

THE GUNSLINGER AND THE DARK MAN

Stephen King

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I

The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.

The desert was the apotheosis of all deserts, huge, standing to the sky for what might have been parsecs in all directions. White; blinding; waterless; without feature save for the faint, cloudy haze of the mountains which sketched themselves on the horizon and the devil-grass which brought sweet dreams, nightmares, death. An occasional tombstone sign pointed the way, for once the drifted track that cut its way through the thick crust of alkali had been a highway and coaches had followed it. The world had moved on since then. The world had emptied.

The gunslinger walked stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing. A hide waterbag was slung around his middle like a bloated sausage. It was almost full. He had progressed through the khef over many years, and had reached the fifth level. At the seventh or eighth, he would not have been thirsty; he could have watched own body dehydrate with clinical, detached attention, watering its crevices and dark inner hollows only when his logic told him it must be done. He was not seventh or eighth. He was fifth. So he was thirsty, although he had no particular urge to drink. In a vague way, all this pleased him. It was romantic.

Below the waterbag were his guns, finely weighted to his hand. The two belts crisscrossed above his crotch. The holsters were oiled too deeply for even this Philistine sun to crack. The stocks of the guns were sandalwood, yellow and finely grained. The holsters were tied down with rawhide cord, and they swung heavily against his hips. The brass casings of the cartridges looped into the gun belts twinkled and flashed and heliographed in the sun. The leather made subtle creaking noises. The guns themselves made no noise. They had spilled blood. There was no need to make noise in the sterility of the desert His clothes were the no-color of rain or dust. His shirt was

open at the throat, with a rawhide thong dangling loosely in hand-punched eyelets. His pants were seam-stretched dungarees.

He breasted a gently rising dune (although there was no sand here; the desert was hardpan, and even the harsh winds that blew when dark came raised only an aggravating harsh dust like scouring powder) and saw the kicked remains of a tiny campfire on the lee side, the side which the sun would quit earliest. Small signs like this, once more affirming the man in black's essential humanity, never failed to please him. His lips stretched in the pitted, flaked remains of his face. He squatted.

He had burned the devil-grass, of course. It was the only thing out here that would burn. It burned with a greasy, flat light, and it burned slow. Border dwellers had told him that devils lived even in the flames. They burned it but would not look into the light. They said the devils hypnotized, beckoned, would eventually draw the one who looked into the fires. And the next man foolish enough to look into the fire might see you.

The burned grass was crisscrossed in the now-familiar ideographic pattern, and crumbled to gray senselessness before the gunslinger's prodding hand. There was nothing in the remains but a charred scrap of bacon, which he ate thoughtfully.

It had always been this way. The gunslinger had followed the man in black across the desert for two months now, across the endless, screamingly monotonous purgatorial wastes, and had yet to find spoor other than the hygienic sterile ideographs of the man in black's campfires. He had not found a can, a bottle, or a waterbag (the gunslinger had left four of those behind, like dead snake-skins).

— Perhaps the campfires are a message, spelled out letter by letter. Take a powder. Or, the end draweth nigh. Or maybe even, Eat at Joe's. It didn't matter.

He had no understanding of the ideograms, if they were ideograms. And the remains were as cold as all the others. He knew he was

closer, but did not know how he knew. That didn't matter either. He stood up, brushing his hands.

No other trace; the wind, razor-sharp, had of course filed away even what scant tracks the hardpan held. He had never even been able to find his quarry's droppings. Nothing. Only these cold campfires along the ancient highway and the relentless range-finder in his own head.

He sat down and allowed himself a short pull from the waterbag. He scanned the desert, looked up at the sun, which was now sliding down the far quadrant of the sky. He got up, removed his gloves from his belt, and began to pull devil-grass for his own fire, which he laid over the ashes the man in black had left. He found the irony, like the romance of his thirst, bitterly appealing.

He did not use the flint and steel until the remains of the day were only the fugitive heat in the ground beneath him and a sardonic orange line on the monochrome western horizon. He watched the south patiently, toward the mountains, not hoping or expecting to see the thin straight line of smoke from a new campfire, but merely watching because that was a part of it. There was nothing. He was close, but only relatively so. Not close enough to see smoke at dusk.

He struck his spark to the dry, shredded grass and lay down upwind, letting the dreamsmoke blow out toward the waste. The wind, except for occasional gyrating dust devils, was constant.

Above, the stars were unwinking, also constant. Suns and worlds by the million.

Dizzying constellations, cold fire in every primary hue. As he watched, the sky washed from violet to ebony. A meteor etched a brief, spectacular arc and winked out. The fire threw strange shadows as the devil-grass burned its slow way down into new patterns—not ideograms but a straightforward crisscross vaguely frightening in its own no-nonsense surety. He had laid his fuel in a pattern that was not artful but only workable. It spoke of blacks and whites. It spoke of a man who might straighten bad pictures in

strange hotel rooms. The fire burned its steady, slow flame, and phantoms danced in its incandescent core. The gunslinger did not see. He slept. The two patterns, art and craft, were welded together. The wind moaned. Every now and then a perverse downdraft would make the smoke whirl and eddy toward him, and sporadic whiffs of the smoke touched him. They built dreams in the same way that a small irritant may build a pearl.

II

He had come down off the last of the foothills leading the donkey, whose eyes were already dead and bulging with the heat. He had passed the last town three weeks before, and since then there had only been the deserted coach track and an occasional huddle of border dwellers' sod dwellings. The huddles had degenerated into single dwellings, most inhabited by lepers or madmen. He found the madmen better company. One had given him a stainless steel Silva compass and bade him give it to Jesus. The gunslinger took it gravely. If he saw Him, he would turn over the compass. He did not expect to.

Five days had passed since the last hut, and he had begun to suspect there would be no more when he topped the last eroded hill and saw the familiar low-backed sod roof.

The dweller, a surprisingly young man with a wild shock of strawberry hair that reached almost to his waist, was weeding a scrawny stand of corn with zealous abandon. The mule let out a wheezing grunt and the dweller looked up, glaring blue eyes coming target-center on the gunslinger in a moment. He raised both hands in curt salute and then bent to the corn again, humping up the row next to his hut with back bent, tossing devil-grass and an occasional stunted corn plant over his shoulder. His hair flopped and flew in the wind that now came directly from the desert, with nothing to break it.

The gunslinger came down the hill slowly, leading the donkey on which his waterskins sloshed. He paused by the edge of the lifeless-looking cornpatch, drew a drink from one of his skins to start the saliva, and spat into the arid soil.

"Life for your crop."

"Life for your own," the dweller answered and stood up. His back popped audibly.

He surveyed the gunslinger without fear. The little of his face visible between beard and hair seemed unmarked by the rot, and his eyes, while a bit wild, seemed sane.

“I don’t have anything but corn and beans,” he said. “Corn’s free, but you’ll have to kick something in for the beans. A man brings them out once in a while.

He don’t stay long.” The dweller laughed shortly. “Afraid of spirits.”

“I expect he thinks you’re one.”

“I expect he does.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The dweller put out his hand.

“Brown is my name.” The gunslinger shook his hand. As he did so, a scrawny raven croaked from the low peak of the sod roof. The dweller gestured at it briefly: “That’s Zoltan.”

At the sound of its name the raven croaked again and flew across to Brown. It landed on the dweller’s head and roosted, talons firmly twined in the wild thatch of hair.

“Screw you,” Zoltan croaked brightly. “Screw you and the horse you rode in on.”

The gunslinger nodded amiably.

“Beans, beans, the musical fruit,” the raven recited, inspired. “The more you eat, the more you toot”

“You teach him that?”

“That’s all he wants to learn, I guess,” Brown said. “Tried to teach him The Lord’s Prayer once.” His eyes traveled out beyond the hut for a moment, toward the gritty, featureless hardpan. “Guess this ain’t Lord’s Prayer country. You’re a gunslinger. That right?”

“Yes.” He hunkered down and brought out his makings. Zoltan launched himself from Brown’s head and landed, flittering, on the gunslinger’s shoulder.

“After the other one, I guess.”

“Yes.” The inevitable question formed in his mouth: “How long since he passed by?”

Brown shrugged. “I don’t know. Time’s funny out here. More than two weeks. Less than two months. The bean man’s been twice since he passed. I’d guess six weeks.

That’s probably wrong.”

“The more you eat, the more you toot,” Zoltan said.

“Did he stop off?” the gunslinger asked.

Brown nodded. “He stayed supper, same as you will, I guess. We passed the time.”

The gunslinger stood up and the bird flew back to the roof, squawking. He felt an odd, trembling eagerness. “What did he talk about?”

Brown cocked an eyebrow at him. “Not much. Did it ever rain and when did I come here and had I buried my wife. I did most of the talking, which ain’t usual.” He paused. and the only sound was the stark wind. “He’s a sorcerer, ain’t he?”

“Yes.”

Brown nodded slowly. “I knew. Are you?”

“I’m just a man.”

“You’ll never catch him.”

“I’ll catch him.”

They looked at each other, a sudden depth of feeling between them, the dweller upon his dust-puff-dry ground, the gunslinger on the hardpan that shelved down to the desert. He reached for his flint.

“Here.” Brown produced a sulfur-headed match and struck it with a grimed nail.

The gunslinger pushed the tip of his smoke into the flame and drew.

“Thanks.”

“You’ll want to fill your skins,” the dweller said, turning away.

“Spring’s under the eaves in back. I’ll start dinner.”

