



The Blue Hotel

*T*HE PALACE HOTEL AT FORT ROMPER WAS painted a light blue, a color of blue found on the legs of a certain bird that makes it bright in any surroundings. The Palace Hotel, then, looked always loud and screaming in a way that made the bright winter scenes of Nebraska seem only a dull gray. It stood alone, and when the snow was falling, the town two hundred yards away could not be seen.

When a traveler came from the railroad station, he was obliged to pass the Palace Hotel before he came to the group of low houses which was Fort Romper. It was believed that no traveler could pass the Palace Hotel without looking at it. Pat Scully, the hotel owner, had proved himself a master at choosing paints. It is true that on clear days, when the long lines of trains swept through Fort Romper, passengers were surprised at the sight. Those that knew the brown-reds, and the dark

greens of the eastern part of the country laughingly expressed shame, pity, shock. But to the citizens of this western town and to the people who stopped there, Pat Scully had performed a wonder.

As if the displayed delights of such a blue hotel were not sufficiently inviting, Scully went every morning and evening to meet the trains that stopped at Romper. He would express greetings and welcome to anyone he might see hesitating.

One morning when a snow-covered engine dragged its long string of cars to the station, Scully performed the marvelous trick of catching three men. One was a shaky and quick-eyed **Swede**, with a great, shining, cheap bag; one was a tall, sun-browned **cowboy**, who was on his way to a job near the Dakota border; one was a little silent man from the east coast, who didn't look like it and didn't announce it.

Scully practically made them prisoners. He was so quick and merry and kindly that each probably thought it would be cruel to try to escape. So they followed the eager little man. He wore a heavy fur cap pulled tightly down on his head. It caused his two red ears to stand out stiffly, as if they were made of tin.

At last, Scully grandly conducted them through the door of the blue hotel. The room which they entered was small. It was occupied mostly by a huge stove in the center, which was burning with great force. At various points on its surface the iron had become shiny and glowed yellow from the heat. Beside the stove, Scully's son, Johnnie, was playing a game of cards with a farmer. They were quarreling.

With loud words Scully stopped their play, and hurried his son upstairs with the bags of the new guests. He himself led them to three bowls of icy water. The cowboy and the Easterner washed themselves in this water until they were as red as fire. The Swede, however, merely placed his fingers in the bowl. It was noticeable throughout these proceedings that the three travelers were made to feel that Scully was very kind indeed. He was giving out great favors.

Afterward they returned to the first room. There, sitting about the stove, they listened to Scully shouting at his daughters, who were preparing the noon meal. They employed the silence of experienced

men who move carefully among new people. The Swede was especially silent. He seemed to be occupied in making secret judgments of each man in the room. One might have thought that he had the sense of foolish fear which accompanies guilt. He looked like a badly frightened man.

Later, at dinner, he spoke a little, directing his conversation entirely to Scully. He said that he had come from New York, where he had worked for ten years as a suit maker. These facts seemed to interest Scully, and afterward he told that he had lived at Romper for fourteen years. The Swede asked about the crops and the price of labor. He seemed hardly to listen to Scully's lengthy replies. His eyes continued to wander from man to man.

Finally, with a laugh, he said that some of these western towns were very dangerous; and after this declaration he straightened his legs under the table, nodded his head, and laughed again, loudly. It was plain that this had no meaning to the others. They looked at him, wondering and in silence.

After dinner, it was decided to play a game of cards. The cowboy offered to play with Johnnie, and they all turned to ask the Swede to play with the little Easterner. The Swede asked some questions about the game. Learning that it wore many names, and that he had played it under another name, he accepted the invitation.

He came toward the men nervously, as though he expected to be attacked. Finally, seated, he looked from face to face and laughed sharply. This laugh was so strange that the Easterner looked up quickly, the cowboy sat with his mouth open, and Johnnie paused, holding the cards with still fingers.

Afterward there was a short silence. Then Johnnie said, "Well, let's begin. Come on now!" They pulled their chairs forward until their knees touched under the table. They began to play, and their interest in the game caused the others to forget the strange ways of the Swede.

