

GUNLOCK RANCH

by FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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WNU Service

CHAPTER X—Continued

—12—

"Sure, it's my horse."
"Right this way, Barney," returned McAlpin. "Put out your cigars, boys, and come along with me," he added, lantern in hand. He scuttled down the gangway, Rebstock and Sawdy after him, stopped at the stall box, hung his lantern on a high gangway hook, unlatched the stall door, and pointed within. "There's your horse, Barney. Maybe I better give him a bit of oats before you go . . . No? Water then?"

"Rebstock and Sawdy had stepped into the stall with McAlpin. The liveryman led the horse out. Rebstock started to follow. Sawdy laid a hand on his shoulder. "Just a minute. I want to talk to you, Barney. We'll join you in a minute, Mac."

"What's up?" asked Rebstock, eyeing Sawdy closely, and always suspicious.

Sawdy was standing backed against one side of the box stall. "Barney," he said in confidential fashion, "I'd like to have just a little horse-to-horse talk with you."

"What d'you mean, horse-to-horse talk?" snapped Barney.

"Just this: Do you feel just exactly right, leavin' your money with Harry Boland?"

"What do you mean?"
"Do you feel safe? I ask you as man to man, Barney, and an old friend, do you feel safe, leaving a roll with Boland?"

Barney fumbled mentally. "Why shouldn't I?" he countered bluntly.

"I'd hate to see you, after this trouble you've had, lose your money with Harry Boland," persisted the cowman. "I'll tell you honest—and you can tell the critter himself if you like—I wouldn't never leave five hundred of my money with Harry Boland."

"Never had it to leave, did you?"
"Well, no foolin', Barney, I wouldn't do it. So that's what I say, as man to man—keep your money in the bank, not in a dive. Have you got a receipt for your money?"

"No."
"How much money are you leavin' with him?"

"None of your damned business, that's how much I'm headin' up the street. Get out of the way."

"Don't get sore, Barney. I'm meanin' the best for you. Just wait a minute an' I'll walk up the street with you—gettin' kind of thirsty myself. Did you hear, Barney, about Bill Denison's place gettin' burned down?"

"I heard about a fire out that way—what about it?" demanded Rebstock.

"Why, nothin'—nothin' at all. But, Barney, this is why I wanted to talk to you: There's folks here in town that don't know you as well as I do, are mean enough to say you know a lot more about that fire than you want to tell. I claim they're wrong—what'll I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em to go to hell."
"Suppose they won't do it, Barney?" asked Sawdy calmly.

Rebstock shuffled angrily. "Look here, Sawdy. You can't bunk me any more. If they don't want to go to hell, you go for 'em."

With this suggestion, Rebstock started again for the stall door. Sawdy's hand came down a bit heavier on Barney's shoulder.

"Barney, I want to be friends with you. What's the facts about that fire?"

With a volley of oaths, Rebstock tore loose from Sawdy's grasp, backed hurriedly away, and tried to spring over the side wall. Sawdy was too quick. He jumped to him, caught him by the arm, and slammed him halfway across the stall. Barney landed on his hands and knees, sprang to his feet, and

faced his old-time acquaintance with wicked eyes. In the dim light of the lantern, high in the gangway, Sawdy caught the flash of the blade of a knife.

Both were quick. Rebstock, smaller and lighter, could strike and spring like a wildcat, but he faced a foe who, though larger and heavier, was esteemed among his fellows as one hard to corner. Sawdy held the door side of the stall with his back to the light. He could see Rebstock's eyes flashing green. Rebstock wanted to get close enough to Sawdy to cut him and jump through the door.

Sawdy carried his gun—Rebstock had left his own with Boland—but he disdained to use it on a partly unarmed man. It was no part of his program to get himself embroiled with the law by shooting the criminal; what he and his cronies wanted from Rebstock was information.

In a moment, both men, one big, the other small, were jumping about the stall like boxers stripped for the ring. But Sawdy, though big, was the fastest on his feet among the cowmen that rode the Gunlock ranges. He had little alcohol aboard, was naturally as quick as a flash, and knew he was facing the most dangerous man with a knife along the Spanish Sinks. Ten youthful years spent among Mexican bandits, together with a lean and jumpy physical make-up, had given Barney Rebstock the name of a mean man with a knife, and Sawdy had no intention of adding to the outlaw's reputation as a killer, if he could help it.

The fight was in the lap of the gods. A misstep or a foot slip might end it any second.

Barney, enraged at his plight, was breathing hard, and wind was too precious to waste in words. This silent struggle for the one slight advantage that would end the fight went on to the music of jerky breaths and nimble footing. It was soon a question as to whose wind would give out first—Sawdy, heavier, was at a disadvantage in endurance. While they feinted and jumped about, his foot slipped.

Barney saw the opening. He lunged forward. Sawdy instinctively whirled sidewise and threw up his knee to save his stomach. The savage thrust of Barney's knife caught the calf of his leg. As the cowman went down, his fingers gripped Barney's wrist. With a mere twist of the deadly grip learned long ago in Panhandle knife fights, he snapped like matches the two bones of Barney's forearm.

