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## **Showdown in the Panhandle**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent out Texas and live in Hell*  
General Philip Henry Sheridan

In the spring of 1890, Harry Gunnach was forcibly booted out of the Nicolett Hotel in Lubbock for cheating at card games. He was accused of having some way of figuring out other players' hands and using his skill to swindle hundreds of dollars from the merchants and cattle ranchers of the town.

Soon, a mob of dispossessed gamblers assembled and began chasing after Harry, seeking to recover the moneys he had stolen. He ran for his life and barely escaped his pursuers by purloining a pony from a stable in the outskirts of town. After a three-day forced march, Harry covered the hundred miles between Lubbock and the new town of Oneida (which was later to become Amarillo), and made a stop.

Oneida's original location had been in a low-laying area prone to flooding and, after the disastrous 1889 rainy season, had just been moved to higher ground. The move had led to an influx of merchants, cattle buyers, and settlers, whose business had spurred the opening of the 66 Saloon next to the Crescent Hotel. Harry had heard about the 66 from another card sharp in Lubbock, who claimed it was already the roughest new bar in Texas and the easiest place to get killed outside of Mason County. Harry had been intrigued by the implicit challenge in the

description; its memory drew him to gallop towards Oneida as the citizens of Lubbock organized a posse to lynch him.

Harry hated the West. He was originally from Philadelphia, but had learned early in life that the City of Brotherly Love had no affection for him. After leaving Philadelphia, he had been forced to relocate scores of times, moving from one Eastern town to another in search of places where he could pass unnoticed. The vast emptiness of Texas had lured him in, but soon the big cities like Houston and San Antonio had become inhospitable. He continued to search for a place where he could thrive in obscurity as a card sharp, and at last discovered the northern corner of the state and chose it as the area most likely to fit his needs.

He had several hundred dollars left from his last games in Lubbock. He got himself a room at the Crescent and paid a visit to the town barber for a haircut and a shave. Then, dressed in his business suit, he walked the few steps over to the 66, which was a crude wooden shack squat on the yellow dirt of the panhandle. He entered the saloon at sunset and sat at a side table, ordered a whiskey, and nursed his drink, waiting for a card game to get going.

It did not take long. Six men had already gathered around the long table next to the bar; two seats remained empty. Harry watched for a few minutes, concentrating on the emotional and physical signatures emitted by the players. He concluded that four of them were amateurs, cattle ranch hands come to gamble away their pay. Another player, a giant of a bearded man named Karl, seemed to be an experienced player, for he took few risks and displayed no feelings on his stolid face. The sixth player was another big fellow called Lucius, who said little and sprouted a white goatee on his square jaw. Lucius' emotions seemed shrouded by a veil that Harry's probing could not penetrate. Harry concluded that the man was some sort of a card sharp, like himself.

They were playing Five Card Draw, a version of poker that had become increasingly popular since the war between the States. Harry liked that variation of the game, since each player immediately saw the hand he was dealt and couldn't stop broadcasting his feelings about it. For someone like Harry, able to read other people's emotions, no bluffs could disguise weak holdings. He did not need to know the exact nature of the hand held by each player to be aware of who held losers and which had good prospects, although that information would become more evident as the betting progressed.

There was a break as the players got their liquor refills and two of them went outside to relieve themselves. Harry sidled over to the gamblers' table and asked whether he could join the game in progress. Karl, the man who Harry pegged as the experienced player, seemed to be in charge of the game and nodded his assent as Harry took one of the empty chairs, two seats to the left of him.

The players' reaction to the hands they were dealt by Lucius was revelatory. After nickel antes were deposited, each player received five cards, one at a time, all face down. The remainder of the deck was placed aside, secured under Lucius' half-empty whiskey glass. The players picked up their cards and held them in their hands, being careful to keep them concealed.

Harry closed his eyes and cast his mind around the table. Two of the amateur players were unhappy with their hands. One inadvertently sighed in resignation; the fourth's mood had become upbeat. Karl only registered a subtle feeling of disquiet. Lucius's mind was blank.

