

DESPERATE AMBROSE

by Donald Payton



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SYNOPSIS: It all started when Ambrose Groves and Bert Miller, a couple of would-be vaudeville comedians, were crossing the desert headin' California way and got booted off the train because someone stole their tickets and all of their money. After trudging across the desert for a couple of days, they blow into Dead Man's Gulch, the wildest, woolliest, roughest spot in the wild West, where everybody fights everybody and blood flows like Old Faithful. Now it just so happens that Homer The Kid and his pal, Gun Smoke Carter, the two hardest shootin', hardest ridin' cowpokes to straddle a saddle, are expected to breeze into town that day to quell the shootin'. So when Ambrose and Bert hobble in, they are mistaken for the West's most fearless cowpunchers! Ambrose is taken for the hero, Homer The Kid, and from there on out, it's a knock-down, drag-out of laughs! Bungling Ambrose winds up doing everything opposite from the cowpuncher's union . . . he doesn't get the goods on the crooked sheriff; he's completely beaten and soundly trounced by Hoot Owl Pete; practically hung by Stinkweed; and he doesn't get the heroine, Nancy, either! But he does get things in the most devastating of devastating messes in this hilarious satire on the old West. One interior set.

CAST OF CHARACTERS*(6 females, 7 males)*

PANHANDLE JAKE (m)..... The grizzly, whiskered, easy-going bellhop/desk clerk. Wears faded jeans, plaid shirt, old cowboy boots, and a battered western hat that, like Jake himself, has seen better days. He's spent the better part (or in his case, worse part) of his sixty years as a prospector.
(85 lines)

AMBROSE GROVES (m)..... A meek and mild-mannered young feller from the East, but when he arrives in Dead Man's Gulch, he is mistaken for Homer the Kid, the sure-shootin' desperado of the West. In Act One, he is wearing the kind of suit that a fella like

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- Ambrose would wear when traveling from Kansas City to Sacramento. When "trapped" at Dead Man's Gulch, he changes to cowboy boots, ten-gallon hat, chaps, and general all-round Western garb. If this regalia is impossible to locate, Ambrose could be equally convincing in plaid shirt and jeans. A ten-gallon hat would help. (284 lines)
- BERT MILLER (m).....Ambrose's partner from the East, dresses just like Ambrose. (119 lines)
- SHERIFF CRANDEL (m).....The sheriff of Dead Man's Gulch, but, alas and alack, he is really the culprit who's causin' all the commotion in these here parts. He is intact with badge, two six-guns, and everything else that goes into the regalia of a villainy sheriff. (169 lines)
- HOOT OWL PETE (m)An old-time grizzly hombre. Dressed in - you guessed it - solid black. Wears boots, spurs, black sombrero, and a scowl from ear to ear. (Accessories may be simplified.) (138 lines)
- STINKWEED (m)Hoot Owl's hireling. A none-too-bright would-be rustler. Also rigged in Western garb. (51 lines)
- NANCY MARTIN (f).....Pretty, twenty-one years of age, the heroine. She comes to Dead Man's Gulch to take over the hotel that was left to her and her sister by her late uncle. (110 lines)
- ANNE MARTIN (f).....Nancy's sister. She is nineteen, also pretty. Influenced by her sister, but still has a mind of her own. (94 lines)
- TILLIE (f).....Chaperone and traveling companion of the sisters. She's loud and brusque, unmarried but looking - in Jake's direction. Probably in her mid-fifties. (43 lines)

- BETH (f).....Matronly, about forty-five, a Western type. She takes the girls under her wing when they arrive in this wild and wooly Western town. She carries a gun, wears a Western style skirt, cowboy hat and boots. (Substitutions for this apparel may be made if these items are too difficult to locate.) (143 lines)
- MRS. SPROOL (f).....A middle-aged, gossipy gadabout resident of Dead Man's Gulch. (29 lines)
- LENA (f).....Mrs. Sprool's teen daughter. (24 lines)
- JUDGE (m).....The newly-elected judge of Dead Man's Gulch (13 lines)

NOTE: The women may wear old-fashioned floor-length gowns typical of the 1880's. However, the time of the play may be changed from 1880 to the present, in which case each woman would wear bright cotton dresses suitable for her own age and character.

All characters and situations herein depicted are purely imaginary. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is sure enough a coincidence!

PLACE

The Dead Man's Gulch Hotel

TIME

ACT ONE: The afternoon of a hot, sultry day in the year 1880 (*or present time*).

ACT TWO:

 Scene 1: A few hours later.

 Scene 2: That evening.

ACT THREE: A few hours later.

HAND PROPERTIES

- ☐ Suitcase – Ambrose
- ☐ Banjo – Ambrose
- ☐ Trunk – Two Men
- ☐ Suitcase – Tillie
- ☐ Kitchen Plate – Tillie
- ☐ Pistol – Beth
- ☐ Guns and holsters – Hoot Owl, Sheriff, Stinkweed
- ☐ Knife – Hoot Owl
- ☐ A raw steak on a plate – Anne
- ☐ Table service and food for two (*on table beginning of Act Two*) – Ambrose and Bert
- ☐ Envelope – Sheriff
- ☐ Autograph book or sheet of paper – Lena
- ☐ Pencil – Lena
- ☐ Badges – Sheriff, Hoot Owl, and Stinkweed
- ☐ Big red handkerchief – Sheriff
- ☐ Coffee pot – Jake
- ☐ Cup – Ambrose

ACT ONE

SETTING: *The Dead Man's Gulch Hotel, located in the little desert town of Dead Man's Gulch. There are three openings, one left, which is the main entrance to the hotel; one right, which leads to the kitchen; and the one center, which leads to the remainder of the hotel. There are two windows, one on each side of the door, left. A rather large desk is at up right with a chair behind it. A lamp, either kerosene or gasoline, is on the desk, as well as a register. There are three tables, one up left, one down left, and the last one down center. These tables are covered with plaid table cloths, and chairs surround all the tables. Another chair is down right. Add other furniture as desired.*

AT RISE: *PANHANDLE JAKE, the gnarled, grizzly, whiskered, slow-moving bellhop/desk clerk, is sitting at the desk, drifting to sleep. As his head droops he jumps, shakes his head sleepily, scratches himself with eyes closed, and then starts nodding off again.*

JAKE: *(Talking to himself.) Jake! (He jumps, barely awake, opens eyes.) Huh? (Sharply.) Wake up. (Nodding again, eyes closed, mumbling.) I'm awake. (Jumps.) Jake! (Shakes head to clear it.) You hear me, Jake? (Nodding drowsily.) Yeah...I hear ya. (Catches himself again; sharply.) Jake, you can't go to sleep. (Nodding.) Oh yes I can. (Jerks head up.) Jake. (Sleepily.) Huh? (Sternly.) You wouldn't be sleepin' like this if your old Grandpaw Griswald walked in here. You'd be on your feet. (He looks up, blinks.) I shore would. (Sharply.) You'd be on your feet 'cause his motto was "a day's work fer a day's pay." (Eyes wide.) I'd be on my feet 'cause they hung him thirty years ago fer cattle rustlin'. (Disgustedly.) Jake, I give up. (Nodding, sleepily.) Then that makes two of us.*

He nods, scoots down in the chair, and continues to scoot down until he is out of sight of anyone entering left. AMBROSE GROVES and BERT MILLER enter left. They are dusty, dirty, and have the appearance of two bedraggled individuals who have just walked a great distance. AMBROSE is carrying a suitcase and banjo. He lets

these fall to the floor with a bang, then wipes the perspiration from his face with the back of his hand.

AMBROSE: Whew!

BERT: I was never so tired in my life. *(He walks with great effort to the table center and drops into a chair.)*

AMBROSE: Me, too. *(He practically falls into a chair.)* And hungry. At least I ain't thirsty no more.

BERT: I should hope not, as much as you drank out there at that horse trough.

AMBROSE: Well, after trampin' all over the desert for two days, I felt like a horse. Boy, am I tired. *(He falls back into the chair.)*

BERT: *(Calling.)* Hey, waiter.

AMBROSE: Whatcha callin' a waiter for, Bert?

BERT: Something to eat, dunce. This is a hotel . . . said so out there . . . and I'm hungry.

AMBROSE: Watcha gonna buy it with?

BERT: I'd dry dishes for the rest of my life before I'd just sit here and starve. *(Disgustedly.)* Trampin' all over the desert like a couple of gophers.

AMBROSE: Worse'n gophers, at least they've got a hole to go to.

BERT: *(Rising.)* If we hadn't stumbled into this town no tellin' what would have happened. *(Glaring at AMBROSE.)* We'd be out there walkin' yet. *(Walks slowly around the room.)*

AMBROSE: And years from now some prospector would stumble across our weary bones, where we fell weak, exhausted, and—

BERT: *(Breaking in.)* Shut up, Ambrose. We may have come closer to that very thing than you think. It isn't funny. *(Glaring at him again.)* If it hadn't been for you—

AMBROSE: Me? It wasn't my fault we were stranded.

BERT: *(Wailing.)* Oh no? *(Coming over to AMBROSE.)* Who bought the tickets to Sacramento?

AMBROSE: *(Hanging his head.)* I did.

BERT: And where did you put them?

AMBROSE: In my billfold.

BERT: And who lost the billfold?

AMBROSE: I did.

BERT: Thought so. The life savings of Ambrose Groves and Bert Miller stored inside it - all we had to our very names - as well as two tickets to Sacramento. (*Leaning on the table, opposite AMBROSE.*) Now . . . whose fault is it?

AMBROSE: (*Looking at him.*) Yours.

BERT: (*Exploding.*) Mine?!

AMBROSE: Well, that idea of going into vaudeville certainly wasn't mine. (*Mocking.*) Ambrose Groves and Bert Miller. The comedy team that'll have their sides splittin' from the U.S. to Britain. If they'd see us now, they'd split all right. (*Glaring.*) I can hear you now. (*Sarcastically.*) We'll have steaks smothered in mushrooms. (*Again wiping his brow.*) And the only thing that's smothered is us. Do you realize we ain't had nothing to eat since they threw those eggs and tomatoes at us in Abilene? What have you got to say?

BERT: (*Pounding the table.*) Hey, waiter?

AMBROSE: My achin' feet. (*He bends over, starts untying his shoe laces.*) Trampin' over the desert like a jackass.

BERT: You gripe more than any human being I've ever known.

AMBROSE: (*Disgustedly.*) Who wouldn't gripe? Walkin' across the desert. Clear across it, at that.

BERT: Why, oh why, didn't you put that money in your sock?

AMBROSE: (*Holds up his foot.*) A lot of good that would do. (*The foot is completely out of the sock and there's nothing left but the top.*) I've walked clear out of my shoes and socks. (*He pours the sand out of his shoes.*)

BERT: Wish we could get some service around here.

AMBROSE: Wonder where we are?

BERT: The sign said this was the Dead Man's Gulch Hotel. So I guess this is Dead Man's Gulch.

AMBROSE: (*Fearfully.*) Dead Man's Gulch? (*And shudders.*) The sooner I get out of here the better.

BERT: (*Calling.*) Waiter. (*He goes up center, peers out.*) Nobody stirring around here: Looks like it's deserted.

AMBROSE: (*Sadly.*) I wish I was choo-chooing to Sacramento.

BERT: (*Coming back downstage.*) I wish I was chew-chewing on something to eat.

AMBROSE: I was never so humiliated in my whole life. Kicked right off of a train in the middle of the desert. *(He rises.)* I'm a comedian - I tell funny jokes - people laugh at me. That conductor never heard of Ambrose and Bert—who keep the joint hoppin' from Frisco to Joplin.

BERT: *(Hands deep in his pockets.)* Of all the dumb tricks - losing your wallet.

AMBROSE: Well, it's gone and we walked and we're at least three hundred miles from nowhere right out in the middle of the desert in a place called Dead Man's Gulch and we're broke and we're due to open a two-week run at the Palace Theatre in Sacramento the first of next week. That brings us up-to-date.

BERT: *(Again looking around.)* This looks like a ghost town.

AMBROSE: *(Rambling on.)* And we're in a heck of a mess. I forgot that. *(He again sits.)* Oh, how I wish I was back in dear old Providence.

BERT: Not a soul around here - just look at the dust.

AMBROSE: I can't. I got my eyes filled with sand. Good, clean American sand.

JAKE snores loudly. AMBROSE stands bolt-upright.

BERT: What was that?

AMBROSE: *(Starting left.)* Must have been that ghost.

BERT: Where are you going?

AMBROSE: Back to the desert.

BERT: *(Disgustedly.)* Come back here, Ambrose, you're the biggest chicken I've ever seen. *(Crosses to desk.)* Hey, we're not deserted after all.

AMBROSE: You know who-who-who-it-is?

BERT: I don't even know what it is. *(Shakes JAKE.)* Hey, wake up.

JAKE: *(Sleepily.)* Huh? *(Louder.)* Huh? *(Jumping up, terrified.)* Who - what - *(Raises hands, trembling.)* Don't shoot. I didn't do it.

AMBROSE: *(Crossing.)* Who are you, anyway?

JAKE: *(Hands still raised.)* P-P-P-Panhandle J-J-Jake.

BERT: You work around here?

JAKE: Yes, sir. A day's work for a day's pay. I'm the bellhop and desk clerk – when the – hotel's open. (*Hands still trembling.*) Right now it's closed on account—

AMBROSE: What'ya mean, closed on account?

JAKE: Closed on account of the proprietor was sh-sh-shot (*Gulps.*) dead.

BERT: Shot?

AMBROSE: Dead?

JAKE: (*Nodding, fearfully.*) Mr. Mahoney was a fine ole gentleman. An' last week (*Gulping.*) they shot him.

BERT: Who?

