

"GUNSIGHT PASS"

By William MacLeod Raine.

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Dave helped himself to bread from a plate stacked high with thick slices. He buttered it and began to eat. Hart did the same. At Delmonico's nobody ever waited till the meal was served. Just about to attack a second slice, Dave stopped to stare at his companion. Hart was looking past his shoulder with alert intensity. Dave turned his head. Two men, leaving the restaurant, were paying the cashier. "They just stepped out," said Dave to the right, "whispered Bob. The men were George Doble and a cowpuncher known as Shorty, a broad, heavy-set little man who worked for Bradley Steelman, owner of the Rocking Horse Ranch, what time he was not engaged on nefarious business of his own. He was wearing a check shirt and leather chaps with silver conchas. At this moment Hop Lee arrived with dinner. Dave sighed as he grinned at his friend. "I need that supper in my system, I sure do, but I reckon I don't get it."

"You do not, old Hazzard," agreed Hart. "I'll say Doble's the most inconsiderate fellow I ever did see. Why couldn't he show up a half-hour later, d-d-gum his ornery hide?" They paid their bill and passed into the street. Immediately the sound of a clear, high voice arrested their attention. It vibrated indignation and dread. "What have you done with my father?" came the cry from them on the wings of the soft night wind. A young woman was speaking. She was in a buggy and was talking to two men on the sidewalk—the two men who had just left the restaurant. "Why, Miss, we ain't done a thing to him—nothin' at all," the man Shorty was speaking, and in a tone of honest conciliation. It was quite plain he did not want a scene on the street.

"That's a lie," the voices of the two broke for an instant to a sob. "Do you think I don't know your father?" Brad Steelman's hand, that you do his meanness for him when he snaps his fingers?" "You sure ain't clik yore heels mighty loud, Miss," Dave cried in that soft answer the purr of malice. He remembered now hearing from Buck Brington that years ago Emerson Crawford had roared evidence to send Shorty to the penitentiary for rebranding through a blanket. "I reckon you come by it honest, Em always acted like he was Doble's man."

"Where is he? What's become of him?" she cried. "Is yore paw misin?" I'm right sorry to hear that," the cowpuncher countered with suave irony. He was eager to be gone. His glance followed Doble, who was moving slowly down the street. The girl's face, white and shining in the moonlight, leaned out of the buggy toward the retreating vaquero. "Don't you dare hurt my father! Don't you dare!" she warned. The words choked in her tense throat. Shorty continued to back away. "You're excited, Miss. Go home and think it over reasonable. You'll be sorry you talked this away to me," he said with uncanny virtue. Then, swiftly, he turned and went striding down the walk, his spurs jangling music as he moved.

Quickly Dave gave directions to his friend. "Duck back into the restaurant, Bob. Let a pocketful of dry rice from the Chink. Trail those birds to their nest and find where they roost. Then stick around like a buzzard. Scatter rice behind you, and I'll drift along later. First of all, I got to stay and talk with Miss Joyce. And, say, take along a rope. Might need it."

A moment later Hart was in the restaurant commanding the waiter. Sanders was lifting his dusty hat to the young woman in the buggy. "If I can help you any, Miss Joyce," he said. "Beneath the dark and delicate brows she frowned at him. "Who are you?" "Dave Sanders my name is. I reckon you never heard tell of me. I punch cows for yore father."

Her luminous, hazel-brown eyes steadied in his, read the honesty of his simple, boyish heart. "You heard what I said to that man?" "Part of it."

"Well, it's true. I know it is, but I can't prove it."

Hart, moving swiftly down the street, saw a head at his friend as he passed. Without turning his attention from Joyce Crawford, Dave acknowledged the signal.

"How do you know it?" "Steelman like a hawk been watching our house. They were hanging around at different times day before yesterday. This man Shorty was one."

"Any special reason for the feud to break out right now?" "Father was going to prove up on a claim this week—the one that takes in the Tularosa water-holes. You know the trouble they've had about it—how they kept breaking our fences to water their sheep and cattle. Don't you think maybe they're trying to keep him from proving up?"

