

THE SHOOTIST—GLENDON SWARTHOUT—1975

SIX

He thought: Let them gawp. Let them conclude you do not give a good God damn.

It was the right place. The Constantinople had more class than any saloon he had ever seen, and would deserve its fame. The barroom was long, with a ceiling twenty feet high, and suspended from it were four three-balded [*sic*]fans which revolved slowly, cooling the room on this warm day, and which were powered, probably, by electricity. The floor was a mosaic of green and white tiles. The woodwork—bar, tables, chairs, wine booths—was mahogany bleached to a reddish hue and carved with intricate Moorish designs. The bar was perhaps thirty feet long, and fronting the mirror behind it, on shelves, were tiers of sparkling glassware sized and shaped for every libation, for whiskey, and beer, for champagne and wine and liqueurs. The cash register gleamed, as did the bar rail, as did the cuspidors, as did the light fixtures, which were grapes of glass. Each table top was inset with shell and beadwork in stars and crescent moons. Beyond the bar, this side of the archway, was a billiard table. Inside the doors, to the right, was a mahogany booth, with a door of frosted glass and gilt lettering: TELEPHONE.

It was the murals, however, the scope and subject matter of the murals, which stunned. They covered the walls, that over the bar, over the archway, and the full wall to the left. They depicted, in colors that whooped, in perspective that was fantastically out of whack, exotic scenes on the far side of exotic seas. There were domes and mosques and caravans of camels and pyramids and horsemen waving scimitars and minarets and palm trees and Sphinxes and tombs and dancing girls with navels as big as the tops of tin cans and boobs as pendant as hams hung on hooks and tents and oases on burning sands and dhows on rivers and dusty battles. The Constantinople had class, all right, but Books was in some doubt about the murals. They appeared to be the masterwork of a frontier genius who had been paid in alcohol or opium and who, by the time he had slap-dashed his visions and laid down his brush, had become either an addict or an irredeemable drunk. They spit in the rational eye. They kicked art in the ass.

He thought: Well, it will not be where I was that will count. It will be what I did.

Only then, after he had looked his fill, only then did Books acknowledge the existence of the others. Jay Cobb he could identify by his youth; Serrano by his plug-ugliness; Pulford by his attire and dealer's hands. The man in flowered suspenders and derby hat, Cross-eye's sidekick, he could not. One by one he considered them. He sensed their awe of him, and their unease. They knew why he had come, or believed they did, but none of the three principals, Cobb or Serrano or Pulford, understood why in hell the other two were here. And in their turn they stared at him, and waited, motionless, and stared. They were like actors on an empty stage, the five. The curtain had risen, the hour come. But they had no audience, save for one another, and even more bewildering, they had no play. They were assembled to take roles for which no lines had yet been written, to participate in a

tragedy behind which there was no clear creative intent, to impose upon senselessness some sort of deadly order.

Books gave them a cue. Stepping to the center of the bar, boot heels clicking on the tile, he turned his back to them.

The barkeep slid along the bar to him, treading on eggs. He was a long drink of water called "Mount" Murray, and he had moved from the Acme to the Constantinople when the latter opened. The wages were better, the atmosphere higher-toned. Murray had noted them enter, first the four, now the man who must be J. B. Books. What he was about to witness he could not imagine, except that it would be slaughterous, and every instinct clamored that on the floor or under the billiard table or any damned where in that room would be a damned dangerous place to be.

"Sir?" he said.

"I will have a glass of white wine," said Books.

"Yes, sir."

The barkeep poured a glass, and when he set it on the bar Books put down his dollar bill. Murray did not seem to see it. He about-faced and strode along the bar past the billiard table and through the archway with as much dignity as his ladder-legs would allow.

Books was alone. Using his left hand, resting his right on the bar near the opening between the lapels of his Prince Albert coat, he sipped the wine. He faced the mirror, in which was reflected the entire panorama of the room behind him, and its occupants.