Suddenly the Swede spoke to Johnnie: "I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room." The mouths of the others

dropped open and they looked at him.

“What are you talking about?” said Johnnie.

The Swede laughed again his loud laugh, full of a kind of false courage. “Oh, you know what I mean all right,” he answered.

“I don’t!” Johnnie protested. The card game stopped, and the men stared at the Swede. Johnnie evidently felt that as the son of the hotel-owner he should make a direct inquiry. “Now, what are you trying to say?” he asked.

The Swede’s fingers shook on the edge of the table. “Oh, maybe you think I haven’t been anywhere. Maybe you think I don’t have any experience?”

“I don’t know anything about you,” answered Johnnie “and I don’t care where you’ve been. I just don’t know what you’re trying to say. Nobody has ever been killed in this room.”

The cowboy, who had been steadily gazing at the Swede, then spoke: “What’s wrong with you, fellow?”

Apparently it seemed to the Swede that he was powerfully threatened. He trembled, and turned pale near the corners of his mouth. He sent an appealing glance in the direction of the little Easterner. “They say they don’t know what I mean,” he remarked bitterly to the Easterner.

The latter answered after long and careful thought. “I don’t understand you,” he said calmly.

The Swede made a movement then which announced that he thought he had met attack from the only place where he had expected sympathy, if not help. “I see that you are all against me. I see—”

The cowboy felt as though he had lost his senses. “Say,” he cried, as he threw the cards fiercely down upon the table, “say, what are you trying to do?”

The Swede jumped up. “I don’t want to fight!” he shouted. “I don’t want to fight!”

The cowboy stretched his long legs slowly and carefully. His hands were in his pockets. “Well, who thought you did?” he inquired.

The Swede moved rapidly back toward a corner of the room. His hands were out protectingly in front of his chest, but he was making an

apparent struggle to control his fright. “Gentlemen,” he almost whispered, “I suppose I am going to be killed before I can leave this house! I suppose I am going to be killed before I can leave this house!”

A door opened, and Scully himself entered. He paused in surprise as he noted the terror-filled eyes of the Swede. Then he said, “What’s the matter here?”

The Swede answered him quickly and eagerly: “These men are going to kill me.”

“Kill you!” shouted Scully. “Kill you! What are you talking about?”

The Swede put out his hands helplessly.

Scully turned upon his son. “What is this, Johnnie?”

The lad had become ill-tempered. “I don’t know,” he answered. “It doesn’t make any sense to me.” He began to pick up the cards, gathering them together angrily. “He says a good many men have been killed in this room, or something like that. And he says he’s going to be killed here, too. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He’s probably crazy.”

Scully then looked for explanation to the cowboy, but the cowboy simply shook his head.

“Kill you?” said Scully again to the Swede. “Kill you? Man, you’re crazy.”

“Oh, I know,” burst out the Swede. “I know what will happen. Yes, I’m crazy—yes. Yes, of course, I’m crazy—yes. But I know one thing—” There was suffering and terror upon his face. “I know I won’t get out of here alive.”

Scully turned suddenly and faced his son. “You’ve been troubling this man!”

Johnnie’s voice was loud with its burden of undeserved blame. “Why, good God, I haven’t done anything to him!”

The Swede broke in. “Gentlemen, do not trouble yourselves. I will leave this house. I will go away, because—” he blamed them with his glance— “because I do not want to be killed.”

“You will not go away,” said Scully. “You will not go away until I hear the reason of this business. If anybody has troubled you, I will take care of him. This is my house. You are under my roof, and I will not

allow any peaceful man to be troubled here.” He looked threateningly at Johnnie, the cowboy, and the Easterner.

“Don’t, Mr. Scully, don’t. I will go away. I do not want to be killed.” The Swede moved toward the door which opened to the stairs. It was evidently his intention to go at once for his bag.

“No, no,” shouted Scully commandingly; but the pale-faced man slipped by him and disappeared. “Now,” Scully angrily to the others, “what does this mean?”

