

# GOLD BULLETS

by Charles G. Booth

**CHAPTER I**  
**THE GOLD-MOUNTED PISTOL.**  
 There was nothing in Nathan Hyde's note that even remotely suggested a connection with what was to happen that night. If there had been, I should have quailed a little, for I am getting on for that sort of thing. Not that I am old—at 59 one has hardly begun one's declining years. My father, my books, and my collection of pistols fill my active moments, and Lucy, my niece, gives me such contact with life as I desire.

The note, which was written in Hyde's cramped hand, asked me to drop in and see him about an old pistol he thought might interest me. I don't care a great deal for Hyde—he is as smooth as a mahogany walking-stick—but he has an uncanny faculty of getting his hands on the rarest collectors' items. Lucy calls his shop the "Pirate's Cave," and Hyde, she insists, is a reincarnation of Captain Kidd.

It was early afternoon. I had nothing to do, so there was no reason why I should not see Hyde at once. Magnolia avenue is the best thoroughfare of San Felipe and I drove along it with pride. And yet, 20 years ago the San Felipe Valley was a sun-burned waste of sage and cactus. But that was before Andrew Ogden, our first citizen, brought water and accomplished another of those miracles which are the wonder of the Southwest.

Andrew is my next door neighbor and my friend. His wealth has left him unimpeded and we have much in common. In fact, there is between us that fine quality of affection which men achieve so rarely in their friendships. And if, at times, during the nine years we have known each other, I have felt a restraint upon his spirit, had a sense of looking upon a mask instead of the man himself, and if his antecedents are a matter of conjecture, what of it? My feeling was probably nonsense. But if it were not, hadn't he the right to seal what chambers of his memory he chooses?

Jeery Ogden, Andrew's boy, and Lucy have cemented our friendship. Lucy, I see, is wearing a handsome sapphire. I shall be sorry to lose her.

After the brilliant afternoon sunlight the weird gloom of Hyde's shop blinded me and I had to grope my way forward. There seemed to be no one about; and then I heard voices in the office at the rear. As I approached the office I saw that Hyde was talking with Roy Hammond, a local lawyer.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen."  
 I wear rubber heels and I instantly realized that they had not heard me coming. Hyde was sitting at his desk. His law-like head went up with a jerk and he shortly slid a letter over some object on his desk. Hammond spun on his heel with a muttered exclamation.

"Excuse me, Hyde," I said, withdrawing. "I didn't know you were busy. I'll drop in later."  
 "Ah, Peebles! Nothing of the sort. Come right in," Hyde protested suavely.

He stood up, "long and lean and bony," as Mr. Cotteridge's Ancient Mariner.

"I was just going," Hammond muttered. "I wanted Hyde to bring some junk down from the house."  
 It was none of my business that Hammond had lied. He is a tall, heavily built man with a meaty face which I never saw cast in any expression but one of cultivated affability. In his younger days Hammond prospected through the desert mountains. A lucky strike gave him a small capital and he went in for law. Now he belongs to every luncheon club and frat-



Hyde deftly slid a letter over some object on his desk.

ernal order in town and I believe he has designs on the state legislature. He wouldn't be entrusted with any of my legal affairs.

"Well," I said to Hyde as Hammond departed, "what have you got?"  
 "It may not interest you," Hyde's sly chuckle irritated me.

But when I saw him reach for his snuff-box, which he keeps in a pocket somewhere in the fall of his morning coat, I knew he had something I wanted. The snuff-box, an elaborate affair of richly chased silver, had belonged to a French Louis, and taking snuff from it is in the nature of a ceremony Hyde always indulges in before and after pocketing a fat profit. After much dithering he withdrew his hand without it.

"Quer?" he mumbled.  
 I concluded he had misplaced the snuff-box. "Never mind, Hyde. It'll turn up."  
 His hand came up with a jerk. "Ah, yes, to be sure. The

snuff-box. Let me see. Oh, yes, the pistol. Sit down, Peebles."  
 I did so and he resumed his own chair with an audible creak of old bones. My eye fell on the letter he had slid over the object beneath it. The incident bothered me. Why should Hyde have been in such haste to conceal the thing from me?