He thought: Watch now, Victoria, watch. We are checking to each other now, which is a word we use in poker, a game of cards, but any second one of them will bet. One of them, Your Majesty, will make a move.

Waiting, surveying the room in the mirror through an opacity of pain, he could accept at last the horror of his countenance. This was the face the world would see tomorrow, at the undertaker's, after it had paid its fifty cents. It would have its money's worth tomorrow, and tomorrow night, bad dreams.

He thought: I do not know which one it will be, or what will happen, but neither do they. So we start even. No, not even, they are well and I am not. But I have an edge too. They want to live.

It was silent in the Constantinople. And yet, threaded through the silence was a breathing, a soft and rhythmic respiration. It was the fans overhead, turning slowly, easing the stale and anxious air.

He thought: All right, you sons of bitches. I have given you your chance, now give me mine. Give me some meaning. Let's go.

Rising at his table in the left rear corner, tipping his chair over backward, Jay Cobb drew the Colt's on his right thigh and fanned and fired three times at J. B. Books.

His first round missed its mark. It hit the cash register, slicing the first column of keys from the machine, then ricocheted upward and off the ceiling.

His movement triggered another. Serrano on the instant pulled his Peacemaker from beneath the table, turning in his chair. In the interval between Cobb's first and second rounds, Cross-eye shot the youth through the chest.

Cobb fired a second round at Books while falling across a table, and a third while writhing in agony to the floor.

His second round struck the mirror behind the bar. A split of quicksilver spread from end to end. His third blew three shelves of glassware into a phenomenon of light. A cascade of shards tinkled brilliantly to the floor and bar top.

The effects of low-velocity slugs fired at close range from weapons of heavy caliber, .38s and .45s, are massive. Serrano had sent a bullet through Jay Cobb's rib cage from the right side at a distance of nine feet. After encountering bone, entering the chest cavity anteriorly, the slug tumbled through the lower lobe of the left lung, macerating it, before exiting posteriorly through the rib cage on the left side, tearing an exit wound the size of a fist. With such force was the round driven into and through and out of the body that bits and pieces of bone and shirt were found adhering to the rearwall mural the following day, together with gobbets of lung tissue, pink and gray in color.

Jay Cobb lay still upon the floor. He was not, however, dead.

The Constantinople was unsuited, acoustically, to gunfire. Not only were the explosions magnified, they were prolonged. They crashed back and forth between the walls, they boomed from tile floor to high ceiling and downward again. They reverberated and echoed and re-echoed within the chamber of the saloon. They made awful demands upon the ears.

There was an intermission.

Books, his back turned, had not moved. Nor had he permitted himself to be surprised that Serrano had elected to shoot at Jay Cobb rather than at him. To be surprised during a gunfight, he had long ago learned, was to be dead.

He drained his glass. After this, he walked along to the street end of the bar, rounded it, stepped over a snow of glassware to the center, found a bottle of white wine, filled his glass, and facing the room from behind the bar, considering Pulford and the man in the derby hat, who had been surprised, and Serrano as they eyed each other and him, sipped wine again.

When the echoes in the room had faded, the aftermath of silence was broken by a sucking sound.

Jay Cobb had incurred what doctors call a "sucking wound." He had hauled himself to hands and knees, and since one lung had collapsed, the macerated left, as he breathed laboriously by means of the right lung, air was drawn loudly through the gaping aperture in his left rib cage. Now he commenced to crawl from his table toward the bar and, reaching that, toward the front door of the saloon. His progress was slow. His left lung was hemorrhaging, his chest cavity filled with blood. As he attempted to inhale through his mouth, he gagged on blood, and stopped crawling, and coughed a

bloody froth. The four men watched him crawl and gag and cough. It was obvious his wound was mortal.

Deliberately therefore, Books drank the last of his wine, put down the glass, drew the Remington from his left-side holster, leaned over the bar, aimed the pistol, and shot Jay Cobb through the head.

