

THE BEAUTIFUL SHAVE

Ray Bradbury

He came into town riding fast and firing his guns at the blue sky. He shot a chicken in the dust and kicked it around, using his horse as a mauler, and then, reloading and yelling, his three-week beard red and irritable in the sunlight, he rode on to the Saloon where he tethered his horse and carried his guns, still hot, into the bar where he glared at his own sunburned image in the mirror and yelled for a glass and a bottle. The bartender slid them over the edge of the bar and went away.

The men along the bar moved down to the free lunch at the far end, and conversation withered.

“What in hell’s wrong with everyone?!” cried Mr. James Malone. “Talk, laugh, everyone. Go on, now, or I’ll shoot your damn eyebrows off!”

Everyone began to talk and laugh.

“That’s better,” said James Malone, drinking his drinks one upon another.

He rammed the wing doors of the Saloon wide and in the resulting wind stomped out like an elephant into the afternoon street where other men were riding up from the mines or the mountains and tying their horses to the worn hitching poles.

The barber shop was directly across the street.

Before crossing to it, he rechecked his bright blue pistols and snuffed at them with his red nose, saying Ah! at the scent of gunpowder. Then he saw a tin can in the talcummy dust and shot it three times ahead of him as he strode laughing, and the horses all along the street jumped

nervously and flickered their ears. Reloading again, he kicked the barber shop door wide and confronted a full house. The four barber chairs were full of lathered customers, waiting with magazines in their hands, and the mirrors behind them repeated the comfort and the creamy lather and the pantomime of efficient barbers. Along the wall on a bench sat six other men waiting to be cleansed of the mountain and the desert.

“Have a seat,” said one of the barbers, glancing up.

“I sure will,” said Mr. James Malone, and pointed his pistol at the first chair. “Get out of there, mister, or I’ll sew you right back into the upholstery.”

The man’s eyes were startled, then angry, then apprehensive in turn above his creamy mask, but after a long hesitation, he levered himself up with difficulty,

swiped the white stuff off his chin with the apron, flung the apron to the floor, and walked over to shove in and sit with the other waiting men.

James Malone snorted at this, laughed, jounced into the black leather chair, and cocked his two pistols.

"I never have to wait," he said to no one and everyone at once. His gaze wandered over their heads and touched on the ceiling. "If you live right, you don't have to wait for anything. You ought to know that by now!"

The men looked at the floor. The barber cleared his throat and put an apron over Jamie Malone. The pistols stuck up, making white tents underneath. There was a sharp click as he knocked the pistols together, just to let everyone know they were there, and pointed.

"Give me the works," he said to the barber, not looking at him. "A shave first, I feel itchy and mean, then a haircut. You men there, starting on the right, tell jokes. Make 'em good jokes. I want entertainment while I'm being shorn. Ain't been entertained in months. You, there, mister, you start." The man who had been evicted from his comfortable chair unfroze himself slowly and rolled his eyes at the other men and talked as if someone had hit him in the mouth.

"I knew a gent once who . . ." he said, and word by word, white-faced, he launched himself into a tale. "That gent, he . . ."

To the barber, James Malone now said, "Listen, you, I want a shave, I want a beautiful shave. But I got a fine-skinned face and it's a pretty face with the beard off, and I been in the mountains for a long time and I had no luck with gold-panning, so I'm feeling mean. I just want to

warn you of one little thing. If you so much as nick my face once with your straight razor, I'll kill you. You hear that? I mean I'll kill you. If you so much as bring one little speck of blood to the surface, I'll plug you clean through the heart. You hear?"

The barber nodded quietly. The barber shop was silent. Nobody was telling jokes or laughing.

"Not one drop of blood, not one little cut, mind you," repeated Mr. James Malone, "or you'll be dead on the floor a second later."

"I'm a married man," said the barber.

"I don't give a damn if you're a Mormon with six wives and fifty-seven children. You're dead if you scratch me once."

"I happen to have two children," said the barber. "A fine little girl and a boy."

"Don't hand me any of that," said Malone, settling back, closing his eyes. "Start."

STORY

TALKS

The barber began to get the hot towels ready. He put them on James Malone's face, and under them the man cursed and yelled and waved his pistols under the white apron. When the hot towels came off and the hot lather was put on his beard, James Malone still chewed on his profanity and threats, and the men waiting sat white-faced and stiff with the pistols pointing at them. The other barbers had almost stopped moving and stood like statues by their customers in the chairs, and the barber shop was cold for a summer day.

"What's wrong with the stories?" snapped James Malone. "All right, then sing. You four there, sing something like 'My Darling Clementine.' Start it up. You heard me." The barber was stropping his razor slowly with a trembling hand.

"Mr. Malone," he said.

"Shut up and get to work." Malone tilted his head back, grimacing.

The barber stropped his razor some more and looked at the men seated all around the shop. He cleared his throat and said, "Did all of you gentlemen hear what Mr. Malone said to me?"

Everyone nodded mutely.

"You heard him threaten to kill me," said the barber, "if I so much as drew a drop of blood to his skin?"

The men nodded again.

"And you'd swear to it in a court of law, if necessary?" asked the barber.

The men nodded for the last time.

"Cut the malarkey," said Mr. James Malone. "Get to work."

"That's all I wanted to be sure of," said the barber, letting the leather strop fall and clatter against the chair. He raised the razor in the light and it gleamed and glittered with cold metal there.

He tilted Mr. James Malone's head back and put the razor against the hairy throat.

"We'll start here," he said. "We'll start here."

The end