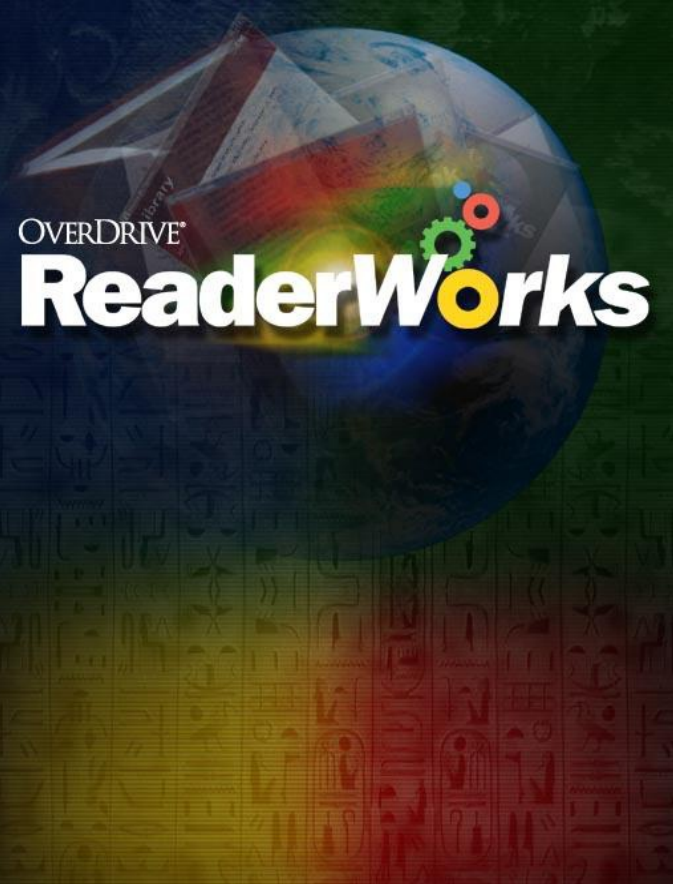




OVERDRIVE®

ReaderWorks

SLADE

It was almost dark when Slade rode into Dead Steer Springs. He was tall in the saddle, a grim faced man dressed all in black. Even the handles of his two sinister .45s, which rode low on his hips, were black. Ever since the early 1870s, when the name of Slade had begun to strike fear into the stoutest of Western hearts, there had been many whispered legends about his dress. One

story had it that he wore black as a perpetual emblem of mourning for his Illinois sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, who passed tragically from this vale of tears when a flaming Montgolfer balloon crashed into the Peachtree barn while Polly was milking the cows. But some said he wore black because Slade was the Grim Reaper's agent in the American Southwest - the devil's handyman. And then there were some who thought he was queerer than a three-dollar bill. No one, however, advanced this last idea to his face.

Now Slade halted his huge black stallion in front of the Brass Cuspidor Saloon and climbed down. He tied his

horse and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket. He lit it and let the acrid smoke drift out onto the twilight air. From inside the bat-wing doors of the Brass Cuspidor came noises of drunken revelry. A honkytonk piano was beating out "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

A faint shuffling noise came to Slade's keen ears, and he wheeled around, drawing both of his sinister.45s in a single blur of motion

"Watch it there, mister!"

Slade shovelled his pistols back into their holsters with a snarl of contempt. It was an old man in a battered Confederate cap, dusty jeans and suspenders. Either the town drunk or the

village idiot, Slade surmised. The old man cackled, sending a wave of bad breath over to Slade. "Thought you wuz gonna hole me fer sure, Stranger."

Slade smoked and looked at him.

"Yore Jack Slade, ain'tchee, Pard?"

The old man showed his toothless gums in another smile. "Reckon Miss Sandra of the Bar-T hired you, that right? She's been havin' a passel of trouble with Sam Columbine since her daddy died an' left her to run the place."

Slade smoked and looked at him. -

The old man suddenly rolled his eyes.

"Or mebbe yore workin' fer Sam Columbine hisseif - that it? I heer he's been hiring a lot of real hardcases to help pry Miss Sandra off'n the Bar-T. Is

that-

"Old man," Slade said, "I hope you run as fast as you talk. Because if you don't, you're gonna be takin' from a plot six feet long an' three wide."