A first round of betting began. One of the ranch hands immediately dropped out. The rest, starting with the one to the left of the Lucius, placed bets that either raised or met the existing high bet. By the end of the round, another of the ranch hands had dropped out.

Each of the remaining players then specified how many of the cards in his hand he wanted replaced, and received fresh cards from the deck in place of the ones discarded. There was more for Harry to learn then: one of the ranch hands asked for two cards, though he seemed unhappy with what he held previously and remained so after he was dealt replacement cards. Harry concluded he was getting ready to bluff. The other, which had previously seemed in a good mood, remained somewhat upbeat, though no more so than before the cards he had discarded were replaced with fresh ones. Harry knew he held at most a two pair. Karl had asked for two cards and had registered just a smidgen of satisfaction with the new hand he had gotten. Lucius drew only one card for himself, and had remained aloof after the exchange. Harry had asked for three cards and had given only a casual glance at them. He did not expect to win this hand.

There was a second of betting, after which Harry could predict the personalities and likely behaviors of most of the players for the rest of the night. Three of the cattle ranch hands were transparent: they would immediately telegraph the quality of their cards. The other one would try to bluff and pretend his hand was better than it actually was. Karl proved hard to read, except if he held a very good or very poor hand. Lucius remained a mystery.

Play continued for over two hours, through over a dozen games. At the end, all four cattle ranch hands had lost everything and had gone home or remained around the table as spectators. Karl was losing moderately. Lucius was ahead by about twenty dollars. Harry had won about forty.

Karl then proposed: "Let this be the last round. I'm getting tired and have a lot of work ahead of me tomorrow." Harry and Lucius agreed.

Lucius then suggested: “How about a twenty-dollar ante for the last game?” They all agreed. Karl opened the bidding with a five-dollar bet. Harry raised ten; Lucius and Karl checked.

Karl asked for a three-card replacement. After seeing his new cards, his eyes gleamed for just one second on the otherwise stony face. Harry sensed that Karl’s pulse had quickened. Lucius discarded one card, but again, Harry could not detect any emotions. Harry asked for three cards, and a quick look at his new hand showed a full house, sevens and queens.

Now the second round of betting started. Karl bet twenty, and Harry raised twenty on him. Lucius folded. Karl then raised two hundred, and Harry glanced at him briefly. The hopeful gleam in Karl’s eye was there, but then dimmed; at the end, his pulse had quickened and his heart was beating a bit faster. Harry realized he was bluffing. He felt like raising again, but it was not wise to be too greedy on his first night out: there would be more money to be made tomorrow. He called Karl’s bet, and they went into the showdown. Karl only had three kings. Harry’s full house won, and he readied to take the pot.

“Not so fast,” growled Karl. “You’ve been cheating. You are a damn card sharp!”

“Why do you say that?” replied Harry. “What have I done?”

“Somehow you knew my hand,” countered Karl. “I initially had a couple of kings, but when I drew the three cards, I saw another king and momentarily mistook a jack for a king, so I thought I had four kings. Then I raised two hundred and stared at the cards again. I immediately saw my error, but nothing could be done about it. Normally I would have expected you to hesitate for a moment or two, wondering what to do. You didn’t, but jumped on my bid right away. And your hand was good, but not good enough to be so confident. Somehow you knew I had goofed.”

“That’s hogwash,” said Harry, getting to his feet.

“Cheater!” screamed Karl, getting up himself, seizing Harry by the waist and forcibly throwing him on the table, scattering cards, money and glasses in the process.

“Let me go!” demanded Harry, but he was a small man and no match for the irate Karl.

Lucius, who had remained silent since dropping out of the game, cleared his throat. “I spent years in Japan training in *mushin no shin*, a form of mind control. From my training, I can play cards automatically, letting my brain simply plow through, while still well conscious of my surroundings. I noticed the same thing Karl said, but saw no signs of card sharpening as such. I reckon this man won the games fair and square.”

Karl let go of Harry and turned his rage onto Lucius. “What makes you such an expert on cheating? Are you in cahoots with this bastard?”

“No, sir” replied Lucius icily. “I am a marshal sent from Austin by the Governor to investigate the spate of recent killings in this town. Right now, I’m going to take this man into custody for questioning. Please step aside.” He got up and took Harry by the arm and led him out of the saloon.

