

"This is your last chance, Son," the man says coolly. He stands with his feet shoulder width apart, his coat pulled open, staring intently while several strands of gray hair dance in his field of vision.

Someone hollers from the General Store, "Do what he says boy."

"Walk away feller," someone else chimes. "While you still can."

"But he killed my brother," the fighter says, and quickly wipes his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. His breath reaches out in hurried white puffs as his hand rests shakily on the ivory grip of his Colt revolver.

"The sheriff's done killed lots of folks," a third anonymous voice informs from underneath a weathered telegraph sign.

"Don't mean they didn't deserve it," the sheriff himself tells the crowd, his glare boring into the young gun's wide eyes.

"Matthew never hurt a fly," the avenger spits.

"I can't rightly say. I just know he come against me." The sheriff pauses to spit, says, "Sound familiar?"

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A few hours later the bartender mumbles, "Pity about today," while attempting to rub a hole in the mahogany bar.

"Yup," the sheriff agrees.

The towel comes to a stop and the barkeep looks up at the saloon's only patron. "Ike, how's it you're so damnable good at killin folks?" He fidgets with his suspenders, says, "I mean no offense."

"None taken," the sheriff says before emptying his glass. He slides it toward his friend and continues, "I ain't never really give it much thought."

"Heck, I'd of thought you'd have some sort of strategy."

The sheriff thinks for a moment, says, "Well, I reckon most fellers wait for the shootin hand to flinch. Me, I study the face. The face'll tell you what you need to know."

The tender fills the glass, says, "How so Sheriff?"

"I suppose it gives me a better idea of what I'm up against for starters. Case in point that poor feller today never stood a chance. There wasn't a body who witnessed that had any doubts about the outcome."

"Poor soul," the bartender says shaking his head.

The sheriff drains another shot, says, "But them real guns, them fellers only tell ya what there up to with their faces. A quick grittin of the teeth'll set off the jaws. That last flash of hatred'll come out in the eyes. Heck, one time I seen a feller's ears wiggle just before he drew." The sheriff chuckles, says, "That sombitch should of wore a hat."

"I remember that one feller last year died a smilin." The barkeep snickers then spits in the spittoon.

"Yup."

"What was a goin through his mind?"

The sheriff grinned, says "Why, that one was plain ole crazy William." He slides his glass across the bar's gray surface, says, "I reckon I'll have one more."

The barkeep obliges and after an extended silence, mutters, "Yup. Sure is a pity about today though."

"Yup," the sheriff agrees.

The saloon door squeaks as the bartender begins, "I suppose you never kn--"

Ike notices a strained look come over his friend's face. With his left hand, the sheriff brings his glass up to his mouth while his right hand moves unnoticed to his five shot Manhattan Navy Revolver. He drains the whiskey and turns suddenly toward the intruder while slinging the shot glass with a quick backhanded thrust. He exposes only his profile to the intruder who flinches and squints his eyes.

The stalker's gun explodes into fire at the same instant the glass shatters against the door behind him. The burning pain in the sheriff's head doesn't come until after the bullet whizzes by shattering the mirror behind the bar, and the sheriff's own gun belches lead and smoke into the dim saloon.

The assassin makes a noise like a deflating bellows before his gun hits the floor. He clutches his chest and staggers back through the swinging door. The sheriff gets up and peaks outside in time to see the young man fall backward into the road not far from where his brother perished earlier. His uncaring body sends up a plume of dust. The drift, the buildings, and the lowering clouds all have the same deathly pallor. Ike makes a sharp T sound by sucking between his teeth and tongue and turns back toward the bar.

Walking back to his stool he barely hears the bartender say, "I'll be damned if you didn't have to kill the whole bunch of em in as many days," through ringing ears.

"I reckon so," the sheriff says patting his chafed head with a handkerchief.

"Sure is a pity," the barkeep laments.

"Yup," the sheriff agrees, adds, "One more thing, William. Bout killin folks I mean."

"What's that, Sheriff?"

"Sometimes you gotta be lucky."

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