The old sourdough grimaced with sudden fear. "You-you wouldn't-"

Slade drew one sinister.45.

The old geezer started to run in grotesque flying hops. Slade sighted carefully along the barrel of his sinister.45 and winged him once for luck. Then he dropped his gun back into its holster, turned and strode into the Brass Cuspidor, pushing the bat-wing doors wide.

Every eye in the place turned to stare at him. Faces went white. The bartender

dropped the knife he was using to cut off the foamy beer heads. The fancy dan gambler at the back table dropped three aces out of his sleeve - two of them were clubs. The piano player fell off his stool, scrambled up, and ran out the back door. The bartender's dog, General Custer, whined and crawled under the card table. And standing at the bar, calmly downing a straight shot of whiskey, was John "The Backshooter" Parkinan, one of Sam Columbine's top guns.

A horrified whisper ran through the crowd. "Slade!" "It's Jack Slade!" "It's Slade!"

There was a sudden general rush for the doors. Outside someone ran down

the street, screaming.

"Slade's in town! Lock yore doors! Jack Slade is in town an' God help whoever he's after!"

"Parkman!" Slade gritted.

Parkman turned to face Slade. He was chewing a match between his ugly snagged teeth, and one hand hovered over the notched butt of his sinister .41.

"What're you doin' in Dead Steer, Slade?"

"I'm working fer a sweet lady name of Sandra Dawson," Slade said laconically. "How about yoreself, 'Backshooter'?"

"Workin' fer Sam Columbine, an' go

to hell if you don't like the sound of it, Pard."

"I don't," Slade growled, and threw away his cigar. The bartender, who was trying to dig a hole in the floor, moaned.

"They say yer fast, Slade."

"Fast enough."

Backshooter grinned evilly. "They also say yore queerer'n a three dollar bill."

"Fill yore hand, you slimy, snaky son of a bitch!" Slade yelled

'The Backshooter' went for his gun, but before he had even touched the handle both of Slade's sinister .45s were out and belching lead. 'Backshooter' was thrown back against the bar, where he crumpled.

Slade re-holstered his guns and walked over to Parkman, his spurs jingling. He looked down at him. Slade was a peace-loving man at heart, and what was more peace-loving than a dead body? The thought filled him with quiet joy and a sad yearning for his childhood sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois.

The bartender hurried around the bar and looked at the earthly remains of John 'The Backshooter' Parkman.

"It ain't possible!" He breathed. "Shot in the heart six times and you could cover all six holes with a twenty-dollar gold piece!"

Slade pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket

and lit up. "Better call the undertaker an' cart him out afore he stinks."

The bartender gave Slade a nervous grin and rushed out through the batwings. Slade went behind the bar, poured himself a shot of Digger's Rye(190 proof), and thought about the lonely life of a gun for hire. Every man's hand turned against you, never sure if the deck was loaded, always expecting a bullet in the back or the gall bladder, which was even worse. It was sure hard to do your business with a bullet in the gall bladder. The batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor were thrown open, and Slade drew both of his sinister.45s with a quick, flowing motion. But it was a girl - a beautiful blonde with a shape

which would have made Ponce de Leon forget about the fountain of youth - Hubba-hubba, Slade thought to himself. His lips twisted into a thin, lonely smile as he re-holstered his guns. Such a girl was not for him, he was true - to the memory of Polly Peachtree, his one true love.

"Are you Jack Slade?" The blonde asked, parting her lovely red lips, which were the color of cherry blossoms in the month of May.

"Yes ma'am," Slade said, knocking off his shot of Digger's Rye and pouring another.

"I'm Sandra Dawson," she said, coming over to the bar.

"I figgered," Slade said.

Sandra came forward and looked down at the sprawled body of John "The Backshooter" Parkman with burning eyes. "This is one of the men that murdered my father!" She cried "One of the low, murdering swine that Sam Columbine hired!"

"I reckon," Slade said.

Sandra Dawson's bosom heaved. Slade was keeping an eye on it, just for safety's sake. "Did you dispatch him, Mr. Slade?"

"I shore did, ma'am. And it was my pleasure."