He died instantly. The bullet was fired from above and from the rear, an oblique trajectory, at a range of seven feet. It penetrated the temporal bone above and forward of the ear, exposing the brain, passed through the brain, carrying with it segments of skull, and exited through the right orbit, or eye socket, taking off the ethmoid plate and the bridge of the nose. On the tile floor under what remained of Jay Cobb's face lay an eyeball and the brain matter which housed the accumulated knowledge of his twenty years, a grayish, adhesive slop of girls and kings and arithmetic and cows and prayer and mountains but primarily of how to fire a revolver accurately and hate himself and deliver milk and cream and butter.

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But while Books's attention was concentrated on this work of mercy, Jack Pulford took advantage of the opportunity.

Standing at his table in the front, he slipped the Smith & Wesson rapidly from his hip and shot the ugly man in the left shoulder.

Books reeled backward, steadied himself with a left hand behind him on a shelf. His pistol was already leveled over the bar, at the fallen Cobb. It turned on his wrist; he thumbed the hammer back and fired. The bullet struck Jack Pulford in the heart.

He was staggered by the impact, driven against the wall, and slumping down it, continued to fire randomly at Books, emptying the Smith & Wesson into the bar instead. This firing was reflexive, an act of tendon spasm rather than conceived assault. The gambler was dead before he attained a seated position, back to the wall. Books had fired from sixteen feet. His round had entered Jack Pulford's white silk shirt near a diamond stud slightly to the left of the sternum, or breastplate, and torn through the antrio-ventricular [*sic*] groove. The heart was literally cleaved in two. Yet there was no exit wound in his back, for the heart muscle, tough and fibrous, poses a real impediment, even to a bullet.

Simultaneously, as Pulford and Books began their exchange, Serrano took his Peacemaker from the table, stood, and fired five rounds in Books's general direction. Not one was accurate, for Books had been hit in the left shoulder, and his left hand on a shelf would not sustain him. It gave way, and as he sank backward, a moving, diminishing target, he shot four times at Serrano. His slugs chipped plaster, ripped tables, screamed away into corners. Cross-eye's spiderwebbed the mirror behind the bar with cracks and disintegrated that glassware still intact.

One of Books's shots having plowed a furrow across the table top inches from his elbow, Koopmann plunged under the table at which he and El Tuerto had been seated, in this precipitous process knocking the derby hat from his head.

Through a sleet of glass Books disappeared behind the bar.

The door of the telephone booth opened. A man in a brown suit emerged, a salesman evidently, who had been trapped in the booth while calling a prospective customer, for he carried a leather sample case. Looking neither to left nor right, ignoring the combatants, stepping abstractedly over Jay Cobb's body, he tramped through the open doors of the saloon and took an incurious departure.

There was another intermission.

Had the salesman not guided on the daylight from the doors, he might have been unable to find his way out of the Constantinople. So many rounds had been fired, so much black powder burned, that the room was surcharged with smoke. It did not hang inert. The fans made it into veils and wreaths which turned and twisted and lifted and dropped as the blades revolved. In the midst of death, the black smoke was alive.

Jay Cobb lay on the tiles near the street end of the bar. Jack Pulford sat upright against the wall in an attitude of thought. Koopmann hunched on all fours under the protection of a table in the center of the room. Down on one knee beside the table, Serrano reloaded his pistol. J. B. Books sat in broken glass upon the wooden slatting behind the bar, bleeding only moderately. Pulford's soft-lead slug, fired from sixteen feet, had passed completely through his left shoulder, missing fortunately the subclavian artery but cracking the clavicle and tearing the deltoid muscle and the upper margin of the trapezius. His left arm was stunned and useless.

He put down his empty weapon. His back was to the wooden lockers. Leaning against them, by contorting his right forearm and wrist, he drew the other Remington from the right-side holster on his vest and laid it on his lap. He next removed his Stetson and placed it beside him, noting nearby the dollar bill he had put on the bar for his first glass of wine. Looking up, he saw something remarkable. The glass still stood on the bar, undamaged, and now and then, as the black smoke swirled, sunlight through the front doors of the saloon illumined the glass.