Johnnie and the cowboy cried together: “Why, we didn’t do anything to him!”

Scully’s eyes were cold. “No,” he said, “you didn’t?”

Johnnie repeated his words. “Why, this is the wildest madman I ever saw. We didn’t do anything at all. We were just sitting here playing cards, and he—”

The father suddenly spoke to the Easterner. “What have these boys been doing?”

The Easterner thought again. “I didn’t see anything wrong at all,” he said at last, slowly.

Scully began to shout. “But what does it mean?” He stared fiercely at his son. “I ought to beat you for this, my boy.”

Johnnie was wild. “Well, what have I done?” he screamed at his father.

“I think you are tongue-tied,” said Scully finally to his son, the cowboy, and the Easterner; and at the end of this sentence he left the room.

Upstairs the Swede was closing his bag. His back was half-turned toward the door, and hearing a noise there, he turned and jumped up, uttering a loud cry. Scully’s face was frightening in the light of the small lamp he carried. This yellow shine, streaming upward, left his eyes in deep shadows. He looked like a murderer.

“Man! Man!” exclaimed Scully. “Have you gone mad?”

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” answered the other. “There are people in this world who know nearly as much as you do—understand?”

For a moment they stood gazing at each other. Then Scully placed the light on the table and sat himself on the edge of the bed. He spoke slowly. "I never heard of such a thing in my life. It's a complete mystery. I can't think how you ever got this idea into your head." Then Scully lifted his eyes and asked, "And did you really think they were going to kill you?"

The Swede looked at the old man as if he wished to see into his mind. "I did," he said at last. He apparently thought that this answer might cause an attack. As he worked on his bag his whole arm shook, the elbow trembling like a bit of paper.

Having finished with his bag, the Swede straightened himself. "Mr. Scully," he said with sudden courage, "how much do I owe you?"

"You don't owe me anything," said the old man angrily.

"Yes, I do," answered the Swede. He took some money from his pocket and held it out to Scully, but the latter moved his hand away in firm refusal.

"I won't take your money," said Scully. "Not after what's been happening here." Then a plan seemed to come to him. "Here," he cried, picking up his lamp and moving toward the door. "Here! Come with me a minute."

"No," said the Swede, in great alarm.

"Yes," urged the old man. "Come on! I want you to come—just across the hall—in my room."

The Swede must have decided that the hour of his death had come. His mouth dropped open and his teeth showed like a dead man's. He at last followed Scully across the hall, but he had the step of one hung in chains.

"Now," said the old man. He dropped suddenly to the floor and put his head beneath the bed. The Swede could hear his dulled voice. "I'd keep it under my pillow if it weren't for that boy Johnnie. Where is it now? I never put it twice in the same place. There—now, come out!"

Finally he came out from under the bed, dragging with him an old coat. "I've got it," he whispered. Still on the floor on his knees, he unrolled the coat and took from it a large, yellow-brown whiskey bottle.

His first act was to hold the bottle up to the light. Satisfied, apparently, that nobody had touched it, he pushed it with a generous movement toward the Swede.

The weak-kneed Swede was about to eagerly grasp this element of strength, but he suddenly pulled his hand away and cast a look of terror upon Scully.

“Drink,” said the old man in a friendly tone. He had risen to his feet, and now stood facing the Swede.

There was a silence. Then again Scully said, “Drink!”

The Swede laughed wildly. He seized the bottle, put it to mouth. And as his lips curled foolishly around the opening and his throat worked, he kept his glance, burning with hate, upon the old man’s face.

After the departure of Scully, the three men, still at the table, sat for a long moment in surprised silence. Then Johnnie said, “That’s the worst man I ever saw.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied the Easterner.

“Well, what do you think makes him act that way?” asked the cowboy.

“He’s frightened.” The Easterner knocked his pipe against the stove. “He’s frightened right out of his senses.”

“At what?” asked Johnnie and the cowboy together.

“I don’t know, but it seems to me this man has been reading cheap novels about the West, and he thinks he’s in the middle of it—the shooting and killing and all.”