Sandra threw her arms around Slade's neck and kissed him, her full lips burning against his own. "You're the man I've been looking for," she breathed, her

heart racing. "Anything I can do to help you, Slade, anything -"

Slade shoved her away and drew deeply on his famous Mexican cigar to regain his composure. "Reckon you took me wrong, ma'am. I'm bein' true to the memory of my one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. But anything I can do to help you -"

'You can, you can!' She breathed. "That's why I wrote you. Sam Columbine is trying to take over my ranch, the Bar-T! He murdered my father, and now he's trying to scare me off the land so he can buy it cheap and sell it dear when the Great Southwestern Railroad decides to put a branch line through here! He's hired a lot of hardcases like this one -"

she prodded "The Backshooter" with the toe of of her shoe- "and he's trying to scare me out!" She looked at Slade pleadingly. "Can you help me?"

"I reckon so," Slade said. "Just don't get yore bowels in an uproar, ma'am."

"Oh, Slade!" She whispered. She was just melting into his arms when the bartender rushed back into the saloon, with the undertaker in tow. By this time the bartender's dog, General Custer, had crawled out from under the card table and was eating John "The Backshooter" Parkman's vest.

"Miss Dawson! Miss Dawson!" The bartender yelled. "Mose Hart, yore top hand, just rode into town! He says the Bar-T bunkhouse is on fire!"

But before Sandra Dawson could reply, Slade was on his way. Before a minute had passed, he was galloping toward the fire at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch.

Slade's huge black stallion, Stokely, carried him rapidly up Winding Bluff Road toward the sinister fire glow on the horizon. As he rode, a grim determination settled over him like warm butter. To find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style!

When he arrived at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch the bunkhouse was a red ball of flame. And standing in front of it, laughing evilly, were three of Sam Columbine's gunmen--Sunrise Jackson, Shifty Jack Mulloy, and Doc Logan. Doc

Logan himself was rumored to have sent twelve sheep-ranchers to Boot Hill in the bloody Abeliene range war. But at that time Slade had been spending his days in a beautiful daze with his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. She had since been killed in a dreadful accident, and now Slade was cold steel and hot blood - not to mention his silk underwear with the pretty blue flowers.

He climbed down from his stallion and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his pocket. "What're you boys doin' here?" He asked calmly.

"Havin' a little clambake!" Sunrise Jackson said, dropping one hand to the butt of his sinister .50 caliber horse-

pistoL "Maw, haw-, haw!",

A wounded cowpoke ran out of the red-flickering shadows. "They put fire to the bunkhouse!" He said. "That one--" he pointed at Doc Logan--"said they wuz doin'it on the orders of that murderin' skunk Sam Columbine!"

Doc Logan pulled leather and blew three new holes in the wounded cowpoke, who flopped. "Thought he looked hot from all that fire," Doc told Slade, "so I ventilated him. Haw', 'haw, haw!"

"You can always tell a low murderin' puckerbelly by the way he laughs," Slade said, dropping his hands over the butts of his sinister.45s.

"Is that right?" Doe said. "How do

they laugh?"

"Haw, haw, haw," Slade gritted.

"Pull leather, you Republican skunk!" Shifty Jack Mulloy yelled, and went for his gun, Slade yanked both of his sinister .45s out in a smooth sweep and blasted Shifty Jack before Mulloy's

piece had even cleared leather. Sunrise Jackson was already blasting away, and Slade felt a bullet shave by his temple. Slade hit the dirt and let Jackson have it. He took two steps backward and fell over, dead as a turtle with smallpox.

But Doc Logan was running. He vaulted into the saddle of an Indian pony

with a shifty eye and slapped its flank. Slade squeezed off two shots at him, but the light was tricky, Logan's pony jumped the shakepole fence and was gone into the darkness - to report back to Sam Columbine, no doubt.

Slade walked over to Sunrise Jackson and rolled him over with his boot. Jackson had a hole right between the eyes. Then he went over to Shifty Jack Mulloy, who was gasping his last.

"You got me, Pard!" Shifty Jack gasped. "I feel worse'n a turtle with smallpox"

'You never shoulda called me a Republican." Slade snarled down at him. He showed Shifty Jack his Gene McCarthy button and then blasted him.

Slade holstered his sinister.45 and threw away the smoldering butt of his famous Mexican cigar. He started toward the darkened ranch-house to make sure that no more of Sam Columbine's men were lurking within. He was almost there when the front door was ripped open and someone ran out.

