

Showdown at Mud Creek

BY MARC S. RUPERT



“Pete — come out and show yourself!”

Ash Taylor’s ringing words broke the closing days stillness and echoed off scattered ramshackle buildings lining the single street. The isolated town of Mud Creek, tucked away in the Uinta Mountains of Utah, had settled down for the night.

Stepping off the sagging plank porch onto the hard-packed dirt road, Ash Taylor took five unhurried steps forward and halted. Glancing westward up the narrow lane to the silhouetted peaks beyond, a red-orange twilight glow lit up his leathery face and unruly white hair with a strange hue. Yellow squares of lamp light stood out sharply from nearby buildings.

He felt at ease buckling the familiar holster around his lean waist. The weight tugging at his right hip felt reassuring. Grasping the smooth pistol butt, he loosened the gun for an easier draw. Years had passed since Ash last wore his shooting iron.

“Pete, I’m a-callin’ you out! Face me or be branded a coward!” Ash noticed a few townspeople glance out their windows, but none seemed too interested. It took more than an old man’s hollering to lure the residents of Mud Creek from their evening meals.

Ash’s seasoned eyesight caught a glimpse of movement in the livery stable’s wide, black opening across the way.

“I see you, Pete! Quit your skulkin’ and get out here in the open like a man!”

Suddenly, Pete came forth in the waning light of dusk, heading straight toward Ash in a determined fashion.

“Far enough,” Ash said.

Pete froze in his tracks, leaving a good 20 feet between the two.

“I’m a-callin’ your hand, Pete,” Ash said in a cool, controlled voice. “Ain’t nobody around to back you up; gotta face me alone and prove yourself.”

“Ever since gettin’ in town I’ve heard

nothin’ but how good you are, ‘bout your fancy tricks and such.” Ash adjusted his holster, continued to glare at Pete. “Sounds to me like you fancy yourself somethin’ of a slick-backed wonder!”

Ash paused a moment, enjoying the showdown.

“Pete, I’m sayin’ you’re a low-bellied four-flusher.”

Eyes unblinking, body motionless, Pete maintained a steady gaze. He looked bored, as if this situation occurred daily.

“So — won’t talk, eh?” Ash said triumphantly. “Figured as much. Your type packs a loose mouth when there’s nobody around to hobble it. Once backed into a corner, you go speechless.”

A faint grating noise came from the weathered porch behind Ash. The old-timer smiled, knowing who stood there.

Although Pete’s eyes shifted momentarily to seek out the new arrival, his body remained stiff and poised.

“Grandpa — please don’t get mad at...”

“Stay clear, Billy,” cut in Ash. Gonna find out if Pete’s the shinin’ marvel you done said he was over the supper table.”

Darkness was fast approaching. The crimson radiance had given way to a purple haze, and stars glittered in number across the heavens.

“This is it, Pete,” he warned.

Ash Taylor’s hand dipped in a blur, the pistol coming up in one flashing motion.

He pointed the barrel from long-ingrained habit and squeezed the trigger.

“Bang!” yelled Ash, his gun’s hammer falling on an empty chamber.

Pete sagged, fell on his side and went limp.

Ash stared in wonder, then holstered his weapon. Chuckling, he turned to the blond-headed boy.

“By jingo Billy — you was right ‘bout that flea-bag hound of your’n. Plays dead better ‘n any I ever saw.”

Billy leapt off the porch grinning from ear to ear and rushed into his grandfather’s embracing arms. Pete’s barking filled the silent valley as he deserted his act and circled the pair, longing for attention.