He waited. Koopmann he had seen go under a table. Serrano could not know if he, Books, were dead or alive behind the bar, but a man bent on killing would have to find out. Closing his fingers around the pearl handle of the second Remington in his lap, Books watched the wineglass on the bar top and waited.

Within a minute, when sunlight turned the glass translucent, it darkened suddenly, a darkening which passed from right to left. He could hear no footstep, but the movement of the dark meant to him that someone—it had to be Cross-eye—had skulked along the front of the bar toward the street end.

Books raised his left knee, laying the barrel of the pistol over it, cocked and sighted on the edge of the street end of the bar, and waited. He could feel the wound in his shoulder drain, the slow seepage of blood upon his skin. It was like being leeched.

Then, three feet above the floor, around the edge of the bar, an eye appeared, the Mexican's good eye, and Books fired.

His bullet totally smashed Serrano's globe, or eyeball, spattering floor and bar and locker doors with the gelatinous substance of the eyeball. Slivers of bone were driven by the round through the brain, and a triangle of skull and hair was lifted out at the exit wound in the occipital area. Serrano tumbled backward to lie on his side near Jay Cobb.

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There was another intermission.

A man strayed through the front doors of the Constantinople to have a drink. Gasping, he peered into the gunpowder haze. He saw a young man lying near him facedown in the slime of his own brains, and a Mexican next to him with a gaping hole in his skull, and a third man seated on the floor against the left-hand wall wearing a white silk shirt soaked with blood, and a fourth man, alive, cowering under a table.

"Dear God," said the stray, and backed through the doors.
His were the first words spoken.

Koopmann crawled from under the table, retrieved his derby, and settled it on his head.

"Books!" he shouted.

There was no response from behind the bar.

"I am trowing to you my gun, Books!" His accent was German. "I vant oud of dis, Books, zo I am trowing to you my gun!"

Koopmann sailed his Navy Colt's over the bar.

"Dere!"

On the sly, he reached for, picked up the revolver Jay Cobb had dropped when first hit, and concealed it behind his back.

"I am standing now up, Books, and valking oud of here!"

Koopmann stood, kept the revolver behind his back in his right hand and, turning to keep the weapon out of sight, began to walk ponderously toward the doors.

"I am now going. I am braying to Gott you vill led me, Books."

He was a big man with round, red cheeks, and now, passing along the bar, passing what might be behind it, his eyes began to perspire tears which rolled down his round, red cheeks.

"I am braying to Gott, Books!" he shouted. "Dat you vill led me valk oud of dis place alife!"

Behind the bar, Books came to his knees, shoved the Remington into a coat pocket, extended his right arm to seize hold of the cold water tap over the sink, and pulled himself to his feet.

Koopmann had passed Jay Cobb's body and moved the revolver around to his chest and was now near the doors.

Putting his weight against the bar to keep himself erect, Books drew the pistol from his coat pocket, leveled it, and shot Koopmann in the back.

The round was well placed. It entered the torso in the intercostal space between the ribs, missing the spine but mangling the paravertebral muscles, and exited by breaking out a wide swatch of the sternum, or breastbone. Koopmann dropped the Colt's, hugged his chest, and staggered several more steps toward the doors. But the aortic root had been transected, severed by the bullet. The pumping of the heart builds enormous pressure in the human vascular system, which was suddenly released. Blood sprayed from the outlet in his breast as though from the nozzle of a hose, drenching tables and chairs and tiles, so that by the time Koopmann hit the floor he splashed into a pool of his own blood, for he was practically exsanguinated.

It was ended.

The roar of gunfire receded, died. Suspended from the ceiling on their stems, the blades of the four fans rotated, stirring the caldron of black smoke. The sound they made, however, the only sound in the room, was no longer that of breathing, of soft and rhythmic respiration. They sighed. They seemed to sigh an endless, electrical dirge for the repose of the dead below.