JAKE: (*Slowly lowering hands.*) The outlaws that's been hangin' 'round Dead Man's Gulch.

AMBROSE: You got anything around here to eat?

JAKE: Not a thing. They have me here to tell people we're not servin' nothin' 'cause Mr. Mahoney's been shot - dead.

BERT: But we've been traveling for two days without anything to eat.

JAKE: (*Sitting.*) They said they're not servin'.

AMBROSE: Who?

JAKE: The sheriff.

BERT: When can we get a train around here?

JAKE: Don't have trains into Dead Man's Gulch. Or out, neither.

AMBROSE: (*Astonished.*) No trains?

JAKE: Nope. But there'll be a stagecoach through here in the morning.

BERT: At least that's something.

AMBROSE: Can we get a room here tonight?

JAKE: The sheriff said no rooms, no food, no nothin'. The hotel's closed cause—

AMBROSE: Old man Mahoney's been shot - dead.

BERT: We're dead tired and need sleep.

AMBROSE: How about lettin' us stay here just tonight?

JAKE: But the sheriff said—

AMBROSE: We'll explain to the sheriff.

JAKE: I don't aim to pick no fight with the law. I'm jus' an old grub-stakin' prospector tryin' to do a day's work fir a day's pay. (*Closes eyes.*)

BERT: (*Pulling a chair up beside him and sitting.*) Look. If you let us stay, there'll be a little something in it for you. (*JAKE opens one eye.*) We're flat broke now, but after we get to Sacramento there'll be something for you on the next stage.

JAKE: You tryin' to bribe me, Mister?

BERT: Well...sorta.

JAKE: (*Rising.*) Why didn't ya say so sooner? (*Points to suitcase.*) That your stuff?

AMBROSE: (*Happily.*) Yes, sir. (*AMBROSE picks up banjo.*)

JAKE: (*Picks up suitcase.*) C'mon. (*They start center.*) But if the sheriff says somethin', I'm sending him right up.

As they exit center, SHERIFF CRANDEL, HOOT OWL PETE and STINKWEED enter left.

SHERIFF: Well, Hoot Owl, I guess you can move in in the morning.

HOOT OWL: (*Looking around the room.*) Just what I've always wanted, Sheriff. A hotel all my own.

SHERIFF: Wal, here she is. (*A motion of his hand.*) The Dead Man's Gulch Hotel—

HOOT OWL: Owned and operated by Hoot Owl Pete.

STINKWEED: Don't forget me, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: I ain't forgettin' you, Stinkweed. (*To the SHERIFF.*) Owned and operated by Hoot Owl Pete and his assistant, Stinkweed Meade.

STINKWEED: That's more like it, Hoot Owl. (*He starts roaming around the room.*)

HOOT OWL: I gotta hand it to you, Sheriff, this is a clever deal.

SHERIFF: Shh, somebody might be listenin', Hoot Owl. (*He looks cautiously around the room, tiptoes to the door at right, peers out, then comes back.*)

HOOT OWL: Wonder where Panhandle Jake is?

SHERIFF: Must be asleep somewhar, leastways, I don't think he's around here. (*After satisfying himself that there's no one in earshot.*) Now, what was that you war sayin', Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: I was just sayin' that this was the slickest deal ever pulled this side of the Mississippi, Sheriff.

STINKWEED: Just look at the first class furniture in here.

HOOT OWL: The whole joint is lousy with dust.

STINKWEED: (*Running his finger on the desk.*) But it's shore first class dust, Hoot Owl. In fac', everything 'round here's first class.

SHERIFF: (*Putting a foot on a chair.*) We've got everything in the county goin' our way now, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: Yeah, that was real nifty thinkin', Sheriff.

STINKWEED: (*Strolling over.*) I still don't like the idea of us shootin' old man Mahoney like that.

SHERIFF: He was gettin' wise, Stinkweed. I think he suspected me.

STINKWEED: (*Worriedly.*) But I was just thinkin'—

HOOT OWL: (*Breaking in, sharply.*) You ain't gettin' paid to think, Stinkweed. (*Growling.*) See that it don't happen no more.

STINKWEED: Okay, from now on I'll be a perfect blank.

HOOT OWL: That's it, just act natural.

STINKWEED again starts rambling about the room.

SHERIFF: I'd been a-watchin' him of late, Hoot Owl. When he looked at me, his eyes war sharp, like he suspicioned maybe what I was up to. So I got to thinkin', if I come in here sometime, ask him to ride in a posse, and had one of your hombres planted in the hills just to shoot him, we'd kill two birds with one stone 'cause old Mahoney warn't married - didn't have no family - and didn't have no one to leave the hotel to - and with no one to claim the property, it goes to the court, naturally.

HOOT OWL: You're a sharp man, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: So I did some more calcylatin'. I'm the sheriff 'round hyar. The people trust me in Dead Man's Gulch. (*He smiles.*) And the hotel would naturally fall into my hands - bein' as how I'm the law - and it would be mine to sell to the highest bidder. And nobody ain't gonna know but what you turned over hard cash for the building, Hoot Owl. They saw you pay me the money - they saw it go on the stage - (*He sits importantly.*) but what they didn't see was our boys liftin' it off the stagecoach out by Big Rock.

HOOT OWL: That's real smart thinkin', Sheriff.

SHERIFF: It had to be smart thinkin', Hoot Owl. The beauty part of the whole thing was when they came back a yelpin' 'bout a hold-up, all I had to do was offer five thousand dollars reward - five thousand reward for my own hide. *(He and HOOT OWL chuckle merrily.)*

STINKWEED: But some of the boys didn't like the idea of knockin' off the driver of the stagecoach, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: It'll be alright, Stinkweed. The five thousand will cover that, too. Toss in everything—give 'em their money's worth...the suckers. But nobody's gonna get wise, 'cause nobody knows nothing about it but you and Stinkweed. But you guys ain't gonna talk 'cause you're gettin' too much out of it, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: Right, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: And you, Stinkweed, ain't gonna talk because you know you'd wake up and find yourself in the bottom of the river with water flowin' and gushin' through them nineteen bullet holes like the Niagry Falls.

HOOT OWL: You ain't got nothin' to be feared of, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: And if any coyotes try to stop us, we'll fill their carcasses so full of lead they'll never know what hit 'em. *(Banging his gun butt on the table.)* Cause we're tough.

STINKWEED: That's right, fellows, We're tough.

SHERIFF: You can move into the hotel in the morning, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: Okay, Sheriff. I'll be a movin' in. And if anyone tries to stop me, I'll fill 'em so full of slugs that they'll look like a piece of Swiss cheese.

SHERIFF: *(Rising, pounding him on the back.)* That's the spirit, Hoot Owl. *(A pleased expression on his face.)* Yessir, I think you'll be a good man to have runnin' this hotel.

HOOT OWL: And you know, Sheriff, I think people here are havin' more respect for you all the time.

SHERIFF: I know they are, Hoot Owl. This election we're holdin' today - they been wantin' an election - wal - they're get'in it. Hey, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: Yeah?

SHERIFF: Did you copy the names off the tombstones like I asked you to?

STINKWEED: No, but I'm goin' to.

SHERIFF: See that you do. Everybody's votin' in Dead Man's Gulch today. Even those we shot.

HOOT OWL: Another good idea, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: I'm full of 'em, Hoot Owl. And nobody's gonna get wise about nothin', neither. 'Cause if they do, I can hang 'em of my own free will. You better go cram those ballot boxes now, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: Okay, Sheriff. *(His boots make a noisy clatter as he starts left.)*

SHERIFF: You better go out the back way, Stinkweed. We can't be too careful.

STINKWEED: Okay, Sheriff. *(He turns and clatters out right.)*

SHERIFF: And maybe you'd better see how the election's coming, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: Okay, Sheriff. I'll be seein' you. *(He exits left.)*

SHERIFF: Wonder where Panhandle Jake is? Probably layin' in the shade someplace, doin' a day's work fer a day's pay. *(JAKE enters center.)*

SHERIFF: Oh, there you are, Panhandle.

JAKE: *(Surprised.)* Sheriff, wh-what are you doin' here?

SHERIFF: Just dropped by to tell you the hotel's openin' tomorrow. Sold it to the highest bidder—Pete Brackett.

JAKE: *(Eyes wide.)* You mean, Hoo-Hoo-Hoot Owl P-P-Pete?

SHERIFF: *(Grinning.)* Well, I reckon, he's called that off an' on.

JAKE: He's a mighty rough customer to be runnin' the hotel.

SHERIFF: Nonsense, Panhandle. I'm the sheriff, so I reckon I know who's rough and who isn't in this county.

JAKE: Guess you're right, Sheriff. Only I don't trust him no farther than I can see, an' today I'm havin' a heap o' trouble seein'.

SHERIFF: Anyway, they say he's got quite a way about him.

JAKE: Yeah. He's got away all right - from the marshall in Dodge, a posse in Pocatello, and the jail in Junction City.

SHERIFF: Since it's opening tomorrow, you make sure no one stays here tonight.

JAKE: Tonight? Then there's something you ought to know.

SHERIFF: Hoot Owl - *(Catching himself.)* I mean, Mr. Bracket is going to spruce it up.

JAKE: *(Pointing.)* There's a couple of -

SHERIFF: *(Breaking in.)* He's going to change all the sheets.

JAKE: But I already changed 'em.

SHERIFF: You did?

JAKE: (*Proudly.*) Changed 'em yesterday, Sheriff, from one bed to the other. 'Bout not sleepin' here tonight. You mean even people that are *really* sleepy?

SHERIFF: I mean anyone and everyone!

JAKE: Even folks that are plumb tuckered?

SHERIFF: (*Darting to window.*) Was that a stagecoach that just went by? (*At window.*) It is a stagecoach. There's none due in here until morning. (*He turns away as JAKE crosses to window.*)

JAKE: Hey, Sheriff, there's some ladies gettin' out.

SHERIFF: How many?

JAKE: More than two but less than four.

SHERIFF: (*Sharply.*) Quit playin' games. How many?

JAKE: (*Peering out.*) Three lovely damsels...two of 'em young an' innocent, an' the other a more mature, matronly lady with ruby red lips, soft blue eyes, an' a dimple on her chin.

SHERIFF: (*Squinting.*) I thought you were havin' trouble with your eyes?

JAKE: Looks like it just cleared up.

SHERIFF: (*Looking out window.*) They're lookin' this direction.

JAKE: They're even walkin' in this direction. An' look at that walk.

SHERIFF: That's odd. There was no stage due until morning.

NANCY: (*From off left.*) Just carry that trunk right in here.

Two MEN enter carrying a rather heavy trunk. They are followed by NANCY and ANNE MARTIN and their chaperone, TILLIE, who's carrying a suitcase.

MAN: Anything else?

NANCY: Yes, our suitcases, please.

MAN: Coming right up. (*The two MEN go out left.*)

ANNE: Well, Nancy, this is it. (*They look around the room.*)

SHERIFF: (*Quickly.*) Welcome to Dead Man's Gulch, my name's Crandel. (*Pulling his vest back to show his badge.*) Sheriff Crandel.

NANCY: I'm Nancy Martin and this is my sister, Anne.

ANNE: (*Cordially.*) Hi.

JAKE: I'm Panhandle Jake.

TILLIE: Glory be! I never figured I'd see anything like you here.

JAKE: Surprised, huh?

TILLIE: Surprised? I'm terrified. I haven't figured out what you are yet.

SHERIFF: Don't be afraid of Jake. He's just a harmless old sourdough.

TILLIE: (*Rubbing hands together.*) I never worry 'bout how sour they are. (*Extends hand.*) Pleased to meet ya, Jake, I'm Tillie. Travelin' companion and chaperone for the gals here. (*They shake hands.*) You're just what I've been lookin' for.

JAKE: (*Pleased, beaming.*) I am?

TILLIE: Yeah. How 'bout hustlin' my suitcase upstairs. (*He stares at her, wide eyed, as love starts to chisel a foothold.*) Come on. (*She picks up suitcase.*) You do have moving parts? (*Disgustedly.*) Never mind. Just show me my room. (*They exit center, as the MEN reenter with suitcases.*)

MAN: Where shall I put these, ma'am?

NANCY: You may carry all of those right in there. (*Motioning center with tilt of her head.*) You show him, Anne.

ANNE: Alright, Nancy. I'll pick out the best room. (*She goes out center, followed by the two MEN.*)

NANCY: (*Walking around the room, scrutinizing it carefully.*) This place is certainly filthy.

SHERIFF: Well, you see, ma'am, it hain't open now.

NANCY: I know. And the dust—it's terrible. (*The SHERIFF takes off his hat, watches NANCY, scratches his head.*) It's not so bad. A little work will straighten it out.

SHERIFF: Nope—I reckon not.

NANCY: (*Looking around.*) And the whole place needs redecorating.

SHERIFF: (*Now very curious.*) You act like you might be aimin' on buyin' it, ma'am.

NANCY: (*Her back to the SHERIFF, as if lost in thought.*) Oh no.

SHERIFF: (*Very relieved.*) Oh, you're not?

NANCY: (*Looking at the ceiling.*) No - (*A pause, for emphasis.*) I already own it.

SHERIFF: (*Suddenly.*) You what? (*Catching himself.*) I mean -you do?

NANCY: You see, it belonged to my uncle, Jim Mahoney. (*She turns to him.*) Did you know him?

SHERIFF: (*Looking her square in the eye.*) Ah reckon I did, ma'am. Good friend of mine, Jim was!

NANCY: He willed this hotel to us years ago, when we were just little tykes.

SHERIFF: (*Trying to keep calm.*) Willed it to you?