Slade drew in one lightning movement and blasted away, the gunflashes from the barrels of his sinister.45 lighting the dark with bright flashes. Slade walked over and lit a match. He had bagged Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook.

"Well," Slade said sadly, holstering his gun and feeling a great wave of longing for his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, "I guess you can't

win them all."

He started to reach for another famous Mexican cigar, changed his mind and rolled a joint. After he had begun to see all sorts of interesting blue and green lights in the sky, he climbed back on his sinister black scallion and started towards Dead Steer Springs.

When he got back to the Brass Cuspidor saloon, Mose Hart, the top hand at the Bar-T rushed out, holding a bottle of Digger's Rye in one hand, with which he had been soothing his jangled nerves.

"Slade!" He yelled. "Miss Dawson's been kidnapped by Sam Columbine!"

Slade got down from his huge black stallion, Stokely, and lit up a famous

Mexican cigar. He was still brooding over Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook at the Bar-T, who he had drilled by mistake.

"Ain't you going after her?" Hart asked, his eyes rolling wildly. "Sam Columbine may try to rape her - or even rob her! Ain't you gonna get on their trail?"

"Right now," Slade snarled, "I'm gonna check into the Dead Steer Springs Hotel and catch a good night's sleep. Since I got to this damn town I have had to blast three gunslingers and one Chinese cook and I'm mighty tired."

"Yeah," Hart said sympathetically, "It must really make you feel turrible, havin' snuffed out four human lives in the space of six hours."

"That's right," Slade said, tying Stokely to the hitching rack, "And I got blisters on my trigger finger. Do you know where I could get some Solarcaine?"

Hart shook his head, and so Slade started down towards the hotel, his spurs jingling below the heels of his Bonanza cowboy boots (they had elevator lifts inside the heels, Slade was very sensitive about his height). When old men and pregnant ladies saw him coming they took to the other side of the street. One small boy came up and asked for his autograph. Slade, who didn't want to encourage that sort of thing, shot him in the leg and walked on.

At the hotel he asked for a room, and

the trembling clerk said the second floor suite was available, and Slade went up. He undressed, then put his boots on again, and climbed into bed. He was asleep in moments.

Around one in the morning, while Slade was dreaming sweetly of his childhood sweetheart Miss Polly Paduka of Peachtree, Illinois, the window was eased up little by little, without even a squeak to alert Slade's keen ears. The shape that crept in was frightful indeed - for if Jack Slade was the most feared gunslinger in the American Southwest, the Hunchback Fred Agnew was the most detested killer. He was a two foot three inch midget with a hump big enough for a camel halfway down his

crooked back. In one hand he held a three foot Arabian skinning knife (and although Hunchback Fred had never skinned an Arab with it, he was known to have put it to work changing the faces of three U.S. marshals, two county sheriffs and an old lady from Boston on the way to Arizona to recuperate from Parkinson's disease). In the other hand he held a large box made of woven river reeds.

He slid across the floor in utter silence, holding his Arabian skinning knife ready, should Slade awake. Then he carefully put the box down on the chair by the bed. Grinning fiendishly, he opened the lid and pulled out a twelve-foot python named Sadie Hawkins.

Sadie had been Hunchback Fred's bosom companion for the last twelve years, and had saved the terrifying little man from death many times.

"Do your stuff, hon." Fred whispered affectionately. Sadie seemed to almost grin at him as Hunchback Fred kissed her on her dead black mouth. The snake slid onto the bed and began to crawl towards Slade's head. Giggling fiendishly, Hunchback Fred retreated to the corner to watch the fun.

Sadie wiggled in slow S-curves up the side of the bed, and drew back to strike. In that instant, the faint hiss of scales on the sheet came to Slade's ears.

A woman was in bed with him! That was his first thought as he rolled off the

bed and onto the floor, grabbing for the sinister derringer that was always strapped to his right calf. Sadie struck at the pillow where his head had been only a second before. Hunchback Fred screamed with disappointment and threw his three-foot Arabian skinning knife, which nicked the corner of one of Slade's earlobes and quivered in the floor.

Slade fired the derringer and Hunchback Fred fell back against the wall, knocking the picture Niagara Falls off the dresser. His sinister career was at an end.

