

## "GUNSIGHT PASS"

By William MacLeod Raine.

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### CHAPTER XVI.

#### Dave Meets Two Friends and a Fox

In the early morning Dave turned to rest his cramped limbs. He was in a day coach, and his sleep through the night had been broken. The light coming from the window woke him. He looked out on the opulent day of the desert, and the light quickened at sight of the enchanted mesa. To him came that joyous thrill of one who comes home to his own after years of exile.

Presently he saw the silvery sheen of the mesquite when the sun is streaming upward. Dust eddies whirled across the barrenness. The prickly pear and the palo verde flashed past, green splashes against a background of drab. The pudgy creosote, the buffalo grass, the undulation of sand hills were an old story, but today the eyes devoured them hungrily. The wonderful effect of space and light, the cloud sheens drawn out as by some invisible hand, the brown ribbon of road that wandered over the hills, drew him to him an emotion poignant and surprising.

The train slid into a narrow valley bounded by hills frantically ordered to fantastic shapes. Pinon trees fed to the rear. A sheep corral fenced with brush and twisted roots, in which were long, shallow feed troughs and flat-roofed sheds, leaped out of nowhere, was for a moment and vanished like a scene in a moving picture. A dim, gray mass of color on a hillside was agitated like a sea wave. It was a flock of sheep moving toward the corral. For an instant Dave caught a glimpse of a dog circling the huddled pack; then dog and sheep were out of sight together.

The pictures stirred memories of the arid smoke of hill camp-fires, of nights under a tarp with the rain beating down on him, and still others of a road herd bawling for water, of winter camps when the ropes were frozen stiff and the snow slid from trees in small avalanches.

At the junction he took the stage for Malapi. Already he could see that he was going into a new world, one altogether different from the one he had last seen here. These men were not cattlemen. They talked the vocabulary of oil. They had the shrewd, keen look of the driller and the wildcatter. They were full of nervous energy that oozed out in constant conversation.

"Jackpot Number Three lost a string of tools yesterday. While they're fixing, Steelman's in hell. You got to sit up all night to beat that Coal Oil Johnny, one wrinkled little man said."

A big man in boots laced over cowboy trousers nodded. "He's smooth as a pump plunger, and he sure has luck. He can buy up a dry hole any old time and it'll be a gusher in a week. He'll bust Em Crawford high and dry before he finishes with him. Em had ought to 'a' stuck to cattle. That's one game he knows from hoof to hide."

"Sure. Em's got no business in oil. Say, do you know when they're expectin' Shiloh Number Two in?"

"She's into the sand now, but still dry as a cork leg. That's liable to put a crimp in Em's bank roll, don't you reckon?"

"Yep. Old Man Hard Luck's campin' on his trail sure enough. The banks'll be shakin' their heads at his paper soon."

The stage had stopped to take on a mail sack. Now it started again, and the rest of the talk was lost to Dave. But he had heard enough to guess that the old friend between Crawford and Steelman had taken on a new phase, one in which his friend was likely to get the worst of it.

At Malapi Dave descended from the stage into a town he hardly knew. It had the same wide main street, but the business section extended five blocks instead of one. Everywhere oil dominated the place. Hotels, restaurants and boarding stores jostled saloons and gambling houses. Tents had been set up in vacant lots beside frame buildings, and in them stores, rooming-houses, and lunch-rooms were doing business. Everybody was in a hurry. The street was filled with men who had to sleep with one eye open lest they miss the news of some new discovery.

The town was having growing pains. One contractor was putting down sidewalks in the same street where another laid sewer pipe and a third put in telephone poles. A branch line of a trans-continental railroad was moving across the desert to tap the new oil fields. Houses rose overnight. Mule teams jingled in and out of freighting supplies to Malapi and from there to the fields. On all sides were dust, energy, and optimism, signs of the new West in the making.