NANCY: He said that if he ever - (*She lowers her gaze.*) when he died, that he wanted us to have it. (*She looks at the SHERIFF, he says nothing.*) I didn't like the idea of coming here - but he thought so much of us and we liked Uncle Jim (*Motions with her hands.*) and well, here we are.

SHERIFF: (*Craftily, moving to block them.*) You know, there may be some doubt about your taking possession.

NANCY: Oh, I have the will and everything - and you're the sheriff. Shouldn't be any trouble at all, should it?

SHERIFF: (*Turning, thoughtfully.*) No, I reckon not...

NANCY: We left as soon as we got word that...that— (*Coming over to the SHERIFF.*) Was he really shot, Mr. Crandel?

SHERIFF: I'm afraid he was, Miss Martin.

NANCY: (*Shuddering.*) How terrible.

SHERIFF: This ain't a very healthy place for a fine lady like you, ma'am.

NANCY: (*Again, looking around the room.*) I must admit that it's not what I thought it would be. But first impressions are usually the worst.

SHERIFF: (*Anxious.*) And there hain't much to do 'round hyar. Nothin' like you're probably used to.

NANCY: (*Smiling.*) I think we'll have enough work to pacify us for awhile.

SHERIFF: I'd clear out right now if I was you, Miss Nancy.

NANCY: Why, Sheriff, I think you're trying to discourage me.

SHERIFF: On the contrary, ma'am, I'd like for you to stay. Pretty faces like yours and your sisters hain't been seen 'round these parts of late. But it just ain't a fit place for women.

The two MEN reenter, pick up the trunk and carry it out center.

NANCY: Well, we can give it a try, and if it doesn't suit us, we can always leave.

SHERIFF: Wal, I reckon you are your own boss.

NANCY: And if we get busy, we can be serving before long. *(She starts center.)* Please excuse me, Sheriff Crandel, but we've just gobs of work to do.

SHERIFF: *(Watching her.)* Why shore, ma'am, shore... *(He stands watching center.)*

The two MEN reenter.

FIRST MAN: Well, I guess that's everything, ma'am.

NANCY: Have we paid you sufficiently?

SECOND MAN: Yes, ma'am. And before we go, we want to wish you all the success in the world.

NANCY: Thank you, I think we're going to need it. Goodbye - and thanks. *(She smiles.)*

FIRST MAN: Goodbye, ma'am. *(They bow as she exits center.)*

SHERIFF: *(Coming over to them.)* You hombres drive them all the way here?

SECOND MAN: Just from King's Canyon. They got there on the train - they're from Kansas City. *(The two men leave left.)*

SHERIFF: *(Walking around the room, deep in thought.)* Kansas City.

He is pacing around the room, rubbing the stubble on his chin, as HOOT OWL PETE comes barging in left, hurriedly.

HOOT OWL: *(As he enters.)* Hey, Sheriff, have I got news for you.

SHERIFF: *(Still walking around the room.)* I got news for you, too.

HOOT OWL: What?

SHERIFF: Did you see that stage across the street?

HOOT OWL: Yeah.

SHERIFF: *(Worriedly.)* That, my friend, brought the two new owners of the Dead Man's Gulch hotel to—

HOOT OWL: *(Breaking in, irately.)* Why you dirty, double-crossing, I thought I—

SHERIFF: *(Also breaking in.)* Take it easy, Hoot Owl. It shore hain't none of my doin's. *(He continues to pace the floor.)*

HOOT OWL: (*Following him.*) Whattya mean?

SHERIFF: (*Sitting.*) Two gals - name's Martin - got here from Kansas City. Nieces of old man Mahoney that you bumped off.

HOOT OWL: I didn't think he had no relatives.

SHERIFF: I didn't either, but they've got the papers to prove it.

HOOT OWL: What'll we do, run 'em out of town?

SHERIFF: Not now, but we will eventually. We'll make it so hot for 'em, they'll wish they'd never even heard of Dead Man's Gulch.

HOOT OWL: What'll we do?

SHERIFF: (*Frowning.*) I don't know (*Clenching his fists.*) But, we'll think of something. What was that you war gonna tell me?

HOOT OWL: It hain't very good news, Sheriff. I'll tell you that some of the boys said they saw Homer the Kid ridin' this way and—

SHERIFF: (*Rising, breaking in fearfully.*) Homer the Kid?

HOOT OWL: (*Growling.*) Yeah...him and Gun Smoke Carter.

SHERIFF: (*Astonished.*) Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke Carter?!

HOOT OWL: What'll we do, Sheriff?

SHERIFF: (*Again walking around the room.*) I shore don't know now, Hoot Owl. (*To himself.*) Why did he have to head to these parts?

HOOT OWL: I ain't afeard of Homer the Kid. I been waitin' for this opportunity. I can whip his hide any time, place, or fashion.

SHERIFF: (*Worriedly.*) He's the toughest coyote this side o' San Anton. And he's hanged, shot, or had shot every desperado he's ever mixed with north of the border. Things look tough, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: (*Coming over to him.*) You ain't gonna quit, are you, Sheriff?

SHERIFF: Quit? I should say not. He's whipped men, fist with fist - I'm gonna outthink him - (*His eyes like slits.*) We're gonna do two things, Hoot Owl. We're gonna get rid of the most feared cowpuncher in the country and get some mighty meddlesome gals out of the way, too. This is gonna call for some thinking. (*He starts left.*) Come along, Hoot Owl. Let's hold a pow-wow.

They start left as BETH MALONE enters left.

SHERIFF: (*Changing his manner completely.*) Oh, hello, Beth.

BETH: Hello, Sheriff Crandel.

SHERIFF: Been out to vote yet?

BETH: Not yet I ain't, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: I have. (*A twinkle in his eye.*) And I nominated you for probate judge, too.

BETH: I don't know why in the world you nominated me for probate judge, Sheriff. A woman don't have no business in politics.

SHERIFF: You know darn well why I nominated you, Miss Beth. I've had my eyes set on you a long time. Be kinda nice havin' a judge and sheriff all in the same family. (*SHERIFF and HOOT OWL exit.*)

JAKE: (*Entering center.*) Jumpin' jackrabbits. (*Mops brow, leans against door.*) What an ordeal.

BETH: Howdy, Jake.

JAKE: Howdy, Beth.

BETH: You seen the new gals in town?

JAKE: Seen 'em? I just got away from one of 'em. Never met nothin' like her in all my born days. She's their travelin' companion. (*Staggers to chair, sitting.*) Only it's other folks that does the travelin'. In less than five minutes time, I travelled fer towels and I traveled fer soap and I traveled fer drinkin' water and I travelled fer a dust mop and when she turned her back—I travelled fer the door.

BETH: (*Smiling.*) Who are you talkin' about, Jake?

JAKE: Tillie, the Martin gal's chaperone, I believe in a day's work for a day's pay, Beth, but not in a time span of five minutes. If she comes breezin' in here, tell her I'm considerin' goin' back to prospectin'.

TILLIE: (*Entering center, pointing.*) There you are, Jake.

JAKE: On second thought, tell her I've done gone. (*He starts right.*)

TILLIE: (*Sharply.*) Jake, just hold your horses. We've got work to do. (*He freezes.*) An' after supper, Jake— (*She touches his arm.*)

JAKE: (*Eyes getting wide.*) Huh?

TILLIE: You're gonna take a bath.

JAKE: Take a bath?

TILLIE: An' spiffy up.

JAKE: Spiffy up?

TILLIE: An' we're goin' out on the town and you're gonna show me a good time.

JAKE: (*Sitting.*) If it's all th' same to you, I'll just sit and point it out to you.

NANCY: (*As she and ANNE enter center.*) We've so much to do I hardly know where to begin.

ANNE: I don't think it makes much difference. Everything's to be done over, anyway.

NANCY: (*Sees BETH, cordially.*) Oh, hello.

BETH: (*Smiling.*) Hello. Are you Nancy?

NANCY: (*Surprised.*) Why - why yes.

BETH: (*As if to an old friend.*) I'd have known you anywhere. Your hair, your eyes. I've heard your uncle speak so much about you and Anne.

ANNE: (*With surprise.*) Do you mean Uncle Jim?

BETH: Yes, Jim Mahoney.

NANCY: (*Smiling.*) Then you must be Beth Malone.

BETH: (*Smiling warmly.*) That's right, child. Your uncle and I were...were (*Dropping her gaze.*) going to be married.

NANCY: I know he thought lot of you. In every letter, it was Miss Beth this and Miss Beth that.

BETH: He was the only man I ever loved. But he was a good man. As good a man as ever drew breath. I lived forty-five years just waitin' for the right man to come along. Well - he came and he left me - but he ain't really gone. Still got memories, memories that'll last me forever.

NANCY: Uncle Jim always said he'd never get married - never - until he found the perfect woman. Miss Malone, I guess you're that perfect woman.

BETH: I'm going to help you girls make a success of it here. Jim wanted you here - he wanted it to be yours - and he wanted this hotel to be run good and decent - but it's gonna be hard. (*Earnestly.*) Can I help you girls? (*Looking from one to the other.*) Please tell me you'll let me help you.

ANNE: Of course you can, (*Pauses, for emphasis.*) Aunt Beth!

BETH: Aunt Beth. (*She wipes a tear from her eye.*) Thank you, child. Thank you.

NANCY: And I'm not near as scared now, Aunt Beth. But we won't be able to pay you much at—

BETH: (*Breaking in.*) Pay? I'm gettin' pay enough right now. You're wonderful girls - you're good girls - and you're always gonna be and I got a six shooter here that backs up my statement. (*She pulls out an old-fashioned, long-barreled pistol.*)

ANNE: Aunt Beth, was Uncle Jim - (*She stops.*) was he - (*She makes a face.*) he - in cold blood'?

BETH: Yes, he was, gals. Shot down in cold blood while ridin' in a posse. And it's all mighty peculiar, it is.

ANNE: Do you - know who did it?

BETH: No, not exactly. But I got my suspicions. Your uncle had his suspicions, too. That's why he was shot. But we're gonna catch the coyotes that did it, gals, or my name ain't Beth Malone.

TILLIE: Mmm! This sounds excitin'.

BETH: What we need is a couple of cowpunchers with good shootin' eyes and itchy trigger fingers.

NANCY: You mean we need a couple of - of gunmen?

BETH: Well, all men carry guns around here. And we can't run a hotel in Dead Man's Gulch single-handed.

TILLIE: In fact, I'm gettin' a gunpowder headache already.

ANNE: I took pistol shooting in school.

NANCY: She's really quick on the draw.

BETH: People are dangerous here, gals. They slip around and well, you'll never really be safe. But if we had a couple of hands...

ANNE: Can't the sheriff get us a couple?

BETH: Somehow Jim never liked the sheriff.

NANCY: You mean Sheriff Crandel, the man that was in here? (*BETH nods.*) Seemed like a good enough man to me.

BETH: For some reason Jim didn't like him. That's enough for me. And there's something about him that's mightily suspicious.

ANNE: (*To NANCY, smiling.*) This is just like a Western thriller. Even the sheriff's crooked.

BETH: I ain't sayin' he's crooked—yet. Talkin' 'bout gettin' a couple of cowpunchers for protection, I heard some of the townspeople sayin' a while ago that they heard somebody say that Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke Carter was a-headin' toward these here parts.

NANCY: (*Excitedly.*) You mean the Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke Carter that are so famous?

BETH: The very ones. The most feared couple of riders in these here parts.

ANNE: I read that Homer the Kid can light a cigarette at a hundred and fifty paces with his six-shooter.

BETH: That's right. And then Gun Smoke Carter puts out the match.

ANNE: (*Excitedly.*) If we could persuade them, I mean - if we could—

BETH: (*Breaking in.*) They may not even be ridin' in this direction. And if they was, they might pass right on through. But I wish we could get 'em. Why, men have been known to just look at Homer the Kid and faint.

JAKE: By the way, there's a couple of strangers stayin' all night here tonight. They was tired and sleepy and hungry and asked—

BETH: (*Breaking in, anxiously.*) Two men, did you say?

JAKE: They checked in jus 'fore you got here. Said they'd been travelin' fer quite a spell.

NANCY: (*Anxiously.*) What'd they look like? .

JAKE: Like they was tired an' hungry an' sleepy.

ANNE: Maybe it's Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke Carter.

BETH: If it is, we're in luck.

NANCY: And if it isn't?

TILLIE: We're in Boot Hill.

BETH: Go upstairs and get 'em, Jake.

JAKE: (*Holding up hand.*) Whooaaa. You mean you want ME to go upstairs and order them critters to come down here?

TILLIE: Come on, Jake. (*She grabs him by the arm, hustles him center.*) Don't you have any git up and go?

JAKE: (*As they exit center.*) I think my git up and go just got up and went.

ANNE: Do you think it might be Homer the Kid?

BETH: I got a hunch it is, Anne.

ANNE: It's nearly too good to be true.

BETH: It certainly is. And they'll find out who killed Jim, too. (*Putting her hand on her gun.*) That's one thing that'll get done if I have to do it myself.

NANCY: Don't worry, Aunt Beth, Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke will do it. They've tracked down more than one tough desperado.

BETH: That's right. They're the rootinest, tootinest, two saddle-sitters that ever busted a bronco. And they've busted plenty of them. There just ain't nothin' that they can't do.

NANCY: And to think - they're right here in our hotel.

AMBROSE and BERT enter center, followed by JAKE and TILLIE.

TILLIE: Here they are, gals. Feast your eyes.

BERT: You want to see us?

AMBROSE scratches eyes sleepily; stops, opens eyes, looks, blinks.

AMBROSE: *(Looking from NANCY to ANNE.)* Hey, do you see what I see or am I seeing things? *(He whistles.)* And right out in the middle of a desert. *(Turning to BERT.)* Don't tell me these are mirages.

