



HIGH CARD LOSES

A Western

“What would it be like to have our fear removed, aye? To take it away as a factor.”

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Richard Marshal fingered the card in his hand. The cards in Faro were a reminder of the subtle cruelty and unforgiving nature of the universe. Dick toyed with the King of Hearts, trying to determine how best to place his bet. "High card" didn't seem like an option. The table was covered with a fine green cloth. The finest place for playing cards he'd seen since he'd left Montana. Although he had to admit, the chairs were a bit rickety for his taste. A large thud in front of him interrupted his thinking. "Bravos" Bill had placed his shooting iron on the table. Its barrel was pointing menacingly at Dick.

The man's voice was rough and dry. "You'd best place your bet with a certain amount of alacrity. And it had better be a big one." After his reflection, it seemed to Dick his best bet would be on the dealer, but it was equally clear Bill had other ideas for his bet. The music of the saloon piano never missed a beat. It was as constant as the smell of watered-down whiskey and stale bourbon.

Pierre LaValle looked at him over his card. "Fear is often the deciding factor in games of chance, yes?" He had a heavy accent, the sound of which could likely have choked a horse. "What would it be like to have our fear removed, aye? To take it away as a factor."

Bill ignored the Frenchman who bore into Dick's eyes like a drill bit ready to pack in explosives for a railway cut. Dick could feel a bead of sweat roll sluggishly down his forehead. "Tell you what I'm gonna do," Bill explained, moving his smoldering cigar from the right to the left side of his mouth. "I'll step out into the street. You follow. Then I'll shoot your chicken ass and place the bet for you after I shine my boots with your innards." Bill picked up his revolver and fingered the hammer.

Dick choked back a reply. "What if I don't come outside?"

Bill smiled. It looked grim, even with the two missing teeth. "Why, that'd be putt' en me at an inconvenience. You wouldn't want to be putt' en me at an inconvenience. 'Cuz then, of course, I'd have to march straight back in here, shoot you in the gut and piss on your face as you die."

Dick gulped loudly.

"Bravos" Bill stood and put his gun back in its holster. "I'll be waiting for you down the street. Don't make me wait too long." Bill emphasized the word 'too,' stretching it out like the cord of a noose. The big man strode outside, boots and spurs clicking on the rough wooden boards as he left. Richard Marshal sat frozen, his face a ghastly white. His breathing was shallow, that is when he remembered to breathe. No one else seemed to notice what was going on. After all it was none of their business. They also sought to avoid getting between "Bravos" Bill and his latest target. Such things could end up with you acquiring a serious case of lead poisoning. Only the Frenchman at the table seemed to give Dick any sign of compassion.

Pierre sniffled, seemingly pulling all the air in the room into his nose. "Quite a predicament, monsieur." His face appeared calm but pensive. With one motion he brought out a small light blue glass bottle.

Dick's eyes practically glazed over. "What the devil is that?"

"Something to give you courage."

Dick cringed. "No thanks. There is plenty of whiskey at the bar."

“This is no ordinary liquor,” he pretested.

“Bravos Bill wants to kill me,” Dick relayed with an angry look on his face’s cracked features. “You think the last thing I want to drink is a vile concoction of snake oil and liver juice?”

The Frenchman gave him a wry grin. “No, my friend, this is no elixir of snake oil. I brought this, personally mind you, all the way from Egypt. It is made according to the same formula as the ancient Egyptian priests of Anubis used. All the Pharaohs drank it.”

“What is it?”

“It is the solution to all your troubles.”

Dick discounted it. He almost scoffed. It sat on the table mocking him. But then he took one look into the Frenchman’s eyes. There was sincerity there. The type which cannot be faked. “Oh, what the hell.” Richard Marshal picked up the small vial and casually flicked off the cork with his thumb. Lifting the bottle up, as the cork bounded across the table, he poured the contents down his gullet in one swift motion. He slammed the container down on the table, practically making the wood jump as he did so. “Doesn’t taste half bad,” Dick mused.

He spit halfway across the room. For a moment, his body was wracked with coughing. “Mostly,” he muttered when the attack was over.

Richard Marshal rose from his chair and adjusted his gun belt. He’d never once used it ... it was merely for show. Right about now his mind was racing with the regret he’d not practiced with the firearm. Chances are it would only be used once. Or not at all, if “Bravos” Bill fired first.

The sun was unbelievably bright as Dick strode into the street. It filled the sky with its unique glow which forced a man to squint to see his own hands in front of his face. Down the dusty street stood “Bravos” Bill, his large form casting a long shadow in the glare. “You ready?” he called out.

“Not so much.”

“Like I give a cow’s piss if you are ready or not,” Bill laughed. “Draw.”

Dick stood, his hand poised above his shining Colt pistol. But the sun crossed the sky faster than Dick moved. Sweat even had time to dry on his forehead.

“Tell you what,” Bill announced, tiring of the pause, “I’ll let you shoot first.”

“Might neighborly of yo...” Dick never got to finish his sentence. It was cut off by the crack of “Bravos” Bill’s six-shooter. Smoke poured out of the barrel. Dick hadn’t felt a thing. Did gunfighter miss? He glanced down at his chest. There was a nice neat hole in his shirt which continued right through his body, directly under his sternum. No, he didn’t miss. Strangest thing, there wasn’t any blood. You’d think a gaping hole of such size would be spirting a fountain of blood like Old Faithful, but no. It was as dry as the unbroken surface of a cactus in the desert.

Anger welled up in Richard Marshal’s breast. He pulled out his pistol and aimed it at the astonished “Bravos” Bill. He had no memory of pulling the trigger, but the retort of the pistol shook him awake. What happened next though seemed to occur in slow motion. A round hole appeared in “Bravos” Bill’s

forehead. Dick was a little disappointed it didn't spout a fountain of blood, only a small spray. More like a fine mist. The rest of "Bravos" Bill's reaction was more to Dick's liking. His whole body seemed to fly up in the air as his head snapped back over his neck. His arms flew akimbo, tossing his shooting iron into the air, his nerveless hands no longer able to hold the grip. Bill sailed through the air on a long arc, landing on his back some distance down the street from where he previously stood.

Dick turned to look at Pierre. The Frenchman displayed a wide grin and gave him the thumb's up sign of success. The same expression of sincerity was in the Frenchman's eyes, but there was also something else. Something more sinister. Richard Marshal stood in the street as jaunty Pierre approached him, the smell of black powder filling the air.

"There you see," the Frenchman stated with unabashed glee, "By the pyramids. It is as I said. You will never have to fear anything again, Mon ami. For you, the fear of death is only a memory, n'est-ce pas"

*In the middle of the street Marshal stood,
He did what no man could
Drank what no man should,
Only from now on,
We wouldn't die so good.*