He quickly recaptured my attention by placing the revolver on the desk in front of me. It was all I could do to keep from leaping to my feet, seizing the revolver, and telling Hyde to name his price. Instead, I casually picked it up, aware that he was watching me slyly.

"Careful, Peebles. It's loaded." The revolver was a long-barreled Colt's .45 of a type in general use 20 years ago. On the butt was a mounting of filigree gold of crude workmanship. It was this unusual feature that had set my elderly heart thumping like a mill-race.

Hyde was watching me with his secret smile. I broke the gilt shells, one of them exploded, fell into my hand. I caught my breath. My hands began to tremble. Sweat dampened my forehead. I bent lower over the pistol to hide my agitation.

"Well?" Hyde asked blandly.  
 "Do you suppose it is authentic?" I parried casually.

He gave his sly chuckle. "You see the mounting. And the bullets—are they not gold?"

His smile broadened. "Peterson's initials are on the butt." As a matter of fact I was sure the gun was Peterson's although I could not prove it was, any more than he could. A thrill of pleasure ran through me. Ever since I began collecting pistols I have wanted to get hold of one of Peterson's gold-mounted revolvers. I had commissioned several dealers to be on the lookout for me, but I never had quite expected to realize my ambition. And yet here I was with one of the famous guns in my hand.

Peterson's fame was mainly local, but I was interested in him because he was typical of a phase of the West. I supposed he was dead, but he wouldn't be an old man if he were alive; no older than I, in fact. He had had his day in the '90's, but he was a young man at the time. Probably more legend than fact clung to his name, but this deepened my interest in him. I don't know that he ever did anything especially remarkable, although his rise above Shuff Valley's lurid horizon must have been as spectacular (and probably as short-lived) as that of the town of Torridity itself. At least, he lived bravely, extravagantly, recklessly; recklessly enough, indeed, to have stamped the imprint of his personality upon the gold-and-town and kept green its memory long after it had become one of that abandoned company of ghost cities which haunt the desolate places of the West.

Peterson, it seems, was an inveterate gambler. He would take a chance on anything and he would back his judgment with his last dollar. There is a story to the effect that once he played poker for a human life. He came to Torridity with nothing but his guns, grew wealthy, and lost everything he had at poker; or so the story goes. "Ten-to-One" appears to have been the sobriquet he became known by.

"Well, do you want it?" Hyde asked blandly.  
 I wasn't going to be caught too easily. "Where did you get it?" Hyde blew his nose. "That," he said delicately, "doesn't matter."  
 "Oh, yes, it does. If there's a story in it I shall want that, too."

"The story," Hyde said smoothly, "is not included in the price. The price is one thousand dollars." I laughed, wrote him a check

for \$500, and tossed it over. "There isn't more than \$150 worth of gold in the bullets and filigree." He picked up the check, precisely tore it into fragments. "My dear Peebles! I said \$1,000!"  
 I capitulated and wrote him a check. "Now give me the story," I growled.  
 He gave me his secret smile instead. "The story is not included in the price. Now is it for sale. Here is your receipt."  
 And talk as I would I could not get him to change his mind.

Hyde wrapped my treasure up while I speculated about the tale I hadn't got. My eye fell on the letter which concealed the article beneath it and I wondered if there was a connection between Peterson's revolver and the subject of Hyde's conversation with Hammond. I left the shop as happy as a boy with the newest thing in mechanical toys. But if I could

trade in your old tires now at their highest value. We'll make you a special allowance on your old rubber during this sale. By selling us your unused mileage you cash in on those tail-end miles that cost so much in time, worry and interruptions on the road. We buy those

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 Our special allowances plus today's favorable price situation enable you to get Generals on your car at the lowest prices ever possible.

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Our special allowances plus today's favorable price situation enable you to get Generals on your car at the lowest prices ever possible.

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