ANNE: *(Sighing.)* A real Western hero.

AMBROSE: *(Turns, looks behind him.)* Where?

ANNE: *(Smiling.)* You, silly.

NANCY: *(Nudging her.)* Anne.

AMBROSE: Me? I mean me! *(In a gruff vice.)* Yeah, me!

BETH: Are you - you - do you live around here?

BERT: I'm afraid not. We're strangers. Just got in. You see, we -

ANNE: *(To AMBROSE.)* Then you are the cowboys.

AMBROSE: *(Sticking out his chest.)* Cowboys? I should say I am. Why, just last week I was confronted by an hombre, see. He had a gun pressed in my ribs, see, one in my back, see, and another at my temple, see.

ANNE: *(Ecstatically.)* Oh, my goodness.

AMBROSE: But I didn't flinch. *(BERT gives him a dirty look.)* I just whirls, see, grabs him, see, and—

JAKE: Great jumpin' toad frogs, it's him.

AMBROSE: Stick around, brother. I'm just gettin' started.

BERT: You'll have to pardon my partner, he—

BETH: *(Breaking in.)* That's all right. We know who you are and what you're all about.

AMBROSE: *(Blinking.)* And you're still gonna let us stay?

NANCY: *(To AMBROSE.)* You're Homer the Kid. *(Turning to BERT.)*

He's Gun Smoke Carter.

AMBROSE: *(Astonished.)* Huh? I mean uh-huh. *(To himself.)* Homer the Kid. *(Liking the idea, louder.)* Uh huh!

ANNE: *(Sidling up to him.)* We need protection.

AMBROSE: *(Importantly.)* Ma'am, you can count on us.

NANCY: After all, we can't stay here all by ourselves.

AMBROSE: You certainly can't.

BETH: Because there's liable to be bloodshed.

AMBROSE: Lady, we—*bloodshed?*

NANCY: What do you say?

AMBROSE: *(Starting left.)* I say I'm gettin' out of here.

BERT: *(Grabbing him.)* Come back here.

AMBROSE: Are you kiddin'?

BERT: Won't you let us talk it over?

AMBROSE: But—

BETH: *(Breaking in.)* Why, of, course.

AMBROSE: But—

BETH: In private?

AMBROSE: *(To BERT.)* But—

NANCY: And please stay with us a couple of weeks, anyway.

AMBROSE: *(Turning to NANCY.)* But—

BERT: Alright, we'll let you know in just a minute. *(BERT turns to AMBROSE; as the others go out right.)*

AMBROSE: *(His hands on his hips.)* Bert, have you plumb gone loco? *(Sarcastically.)* Don't I just look like Homer the Kid?

BERT: Then why did you say you were? *(Mockingly.)* Why, just last week I was confronted by an hombre, see. He had a gun pressed in my ribs, see -

AMBROSE: Bert—

BERT: And one in my back, see. *(AMBROSE slowly sinks to a chair.)*
And another at my temple, see, but I didn't flinch, see.

AMBROSE: I thought they was kiddin', Bert.

BERT: But they're not. They really think we are Homer the Kid and Gun Smoke Carter. And if everyone thinks that—

AMBROSE: *(Looking at BERT, beseechingly.)* Oh no, Bert. Say you don't mean what you're thinkin'.

BERT: Why not, Ambrose? Free feeds - nothing to do but lay around, clean our gun barrels.

AMBROSE: I still don't like it, Bert.

BERT: And think of those girls—

AMBROSE: I don't care, Bert. I've got other things to think of besides girls. Like seein' tomorrow.

BERT: What hair, what eyes, what lips, what a way to spend a vacation.

AMBROSE: (*Pacing around the room.*) It just ain't gonna work, Bert.

BERT: I can see you now - as Homer the Kid. The great hero. (*Coming over to him.*) And do you know what the Western hero always gets? You get the glory—

AMBROSE: Phooey on the glory.

BERT: You get the girl.

AMBROSE: Phooey on the— (*He stops.*) the girl?

BERT: Always, it never fails. The hero always gets the girl.

AMBROSE: By golly, that's right . . . and them gals is sure something.

BERT: And maybe we can get in with them at the hotel. Put on our own little stage revue.

AMBROSE: By golly, you may be right, Bert.

BERT: I know I'm right, Ambrose.

AMBROSE: (*Strutting.*) Homer the Kid. That kinda stuff is right up my alley. I'm really fitted for the part.

BERT: (*Pounding him on the back.*) That's the spirit.

AMBROSE: (*Serious again.*) You sure nothin' won't happen?

BERT: I know it won't. And we'll really be heroes around here.

AMBROSE: Can you imagine that? Ambrose and Bert, who unwind their funnybones like a lasso from Chanutte to El Paso, two of the most feared hombres to ever throw a leg over a cayuse. (*He starts singing.*) "On my cause, let me wander over yonder till I see the mountains rise, I want to ride to the ridge where—"

BERT: But don't forget. You're Homer the Kid. You're tough

AMBROSE: Tough!

BERT: You're fearless

AMBROSE: Fearless!

BERT: - and you're cold-blooded.

AMBROSE: You're so right.

BERT: The bravest gun-toter in the whole wild West.

AMBROSE: *(Beating his chest.)* That's me! *(Serious again.)* You're sure nothing ain't gonna happen?

BERT: How could it, when people take just one look at Homer the Kid and run for shelter?

AMBROSE: Boy, I'm gonna enjoy this.

They all enter right, looking at AMBROSE and BERT expectantly.

BETH: Well?

BERT: Well, me and Homer here have decided to loiter 'round these here parts a bit, ain't we, Homer?

AMBROSE: *(Leaning back importantly.)* Yeah, me and Gun Smoke here have decided to do just that. *(He struts back and forth like a turkey.)*

NANCY: Thank heavens. *(To AMBROSE.)* I feel so much safer with you around.

AMBROSE: All right then, you just stay by me and you'll be protected, little gal.

BERT: By the way, when do we eat?

BETH: Everything's in the kitchen. Come along, girls. I'll show you around. And Jake, we need some wood.

NANCY: You two stay in here and rest. We'll call you as soon as it's ready.

AMBROSE: Wal, thank you, gal, thank you.

They all go out right, leaving only AMBROSE and BERT.

AMBROSE: *(Still talking in a drawl.)* You know, Gun Smoke, I'm beginnin' to like this here little plan better and better all the time. *(Dropping the drawl.)* You sure nothin' ain't gonna happen, huh, Bert?

BERT: Of course nothing ain't going to happen. And don't forget, I'm not Bert anymore, I'm Gun Smoke Carter.

AMBROSE: *(Sitting, propping his feet upon the table.)* Okay, Bert. I just wanted to make sure, that's all. 'Cause if there's any shootin', I'm clearin' out of here, 'cause I'm allergic to bullets.

HOOT OWL PETE comes strolling in left; swaggers to a table, sits.

HOOT OWL: *(Banging the table.)* Give me some service. *(BERT and AMBROSE ignore him.)* Waitress! *(He bangs the table again.)*
Said I wanted some service.

ANNE: *(At the door.)* I thought I heard...

HOOT OWL: *(Breaking in, sharply.)* Bring me a steak.

ANNE: I'm sorry, sir, but we haven't opened yet.

HOOT OWL: Then now's a good time to open. *(Half rising.)* Because I'm hungry and I want a steak.

ANNE: *(Fearfully.)* Ye-ye-yessir. How do you want it cooked?

HOOT OWL: *(Banging the table.)* I want it raw!

ANNE's eyes become saucers. She just stands and stares at HOOT OWL PETE. AMBROSE jumps suddenly. He starts shaking, turns his head slowly toward HOOT OWL, who is staring at ANNE.

HOOT OWL: All right, don't just stand there, I ain't got all day.

ANNE: *(Fearfully.)* Ye-ye-yessir! *(She turns and goes out right, giving a fearful glance toward HOOT OWL as she exits.)*

BERT: *(Punching AMBROSE.)* Get up, Ambrose. Now's the time. Get up. Don't forget, you're Homer the Kid.

AMBROSE: *(Trembling.)* Yeah, I'm Homer the Kid. *(He rises, and his legs are like rubber as he starts pacing back and forth in front of HOOT OWL. As he passes BERT, he whispers.)* Like this, Bert? I mean, Gun Smoke?

BERT: Yeah - keep it up.

HOOT OWL turns around in his chair to stare at AMBROSE.

HOOT OWL: *(Growling.)* I don't like people walking around when I'm going to eat. *(AMBROSE continues to pace back and forth. HOOT OWL repeats himself, this time with more emphasis.)* I said I don't like people walkin' around when I'm gettin' ready to eat.

AMBROSE: Maybe I do. *(He continues to strut.)*

HOOT OWL: *(Rising, putting his hand on his gun.)* I said sit!

BERT: *(Standing right by AMBROSE.)* Don't let him talk to you like that, Homer the Kid. Don't forget, you're tough.

AMBROSE: *(His back is to HOOT OWL.)* Yeah, I'm tough.

BERT: You're fearless.

AMBROSE: Yeah, I'm fearless.

BERT: You're cold-blooded.

AMBROSE: Yeah, I'm - *(He turns, looks at HOOT OWL who draws his guns.)* goin' home. *(He starts left.)*

BERT: *(Grabbing him by the arm.)* Come back here, don't forget who you are.

AMBROSE: Okay, Gun Smoke. *(He starts pacing the floor again.)*

HOOT OWL: Sit down! *(AMBROSE doesn't seem to hear.)* Sit down. *(He cocks his gun and starts toward AMBROSE.)*

AMBROSE: *(Looking at HOOT OWL fearfully, backing away.)* Okay, okay. Just don't get so tough about it. *(And he sits.)*

HOOT OWL: *(Putting his gun back into his holster.)* Now that's more like it. *(And he sits.)*

BERT: Don't let him get by with this.

AMBROSE: By golly, I won't. *(To HOOT OWL.)* I was gettin' tired of walkin', anyway.

HOOT OWL: *(Again rising.)*. Shut up! *(He puts his hand on his gun, AMBROSE swallows hard.)*

BERT: *(Pointing at AMBROSE.)* Do you know who this is?

HOOT OWL: *(Growling.)* I ain't got no idea.

BERT: This . . . is Homer the Kid.

HOOT OWL: Now ain't that just too bad.

AMBROSE swallows hard again as HOOT OWL rises, walks toward him, and deliberately mashes his toe.

AMBROSE: *(Painfully.)* Ouch! *(Rising, looking up at HOOT OWL.)*
You stepped on my toe.

HOOT OWL: Now ain't that just too bad, too. *(AMBROSE raises his foot, holds his toe.)* So you're Homer the Kid. The most fearless. hombre north of the border.

While AMBROSE is standing on one foot, HOOT OWL gives him a push, sending him sprawling onto the floor. AMBROSE's feet go up into the air, then drop to the floor with a bang. He rises slowly, brushes himself off. He is shaking like a leaf as HOOT OWL stands there glaring at him.

BERT: Do something to him, Homer the Kid. I'm behind you.

AMBROSE: *(Fearfully.)* Behind me?! Get in front of me and I will.

BERT: *(To HOOT OWL.)* You might be interested to know that he's whipped more than one hombre with just one hand.

HOOT OWL: *(Sticking his chin in AMBROSE's face.)* Then why don't you fight me?

AMBROSE: *(Shaking.)* Y-you've g-g-got t-two.

HOOT OWL: Listen, kitty, I want you out of town by six o'clock tonight.

BERT: Suppose he doesn't leave?

HOOT OWL: Suppose you stay out of this.

AMBROSE: Yeah, suppose you do.

BERT: What happens if he doesn't leave?

HOOT OWL: Then someone'll find his bullet-riddled carcass layin' behind the nearest cactus. *(Sternly.)* I want you out by six o'clock.

AMBROSE: *(Terrified.)* Wh-wh-what time is it now?

HOOT OWL: *(Looks at his watch.)* Twenty-eight after four.

AMBROSE: I'll be gone by four-thirty. *(He starts center.)*

BERT: *(Grabbing his arm.)* You're not leaving, Homer.

AMBROSE: You heard what he said about you keeping your nose out of this?

BERT: Yeah.

AMBROSE: Then see that you do. I'm leavin' here while I'm still in one piece.

BERT: Oh no, you're not. Don't forget, you're Homer the Kid. The most feared hombre in these parts.

AMBROSE: *(Wildly.)* At a time like this, he thinks of that.

HOOT OWL: You heard what I said. At six I'm coming back, and if I see that nose of yours, I'll blow it off the face of the map. *(He turns and strolls out left, his spurs jangling.)*

AMBROSE: Right here's where you and me part company, Bert, 'cause I ain't gonna stand here and get shot at like a stuffed duck.

BERT: You're just as tough as they are.

AMBROSE: I am?

BERT: Of course. You're Homer the Kid, remember?

AMBROSE: Why, I'm the most fearless - toughest - most cold-blooded -now listen, Bert, are you tryin' to get me killed?

BERT: He won't get you unless it's your time to go.

AMBROSE: *(Starts left again.)* It is and I'm goin'. So long.

BERT: *(Pulling him back again.)* No, you're not. Think of those poor, defenseless girls. Their hair, their eyes—

AMBROSE: *(Gazing into space, dreamily.)* Their hair, their eyes - *(He beats his chest again.)* Those big blue eyes, those smiles.

BERT: The next thing to heaven.

AMBROSE: *(Back to earth.)* Yeah, but if he shoots me dead, think where I'll be then.

BERT: You've gotta be brave, fearless.

AMBROSE: Yeah - *(Beats chest again.)* brave and fearless.

BERT: Show 'em you've got a backbone.

AMBROSE: Yeah, I'll show 'em.

