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ROBBERS' ROOST

by Zane Grey

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Jim Wall, young cowboy from Wyoming, in the early days of the cattle industry, seeks a new field in Utah. He meets Hank Hays, who admits to being a robber, and tells Wall he is working for an Englishman named Herrick, who has located a big ranch in the mountains. Herrick has employed a small army of rustlers and gun-fighters, and Hays and others are plotting to steal their employer's cattle and money. Hays wants Wall to throw in with the rustlers.

Hays sheathed his gun. He did not need to turn to face the rider, for, singularly enough, he had not done anything else. "How'd that strike you, stranger?" "Pretty neat. It amused me," replied the rider. "Is that all?" "I guess so. The stinky old skin-flint deserved to be touched. Wasn't that a slick way to beat the boy here out of six bits?"

"It shore was. An' that's what riled me. Reckon, though, if he hadn't flashed the wallet I'd been a little more circumspect." "Is there a sheriff at Green River?" "I never seen him, if there is. Wal, I'll be ridin' along. Air you comin' with me, stranger?" "Might as well," returned the other. "Stranger, what'd you say your name was?" "Call me Wall, Jim Wall," rejoined the rider.

Hays' nonchalance reassured Wall as to the status of Green River. "Any dance hall in this burg?" asked Wall. "Nary dance hall, worse luck. Any weakness for such?" "Can't say it's a weakness, but the last two I bumped into make me want to steer clear of more."

"Women?" queried the robber. "It wasn't any fault of mine." "Wal, women ruined me," returned Hays, sentimentally. "You don't look it." "Men never look what they air." "Don't agree with you. I can always tell what men are by their looks." "How'd you figure me?" demanded Hays. "I don't want to flatter you on such short acquaintance."

"Humph! Wal, here we air," replied the robber, halting before a red store building. A red-whiskered man appeared in the doorway that led into a saloon and lodging house. "Howdy, Red." "Howdy, Hank." "See anything of a fat party, sort of puffy in the face? He was ridin' a roan an' leadin' two packs."

"Oh, him. Sure. He rode through town yellin' he'd been robbed," returned the man called Red, grinning. "The devil he did! Who was he, Red?" "I dunno. Happy was standin' out here, an' when the feller stopped belerin' that he wanted the sheriff 'cause he'd been robbed, why, Happy up an' says, 'Hey, my friend, did he leave anythin' on you? Then the feller up an' rode off.'"

It was this speech of Red's that decided several things for Jim Wall. "I want to look after my horse," was all he said. "Take him round back to the barn. I'm dog-tired. Send that lazy Jake after my hoss." This edifice was the last one on the street. The barn mentioned was some distance back, at the end of a pole fence. Upon turning a corner to enter the corral

loose-jointed young man. "Say, are you Jake?" he asked. "You bet," returned the other. "There's a man out in front who calls himself Hank Hays. He wants you to come get his horse. Do you know him?" The stable boy's reply to that was to rush off, his boots thudding. "Enough said," muttered Wall to himself. "Mr. Hays stands well in Green River, as far as this outfit is concerned."

Wall sauntered back and before Hank Hays and the two individuals with whom he was talking were aware of his presence he had seen them. They turned at his slow, climbing step. Neither of the two with Hays was the man called Red. "Hullo, here you air," spoke up Hays. "I was speakin' of you. Meet Happy Jack an' Brad Lincoln. . . . Fellers, this stranger to Green River answers to the handle Jim Wall."

Greetings were exchanged, but not one of the three offered a hand. To Wall the man called Happy Jack fitted his name. The only contradictory feature lay in his guns. Like Hank Hays, he packed two. The other, Lincoln, was some one to look at twice—a swarthy, dark, restless-eyed man, who, like Hays and his companion, had nothing of the cowboy stripe in his make-up. "Let's have a drink," suggested Hays.

"Don't care if I do," responded Wall. The interior, bright with lamplight, proved to be more pretentious than the outside of the saloon. The men lined up at the bar, to be served drinks by Red, who was evidently bartender as well as proprietor. Wall missed nothing. "Cowpuncher?" queried Lincoln. "Yes. But I've not ridden the range much of late years," replied Wall. "You've the cut of it. Where you aimin' for?" "No place in particular," replied Wall, guardedly. "Might try ridin' here, if I can get on some outfit."

"On the dodge?" queried Lincoln. "What might you mean by 'on the dodge'?" "Anybody particular lookin' for you?" "I daresay. More than one man."

"So I thought. Friend, you have the cut, the eye, the movement, the hand of a gun-fighter. I happen to know the brand." "Yes? Well, if that's so I hope it isn't against me in Utah."

Here Hays, who had heard this bit of dialogue, interposed both with person and speech: "Wal, that's agin a man anywhere in the West, generally. So many fools wantin' to try you out! But I reckon it's a ticket for my outfit!" "Your outfit?" questioned Wall. "Shore. Don't mind Brad. Let's go an' eat. . . . Fellers, we'll see you later."

Wall followed Hays into a back room, where a woman waved them to seats at a table. At the conclusion of the meal Jim Wall had to guard himself against the feeling of well-being resulting from a full stomach. "Have a cigar," offered Hays. "Don't care if I do."

