

# One Night Stand

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Stephen Malone was tall, handsome, immaculate, and broke. He lay on his back, hands clasped behind his head, trying not to think about breakfast. Three weeks ago he had been playing lead roles in *Hearts of Oak*, *Hamlet*, and *Davy Crockett* on successive nights. Then the bookings ran out, the play closed, and the manager skipped town with the company funds, leaving them stranded.

For some time he had been aware of voices in the next room. A girl was speaking. „He can't! He wouldn't dare!“

The man's tone was touched with despair. „They say he's killed fourteen men. For the kind of money Mason would pay, the Kid wouldn't hesitate to make it fifteen.“

There was a pause. „Even before my hand was crippled I couldn't match him. Now I wouldn't stand a chance.“

„But Pa, if Hickok comes—?“

„If he can get here in time! He's not the kind to forget what I did for him, but unless he shows up I'm finished. Else, I'd give a thousand dollars to see Bill Hickok walk through that door right now!“

Stephen Malone knew a cue when he heard one. He stepped into the hall and rapped on the door of their room.

„Who's there?“ It was the man's voice.

„Bill Hickok.“

The door opened and he was facing a thin old man with gray hair, and a pretty, dark-haired girl. „You aren't Bill Hickok!“ The man was disgusted.

„No,“ Malone said, „but for a thousand dollars I will be.“

„You're a gunfighter?“ Else demanded.

„I'm an actor. It is my business to make people believe I am somebody else.“

„This is different. This isn't playacting.“

„He could kill you,“ Else said. „You wouldn't have a chance.“

„Not if I'm a good enough actor. Not many men would try to draw a gun on Wild Bill Hickok.“

„It's a fool idea,“ the man said.

„So there's an element of risk. I've played Hamlet, Macbeth, and Shylock. Why not Wild Bill?“

„Look, son, you've undoubtedly got nerve, and probably you're a fine actor, but this man is a killer. Oh, I know he's a tinhorn, but you wouldn't have a chance!“

„Not if I'm a good enough actor.“

„He's talking nonsense, and you both know it!“ Else protested.

„To play Hickok, son, you've got to be able to shoot like Hickok.“

„Only if I play it badly. You say the Kid is a tinhorn, I'll trust to your judgment and my skill.“

Brady walked to the window. „It might work, you know. It just might.“

„It would be suicide!“ Else objected.

Brady turned from the window. „I am Emmett Brady. This is my daughter, Else. Frank Mason wants my range, and the Pioche Kid is a friend of his. He was brought here to kill me.“

„The pleasure will be mine, sir.“ Malone bowed.

„Did anyone see you come into the hotel?“ Brady asked.

„Only the man at the desk. It was two o'clock in the morning.“

„Then it's all right. Jim Cooley is a friend of mine.“

„Get him to spread the story that Hickok is in town, and once the story is around, I'll make my play.“

„It's ridiculous!“ Else declared. „Why should you risk your life for us?“

„Miss Brady, as much as I'd enjoy posing as Sir Galahad, I cannot. I'm no knight in armor, just a stranded actor. But for a thousand dollars? I haven't made that much in a whole season!“

„You've got sand, Malone. Else, fetch Jim Cooley.“

„You've still time to back out,“ Else warned.

„I am grateful for your concern but this will be the first time I have been offered one thousand dollars for a single performance.“

Returning to his room, Malone opened his trunk and chose a blond wig with hair to his shoulders. He selected a drooping mustache. „...And the buckskin

jacket I wore as Davy Crockett. Then I'll remove the plume from this hat I wore in *Shenandoah*—“

The Pioche Kid stared complacently into his glass. Brady was an old man with a bad right hand. He was nothing to worry about.

Jim Cooley came through the swinging doors. „Give me a shot, Sam.“ He glanced around the room. „Wait until you boys hear who is in town! Wild Bill himself ! Rode in last night, all the way from Kansas because he heard his old friend Emmett Brady needed help!“

The Pioche Kid went sick with shock. Somebody was asking what Brady had on Hickok. „Nursed him back to health after a gunshot wound. Hickok nearly killed a couple of horses getting here. He's sleeping it off over at the hotel now.“

*Wild Bill Hickok!* The Kid hadn't bargained for this. He took up his whiskey and tossed it off, but the shudder that followed was not caused by the whiskey.

„Sam...?“ He pushed the empty glass toward him.

He could feel the excitement in the room. They were thinking they'd see the Pioche Kid shoot it out with Wild Bill Hickok, the most famous of them all.

Somebody mentioned the fourteen men the Kid was supposed to have killed, but the Kid himself knew there had been but four, and two of those had been drunken cowhands, and one of them a drunken farmer who had never held a pistol before.

Suddenly, desperately, he wanted out. How had he got into this, anyway? Hickok could shoot! He recalled the stories of Hickok's famous target matches with the renowned Major Talbot, at Cheyenne.