"Maybe. When did you last see him?" Her lip trembled. ("Night before last, after supper he started for the Cattlemen's Club, but he never got there.")

"Sure he wasn't called out to one of the ranches unexpected?" "I sent out to make sure. He hasn't been seen there."

"Looks like some of Brad Steelman's smooth work," admitted Dave. "If he could work yore father to sign a relinquishment—"

Fire flickered in her eye. "He'd ought to know Dad better."

"That's right too. But Brad needs that water-holes in his business bad. Without 'em he loses the whole Round Top Range. He might take a crack at turning the screws on yore father."

"Yes, don't think—?" She stopped, to fight back a sob that filled her soft throat.

Dave was not sure what he thought, but he answered cheerfully and instantly. "No, I don't reckon they're dry-gulched him or anything. Emerson Crawford is one sure-enough husky citizen. He couldn't either be shot or rough-housed in town without some one hearin' the noise. What's more it wouldn't be their play to injure him, but to force a relinquishment."

"That's true. You believe that, don't you?" Joyce asked eagerly. "Yes, I do. And Dave discovered that his argument or his hopes had for the moment convinced him. "Now the question is, what's to be done?" "Yes, she admitted, and the tremor of the lips told him that she depended upon him to work out the problem. His heart swelled with glad pride at the thought.

"That man who just passed is my friend," he told her. "He's a trail rider that duck Shorty. Like as not we'll find out what's stirrin'."

"I'll go with you," the girl said, vivid lips parted in anticipation. "No, you go home. This is a man's job. Soon as I find out anything I'll let you know."

"You'll come, no matter what time it might be," she pleaded. Her firm little hand rested in his brown palm. "I'm depending on you," she murmured in a whisper lifted to a low wall by a stress of emotion.

CHAPTER VI. By Way of a Window

The trail of rice led down mission street, turned at Juniper, crossed into an alley, and trickled along a dusty road to the outskirts of the frontier town.

The responsibility Joyce had put upon him, the silent Dave. He had followed the horse-race gambler to town on a purely selfish undertaking. But he had been caught in a cross-current of fate and was being swept into dangerous waters for the sake of another.

Doble and Miller were small fish in the swirl of this more desperate venture. He knew Brad Steelman by sight, and by reputation. The man's coffee-brown, hatched face, his restless, black eyes, the high, narrow shoulders, the slope of nose and chin, combined somehow to give him the look of a wily and predaacious wolf. He had never met any one who so impressed him with a sense of ruthless rapacity. He was audacious and deadly in attack, but always he covered his tracks cunningly. Succeeded of many crimes, he had been proved guilty of none. It was a safe bet that now he had a line of retreat worked out in case his plans went awry.

A soft low whistle stayed his feet. From behind a greasewood bush Bob rose and beckoned him. Dave tipped to him. Both of them crouched behind cover while they whispered.

"The 'dobe house over to the right," said Bob. "I been up and tried to look in, but they got the curtains drawn. I would like to've seen how many gents are present. Nothin' down. It's a strictly private party."

Dave told him what he had learned from the daughter of Emerson Crawford.

"Might make a rather of boys and raid the joint," suggested Hart. "Bad medicine, Bob. Our work's got to be smoother than that. How do we know they got the old man a prisoner there? What chance we got for attackin' a peaceable house? A friend of mine's brother once got shot up makin' a similar mistake. Maybe Emerson's there. Maybe he'll kill me. Say he is. All right, b'llin' of men pour out the place. We go in and find the old man with a bullet right spang through his forehead. Well, ain't that too bad! In the rookies his own puncher mail 'a' gunned him accidental. How would that story listen in court?"

"It wouldn't listen good to me. Howcome Crawford to be a prisoner there. I want to know."

"Sure you would, and Steelman would have witnesses a-plenty to swear the old man had just dropped in to see if they couldn't talk things over and make a settlement of their troubles."

"All right—What's yore program then?" asked Bob. "Darned if I know. Say we scout the ground over first."

They made a wide circuit and approached the house from the rear, worming their way through the Indian grass toward and tried the door. It was locked. The window was latched and the blind lowered. He drew back and rejoined his companion.