“But,” said the cowboy, deeply shocked, “this isn’t a wild place. This is Nebraska.”

“Yes,” added Johnnie, “and why doesn’t he wait until he really gets out West?”

The traveled Easterner laughed. “Things aren’t bad even there—not in these days. But he thinks he’s right in the middle of hell.”

Johnnie and the cowboy thought for a long while.

“It’s strange,” remarked Johnnie at last.

“Yes,” said the cowboy. “This is a queer game. I hope we don’t get

a lot of snow, because then we'd have to have this man with us all the time. That wouldn't be any good."

Soon they heard a loud noise on the stairs, accompanied by jokes in the voice of old Scully; and laughter, evidently from the Swede. The men around the stove stared in surprise at each other. The door swung open, and Scully and the Swede came into the room.

Five chairs were now placed in a circle about the stove. The Swede began to talk, loudly and angrily. Johnnie, the cowboy, and the Easterner remained silent while old Scully appeared to be eager and full of sympathy.

Finally the Swede announced that he wanted a drink of water. He moved in his chair, and said that he would go and get some.

"I'll get it for you," said Scully at once.

"No," refused the Swede roughly. "I'll get it for myself." He got up and walked with the manner of an owner into another part of the hotel.

As soon as the Swede was out of the room, Scully jumped to his feet and whispered quickly to the others: "Upstairs he thought I was trying to poison him."

"This makes me sick," said Johnnie. "Why don't you throw him out in the snow?"

"He's all right now," declared Scully. "He was from the East, and he thought this was a rough place. That's all. He's all right now."

The cowboy looked with admiration upon the Easterner. "You were right," he said.

"Well," said Johnnie to his father, "he may be all right now, but I don't understand it. Before, he was afraid, but now he's too brave."

Scully now spoke to his son. "What do I keep? What do I keep? What do I keep?" he demanded in a voice like thunder. He struck his knee sharply to indicate he himself was going to make reply, and that all should listen. "I keep a hotel," he shouted. "A hotel, do you hear? A guest under my roof has special privileges. He is not to be threatened. Not one word shall he hear that would make him want to go away. There's no place in this town where they can say they took in a guest of mine because he was afraid to stay here." He turned suddenly

upon the cowboy and the Easterner. "Am I right?"

"Yes, Mr. Scully," said the cowboy, "I think you're right." "Yes, Mr. Scully," said the Easterner, "I think you're right."

At supper that evening, the Swede burned with energy. He sometimes seemed on the point of bursting into loud song, and in all of his madness he was encouraged by old Scully. The Easterner was quiet; the cowboy sat in wide-mouthed wonder, forgetting to eat, while Johnnie angrily finished great plates of food. The daughters of the house, when they were obliged to bring more bread, approached as carefully as rabbits. Having succeeded in their purpose, they hurried away with poorly-hidden fear. The Swede controlled the whole feast, and he gave it the appearance of a cruel affair. He seemed to have grown suddenly taller; he gazed bitterly into every face. His voice rang through the room.

After supper, as the men went toward the other room, the Swede hit Scully hard on the shoulder. "Well, old boy, that was a good meal."

Johnnie looked hopefully at his father. He knew that the old man's shoulder was still painful from an old hurt. And indeed, it appeared for a moment as if Scully were going to flame out in anger about it. But Scully only smiled a sickly smile and remained silent. The others understood that he was admitting his responsibility for the Swede's new attitude.

When they were gathered about the stove, the Swede insisted on another game of cards. In his voice there was always a great threat. The cowboy and the Easterner both agreed, without interest, to play. Scully said that he would soon have to go to meet the evening train, and so the Swede turned to Johnnie. For a moment their glances crossed like swords, and then Johnnie smiled and said, "Yes, I'll play."

They formed a square around the table. The Easterner and the Swede again played together. As the game continued, it was noticeable that the cowboy was not playing as noisily as before.