Carefully avoiding the python (which seemed to have gone to sleep on the bed), Slade got dressed. It was time to

go out to Sam Columbine's ranch and put an end to that slimy coyote once and for all.

Strapping on the twin gunbelts of his sinister.45s, Slade went downstairs. The desk clerk looked at him even more nervously than before. "D-did I hear a shot?" He asked.

"Don't think so," Slade said, "But you better go up and close the window by the bed. I left it open -"

"Yessir, Mr. Slade. Of course. Of course."

And then Slade was off, grimly determined to find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style once and for all.

Slade shoved his way into the Brass Cuspidor where the foreman of Sandra

Dawson's Bar-T, Mose Hart, was leaning over the bar with a bottle of Digger's Rye (206 proof) in one hand.

"Okay, you slimy drunkard," Slade gritted, pulling Hart around and yanking the bottle out of his hand. "Where is Sam Columbine's ranch? I'm going to get that rotten liver-eater, he just sent Hunchback Fred Agnew up against me."

"Hunchback Fred?! " Hart gasped, going white as a sheet. "And you're still alive?"

"I filled him full of lead," Slade said grimly. "He should have known that putting a snake in my bed was a no-no."

"Hunchback Fred Agnew," Hart whispered, still awed, "There was talk

that he might be the next Vice President of the American Southwest."

Slade let go of a grating laugh that even made the bartenders dog, General Custer, cringe.

"Well I reckon that now he can be Vice President of Hell!" Slade proclaimed. He motioned to the bartender, who was standing at the far end of the bar reading a western novel.

"Bartender! What have you got for mixed drinks?"

The bartender approached cautiously, tucking the dog-eared copy of Blood Brides of Sitting Bull into his back pocket. "

Wal, Mr. Slade, we got about the usual - The Geronimo, The Fort Bragg

Backbreaker, Popskull Pete, Sourdough Armpit -"

"How about a shot of Digger's Rye (206 proof)?" Mose Hart said with a glassy grin.

"Shut up," Slade growled. He turned to the bartender and drew one of his sinister.45s.

"If you don't produce a drink that I ain't never had before, friend, you're gonna be pushing up daisies before dawn."

The bartender went white, "W-well, we do have drink of my own invention, Mr. Slade. But it's so potent that I done stopped serving them. I got plumb tired of having people pass out on the roulette wheel"

"What's it called?"

"We call it a zombie," the bartender said.

"Well mix me up three of them and make it fast!" Slade commanded.

"Three zombies?" Mose Hart said with popping eyes. "M'God, are you crazy?"

Slade turned to him coldly "Friend, smile when you say that."

Hart smiled and took another drink of Digger's Rye.

"Okay," Slade said, when the three drinks had been placed in front of him. They came in huge beer steins and smelled like the wrath of God. He drained the first one at a single draught, blew out his breath, staggered a little,

and lit one of his famous Mexican cigars. Then he turned to Mose.

"Now just where is Sam Columbine's ranch?" He asked.

"Three miles west and across the ford," Mose said. "It's called the Rotten Vulture Ranch"

"That figursh," Slade said, draining his second drink to the ice-cubes. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy. It probably had something to do with the lateness of the hour, he thought, and began to work on his third drink.

"Say —" Mose Hart said timidly, "I don't really think you're in any shape to go up against Sam Columbine, Slade. He's apt to put a crimp in your style."

"Doan tell me w'hat to do," Slade,

swaggering over to pat General Custer. He breathed in the dog's face and General Custer promptly went to sleep. "If there'sh one thing that I can do, it's lick my holder, I mean hold my liquor. Ho get out of my way before I blon you in tno."

"The door's out the other way," the bartender said cautiously.

"Coursh it is. You think I doan tinow where I'm goin'?"

Slade staggered across the bar, stepping on General Custer's tail (the dog didn't wake up) and managed to make his way out through the batwing doors where he almost fell off the sidewalk. Just then a steely arm clamped his elbow. Slade looked around blearily.

"I'm Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael," the stranger said, "and I'm taking yuh in."

"On what charge?" Slade asked.

"Public intoxication. Now let's go."

Slade burped. "Everything happen'sh to me," he groaned. The two of them started off for the Dead Steer Springs jail.