The gunslinger stepped gingerly over the rows of corn and went around back. The spring was at the bottom of a hand-dug well, lined with stones to keep the powdery earth from caving. As he descended the rickety ladder, the gunslinger reflected that the stones must represent two years’ work easily — hauling, dragging, laying. The water was clear but slow-moving, and filling the skins was a long chore.

While he was topping the second, Zoltan perched on the lip of the well.

“Screw you and the horse you rode in on,” he advised.

He looked up, startled. The shaft was about fifteen feet deep: easy enough for Brown to drop a rock on him, break his head, and steal everything on him. A crazy or a rotter wouldn’t do it; Brown was neither. Yet he liked Brown, and so he pushed the thought out of his mind and got the rest of his water. What came, came.

When he came through the hut’s door and walked down the steps (the hovel proper was set below ground level, designed to catch and hold the coolness of the nights), Brown was poking ears of corn into

the embers of a tiny fire with a hardwood spatula. Two ragged plates had been set at opposite ends of a dun blanket. Water for the beans was just beginning to bubble in a pot hung over the fire.

“I’ll pay for the water, too.”

Brown did not look up. “The water’s a gift from God. Pappa Doc brings the beans.”

The gunslinger grunted a laugh and sat down with his back against one rude wall, folded his arms and closed his eyes. After a little, the smell of roasting corn came to his nose. There was a pebbly rattle as Brown dumped a paper of dry beans into the pot. An occasional tak-tak-tak as Zoltan walked restlessly on the roof.

He was tired; he had been going sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day between here and the horror that had occurred in Tull, the last village. And he had been afoot for the last twelve days; the mule was at the end of its endurance.

Tak-tak-tak.

Two weeks, Brown had said, or as much as six. Didn’t matter. There had been calendars in Tull, and they had remembered the man in black because of the old man he had healed on his way through. Just an old man dying with the weed. An old man of thirty-five. And if Brown was right, the man in black had lost ground since then. But the desert was next. And the desert would be hell.

Tak-tak-tak.

— Lend me your wings, bird. I’ll spread them and fly on the thermals.

He slept



Brown woke him up five hours later. It was dark. The only light was the dull cherry glare of the banked embers.

“Your mule has passed on,” Brown said. “Dinner’s ready.”

“How?”

Brown shrugged. “Roasted and boiled, how else? You picky?”

“No, the mule.”

“It just laid over, that’s all. It looked like an old mule.” And with a touch of apology: “Zoltan et the eyes.”

“Oh.” He might have expected it “All right”

Brown surprised him again when they sat down to the blanket that served as a table by asking a brief blessing: Rain, health, expansion to the spirit “Do you believe in an afterlife?” The gunslinger asked him as Brown dropped three ears of hot corn onto his plate.

Brown nodded. “I think this is it.”

IV

The beans were like bullets, the corn tough. Outside, the prevailing wind snuffled and whined around the ground-level eaves. He ate quickly, ravenously, drinking four cups of water with the meal. Halfway through, there was a machine-gun rapping at the door. Brown got up and let Zoltan in. The bird flew across the room and hunched moodily in the corner.

“Musical fruit,” he muttered.

After dinner, the gunslinger offered his tobacco.

— Now. Now the questions will come.

But Brown asked no questions. He smoked and looked at the dying embers of the fire. It was already noticeably cooler in the hovel.

“Lead us not into temptation,” Zoltan said suddenly, apocalyptically.

The gunslinger started as if he had been shot at. He was suddenly sure that it was an illusion, all of it (not a dream, no; an enchantment), that the man in black had spun a spell and was trying to tell him something in a maddeningly obtuse, symbolic way.

“Have you been through Tull?” he asked suddenly.

Brown nodded. “Coming here, and once to sell corn. It rained that year. Lasted maybe fifteen minutes. The ground just seemed to open and suck it up. An hour later it was just as white and dry as ever. But the corn — God, the corn. You could see it grow. That wasn’t so bad. But you could hear it, as if the rain had given it a mouth. It wasn’t a happy sound. It seemed to be sighing and groaning its way out of the earth.” He paused. “I had extra, so I took it and sold it.

Pappa Doc said he'd do it, but he would have cheated me. So I went."

"You don't like town?"

"No."

"I almost got killed there," the gunslinger said abruptly.

"That so?"

"I killed a man that was touched by God," the gunslinger said. "Only it wasn't God. It was the man in black."

"He laid you a trap."

"Yes."

The looked at each other across the shadows, the moment taking on overtones of finality.

— Now the questions will come.

But Brown had nothing to say. His smoke was a smoldering roach, but when the gunslinger tapped his poke, Brown shook his head.

Zoltan shifted restlessly, seemed about to speak, subsided.

"May I tell you about it?" the gunslinger asked.

"Sure."

The gunslinger searched for words to begin and found none. "I have to flow," he said.

Brown nodded. "The water does that. The corn, please?"

"Sure."

He went up the stairs and out into the dark. The stars glittered overhead in a mad splash. The wind pulsed steadily. His urine arched out over the powdery cornfield in a wavering stream. The man in black had sent him here. Brown might even be the man in black himself. It might be —He shut the thoughts away. The only contingency he had not learned how to bear was the possibility of his own madness. He went back inside.

“Have you decided if I’m an enchantment yet?” Brown asked, amused.

The gunslinger paused on the tiny landing, startled. Then he came down slowly and sat

“I started to tell you about Tull.”

“Is it growing?”

“It’s dead,” the gunslinger said, and the words hung in the air.

Brown nodded. “The desert. I think it may strangle everything eventually. Did you know that there was once a coach road across the desert?”

The gunslinger closed his eyes. His mind whirled crazily.

“You doped me,” he said thickly.

“No. I’ve done nothing.”

The gunslinger opened his eyes warily.

“You won’t feel right about it unless I invite you,” Brown said. “And so I do.

Will you tell me about Tull?”

The gunslinger opened his mouth hesitantly and was surprised to find that this time the words were there. He began to speak in flat

bursts that slowly spread into an even, slightly toneless narrative. The doped feeling left him, and he found himself oddly excited. He talked deep into the night. Brown did not interrupt at all. Neither did the bird.

V

He had bought the mule in Pricetown, and when he reached Tull, it was still fresh. The sun had set an hour earlier, but the gunslinger had continued traveling, guided by the town glow in the sky, then by the uncannily clear notes of a honky-tonk piano playing Hey Jude. The road widened as it took on tributaries.

The forests had been gone long now, replaced by the monotonous flat country: endless, desolate fields gone to timothy and low shrubs, shacks, eerie, deserted estates guarded by brooding, shadowed mansions where demons undeniably walked; leering, empty shanties where the people had either moved on or had been moved along, an occasional dweller's hovel, given away by a single flickering point of light in the dark, or by sullen, inbred clans toiling silently in the fields by day. Corn was the main crop, but there were beans and also some peas. An occasional scrawny cow stared at him lumpishly from between peeled alder poles.

Coaches had passed him four times, twice coming and twice going, nearly empty as they came up on him from behind and bypassed him and his mule, fuller as they headed back toward the forests of the north.

It was ugly country. It had showered twice since he had left Pricetown, grudgingly both times. Even the timothy looked yellow and dispirited. Ugly country. He had seen no sign of the man in black. Perhaps he had taken a coach.

The road made a bend, and beyond it the gunslinger clucked the mule to a stop and looked down at Tull. It was at the floor of a circular, bowl-shaped hollow, a shoddy jewel in a cheap setting. There were a number of lights, most of them clustered around the area of the music. There looked to be four streets, three running at right angles to the coach road, which was the main avenue of the

town. Perhaps there would be a restaurant. He doubted it, but perhaps. He clucked at the mule.

More houses sporadically lined the road now, most of them still deserted. He passed a tiny graveyard with moldy, leaning wooden slabs overgrown and choked by the rank devil-grass. Perhaps five hundred feet further on he passed a chewed sign which said: TULL

The paint was flaked almost to the point of illegibility. There was another further on, but the gunslinger was not able to read that one at all.

A fool's chorus of half-stoned voices was rising in the final protracted lyric of Hey Jude — “Naa-naa-naa naa-na-na-na... hey, Jude...” — as he entered the town proper. It was a dead sound, like the wind in the hollow of a rotted tree.

Only the prosaic thump and pound of the honky-tonk piano saved him from seriously wondering if the man in black might not have raised ghosts to inhabit a deserted town. He smiled a little at the thought.

There were a few people on the streets, not many, but a few. Three ladies wearing black slacks and identical middy blouses passed by on the opposite boardwalk, not looking at him with pointed curiosity. Their faces seemed to swim above their all-but-invisible bodies like huge, pallid baseballs with eyes. A solemn old man with a straw hat perched firmly on top of his head watched him from the steps of a boarded-up grocery store. A scrawny tailor with a late customer paused to watch him by; he held up the lamp in his window for a better look. The gunslinger nodded. Neither the tailor nor his customer nodded back. He could feel their eyes resting heavily against the low-slung holsters that lay against his hips. A young boy, perhaps thirteen, and his girl crossed the street a block up, pausing imperceptibly. Their footfalls raised little hanging clouds of dust. A few of the street side lamps worked, but their glass sides were cloudy with congealed oil. Most had been crashed out. There was a livery, probably

The gunslinger led his mule past them and looked into the dim depths of the barn. One lamp glowed sunkenly, and a shadow jumped and flickered as a gangling old man in bib overalls forked loose timothy hay into the hay loft with huge, grunting swipes of his fork.

“Hey!” the gunslinger called.

The fork faltered and the hostler looked around waspishly. “Hey yourself!”

“I got a mule here.”

