

"GUNSLIGHT PASS"

By William MacLeod Raine.

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(Continued from page ten)

the uplands, plunging into a land of deep gorges and great chasms. Here manzanita grew and liveoaks flourished. They sent a whitetail buck crashing through the brush into a canon.

When night fell they built a fire of nighthead and after they had eaten found its glow grateful. For they were well up in the hills now and the night air was sharp.

In the morning desert they had followed easily the trail of the thieves, but as they got into the hills the tracks had become fainter and fewer. The young men discussed this while they lay in their blankets in a water-gutted gulch not too near the fire they had built.

"Like huntin' for a needle in a haystack," said Bob. "You're really done patered out. They might be in any one of a hundred pockets right close, or they may have bore away to the right. All they got to do is hole up and not build any fire."

"Fat chance we've got," admitted Dave. "Unless they build a fire like we done. Say, I'd a heap rather be sleepin' here than by that nighthead blaze tonight. They might creep up and try to gun us."

Before they had been in the saddle an hour next day the trail of the thieves was lost. The puruers spent till sunset trying to pick it up again. The third day was wasted in aimless drifting among the crevices of the mountains.

"No use, Bob," said his friend while they were cooking supper. "They've made their getaway. Might as well drift back to Molepit. Don't you reckon?"

"Looks like. We're only wastin' our time here."

Long before day broke they started.

The canons below were filled with mists as they rode down out of the mountains toward the crystal dawn that already flooded the plain. The court-house at Molepit lay in the distance as time was midnight when the dust-covered men and horses drew into the town.

The tired men slept till noon. At the Delmonico Restaurant they found Buck Bryington and Steve Russell. The trail herd had been driven in an hour before.

"How'd it all turn out?" asked Dave of his friend Bob, thumping him on the back.

"Jee! toabably," answered the old-timer, making great play with knife and fork. "A man or a hawse don't either one amount to much after three months. Let's see. Since that brone piler met at Willow Creek I been mighty stiff, you might say."

"Dug's payin' off today, boys," Russell told them. "You'll find him round to the bank."

"The foreman settled 'tween 'em," said Hart, after which he turned to the page in his pocket notebook that held the account of Sanders.

"You've drew one month's pay. That leaves you three months, less the week you've fooled away at the pinto."

"Hold on!" objected Dave. "My pay's thirty-five a month."

"First I knew of it," said the foreman, eyes bleak and harsh. "Thirty-five you're gettin'."

"I came in as top hand at thirty-five."

"You did not," denied Doble flatly.

"The young man flushed. 'You can't run that on me, Dug. I'll not stand for it.'"

"Eighty-two fifty is what you get," answered the old, dogmatically. "You can take it or go to hell."

He began to sort out a number of small checks with which to pay the puncher. At that time the currency of the country consisted largely of the cattlemen's checks, which were grimy with dirt. Often these were not cashed for months later.

"We'll see what the old man says about that," retorted Dave hotly. It was in his mind to say that he did not intend to be robbed by both the Doble brothers, but he wisely repressed the impulse. Dug would not soor fight as eat, and the young rider knew that he would have a chance in the world against him.

"All right," sneered the foreman. "Run with yore tale of grief to Crawford. Tell him I been pickin' on you. I hear you've got to be quite a pet of his."

This brought Dave up with a short turn. He could not take advantage of the service he had done the owner of the D Bar Lazy R to ask him to interfere in his behalf with the foreman. Doble might be cynically defrauding him of part of what was due him in wages. Dave would have fought that out with him for himself. The worst of it was that he had no redress. Unless he appealed to the cattlemen he would have to accept what the foreman offered.

Forever, his pride was touched. He was young enough to be sensitive on the subject of his ability to look out for himself.

"I'm no pet of anybody," he flung out. "Gimme that money. It ain't a square deal, but I reckon I can stand it."

"I reckon you'll have to. It's neck meat or nothin'," grunted the foreman.