ANNE: *(Entering with the steak on a plate.)* Where's the man that ordered this raw steak?

AMBROSE: *(Raising his hand.)* Right here. *(He grabs it and starts chewing.)*

CURTAIN.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

SCENE: *The same.*

TIME: *A little over an hour later.*

AT RISE: *BERT is seated at a table, eating. AMBROSE is pacing nervously around the room. The two are now attired in Western garb with cowboy boots, handkerchief, guns and holsters. AMBROSE is wearing chaps and a ten-gallon hat. BERT is wearing dungarees.*

AMBROSE: *(Breaking the silence of a few moments, still pacing the floor.)* What time is it now, Bert?

BERT: *(Glancing at his watch, his mouth full of food.)* Ten minutes until six.

AMBROSE: *(Frantically.)* Ten minutes of six? *(Coming over to BERT.)* Only ten more minutes and he comes in here and cooks my goose. *(Glares at BERT disgustedly.)* How in the world can you sit here and feed your face at a time like this?

BERT: *(Taking another bite.)* Why don't you eat something, Ambrose? It'll make you feel better.

AMBROSE: Huh uh, not me. *(Paces the floor again.)* Anyway, I've just had nine finger nails and part of a thumb. *(Crosses to BERT.)* I'm clearin' out of here pronto, Bert. I ain't gonna stay 'round and let him fatten up his shootin' average on me.

BERT: *(Buttering some bread.)* Be sensible, Ambrose. If he shoots you, the sheriff will toss him right in jail.

AMBROSE: *(Leaning over the table.)* A lot of good that's going to do me then.

BERT: Therefore, he won't shoot you. Don't you know that?

AMBROSE: All I know is that I'm clearin' out of here while the clearin's good. *(He starts pacing the floor again.)*

BERT: Don't you have any backbone, Ambrose?

AMBROSE: Yeah, and I'm makin' durn sure I keep it, too.

BERT: Don't you have any red blood in your veins?

AMBROSE: I don't know what color my blood is, and I'm not gonna stand around to find out, either.

BERT: Think of the good you can do those poor, defenseless girls.

AMBROSE: Six feet under?

BERT: They're countin' on you, Ambrose. *(He rises.)*

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AMBROSE: I won't do much good shot in two. What time you got now, Bert?

BERT: (*Disgustedly.*) Ambrose, you've been asking that every minute on the minute for the past hour and a half. I think you're a coward.

AMBROSE: I think I'm getting out of here. I ain't gonna stand around and let any two-gun cowpuncher take his old trusty forty-four and write "Rest in Peace" on me one bullet at a time.

BERT: But don't you see? You're Homer the Kid.

AMBROSE: You'd better tell him that.

BERT: If he gets his bluff in on you, you'll be in a fine mess.

AMBROSE: It would be worse if it was a bullet. What time is it now?

BERT: (*Ignoring him.*) They think you're the most fearless, hard-riding, hard-shooting; hard-driving hombre in these here parts.

AMBROSE: (*Still walking around the room; his hands behind his back.*) What they don't know won't hurt 'em.

BERT: And you'd just walk out.

AMBROSE: That would certainly beat riding a horse. (*Coming over to BERT.*) What was the big idea telling them I was a great rider?

BERT: Well, Homer the Kid is a great rider, and as long as you're Homer the Kid, you might as well act the part.

AMBROSE: And then they got me out on a horse. I was never so humiliated in my whole life.

BERT: I thought it was wonderful the way you turned around in the saddle.

AMBROSE: (*Pacing the room again.*) Well, believe me, it was an accident.

BERT: And the way you stood on one foot.

AMBROSE: Who wouldn't? With the darned horse taking the corner on two feet. I'm never gettin' on one of those beasts again. I'm so sore, I can hardly walk.

BERT: Then why don't you sit down?

AMBROSE: (*Grabbing the seat of his pants.*) Are you kiddin'? (*He starts center.*)

BERT: Please think it over, Ambrose.

AMBROSE: Every time I do, I convince myself it's a waste of time.

BERT: We've been friends for years. You don't want anything to come between us, do you?

AMBROSE: (*Stopping at the door, center.*) Like six feet of Mother Earth? I'm headin' for my belongings, right now.

BERT: But Ambrose, I don't believe he has the nerve.

AMBROSE: Neither do I. (*TILLIE enters center.*)

TILLIE: Hi, Homer.

AMBROSE: (*Jumps, throws up hands, and freezes, his back to TILLIE.*) Don't shoot. (*Turning.*) Oh, hi Tillie.

TILLIE: You seen Jake?

BERT: Not lately.

TILLIE: (*Picking up dishes and silverware.*) Probably outside under a shade tree doin' a day's work for a day's pay. (*AMBROSE and BERT head center.*) If you see him, call me.

AMBROSE: If we call you, sister, it's gonna be long distance. (*They exit center.*)

TILLIE continues to gather up dishes as JAKE sticks head in left. He tiptoes center. She turns as he reaches door.

TILLIE: (*Sharply.*) Jake. (*He freezes.*) I been lookin' fer you. Come and help with these dishes.

JAKE: (*Crossing.*) Woman, all you ever think about is work.

TILLIE: What would a crusty of a sidewindin' jakeleg prospector like you know about women? (*She picks up a clean plate, looks in it, starts fixing her hair with her free hand.*) Offhand, would you say I'm starting to look like a daughter of the old west?

JAKE: Offhand, I'd say you look more like one o' those sons o' the pioneers.

TILLIE: (*Raises a plate as if to smash it over his head, thinks better of it.*) What's the use? (*Turns away.*) I'm just plain wastin' my time with you. Probably the only time you ever happened onto romance was when you were lookin' in the dictionary.

JAKE: And that jus' shows what you know about it. I been in and out o' Romance more times than you could count.

TILLIE: (*Astonished.*) You mean romance, as in matrimony?

JAKE: I mean Romance, as in Texas. Down th' road a ways from San Antone.

TILLIE: I shoulda known. (*Shakes head.*) For a moment or two there when we first met, I thought maybe I was cut out fer you, Jake.

JAKE: At what factory?

TILLIE: (*Arms akimbo.*) And what do you mean by a crack like that?

JAKE: All I know is you aren't a woman - you're some kind of work machine.

MRS. SPROOL enters left, leading her little daughter, LENA.

MRS. SPROOL: Pardon me.

JAKE: Howdy, Mrs. Spool. What can we do fer ya?

MRS. SPROOL: I'm here on behalf of the Ladies Society. You might call us the welcome wagon of Dead Man's Gulch. And believe me, any wagon into this place is welcome.

TILLIE: The women you want to see are in there. (*She points right.*)

MRS. SPROOL: Thank you. Come along, Lena. Lena! (*She jerks her by her hand and pulls her right.*) If you don't start minding, I'm going to sic Homer the Kid on you. (*They exit.*)

TILLIE: (*Coolly.*) Pick up those dishes and carry them into the kitchen.

JAKE: That's what I mean. You're a machine. Just work, work, work.

TILLIE: How do you expect to get ahead in this world if you don't work?

JAKE: (*Grumbling.*) I've already got a head. Don't need two.

TILLIE: (*Starting right, hands full.*) You don't even need the one you've got. I doubt if you ever use it. (*They exit right.*)

HOOT OWL PETE comes in left. He enters, stops, looks around, then takes both guns from his holster to make sure they're loaded. He looks in them, blows down the barrel of each, then makes sure they're shiny. He hauls a knife from his pocket and starts cutting a notch on the barrel of the guns. STINKWEED comes in left.

STINKWEED: Who you waitin' for?

HOOT OWL: (*Whirls around, points the guns, then lowers them as he sees STINKWEED.*) Oh, it's you.

STINKWEED: Who you layin' for, Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: (*Continuing the carving.*) Homer the Kid.

STINKWEED: Gosh.

HOOT OWL: (*Still working.*) I gave him until six to get out of town.

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STINKWEED: And what you gonna do if he don't get, Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: He'll get all right, Stinkweed. He'll get filled with lead from both of these barrels. I'll blow him out of town a piece at a time.

STINKWEED: I'd sure hate for you to be mad at me, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: You just always do as I say and nothin's gonna happen to you, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: You gonna plug him right now, Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: I gave him until six to get out, and if he ain't gone, I'm gonna start some fireworks.

STINKWEED: It's about time now, ain't it, Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: Yeah. *(Pulls back the hammers on his guns.)* I reckon it is.

The door opens left. HOOT OWL draws both guns and rears back as the SHERIFF enters.

HOOT OWL: *(Lowering his guns.)* Oh, Sheriff!

SHERIFF: Looks like you were expecting maybe Homer the Kid, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: *(Putting the guns in his holsters.)* Yeah, maybe I was.

SHERIFF: I heard about that.

HOOT OWL: Is that so?

SHERIFF: Yeah. *(Pause.)* I'm not gonna let you do it, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: You're not gonna— *(He stops.)* What's the big idea, Sheriff? I thought you was a wantin' Homer the Kid out o' the way.

SHERIFF: I do, Hoot Owl, I do. But don't you see? We got nothing on this Homer the Kid . . . as far as we know, he's the most honest, upstanding man in the whole wide world.

HOOT OWL: *(Squinting his eyes.)* I'd like to shoot his filthy head right off of that upstanding neck.

SHERIFF: *(Sitting calmly.)* We'll get him, Hoot Owl. But we want to be sensible. We want to think things out. If you go and shoot this Kid, everyone in town's gonna want your neck and they'll demand to see you hung. If I don't do it, they might do it themselves.

HOOT OWL: Yeah, I hadn't thought about that.

SHERIFF: So all we've got to do is go out and get some evidence on Homer the Kid. *(Playing with the salt shaker.)* Enough to hang him.

STINKWEED: Hang him?

SHERIFF: Yeah, hang him. You know that money we put on the stage and then, uh, had removed?

HOOT OWL: Yeah -

SHERIFF: By accident, we're going to find that on Homer the Kid. And since the driver was shot, we'll have enough right there to make him the life of the party. *(Pauses for emphasis.)* A neck-tie party.

HOOT OWL: Sounds great, Sheriff.

STINKWEED: Sheriff, I copied all those names off the tombstones and stuffed 'em in the ballot box.

SHERIFF: Good work, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: *(Importantly.)* Yeah, I voted everyone for Miss Beth.

SHERIFF: *(Astonished.)* Miss Beth? *(Grabbing him by the throat and shaking him.)* Why you yellow-livered polecat, you – you -

STINKWEED: *(Sputtering.)* But I th-thought sh-she was your g-g-girl. I - I - thought you wanted her to be the new pro - bate j-judge.

SHERIFF: Of course not, you fool. *(He quits shaking him. STINKWEED backs off.)* I just nominated her to get on her good side. I wanna marry her, not put her in office. If Beth Malone gets in office, she'll have us cleaned out so fast we won't know what's happening. We'd better get out there pronto, Stinkweed, and see how things is comin'.

STINKWEED: *(Terribly hurt.)* Gosh, I'm awful sorry, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: Sorry, he says. We're on the brink of disaster and he says he's sorry. We gotta *(He starts for the door, left, followed by STINKWEED.)* get out there fast, 'cause the polls close in a few minutes and we ain't aimin' on gettin' licked. *(Stopping at the door, as if just remembering.)* And Hoot Owl, you be sure and apologize to Homer the Kid.

HOOT OWL: *(Astonished.)* Apologize? *(Angrily.)* Why, I . . .

SHERIFF: *(Breaking in sharply.)* You'll apologize, Hoot Owl. We wanna make him think we're all square. I'll be back in a minute with that money to put on Homer the Kid. Let's go, Stinkweed. *(They exit left.)* If we're ahead, I think I'll close the polls right here and now. *(Exit.)*

HOOT OWL stands watching after them as AMBROSE and BERT enter, center. AMBROSE, entering with his back to the audience, is carrying his suitcase. He doesn't see HOOT OWL.

AMBROSE: *(With finality.)* It's settled, all settled. And I don't intend to discuss it no farther.

BERT: But if - *(He stops dead in his tracks when he sees HOOT OWL.)* If—

AMBROSE: *(Looking at BERT fearfully.)* What's wrong, Bert, what's - *(He starts turning slowly.)* what's wrong? I - I - *(He spots HOOT OWL. His suitcase bangs on the floor.)*

HOOT OWL: *(Sporting his best manners.)* Evenin', gents.

AMBROSE: *(Sputtering.)* Now - now - *(Terrified.)* Let's talk - *(Gulps.)* talk this thing over, Hoot Owl. *(Shoving a chair in his direction.)* Take a chair, Hoot - Hoot Owl. Here, take another. Shall I take your hat, your gloves, your guns - yeah, your guns. *(He extends his hand toward HOOT OWL, wiggling his fingers anxiously.)*

HOOT OWL: I got something I want to talk to you about. You know, when I was here this afternoon, I told you to be -

AMBROSE: *(Terrified, starting to shake, breaking in.)* Just keep yourself all calm there, Hoot Owl. Hot day - mighty hot day. *(Edging toward the door, right.)* I'll get you some water. Good, cold, calm, cool, clear water.

HOOT OWL: I don't reckon I'm very thirsty right now, Homer.

AMBROSE: You will be by the time I get back.

HOOT OWL: Come on over, I wanna discuss something with you.

AMBROSE: *(Gulping.)* You - you want to discuss something with me?

BERT: *(In a low voice.)* Do as he says.

AMBROSE: Whose side you on anyway? *(He edges to a chair, sits cautiously.)* Sure you don't want me to take your guns, Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: Speakin' of guns, you know, this afternoon—

AMBROSE: *(Breaking in, gazing at the windows.)* Looks like it might rain.

HOOT OWL: Ain't a cloud in the sky. Like I says -

AMBROSE: *(Breaking in, swallowing hard.)* Looks like it might rain next week.