"No chance there," he whispered. "How about the roof?" asked Hart.

It was an eight-roomed house, three of the roof were dormers jutted. No light issued from either of them. Dave's eyes lit.

"What's the matter with takin' a whiff at it?" his partner continued. "You're top-hand with a rope."

"Suits me fine."

The young puncher arranged the coils carefully and whistled the loop around his head to get the feel of the throw. It would not do to miss the first cast and let the rope fall dragging down the roof. Some one might hear and come out to investigate.

The rope snaked forward and up, settled gracefully over the chimney, and lightened round it close to the shingles.

"Good enough. Now me for the

chimney," murmured Hart. "Don't pull yore picket-pin, Bob. Me and you got to be in there."

"All right. We ain't no time to debate. Shag up, old scout."

Dave slipped off his high-heeled boots and went up hand over hand, using his feet against the rough adobe walls to help in the ascent. When he came to the eaves he threw a leg up and clambered to the roof. In another moment he was huddled against the chimney waiting for his companion.

As soon as Hart had joined him he pulled up the rope and wound it round the chimney.

"You stay here while I see what's doin'," Dave proposed. "I never did see such a fellow for hoggin' all the fun," objected Bob. "Ain't you goin' to leave me trailin' along with your feet against the wall?"

"Got to play a lone hand till we find out where we're at, Bob. Doubles the chances of being bumped into if we both go."

Then Hart crept on the roof and the young cowpuncher found himself the active center of a cyclone. His own revolver was gone. He grappled with a man, seizing him by the wrist to prevent the use of a long-barreled Colt's. The trigger fell, a bullet flying through the ceiling.

Other men pressed about him, trying to reach him with their fists. Dave struck them. The pack away. Their high heels crushed cruelly the flesh of his stockinged feet. The darkness befriended Dave. In the massed melee they dared not shoot for fear of hitting the wrong man. Nor could they always be sure which shifting figure was the enemy.

Dave clung close to the man he had seized, using him as a shield against the others. The pack away. Down the hall into the wedge of light thrown by the lamp in the room.

Across the head of the man next Shorty reached and raised his arm. Dave saw the blue barrel of the revolver sweeping down, but could not free a hand to protect himself. A jagged pain shot through his head. The power went out of his legs. He staggered at the hinges of his knees. He stumbled and fell down. It seemed to him that bolts of lightning were zigzagging through him.

The pain ceased and he floated away into a sea of space.

CHAPTER VII. Bob Hart Takes a Hand

Bob Hart waited till his friend had disappeared into the house before he moved.

"Thought he'd run it over me, so I roost here on the roof, did he? I'm after the old horn-toad full jump. Dave saw the blue barrel of a gray grin at his good-looking face.

He too, examined his gun before he followed Dave through the dormer. He passed into the room, the door closed behind him. He saw the details of it escaped his cool, keen gaze. At least of all the sawed-off shotgun in the corner.

That scatter gun might come handy. Reckon I'll move up. I'll know just where it's at when I need it," he said to himself, and carried the gun to the bed, where he covered soiled clothing and stained boots. The door was ajar, but nobody was in the room.

He passed himself over the sill and waited for a moment while he listened. The revolver in his hand, it seemed to him that he could hear a faint murmur of voices, but he was too far off to catch the words. He plunked foot, slid across the bare floor, and again stopped to take stock of his surroundings.

He was at the head of a stairway that led down to the first floor and lost itself in the darkness of the hall. Leaning over the banister, he listened intently for any sign of life below. He was sure now that he had a close door.

The cowpuncher hesitated. Should he stop to explore the upper story? Or should he go down at once and find out what those voices meant? He might be in a trap. The time was the essence of his situation to discover what had become of Emerson Crawford. He decided to look for his information on the first floor.

Never before had Dave noticed that stairs creaked and groaned so loudly beneath the pressure of a soft footstep. They seemed to shout his approach, though he took every step lightly. He was willing to bet that he would be shot if he were seen.

"It relieves my mind some to tell you what a yellow coyote you are," he said to himself. "You got about as much as a brush rabbit, and I'd trust you as a brush rabbit."