After Slade was sprung from the pokey, Sandra Dawson's top hand, Mose Hart, went his bail. Slade filled both Hart and Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael full of lead (blame it on his terrible hangover). Then, mounting his huge black stallion, Stokely, Slade made it out to the Rotten Vulture Ranch to have it out once and for all with Sam

Columbine.

But Columbine was not there. He was off torturing ex border guards, leaving Sandra Dawson under the watch of three trusted henchmen - Big Fran Nixon, "Quick Draw" John Mitchell, and Shifty Ron Ziegfeld. After a heated shootout, Slade dropped al three of them in their slimy tracks and freed the fair Sandra.

The acrid, choking smell of gunsmoke filled the room where the lovely Sandra Dawson had been held prisoner. As she saw Slade standing tall and victorious, with a sinister.45 in each hand and a Mexican cigar clenched between his teeth, her eyes filled with love and passion.

"Slade!" she cried, jumping to her feet

and running to him. "I'm saved! Thank heaven! When Sam Columbine got back from torturing the Mexican border guards, he was going to feed me to his alligators! You came just in time!"

"Damn right," Slade gritted. "I always do. Steve King sees to that."

Her firm, supple, silken fleshed body swooned into his arms, and her lush lips sought Slade's mouth with ripe humid passion. Slade promptly clubbed her over the head with one sinister.45 and threw his Mexican cigar away, a snarl pulling at his lips.

"Watch it," he growled "my mom told me about girls like you."

And he strode off to find Sam Columbine.

Slade strode out of the bunk-room leaving Sandra Dawson in the smoke-filled chamber to rub the bump on her head where he had clouted her with the barrel of his sinister.45. He mounted his huge black stallion, Stokely, and headed for the border, where Sam Columbine was torturing Mexican customs men with the help of his A No.1 Top Gun - "Pinky" Lee. The only two men in the American Southwest that could ever approach "Pinky" for pure, dad-ratted evil were Hunchback Fred Agnew (who Slade gunned down three weeks ago) and Sam Columbine himself. "Pinky" had gotten his infamous nickname during the Civil War when he rode with Captain Quantrill and his Regulators.

While passed out in the kitchen of a fancy bordello in Bleeding Heart, Kansas, a Union officer named Randolph P. Sorghum dropped a homemade bomb down the kitchen chimney. "Pinky" lost all his hair, his eyebrows, and all the fingers on his left hand, except for the forth, and smallest. His hair and eyebrows grew back. His fingers did not. He has, however, still faster than greased lightning and meaner than hell. He had sworn to find Randolph P. Sorghum some day and stake him over the nearest anthill.

But Slade was not worried about Lee, because his heart was pure and his strength was as ten.

In a short time the agonized screams

of the Mexican customs officials told him he was nearing the border. He dismounted, tied Stokely to a parking-meter and advanced through the sagebrush as noiselessly as a cat. The night was dark and moonless.

"No More! amigo!" The guard was screaming. "I confess! I confess! I am - who am I?"

"Fergetful bastid, ain't ye?" Pinky said. "Yore Randolph P. Sorghum, the sneakun' low life that blew off 90% o' my hand durin' the Civil War."

"I admit it! I admit it!"

Slade had crept close enough now to see what was happening. Lee had the

customs official tied to a straight-backed chair, with his bare feet on a hassock. Both feet were coated with honey and Lee's trained bear, Whomper, was licking it off with his long tongue.

"I can't stand it!" The guard screamed. "I am theese whatyoumacalluma, Sorghum!"

"Caught you at last!" Lee gloated. He pulled out his sinister Buntline Special and prepared to blow the poor old fellow all the way to Trinidad. Sam Columbine, who was standing far back in the shadows, was ready to bring in the next guard.

Slade stood up suddenly. "Okay, you two skulkin' varmits! Hold it right there!"

Pinky Lee dropped to his chest, fanning the hammer of his sinister Buntline Special. Slade felt bullets race all around him. He fired back twice, but curse it - the hammers of his two sinister .45s only clicked on empty chambers. He had forgotten to load up after downing the three badmen back at the Rotten Vulture.

Lee rolled to cover behind a barrel of taco chips. Columbine was already crouched behind a giant bottle of mayonnaise that had been air-dropped a month before after the worst flood disaster in American Southwest history (why drop mayonnaise after a disaster? None of your damn business).

