Continued from last week

CHAPTER XII

Lonergan sat down with a scowl. "I've got no time to waste, Ferris," he said, in his most judicial manner. "I consented to come here and talk with you because Curran told me you had something here to show me. Well, where is it, and what's the point of it all?"

Curran winked at Ferris, as he stood behind Lonergan's back. Lonergan went on:

"I understand you're willing to accept my offer. But what is it that you've got to show me here?"

"Here's what I got to show yuh, Lonergan!" shouted the ranchman, suddenly drawing a revolver from his armpit. "Desperate? Yeah, and you miscalculated, because you trusted the wrong party when you let Curran bring you here. You've hounded me too long, Lonergan. I warned you the other day in Mescal. Now you're going to sign an agreement making over to me all yore claims on the Cross-Bar, or I'll kill you!"

Lonergan had sprung to his feet. But Curran was at his side, covering him too. The foreman stepped forward and drew a revolver from Lonergan's pocket.

"That's right, Lonergan," grinned Curran, "you slipped up some when yuh come here. Now set down and sign the paper on this table. Yuh don't need to read it. All yuh got to do is to affix yore signature. Mr. Ferris and me will do the balance."

"And suppose I do sign," said Lonergan, apparently weakening, "how do I know you're not planning to kill me afterward?"

"Kill yuh, Mr. Lonergan?" jeered Curran. "Why, we ain't murderers, and you and Ferris has got too much on each other to make it seemly for to kill yuh. He's just aimin' to git back what yuh took from him by the process of fraud. Nobody won't interfere with yuh, after we got yore name signed. Yuh can ride straight home."

With a shrug of his shoulders Lonergan gave in. "My pen's in my saddle-flap with some papers," he announced.

"That's all right, Mr. Lonergan," said Curran. "Mr. Ferris and me will just accompany yuh outside and help yuh find it. Keep him covered, Ferris. I guess he's full of tricks."

Lonergan moved slowly out of the cabin to where his horse was standing, a little beyond the others, the reins thrown over the stump of a tree. He lifted the flap of his saddle and affected to be looking for the pen. Curran, who was standing beside Ferris, interposed.

"You was speakin' of killing, judge," he said, "and that sure hurt my feelings and Mr. Ferris'. Besides which there was a little misunderstanding. We got the funeral staged all right, but we ain't got the right corpse."

Curran struggled helplessly to escape.

Lonergan turned around. "Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"You!" shouted Curran—not at Lonergan but at the ranchman.

With a bound he was upon Ferris, and had twisted the revolver out of his hand. At the same instant Lonergan's hand appeared from the flap of the saddle, holding another gun in it.

In the brief interval before the shots that followed, Ferris saw the trap, and understood that he had foreseen Curran's treachery quite well, in the depths of his subconsciousness. He screamed twice as the two heavy slugs from the guns of Lonergan and Curran ploughed their way through the upper part of his body, reeled, and dropped like a log down the slope into the ravine.

Curran fired a second shot as Ferris' body was in the act of falling, and turned to his companion with a grin.

"Well, there's one hombre won't make no more trouble," he said. "I'll spade him under in the mornin'."

But Lonergan was shaking. "Get me that drink, Curran," he said. "Why did you make that play? There were moments when I wasn't sure you were not double-crossing me."

"Double crossin' yuh, Mr. Lonergan? Why, I thought yuh had more confidence in me than that," replied the foreman. "I made that play so as that girl inside wouldn't know just what was happenin'. Ferris had to go. He was gitting too wise. It sure was hard to keep from laughin', him thinking it was you who was goin' to be bumped off instead of himself. What's that?"

There sounded the creak of saddles, the scamper of horses' hoofs. Then came Coggswell's sudden challenge out of the dark:

"Sky high, the pair of you! We've got you covered!"

Panic stricken, Lonergan twisted this way and that, as he recognized the sheriff's voice. Now, in the faint starlight, he could see two mounted figures looming up out of the scrub close at hand.

