(Continued from last week)

CHAPTER IX

Lonergan ushered Ferris out into the street, closed the door, and strode briskly in the direction of the courthouse, outside which a knot of men was already milling. Ferris got on his horse and rode slowly back toward his ranch, taking the opposite direction till he got clear of the town.

Suddenly blind rage filled Ferris' heart. And, according to the nature of the man, it did not show itself upon his face, which became a mask. Stupidly, blindly trying to find reality in this new confusion, Ferris rode back toward his ranch house with a sudden resolution formed.

Weak, irresolute, he was following the traditional line of least resistance in seeking a confindant. And Curran, the foreman, was the man he sought. He was throwing himself upon the mercy of the man between whom and himself there had been undeclared enmity ever since Lonergan made Curran foreman of the Cross-Bar outfit.

"Want to see you in the office," he told Curran, who was taking it easy in the bunkhouse after his night's ride. And when they reached the office, he said, "Curran, I reckon you and me haven't pulled together as well as we might have done. I'm in a jam now. Maybe us two could get together."

Curran's eyes narrowed. "I never bore yuh no ill feelin's, Mr. Ferris," he answered. "Course, I knew yuh didn't exactly like Judge Lonergan putting me here, but I done my best for yore spread."

"Lonergan's got me by the throat," said the ranchman bitterly, and recounted their conversation of that morning.

"But so far as I understand, yuh have kept up the mortgage interest," said Curran. "And the mortgage has got another eighteen months to run."

"Damn him, he's got something on me!" exploded Ferris. "Something that happened before I came into the valley, that he could put me behind the bars for. He's aimin' to treat me the way he was going to treat old Hooker. When he's cleaned up on my ranch, how long d'you think your job will last?"

"Yeah, I been thinkin' about that myself," Curran confessed.

Ferris asked the question that he had asked Lonergan: "Why was Lonergan so interested in that Hooker girl?"

Curran grinned. "Most folks think she's his daughter," he said. "Don't bear no resemblance to him, of course, but she may take after her mother. I never seen Mrs. Hook; she died before I came here.

"I've heard that story, but I don't believe it."

"You think the sheriff will get Bruce and that girl?" he asked in the meanwhile.

"I dunno," said Curran. "Lois Hooker, she knows the mountains like that herd of broncs she trails

"Yuh ain't—ain't cryin', girl?"

after her. If they got enough food, they can hide up till all interest in the affair has died out, so far as the sheriff's concerned. But I'll tell yuh something. I'm goin' to git her."

Curran knew his man. "I dunno what Lonergan's got on yuh, Ferris," he said, "but I ain't trustin' that feller further than I kin see him. And I guess there's plenty of folks in Mescal who wouldn't cry their eyes out if anything happened to him."

The ranchman's eyes met Curran's. "You mean— you mean—?" he stammered.

"I could do with a share in the Cross-Bar," said Curran bluntly. "I ain't the kind who'd ride yuh down the way Lonergan's doin'. And what I had on you, you'd have on me, I guess. A third share's all I'd ask."

"Suppose — suppose Blane Rowland ever came back?" the ranchman quavered. "He's still half-owner. If he hadn't made that mad break when he thought the Cross-Bar was going to smash—"

"Yuh needn't worry about him," grinned Curran. "He won't come back. First place, he'd be facing a long term in the pen, and second place, he'd have to make restitution of that money he stole, which represents purty nigh half the value of the ranch."

"What's your proposal?"

"I ain't makin' none, Ferris. It come from you. I was only saying, if anything happened to Lonergan, nobody's goin' to lay roses on his grave."

"When—how—what's your plan?" whispered Ferris, spilling a trail of whiskey over the floor as he tried to refill his drink.

"Just leave it to me, and I'll keep yuh posted, Ferris," answered Curran.

"I've got to give Lonergan his answer within the next two days," the ranchman protested.

"Stall him off," said the foreman. "String him along a day or two more, and if he insists tell him to go plumb to hell. All you need to do is to keep a stiff top lip. I'm glad you and me had this talk. It clears up things considerable. Yuh won't see much of me the next day or two, because I'll be on a lone wolf hunt in the mountains. But I'll let yuh know when the trap's sprung."

He went out of the office, reeling silghtly, humming a song. Ferris watched him with new, dawning hope.

In the few days that followed, Lois regained her strength rapidly. Apart from the quantity of blood she had lost, the wound was a superficial one, and youth and the pure mountain air contributed alike to a quick recovery.

They never spoke about the future. It seemed sufficient to both of them to enjoy that perfect comradeship that had sprung up between them. The only shadow over the girl's mind appeared to be her inability to attend Hooker's funeral in Mescal.

"Of course, I always knew I wasn't his daughter — at least, I knew Mrs. Hooker was not my mother, after I found this."

She detached a little, battered gold locket from a cord about her neck, opened it, and handed it to Dave. Inside was the faded photograph of a young woman. It was a pretty face, but rather a hard one, and there was a marked resemblance to Lois.

"I remembered her, after I found this locket," said the girl.

"You say you found this?" asked Dave, handing her back the locket.

"Where did yuh find it?"

"Not a hundred yards away from here, lying on a ledge under a heap of dead leaves."

"It's queer," said Dave. "Yuh got no idea how it could have got here?

"I've racked my brains trying to imagine. Unless my mother was some relative of Mr. Lonergan's and gave him the locket, and he dropped it here. You see, Mr. Lonergan made the Hookers adopt me and bring me here. But why should he have come here? He's never been here since, nor anyone. I'm sure no one in Mescal knows of its existence."

"Well," said Dave, "things have a way of comin' to light. Some day we'll know. You sure had a tough break, girl, not even knowin' who yore dad was, and livin' up in these mountains. Did yuh ever figure on what yuh were goin' to do in life?"