"Who's that out there?" Lee yelled.

Slade thought quickly. "It's Randolph P. Sorghum" Hh cried. "The real McCoy, Lee! And this time I'm gunna blow off more than three fingers!"

His crafty challenge had the desired effect. Pinky rushed rashly (or rashly rushed if you preferred) from cover, his sinister Buntline Special blazing. "I'll blow ya apart!" he yelled "I'll -"

But at that moment Slade carefully put a bullet through his head. Pinky Lee flopped, his evil days done.

"Lee?" Sam Columbine called. "Pinky: You out there:" A craven cowardly note had crept into his voice. "I just dropped him, Columbine!" Slade yelled. "And now it's just you and me...and I'm comin' to get you!"

Sinister.45s blazing, a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth, Slade started down the hill after Sam Columbine.

Halfway down the slope, Sam Columbine let loose such a volley of shots that Slade had to duck behind a barrel cactus. He could not get off a clear shot at Columbine because the wily villain had hidden behind a convenient, giant bottle of mayonnaise.

"Slade!" Columbine yelled. "It's time we settled this like men! Holster yore gun and I'll holster mine! Then we'll come out an' draw! The better man will walk away!"

"Okay, you lowdown sidewinder!" Slade yelled back. He holstered his sinister.45s and stepped out from behind

the barrel cactus. Columbine stepped out from behind the bottle of mayonnaise. He was a tall man with an olive complexion and an evil grin. His hand hovered over the barrel of the sinister Smith & Wesson pistol that hung on his hip.

"Well, this is it, pard!" Slade sneered. There was a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth as he started to walk toward Columbine. "Say hello to everyone in hell for me, Columbine!"

"We'll see," Columbine sneered back, but his knees were knocking as he halted, ready for the showdown.

"Okay!" Slade called. "Go fer yore gun!"

"Wait," Someone screamed. "Wait,

wait, WAIT!"

They both stared. It was Sandra Dawson! She was running toward them breathless.

"Slade!" She cried. "Slade!"

"Get down!" Slade growled. "Sam Columbine is-"

"I had to tell you, Slade! I couldn't let you go off, maybe to get killed! And you'd never know!"

"Know what?" Slade asked.

"That I'm Polly Peachtree!"

Slade gaped at her. "But you can't be Polly Peachtree! She was my one true love and she was killed by a flaming Montgolfer balloon while milking the cows!"

"I escaped but I had amnesia!" She

cried. "It's all just come back to me tonight. Look!" And she pulled off a blond wig she had been wearing. She was indeed the beautiful Polly Peachtree of Paduka, returned from the dead!

"POLLY!!!"

"SLADE!!!"

Slade rushed to her and they embraced, Sam Columbine forgotten. Slade was just about to ask her how things were going when Sam Columbine, evil rat that he was, crept up behind him and shot Slade in the back three times.

"Thank God!" Polly whispered as she and Sam embraced "At last. he's gone and we are free, my darling!"

Yeah," Sam growled "How are things going Polly?"

You don't know how terrible it's been," she sobbed "Not only was he killing everybody, but he was queerer than a three-dollar bill."

"Well it's over," Sam said.

"Like fun!" Slade said. He sat up and blasted them both. "Good thing I was wearing my bullet proof underwear," he said lighting a new Mexican cigar. He stared at the cooling bodies of Sam Columbine and Polly Peachtree, and a great wave of sadness swept over him. He threw away his cigar and lit a joint. Then he walked over to where he had tethered Stokely, his black stallion. He wrapped his arms around Stokely's neck and held him close.

"At last, darling," Slade whispered.
"We're alone."

After a long while, Slade and Stokely
rode off into the sunset in search of new
adventures.

THE END

"Slade." The Maine Campus June-August 1970. "Slade" is in some ways the most exciting of King¹'s uncollected juvenalia, an engaging explosion of off the wall humor, literary pastiche, and cultural criticism, all masquerading as a Western - the adventures of Slade and his quest for Miss Polly Peachtree of

Paduka. Published in several installments in the UMO college newspaper during the summer following King's graduation, the story is most important in showing King reveling in the joy of writing.

-excerpt from "The Annotated Guide to Stephen King, p.45.