Doble counted him out eighty dollars in cattlemen's checks and paid him twenty-five in cash. While Dave signed a receipt the hook-nosed foreman, broad shoulders thrown back and thumbs hitched in the arm-holes of his vest, sat at ease in a tilted chair and grinned maliciously at his victim. He was "puttin' somethin' over on him," and he wanted Dave to know it. Dug had no affection for his half-brother, but he resented the fact that Sanders publicly and openly despised him as a crook. He took it as a personal reflection on himself.

Still smoldering with anger at this high-handed proceeding, Dave went down to the Longhorn corral and saddled his horse. He had promised Bryington to help water the herd.

This done, he rode back to town, hitched the horse back of a barber shop, and went in for a shave. Presently he was stretched in a chair, his boots thrown across the foot-rest in front of him.

The barber lathered his face and murmured gossip in his ear. "George Doble and Miller claim they're goin' to Denver to run some skin game at a street fair. They're sure slick for sure."

Dave noticed no comment. "You notice they didn't steal any of Em Crawford's stock. No, sirree! They know they're hopin' away with broncos belongin' to you boys because they know it'd be safe."

"Picked easy marks, did they?" asked the cowpuncher sarcastically. "Any one of the men that rode the chinch of his customer and began to scrape. 'Well, o' course you're only boys. They took advantage of that and done you a mean one.'"

Dug Doble came into the shop, very grim about the mouth. He stopped to look down sarcastically at the new boots Sanders was wearing.

"I see you've bought a new pair of boots," he said in a heavy, sneering voice.

Dave waited without answering, his eyes meeting steadily those of the foreman.

The big fellow laid a paper on the breast of the cowpuncher. "Here's a bill for a pair of boots charged to the old man's account—eighteen dollars. I took 'em just now at the store. You'll dig 'em."

It was the custom of riders who came to town to have the supplies they needed charged to their cowpunchers against wages due them. Doble took it for granted that Sanders had done this, which was contrary to the orders he had given his outfit. He did not know the young man had taken his boots while residing at Crawford and had been authorized by him to get another pair in place of them.

Nor did Dave intend to tell him. Here was a chance to even the score against the foreman. Already he had a plan smoldering in his mind that would take him out of this part of the country for a time. He no longer cared for Doble without friction, and he had business of his own to attend to. The way to solve the immediate difficulty flashed through his brain instantly, every detail clear.

It was scarcely a moment before he drew an answer. "I'll tend to it soon as I'm out of the chair," he gave out for none of you fellows to charge goods to the old man," said Doble harshly.

"Did you?" Dave's voice was light and careless. "You're goin' to hunt a job somewhere else. You're through with me."

"I'll hate to part with you," said Dave to the young fellow.

"No," answered Dave with mock meekness.

Doble sat down in the chair to wait. He had no intention of leaving in a hurry. He had settled the matter with the barber and finished with him the puncher stepped across to a looking-glass and adjusted carefully the silk handkerchief worn around his neck. He had a good look at his boots and had a good look at how the wounded boy had been taken to the cattlemen's home and nursed there. It pleased him now to score off what he chose to call the soft-headedness of his chief.

The cattlemen showed interest. "That so, Dug? Sorry. I took a fancy to that boy. What did he do?"

"You know how vaqueros are always comin' in and chargin' goods against the boss. I give out the word they was to quit it. Sanders he gets a pair of light-colored boots, then jumps the town before I find out about it."

Crawford started to speak, but Doble finished his story.

"I took out of him, but my brone went lame from a stone in his hoof. You'll never see that eight-year-old plunk. Em. It don't do to pet cowhands."

"Too bad you took all that trouble, Dug," the old cattlemen began mildly. "The fact is—"

"Trouble, say, I'd ride to Tombstone to get a crack at that young man," said Doble, his eyes twinkling. "I do to him if I ever got my fists on him."

"So you did catch up with him," said Dug to the young fellow.

"I did, but I didn't want to hurt him. He did not intend to tell all he knew about the Gunsight Pass episode. 'I didn't say 'when' I told him."

"That's so. You didn't. Well, I'm right sorry you took so much trouble to find him. You know, though, he didn't tell you I gave him the boots."

"But he won't gimme one."

"Not his business. It's your business."

The dispatcher got busy over his chart. Dave became aware that he was going to get no satisfaction here. He strapped back to the platform.

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