“Good for you.”

The gunslinger flicked a heavy, unevenly milled gold piece into the semi dark.

It rang on the old, chaff-drifted boards and glittered.

The hostler came forward, bent, picked it up, squinted at the gunslinger. His eyes dropped to the gunbelts and he nodded sourly.

“How long you want him put up?”

“A night. Maybe two. Maybe longer.”

“I ain’t got no change for gold.”

“I’m not asking for any.”

“Blood money,” the hostler muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” The hostler caught the mule’s bridle and led him inside.

“Rub him down!” the gunslinger called. The old man did not turn.

The gunslinger walked out to the boys crouched around the marble ring. They had watched the entire exchange with contemptuous interest “How they hanging?” the gunslinger asked conversationally.

No answer.

“You dudes live in town?”

No answer.

One of the boys removed a crazily tilted twist of corn-shuck from his mouth, grasped a green cat’s-eye marble, and squirted it into the dirt circle. It struck a croaker and knocked it outside. He picked up the cat’s-eye and prepared to shoot again.

“There a restaurant in this town?” the gunslinger asked.

One of them looked up, the youngest There was a huge cold-sore at the corner of his mouth, but his eyes were still ingenuous. He looked at the gunslinger with hooded brimming wonder that was touching and frightening.

“Might get a burger at Sheb’s.”

“That the honky-tonk?”

The boy nodded but didn’t speak. The eyes of his playmates had turned ugly and hostile.

The gunslinger touched the brim of his hat. “I’m grateful. It’s good to know someone in this town is bright enough to talk.”

He walked past, mounted the boardwalk and started down toward Sheb’s, hearing the clear, contemptuous voice of one of the others, hardly more than a childish treble:

“Weed-eater! How long you been screwin’ your sister, Charlie? Weed-eater!”

There were three flaring kerosene lamps in front of Sheb's, one to each side and one nailed above the drunk-hung batwing doors. The chorus of Hey Jude had petered out, and the piano was plinking some other old ballad. Voices murmured like broken threads. The gunslinger paused outside for a moment, looking in.

Sawdust floor, spittoons by the tipsy-legged tables. A plank bar on saw-horses.

A gummy mirror behind it, reflecting the piano player, who wore an inevitable piano-stool slouch. The front of the piano had been removed so you could watch the wooden keys whonk up and down as the contraption was played. The bartender was a straw-haired woman wearing a dirty blue dress. One strap was held with a safety pin. There were perhaps six townies in the back of the room, juicing and playing Watch Me apathetically. Another half-dozen were grouped loosely about the piano. Four or five at the bar. And an old man with wild gray hair collapsed at a table by the doors. The gunslinger went in.

Heads swiveled to look at him and his guns. There was a moment of near silence, except for the oblivious piano player, who continued to tinkle. Then the woman mopped at the bar, and things shifted back.

"Watch me," one of the players in the corner said and matched three hearts with four spades, emptying his hand. The one with the hearts swore, handed over his bet, and the next was dealt.

The gunslinger approached the bar. "You got hamburger?" he asked.

"Sure." She looked him in the eye, and she might have been pretty when she started out, but now her face was lumpy and there was a livid scar corkscrewed across her forehead. She had powdered it heavily, but it called attention rather than camouflaging. "It's dear, though."

"I figured. Gimme three burgers and a beer."

Again that subtle shift in tone. Three hamburgers. Mouths watered and tongues licked at saliva with slow lust Three hamburgers.

“That would go you five bucks. With the beer.”

The gunslinger put a gold piece on the bar.

Eyes followed it.

There was a sullenly smoldering charcoal brazier behind the bar and to the left of the mirror. The woman disappeared into a small room behind it and returned with meat on a paper. She scrimped out three patties and put them on the fire.

The smell that arose was maddening. The gunslinger stood with stolid indifference, only peripherally aware of the faltering piano, the slowing of the card game, the sidelong glances of the barflies.

The man was halfway up behind him when the gunslinger saw him in the mirror. The man was almost completely bald, and his hand was wrapped around the haft of a gigantic hunting knife that was looped onto his belt like a holster.

“Go sit down,” the gunslinger said quietly.

The man stopped. His upper lip lifted unconsciously, like a dog’s, and there was a moment of silence. Then he went back to his table, and the atmosphere shifted back again. His beer came in a cracked glass schooner. “I ain’t got change for gold,” the woman said truculently.

“Don’t expect any.”

She nodded angrily, as if this show of wealth, even at her benefit, incensed her. But she took his gold, and a moment later the hamburgers came on a cloudy plate, still red around the edges.

“Do you have salt?”

She gave into him from underneath the bar. “Bread?”

“No.” He knew she was lying, but he didn’t push it. The bald man was staring at him with cyanosed eyes, his hands clenching and unclenching on the splintered and gouged surface of his table. His nostrils flared with pulsating regularity.

The gunslinger began to eat steadily, almost blandly, chopping the meat apart and forking it into his mouth, trying not to think of what might have been added to cut the beef.

He was almost through, ready to call for another beer and roll a smoke when the hand fell on his shoulder.

He suddenly became aware that the room had gone silent again, and he tasted thick tension in the air. He turned around and stared into the face of the man who had been asleep by the door when he entered. It was a terrible face. The odor of the devil-grass was a rank miasma. The eyes were damned, the staring, glaring eyes of those who see but do not see, eyes ever turned inward to the sterile hell of dreams beyond control, dreams unleashed, risen out of the stinking swamps of the unconscious.

The woman behind the bar made a small moaning sound.

The cracked lips writhed, lifted, revealing the green, mossy teeth, and the gunslinger thought: — He’s not even smoking it anymore. He’s chewing it. He’s really chewing it.

And on the heels of that: — He’s a dead man. He should have been dead a year ago.

And on the heels of that: — The man in black.

They stared at each other, the gunslinger and the man who had gone around the rim of madness.

He spoke, and the gunslinger, dumfounded, heard himself addressed in the High Speech:

“The gold for a favor, gunslinger. Just one? For a pretty.”

The High Speech. For a moment his mind refused to track it. It had been years —

God! — centuries, millenniums; there was no more High Speech, he was the last, the last gunslinger. The others were — Numbed, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a gold piece. The split, scrubbed hand reached for it, fondled it, held it up to reflect the greasy glare of the kerosene lamps. It threw off its proud civilized glow; golden, reddish, bloody.

“Ahhhhh... “An inarticulate sound of pleasure. The old man did a weaving turn and began moving back to his table, holding the coin at eye level, turning it, flashing it.

The room was emptying rapidly, the batwings shuffling madly back and forth. The piano player closed the lid of his instrument with a bang and exited after the others in long, comic-opera strides.

“Sheb!” The woman screamed after him, her voice an odd mixture of fear and shrewishness, “Sheb, you come back here! Goddammit!”

The old man, meanwhile, had gone back to his table.

He spun the gold piece on the gouged wood, and the dead-alive eyes followed it with empty fascination. He spun it a second time, a third, and his eyelids drooped. The fourth time, and his head settled to the wood before the coin stopped.

“There,” she said softly, furiously. “You’ve driven out my trade. Are you satisfied?”

“They’ll be back,” the gunslinger said.

“Not tonight they won’t.”

“Who is he?” He gestured at the weed-eater.

“Go — “She completed the command by describing an impossible act of masturbation.

“I have to know,” the gunslinger said patiently. “He—”

“He talked to you funny,” she said. “Nort never talked like that in his life.”

“I’m looking for a man. You would know him.”

She stared at him, the anger dying. It was replaced with speculation, then with a high, wet gleam that he had seen before. The rickety building ticked thoughtfully to itself. A dog barked brayingly, far away. The gunslinger waited.

She saw his knowledge and the gleam was replaced by hopelessness, by a dumb need that had no mouth.

“You know my price,” she said.

He looked at her steadily. The scar would not show in the dark. Her body was lean enough so the desert and grit and grind hadn’t been able to sag everything.

And she’d once been pretty, maybe even beautiful. Not that it mattered. It would not have mattered if the grave-beetles had nested in the arid blackness of her womb. It had all been written.

Her hands came up to her face and there was still some juice left in her —

enough to weep.

“Don’t look! You don’t have to look at me so mean!”

“I’m sorry,” the gunslinger said. “I didn’t mean to be mean.”

“None of you mean it!” She cried at him.

“Put out the lights.”

She wept, hands at her face. He was glad she had her hands at her face. Not because of the scar but because it gave her back her maidenhood, if not head.

The pin that held the strap of her dress glittered in the greasy light.

“Put out the lights and lock up. Will he steal anything?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Then put out the lights.”

She would not remove her hands until she was behind him and she doused the lamps one by one, turning down the wicks and then breathing the flames into extinction. Then she took his hand in the dark and it was warm. She led him upstairs. There was no light to hide their act.

VI

He made cigarettes in the dark, then lit them and passed one to her. The room held her scent, fresh lilac, pathetic. The smell of the desert had overlaid it, crippled it. It was like the smell of the sea. He realized he was afraid of the desert ahead.

“His name is Nort,” she said. No harshness had been worn out of her voice. “Just Nort. He died.”

The gunslinger waited.

“He was touched by God.”

The gunslinger said, “I have never seen Him.”

“He was here ever since I can remember — Nort, I mean, not God.” She laughed jaggedly into the dark. “He had a honeywagon for a while. Started to drink.

Started to smell the grass. Then to smoke it. The kids started to follow him around and sic their dogs onto him. He wore old green pants that stank. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“He started to chew it. At the last he just sat in there and didn’t eat anything. He might have been a king, in his mind. The children might have been his jesters, and the dogs his princes.”