HOOT OWL: I just started to say -

AMBROSE: (*Again breaking in.*) Maybe the week after that. If it don't rain sometime, it's shore gonna be a long dry spell.

HOOT OWL: I been thinkin' -

AMBROSE: (*Rising.*) Speakin' of dry spells, I been dry for quite a spell, needin' a drink of water. (*Starts edging right again.*) Yep, been dry for quite a spell, (*He's now tiptoeing, his shoulders hunched as if he's expecting to be "filled with lead" at any moment, and he's trying to make himself as small as possible.*)

HOOT OWL: (*Turning to BERT.*) I've been thinkin', Gun Smoke, about what I said awhile ago to Homer the Kid. (*AMBROSE has just reached the door.*) I'm calculatin' on takin' the whole thing back.

AMBROSE: (*Stops dead in his tracks, after lifting his foot to take the final step.*) Huh?

HOOT OWL: (*He extends his hand.*) I want to apologize - reckon I sorta lost my head.

AMBROSE: (*Rocking on his heels, wiping perspiration from his face.*) Yeah - I thought I was gonna lose mine, too.

HOOT OWL: And I'm sorry about the whole thing.

AMBROSE: (*Strutting now, comes swaying to HOOT OWL importantly.*) I accept your apology, Hoot Owl. It was quite all right.

He takes HOOT OWL's hand. HOOT OWL squeezes it so tightly that AMBROSE starts to go down slowly, his knees wide apart. Then they come together with a bang, AMBROSE's mouth drops open, and when HOOT OWL twists his hand, he pitches over onto the floor. HOOT OWL turns and strides out left, making it in about four steps.

BERT: (*Bending over, excitedly.*) Well, you've got his bluff.

AMBROSE: (*Sitting up.*) Yeah, and he's got my hand, too.

BERT: He's scared of you, Ambrose.

AMBROSE: (*Looking up.*) You think so?

BERT: I know so. Why else would he apologize?

AMBROSE: (*Wide-eyed.*) Hey, that's right. (*He picks himself up.*) I guess he is. (*Strutting around the room.*) Yeah, I guess he is scared of me. Homer the Kid! They ain't got the nerve to face me, Bert.

BERT: We've got 'em where we want 'em.

AMBROSE: The more I think about it, the better I like it.

BERT: You gonna stay now, Ambrose?

AMBROSE: With all the hombres runnin' from me and a girl like Nancy, he asks if I'm gonna stay. *(With emphasis.)* I was stayin' all along. *(He exits center, followed by BERT.)*

The SHERIFF enters left, looks around, then beckons for HOOT OWL to enter. He does.

HOOT OWL: They gone?

SHERIFF: Don't see nobody in here, do you? We've gotta slip this money *(He takes an envelope from his pocket.)* on him or his belongings.

HOOT OWL: You settle the election okay, Sheriff?

SHERIFF: We was ahead by one vote and I just closed the polls. Election's all over and boy, was that a close shave. *(Spots the suitcase.)* Wonder whose suitcase that is?

HOOT OWL: *(Looking in it.)* It's his. Those are the clothes he wore when he got here.

SHERIFF: I'll put it in here.

The SHERIFF takes a quick glance about the room, then starts to put it outside of center door as MRS. SPROOL's voice is heard off right.

MRS. SPROOL: *(Off stage.)* So on behalf of the women's society of Dead Man's Gulch, we want to wish you women all the success in the world and we hope you'll be very satisfied here. Don't we, Lena?

HOOT OWL: *(On the spoken cue of "want to wish you.")* Hurry up, here comes someone.

LENA: *(Upon completion of her mother's speech.)* Yes, Mother.

The SHERIFF is just closing the suitcase as MRS. SPROOL enters with LENA. They are followed by ANNE, NANCY, and BETH.

NANCY: Thank you.

MRS. SPROOL: (*Bubbling over as usual.*) Oh, hello, Sheriff. I want you to know that everyone in the women's society of Dead Man's Gulch voted in the election.

SHERIFF: Glad to hear that, Mrs. Sprool. (*Turning to BETH.*) I came over here about the election, Beth. I got some bad news for you.

BETH: You mean I was elected judge?

SHERIFF: On the contrary, gal. Timothy Finch beat you by one vote - only one vote.

HOOT OWL: You ran him a good race, ma'am. A close race.

SHERIFF: (*Wiping his brow.*) Too close.

ANNE: What?

SHERIFF: (*Catching himself.*) I . . . I mean it's time, uh, to close the polls.

NANCY: But we're citizens of Dead Man's Gulch. Why can't we vote? We'd swing you in, Aunt Beth. Three more votes would be a landslide -

SHERIFF: Sorry, gals. But you gotta live . . . in this . . . here county thirty days.

BETH: Suits me fine the way it is. Wasn't hankerin' to be judge no how. You know that, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: By the way, Beth gal. I'm hot on the trail of Jim's murderer. We got reason to believe it's the same coyote that robbed the stage and killed the driver - but we're closin' in on him.

MRS. SPROOL: And I know you'll get him, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: Well, I don't like to brag, ma'am, but I ain't let no one get away from me yet.

BETH: Wal, gals, I reckon I better be ambling along.

SHERIFF: My arm, Beth?

BETH: I ain't so old but what I can stand up alone. (*She starts left; turns at the door.*) I'll be back tonight, gals.

MRS. SPROOL: I'm headin' thataway, too. Come along, Lena.

MRS. SPROOL jerks LENA practically off her feet and goes out left, following BETH, HOOT OWL PETE, and the SHERIFF.

ANNE: Well, I guess that leaves just us, doesn't it, Nancy?

NANCY: Yes. You know, it gives a person a creepy feeling out in the desert with night coming on,

ANNE: (*Shuddering.*) Yeah. I wish we were back in Kansas City.

NANCY: But we're not. We're in the middle of the desert with a lot of work to be done. Come along. (*They go out right.*)

AMBROSE and BERT come back in center.

AMBROSE: (*Goes straight to the suitcase.*) Yeah, here it is. Right here.

LENA enters left, her hands behind her back. AMBROSE picks up the suitcase.

LENA: You goin' somewhere, mister?

AMBROSE: Just goin' back to my room, lil gal.

LENA: Are you Mister Homer the Kid?

AMBROSE: Yeap, that's me, lil heifer. The roughest, toughest cowpoke what ever straddled a saddle.

LENA: (*Her eyes gleaming.*) Gosh . . . and you're really Homer the Kid.

AMBROSE: You disappointed?

LENA: I think you look a little peaked.

AMBROSE: Peaked?

LENA: Homer the Kid never looks peaked.

BERT: He had a bad night, got up on the wrong side of the ground this morning.

AMBROSE: (*In that rough, tough voice of his.*) Yeah, I got up on the wrong side of the ground. GRRR!

LENA: (*Her eyes like saucers.*) Gosh!

BERT: What are you doin' here, little girl?

LENA: I runned away from my mother to see Homer the Kid.

AMBROSE: Shame on you.

LENA: She's used to that, though. I run away all the time.

AMBROSE: You're a juvenile delinquent, lil heifer, that's what you are.

LENA: If you're really Homer the Kid, you've bull-dogged steers, ain't you?

AMBROSE: *(Not wanting to get in too deeply.)* Have I? *(He looks at BERT who nods his head in the affirmative.)* I - I -mean - I HAVE! Why, I had the best little bulldog what ever . . . *(BERT shakes his head at him negatively. AMBROSE also shakes his.)* Fox terrier? *(BERT shakes his head again. AMBROSE then shakes his.)* Poland China?

BERT: *(BERT makes a wry face, turns and starts center, disgustedly.)* For cryin' out loud!

AMBROSE: Wait a minute, Bert. Gun Smoke, wait - *(He stops when BERT exits.)*

LENA: You've shot a lot of mean men, ain't ya, mister?

AMBROSE: *(Enjoying himself.)* I should say yes!

LENA: And if you have, you got notches in your gun, ain't ya?

AMBROSE: *(Rearing back.)* Heifer, I killed so many hombres that I even got notches in my notches. *(He struts around like a wrestler.)*

LENA: Gosh! Can I have your autograph, Mister Homer, can I?

AMBROSE: Autograph?

LENA: Yeah, just sign this. *(She thrusts a piece of paper toward him, along with a pencil.)*

AMBROSE: Well, gosh, yes. Can't refuse my fans. *(He signs it.)*

LENA: Now would you tell me some of your experiences?

AMBROSE: *(Stares at her a moment, surprised.)* Experiences? Experiences! Why yes, gal. *(He sits at the table center, facing the audience.)* Wal, gal, I'll start by tellin' you one of my most hair-raising experiences. *(LENA sits at the table, stares up at him with wide-eyed approval.)* It was in a little town this side of Amorilla. There was three rowdies who'd been tearin' up the joint, see. They was droppin' men all over the place. They was makin' 'em bite the sawdust to the right, sawdust to left. Well, see, I looked up from the table in time to see these three hombres startin' toward me. So I rises, see . . .

He rises, fists clinched, about to swing into action. The SHERIFF, HOOT OWL PETE, and STINKWEED enter with guns drawn.

AMBROSE: And prepares to do battle. Three of them against me, myself, and I. A man apiece. They start at me, their steel gun barrels a shinin' in the sunlight. But I didn't flinch, see. Not one inch did I flinch. I just stood there like this, see. (*His hands on his hips.*) My muscles was vibratin' with anticipation. My eyes was sharp as razors, just glarin at those hombres as they started to surround me. (*The three start to surround AMBROSE, one right, one center, and the other left. Neither AMBROSE nor LENA have seen them.*) But, I just stands there waitin', see. Still calm like a cucumber. Then finally I says, in a sneery kind of voice, (*Talking through his nose.*) "What do you think you're goin' to do?" And one of them said—

SHERIFF: I'm goin' to arrest you, Homer the Kid.

AMBROSE: And then I says right back to him, "Oh, you— (*He stops, freezes in his tracks, his eyes become saucers. He slowly turns around, tries to talk, but all he can do is wheeze.*) Sh-sh-heriff.

SHERIFF: And my two deputies. (*They step forward, stick out their badges toward AMBROSE.*) I'm here to arrest you. (*AMBROSE tries to talk. He opens his mouth two or three times, but nothing comes out. He points fearfully at the guns.*) We have reason to belive you're the one that held up the stage, shot the driver, and maybe Mr. Mahoney. Look him over, boys. (*HOOT OWL starts frisking him.*) Look through that suitcase, Stinkweed.

AMBROSE: You're makin' a terrible mistake, Sheriff.

MRS. SPROOL: (*Entering left.*) Lena! Oh, my darling daughter, Lena. (*She runs up to her, hugs her.*) Are you all right?

SHERIFF: Don't get too close to this man here, Mrs. Sprool. He's a dangerous critter.

STINKWEED: Here it is, Sheriff. (*And he hauls out the envelope.*)

SHERIFF: Huh? What? (*He grabs it, looks through the contents.*) Here it is, Homer the Kid, (*Waving the bills at him.*) the whole lump sum.

AMBROSE: (*Pointing, still wheezing.*) In-in-in-in my s-s-suitcase?

SHERIFF: In your suitcase. I'm takin' you in.

MRS. SPROOL: Oh my goodness.

AMBROSE: But that was planted in my suitcase, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: You're the only thing that's gonna be planted around here, Homer the Kid. We've enough evidence to hang you for seven straight mornings.

AMBROSE: (*Swallowing hard, terrified, trying to talk.*) H-h-h-h-hang (*Swallows hard again.*) me?

SHERIFF: (*Dragging him toward left.*) Yeah. (*Growling.*) Tomorrow morning at sunrise.

AMBROSE: (*His hand on his throat.*) Now . . . now . . . wait a minute, Sheriff, let us not lose our heads over this.

MRS. SPROOL and LENA stand by in wide-eyed astonishment as the men drag a very pale AMBROSE out the door, left.

CURTAIN.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

AT RISE: *It is later the same night. NANCY is seated at a table, her chin in her hands. ANNE and BETH are walking around the room. NANCY finally looks up, breaks the silence.*

NANCY: You mean they're really going to hang him, Aunt Beth?

BETH: That's right. Sheriff Crandel says there's enough evidence to hang him without a trial.

NANCY: How ghastly.

ANNE: You don't think he did it, do you?

BETH: No, of course not. But I don't know what we can do about it. We can't prove anything.

ANNE: And he was such a likeable fellow.

NANCY: We can't just stand by and let them string him up.

MRS. SPROOL enters left.

MRS. SPROOL: (*Gushing over as she enters.*) My, isn't it all just too exciting? I never knew anything like this could happen to me and Lena. They want us for witnesses. Can you imagine that? Witnesses. Because we saw this Stinkweed person pull the money out of the suitcase. And I'm thrilled—just simply thrilled!

ANNE: Do you . . . do you think they'll really . . . hang him?

MRS. SPROOL: Oh my goodness, yes. The townspeople are roaring for blood. Simply roaring for blood.

NANCY: (*Making a wry face.*) How horrible!

MRS. SPROOL: Yes, isn't it? But so exciting. (*Now in a low, fast voice.*) And let me tell you something else. The sheriff knew all the time that the money was in the suitcase. He knew it all the time. (*Points.*) That it was right there in THAT suitcase.

BETH: (*With interest.*) He did?

MRS. SPROOL: He did. Because when I came in here, he was bending over the suitcase and that Hoot Owl fellow was looking around . . . Looking all around. And he was surprised when he saw me and the sheriff acted surprised, too. They both acted surprised. But they certainly got the goods on him. And it's just all too exciting. I think it's all exciting.

BETH: You didn't mention anything to the sheriff about . . . about what you saw? About the sheriff bending over the suitcase.

