

PARDNERS

By WALTER HACKETT

Drawings by W. Herbert Dunton

IT was the opinion of Billy Bender, the bartender at the Grub Gulch Palace hotel, a man whose avocation gave him rather a broad point of view, that if Jack Fuller tried to draw on his partner Reverse Dawson, when they met, the latter was also privileged.

Judge Onderdonk of Fresno, whose familiarity with the code was proverbial, held otherwise, however. According to the Judge, Reverse as a man of honor should permit Fuller to take a shot at him before making a hostile sign. In support of this position the Judge adduced several precedents, in each case suppressing the names, all of which he assured his hearers were famous, because in everyone as in the present case, a woman had been involved.

It was this bewildering uncertainty as to how the men would act that had drawn the whole county into town to witness the meeting. Ever since it had been known that Reverse Dawson had brought Sally Fisher, the belle of Mariposa, to Grub Gulch as his bride, and that they were stopping at the Palace hotel, well informed people knew that something was bound to happen when Dawson met his partner. Therefore, mining for the day was suspended and everyone hastened to town to be present at the catastrophe.

It was this phase of the affair that was predominant, though even it could not entirely drown the wonder at Miss Fisher's action. Of all the women south of Stockton and north of the divide, she was the most eagerly sought. Every unattached man in the region had gallantly offered her his hand and fortune, and she chose Dawson. Why, no one could say. Reverse (he had earned that sobriquet by a habit of wearing his waistcoat inside out on dress occasions under the pleasing fancy that it gave him a fashionable air) was twenty-five years her senior, poor, inclined to be lazy, and entirely uninteresting. To explain her action was indeed difficult, and only Bender had the temerity to attempt it.

"It could not have been for money," he declared, leaning across the bar and facing a group of enthralled listeners, "because there isn't enough money in the world to tempt any woman to marry Reverse, and besides, he hasn't got any, anyhow. So you've just got to put it down to natural cussedness, which all women has and most of them uses when they ain't busy at anything else."

And this dictum was universally accepted as correct. It might perhaps have found contradiction on the other side of the affair had not been of such absorbing interest. But in the contemplation of what the Sunset partners would do when they met all else was put aside. For five years they had worked the old Sunset claim on Almaden Mountain together, and their devotion was proverbial. Five years is a long time for men to stay together, when every day their luck grows worse, and that is what had happened to the Sunset partners. Their reverses seemed only to bring them closer together. Dawson, who was much the elder and more demonstrative, showed his deep affection in a thousand ways. When Fuller had one of his wild spells and was drinking heavily, he would follow him for hours to see that he came to no harm, and when at last he was utterly overcome by liquor he would care for him as tenderly as for a baby. His gentle nature could never be aroused except by some slight to Fuller, and then he would fight like a demon. And now this same Dawson had gone over to Mariposa and married the woman whom Jack Fuller loved, whom he had sworn to make his wife. It was absolutely inexplicable, and Grub Gulch could only gasp and wait.

In Miss Fisher's wilful, romantic career, Fuller had supplied the most romantic episode. For three months he had been her constant attendant, her chosen suitor. They had ridden together, walked together, danced together, forgetting, it seemed, all the world but themselves.

Then came the Milligan dance at Duncans Mills. Miss Fisher had wilfully insisted on dancing twice with Dan Thomas, who owned the Lucky Strike mine. This was in direct defiance of Fuller's wishes. When her next dance with him came he stood by the door and made no move toward her. She waited for a moment, and then, tossing her head, walked across the floor to where Thomas was and asked him to dance with her again.

In an instant, Fuller, his face white and set beneath his dark, curling hair, and his eyes gleaming, strode across the floor to where they stood. "You can't dance with him any more!" he said.

Everyone in the room heard him. For a second she looked at him, and then, turning lazily to Thomas, she asked, in her slow southern drawl: "Well, Dan, ain't yo' ever goin' to be ready?"

For answer Thomas took her hand and put his arm about her waist.

Fuller's face grew even paler and he took a step

toward them menacingly. He checked himself, however, and said, "You've promised to marry me, but I won't let you. I turn you down here, before everybody. The next time I see you will be when you come after me and beg me to marry you. And when you are on your knees to me, maybe I'll forgive you and do it."

Then he turned on his heel and walked through a lane of silent people out of the room. The moment he disappeared, the curious, awed silence he had aroused vanished, and a dozen eager suitors for Miss Sally's favor had drawn their pistols and were making after him. She stopped them all.