„He's the best,“ Cooley was saying. „Eyes in the back of his head, seems like. Remember the time he killed Phil Coe, then turned and killed a man running up behind him?“

Cooley smiled at the Kid. „Should be something, you and him. You've killed more than he has if you discount those he killed while a sharpshooter in the Army. But I did see him take four at once. Killed two, a third died later, and the fourth was never any good for anything after.“

Cooley finished his drink. „I'm gettin' out of here. I've seen too many bystanders get gut-shot. Sorry I can't wish you luck, Kid, but Bill's a friend of mine.“

Men moved to the tables, away from the bar. One hastily paid for his drink and left the bar. The Kid was alone, isolated, cut off.

What the hell was happening? This was Hickok! If he won they'd all slap him on the back and buy him drinks, but if he lost they'd just stare at the body as they walked by. He mopped his face. He was soaked with sweat, and he knew why. He was scared.

Mason was at the door. „He's comin', Kid. Be something to be known as the man who killed Wild Bill.“

Malone paused in the door to wave at someone down the street, then he walked to the bar. All eyes were on him. „Rye, if you please.“

Sam put a bottle and a glass before him. The Kid licked dry lips with a fumbling tongue. Desperately he wanted to wipe his palm dry on his pants, but he was afraid Hickok would think he was going for a gun. Now was the time. He should open the ball. Sweat dripped from his face to the bar. He opened his mouth to speak, but Malone spoke first.

„Bartender, I'd like to find two men for a little job. I'll pay a dollar each. It's a digging job.“

„You said... a *digging* job?“

„That's right. I want two men to dig a hole about“—he turned deliberately and looked right at the Kid—„six feet long, six feet deep, and three wide.“

„Whereabouts do you want it dug?“

„On Boot Hill.“

„A grave?“

„Exactly.“

Sam motioned to two men at a nearby table. „Tom? Joe? Mr. Hickok wants a couple of men.“ He hesitated ever so slightly. „To dig a grave.“

„And to make a slab for a marker,“ Malone said.

Sam was loving every moment of it. „You want a name on it?“

„Don't bother with the name. Within the week they will have forgotten who he was, anyway. Just carve on it HE SHOULD HAVE LEFT BEFORE THE SUN WENT DOWN.“

He finished his drink. „Good afternoon, gentlemen.“

He strolled to the door, paused briefly with his hand on the door, then stepped out on the boardwalk and turned toward the hotel.

Within the saloon a chair creaked as someone shifted weight. The Kid lifted a fumbling hand to brush away the sweat from his face and the hand trembled. He tossed off his drink, spilling a little on his chin. Never had death seemed so close.

What kind of a damned fool was he, anyway? What did he have to do with Brady? Let Mason do his own killing. Suddenly all he wanted was to be away, away from those watching eyes, staring at him, so willing to see him die.

What did he owe Mason? All he had to do was cross the street, mount his horse, and ride. Behind his back they would sneer, but what did that matter? He owed these people nothing, and there were a thousand towns like this. Moreover, he'd be alive... alive!

He wanted to feel the sunshine on his face, the wind in his hair, to drink a long, cold drink of water. He wanted to live!

Abruptly, he walked to the door. He had seen men die, seen them lie tormented in the bloody dust. He did not want to feel the tearing agony of a bullet in his guts.

There was Hickok, his broad back to him, only a few paces away. A quick shot... he could always say Hickok had turned.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, dimly he remembered *eyes in the back of his head*. On that other occasion Hickok had turned suddenly and fired... dead center.

The Kid let go of his gun as if it were red hot.

Yet he could still make it. He was a pretty good shot... well, a fair shot. He could—

Two men emerged from the livery stable, each carrying a shovel. Tom and Joe, to dig a grave... *his* grave?

He crossed the street, almost running, and jerked loose the tie-rope. He missed the stirrup with his first try, made it on the second, and was almost crying when he hit the saddle. He wheeled the horse from the hitch rail and left town at a dead run.

His saddle was hot from the sun, but he could *feel* it. The wind was in his face... he was free! He was riding, he was living, and there were a lot of other towns, a lot of country.

Brady turned from the window. „He’s gone, Else. Malone did it.“

„Mason’s leaving, too,“ she added.

The door opened behind them and Stephen Malone stepped in, removing his hat, then the wig and the mustache. „That’s one part I never want to play again!“

„Here’s your money, son. You earned it.“

„Thanks.“

„What would you have done, Malone,“ Cooley asked, „if the Kid had called your hand?“

„Done? Why this—!“

His draw was surprisingly fast, and he fired at Cooley, point-blank. Cooley sprang back, shocked. His hands clutched his abdomen.

His hands came away and he stared at them. No blood. No—!

Malone was smiling.

„Blanks!“ Cooley exclaimed. „You faced the Kid with nothing in your gun but blanks!“

„Well, why not? It was all part of the act.“