Scully left to meet the train. In spite of his care, an icy wind blew into the room as he opened the door. It scattered the cards and froze the players. The Swede cursed frightfully. When Scully returned, his

icy entrance interrupted a comfortable and friendly scene. The Swede cursed again, but soon they were once more giving attention to their game, their heads bent forward and their hands moving fast.

Scully took up a newspaper, and as he slowly turned from page to page it made a comfortable sound. Then suddenly he heard three awful words: “You are **cheating!**”

The little room was now filled with terror. After the three words, the first sound in the room was made by Scully’s paper as it fell forgotten to his feet. His eyeglasses had fallen from his nose, but by a grasp he had caught them. He stared at the card-players.

Probably the silence was only an instant long. Then, if the floor had been suddenly pulled out from under the men, they could not have moved more quickly. The five had thrown themselves at a single point. Johnnie, as he rose to throw himself upon the Swede, almost fell. The loss of the moment allowed time for the arrival of Scully. It also gave the cowboy time to give the Swede a good push which sent him backwards.

The men found voices together, and shouts of anger, appeal, or fear burst from every throat. The cowboy pushed and pulled feverishly at the Swede, and the Easterner and Scully held wildly to Johnnie. But through the smoky air, above the straining bodies of the peace-compellers, the eyes of the enemies steadily warned each other.

Scully’s voice was loudest. “Stop now! Stop, I say! Stop, now—” Johnnie, as he struggled to break away from Scully and the Easterner, was crying, “Well, he says I cheated! He says I cheated! I won’t allow any man to say I cheated! If he says I cheated him, he’s a—!”

The cowboy was telling the Swede, “Stop now! Do you hear?”

The screams of the Swede never ceased: “He did cheat! I saw him! I saw him!”

As for the Easterner, he was begging in a voice that was not heard: “Wait a moment, can’t you? Oh, wait a moment. What’s the use of fighting over a game of cards? Wait a moment.”

In-this noisy quarrel, no complete sentence was clear. “Cheat”—“Stop”—“He says”—these pieces cut the screaming and rang out sharply. It was remarkable that Scully, who undoubtedly made the most

noise, was the least heard.

Then suddenly there was a great stillness. It was as if each man had paused for breath. Although the room still filled with the anger of men, it could be seen there was no danger of immediate fighting.

At once Johnnie pushed forward. "Why did you say I cheated? Why did you say I cheated. I don't cheat, and I won't let any man say I do!"

The Swede said, "I saw you! I saw you!"

"Well," cried Johnnie, "I'll fight any man who says I cheat!"

"No, you won't," said the cowboy. "Not here."

Johnnie spoke to the Swede again. "Did you say I cheated?"

The Swede showed his teeth. "Yes."

"Then," said Johnnie, "we must fight."

"Yes, fight," roared the Swede. He was like a mad devil. "Yes, fight! I'll show you what kind of a man I am! I'll show you who you want to fight! Maybe you think I can't fight! Maybe you think I can't! I'll show you, you criminal! Yes, you cheated! You cheated! You cheated!"

"Well, let's start, then, fellow," said Johnnie coolly.

The cowboy turned in despair to Scully. "What are you going to do now?"

A change had come over the old man. He now seemed all eagerness; his eyes glowed.

"We'll let them fight," he answered bravely. "I can't watch this any longer. I've endured this cursed Swede till I'm sick. We'll let them fight."

The men prepared to go out. The Easterner was so nervous that he had great difficulty putting on his new leather coat. As the cowboy pulled his fur cap down over his ears, his hands trembled. In fact, Johnnie and old Scully were the only ones who displayed no emotion. No words were spoken during these proceedings.

Scully threw open the door. Instantly a wild wind caused the flame of the lamp to struggle for its life. The men lowered their heads and pushed out into the cold.

No snow was falling, but great clouds of it, swept up from the ground by the fierce winds, were streaming all around. The covered land was a deep blue, and there was no other color except one light shining from the low, black railroad station. It looked like a tiny jewel.

The Swede was calling out something. Scully went to him, put a hand on his shoulder, and indicated an ear. "What did you say?"

"I said," screamed the Swede again, "I won't have a chance against this crowd. I know you'll all jump on me."

