

# BLACK DAWN

by Victor Rousseau

## CHAPTER X

SYNOPSIS

Dave Bruce, out of a job, arrives at Wilbur Ferris' Cross-Bar ranch. Curran, the foreman, promises him a job if he can break a horse called Black Dawn. When he succeeds, he discovers that Curran expected the horse to kill him. A girl named Lois rides up, angry with Dave for breaking "her" horse. She refuses to speak to him even when he uses his savings to pay off the mortgage on the small ranch she shares with her foster father, a man named Hooker. But when Hooker is shot and Dave is charged with murder, Lois saves him from being lynched. Wounded, she guides him to a mountain pass where she thinks they will be safe from Curran and the sheriff's posse. A quarrel between Ferris and Judge Lonergan reveals that Ferris had killed his partner, Blaine Rowland, many years before. Thoroughly scared, Ferris takes Curran into his confidence. Dave leaves Lois alone for a while, not knowing that Curran is hiding nearby.



For an instant the girl looked at the foreman, frozen with terror.

When Dave and the horses had finally vanished behind the skyline, Curran jumped to his feet. He made his way along the ledge trail, past the place where his two horses were tethered, in the direction of the cave.

Crouching in the last clump of jackpine scrub, Curran watched Lois as she returned from the little pool and entered the cave. Then he crept on tiptoe after her.

It was the shadow of the man, falling across the floor, that caused Lois to look around. She thought it was Dave returned. For an instant the girl looked at the foreman, frozen with terror. Then she opened her mouth to scream.

That instant Curran had leaped upon her, clapping one hand to her mouth, stifling her cry before she could utter it. In that hand was a gag, which he thrust down Lois' throat. With his other hand he brought the strings behind her head. Holding her to him, so that her attempts to free herself were futile, Curran quickly had the gag adjusted. She half broke free. Curran grasped her in his arms again.

"Goin' to set the herd on me, huh?" jeered Curran. "I told yuh I'd git yuh, Lois."

It was the work of a moment or two to slip the knotted ropes, which he had already prepared, over Lois' arms and to fasten their

ends to the horn of his saddle. He set her upon one of the horses and sprang upon the other. Holding her fast, he started the two horses down the trail.

Still weak from her wound, half choked by the gag, utterly helpless to cry out or attempt to escape, Lois managed to keep her seat until the horses reached the end of the ravine. Instead of making for the trail that ran toward Hooker's shack, Curran turned the horses' heads toward the mountains.

Lois, who knew the mountains like a book, had already guessed where Curran was taking her, and as the route confirmed her belief her heart sank even lower. For Dave would never be able to trail her here, and she would be utterly at Curran's mercy.

His destination was a small shack, about four miles away, where a prospector had once lived while engaged in a fruitless search for gold in the mountains. Nobody ever traveled in that direction. There was no pass through the perpendicular cliffs that walled in the blind canyon which Curran was already entering.

The journey was nearly ended. The shack came into sight at the end of the canyon, down which a thin stream of water trickled. A

rotting cradle still lay on the bank and beside it a blade of a spade protruded from a mound of earth almost eaten away with rust. Curran reined in and dismounted. He slipped the rope from Lois' arms and carried her inside.

The shack contained a small room and another smaller one, with a plank door between. In the first room was a table fashioned from packing cases, and some tree stumps that had been used for seats. In one corner was a bunk with a rotting mattress. In the smaller room was another bunk, and nothing more.

Out of the first bunk staggered a Mexican.

"Well, yuh got here, Pedro," said Curran. "Did yuh warn Ferris to be here an hour after sundown?"

"Si, senor, I tell him, but he say he does not know the way, and I must go back for him."

"He was lyin," snarled Curran. "Ferris knows a lot more than he purtends to know, and he don't know a whole of things he thinks he knows. However, if that's his message, yuh'd best ride and bring him back. Yuh start at 7 pronto. Understand?"

"I understand," grinned the Mexican. Swiftly Curran seized Lois in his

arms and pulled her to the floor. He stood with his hands upon her shoulders, holding her fast.

"Are yuh goin' to marry me?" he demanded.

Lois struck at him, and he laughed. She screamed—and suddenly, as if in answer to her cry both of them heard the hoofbeats of a horse pounding along the rocky trail toward the cabin.

Curran released Lois with an oath, clapped his hand to his holster and crouched, listening. The sun was already behind the mountains and, though it had not yet set, the whole wild terrain outside was plunged into a shadowy twilight. For an instant the girl was on the point of throwing herself upon Curran, to wrest the six-gun from him, to save Dave's life.

But then she realized that this oncoming horse was neither Black Dawn nor Hooker's, and with a little gasp of relief she sank back against the bunk. A moment later Curran straightened himself. He had seen the horseman rounding the curve of the trail and recognized him.

The rider pulled in a little distance away and halted, glancing suspiciously about him.

"It's all right, Mr. Ferris," called Curran. "I got her here and nobody else."