"Wal, let's go out an' talk before we join the other fellers," suggested Hays. They returned to the big room. It was empty except for Red, who was filling a lamp. "They've all gone down to meet the stage. It's overdue now."

"Stage! From where?" "West, so set easy," laughed Hays. "That one from east won't git in till next Wednesday. By the time you won't be here."

"No? Where will I be, since you seem to know?" "You may be in the garden of Eden, eatin' peaches," retorted Hays. "See here, Wall, you're a pretty cuss. Any reason why you can't be a good feller?" "Come to think of that, yes, there is," returned Wall, thoughtfully. "All right. Thanks for that much. I reckon I understand you better. What were you, Wall, once upon a time?"

Wall laughed musingly. "A country school teacher once." "Wal! I'll be dog-goned!" ejaculated Hays. "It do beat all what a man can be, at different times in his life. But I'm concerned with now. An' I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Fire away." "You said you was broke?" Hays began. "I will be when I pay for this night's lodging." "That's on me. I'll stake you to some money. You'll want to set in the game with us?"

"Any strings on a loan?" "Wal, friend, the string is that I want to locate you. Bond over here, so I can get your ear," went on Hays, confidentially, and when Wall had complied he said: "I run true to form today when I held up that stranger. But it was a blunder, considerin' the iron I have in the fire. Now, listen. Lately I've got in with a rancher over here in the Henry mountains. He's an Englishman with more money than sense. Bought ten thousand head of cattle an' a lot of hosses. There's some tough cowboy outfits over there, an' more'n one real rustler outfit. Wal, this Englishman—his name is Herrick—got the idee of hirin' all the hands available, cowpunchers, range-riders, gun-toters an' plain out-an'-out bad men. An' to throw this select outfit agin the whole country. What do you think of that idee?"

"Original, to say the least. But not practical, unless he can reform bad men," replied Wall, much interested. "Wal, exactly. But I'm not concerned with the practicability of it. Herrick took a shine to me, made me what he calls his superintendent, an' sent me all over lookin' for hard-shootin', hard-ridin' men. An' that's how you happened to run into me. I call it good luck for us both."

"You've taken me for one of the hard-shootin', hard-ridin' kind, eh?" "Wal, I want you in my outfit," resumed Hays. "Brad didn't cotton to you, I seen first off. But he's a gun-thrower himself. All the same he's in my outfit an' I reckon you might get along. It's Heeseman who sticks in my craw."

"Heeseman. Who is he?" "Heeseman is the rustler of Dragon Canyon. None of the ranchers even 'round here know that, but I know it. He's got a small outfit, but shore enough bad. An' in some way he got wind of Herrick's scheme. Darned if he didn't pack over to the Henrys with his outfit an' start ridin' for him."

"Heeseman saw the same opportunity as you?" queried Wall, quietly. "Wal, yes, I was comin' to that," resumed Hays, gruffly. "I got the upper hand, though, an' I'll be the boss. That'll lead to friction. There'll be two factions sooner or later, an' the sooner that fight comes off the better."

"I see. Less of a division of spoils." "Wal, I'm no rustler," snapped Hays. "Excuse me. If it isn't impertinent, may I ask just what you are?" "Ever heard of Henry Plummer?" "Can't remember if I did."

"Wal, Plummer flourished some ten an' more years ago, first in Montana an' later in Idaho. He was the greatest robber the West ever developed. Educated man of good family, born in the East. But the gold fever called an' he was not the kind of a man to dig. He operated on the placer mines. Was an officer of the law while he was head of the biggest robber gang the frontier ever knew. From Bannock to Lewiston he kept the miners, the stages, the Wells Fargo in terror for years. . . . Wal, I seen Plummer hanged. I was one of his gang, a young man then in years."

"Thanks for the confidence, Hays," returned Wall, in surprise. "You must have strong interest in me to tell that."

"Shore I have. But I don't care to be classed as a rustler."

"Too low down, eh?" "It certainly ain't any two-bit cattle stealin'. . . . However, that's not the point between you an' me. What I want to know is, will you take a job in my outfit?"

"That depends, Hays," returned Wall. "Any scruples about it? Remember, I come clean with you."

"No. I broke jail in Cheyenne." "What was you in for?" "Shot a man. They were goin' to hang me."

"Ahh. Was that square?" "I didn't think so. . . . Had to kill the jailer to get out."

"When was all this, Wall?" "Some years ago." "An' since then?" "Been shooting my way out of one jam after another."

"Much obliged," replied Hays, feelingly. "Wal, you're a hunted man. You're broke. It's about where you cross the divide."

"One more question. What 'bout this Herrick's family?" "Wal, he ain't got any," rejoined Hays. "We heard somethin' about a sister comin' out, but she never turned up."

"Sister? It'd be a h-l of a note if she did."

"Wal, this shore ain't no country for women."

It seemed to Jim Wall that this sally completed a definitely conscious feeling in his mind toward the self-confessed robber. If it had not been dislike and disgust before, it certainly fixed at

Continued Next Week

SNOODLES



BY CY HUNGERFORD