The wiry outlaw screamed. He was through; the rear gangway doors were flung open, and the confederates came running in from the corral.

From the darkness of the box stall came only the swish of hard breathing and the oaths and cries of Barney. Lefever grasped the ball of the lantern and threw the light rays within.

"Henry!" he yelled in alarm. "What's a-matter, pard? What's wrong?" He unlatched the gate of the stall as he called and hastened inside with Scott and Page at his heels. McAlpin ran down from the office. It was a moment before Lefever could make out just what was happening on the floor, as Barney, half choked, writhed under the remorseless grip that closed his windpipe. Sawdy, spread out on his stomach, lay, a huge bulk, with one arm over his antagonist. Only his heavy breathing indicated life. "Henry!" exclaimed Lefever. "What the hell's happened?"

"Nothing's happened yet. John. Look at my leg. Where's his knife?"

"God a'mighty! It's in your leg, Henry."

Lefever started to draw it out. "Hold on, John! Don't touch that till you get a tourniquet on. Who's here?" His heavy bloodshot eyes

turned on Scott. "Bob! Look-see whether he's slit an artery or a vein."

Scott found blood spurting from the wound. He fashioned a tourniquet from a thong of rawhide.

"Get up and get Carpy, quick!" muttered McAlpin to Page. "What you moonin' about? Henry is bad cut. Run, Ben!"

"All right. You hold Barney," growled Page, turning over his writhing prisoner.

Turning to the prostrate cowman while Scott twisted the tourniquet, McAlpin, gripping Rebstock, gave orders to Sawdy; the liveryman always took the stage. "Henry!" he shouted, in his excitement. "Lay right where you are. Don't stir till Carpy comes. Why didn't you call for help?" he thundered at Sawdy.

"Ain't never learned how yet," retorted the wounded man majestically.

Carpy reached the box stall ten minutes later.

The doctor held up the lantern. "Hell's bells!" he exclaimed to McAlpin and the hostler. "Don't leave the man lying in this dirt. Henry,"—he knelt at Sawdy's head—"what have they been doing? Who stuck you?"

"Doc," declared the notorious bachelor, "you might say I stuck myself. Sew me up and send the bill to my father-in-law after I get married, will you?"

"I wouldn't want to impose like that on a decent father-in-law, Henry; it'll be bad enough for any man



He Could See Rebstock's Eyes Flashing Green.

to have you hitched into his family. Lift him out of here, boys—give me a hand. We've got to get him up to the office. What's that noise out in the corral?"

"Nothin' at all," blustered McAlpin, struggling along the gangway with Sawdy's feet. "Just a few bucks from the Reservation, initiated in Barney Rebstock into the tribe. Henry, you're heavier than a ton of bricks. I can't hold on much longer."

Not until the doctor had nearly finished dressing the cowman's leg did the wounded man begin to tell the story. And he had hardly been made ready to send to the hospital when John Lefever and Bob Scott appeared at the box office door with Barney Rebstock, white and scared.

"What's a-matter with the rest of you?" exclaimed Carpy testily, as he eyed the three.

"Why, Barney," explained Lefever blandly, "fell off his horse a few minutes ago and broke his wrist. Fix him up, will you, doc?"

"What the devil's this cutting and squawking all about?" asked Carpy of Lefever later that night.

The two were seated in the doctor's office about midnight. "Doc," explained Lefever, "the boys are pretty sore about Bill Denison's ranch house gettin' burned down. The day after the fire Barney Rebstock left two hundred with Harry

Boland. Where'd he get it? The boys made up their minds to find out. Sawdy got him down to McAlpin's barn, but when he began to pump Barney the cuss showed fight. You know Henry. He'd never used a gun on a shrimp with a knife. So the rest of us, waitin' in the corral, carried Barney out of the barn, showed him a rope by the light of the lantern, and asked him how about that fire."

Carpy shook his head. "Dangerous business, John. Did you string him up?"

"Hell no. I hadn't no more'n adjusted the noose and asked him was it comfortable under his ear, when he told the whole story. McCrossen hired him to do it for Van Tambel—"

Carpy muttered an angry epithet. "—gave him two hundred and promised two more when the job was done. What do you think of that, Doc?"

"You fellows ought've asked me that afore you began stringin' Barney up," added Carpy, after a moment's thought, "there's only one thing I know of you can do now. Bill Denison is the man most interested in the situation the way it stands."

"I guess we can't get away from that," admitted Lefever.

"Lay the whole mess before Bill and ask him what's to be done."

Lefever was doubtful. "I don't know what the boy will say, doc."

"And I don't care a hang," retorted Carpy. "That's all they'll get from me."

Next morning Carpy was making his rounds at the hospital. In the corridor he encountered Lefever. John took off his hat and scratched his head. "Well, doc!" he exclaimed.

"Well," echoed Carpy, "what you doing up here?"

"We talked it over."

"Who's we?"