Books stood at the bar, weapon in hand, looking down at Koopmann's body.

Behind him the barkeep, Murray, stepped through the archway from the gambling room, sized the situation, put a double-barreled 10-gauge Parker shotgun to his shoulder, aimed, and fired one barrel, then the other, into Books's back.

The shootist was blown away from the bar, blown over, blown down, falling into the walkway between bar and lockers.

Shotgun shells were loaded with a heavy powder charge. And in this case they contained No. 4 bird shot, which spread into a pattern the diameter of a plate and were intended to maim a man, even at close range, rather than to kill. They penetrated Books's coat, vest, shirt, underwear, and skin, they lacerated much muscle, a few pellets entered the chest cavity, and there was some external bleeding, but the wounds were scarcely fatal.

Knowing this, the barkeep stepped immediately back through the archway into the gambling room again, out of sight, to reload.

Books lay on his belly. Drawing up his legs, he pushed with his feet against the bar and switched himself so that he lay prone again, facing the opposite direction, facing the archway. There was still no feeling in his left arm. With his right he pulled at the left, bending it at the elbow, placing the forearm before him, and settling his chin upon the wrist. Then, clawing in broken glass with his good hand, he located the Remington he had just fired and, extending his right arm on the slatting, cocked and pointed the revolver at the archway.

He was not surprised that he had been shot from the rear, but he did not know who had done it. He had killed the men he wanted to. But someone was still trying to kill him, and even in a state of total shock, instinct required him to defend himself.

Gun in hand, bleeding moderately from the wounds in his left shoulder and back, he waited.

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In a minute or two Murray poked his head around the molding of the archway to have a look.

Books fired, and missed.

Astonished that the gunman still had fight in him, the barkeep ducked away again, out of sight.

He thought: All of them needed killing, and it is done. I have hurt like this before. That one in the gut, over in Bisbee. I have hurt worse than that, though, but till now I disremembered it. Once, when we were kids, the four of us, we got into some real mischief. It was over in San Saba County. One day my mother hooked a yoke of oxen up to a wagon and went to a neighbor's and told us to be good and left us alone, Em and Clara, my sisters, and my little brother Joe and me. I have not seen them since I was sixteen. I wish I knew what has become of them, if they are well and happy, for they were dear to me. God bless them. Well, no sooner was she gone than we went to it. There was a barrel of homemade molasses in the kitchen, but no bread, so we got a caddy of tobacco from under my pa's bed. A caddy held twenty-five plugs, as I recollect. We would take a plug of tobacco and dip it in the molasses and then lick the molasses off the tobacco. After enough licks, we took powerfully sick. We had bellyaches as big as Texas. How we howled and carried on till Ma came home. We thought we were about to die and would just as soon. So I have hurt like this before. I have not seen them since I was sixteen. God bless them.

Gillom Rogers inched through the doors of the Constantinople. Eyes watering from the smoke, he gaped at Jay Cobb and Serrano and Koopmann, and at Jack Pulford, seated against the wall.

Skirting the three bodies near the bar, avoiding the blood and brains as best he could, he looked over the bar, then scuffed in wonder through the carnage of glass behind it. A dollar bill stopped him. He put it in the pants pocket that held the other money. A black-handled Remington lay in the walkway. He picked it up and holding his breath approached the prone man, who seemed small to him now, even puny.

"Mister Books?"

He saw the torn coat and the blood on it and the right arm extended stiffly, gun aimed. He moved slowly to Books's side, bending.

"It's me, Gillom," he said.

He got down on his knees. Books was incapable of speech. His chin was clamped upon his left wrist. Gillom did not care to look into the face, but the eyes arrested him. They considered.

They considered not only the archway, as though something implacable waited on the other side, but something transcendent beyond that as well, far beyond.

"Mister Books, it's me, Gillom."

The mouth opened. Nothing audible issued from it, but the lips formed two words: "kill" and "me."

"Kill you?"

Gillom chewed his lips.