No use to get on the peck, Em. I don't know you no good to make me sore. Maybe yore own friend here yore shet of Brad."

"It relieves my mind some to tell you what a yellow coyote you are," he said to himself. "You got about as much as a brush rabbit, and I'd trust you as a brush rabbit."

Bob tried the door. The knob turned in his hand and the door swung open inward.

The rattle of the latch brought George Doble's sly, shifty eye round. He was expecting to see one of his friends, and he was staring at a blank astonishment to see a stranger in a leading flicker of fear. The crook jumped to his feet, tugging at his gun. Before he could fire, the ranger leaped at him, and he fell.

The plunging attack drove Doble back against the table, a flimsy, round-topped affair which gave way beneath this assault upon it. The crook fell into the wreck. Doble squirmed away in the wreck before he could turn to use his revolver. Bob was on him again. The puncher caught his right arm, in time as in more than time. He deflected the bullet and saw a glint of the bed.

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command. "Cut me loose," Bob had heard that voice no more than one round-up. It was that of Emerson Crawford.

The range-rider's sharp knife cut the ropes that tied the hands and feet of his employer. He worked in the dark and it took time.

"Who are you? How come you you here?" demanded the cattleman. "I'm Bob Hart. It's quite a story. Miss Joyce sent me and Dave Sanders," answered the young man, still busy with the ropes.

From below came the sound of a shot, the shuffling of many feet. "Must be the downstairs."

"I reckon. They're a muley gun in the hall."

Crawford stretched his cramped muscles, flexing and reflexing his arms and legs. Get it, son. We'll split down and sit in."

When Bob returned he found the big cattleman examining Doble's revolver. He broke the shotgun to make sure it was loaded.

"Then, 'Well travel,' he said coolly. The battle sounds below had died away. From the landing they looked down into the hall and saw a bar of light that shined through a partly open door. Voices were lifted in excitement.

"One of Em Crawford's riders," some one was saying. "A whole lot of 'em must be round the place."

Came the third of a foot on something soft. "Put the damn spy outa business, I say," broke in another angrily.

Hart's finger rose. "That's Miller," he whispered to his chief. "He's kickin' Dave now he's down 'cause Dave whaled him good."

Softly the two men padded down the stair treads and moved along the passage.

"Who's that?" demanded Shorty, thrusting his head into the hall. "Say right there or I'll shoot."

"Oh, no, you won't," answered the cattleman evenly. "I'm comin' into that room to have a settlement. There'll be no shootin'—unless I do it."

His step did not falter. He moved forward, brushed Shorty aside, and strode into the midst of his enemies. Dave lay on the floor. His hair was dotted with blood and a thin stream of it dripped from his head. The man groped round his body and had their eyes focused on the man who had just pushed his way in. All of them were armed, but not one of them made a move to attack.

For a moment something about a strong man, unafraid, more potent than a company of troopers. Such a man was Emerson Crawford now. His life might be hanging in the balance of his own fears, but he gave no sign of uncertainty. His steady grey eyes swept the circle, rested on each worried face, and fastened on Brad Steelman.

Bob had been enemies for years, rivals for control of the range, and for leadership in the community. Before that, as young men, they had been candidates for the hand of the girl, the better one had won. The sheepman shrewd and cunning, but he had no such force of character as Crawford. At the bottom of his heart, though he seethed with hatred, he qualified before the level gaze. Did his foe have the house surrounded with his range-riders? Did he mean to make him pay with his life for the thing he had done?

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again," the doctor said. He did, and found Dave much improved. The clean outdoors of the rough-riding West builds blood that is red. A city man might have kept his bed a week, but Dave was up and ready to say good-bye within forty-eight hours. He was still a bit under par, a trifle washed-out, but he wanted to take the road in pursuit of Miller and Doble, who had again decamped in a hurry with the two horses they had stolen.

"They had the broncs hid up Frio Canon way, I reckon," explained Hart. "But they didn't take no chances. When they left that 'dobe house they lit a-runnin' and clumb for the high hills on the jump. And they didn't leave no address neither. We'll be followin' a cold trail. We're not liable to find them after they hole up in some mountain pocket."