“Yes.”

“He died right in front of this place,” she said. “He came clumping down the boardwalk — his boots wouldn’t wear out, they were engineer boots — with the children and dogs behind him. He looked like wire clothes hangers all wrapped and twirled together. You could

see all the lights of hell in his eyes, but he was grinning, just like the grins the children carve into their pumpkins on All-Saints Eve. You could smell the dirt and the rot and the weed. It was running down from the corners of his mouth like green blood. I think he meant to come in and listen to Sheb play the piano. And right in front, he stopped and cocked his head. I could see him, and I thought he heard a coach, although there was none due. Then he puked, and it was black and full of blood. It went right through that grin like sewer water through a grate. The stink was enough to make you want to run mad. He raised up his arms and just threw over. That was all. He died with that grin on his face, in his own vomit.”

She was trembling beside him. Outside, the wind kept up its steady whine, and somewhere far away a door was banging, like a sound heard in a dream. Mice ran in the walls. The gunslinger thought in the back of his mind that it was probably the only place in town prosperous enough to support mice. He put a hand on her belly and she started violently, then relaxed.

“The man in black,” he said.

“You have to have it, don’t you!”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll tell you.” She grasped his hand in both of hers and told him.

VII

He came in the late afternoon of the day Nort died, and the wind was whooping up, pulling away the loose topsoil, sending sheets of grit and uprooted stalks of corn wind milling past. Kennerly had padlocked the livery, and the other few merchants had shuttered their windows and laid boards across the shutters. The sky was the yellow color of old cheese and the clouds moved flyingly across it, as if they had seen something horrifying in the desert wastes where they had so lately been.

He came in a rickety rig with a rippling tarp tied across its bed. They watched him come, and old man Kennerly, lying by the window with a bottle in one hand and the loose, hot flesh of his second-eldest daughter's left breast in the other, resolved not to be there if he should knock.

But the man in black went by without hawing the bay that pulled his rig, and the spinning wheels spumed up dust that the wind clutched eagerly. He might have been a priest or a monk; he wore a black cassock that had been floured with dust, and a loose hood covered his head and obscured his features. It rippled and flapped. Beneath the garment's hem, heavy buckled boots with square toes.

He pulled up in front of Sheb's and tethered the horse, which lowered its head and grunted at the ground. Around the back of the rig he untied one flap, found a weathered saddlebag, threw it over his shoulder, and went in through the batwings.

Alice watched him curiously, but no one else noticed his arrival. The rest were drunk as lords. Sheb was playing Methodist hymns ragtime, and the grizzled layabouts who had come in early to avoid the storm and to attend Nort's wake had sung themselves hoarse. Sheb, drunk nearly to the point of senselessness, intoxicated and

horny with his own continued existence, played with hectic, shuttlecock speed, fingers flying like looms.

Voices screeched and hollered, never overcoming the wind but sometimes seeming to challenge it. In the corner Zachary had thrown Amy Feldon's skirts over her head and was painting zodiac signs on her knees. A few other women circulated. A fervid glow seemed to be on all of them. The dull stormglow that filtered through the batwings seemed to mock them, however.

Nort had been laid out on two tables in the center of the room. His boots made a mystical V. His mouth hung open in a slack grin, although someone had closed his eyes and put slugs on them. His hands had been folded on his chest with a sprig of devil-grass in them. He smelled like poison.

The man in black pushed back his hood and came to the bar. Alice watched him, feeling trepidation mixed with the familiar want that hid within her. There was no religious symbol on him, although that meant nothing by itself.

"Whiskey," he said. His voice was soft and pleasant. "Good whiskey."

She reached under the counter and brought out a bottle of Star. She could have palmed off the local popskull on him as her best, but did not. She poured, and the man in black watched her. His eyes were large, luminous. The shadows were too thick to determine their color exactly. Her need intensified. The hollering and whooping went on behind, unabated. Sheb, the worthless gelding, was playing about the Christian Soldiers and somebody had persuaded Aunt Mill to sing. Her voice, warped and distorted, cut through the babble like a dull ax through a calf's brain.

"Hey, Allie!"

She went to serve, resentful of the stranger's silence, resentful of his no-color eyes and her own restless groin. She was afraid of her needs. They were capricious and beyond her control. They might be

the signal of the change, which would in turn signal the beginning of her old age—a condition which in Tull was usually as short and bitter as a winter sunset.

She drew beer until the keg was empty, then broached another. She knew better than to ask Sheb, he would come willingly enough, like the dog he was, and would either chop off his own fingers or spume beer all over everything. The stranger's eyes were on her as she went about it; she could feel them.

"It's busy," he said when she returned. He had not touched his drink, merely rolled it between his palms to warm it.

"Wake," she said.

"I noticed the departed."

"They're bums," she said with sudden hatred. "All bums."

"It excites them. He's dead. They're not."

"He was their butt when he was alive. It's not right that he should be their butt now. It's..." She trailed off, not able to express what it was, or how it was obscene.

"Weed-eater?"

"Yes! What else did he have?"

Her tone was accusing, but he did not drop his eyes, and she felt the blood rush to her face. "I'm sorry. Are you a priest? This must revolt you."

"I'm not and it doesn't." He knocked the whiskey back neatly and did not grimace. "Once more, please."

"I'll have to see the color of your coin first. I'm sorry."

"No need to be."

He put a rough silver coin on the counter, thick on one edge, thin on the other, and she said as she would say later:

“I don’t have change for this.”

He shook his head, dismissing it, and watched absently as he poured again.

“Are you only passing through?” she asked.

He did not reply for a long time, and she was about to repeat when he shook his head impatiently. “Don’t talk trivialities. You’re here with death.”

She recoiled, hurt and amazed, her first thought being that he had lied about his holiness to test her.

“You cared for him,” he said flatly. “Isn’t that true?”

“Who? Nort?” She laughed, affecting annoyance to cover her confusion. “I think you better — “

“You’re soft-hearted and a little afraid,” he went on, “and he was on the weed, looking out hell’s back door. And there he is, and they’ve even slammed the door now, and you don’t think they’ll open it until it’s time for you to walk through, isn’t it so?”

“What are you, drunk?”

“Mistuh Norton, he dead,” the man in black intoned sardonically. “Dead as anybody. Dead as you or anybody.”

“Get out of my place.” She felt a trembling loathing spring up in her, but the warmth still radiated from her belly.

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “It’s all right. Wait. Just wait.”

The eyes were blue. She felt suddenly easy in her mind, as if she had taken a drug.

“See?” he asked her. “Do you see?”

She nodded dumbly and he laughed aloud — a fine, strong, untainted laugh that swung heads around. He whirled and faced them, suddenly made the center of attention by some unknown alchemy. Aunt Mill faltered and subsided, leaving a cracked high note bleeding on the air. Sheb struck a discord and halted. They looked at the stranger uneasily. Sand rattled against the sides of the building.

The silence held, spun itself out. Her breath had clogged in her throat and she looked down and saw both hands pressed to her belly beneath the bar. They all looked at him and he looked at them. Then the laugh burst forth again, strong, rich, beyond denial. But there was no urge to laugh along with him.

“I’ll show you a wonder!” he cried at them. But they only watched him, like obedient children taken to see a magician in whom they have grown too old to believe.

The man in black sprang forward, and Aunt Mill drew away from him. He grinned fiercely and slapped her broad belly. A short, unwitting cackle was forced out of her, and the man in black threw back his head.

“It’s better, isn’t it?”

Aunt Mill cackled again, suddenly broke into sobs, and fled blindly through the doors. The others watched her go silently. The storm was beginning; shadows followed each other, rising and falling on the white cyclorama of the sky. A man near the piano with a forgotten beer in one hand made a groaning, grinning sound.

The man in black stood over Nort, grinning down at him. The wind howled and shrieked and thrummed. Something large struck the side of the building and bounced away. One of the men at the bar tore himself free and exited in looping, grotesque strides. Thunder racketed in sudden dry volleys.

“All right,” the man in black grinned. “All right, let’s get down to it.”

He began to spit into Nort’s face, aiming carefully. The spittle gleamed on his forehead, pearly down the shaven beak of his nose.

Under the bar, her hands worked faster.

Sheb laughed, loon-like, and hunched over. He began to cough up phlegm, huge and sticky gobs of it, and let fly. The man in black roared approval and pounded him on the back. Sheb grinned, one gold tooth twinkling.

Some fled. Others gathered in a loose ring around Nort. His face and the dewlapped rooster-wrinkles of his neck and upper chest gleamed with liquid —

liquid so precious in this dry country. And suddenly it stopped, as if on signal. There was ragged, heavy breathing.

The man in black suddenly lunged across the body, jackknifing over it in a smooth arc. It was pretty, like a flash of water. He caught himself on his hands, sprang to his feet in a twist, grinning, and went over again. One of the watchers forgot himself, began to applaud, and suddenly backed away, eyes cloudy with terror. He slobbered a hand across his mouth and made for the door.

Nort twitched the third time the man in black went across.

A sound went through the watchers — a grunt — and then they were silent. The man in black threw his head back and howled. His chest moved in a quick, shallow rhythm as he sucked air. He began to go back and forth at a faster clip, pouring over Nort’s body like water poured from one glass to another glass. The only sound in the room was the tearing rasp of his respiration and the rising pulse of the storm.

Nort drew a deep, dry breath. His hands rattled and pounded aimlessly on the table. Sheb screeched and exited. One of the women followed him.