"No, no, man—" called Scully. But the wind tore the words from his lips and scattered them far.

The Swede shouted a curse, but the storm also seized the remainder of the sentence.

The men turned their backs upon the wind, and walked to the sheltered side of the hotel. Here a V-shaped piece of icy grass had not been covered by the snow. When they reached the spot, it was heard that the Swede was still screaming.

"Oh, I know what kind of a thing this is! I know you'll jump on me. I can't beat you all!"

Scully turned on him angrily. "You won't have to beat all of us. You'll have to beat my son Johnnie. And the man that troubles you during that time will have to deal with me."

The arrangements were quickly made. The two men faced each other, obeying the short commands of Scully. The Easterner was already cold and he was jumping up and down. The cowboy stood rock-like.

The fighters had not removed any clothing. Their hands were ready, and they eyed each other in a calm way that had the elements of fierce cruelty in it.

"Now!" said Scully.

The two leaped forward and struck together like oxen. There was heard the dull sound of blows, and of a curse pressed out between the tight teeth of one.

As for the watchers, the Easterner's held-in breath burst from him in relief, pure relief after the anxious waiting. The cowboy leaped into the air with a scream. Scully stood unmoving, as if in complete surprise

and fear at the fierceness of the fight which he himself had permitted and arranged.

For a time the fight in the darkness was such a scene of flying arms that it showed no more detail than a moving wheel. Sometimes a face would shine out, frightful and marked with pink spots. A moment later, the men would be only shadows.

Suddenly the cowboy was caught by warlike desires, and he leaped forward with the speed of a wild horse. "Hit him, Johnnie! Hit him! Kill him! Kill him!"

"Keep still," said Scully, icily.

Then there was a sudden loud sound, dull, incomplete, cut short. Johnnie's body fell away from the Swede, with sickening heaviness to the grass. The cowboy hardly had time to prevent the mad Swede from throwing himself upon the fallen body.

Scully was at his son's side. "Johnnie! Johnnie, my boy!" His voice had a quality of sad tenderness. "Johnnie! Can you fight some more?" He looked anxiously down into the bloody, beaten face of his son.

There was a moment of silence. And then Johnnie answered in his ordinary voice, "Yes—I—it—yes."

Helped by his father, he struggled to his feet. "Wait a minute now till you get your breath," said the old man.

A few steps away, the cowboy was telling the Swede, "No you don't. Wait a second."

The Easterner was pulling at Scully's arm. "Oh, this is enough!" he begged. "This is enough! Let it go as it is. This is enough!"

"Bill," said Scully, "get out of the way." The cowboy stepped aside. "Now."

The fighters advanced toward each other. Then the Swede aimed a lightning blow that carried with it his entire weight. Johnnie, though faint from weakness, luckily stepped aside, and the unbalanced Swede fell to the ground.

The cowboy, Scully, and the Easterner cheered, but before its finish the Swede was up and attacking his enemy madly. There were more wildly moving arms and Johnnie's body again fell away, like a stone.

The Swede quickly struggled to a little tree and leaned upon it, breathing hard, while his fierce and flame-lit eyes wandered from face to face as the men bent over Johnnie.

“Can you still fight, Johnnie?” asked Scully in a voice of despair.

After a moment, the son answered, “No—I—can’t fight—any—more.” Then, from shame and bodily ill, he began to weep, the tears pouring down through the blood on his face. “He was too—too—too heavy for me.”

Scully straightened and spoke to the waiting figure. “Stranger,” he said calmly, “we’re finished.” Then his voice changed into that deep and quiet tone which is the tone of the most simple and deadly announcements. “Johnnie is beaten.”

Without replying, the winner moved away to the door of the hotel. The others raised Johnnie from the ground, and, as soon as he was on his feet, he refused all attempts at help. When the group came around the corner they were almost blinded by the blowing snow. It burned their faces like fire. The cowboy carried Johnnie through the piles of snow to the door.

Inside they were greeted by a warm stove and women who took Johnnie to the kitchen. The three others sat around the heat, and the sad quiet was broken only by the sounds overhead when the Swede moved about in his room.

