



Lay that pistol down

by Gordon Kahn

From the *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1944

AT THE bar of the Silver Dollar Saloon the boys from the Tumbling-T Ranch are watching Black Dalton and the Pecos Kid. They know that only death can sunder the chain of hate between those two.

"Black Dalton," says the Kid evenly, scarcely parting his thin lips, "draw!"

Dalton, his hand cautiously distant from his hip, shakes his head. "I ain't swappin' lead agin' the Pecos Kid—not Black Dalton."

"Like I thought," rasps the Kid. "More like you to dry-gulch a waddy, yah yaller-gilled dehorn!"

Dalton, goaded to the quick, gnaws his mustache and fingers the diamond horseshoe in his cravat. The Kid, his, cold gaze never veering from the shifting eyes of his adversary, rolls himself a smoke, completing the operation with one hand.

"Yer wastin' yer time, Pecos," Black Dalton snarls. "I know that one. Yer temptin' me to draw, but I ain't doin' it."

Baffled, the Kid half turns to the bar and pours himself a moderate hooker (four fingers). He picks the glass up with his right hand, but like lightning he wheels in mid-gesture. The Colt in his left hand blazes once and Black Dalton staggers back, a bullet between his eyes. A derringer clatters out of his treacherous hand, limp in death. He is cold as a smelt.

The Pecos Kid, his cigarette dangling from his lower lip, picks up his glass and holds the fiery rye up to the light.

"This'n," he says, "this'n is on the late Mr. Dalton."

He swallows the drink in one gulp and smashes the glass against the back bar. Then with easy grace he turns to the door, his lithe back a target for any cowardly ball. But none dare shoot. The fear of his swift, deadly guns is still upon them.

Those who have witnessed that scene or its equivalent in the movies are well advised to treasure its memory. Its like will not be seen again, for it is now the Gotterdammerung of the centaur who spoke with a six-gun in each hand and never gave an order twice. It is the hour of twilight for the Western Hero. And the bicycle racks in front of the Little Gem and Bijou theatres throughout the land are empty in token of adolescent lament for his passing.

The Pecos Kid has been succeeded by a milk-fed man of parts—one part Sir Galahad, one part Chevalier Bayard, and two parts Model Youth. This one has yet to pistol his first man, drink his first tumbler of anything headier than lime coke, utter his first cuss, or, for that matter, embrace one female who is not his mother.

He is not a refined version of that nonpareil of sagebrush derring-do, but an entirely new specimen from the soles of his eighty-five-dollar custom boots to the crown of his fifty-dollar dove-coloured Stetson. He is the Singing Cowboy, a laboratory product, designed jointly by the Producers Association (otherwise called the Hays Office), the Congress of Parents and Teachers, the American Legion Auxiliary, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Legion of Decency, and forty-four State Censorship Boards.