MRS. SPROOL: You mean I should have? Would it make a difference in the trial? Withholding evidence and all. Would it make a difference?

BETH: On the contrary, Mrs. Sprool, I (*Leaning over and whispering.*) wouldn't tell a soul.

MRS. SPROOL: Then I won't. I won't tell a soul.

BETH: I'm sure the sheriff would appreciate that. So if I were you, I'd keep it to myself.

MRS. SPROOL: I'll keep it to myself. Well, I'll run along, I'll run along home now - they may want me at any time. I'm a witness, you know. Their number one witness. Well, I'll run along. (*She exits.*)

NANCY: Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Aunt Beth?

BETH: (*Thoughtfully.*) He was leaning over the suitcase - (*She walks around.*)

ANNE: You think the sheriff really is—really might be—I'll bet that's it.

BETH: But what can we do? I'm sure that's it. I'm certain that he put that money in Homer's suitcase—and we can't do anything about it.

ANNE: If only Homer the Kid were here. (*AMBROSE sticks his head in the door, center.*)

AMBROSE: Is the coast clear?

ANNE: (*Happily.*) Homer!

NANCY: There's no one here, c'mon in.

BETH: How'd you get here?

AMBROSE: (*Entering.*) Climbed through a window.

BETH: I mean how'd you get out?

AMBROSE: Bert, Gun Smoke came over and when he caught that Stinkweed fellow off guard, he turned me loose. Ain't he 'round here somewhere?

NANCY: We haven't seen him.

AMBROSE: (*Worriedly.*) Then that means they must have caught him and they'll be over here lookin' for me in a minute or two.

ANNE: You didn't shoot Uncle Jim, did you, Homer?

AMBROSE: I've never seen this place before in my life till we breezed in here this afternoon.

BETH: Mrs. Spool was in here a moment ago and she said she saw the sheriff bending over your suitcase and Hoot Owl Pete was looking around - keeping guard, I imagine.

AMBROSE: Then maybe it was the sheriff that planted that money in there. That's bound to be it. Why, that dirty—

BETH: We've got to stall them off somehow.

AMBROSE starts pacing the floor, his hands behind him.

BETH: Your Uncle Jim didn't care much for Sheriff Crandel. Said there was something about him that didn't add up.

AMBROSE: Yeah, and I agree. The minute he finds out I'm gone, he'll be over here like a bat out of—

ANNE: (*Breaking in, peering out the window, terrified.*) Here he comes now.

AMBROSE: (*Looking over his shoulder as he starts right.*) Huh?

ANNE: (*Terrified.*) The sheriff. Hide, Homer, hide!

Before she can get her words out, AMBROSE, looking back over his shoulder, bangs into a table, scoots across the top of it, and lands kerplunk on the floor, his hat bounding away in the melee. All are terified and start running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

NANCY: Quick, under the table.

AMBROSE crawls on his hands and knees to the table and they have just put the cloth back on it as the SHERIFF strides in left.

SHERIFF: Thought I'd come over and see if Homer the Kid was around here somewheres. I'm lookin' for him and shootin' on sight. *(AMBROSE's teeth start chattering. He wipes the perspiration from his brow using the end of the tablecloth.)* We got his pal locked up over in the hoosegow now, and by golly he's stayin' thar, too, 'cause the minute we get this Homer the Kid, we're gonna hang 'em both, pronto. You seen him around, Beth gal?

NANCY has been sidling over toward the hat, and she slowly picks it up, and stands with it behind her back, making sure the SHERIFF doesn't see it. ANNE looks as if she'll collapse at any moment.

BETH: Why, Sheriff, don't you think I'd have told you? Especially you?

SHERIFF: Yeah, I reckon maybe you would. *(He strolls to the table, stands beside it.)* I've got somethin' I been aimin' on askin' you, Beth gal, and just as soon as I get rid of these two coyotes, I reckon I'll ask it. Yep, soon as I catch him. And when I do, I'm gonna hang him to the old cottonwood tree.

AMBROSE starts shaking. He gulps and is completely terrified as he starts pulling the edge of the tablecloth, scooting it along on the table as he wipes his brow. The girls are wide-eyed as they watch it scoot back and forth.

SHERIFF: And if I see him, I may just shoot first and ask questions later.

BETH: (*Pushing the SHERIFF left.*) Why don't you go get a rope, Sheriff? You, you - (*Looking back over her shoulder at AMBROSE.*) can't afford to waste time with a dangerous criminal like him on the loose.

SHERIFF: That's right. And don't you worry, Beth gal, I'll have him rounded up in little or no time. (*He goes out left. They all sigh with relief.*)

ANNE: Homer, you've got to get out of here.

NANCY: You've got to do something.

AMBROSE: And I think I know what.

ANNE: (*Her face lighting up.*) You do?

AMBROSE: I can't do nothin' till those guys quit chasin' me, and the only way they're gonna quit chasin' me is for someone to change their minds. Someone like you, Beth.

BETH: Me?

AMBROSE: Yeah, he'd do anything for you. Especially if you told him you'd marry him.

BETH: (*Exploding.*) Marry him?

AMBROSE: Well, it's plain to see that the guy's nuts about you.

BETH: Me marry that low-down two-bit rattlesnake of—

AMBROSE: (*Breaking in.*) But don't you see? You don't really marry him. You just get engaged, he calls his dogs off of me, I track him down, and poof, that's all there is to it.

BETH: Wal, that might be okay. But I'd shore as thunder hate to be caught married to that polecat.

AMBROSE: Don't worry. I'll see that that never happens.

BETH: You'd just better make durn sure it never happens. That's all I've got to say.

ANNE: The whole thing sounds all right to me.

AMBROSE: Don't forget you get him not to chase me and I take over from there. I'll go up to my room and figure this thing out. (*He exits center.*)

NANCY: I don't like it, Aunt Beth.

BETH: I shore don't, either. But don't forget, Homer the Kid is the greatest tracker-downer of outlaws in these here parts, so I reckon it'll be all right.

ANNE: And he's been up against some mighty tough men, too. Homer knows what he's doing.

NANCY: (*Peering out the window, left.*) Here he comes. Come along, Anne. I don't think our presence would be much appreciated. (*They exit right.*)

SHERIFF: (*As he enters, a piece of rope dangling from his hand.*) He been here since I left?

BETH: Oh, Sheriff. (*She strolls to him, ecstatically.*) Sheriff boy, won't you sit down? (*She gazes at him ecstatically.*)

SHERIFF: (*Looking at her, his eyes like saucers, panting.*) Yeah. (*His legs start to buckle.*)

BETH: (*Putting her hand on his shoulder.*) I meant in a chair.

SHERIFF: (*Panting.*) Yeah, in a chair. (*He staggers to a chair.*)

BETH: Now, are you all comfy?

SHERIFF: Yeah, all comfy.

BETH: (*Sitting beside him.*) Sheriff Crandel, is it all right if I call you Crandy?

SHERIFF: (*Hauling out a big real handkerchief.*) Yeah, Crandy.

BETH: You remember you said you had something to ask me?

SHERIFF: Yeah. (*Dazedly.*) Something to ask.

BETH: (*Rubbing the back of his neck.*) Well, don't you have something to say?

SHERIFF: Well, I - (*Holding the handkerchief at his forehead.*) I - I - I - (*He looks at her.*) Boy, it's hot.

BETH: (*Leaning toward him.*) Were you going to say . . . that you thought I was the one for you? (*The SHERIFF grins, nods his head.*) And that you thought you were the one for me? (*And he nods again.*) Then let's just skip all that and get ourselves hitched.

SHERIFF: (*Wolfishly, as BETH sits up alarmed.*) You mean that, Beth gal? (*He jumps up, as does BETH. She manages to get the table between them.*) Beth, you've made me the happiest man in the world. (*He starts around the table after her. BETH moves into high gear.*) What's the matter, Beth, honey? Ain't ya gonna give me an engagement kiss?

BETH: (*Stopping as he stops.*) Whattya mean? What kind of gal do you think I am? You'll wait until *after* we're married, and you'll wait patiently.

SHERIFF: (*A hurt look.*) I'm sorry, Beth honey.

BETH: There's one other thing. One little thing—

SHERIFF: *(Stands across the table from her, holding her hands, gazing fondly at her.)* Yes?

BETH: *(Barking.)* Will you please get that calf-eyed look wiped off your face?

SHERIFF: *(Not changing his expression.)* Anything you say, love bird—

BETH: Crandy, since you're going to marry me, and since I'm going to marry you, and since Homer the Kid is so mean, I want you to promise me that you won't look for him anymore.

SHERIFF: But, Beth gal, I can't -

BETH: *(Breaking in, turning her back.)* Then I won't marry you.

SHERIFF: For you I'd do it, Beth. Just for you.

BETH: You'll forget all about him - not even think of him anymore?

SHERIFF: For you I . . . guess . . . I'd do it. In fact, I'll go out and tell them right now that Homer the Kid has just been acquitted. *(Exits left.)*

BETH drops into a chair as NANCY and ANNE enter.

ANNE: How'd you make out?

BETH: *(Wiping her brow.)* Too good, I'm afraid.

AMBROSE: *(Entering.)* What happened?

BETH: He accepted, said he wouldn't chase you any more. The shootin's over.

AMBROSE: *(Sitting.)* Whew! Was that a close one.

BETH: You ain't kiddin', brother. And don't forget. I ain't gonna marry that big galoot. *(She rises, starts right.)* And after an ordeal like that I . . . feel like I could eat something.

NANCY: We'll fix you something in a jiffy, Aunt Beth. *(BETH, ANNE and NANCY exit right.)*

AMBROSE continues to sit, staring at the audience. He yawns, a pleased expression on his face. HOOT OWL PETE, guns drawn, enters left, and tiptoes toward AMBROSE.

HOOT OWL: *(Growling.)* Reach and keep.reachin'!

AMBROSE: *(Goes straight up in the air.)* Now - now - wait a minute, Hoot Owl Pete. Didn't you see - see - see the sheriff?

HOOT OWL: Yeah - and that idea of his not shootin' you is his business, not mine. I'm still aimin' for you – and so are my guns.

AMBROSE: (*Trembling.*) You - you - c-c-can't sh-sh-hoot me.

HOOT OWL: Oh, I can't? Now ain't that too bad?

AMBROSE: Not in the back.

HOOT OWL: It'll save you the trouble of turnin' around. When I count to five, I'm gonna shoot. One - two - (*AMBROSE's legs are shaking like leaves.*) three –three (*Thoughtfully.*) What comes after three?

AMBROSE: (*Trembling.*) F-f-f-f-four.

HOOT OWL: Four - four - what comes next?

AMBROSE: Hoo-Hoot Owl, you knew the sheriff was gonna marry Miss Beth, didn't you?

HOOT OWL: Yeah – quit stallin'. What comes after four?

AMBROSE: Well, why don't you just have a – a double wedding?

HOOT OWL: (*Growingl.*) Whaddya mean?

AMBROSE:. That Miss Nancy Martin is a right nice lookin' gal.

HOOT OWL: (*Lowering his guns with rapture.*) Yeah, what a heifer!

AMBROSE: I have an idea that she might go for you.

HOOT OWL: (*Coming to him, all business.*) You think so?

AMBROSE: Yeah - and if you just step outside, I'll - I'll arrange the whole thing.

HOOT OWL: How can I trust you?

AMBROSE: Well, you've just got to, that's all.

HOOT OWL: Don't try no tricks, 'cause I'll be a-waitin' outside with both triggers cocked.

AMBROSE: (*Pushing him out left.*) Don't you worry, podner. I think Miss Nancy goes for you in a big way. (*He pushes HOOT OWL out left, turns and practically runs right, rubs his hands together and stops at the door, calls.*) Nancy! (*Whistles.*) Hey, Nancy!

NANCY: (*Entering.*) You call me?

AMBROSE: (*Talking in gulps.*) Yeah, listen, that Hoot Owl Pete just stuck his beak in here and had his old rusty gun barrels poked up against my spine.

NANCY: But I thought the sheriff—

AMBROSE: (*Breaking in.*) That didn't tread no water with Hoot Owl. And he was about to shoot me down, so I told him - I told him—

NANCY: (*Astonished.*) Homer, you didn't tell him that I - that I -

AMBROSE: I reckon I did. (*Hanging his head.*) But I had to . . . I get sorta cross-eyed lookin' at two gunbarrels stickin' under by nose at the same time.

NANCY: (*Arms akimbo, astonished.*) Homer, how could you?

AMBROSE: Well, gee whiz, Nancy. As long as Beth promised, you might as well, too. And heck, you won't really get married. And heck -

NANCY: (*Breaking in.*) Well, all right. But you'd just better make certain that it doesn't happen. That it doesn't even get close to happening.

AMBROSE: (*Pushing her right.*) Now, you don't have a thing to worry about, Nancy. I'll take care of the whole thing. Honest, I'll take care of it all.

NANCY: (*As he pushes her out right.*) You just make sure that you do. (*Exits.*)

He turns, crosses left, and admits HOOT OWL PETE.

HOOT OWL: What did she say, pal?

AMBROSE: It's all settled.

HOOT OWL: (*Excited.*) You mean she's gonna marry me?

AMBROSE: That's right, providing there's no more shootin'.

HOOT OWL: Of course, pal. (*Extending his hand.*) No more shootin'. (*AMBROSE starts to take his hand, then decides not to.*) I think this is really big of you.

AMBROSE: (*Eager to get him out.*) You just run along now, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: But - but I want to see my little chickadee.

AMBROSE: (*Behind him and pushing him left.*) You got your whole life to see her, Hoot Owl.

HOOT OWL: Yeah - pal - I guesses you're right.