"Beat it!" hissed Curran in his ear. "They're on the wrong side of the gully!"

Dave and Coggswell had come up on the other side of the ravine which, at this point near its blind end, was little more than a coulee. It was, however, too wide to set a horse to jump it. Next instant Curran was on his knees and firing at the two mounted figures.

Dave felt a slug thump into his saddlehorn and heard a yelp of pain as he emptied his gun at the flashes. He saw the other figure racing away, dimly outlined against the sky. Then Curran was following, bending almost double, weaving in and out of the scrub, with his hand clapped to his ear.

"Git Miss Lois, Bruce. I'll handle this pair!" the sheriff shouted, and he raced his horse around the blind end of the gully.

Dave, cramming fresh cartridges into his gun, saw the two weaving figures attempting to mount two of the group of horses that were clustered together near the cabin entrance. Coggswell was almost upon them, his gun blazing. There came a single shot in return, then the thump and clatter of hoofs, and one of the pair was racing along the trail, leaning flat upon his horse's neck.

This was Curran, making his getaway at top speed, while Coggswell was struggling with Lonergan. Dave raced his stallion to the sheriff's side.

"We'll git the other, Bruce,' said Coggswell. "See if Miss Lois is in the cabin."

Dave required no third invitation, he dashed into the shack. The candles were guttering on the table in the outer room, but the room was empty. But in the smaller room Dave saw a little figure gagged and bound.

"Loise!" His voice went out in a cry of fury. He ran to her side, slit the gag form her mouth, cut the ropes with his jackknife.

"Lois! Lois!" he whispered. "They ain't harmed yuh, honey girl?"

She tried to speak, but could only reach up for Dave's neck. He bent and covered her face with kisses.

"They ain't harmed yuh?"

"No," said Lois in the faintist whisper. "I'm all right, Dave."

Dave swung about as the sheriff entered the cabin with his prisoner. "I got her, sheriff," he called. "They ain't harmed her. Who was the other coyote, Lois?"

"Curran!" Lois' voice was just audible.

"Yeah, Curran," said the sheriff grimly. "I recognized him. Dunno yet who was shot, but I'll know soon. Yuh best come though, Lonergan," he continued. "No use splutterin' like a trapped cat. There's too much evidence against yuh. And I'm stayin' here till yuh talk."

Lonergan glared at his captor, then seemed to wilt. "Coggswell, I'll talk—I'll talk to you,' he said. "I'll talk when we're alone. Get me?"

"No difficulty about that," said Lonergan. "Bruce, s'pose yuh take Miss Lois back to her cabin on yore horse. She'll be feelin' better there, and I'll see yuh there before the night's through."

Dave picked the girl up in his arms and carried her to where Black Dawn was standing. He raised her into the saddle and swung up behind her.

"Dave, they shot Mr. Ferris," whispered Lois, shuddering. "I heard the shot. They trapped him here."

"Ferris?" Dave cried. He pulled Black Dawn around and rode up to the cabin door. "Sheriff, Lois says it was Ferris that they shot just now."

"Yeah," came the sheriff's grim voice, "Mr. Lonergan's just told me that. I'll be seein' yuh later at the Hooker cabin, Bruce. Keep yore eyes peeled for Pedro."

Dave turned the black and rode off along the gully again. They rode through the canyons and were approaching the thick undergrowth at the back of Hooker's cabin. Dave leaned forward.

"We're home, Lois, darling. And it looks as if all our troubles were just about over."

And as the words left his mouth, there came the crack-crack-crack of six-guns from a clump of scrub to the left.

Black Dawn leaped convulsively. A bullet whipped Dave's hat about on his head. Another passed between the reins, searing his knuckles. Black Dawn's legs bent under him. The horse was going down.

"We got the coyote!" yelled Curran exultantly out of the scrub.

A second man ran forward, and Dave recognized the Mexican, Pedro. But Dave was already on his feet and had pulled Lois to the ground. His gun belched answer. Pedro howled as the bullets caught him in the chest and abdomen. Then he flattened out, his scream of death cut short, and dropped almost benaath the staggering stallion.