The man in black went across once more, twice, thrice. The whole body was vibrating now, trembling and rapping and twitching. The smell of rot and excrement and decay billowed up in choking waves. His eyes opened.

Alice felt her feet propelling her backward. She struck the mirror, making it shiver, and blind panic took over. She bolted like a steer.

“I’ve given into you,” the man in black called after her, panting. “Now you can sleep easy. Even that isn’t irreversible. Although it’s... so...

goddamned...funny!” And he began to laugh again, The sound faded as she raced up the stairs, not stopping until the door to the three rooms above the bar was bolted.

She began to giggle then, rocking back and forth on her haunches by the door.

The sound rose to a keening wail that mixed with the wind.

Downstairs, Nort wandered absently out into the storm to pull some weed. The man in black, now the only patron of the bar, watched him go, still grinning.

When she forced herself to go back down that evening, carrying a lamp in one hand and a heavy stick of stovewood in the other, the man in black was gone, rig and all. But Nort was there, sitting at the table by the door as if he had never been away. The smell of the weed was on him, but not as heavily as she might have expected.

He looked up at her and smiled tentatively. “Hello, Allie.”

“Hello, Nort.” She put the stove wood down and began lighting the lamps, not turning her back to him.

“I been touched by God,” he said presently. “I ain’t going to die no more. He said so. It was a promise.”

“How nice for you, Nort.” The spill she was holding dropped through her trembling fingers and she picked it up.

“I’d like to stop chewing the grass,” he said. “I don’t enjoy it no more. It don’t seem right for a man touched by God to be chewing the weed.”

“Then why don’t you stop?”

Her exasperation startled her into looking at him as a man again, rather than an infernal miracle. What she saw was a rather sad-looking specimen only half-stoned, looking hangdog and ashamed. She could not be frightened by him anymore.

“I shake,” he said. “And I want it. I can’t stop. Allie, you was always so good to me — “he began to weep. “I can’t even stop peeing myself.”

She walked to the table and hesitated there, uncertain.

“He could have made me not want it,” he said through the tears. “He could have done that if he could have made me be alive. I ain’t complaining ... I don’t want to complain...” He stared around hauntedly and whispered, “He might strike me dead if I did.”

“Maybe it’s a joke. He seemed to have quite a sense of humor.”

Nort took his poke from where it dangled inside his shirt and brought out a handful of grass. Unthinkingly she knocked it away and then drew her hand back, horrified.

“I can’t help it, Allie, I can’t — “and he made a crippled dive for the poke.

She could have stopped him, but she made no effort. She went back to lighting the lamps, tired although the evening had barely begun.

But nobody came in that night except old man Kennerly, who had missed everything. He did not seem particularly surprised to see Nort. He ordered beer, asked where Sheb was, and pawed her. The next day things were almost normal, although none of the children followed Nort. The day after that, the catcalls resumed. Life had gotten back on its own sweet keel. The uprooted corn was gathered together by the children, and a week after Nort's resurrection, they burned it in the middle of the street.

The fire was momentarily bright and most of the barflies stepped or staggered out to watch. They looked primitive. Their faces seemed to float between the flames and the ice-chip brilliance of the sky. Allie watched them and felt a pang of fleeting despair for the sad times of the world. Things had stretched apart. There was no glue at the center of things anymore. She had never seen the ocean, never would.

"If I had grits," she murmured, "If I had guts, guts, guts..."

Nort raised his head at the sound of her voice and smiled emptily at her from hell. She had no guts. Only a bar and a scar.

The fire burned down rapidly and her customers came back in. She began to dose herself with the Star Whiskey, and by midnight she was blackly drunk.

VIII

She ceased her narrative, and when he made no immediate comment, she thought at first that the story had put him to sleep. She had begun to drowse herself when he asked: "That's all?"

"Yes. That's all. It's very late."

"Um." He was rolling another cigarette.

"Don't go getting your tobacco dandruff in my bed," she told him, more sharply than she had intended.

"No."

Silence again. The tip of his cigarette winked off and on.

"You'll be leaving in the morning," she said dully.

"I should. I think he's left a trap for me here."

"Don't go," she said.

"We'll see."

He turned on his side away from her, but she was comforted. He would stay. She drowsed.

On the edge of sleep she thought again about the way Nort had addressed him, in that strange talk. She had not seen him express emotion before or since. Even his lovemaking had been a silent thing, and only at the last had his breathing roughened and then stopped for a minute. He was like something out of a fairytale or a myth, the last of his breed in a world that was writing the last page of its book. It didn't matter. He would stay for a while. Tomorrow was time enough to think, or the day after that. She slept.

IX

In the morning she cooked him grits which he ate without comment. He shoveled them into his mouth without thinking about her, hardly seeing her. He knew he should go. Every minute he sat here the man in black was further away —

probably into the desert by now. His path had been undeviatingly south.

“Do you have a map?” he asked suddenly, looking up.

“Of the town?” she laughed. “There isn’t enough of it to need a map.”

“No. Of what’s south of here.”

Her smile faded. “The desert. Just the desert. I thought you’d stay for a little.”

“What’s south of the desert?”

“How would T know? Nobody crosses it. Nobody’s tried since I was here.” She wiped her hands on her apron, got potholders, and dumped the tub of water she had been heating into the sink, where it splashed and steamed.

He got up.

“Where are you going?” She heard the shrill fear in her voice and hated it.

“To the stable. If anyone knows, the hostler will.” He put his hands on her shoulders. The hands were warm. “And to arrange for my mule. If I’m going to be here, he should be taken care of. For when I leave.”

But not yet. She looked up at him. “But you watch that Kennerly. If he doesn’t know a thing, he’ll make it up.”

When he left she turned to the sink, feeling the hot, warm drift of her grateful tears.

Kennerly was toothless, unpleasant, and plagued with daughters. Two half-grown ones peeked at the gunslinger from the dusty shadows of the barn. A baby drooled happily in the dirt. A full-grown one, blonde, dirty, sensual, watched with a speculative curiosity as she drew water from the groaning pump beside the building.

The hostler met him halfway between the door to his establishment and the street. His manner vacillated between hostility and a craven sort of fawning —

like a stud mongrel that has been kicked too often.

“It’s bein’ cared for,” he said, and before the gunslinger could reply, Kennerly turned on his daughter: “You get in, Soobie! You get right the hell in!”

Soobie began to drag her bucket sullenly toward the shack appended to the barn.

“You meant my mule,” the gunslinger said.

“Yes, sir. Ain’t seen a mule in quite a time. Time was they used to grow up wild for want of ‘em, but the world has moved on. Ain’t seen nothin’ but a few oxen and the coach horses and... Soobie, I’ll whale you, ‘fore God!”

“I don’t bite,” the gunslinger said pleasantly.

Kennerly cringed a little. ‘It ain’t you. No, sir, it ain’t you.” He grinned loosely. “She’s just naturally gawky.

She’s got a devil. She’s wild.” His eyes darkened. “It’s coming to Last Times, mister. You know how it says in the Book. Children won’t

obey their parents, and a plague'll be visited on the multitudes."

The gunslinger nodded, then pointed south. "What's out there?"

Kennerly grinned again, showing gums and a few sociable yellow teeth. "Dwellers.

Weed. Desert. What else?" He cackled, and his eyes measured the gunslinger coldly.

"How big is the desert?"

"Big." Kennerly endeavored to look serious. "Maybe three hundred miles. Maybe a thousand. I can't tell you, mister. There's nothing out there but devil-grass and maybe demons. That's the way the other fella went The one who fixed up Norty when he was sick."

"Sick? I heard he was dead."

Kennerly kept grinning. "Well, well. Maybe. But we're growed-up men, ain't we?"

"But you believe in demons."

Kennerly looked affronted. "That's a lot different."

The gunslinger took off his hat and wiped his forehead. The sun was hot, beating steadily. Kennerly seemed not to notice. In the thin shadow by the livery, the baby girl was gravely smearing dirt on her face.

"You don't know what's after the desert?"

Kennerly shrugged. "Some might. The coach ran through part of it fifty years ago. My pap said so. He used to say 'twas mountains. Others say an ocean... a green ocean with monsters. And some say that's where the world ends. That there ain't nothing but lights that'll drive a man blind and the face of God with his mouth open to eat them up."

“Drivel,” the gunslinger said shortly.

“Sure it is.” Kennerly cried happily. He cringed again, hating, fearing, wanting to please.

“You see my mule is looked after.” He flicked Kennerly another coin, which Kennerly caught on the fly.

“Surely. You stayin’ a little?”

“I guess I might.”

“That Allie’s pretty nice when she wants to be, ain’t she?”

“Did you say something?” The gunslinger asked remotely.

Sudden terror dawned in Kennerly’s eyes, like twin moons coming over the horizon. “No, sir, not a word. And I’m sorry if I did.” He caught sight of Soobie leaning out a window and whirled on her. “I’ll whale you now, you little slut-face! ‘Fore God! I’ll — “

The gunslinger walked away, aware that Kennerly had turned to watch him, aware of the fact that he could whirl and catch the hostler with some true and untingered emotion distilled on his face. He let it slip. It was hot. The only sure thing about the desert was its size. And it wasn’t all played out in this town. Not yet.

XI

They were in bed when Sheb kicked the door open and came in with the knife.

It had been four days, and they had gone by in a blinking haze. He ate. He slept. He made sex with Allie. He found that she played the fiddle and he made her play it for him. She sat by the window in the milky light of daybreak, only a profile, and played something haltingly that might have been good if she had been trained. He felt a growing (but strangely absent-minded) affection for her and thought this might be the trap the man in black had left behind. He read dry and tattered back issues of magazines with faded pictures. He thought very little about everything.