Soon they heard him on the stairs. He threw the door open and walked straight to the middle of the room. No one looked at him. “Well,” he said loudly to Scully, “I suppose you’ll tell me now how much I owe you?”

The old man, with a dull expression, remained calm. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Mr. Scully,” called the Swede again, “how much do I owe you?” He was dressed to go, and he had his bag in his hand.

“You don’t owe me anything,” repeated Scully in the same unmoved way.

“I guess you’re right. I guess the truth would be that you would owe me something. That’s what I guess.” He turned to the cowboy.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!” he repeated, in the tone the cowboy had used. Then he laughed.

But he might have been laughing at the dead. The three men did not move or speak—just stared with glassy eyes at the stove.

The Swede opened the door and passed into the storm, giving one last glance at the still group.

The Swede’s face, fresh from Johnnie’s blows, felt more pleasure than pain in the wind and the whipping snow. A number of square shapes appeared before him and he recognized them as the houses of the town. He traveled along a street until he found a saloon. He pushed open the door and entered. At the end of the room four men sat drinking at a table.

The Swede dropped his bag upon the floor and, smiling at the saloon-keeper, said, “Give me some whiskey, will you?” The man placed a bottle, a whiskey glass, and a glass of ice-filled water upon a table. The Swede poured himself an extra large amount of whiskey and drank it down.

“Bad night,” remarked the saloon-keeper, without interest. He was acting as though he were not noticing the man, but it could have been seen that he was secretly studying the remains of blood on the Swede’s face. “Bad night,” he said again.

“Oh, it’s good enough for me,” replied the Swede, as he poured himself some more whiskey. “No,” continued the Swede, “this isn’t too bad weather. It’s good enough for me.”

The large drinks of whiskey made the Swede’s eyes watery, and he breathed a little heavier. “Well, I guess I’ll take another drink,” said the Swede after a while. “Would you like something?”

“No, thanks; I’m not drinking. How did you hurt your face?”

The Swede immediately began to talk loudly. “Oh, in a fight. I beat the soul out of a man at Scully’s hotel.”

This caught the interest of the four men at the table.

“Who was it?” asked one.

“Johnnie Scully, son of the man who owns the hotel. He will be

nearly dead for some weeks, I can tell you, I beat him well, I did. He couldn't get up. They had to carry him into the house. Have a drink?"

Instantly the men in a quiet way surrounded themselves in privacy. "No, thanks," said one.

It was a strange group. Two were well-known local businessmen; one was a lawyer; and one was a **gambler**.

But a close look at the group would not have enabled an observer to pick the gambler from the other men. He was, in fact, so delicate in manner and so careful with whom he gambled that the men of the town completely trusted and admired him.

His business was regarded with fear and lack of respect. That is why, without doubt, his quiet dignity shone brightly above the quiet dignity of men who might be merely hat-makers, or builders or salesmen. Beyond an occasional unwise traveler who came by rail, this gambler supposedly cheated only careless farmers who, when rich with good crops, drove into town full of foolish pride. Hearing at times of such a farmer, the important men of Romper usually laughed at his losses. And if they thought of the gambler at all, it was with a kind of pride of knowing he would never dare to attack their wisdom and courage.

Besides, it was known that this gambler had a wife and two children in a nice little house, where he led a perfect home life. And when anyone even suggested that there was a fault in his character, the men immediately described the virtues of his family life.

And one must not forget to declare the bare fact of his entire position in Romper. It is true that in all affairs other than his business, this card-player was so generous, so fair, so good, that he could be considered to have a higher moral sense than nine-tenths of the citizens of Romper.

And so it happened that he was seated in this saloon with two local businessmen and the lawyer.

The Swede continued to drink whiskey and to try to make the saloon-keeper drink with him. "Come on. Have a drink. Come on. No? Well, have a little one, then. By God, I've beaten a man tonight, and I beat him good, too! Gentlemen," the Swede cried to the men at the

table, "have a drink?"

