BLACK DAWN

by Victor Rousseau

W.N.U. FEATURES

Continued from last week

CHAPTER XI

There was a clean, round hole at the back, such as a bullet would have made, and the frontal bone was mostly missing, with jagged edges about it.

"Yore horse didn't slip, hombre," said Dave to the skull. "Yores is a case of plain murder. Yore partner shot yuh from behind, the dirty murdering hound!"

Dave put on his socks and shoes again and began to reascend the side of the ravine. Arrived at the top, he looked at the sun and concluded that it was already well past noon. He had told Lois that he would be back to see her around midday.

But when Dave reached the cave, he found it empty. "Lois!" he called. "Lois, girl, where are yuh?"

The echoes of his voice floated back mockingly from the cliffs acorss the ravine, and that was all. Then Dave's pupils contracted as he saw the footpirnts of a man's boots on the other side of the cave, faint, but unmistakable in the gorund softened by the rains.

Here, too, were the prints of Lois' little boots, and where they ceased there was a furrow in the soil as if she had been dragged. Beyond, the prints of the man's boots were deeper, as if he had been carrying a burden.

It was all perfectly clear and unmistakable, and told its story only too well. Coggswell must have got upon the trail and taken Lois away.

The waddy's face was transformed into a grim mask of vengeance. Dave ran back to where Black Dawn was standing and sprang into the saddle. He adjusted his belt, bringing the holster close to his right hand. When he met Coggswell, it would be just too bad for Coggswell.

Softly Dave edged the stallion along the trail, peering right and left for any hidden ambuscade. But the bootprints had changed to the prints of two horses' hoofs. If the sheriff had set an ambuscade along the route, he had certainly not joined it himself.

Dave trailed the hoofprints as [illegible] canyon, and then lost [illegible] impossible to discover any signs of them on the flinty ground. But Dave was pretty sure Coggswell had taken Lois to Hooker's cabin, perhaps to leave her there and come back in search of him.

It was an hour after the discovery that Lois had been kidnaped before he suddenly saw Hooker's cabin before him.

No horse was visible, but Dave dismounted and crept softly forward, peering through the undergrowth. Foot by foot he edged his way forward. The plaintive lowing of the unmilked cow came to his ears from somewhere on the mesa. Otherwise — nothing. And when at last Dave entered Hooker's cabin, he found it empty, with no sign that anyone had been in it since Lois and he had left it.

Grimly Dave turned the stallion and rode back through the canyons the way he had come. Again he found the hoofprints, and again, in spite of casting about in a wide circle, he was unable to discover which way the horses had gone.

The sun was well down in the west when Dave rode back toward Hooker's cabin, reckless now. He was almost through the scrub when he reined in abruptly. He could see the cabin again, and this time a horse was standing saddled in front of it.

Listening, Dave could hear footsteps in the cabin. Someone was walking to and fro inside it.

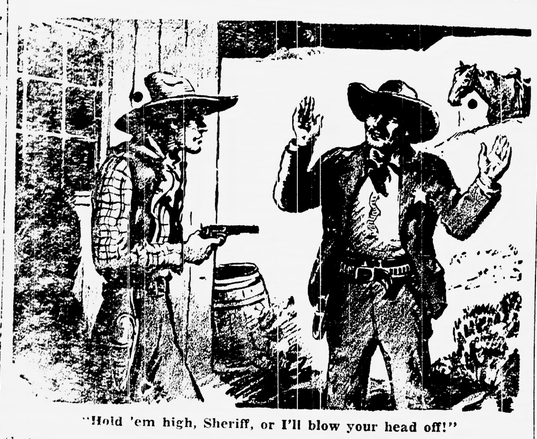
Dave didn't dismount this time. He edged the black horse forward, its hoofs making no sound on the soft mesa. Now he was immediately behind the house. He could hear the footsteps inside distinctly. Now he got out of his saddle and went quietly around the shack. As he reached the front angle he saw Sheriff Coggswell come out of the door and move toward his horse.

Dave leaped forward. His attitude was the crouch of a beast of prey, his voice a rumbling snarl:

"Hold 'em high, sheriff, or I'll blow yore head off!"

Taken utterly by surprise, Coggswell put up his hands.

"Well, you got the drop on me, all right, Bruce," admitted Coggswell. "But killing me won't do you no good."



"Hold 'em high, Sheriff, or I'll blow your head off!"