Ferris rode up to the entrance and dismounted. "I got your message," he said, "but I didn't know if I could find my way here. At first I told Pedro he'd have to bring me, and after he'd gone I thought I'd see if I could find the way alone."

"So yuh didn't meet Pedro? I sent him back for yuh," said Curran. He had planned Ferris' advent for a little later, and the disturbance of his plans momentarily disconcerted him. "Come in. I got her like I told yuh, and Pedro give Sheriff Cogswell an idea of where that murderer's hangin' out."

Lois ran forward. "Mr. Ferris, help me," she pleaded. "Take me away. This man kidnapped me this morning. He—he—"

Curran scowled. "I'll put her in the next room and then we kin talk business, Ferris," he said, picking up the gag and rope from the table where he had deposited them.

Lois, utterly worn out, and realizing that Ferris, who was standing with inverted head, had no intention of aiding her, was incapable of any resistance worth mentioning. In a couple of minutes Curran had her gagged again and carried her to the smaller room. After binding her securely, he went back to where the ranchman was standing.

"I don't like this business, Curran," mumbled Ferris. "That girl will overhear everything."

"Well, that couldn't be helped," answered the foreman. "Maybe Sheriff Cogswell won't find that cowpoke, and anyways, by the time I git through with her, she'll be all ready to hitch up with me and help run the ranch house. Nice little housekeeper yore goin' to have, Ferris."

"Pedro told me a certain party's comin' 'bout sundown," said Ferris.

"Yeah, Lonergan'll be here. I baited the trap by tellin' him I'd got the girl and she was ready to make some int'restin' disclosures, and how you was comin' here to hear them."

"Curran, we can't—can't kill Lonergan with her in the next room!" whispered the ranchman.

"Nope, we'll git him outside. Leave that to me," answered Curran. "You saw him yesterday?"

"Yep, he drove up to the house and demanded my answer to his proposal. I stalled him at first, like you said, and when he insisted I told him where I'd see him first."

"That's the stuff, Ferris. Have a drink," said the foreman, pouring out a stiff measure of whiskey into the cup. Ferris took it with shaking hand and drained the contents.

"I'm trusting you, Curran," he said. "I'm not imaginin' you're comin' in with me out of friendly feelin'. I've convinced you that it's to your advantage, and I'm willin' to sign that paper givin' you a third of the ranch, I wrote it out and brought it along. You can read it."

"He drew a document from his pocket and unfolded it.

"Fine," said Curran, laying it on the table. "I'll read it later."

"Of course we'll have to wait till we get back before signin' it," said Ferris. "We got to have witnesses."

"Well, we got two, ain't we?" roared the foreman. "That girl and Lonergan."

"Lonergan?" cried the ranchman.

"Sure, that's what I said. We'll make him sign before we bump him off."

"Don't talk so loud!" whispered Ferris.

"Here, take another drink and keep yore nerves steady," replied Curran contemptuously. "We're all in this up to our necks. When Lonergan comes, I'm goin' to string him along a little bit. He thinks yore goin' to be the innocent victim. Ho, ho."

"Ho, ho!" echoed Ferris. But there was a note of uncertainty in his voice, that of a bewildered man, striving to steer himself

through currents that are bearing him away.

"Listen!" Curran whispered. "The hoofbeats of another horse could be heard coming along the trail. Ferris was shaking."

"Lonergan!" he mumbled. "Maybe Pedro come back. But he wouldn't have time to make the round trip," Curran whispered back, pressing his body against the wall and peering through the entrance.

"Nope," he said a moment later. "It's Lonergan. We got that feller in the trap, Ferris. Just follow my lead and when we're through with him he won't be in no position to make trouble again."

"But outside—outside, Curran," whispered Ferris, staring with dilated eyes at the approaching rider, while his body shook like an aspen. "Outside, where she won't hear when—when we—"

Dave watched the horses grazing on the young grass that was already springing up with incredible swiftness, after the night of rain. He lay back, dreaming of Lois and of their future. Finally he stretched himself, rolled and lit a cigarette, and rose to his feet. Underneath him the water was still running down the ravine, but it had dried to a thin trickle in places.

Suddenly Dave perceived something white gleaming underneath the sunshine. It looked like—it was a part of the skeleton of a man. Those ribs were human ribs, not bovine. And there was the skull, just visible under the earth piled about it.

It was evident from the whiteness of the bones, that the skeleton had lain in the ravine for a considerable time. It looked as if it had been buried, unearched by flood waters, buried under an accumulation of debris that they brought down, and washed up again.

Instantly curious, Dave began scrambling down the side of the ravine. There was a sturdy growth of pine saplings that afforded him hand-hold and, bracing his feet against the rocky wall, he was able to make the descent without any special difficulty.

Between the bank and the skeleton there were about two feet of muddy water. Dave removed his shoes and socks and began wading through it.

It was undoubtedly the skeleton of a man. One of the legs protruded stiffly out of the mud, and Dave saw that it had been broken near the thigh. It evidently had been badly set, for the broken ends were not in alignment, and there was a considerable thickening of (Continued from Page 3)

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