can get even faster than I am, or control my bullets better at long range. So you be here, get that?"

He turned and walked out the door.

The professor said, "He's not sane."

"Nutty as a locoed steer," I said. "Been that way for a long time. An ugly shrimp who hates everything—and now he's in the saddle holding the reins, and some people are due to get rode down." I looked curiously at him. "Look, professor—this telekinesis stuff—is all that on the level?"

"Absolutely."

"He just *thinks* his gun into his hand?"

"Exactly."

"Faster than anyone could ever draw it?"

"Inconceivably faster. The time element is almost non-existent."

I got up, feeling worse than I'd ever felt in my life. "Come on," I said. "Let's see what happens."

As if there was any doubt about what was bound to happen.

We stepped out onto the porch and over to the rail. Behind us, I heard Menner come out too. I looked over my shoulder. He'd wrapped a towel around his head. Blood was leaking through it. He was looking at Buck, hating him clear through.

The street was deserted except for Buck standing about twenty feet away, and, at the far end, Sheriff Ben Randolph coming slowly toward him, putting one foot ahead of the other in the dust.

A few men were standing on porches, pressed back against the walls, mostly near doors. Nobody was sitting now—they were ready to groundhog if lead started flying wild.

"God damn it," I said in a low, savage voice. "Ben's too good a man to get kilt this way. By a punk kid with some crazy psychowhosis way of handling a gun."

I felt the professor's level eyes on me, and turned to look at him.

"Why," he said, "doesn't a group of you get together and face him down? Ten guns against his one. He'd have to surrender."

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "That ain't the way it works. He'd just dare any of us to be the first to try and stop him—and none of us would take him up on it. A group like that don't mean anything—it'd be each man against Buck Tarrant, and none of us good enough."

"I see," the professor said softly.

"God..." I clenched my fists so hard they hurt. "I wish we could think his gun right back into the holster or something!"

Ben and Buck were about forty feet apart now. Ben was coming on steadily, his hand over his gunbutt. He was a good man with a gun, Ben—nobody around these parts had dared tackle him for a long time. But he was out-classed now, and he knew it. I guess he was just hoping that Buck's first shot or two wouldn't kill him, and that he could place a good one himself before Buck let loose any more.

But Buck was a damn good shot. He just wouldn't miss.

The professor was staring at Buck with a strange look in his eyes.

"He should be stopped," he said.

"Stop him, then," I said sourly.

"After all," he mused, "if the ability to perform telekinesis lies dormant in all of us, and is released by strong faith and desire to accomplish something that can be accomplished only by that means—then our desire to stop him might be able to counter his desire to—"

"Damn you and your big words," I said bitterly.

"It was your idea," the professor said, still looking at Buck. "What you said about thinking his gun back into its holster—after all, we *are* two to his one—"

I turned around and stared at him, really hearing him for the first time. "Yeah, that's right—I said that! My God ... do you think we could do it?"

"We can try," he said. "We know it *can* be done, and evidently that is nine-tenths of the battle. He can do it, so we should be able to. We must want him *not* to more than he *wants* to."

"Lord," I said, "I want him not to, all right..."

Ben and Buck were about twenty feet apart now, and Ben stopped.

His voice was tired when he said, "Any time, Buck."

"You're a hell of a sheriff," Buck sneered. "You're a no-good bastard."

"Cuss me out," Ben said. "Don't hurt me none. I'll be ready when you start talking with guns."

"I'm ready now, beanpole," Buck grinned. "You draw first, huh?"

"*Think of his gun!*" the professor said in a fierce whisper. "Try to grab it with your mind—break his aim—pull it away from him—*you know it can be done! Think, think—*"

Ben Randolph had never in anyone's knowledge drawn first against a man. But now he did, and I guess nobody could blame him.

He slapped leather, his face already dead—and Buck's Peacemaker was in his hand—

And me and the professor were standing like statues on the porch of the Once Again, thinking at that gun, glaring at it, fists clenched, our breath rasping in our throats.

The gun appeared in Buck's hand, and wobbled just as he slipped hammer. The bullet sprayed dust at Ben's feet.

Ben's gun was halfway out.

Buck's gunbarrel pointed down at the ground, and he was trying to lift it so hard his hand got white. He drove a bullet into the dust at his own feet, and started to whine.

Ben's gun was up and aiming.

Buck shot himself in the foot.

Then Ben shot him once in the right elbow, once in the right shoulder. Buck screamed and dropped his gun and threw out his arms, and Ben, who was a thorough man, put a bullet through his right hand, and another one on top of it.

Buck sat in the dust and flapped blood all around, and bawled when we came to get him.

The professor and I told Ben Randolph what had happened, and nobody else. I think he believed us.

Buck spent two weeks in the town jail, and then a year in the state pen for pulling on Randolph, and nobody's seen him now for six years. Don't know what happened to him, or care much. I reckon he's working as a cowhand someplace—anyway, he sends his mother money now and then, so he must have tamed down some and growed up some too.

While he was in the town jail, the professor talked to him a lot—the professor delayed his trip just to do it.

One night he told me, "Tarrant can't do anything like that again. Not at all, even with his left hand. The gunfight destroyed his faith in his ability to do it—or most of it, anyway. And I finished the job, I guess, asking all my questions. I guess you can't think too much about that sort of thing."

The professor went on to San Francisco, where he's doing some interesting experiments. Or trying to. Because he has the memory of what happened that day—but, like Buck Tarrant, not the ability to do anything like that any more. He wrote me a couple times, and it seems that ever since that time he's been absolutely unable to do any telekinesis. He's tried a thousand times and can't even move a feather.

So he figures it was really me alone who saved Ben's life and stopped Buck in his tracks.

I wonder. Maybe the professor just knows too much not to be some skeptical, even with what he saw. Maybe the way he looks at things and tries to find reasons for them gets in the way of his faith.

Anyway, he wants me to come to San Francisco and get experimented on. Maybe someday I will. Might be fun, if I can find time off from my job.

I got a lot of faith, you see. What I see, I believe. And when Ben retired last year, I took over his job as sheriff—because I'm the fastest man with a gun in these parts. Or, actually, in the world. Probably if I wasn't the peaceable type, I'd be famous or something.

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