AMBROSE: (*He pushes HOOT OWL out.*) Whew! What an ordeal. (*He starts pacing the floor.*)

ANNE: (*Entering right.*) Are you worried, Homer?

AMBROSE: (*Still walking.*) Yeah - just a little. I got things on my mind.

ANNE: I know. Nancy was telling me.

AMBROSE: But he ain't gonna marry her, Anne. I'd fight 'em all single-handed before I'd let that happen.

ANNE: They can stall them off for awhile. But the sheriff and Hoot Owl will get suspicious if they just keep stallin' 'em off.

AMBROSE: Yeah - I gotta get busy.

ANNE: Don't worry, Homer. I know everything will be alright.

AMBROSE: Thanks, Anne.

STINKWEED comes creeping in left, his gun drawn.

ANNE: *(Jumping in front of AMBROSE.)* Look out, Homer.

AMBROSE: *(Whirling.)* Huh? *(Starts shaking.)* Now - now - wait a minute, St-St-Stinkweed. Let us talk this thing over.

ANNE: I think I'm going to faint.

AMBROSE: *(Terrified.)* Oh no, Anne, please don't. Not at a time like this.

STINKWEED: *(Glaring at him.)* I'm gonna get you, Homer the Kid. And pronto.

ANNE: *(Closing her eyes.)* I know I'm going to faint.

AMBROSE: *(Shaking.)* Oh no, Anne, you can't.

ANNE groans, her legs seem to give way, and she starts dropping toward the floor. AMBROSE grabs her. Terrified, he holds her in front of him.

AMBROSE: Anne - I - Anne, say something. *(He looks up, spots STINKWEED sneering at him.)* Now - now, wait a minute, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: Hidin' behind a woman's skirt.

AMBROSE: *(As STINKWEED starts toward him.)* Let's - let's talk this th-thing over, Stinkweed.

STINKWEED: *(Wiggling his gun.)* This'll do my talkin'.

STINKWEED starts circling AMBROSE, who is trying desperately to keep ANNE in front of him. Her legs collapse, she starts towards the floor, but AMBROSE pulls her back up again.

AMBROSE: (*His eyes glued on the gun.*) Now – now, Stinkweed, old boy. (*STINKWEED continues to circle him.*) Th-th-they promised not to shoot me.

STINKWEED: But I didn't. And you needn't try to get away, 'cause I gotcha and I'm shootin' right now.

ANNE's legs collapse again. She melts, terrified. AMBROSE quickly yanks her up again.

AMBROSE: (*Wheezing.*) St-st-st-Stinkweed, old boy. (*He looks at ANNE, and a triumphant look comes on his face as he grasps a good idea.*) Oh, Stinkweed!

STINKWEED: Huh?

AMBROSE: Oh, Stinkweed! This - this girl here - in case you didn't know - has simply been having fits over you.

STINKWEED: (*Pointing.*) You mean her?

AMBROSE: Yeah, and it's a shame you're going to shoot me, since I could get you and this fragile damsel hooked up for life. You ain't just gonna stand by while the sheriff and Hoot Owl Pete get tied in a wedding knot, are you?

STINKWEED: (*Liking the idea.*) You really think she'd go for me?

AMBROSE: Stinkweed, you just can't imagine how far she would go. And your whole, blissful, romance-filled life depends on just one person.

STINKWEED: It does?

AMBROSE: Yeah—me. (*He drops ANNE, who goes banging to the floor.*) Your life's drab now, ain't it, Stinkweed? (*STINKWEED nods.*) No nice woman to come home to at night after a hard day's cattle rustlin'. No bright little face to meet you at the door when you come in tired and hot from a bloody shootin' scrape. No feminine hand, soft and gentle, to stroke your hairy back - and dig out the buckshot.

STINKWEED: (*Engrossed.*) Gosh, I never thought of it that way.

AMBROSE: (*Spreading it on thick.*) There ain't nothin' as wonderful as a husband and wife gettin' married. Nothing can take the place of wedded matrimony. She loves you so much.

STINKWEED: (*Gazing down at her.*) And I love her so much. (*Pocketing his gun.*) It's a deal, pal.

AMBROSE: That's the spirit, Stinkweed, old man. (*Pushing him left.*)
You just run along and tell them other fellers that you're gettin' hitched, too. (*And he shoves him out left.*)

ANNE: (*Sitting up.*) Are you alright, Homer?

AMBROSE: You better stay down there, Anne. So in case you faint again, you won't have so far to fall.

ANNE: What do you mean, Homer?

AMBROSE: (*Hanging his head.*) Well, I reckon I sorta had to tell him that you - that you -

ANNE: (*Rising; sympathetically.*) That's all right, Homer, I'm glad you told him if it would save you. I'd do anything for you.

AMBROSE: Gosh, Anne, I'm glad you ain't real mad, and you know you ain't really gonna marry him. (*She smiles at him.*) I - I guess I'll go up and study this thing out. Don't worry, Anne. I'll think of something

He turns and goes out center, as NANCY and BETH enter right.

NANCY: All I've got to, say is, he'd better keep his part of the bargain.

ANNE: (*Turning.*) Don't worry, he will.

BETH: Did he get you, too?

ANNE: And why not? As long as you two were in it, I'd just as well be, too. And, Homer said we wouldn't have to marry them, and if he said it, then it's true.

NANCY: Anne, I do believe you're falling for that two-bit cowboy.

ANNE: (*Hotly.*) He isn't a two-bit cowboy.

BETH: He's a whole lot of bit.

NANCY: That whole lot of bit better not let us down.

The SHERIFF, HOOT OWL, PETE, and STINKWEED enter left.

SHERIFF: Well, it's all settled.

BETH: (*With suspicion.*) What's all settled?

SHERIFF: (*Gazing at her fondly.*) The weddin'.

NANCY: (*Fearing the worst.*) Wh-what do you mean?

HOOT OWL: Well, bein' as how the probate judge was just elected today, he consented to marry us.

BETH: Oh, that's fine. Did he say – uh - how many weeks it would be?

SHERIFF: Weeks? He's on his way over now.

ANNE: (*Terrified.*) Now?

SHERIFF: Yep. And this here town of Dead Man's Gulch is goin' to have one of the biggest blowouts it's ever had. The whole town's started to celebrate now, and everything's on me!

NANCY: But we - we can't be married now.

HOOT OWL: Of course we can, darlin'. We can and we are. Old Dead Man's Gulch is gonna celebrate tonight like nobody's business. Thanks to you, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: Thanks to all these beautiful gals here.

STINKWEED: Yeah - thanks to the beautiful gals.

NANCY: But - but we can't get married like this.

SHERIFF: We can't keep the people waitin'. They're just rarin' to give us the biggest blowout ever witnessed.

BETH: But—

SHERIFF: (*Breaking in.*) We'll go hurry the judge up - be back in just a second, gals. (*They go out left.*)

NANCY: (*After they leave.*) Well, we're in a fine mess now.

ANNE: What'll we do?

BETH: Talk to Homer about that. It's his idea, not mine. We'll play our parts like he instructed. And he'd better play his. We did it just to save that varmint's hide.

ANNE: He'll keep his part of the bargain, don't worry. Homer the Kid has had harder men to fight than these. He could whip them all single-handed and he probably will.

BETH: Just the same, I ain't takin' no chances. I'm gonna put some sleepin' medicine in a pot of coffee and set it in here on a table, and before I'd let that judge marry me, I'm gonna pour that coffee down their grizzly throats.

NANCY: You'd do that, Aunt Beth?

BETH: You're durn tootin' I'll do it. (*Looking around.*) Whar did that varmint Homer the Kid go to?

AMBROSE: (*Entering center.*) Somebody call me?

BETH: You're durn tootin' somebody called you. The sheriff was here a minute ago, and he's on his way over now - with the justice of the peace.

AMBROSE: Huh?

BETH: And the weddin's scheduled to take place pronto. What you gonna do about it, Mr. Homer the Kid?

AMBROSE: Do? I - I - I -

ANNE: Don't worry, Homer. *(Smiling.)* I know you know what you're doing.

AMBROSE: I - I do? I mean, I do. *(Walking around.)* I do, yeah, I do.

BETH: Just make durn sure that you do. 'Cause if you don't – them coyotes out there ain't the only ones that can handle shootin' irons. Savvy? Come on, gals. *(Sarcastically.)* This is a big moment in your lives. *(They exit right.)*

AMBROSE starts walking around furiously, his hands behind his back. He is unconsciously twisting his hat.

AMBROSE: *(Talking to himself,)* Oh, Bert, if you were only here. I don't know what to do. I'm in a mess, a terrible mess. They're so big, all three of 'em and I'm so – so - so, I'm in a terrible mess. *(He sits.)* But I gotta think of something. I can't shoot the sheriff, 'cause the people will hang me, and I can't stop it no other way, 'cause the sheriff will hang me. Ambrose, you're in a mess. *(He sits back dejectedly.)* A terrible mess.

JAKE: *(Enters, carrying pot of coffee.)* Did I hear you say you're in some kind of mess, Homer?

AMBROSE: Yeah - a terrible mess, Jake. I wish I could drown my sorrows with something strong.

JAKE: *(Holds up pot.)* Here's a pot o' coffee that Miss Beth sent in. Help yourself. *(Puts coffee on table.)* You know somethin'? I got a feelin' I'm in trouble, too, sorta like that time in Pampas I waded into quick sand. At first, I thought Tillie had a one-track mind. But she don't. It's two-track.

AMBROSE: What's wrong?

JAKE: She heard the women talkin' 'bout gettin' married, and now she's got the fancy notion that me and her are gonna get hitched, too. She's been in there spoutin' all this love and mush stuff that some coyote named Shakespeare said. Shakespeare this and Shakespeare that. I said if he meant that much to her, she ought to marry him. I've never done nothin' to deserve this.

AMBROSE: Me either. Give me some of that coffee. (*JAKE pours him a cup.*)

JAKE: (*Pouring a cup.*) Can you imagine me, a married man? (*Hands it to AMBROSE.*)

AMBROSE: Can you? (*Takes a swig.*)

JAKE: Yeah, and just imaginin' it is too much for me. Give me some of that coffee. I'm gonna drown my sorrows. (*He pours a cup, swigs it down.*)

AMBROSE: (*Pacing, hands in pockets.*) I'm in a jam. Why, oh why, did I ever leave Providence? (*JAKE sits, chin in hands.*) I gotta think of something. (*He picks up coffee pot, takes a swallow, and carries it with him.*)

JAKE starts nodding. He jerks a couple of times, trying to keep awake as AMBROSE paces around the room.

AMBROSE: (*Yawns broadly.*) Gotta be some way. (*Yawns again.*) Jake, I - (*He looks at JAKE, who's now snoozing with his head down.*) Jake! (*JAKE snores. He goes over, shakes him.*) Jake. You asleep? (*AMBROSE yawns.*) Come to think of it, I feel a little sleepy myself. (*Shakes head sharply.*) I can't go to sleep. I just can't. (*Walks sleepily around room.*) Gotta keep awake. Gotta (*Yawns.*) keep awake. (*Crosses to desk, leans on it.*) Can't... (*Yawns again.*) go . . . to sleep. (*He moves to the back of the desk, and leans on it again. His eyes slowly close; his head droops, his knees buckle, and he slowly drops behind desk, still clutching the pot of coffee.*)

The SHERIFF, HOOT OWL PETE, and STINKWEED, along with the judge, enter left.

SHERIFF: (*Calling.*) Lovey-dovey, we are here.

HOOT OWL: Little Blossom, come and be mine.

STINKWEED: Are you shakin', Hoot Owl?

HOOT OWL: Like a little bud in the spring of the year. Just before it blossoms out into full-grown leafhood. Stinkweed, I'm in an awful poetics mood tonight.

BETH, NANCY, ANNE, and TILLIE enter. All but TILLIE are scared to death.

SHERIFF: (*As they enter.*) Ahhh, just smell that perfume. (*He sniffs.*)

TILLIE: That's probably Jake you smell. (*Arms akimbo.*) And look at that. He's gone to sleep again.

NANCY: (*In low voice, to BETH.*) Where's Homer?

ANNE: He'll be here. Don't worry.

BETH: He'd better be.

SHERIFF: What's that you're sayin', butter blossom?

BETH: Nothing . . . (*Emphasizing it.*) darling. (*He beams at her.*)

JUDGE: Let's get started. I'm a busy man, very busy . . . man.

TILLIE: Jake. (*Shakes him.*) Jake. Wake up, the time has come. (*She drags him to his feet.*)

JUDGE: Now, all join hands. (*The women uneasily exchange glances but their husbands-to-be grab their hands.*) Now that's fine. My, but you look charming. So romantic - so in love- (*The men beam except the snoozing JAKE.*) There's just nothing like being married. Nothing like having a little wifey, men. (*The men rear back importantly.*) Nothing like being married and havin' a home of your own. Nothing like being a married man. (*Clears throat.*) Guess I'll have to try it myself one of these days. Now . . . (*Rubs hands together.*) we'll begin.

NANCY: (*Looking at the door again.*) But - (*HOOT OWL jerks her back in line.*)

JUDGE: Do you, Nancy Martin, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband?

NANCY: I - I - (*She looks around again, finally catches BETH's eye, who nods.*) I - guess I do.

JUDGE: That's fine. And now, do you, Hoot Owl Pete—

HOOT OWL: (*Breaking in.*) I do.

SHERIFF: Can't you hurry it up, Judge?

JUDGE: Wal, I reckon I can. Do you, Anne Martin, Beth Malone, and - uh - don't believe I caught your name.

TILLIE: Tillie.

JUDGE: And - uh - Tillie take these handsome, strapping fellers to be your lawful wedded husbands?

BETH: I - I - (*Looks center, then back, uneasily*) d-do.

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