He didn't hear the little piano player come up ♦ his reflexes had sunk. That didn't seem to matter either, although it would have frightened him badly in another time and place.

Allie was naked, the sheet below her breasts, and they were preparing to make love.

“Please,” she was saying. “Like before, I want that, I want — “

The door crashed open and the piano player made his ridiculous, knock-kneed run for the sun. Allie did not scream, although Sheb held an eight-inch carving knife in his hand. Sheb was making a noise, an inarticulate blabbering. He sounded like a man being drowned in a bucket of mud. Spittle flew. He brought the knife down with both hands, and the gunslinger caught his wrists and turned them. The knife went flying. Sheb made a high screeching noise, like a rusty screen door. His hands fluttered in marionette movements, both wrists broken.

The wind gritted against the window. Allie's glass on the wall, faintly clouded and distorted, reflected the room.

“She was mine!” He wept. “She was mine first! Mine!”

Allie looked at him and got out of bed. She put on a wrapper, and the gunslinger felt a moment of empathy for a man who must be seeing himself coming out on the far end of what he once had. He was just a little man, and gelded.

“It was for you,” Sheb sobbed. “It was only for you, Allie. It was you first and it was all for you. I — ah, oh God, dear God —” The words dissolved into a paroxysm of unintelligibilities, finally to tears. He rocked back and forth, holding his broken wrists to his belly.

“Shhh. Shhh. Let me see.” She knelt beside him. “Broken. Sheb, you ass. Didn’t you know you were never strong?” She helped him to his feet. He tried to hold his hands to his face, but they would not obey, and he wept nakedly. “Come on over to the table and let me see what I can do.”

She led him to the table and set his wrists with slats of kindling from the fire box. He wept weakly and without volition, and left without looking back.

She came back to the bed. “Where were we?”

“No,” he said.

She said patiently, “You knew about that. There’s nothing to be done. What else is there?” She touched his shoulder. “Except I’m glad that you are so strong.”

“Not now,” he said thickly.

“I can make you strong —”

“No,” he said. “You can’t do that.”

XII

The next night the bar was closed. It was whatever passed for the Sabbath in Tull. The gunslinger went to the tiny, leaning church by the graveyard while Allie washed tables with strong disinfectant and rinsed kerosene lamp chimnies in soapy water.

An odd purple dusk had fallen, and the church, lit from the inside, looked almost like a blast furnace from the road.

“I don’t go,” Allie had said shortly. “The woman who preaches has poison religion. Let the respectable ones go.

He stood in the vestibule, hidden in a shadow, looking in. The pews were gone and the congregation stood (he saw Kennerly and his brood; Castner, owner of the town’s scrawny dry-goods emporium and his slat-sided wife; a few barflies; a few “town” women he had never seen before; and, surprisingly, Sheb). They were singing a hymn raggedly, a cappella. He looked curiously at the mountainous woman at the pulpit. Allie had said: “She lives alone, hardly ever sees anybody.

Only comes out on Sunday to serve up the hellfire. Her name is Sylvia Pittston.

She’s crazy, but she’s got the hoodoo on them. They like it that way. It suits them.”

No description could take the measure of the woman.

Breasts like earthworks. A huge pillar of a neck overtopped by a pasty white moon of a face, in which blinked eyes so large and so dark that they seemed to be bottomless tarns. Her hair was a beautiful rich brown and it was piled atop her head in a haphazard, lunatic sprawl, held by a hairpin big enough to be a meat skewer. She wore a dress that seemed to be made of burlap. The arms that

held the hymnal were slabs. Her skin was creamy, unmarked, lovely. He thought that she must top three hundred pounds. He felt a sudden red lust for her that made him feel shaky, and he turned his head and looked away.

“Shall we gather at the river,

The beautiful, the beautiful,

The riiiiiver,

Shall we gather at the river,

That flows by the Kingdom of God.”

The last note of the last chorus faded off, and there was a moment of shuffling and coughing.

She waited. When they were settled, she spread her hands over them, as if in benediction. It was an evocative gesture.

“My dear little brothers and sisters in Christ.”

It was a haunting line. For a moment the gunslinger felt mixed feelings of nostalgia and fear, stitched in with an eerie feeling of déjà vu — he thought: I dreamed this. When? He shook it off. The audience — perhaps twenty-five all told — had become dead silent.

“The subject of our meditation tonight is The Interloper.” Her voice was sweet, melodious, the speaking voice of a well-trained soprano.

“A little rustle ran through the audience.

“I feel,” Sylvia Pittston said reflectively, “I feel that I know everyone in The Book personally. In the last five years I have worn out five Bibles, and uncountable numbers before that. I love the story, and I love the players in that story. I have walked arm in arm in the lion’s den with Daniel. I stood with David when he was tempted by Bathsheba as she bathed at the pool. I have been in the fiery

furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I slew two thousand with Samson and was blinded with St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I wept with Mary at Golgotha.”

A soft, shurring sigh in the audience.

“I have known and loved them. There is only one —one — “she held up a finger — “only one player in the greatest of all dramas that I do not know. Only one who stands outside with his face in the shadow. Only one that makes my body tremble and my spirit quail. I fear him. I don’t know his mind and I fear him. I fear The Interloper.”

Another sigh. One of the women had put a hand over her mouth as if to stop a sound and was rocking, rocking.

“The Interloper who came to Eve as a snake on its belly, grinning and writhing.

The Interloper who walked among the Children of Israel while Moses was up on the Mount, who whispered to them to make a golden idol, a golden calf, and to worship it with foulness and fornication.”

Moans, nods.

“The Interloper! He stood on the balcony with Jezebel and watched as King Ahaz fell screaming to his death, and he and she grinned as the dogs gathered and lapped up his life’s blood. Oh, my little brothers and sisters, watch thou for The Interloper.”

“Yes, O Jesus — “The man the gunslinger had first noticed coming into town, the one with the straw hat.

“He’s always been there, my brothers and sisters. But I don’t know his mind. And you don’t know his mind. Who could understand the awful darkness that swirls there, the pride like pylons, the titanic blasphemy, the unholy glee? And the madness! The cyclopean, gibbering madness that walks and crawls and wriggles through men’s most awful wants and desires?”

“O Jesus Savior — “

“It was him who took our Lord up on the mountain —““Yes — “

“It was him that tempted him and shewed him all the world and the world’s pleasures —“Yesss — “

“It’s him that will come back when Last Times come on the world.., and they are coming, my brothers and sisters, can’t you feel they are?”

“Yesss — “

Rocking and sobbing, the congregation became a sea; the woman seemed to point at all of them, none of them.

“It’s him that will come as the Antichrist, to lead men into the flaming bowels of perdition, to the bloody end of wickedness, as Star Wormwood hangs blazing in the sky, as gall gnaws at the vitals of the children, as women’s wombs give forth monstrosities, as the works of men’s hands turn to blood — “

“Ahhh — “

“Ah, God — “

“Gawwwwwwww — “

A woman fell on the floor, her legs crashing up and down against the wood. One of her shoes flew off.

“It’s him that stands behind every fleshly pleasure ... him! The Interloper!”

“Yes, Lord!”

A man fell on his knees, holding his head and braying.

“When you take a drink, who holds the bottle?”

“The Interloper!”

“When you sit down to a faro or a Watch Me table, who turns the cards?”

“The Interloper!”

“When you riot in the flesh of another’s body, when you pollute yourself, who are you selling your soul to?”

“In — “

“The — “

“Oh, Jesus... Oh — “

“— looper —

“—Aw...Aw...Aw... “

“And who is he?” She screamed (but calm within, he could sense the calmness, the mastery, the control, the domination. He thought suddenly, with terror and absolute surety: he has left a demon in her. She is haunted. He felt the hot ripple of sexual desire again through his fear.) The man who was holding his head crashed and blundered forward.

“I’m in hell!” He screamed up at her. His face twisted and writhed as if snakes crawled beneath his skin. “I done fornications! I done gambling! I done weed! I done sins! I

— ” But his voice rose skyward in a dreadful, hysterical wail that drowned articulation. He held his head as if it would burst like an overripe cantaloupe at any moment.

The audience stilled as if a cue had been given, frozen in their half-erotic poses of ecstasy.

Sylvia Pittston reached down and grasped his head. The man's cry ceased as her fingers, strong and white, unblemished and gentle, worked through his hair. He looked up at her dumbly.

"Who was with you in sin?" She asked. Her eyes looked into his, deep enough, gentle enough, cold enough to drown in.

"The... the Interloper."

"Called who?"

"Called Satan." Raw, oozing whisper.

"Will you renounce?"

Eagerly: "Yes! Yes! Oh, my Jesus Savior!"

She rocked his head; he stared at her with the blank, shiny eyes of the zealot.

"If he walked through that door

— " she hammered a finger at the vestibule shadows where the gunslinger stood — "would you renounce him to his face?"

"On my mother's name!"

"Do you believe in the eternal love of Jesus?"

He began to weep. "Your fucking-A I do — "

"He forgives you that, Jonson."

"Praise God," Jonson said, still weeping.

"I know he forgives you just as I know he will cast out the unrepentant from his palaces and into the place of burning darkness.
"

“Praise God. ” The congregation drained, spoke it solemnly.

“Just as I know this Interloper, this Satan, this Lord of Flies and Serpents will be cast down and crushed... will you crush him if you see him, Jonson?”

“Yes and praise God!” Jonson wept.