Up the street a team of half-broken broncos came on the gallop, weaving among the traffic with a certainty that showed a skilled pair of hands at the reins. From the backboard stepped lightly a straight-backed, well-muscled young fellow. He let out a moment later a surprised shout of welcome and fell upon Sanders with two brown fists.

"Dave! Where in Mexico you been, old alkali? We been lookin' for you everywhere."

"In Denver, Bob."

Sanders spoke quietly. His eyes went straight into the road. Then, by some twist of chance, he decided to take the sidewalk on the other side. The sign of the Delmonico had caught his eye and he remembered that he was hungry.

He took one step—and stopped. He had recognized Sanders. His

eyes as though his friend had come back from a week in the hills on a deer hunt. "We didn't know when the Governor was going to get out. Sanders was right at the gate, me or Em Crawford one. Why n't you answer our letters, you darned old sealawag? Dawgones, but I'm glad to see you."

Dave's heart warmed to this fine loyalty. He knew that both Hart and Crawford had worked in season and out of season for a parole or a pardon. But it's one thing to appear before a pardon board for a convict in whom you are interested and quite another to welcome him to your heart when he stands before you. Bob would do of the tie. Sanders told himself with a rush of gratitude. None of this feeling showed in his dry voice.

"Thanks, Bob."

Hart knew already that Dave had come back a changed man. He had gone in a boy, wild, turbulent, untamed. He had come out tempered by the fires of experience and discipline. The tiger's eyes were no longer frank and gentle. They judged warily and inscrutably. He talked little and mostly in monosyllables. It was a sad guess that he was master of his impulses in his manner was a cold reliance entirely foreign to the Dave Sanders his friend had known and frolicked with. Bob felt in him a quality of steel, but today the eyes devoured them hungrily. The wonderful effect of space and light, the cloud sheens drawn out as by some invisible hand, the brown ribbon of road that wandered over the hills, drew him to him an emotion poignant and surprising.

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Dave shook his head. "I'm much obliged, but I'd rather not get. Got to feel out my way while I learn the ropes."

To this Bob did not consent without a stiff protest, but Sanders was inflexible.

"All right. Suit yourself. You always was a stubborn as a Missouri mule," Hart said with a grin. "Anyhow, you'll eat supper with me. Let's go to the Delmonico for a while. We'll see if Hop Lee knows you. I'll bet he does."

Hart had come in to see a contractor about building a derick for a well. "I got to see him now, Dave. Go along with me," he urged.

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"He's grown older, a heap older. And he's driven what an easy-going kid he was, always friendly and happy as a half-grown pup. Well, he ain't thataway now. Looks like he never would laugh again, real cheerful. I don't reckon he ever will. He's done got the prison brand on him for good. I couldn't see my old Dave in him a-tall. He's hard as nail—and bitter."

The brown eyes softened. "He would be, of course. How could he help it?"

"And he kinda holds you off. He's been hurt by and ain't takin' no chances warden, don't you reckon?"

"Do you mean he's broken?"

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Bob was standing in front of the restaurant, but he was faced in the other direction. His flat, muscular back was rigid. In his attitude was a certain tenseness, as though body was a bundle of steel springs ready to be released.

Bob's eye travelled swiftly past him to a fat man rolling up the street on the opposite sidewalk. "It's Ad Miller, back from the pen. I heard he got out this week," he told the girl in a low voice.

Joyce Crawford felt the blood ebb from her face. It was as though her heart had been drenched with ice water. What was going to take place between these men? Were they armed? Would the gambler recognize his old enemy?

She knew that each was responsible for the other's prison sentence. Sanders had followed the thieves to Denver and found them with his home. The fat crook had tied Dave into the penitentiary by swearing that the boy had fired the first shot. Now they were meeting for the first time since.

Miller had been drinking. The stiff precision of his gait showed that. For a moment it seemed that he would pass without noticing the man across the road. Then, by some twist of chance, he decided to take the sidewalk on the other side. The sign of the Delmonico had caught his eye and he remembered that he was hungry.

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