As he fell, Dave leaped to one side and emptied his gun into the thicket from which the flashes had come. Two wild shots from Curran answered him, then came the audible click of the hammer upon an empty cartridge. Dave was on his feet again and rushing forward. With a vile curse, Curran wheeled his horse and raced through the scrub toward the Hooker cabin.

Dave was no more than twenty yards behind him when Curran reached the open, and he had already jammed fresh cartridges into his cylinder. He saw Curran working frantically with his gun, while his horse, frightened by the sound of the discharges, reared wildly, almost unseating him.

Yelling obscenely, Curran spurred his horse and dashed across the mesa, and a moment later Dave could hear him forcing his mount down the steep side.

He sent a last shot after him and ran back to Lois. She was standing beside Black Dawn. The horse was on his feet again.

"Lois, yuh ain't hit?" Dave shouted.

"No, no! Did he hit you, Dave?"

"Nary a nick. But he hit Black Dawn!" Dave cried.

He had heard the bullet thud into the stallion's body. Dave ran his hand along the flank, and felt the blood dripping from the shoulder. With his fingers he traced the course of the wound. It ranged upward. Suddenly he felt the bullet just beneath the skin. It had been deflected by the shoulder bone, and seemed to have inflicted only a slight, glancing wound.

Dave leaped into the saddle and gripped the horse with his knees. Black Dawn responded with his usual gait, though he was quivering from head to foot. It was clear that neither bone nor sinew had been seriously injured.

(To be continued)

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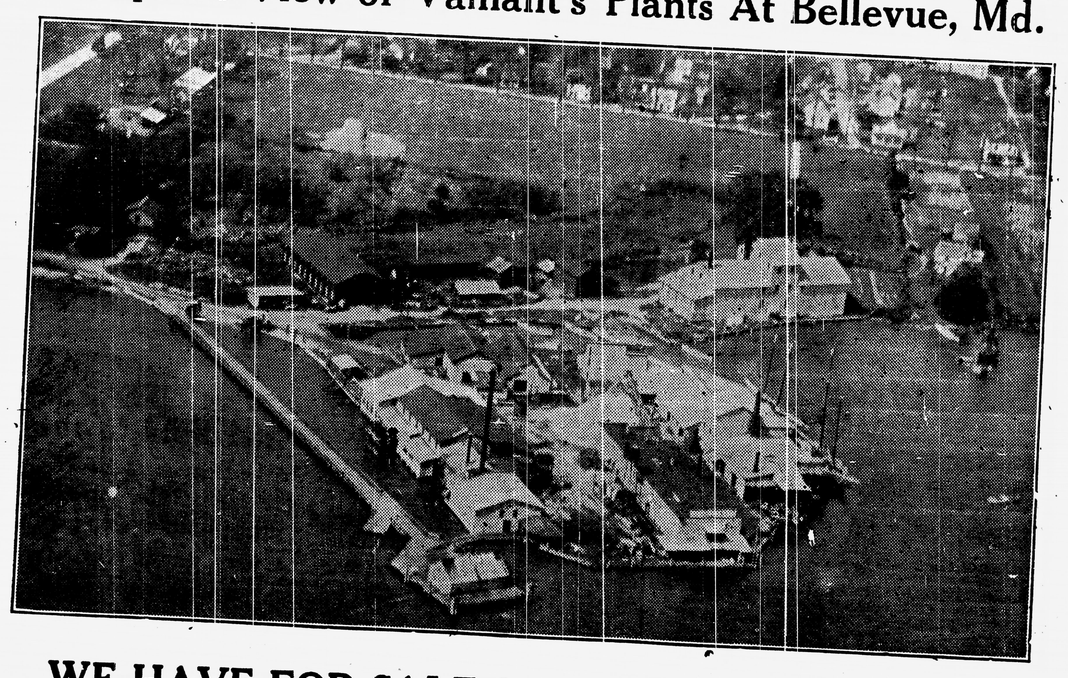

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