Dave stepped forward and relieved Coggswell of his gun. "You can put yore hands down now," he said. "But yo're goin' to talk quick and straight, if yuh want to get back to Mescal without a nasty mess on yore shoulders. What have yuh done with Lois?"

"Bruce," answered Coggswell, "I ain' set eyes on Miss Lois since she rode into town the morning of Hooker's murder, seein' I was knocked cold tryin' to protect you."

The declining sun shone straight into Dave's eyes, showing the haggard lines of his face. He stared into Coggswell's trying to read the truth.

"You swear that's true?" Dave cried suddenly.

"I'm talkin' straight," answered the sheriff. "I rode up here with the idea of caming out and startin' on a hunt for yore trail in the morning. If someone took Miss Lois away when you was gone, it wasn't me. Why, I don't know where you two have been hidin' up. She ain't hurt bad, is she?"

"She was getting well. We was goin' to start out tomorrow." And suddenly the mask of hate vanished from Dave's face. "I'm believinng yuh, sheriff," he said. "But if it wasn't you who took her away, who was it?"

Sheriff Coggswell was silent. Dave met the keen scrutiny of his eyes, then suddenly handed him back his gun and thrust his own into its holster.

"You got the drop on me now, Coggswell," he said. "I'm trustin' you. You can take me into Mescal if yuh want to. But I always felt yuh knew I didn't kill old Hooker. And I'm asking yuh to trust my word same as I trusted yores, and ride with me to find the skunk that took her away. After that, I'll be ready to place myself in yore hands."

Coggswell holstered his own gun in turn and gave Dave his hand.

"That goes with me," he said gravely. "Yo're right, Bruce. I'm pretty sure yuh didn't kill old Hooker. I been workin' on a line of my own, and I think I'm on the trail. I'm accepting them terms of yores. And in a few minutes I think I'll have some evidence. It's in that cabin. Nope, not Miss Lois. I just trussed up and gagged a hombre who was actin' suspicious, after tryin' to kill his horse."

He led the way into the cabin. Trussed and gagged very effectively upon the floor was the Mexican, Pedro, whom Curran had sent back to the Cross-Bar.

"Ain't had time to question him yet," the sheriff explained. "He was sorter stunned when his horse dropped under him. Now we'll see."

He pulled the gag out of the mouth of the helpless man. Pedro, who recognized Dave, glared in mixed fear and fury at him and at Coggswell.

"Yo e jig's up, Pedro," said the sheriff. "Yo're goin' to come across and come quick, or yore life ain't worth a nickel. I'd just as soon shoot yuh there as I'd shoot a sidewinder. Where's Curran?"

"I do not know, Senor Coggswell," protested the Mexican. "I rile jus' now, back to the range, after lookin' for strays, and you shoot my horse and tie me up."

"Now listen, Pedro, it ain't a bit of use lying to me," replied the sheriff, "because I got the goods on yuh. I been doin' some watching myself the last few days, and I seen you and Curran prowling around these parts lookin' for someone.

"I watched yuh this mornin' ride out into the hills, and I watched you ride back. When I called yuh, yuh tried to git away. Now I'm putting it up to yuh. Curran ain't at the Cross-Bar. Where is he?"

"I see him last night. I do not know today. Me and him we look for this man." Pedro jerked his head in Dave's direction. "Today I look for strays—"

"I'm puttin' the question in another way," said the sheriff patiently. "Where's Curran got Miss Lois?"

"Senor, I no have see her since that night she ride away with this man from Mescal—"

Coggswell drew the six-gun from his holster and spun the cylinder. He turned to Dave.

"May as well take this feller where we aim to bury him," he said. "No sense in mussin' up this floor. There's a place at the edge of the mesa where the ground's soft."

He picked up the end of the rope that bound the Mexican and began dragging the man toward the door.

"Senor," chattered Pedro, "you cannot murder me. I did not take the girl away."

"You've had your chance, Pedro. Come on, Bruce, let's git him over the sill and finish him."

The six-gun jerked upward. A scream broke from the Mexican's lips.

"Senor, I tell—don't shoot! I tell —" chattered Pedro. "Curran bring the girl this mornin' to the cabin that the gold prospector built many year ago in the blind canyon."

"I know where it is," answered Coggswell. "All right, Pedro, yuh saved yore life. I'm goin' to leave yuh tied up here for which I reckon yuh'll be grateful to me afterward. I'll get yuh a drink of water."