"Why, Sawdy, McAlpin, Bob Scott, Ben Page, 'n' me. We talked it over 'n' concluded to follow your talk—put it up to Bill."

"Sit down there in the office till I see him myself."

"O. K., Doc. I'll go in and set with Sawdy."

Dr. Carpy opened the door of Denison's room. Close to Denison, who sat, with bandaged eyes, in an armchair, stood Jane, arranging some briar roses in a vase.

Jane turned. "Oh, here's Dr. Carpy, Bill. Good-morning, doctor!"

"Any morning's a good morning when a man can set eyes on an up-an'-coming girl like you," said Carpy. "Bill," he continued brusquely, "you're too slow. If I had as good a sight for sore eyes as she is, right close to me, I'd take a peek at her if I had to go blind the rest of my life."

Jane turned away with a protesting smile. Denison looked confused. "Say!" exclaimed Carpy suspiciously, "what's been going on here? What have you two been up to? Bill," he said suddenly, "you've been moving that bandage!"

"Why, I did lift the bandage for a few seconds," confessed Denison.

"What for?"

"To look at the roses."

"Bill, you're a blamed liar. You lifted it to look at this girl—didn't he, Jane?" Carpy thundered.

"How do I know, doctor?" asked Jane demurely.

"Bill," he said, sitting down by his patient, "tell me just what and how much did you see when you lifted that bandage."

"Doc, I'll confess, I couldn't see much—just a blur."

"And your eyes ache and sting now, don't they?"

"They burn a little, Doc."

"I'll say they burn a little! How many mornings has this been going on?"

Denison was silent. "Only yesterday and today, doctor," confessed Jane, hesitatingly.

"Well, don't try it any more," said Carpy to Denison. "If you do, I'll put you back in a dark room. I only let you out here on the theory you'd behave yourself."

Carpy picked up his bag. He was part way down the corridor when he was waylaid by Lefever.

CHAPTER XI

"COME into Sawdy's room a minute, Doc," pleaded Lefever. "He'd like to talk this thing over with you."

Sawdy, propped up in bed, led the talk. But the talk was not to Dr. Carpy's liking. "Yes," he muttered scornfully, "I expected that's the way it would work out. If there's a mean job to be done in this town, put it on me."

But the pair now working on the doctor's sympathies knew their victim pretty well and, having once brought him to refuse their request, needed only to persevere in order to make him grant it. This brought Carpy back that afternoon to Denison, alone.

"Doctor," said the injured man, "I couldn't be sure this morning when Jane was here whether you were talking to encourage her and me, or whether you really think you can save my sight."

"Bill, I was honest in what I said," returned Carpy. "I believe and hope I can save your eyes. But it's not all in my hands; I told you that, too. If Nature's willing, we're going to get through all right—does that satisfy you?"

"That's all I can ask, Doc."

"Bill," said the doctor suddenly, "Sawdy and Lefever have found out who burned the ranch house—and why it was set afire."

"Who was it?" asked Denison violently.

"Keep cool, Bill; keep cool. It's a mean mess."

Denison was on fire. "Why don't you tell the story?" he demanded angrily. "What did they do?"

"First," responded Carpy, determined not to be rushed, "they found that Barney Rebstock had a pocketful of money since the fire. They lured him down to McAlpin's barn. When Sawdy began to question him, he showed fight. The upshot of it was, the two went at it hammer and tongs in a box stall. Barney had a knife—he drove it through Sawdy's leg, and Sawdy was choking him to death when McAlpin and the boys heard the noise and stepped in to save the thief. Then they took him out behind the barn till he told his story."

"Mind you, this now is Barney's story—might or might not be the facts. He claimed he was paid two hundred dollars to set the house afire, with a promise of two hundred more after he'd burned it."

Carpy paused. He thought the sickening truth must have already begun to penetrate Denison's mind; it had not.

"Who," asked Denison, with a fell epithet, "paid him to burn me up?"

"As Barney tells it," continued Carpy deliberately, "it was between McCrossen and Gus Van Tambel."

Denison sprang from his chair. He tore the bandage from his sightless eyes. From his disfigured lips poured a stream of bitter words.

"Not too fast, Bill—not too fast. Remember there'll be another to suffer like hell if this thing ever gets out."

"Oh, I know it must never get out. But that man! Doc, he ought to be roped and dragged to death by a wild horse. If ever a robber and a thief and a murderer deserved stringing up, that man does. He's killed, or had killed, every man that ever stood in his way of stealing land or cattle, or anything a man had that he wanted."

"Cool off, Bill, cool off."

Denison sat down with his hands over his face. It wrung Carpy's heart to see him suffer. "I can't Doc. I can't!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Cured Cross Eyes

As far back as he or anyone else can remember, William Hawkins, Lagrange (Ga.) negro, was cross-eyed. Recently he was run down by a truck, suffering injuries about the head that sent him to a hospital. His injuries healed, the bandages were removed from over his eyes and about his head. To the amazement of the doctors, nurses and William himself, it was discovered his eyes were perfectly normal and uncrossed.