"I never figured on getting away, Dave, till Mr. Hooker died. Nor till you came," said Lois. "I hated the men who used to come around me when I was in Mescal, or over at the Cross-Bar."

Dave tried to keep back the words, but they seemed to come spontaneously from his lips: "Just before Mr. Hooker died he made me promise that I'd look out for yuh. I told him of course I would. When I first saw yuh, Lois, all worked up over Black Dawn, and madder at me than a hornet, I knew just the same you were the only girl I'd ever wanted.

"I wanted to ride away with you and have you with me for the rest of our lives. Do you think—do you think you'd take a chance on me when we get away from here?"

Then, suddenly, looking into the girl's luminous eyes, Dave knew that she loved him, and that everything was going to be well with them, no matter what trials might still lie ahead of them.

He drew her into his arms, and she laid her head upon his shoulder with her face upturned to is.

"Yuh ain't—ain't cryin', girl?"

"I reckon I am," she answered. "I'm so happy, Dave. I didn't know I could be happy like this. I never cried for anybody else, and I've cried twice for you."

"Twice? I made yuh cry?"

"The first time was when I was sure you hadn't killed Mr. Hooker. And both times have made me happy. I don't want to leave you ever."

After a while he heard her breathing deeply and regularly, and found that she had fallen asleep. He sat there, holding her lightly, till the pale light of dawn came creeping into the cave.

"There's a mesa in the mountains about a mile away, that I don't think anyone except myself has ever seen," said Lois that afternoon. "I think we'll take the horses there. The grass is pretty well gone from here, and they'll need some good garzing before we start.

"You'll be able to ride in about a coupla days more, honey," said Dave. "Is there a trail through the mountains to the other side?"

Lois nodded. "I found it, too, Dave," she said. "It runs right through across the border. We'll never have to go back to Mescal, and nobody will dream we've come through the mountains."

Dave didn't relish the idea of flight. But for Lois, he would probably have scouted about the Mescal district by night, in the hope of unearthing the clue to Hooker's murderer.

But Lois' welfare came first, and Dave realized that the chief task which lay before him was to get her through the mountains to some place of safety. So he said nothing to the girl's suggestion, and they mounted the two horses, riding bareback and guiding them with halters. Lois led the way along the trail beyond the cave. Finally it ran uphill to a long stretch of grass-overed land between the ravine and the heights.

Releasing the horses, they watched them start grazing eagerly seated side by side in the warm sunlight.

"What day is the day after tomorrow, honey?" asked Dave.

"I'm ready, Dave," answered the girl shyly.

"And you'll marry me, soon as we hit the other side of the mountains and find us a minister?"

Lois nodded, her face aglow, then hid it in Dave's shoulder.

"If we're starting tomorrow what do yuh think of restin' up today an' letting me take the horses to the mesa?" asked Dave the next morning. "Maybe I'll leave them there overnight and walk back this evenin'. There's no place they could stray to, is there?"

"No, they'll be quite safe there," answered Lois. "I'll be back around midday to see how you're getting along," he told her, and then rode away on Hooker's horse.

Arriving at the grazing ground, Dave flung himself down, rolled and lit a cigarette, and lost himself in roseate dreams of the future.

For a half hour after his departure Curran, lying behind a boulder watched Dave's course through the pair of field glasses that he had slung about his neck. He guessed pretty shrewdly the purpose of Dave's departure, but he wanted to satisfy himself that he wasn't coming back immediately.

(To be continued)

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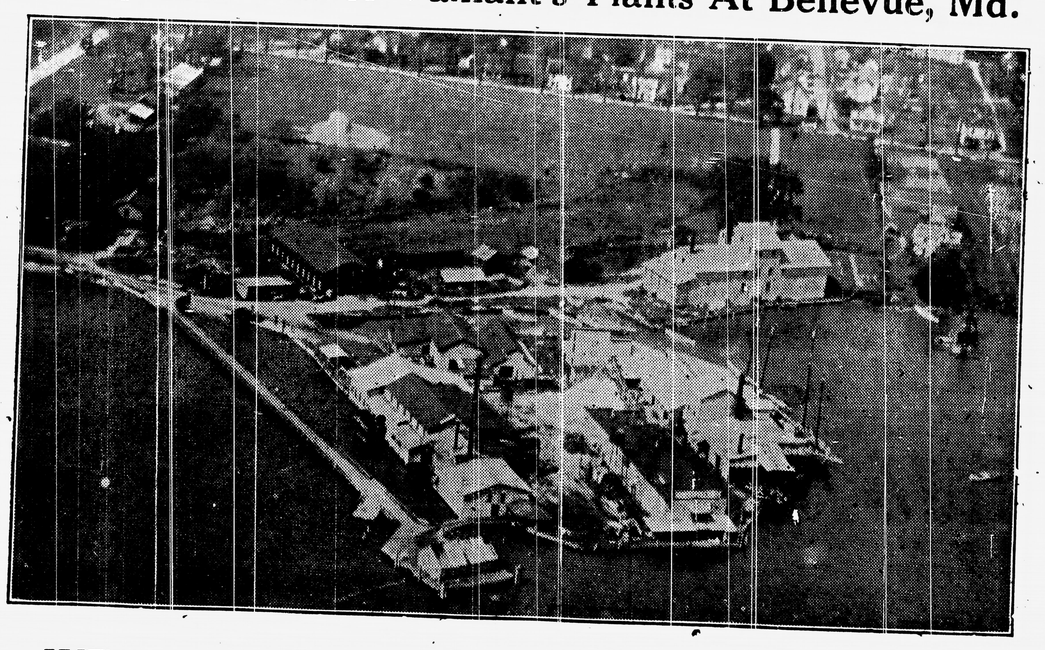

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