"Don't any of you shoot!" she cried, a queer catch in her voice and her eyes shining peculiarly. "He's a man, and there's too few of them left now."

That had been six months before, and they had not met since. He had ignored her existence as proudly as she ignored his, though most people declared that they loved each other. And now she had come to Grub Gulch as his

partner's wife—a crowning insult to him. And so Grub Gulch contended that he was in honor bound to take summary action against the recreant Dawson.

By ten o'clock the one street of the town was crowded with men who had come in to see the shooting. Places that gave a good view of the street were eagerly sought, and one or two storekeepers sold admissions to their roofs.

At ten-thirty it was common gossip that Fuller was riding into town, that he was aware of the facts and was liquoring up at the Gold Dollar saloon. At twelve precisely Dawson emerged from the front door of the Palace hotel. Oddly enough, Fuller came out of the saloon. Instantly there was a rush among the crowd to secure places of vantage. Jim Wiggins and Billy Bender stood on the hotel balcony; Judge Onderdonk chose the topmost limb of a tree opposite. Other leading citizens quickly disposed themselves, leaving the road to the two partners.

Fuller saw Dawson first, and started unsteadily toward him. The liquor had taken a strong hold on him, and he staggered and swayed as he came through the hot dust.

Presently Dawson saw him and waited silently. Near and nearer came Fuller, and still Dawson made no movement. At last the men were within three feet of each other. The crowd watched breathless. And then Dawson put out his hand and said simply:

"Howdy, Jack."

The action amazed Fuller as it did the crowd. He could not understand it. For a full moment he stood swaying in silent wonder, gazing at the hand. Then his temper broke all bounds.

"You hound!" he cried through his closed teeth, "you mean, ornery whelp! You've give me the double cross—me that was your partner, and I'm going to get you!"

As he spoke he drew his revolver. The crowd saw the bright flash as the sun fell upon it. They saw it describe a half circle in the air. They saw Dawson stand fascinated as he watched it. Then they heard a drawing voice that had an oddly sweet contralto note call "Reverse!" and saw the pistol drop aimlessly at Fuller's side. Standing in the doorway of the Palace hotel was Sally Fisher. She was dressed in a gingham dress of heliotrope, a wide hat shaded her pretty face and lazy eyes, and she carried a sunshade coquettishly over her shoulder. There was a hush of breathless expectancy, and then she came forward.

If she saw the crowd, she did not show it. She walked as unconsciously as if she was alone in a



• "Well," He Said Roughly, "What Do You Want?"

meadow. Without a tremor she walked to where Dawson and Fuller stood silently watching her. As she reached them she thrust her arm playfully through Dawson's.

"Reverse," she said, "haven't you anything better to do on your honeymoon than hang about talkin' to drunken loafers? Come, sir! I want to go for a walk."

She turned him, and they started off. Then for the first time she looked at Fuller. Lazily she raised her eyes to his, and then—she cut him dead. He stood like a statue watching the two as they walked down the road till they turned a bend and were lost to sight. Then he threw his revolver to the ground with a curse and, staggering to his horse, leaped on it and rode madly off.

Instantly the crowd dropped from trees and nearby roofs and made their way to the bar room of the Palace hotel. Judge Onderdonk expressed their unanimous sentiments.

"I'll be hanged!" he said.

"Jack!" The lazy, drawing voice with its odd silver fullness drifted out caressingly over the redwood trees. Fuller, toilfully climbing the mountain toward his claim, stopped short and looked about him. No one was in sight. With an impatient gesture, he started to ascend once more.

That was the third time he had imagined he heard her call, and he decided that if he did not go to a doctor or get drunk without delay there would be something seriously wrong with him. Three times he had heard her call, and each time— He started up the grade with redoubled speed. The first time had been when they met again after the episode in Grub Gulch. He had come upon her suddenly lying full length under the trees, her head pillowed in her hands. Her pure beauty, so fresh and charming, burst upon him so suddenly that he stopped and drew in his breath sharply. And while he stood she turned her head and looked at him with a lazy curiosity in which there was a distinct shade of coquetry. Something in her look had sent the hot blood rushing to his face, and it was all he could do to turn on his heel and walk away from her without a word. After his back was turned he fancied that she had called his name, but when he looked back she was lying as he had first seen her, gazing above and apparently utterly unconscious of his presence. He had met her again on the Grub Gulch turnpike, and passed her without a look or a word. Once more he thought that she had called him, only to see her walking away, entirely unmindful of him.

And now he was hearing her again—this time