Coggswell filled a pitcher and held it to Pedro's lips, setting it down beside him when he was through. He turned to Dave. "Reckon we better ride," he said. "I got my four men waitin' down below the mesa, but I don't aim to waste no more time with Miss Lois in the hands of that feller."

Dave only spoke once during the ride. "Sheriff," he said, "you lived in this district quite some time, ain't you? Ever hear of a waddy disappearin' mysteriously? Course he didn't have to be a waddy. May have been a prospector."

He described his discovery of the skeletin in the ravine. "Shot through the back of the head," he said. "Feller had fractured his leg at some time, up near the thigh. It was all healed up rough."

"Yuh found him?" shouted Coggswell, turning around in the saddle. "Well, that clears up considerable more along the lines I was workin' on."

"It's all right, judge," called Curran, as Lonergan drew rein suspiciously, in the way Ferris had done. "Here's Mr. Ferris, and just me, and we're waitin' to talk things over pleasant-like."

"You don't need to shout my title," grumbled Lonergan, dismounting and stalking into the shack. He nodded curtly to the ranchman and seated himself upon one of the tree stumps, waving away Curran's offer of a drink. Lonergan's manner was still that of a judge, a man condescending to meet those socially beneath him.

"What's that noise in there?" demanded Lonergan suspiciously, as Lois, hearing the voice of the new arrivel, made a desperate attempt to free herself.

"Yuh can go in and look if yuh want to, Mr. Lonergan," grunted the foreman. "But that's strictly a private matter."

Lonergan strode to the entrance of the smaller room. He could just make out Lois fastened on the bunk and her eyes turned imploringly upon his. He hesitated, then swung back angrily.

"What's that mean, Curran?" he demanded.

"Got on Bruce's trail this mornin'," answered Curran. "He made his getaway, but I nabbed the girl. Was waitin' for yuh to examine her, after this other business is settled."

(To be continued)

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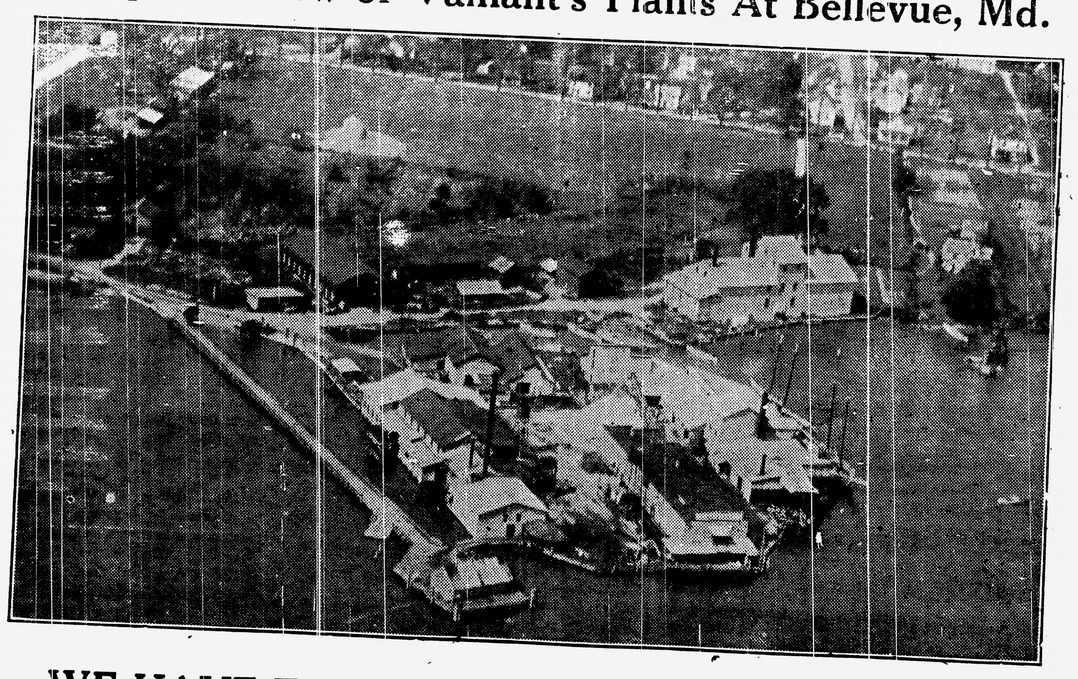

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