"Ssh! Quiet!" said the saloon-keeper.

The group at the table, although really interested, had been trying to appear busy in talk. But now a man lifted his eyes toward the Swede and said shortly, "Thanks. We don't want any more."

At this reply, the Swede straightened. "Well," he shouted, "it seems I can't get anybody to drink with me. I want someone to drink with me now. Now! Do you understand?" He struck the table with his hand.

Years of experience had hardened the saloon-keeper. He merely answered, "I hear you."

"Well," cried the Swede, "listen then. See those men over there? Well, they're going to drink with me, and don't you forget it. Now you watch."

"Stop that!" shouted the saloon-keeper.

"Why should I?" demanded the Swede. He walked to the men's table, and by chance laid his hand on the shoulder of the gambler. "What about it?" he asked angrily. "I asked you to drink with me."

The gambler simply turned his head and spoke over his shoulder. "My friend, I don't know you."

"Never mind!" answered the Swede. "Come and have a drink."

"Now, my boy," advised the gambler kindly, "take your hand off my shoulder and go away." He was a little, thin man and it seemed strange to hear him use this tone to the big Swede. The other men at the table said nothing.

"What! You won't drink with me, you little fool? I'll make you then! I'll make you!" The Swede had grasped the gambler fiercely at the throat, and was dragging him from his chair. The other men jumped up. The saloon-keeper ran toward the table. There was a great scene of shouts and movements, and then a long knife appeared in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body was cut as easily as if it had been a piece of fruit. The Swede fell with a cry of greatest surprise.

The businessmen and the lawyer must have rushed out of the place backward. The saloon-keeper found himself hanging weakly to the arm

of a chair and gazing into the eyes of a murderer.

"Henry," said the latter, "you tell them where to find me. I'll be home waiting." Then he left. A moment afterward the saloon-keeper was in the street racing through the storm for help and, more important, companionship.

Months later, the cowboy was cooking meat on the stove of a small cattle farm near the Dakota border when there was the sound of a horse stopping outside. The Easterner entered with mail and newspapers.

Well," said the Easterner at once, "the fellow who killed the Swede will spend three years in prison. That's not much, is it?"

"He will? Three years!" The cowboy turned the meat in the pan. "Three years. That isn't much."

"No," replied the Easterner. "There was a lot of sympathy for him in Romper."

"If the saloon-keeper had been any good," said cowboy thoughtfully, "he would have gone in and hit that Swede on the head with a bottle in the beginning of it. That would have stopped all this murdering."

"Yes, a thousand things might have happened," said the Easterner sharply.

The cowboy moved his pan of meat on the fire, continued with his philosophy. "It's strange, isn't it? If he hadn't said Johnnie was cheating, he'd be alive this minute. He was an awful fool. I believe he was crazy."

"I feel sorry for that gambler," said the Easterner.

"So do I," said the cowboy. "He doesn't deserve three years in prison for killing that fellow."

"The Swede might not have been killed if everything had been honest."

"Might not have been killed?" exclaimed the cowboy. "Everything honest? When he said that Johnnie was cheating and acted so crazy? And then in the saloon he practically asked to get hurt?" With these arguments the cowboy made the Easterner angry.

“You’re a fool!” cried the Easterner fiercely. “You’re a bigger fool than that Swede. Now let me tell you one thing. Let me tell you one thing. Listen! Johnnie was cheating!”

“Johnnie,” said the cowboy, blankly. There was a minute of silence, and then he said strongly, “Oh, no. The game was only for fun.”

“Fun or not,” said the Easterner, “Johnnie was cheating. I saw him. I know it. I saw him. And I refused to stand up and be a man. I let the Swede fight alone. And you—you were simply jumping around the place and wanting to fight. And old Scully too. We are all in it! This poor gambler just got pulled into it. Every sin is the result of shared effort. We, five of us, have shared in the murder of this Swede. You, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely at the end of a human movement, and gets all the punishment.”

The cowboy, hurt and angry, cried out blindly into this mystery of thought: “Well, I didn’t do anything, did I?”