“Now, you better come clean. What’s your real game?” Lucius demanded of Harry in a tone that left no room for prevarication.

“I do have a special gift,” answered Harry. “Somehow, I’m able to tune into the emotions of others around me. With time and practice, I have learned to profit from this talent. But there is nothing criminal about my gift. A good listener is almost as talented as I am, as my father used to say.” Harry shuddered apologetically.

“Come on, there has to be more to your story. You’re a Cryptid, aren’t you?”

Harry gave a deep sigh. “How did you know?”

“Back in Austin, Cryptids are getting to be common despite the city’s efforts to get rid of them. You can tell them apart because they are sort of scrawny and pale, like you are. But their main giveaway is their necks, because the glands around their necks are swollen up and they try to cover them by wearing scarves or bandanas, the way you do. Those glands send something into the air that helps them figure out what decent folks are thinking so they can take advantage. That’s how they beat regular folks at card games, and cheat them in business and get rich at their expense.”

Harry reacted violently to the accusation. “I’m no damned Cryptid like Bigfoot or the Goatman and the monsters of popular legends. I’m only a regular man trying to make a living the best way I know how.”

“That’s not the whole story, is it? You better come clean, or I’m arresting you.” He seized Harry by the arm and started to pull him away.

Harry pressed his lips tightly, as if he was unwilling to say more, but at the end relented. “Word among us is that our breed comes from the backcountry in Appalachia, where a knot of Scottish families had settled. There was a lot of inbreeding, and soon newborns started to show what we call empathy. At first, we didn’t think much of it other than it was nice that our kids didn’t get into fights because they understood each other so well. But then, sometime in the 1750s, we were driven out of our lands by the government and forced to spread into the towns and cities of the South.

“Once our peculiarity started to be noticed we became outcasts. Not only were we visibly different from the general population, but we had a perceived advantage over the rest of the people. Our kids were resented because they did better academically, so in some towns they were barred from schools and had to be taught at home by their relatives. As we grew more numerous,

our people worked hard and succeeded in all areas where human interaction is a factor. We are good teachers, doctors, lawyers and judges, preachers, merchants and salesmen, politicians, and even card players like me.

“But that success has come at a heavy cost. We live in fear and have to hide what we are, because if we are recognized, we are fired from our jobs, roughed up, arrested without cause, expelled from some towns, and imprisoned. There have been a number of unprovoked riots resulting in some of our people being put to death.

“So, yes, I have chosen to make a living playing cards. I’m pretty good at it, and the stupidity of my opponents allows me to win most of the time and cut my losses when the cards turn against me. Arrest me if you will, but I do nothing that any ordinary citizen wouldn’t do if he could.”

Lucius let go of Harry’s arm. “All of what you say may be true, but it doesn’t excuse you. You and your kind may think you are victims, but you still use your gift, if that’s what it is, for your benefit at the expense of normal folks. If I was not here on a law enforcement mission, I would be tempted to put a bullet through your skull, but I don’t want to add another dead scoundrel to this town’s tally.” After a moment of reflection, he added: “I reckon it’ll be enough to run you out of Oneida, but the word will get around these parts, so you might as well get out of the state. Go to the Territories to ply your trade. Maybe you’ll have better luck with them rubes in New Mexico or Oklahoma than here. And maybe you should change your line of business. Remember the ’84 election? That preacher George Ball who almost cost Grover Cleveland the presidency was a Cryptid like you.

“Do whatever you like, but don’t come back to Texas or I’ll put you away!”



Harry went back to the Crescent and climbed on his horse, tired but eager to skip town. He was last seen galloping away in a cloud of dust.

Later that day, three men from the Lubbock posse arrived in Oneida, looking for Harry and the money he had stolen. They left after an hour, chasing after a fugitive they would never catch: Harry had crossed into New Mexico.

Harry settled in the Taos area, changed his name to Gunn, and became an influential local politician during the Rio Hondo gold fever period. He discovered, as other Cryptids had, that more money can be made in public life than in saloon card games, with much less risk of getting shot.

T H E E N D