“Will you crush him if you see him, brothers and sisters?”

“Yess... ” Sated.

“If you see him sashaying down Main St tomorrow?”

“Praise God... “

The gunslinger, unsettled, at the same time, faded back out the door and headed for town. The smell of the desert was clear in the air. Almost time to move on.

Almost

XIII

In bed again.

“She won’t see you,” Allie said. She sounded frightened. “She doesn’t see anybody. She only comes out on Sunday evenings to scare the hell out of everybody.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Twelve years or so. Let’s not talk about her.”

“Where did she come from? Which direction?”

“I don’t know.” Lying.

“Allie?”

“I don’t know!”

“Allie?”

“All right! All right! She came from the dwellers! From the desert!”

“I thought so.” He relaxed a little. “Where does she live?”

Her voice dropped a notch. “If I tell you, will you make love to me?”

“You know the answer to that.”

She sighed. It was an old, yellow sound, like turning pages. “She has a house over the knoll in back of the church. A little shack. It’s where the ... the real minister used to live until he moved out. Is that enough? Are you satisfied?”

“No. Not yet.” And he rolled on top of her.

XIV

It was the last day, and he knew it.

The sky was an ugly, bruised purple, weirdly lit from above with the first fingers of dawn. Allie moved about like a wraith, lighting lamps, tending the corn fritters that spluttered in the skillet. He had loved her hard after she had told him what he had to know, and she had sensed the coming end and had given more than she had ever given, and she had given it with desperation against the coming of dawn, given it with the tireless energy of sixteen. But she was pale this morning, on the brink of menopause again.

She served him without a word. He ate rapidly, chewing, swallowing, chasing each bite with hot coffee. Allie went to the batwings and stood staring out at the morning, at the silent battalions of slow-moving clouds.

“It’s going to dust up today. “

“I’m not surprised.”

“Are you ever?” She asked ironically, and turned to watch him get his hat. He clapped it on his head and brushed past her.

“Sometimes,” he told her. He only saw her once more alive.

XV

By the time he reached Sylvia Pittston's shack, the wind had died utterly and the whole world seemed to wait. He had been in desert country long enough to know that the longer the lull, the harder the wind would blow when it finally decided to start up. A queer, flat light hung over everything.

There was a large wooden cross nailed to the door of the place, which was leaning and tired. He rapped and waited. No answer. He rapped again. No answer.

He drew back and kicked in the door with one hard shot of his right boot. A small bolt on the inside ripped free. The door banged against a haphazardly planked wall and scared rats into skittering flight. Sylvia Pittston sat in the hall, sat in a mammoth darkwood rocker, and looked at him calmly with those great and dark eyes. The stormlight fell on her cheeks in terrifying half—tones. She wore a shawl. The rocker made tiny squeaking noises.

They looked at each other for a long, clockless moment.

“You will never catch him,” she said. “You walk in the way of evil.”

“He came to you,” the gunslinger said.

“And to my bed. He spoke to me in the Tongue. He — “

“He screwed you. “

She did not flinch. “You walk an evil way, gunslinger. You stand in shadows. You stood in the shadows of the holy place last night. Did you think I couldn't see you?”

“Why did he heal the weed—eater?”

“He was an angel of God. He said so.”

“I hope he smiled when he said it.”

She drew her lip back from her teeth in an unconsciously feral gesture. “He told me you would follow. He told me what to do. He said you are the Antichrist”

The gunslinger shook his head. “He didn’t say that.”

She smiled up at him lazily. “He said you would want to bed me. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“The price is your life, gunslinger. He has got me with child... the child of an angel. If you invade me — ” She let the lazy smile complete her thought At the same time she gestured with her huge, mountainous thighs. They stretched beneath her garment like pure marble slabs. The effect was dizzying.

The gunslinger dropped his hands to the butts of his pistols. “You have a demon, woman. I can remove it”

The effect was instantaneous. She recoiled against the chair, and a weasel look flashed on her face. “Don’t touch me! Don’t come near me! You dare not touch the Bride of God!”

“Want to bet?” the gunslinger said, grinning. He stepped toward her.

The flesh on the huge frame quaked. Her face had become a caricature of crazed terror, and she stabbed the sign of the Eye at him with pronged fingers.

“The desert,” the gunslinger said. “What after the desert?”

“You’ll never catch him! Never! Never! You’ll burn! He told me so!”

“I’ll catch him,” the gunslinger said. “We both know it. What is beyond the desert?”

“No!”

“Answer me!”

“No!”

He slid forward, dropped to his knees, and grabbed her thighs. Her legs locked like a vise. She made strange, lustful keening noises.

“The demon, then,” he said.

“No — “

He pried the legs apart and upholstered one of his guns.

“No! No! No!” Her breath came in short, savage grunts.

“Answer me. “

She rocked in the chair and the floor trembled. Prayers and garbled bits of jargon flew from her lips.

He rammed the barrel of the gun forward. He could feel the terrified wind sucked into her lungs more than he could hear it. Her hands beat at his head; her legs drummed against the floor. And at the same time the huge body tried to take the invader and enwomb it. Outside nothing watched them but the bruised sky.

She screamed something, high and inarticulate.

“What?”

“Mountains!”

“What about them?”

“He stops... on the other side... s—s—sweet Jesus!... to in—make his strength. Med—in—meditation, do you understand? Oh... I’m... I’m ... “

The whole huge mountain of flesh suddenly strained forward and upward, yet he was careful not to let her secret flesh touch him.

Then she seemed to wilt and grow smaller, and she wept with her hands in her lap.

“So,” he said, getting up. “The demon is served, eh?”

“Get out. You’ve killed the child. Get out Get out.”

He stopped at the door and looked back. “No child,” he said briefly. “No angel, no demon.”

“Leave me alone.”

He did.

XVI

By the time he arrived at Kennerly's, a queer obscurity had come over the northern horizon and he knew it was dust. Over Tull the air was still dead quiet.

Kennerly was waiting for him on the chaff—strewn stage that was the floor of his barn. “Leaving?” He grinned abjectly at the gunslinger.

“Yes.”

“Not before the storm?”

“Ahead of it”

“The wind goes faster than a man on a mule. In the open it can kill you.”

“I’ll want the mule now,” the gunslinger said simply.

“Sure.” But Kennerly did not turn away, merely stood as if searching for something further to say, grinning his groveling, hate—filled grin, and his eyes flicked up and over the gunslinger’s shoulder.

The gunslinger sidestepped and turned at the same time, and the heavy stick of stovewood that the girl Soobie held swished through the air, grazing his elbow only. She lost hold of it with the force of her swing and it clattered over the floor. In the explosive height of the loft, barn swallows took shadowed wing.

The girl looked at him bovinely. Her breasts thrust with overripe grandeur at the wash—faded shirt she wore. One thumb sought the haven of her mouth with dreamlike slowness.

The gunslinger turned back to Kennerly. Kennerly's grin was huge. His skin was waxy yellow. His eyes rolled in their sockets. "I — " he began in a phlegm—filled whisper and could not continue.

"The mule," the gunslinger prodded gently.

"Sure, sure, sure," Kennerly whispered, the grin now touched with incredulity.

He shuffled after it.

He moved to where he could watch Kennerly, The hostler brought the mule back and handed him the bridle.

"You get in an tend your sister," he said to Soobie.

Soobie tossed her head and didn't move.

The gunslinger left them there, staring at each other across the dusty, droppings—strewn floor, he with his sick grin, she with dumb, inanimate defiance. Outside the heat was still like a hammer.

XVII

He walked the mule up the center of the street, his boots sending up squirts of dust. His waterbags were strapped across the mule's back.

He stopped at Sheb's, and Allie was not there. The place was deserted, battened for the storm, but still dirty from the night before. She had not begun her cleaning and the place was as fetid as a wet dog.

He filled his tote sack with corn meal, dried and roasted corn, and half of the raw hamburger in the cooler. He left four gold pieces stacked on the planked counter. Allie did not come down. Sheb's piano bid him a silent, yellowtoothed good—by. He stepped back out and cinched the tote sack across the mule's back.

There was a tight feeling in his throat. He might still avoid the trap, but the chances were small. He was, after all, the interloper.

He walked past the shuttered, waiting buildings, feeling the eyes that peered through cracks and chinks. The man in black had played God in Tull. Was it only a sense of the cosmic comic, or a matter of desperation? It was a question of some importance.

There was a shrill, harried scream from behind him, and doors suddenly threw themselves open. Forms lunged. The trap was sprung, then. Men in long handles and men in dirty dungarees. Women in slacks and in faded dresses.

Even children, tagging after their parents. And in every hand there was a chunk of wood or a knife.

His reaction was automatic, instantaneous, inbred. He whirled on his heels while his hands pulled the guns from their holsters, the hafts heavy and sure in his hands. It was Allie, and of course it had to be Allie, coming at him with her face distorted, the scar a hellish purple

in the lowering light He saw that she was held hostage; the distorted, grimacing face of Sheb peered over her shoulder like a witch's familiar. She was his shield and sacrifice. He saw it all, clear and shadowless in the frozen deathless light of the sterile calm, and heard her: "He's got me O Jesus don't shoot don't don't don't — "

But the hands were trained. He was the last of his breed and it was not only his mouth that knew the High Speech. The guns beat their heavy, atonal music into the air. Her mouth flapped and she sagged and the guns fired again. Sheb's head snapped back. They both fell into the dust.