"Sure thing," he said, then stood, moved behind the man, straddled him, and put the muzzle of the revolver he had picked up to the back of the head. He turned his own head away; shut his eyes tight; gritted his teeth; cocked it and pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked.

"Shit," he groaned.

He despaired, aware on the rim of his consciousness of the smoke and the reek of the air and the solemnity of the fans. He got down on his knees again beside the prone man and worked at the fingers clenching the pearl handle of the second Remington, prying them free until he possessed that weapon too.

He stood again, straddled the prone man, and put the muzzle of the revolver to the back of John Bernard Books's head a second time, into the hair. He turned his own head away; shut his eyes tight; gritted his teeth; and pulled the trigger.

He walked out of the Constantinople into chaste air. A crowd of men and boys had gathered across the street. Waiting for a buggy to pass, then a buckboard, he crossed the street to the crowd.

"What happened in there?"

At least six asked.

"They're all dead," said Gillom.

"Who?"

"J. B. Books. Jay Cobb. Jack Pulford. A Mex name of Serrano, a rustler. And some guy I don't know who. A big guy. He killed 'em all."

"Who?"

"Books."

Someone had counted. "Five! Whooeee!"

"Jesus Christ, boys, he killed every hard case around!" someone exulted. "Jesus, boys, we fin'ly got us a clean town!"

"Oughta put up a statue of the murderin' bastard!" someone enthused.

"These are his guns." Gillom held them up for all to covet. "He gave 'em to me before he died."

"Look at that!" "Short barrel, no sight, specials by God—hey, kid, want to sell 'em?" "Hell, no," said Gillom. He grinned and waved at the Constantinople. "O.K., folks, step right over and see the show! Drinks on the house!"

As the crowd strided across the street, Gillom Rogers strode away down it, swinging a gun in each hand. An alchemy of false spring sunlight turned the nickel of the Remingtons to silver. He strode head up, shoulders back, taller to himself, having sensations he had never known before. One gun was still warm in his hand, the bite of smoke was in his nose and the taste of death on his tongue. His heart was high in his gullet, the danger past—and now the sweat, suddenly, and the nothingness, and the sweet clean feel of being born.

Swarthout, Glendon. *The Shootist* (pp. 195-215). Bison Books. Kindle Edition.

ANALYZING THE SCENE

A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one Story Event.

1. What are the characters literally doing?

The characters are participating in a gruesome gunfight.

2. What is the essential action of what the characters are doing in the scene?

Books orchestrates a gunfight between outlaws to help those he leaves behind and to ease his own suffering and allows him be the master of his own demise.

3. What life value has changed for one or more of the characters in the scene?

Life to Death

4. Which life value should I highlight on my Story Grid Spreadsheet?

Because the true enemy in this novel is that cancer that Books is suffering from, and not the outlaws, I think we should underline Freedom/Autonomy on the grounds that Books succeeded in leaving the world in the manner he wanted to

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Life to Death (for multiple characters)

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HOW THE SCENE ABIDES THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF STORYTELLING

Inciting Incident: Books enters the Constantinople and recognises that it is the place the he will die. Then he sees his opponents/targets.

Progressive Complication Turning Point: He unexpectedly gets shot in the back by the bartender.

Crisis: Will he be able to accomplish his goal despite his injuries? What does he do? Will his plan fail?

Climax: Despite coming into this gunfight as a "third option" (not suffering with cancer or killing himself) Books' instincts and his "gift" have gotten him out of the gunfight alive while his foes lay dead. Books asks Gillom to kill him.

Resolution: Gillom obliges and takes Books' guns with him. This could suggest that Gillom may become part of a next generation of outlaw and therefore there is uncertainty that the town will remain "clean" as Books might have intended.

NOTES: It is curious that the narrator seems to be a proficient anatomist. It could be interesting to discuss the function of that in the scene and to contrast that aspect of the third person narrator with the landscape and/or characters of the novel.

Also note that the film and the book end quite differently.