"Might. Never can tell. Let's take a whiff at it anyway," urged Dave. "Hate to give up yore paint horse, don't you?" said Bob with his friendly grin. "Ain't blame," you none. I'd swear on those follow's trail if Chiquito was mine. What say we outfit in the mornin' and pull our freights? Maybe we'll meet up with the thieves at that. Yo no say I don't know."

When Joyce was in the room where Dave lay on the lounge, the young man never looked at her, but he saw nobody else. Brought up in a saddle on the range, he had never before met a girl like her. It was not only that she was beautiful and fragrant as apple-blossoms, a mystery of maidenhood whose presence awed his simple soul. It was not only that she seemed so delicately precious, a princess of the blood royal set apart by reason of her buoyant grace, the soft rustle of her skirts, the fine texture of the satin skin. What took him by the throat was her goodness. She was enshrined in his heart as a young saint. He would have thought it sacrilege to think of her as a wide-awake young woman subject to all the vanities of her sex. And he could have cited evidence. The sweetness of her affection for rough Em Crawford, the dear, maternal tenderness with which she ruled her three-year-old brother Keith, motherless since the death of his father, the kindness of the luminous brown eyes to the uncouth stranger thrown upon her hospitality. Dave treasured them all as signs of angelic grace, and they lay upon his heartstrings disturbingly.

Joyce brought Keith in to say good-bye to Dave and his friend before they left. The little fellow ran across the room to his new pal, who had hugged himself weeping, his hair playthings for the younger.

"You turn back and make be a bawdle, Dave," he cried. "I'll sure come or else send you one of the cowpunchers promised, risin' to meet Joyce."

She carried her slender figure across the room with perfect ease. Her dark hair hung across her shoulders in a thick, wavy mass. She threw herself at Crawford with a moaning little sob.

"Oh Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad!" she cried, and her slender arms went round his neck.

"It's all right, sweetheart. Yore old dad's not even powder-burnt. You been worryin' a heap, I reckon. His voice was full of rough tenderness.

She began to cry. He patted her shoulder and caressed her dark head, drawing it close to his shoulder. "Now—now—now, sweetheart, don't you cry. It's all right, it's honey."

"You're not hurt," she begged through her tears. "Not none. Never was huskier. But I got a boy out here that's beat up some. Come in, Dave—come you, Bob. They're good boys. Joy, want you to meet 'em both."

The girl had thought her father alone. She flung one startled glance into the night, clutched the dressing-gown closer round her throat, and fled her barefoot way into the darkness of the house. To the boys, hanging back awkwardly at the gate, she clung, child-woman, was a vision in her white loveliness a glimpse of heaven.

Her father laughed. "Joy ain't dressed for callers. Come in, boys. He lit a lamp and drew Dave to a lounge. "Lemme look at yore hand, son. Bob, yore hotfoot it for Doc Green."

"It's nothin' a-tall to make a fuss about," Dave apologized. "Only a love tap, compliments of Shorty and some kicks in the slats, kindness of Mr. Miller."

In spite of his debonair manner Dave still had a bad headache and was so sore around the body that he could scarcely move without groaning. He kept his teeth clamped on the pain because he had been brought up in the outdoor code of the West which demands of a man that he grin and stand the gaff.

While the doctor was attending to his injuries, Dave caught sight once or twice of Joyce at the door, clad now in a summer frock of white with a blue sash. She was busy supplying in a brisk, competent way, the demands of the doctor for hot and cold water and clean linen.

Meanwhile Crawford told his story. "It was right close to the club when Doble met me. He pulled a story of how his brother Dug had had trouble with Steelman and got shot up. I swallowed it hook, bait and sinker. Soon as I got into the house they swarmed over me like bees. I didn't even get my six-gun. Brad wanted me to sign a relinquishment. I told him where he could head in at."

"What would have happened if the boys hadn't dropped along?" asked Doc Green as he repacked his medicine case. "The cattleman looked at him, and his eyes were hard and bleak. "Why, Doc, yore guess is as good as mine," he said.

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