Sticks flew through the air, rained on him. He staggered, fended them off. One with a nail pounded raggedly through it ripped at his arm and drew blood. A man with a beard stubble and sweat—stained armpits lunged flying at him with a dull kitchen knife held in one paw. The gunslinger shot him dead and the man thumped into the street. His teeth clicked audibly as his chin struck.

"SATAN!" Some was screaming: "THE ACCURSED! BRING HIM DOWN!"

"THE INTERLOPER!" Another voice cried. Sticks rained on him. A knife struck his boot and bounced. "THE

INTERLOPER! THE ANTICHRIST!"

He blasted his way through the middle of them, running as the bodies fell, his hands picking the targets with dreadful accuracy. Two men and a woman went down, and he ran through the hole they left.

He led them a feverish parade across the street and toward the rickety general store/barber shop that faced Sheb's. He mounted the boardwalk, turned again, and fired the rest of his loads into the charging crowd. Behind them, Sheb and Allie and the others lay crucified in the dust.

They never hesitated or faltered, although every shot he fired found a vital spot and although they had probably never seen a gun except for pictures in old magazines.

He retreated, moving his body like a dancer to avoid the flying missiles. He reloaded as he went, with a rapidity that had also been trained into his fingers. They shuttled busily between gunbelts and cylinders. The mob came up over the boardwalk and he stepped into the general store and rammed the door closed. The large display window to the right shattered inward and three men crowded through. Their faces were zealously blank, their eyes filled with bland fire. He shot them all, and the two that followed them. They fell in the window, hung on the jutting shards of glass, choking the opening.

The door crashed and shuddered with their weight and he could hear her voice: "THE KILLER! YOUR SOULS! THE CLOVEN HOOF!"

The door ripped off its hinges and fell straight in, making a flat handclap.

Dust puffed up from the floor. Men, women, and children charged him. Spittle and stove—wood flew. He shot his guns empty and they fell like ninepins. He retreated, shoving over a flour barrel, rolling it at them, into the barbershop, throwing a pan of boiling water that contained two nicked straight—razors. They came on, screaming with frantic incoherency. From somewhere, Sylvia Pittston exhorted them, her voice rising and falling on blind inflections. He pushed shells into hot chambers, smelling the smells of shave and tonsure, smelling his own flesh as the calluses at the tips of his fingers singed.

He went through the back door and onto the porch. The flat scrubland was at his back now, flatly denying the town that crouched against its huge haunch. Three men hustled around the corner, with large betrayer grins on their faces. They saw him, saw him seeing them, and the grins curdled in the second before he mowed them down. A woman had followed them, howling. She was large and fat and known to the patrons of Sheb's as Aunt Mill. The gunslinger

blew her backwards and she landed in a whorish sprawl, her skirt kinked up between her thighs.

He went down the steps and walked backwards into the desert, ten paces, twenty.

The back door of the barber shop flew open and they boiled out. He caught a glimpse of Sylvia Pittston. He opened up. They fell in squats, they fell backwards, they tumbled over the railing into the dust. They cast no shadows in the deathless purple light of the day. He realized he was screaming. He had been screaming all along. His eyes felt like cracked ball bearings. His balls had drawn up against his belly. His legs were wood. His ears were iron.

The guns were empty and they boiled at him, transmogrified into an Eye and a Hand, and he stood, screaming and reloading, his mind far away and absent, letting his hands do their reloading trick. Could he hold up a hand, tell them he had spent twenty—five years learning this trick and others, tell them of the guns and the blood that had blessed them? Not with his mouth. But his hands could speak their own tale.

They were in throwing range as he finished reloading, and a stick struck him on the forehead and brought blood in abraded drops. In two seconds they would be in gripping distance. In the forefront he saw Kennerly; Kennerly's younger daughter, perhaps eleven; Soobie; two male barflies; a female barfly named Amy Feldon. He let them all have it, and the ones behind them. Their bodies thumped like scarecrows. Blood and brains flew in streamers.

They halted for a moment, startled, the mob face shivering into individual, bewildered faces. A man ran in a large, screaming circle. A woman with blisters on her hands turned her head up and cackled feverishly at the sky. The man whom he had first seen sitting gravely on the steps of the mercantile store made a sudden and amazing load in his pants.

He had time to reload one gun.

Then it was Sylvia Pittston, running at him, waving a wooden cross in each hand.

“DEVIL! DEVIL! DEVIL! CHILD-KILLER! MONSTER! DESTROY HIM, BROTHERS AND SISTERS!

DESTROY THE CHILD-KILLING INTERLOPER!”

He put a shot into each of the crosspieces, blowing the roods to splinters, and four more into the woman’s head. She seemed to accordion into herself and waver like a shimmer of heat.

They all stared at her for a moment in tableau, while the gunslinger’s fingers did their reloading trick. The tips of his fingers sizzled and burned. Neat circles were branded into the tips of each one.

There were less of them, now; he had run through them like a mower’s scythe. He thought they would break with the woman dead, but someone threw a knife. The hilt struck him squarely between the eyes and knocked him over. They ran at him in a reaching, vicious clot. He fired his guns empty again, lying in his own spent shells. His head hurt and he saw large brown circles in front of his ‘eyes. He missed one shot, downed eleven.

But they were on him, the ones that were left He fired the four shells he had reloaded, and then they were beating him, stabbing him. He threw a pair of them off his left arm and rolled away. His hands began doing their infallible trick.

He was stabbed in the shoulder. He was stabbed in the back. He was hit across the ribs. He was stabbed in the ass. A small boy squirmed at him and made the only deep cut, across the bulge of his calf. The gunslinger blew his head off.

They were scattering and he let them have it again. The ones left began to retreat toward the sand—colored, pitted buildings, and still the hands did their trick, like overeager dogs that want to do their rolling—over trick for you not once or twice but all night, and the

hands were cutting them down as they ran. The last one made it as far as the steps of the barber shop's back porch, and then the gunslinger's bullet took him in the back of the head.

Silence came back in, filling jagged spaces.

The gunslinger was bleeding from perhaps twenty different wounds, all of them shallow except for the cut across his calf. He bound it with a strip of shirt and then straightened and examined his kill.

They trailed in a twisted, zigzagging path from the back door of the barber shop to where he stood. They lay in all positions. None of them seemed to be sleeping.

He followed them back, counting as he went. In the general store one man lay with his arms wrapped lovingly around the cracked candy jar he had dragged down with him.

He ended up where he had started, in the middle of the deserted main street. He had shot and killed thirty—nine men, fourteen women, and five children. He had shot and killed everyone in Tull.

A sickish—sweet odor came to him on the first of the dry, stirring wind. He followed it, then looked up and nodded. The decaying body of Nort was spread-eagled atop the plank roof of Sheb's, crucified with wooden pegs. Mouth and eyes were open. A large and purple cloven hoof had been pressed into the skin of his grimy forehead.

He walked out of town. His mule was standing in a clump of weed about forty yards out along the remnant of the coach road. The gunslinger led it back to Kennerly's stable. Outside, the wind was playing a ragtime tune. He put the mule up and went back to Sheb's. He found a ladder in the back shed, went up to the roof, and cut Nort down. The body was lighter than a bag of sticks. He tumbled it down to join the common people. Then he went back inside, ate hamburgers and drank three beers while the light failed and the sand began to fly. That night he slept in the bed where he and Allie had lain. He had no dreams. The next morning the wind was gone and

the sun was its usual bright and forgetful self. The bodies had gone south like tumble-weeds with the wind. At midmorning, after he had bound all his cuts, he moved on as well.

XVIII

He thought Brown had fallen asleep. The fire was down to a spark and the bird, Zoltan, had put his head under his wing.

Just as he was about to get up and spread a pallet in the corner, Brown said, "There. You've told it. Do you feel better?"

The gunslinger started. "Why would I feel bad?"

"You're human, you said. No demon. Or did you lie?"

"I didn't lie." He felt the grudging admittance in him: he liked Brown. Honestly did. And he hadn't lied to the dweller in any way. "Who are you, Brown? Really, I mean. "

"Just me," he said, unperturbed. "Why do you have to think you're such a mystery?"

The gunslinger lit a smoke without replying.

"I think you're very close to your man in black," Brown said. "Is he desperate?"

"I don't know. "

"Are you?"

"Not yet," the gunslinger said. He looked at Brown with a shade of defiance. "I do what I have to do."

"That's good then," Brown said and turned over and went to sleep.

XIX

In the morning Brown fed him and sent him on his way. In the daylight he was an amazing figure with his scrawny, burnt chest, pencil-like collarbones and ring-leted shock of red hair. The bird perched on his shoulder.

“The mule?” The gunslinger asked.

“I’ll eat it,” Brown said.

“Okay.”

Brown offered his hand and the gunslinger shook it. The dweller nodded to the south. “Walk easy. “

“You know it.”

They nodded at each other and then the gunslinger walked away, his body festooned with guns and water. He looked back once. Brown was rooting furiously at his little combed. The crow was perched on the low roof of his dwelling like a gargoyle.

XX

The fire was down, and the stars had begun to pale off. The wind walked restlessly. The gunslinger twitched in his sleep and was still again. He dreamed a thirsty dream. In the darkness the shape of the mountains was invisible. The thoughts of guilt had faded. The desert had baked them out. He found himself thinking more and more about Cort, who had taught him to shoot, instead. Cort had known black from white.

He stirred again and awoke. He blinked at the dead fire with its own shape superimposed over the other, more geometrical one. He was a romantic, he knew it, and he guarded the knowledge jealously.

That, of course, made him think of Cort again. He didn't know where Cort was.

The world had moved on.

The gunslinger shouldered his tote sack and moved on with it.