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ROBBERS' ROOST

by
Zane Grey

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Jim Wall, young cow-
puncher 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
rangers 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.

that now. Wall sensed a gathering
interest in the situation he had hap-
pened upon.
Hays called for drinks and insisted
on a handshake which he executed so-
lemnly, as if it were a compact which
implied honor even among thieves.
Shortly afterwards the saloon gradu-
ally began to fill with loud-voiced,
heavily booted men.

Among them were Happy Jack, Lin-
coln and a giant of a man with a
russet beard, whom Hays introduced as
Montana. Then a man, undoubtedly
a trapper, entered. He wore buck-
skin and seemed out of place in that
crowd. The bartender, Red, did a
thriving business.

"Seems to be no lack of money," ob-



"Sister? It'd Be a H—l of a Note
if She Did."

served Wall to the watchful Hays.

"Where do they get it?"
"Wall, you're surprised, I see. So
was I. This burg here is a stage stop
for points in Utah and west. Lots of
travel. But there's big cattle ranges
off toward the Henrys."

"I see. But at that bar there are
half a dozen men who are not travel-
ers or ranchers or riders."
"Wall, for that matter, all men in
these diggins have got to be riders.
It's a long way from one waterin'
place to another. But you hit into
things, at that. There's four or five
fellows I never seen before."

"Who's the tall one, with his hat
pulled down, so you can only see his
black, pointed beard?"
"That's Morley. Claims to be a
rancher. But if he ain't the boss of
the Black Dragon outfit, I'll eat him."

"And the loud feller—the one with
the plaid vest?"
"His name is Stud somethin' or
other. Seen him before an' ain't
crazy about him."

"Let's play poker."

"Shore, but not just among our-
selves."

"Got any money, Hank?" asked
Happy Jack.

"Did you ever see me broke? Brad,
go dig up some suckers. But not the
hombre they call Stud. He didn't get
that name playin' solitaire."

There were only two large gaming
tables, one of which was in use. Lin-
coln went among the men to solicit
players, returning with Morley and
the russet-bearded giant, Montana.
There was no formality or greeting
between Hays and these men. It was
dog eat dog. Wall grasped.

"Make it six-handed. Come an' set
in, Wall," said Hays. "Friendly little
game of draw. Sky limit."

Wall laughed. "I couldn't play
penny ante."

"Wal, I'll stake you."

"No, thanks. I'd rather watch."

"Excuse me, sir, but we don't care
for watchers," interposed Morley.

No sooner had they seated them-
selves than the man Hays had called
Stud strode up.

"Am I bel'n' left out of this on pur-
pose?" he demanded, and evidently he
addressed Hays.

"Lincoln got up the game," replied
Hays, coolly.

"You ask my friends to set in, an'
not me."

"Wal, if you're so keen about it,
why set in with us," went on Hays,
fingering a deck of cards. "But if you
want to know bad, I'm not stuck on
playin' with you."

"Mean that to insult me?" Stud
queried, sharply, his right hand rising
to the lapel of his open vest. If Wall had
not observed the bulge of two guns
inside this vest he would have divined
from Stud's action that there was one
at least.

"Not at all," replied Hays, leaning
back in his chair. That significant
movement of Stud's had not been lost
upon him. A little cold glint appeared
in his pale eyes. "Reckon you're too
slick a poker player for Hank Hays.
I want a run for my money."

"Slick, eh? Wal, I don't mind bein'
called that. It's a compliment. I've
yet to see the gambler who wouldn't
be slick if he could. But when you
ask my pards to play an' not me—
that's different."

"Set in, Stud," rejoined Hays civilly,
as he began to shuffle the cards. "I
feel lucky tonight. Last time you had
it all your way."

The game began then with Happy
Jack and Wall looking on. Morley
made rather a pointed move and re-
mark anent Wall's standing behind
him.

"Shore I'll change seats with you,"
replied Hays, obligingly, but it was
plain he felt irritated.

"Never mind, Hays," interposed
Wall, deliberately. "The gentleman
evidently fears I'll tip off his cards.
So I'll stand behind you, if I may."

CHAPTER II

From the very first deal Hays was
lucky. Morley stayed about even.
Brad Lincoln lost more than he won.
The giant Montana was a close, wary
gambler, playing only when he had
good cards. Stud was undoubtedly a
player who required the stimulation
and zest of opposition. But he could
not wait for luck to change. He had
to be in every hand. Moreover, he
was not adept enough with the cards
to deal himself a good hand when his
turn came. He grew so sullen that
Wall left off watching and returned
to the fireside.

But presently he had cause to at-
tend more keenly than ever to this
card game. The drift of conversation
wore toward an inevitable fight. These
men were vicious characters. Wall
knew that life out here was raw.
There was no law except that of the
six-shooter.

While he bent a more penetrating
gaze upon Stud, to whom his attention
gravitated, Wall saw him perform a
trick with the cards that was pretty
clever, and could not have been dis-
cerned except from Wall's position.

Nevertheless, fickle fortune most
certainly had picked on Stud. He bet
this hand to the limit of his cash, and
then, such was his confidence, he bor-
rowed from Morley. Still he could not
force Hays to call. He fell from elation
to consternation, then to doubt,
from doubt to dismay, and from this
to a gathering impotent rage, all of
which proved how poor a gambler he
was. When at last he rasped out:
"Wal, I call! Here's mine."

He slammed down an ace full. Hays
had drawn three cards.

"Stud, I hate to show you this
hand," drawled Hays.

"Yes, you do! Lay it down. I
called you."

Whereupon Hays gently spread out
four ten spots, and then with greedy
hands raked in the stakes.

Stud stared with burning eyes.

"Three-card draw? . . . You come
in with a pair of tens?"

"Nope. I held up one ten an' the
ace," replied Hays, nonchalantly. "I
had a hunch, Stud."

"You'd steal coppers off a dead
man's eyes."

"Haw! Haw!" bawled the victori-
ous gambler. But he was the only
one of the six players who seemed to
see anything funny in the situation.
That dawned upon him. "Stud, I was
takin' the crack of yours humorous."

"Was you?" snapped Stud.

"Shore I was," returned Hays, with
concealing voice.

"Wal, I didn't mean it humorous,"
Stud retorted.

"Ahh. Come to look at you I see
you ain't feelin' gay. Suppose you
say just what you did mean."

"I meant what I said."

"Shore, I'm not so awful thick.
But apply that crack to this here card
game an' my playin'."

"Hays, you palmed them three ten-
spots," declared Stud hotly.

Then there was quick action and
the rasp of scraping chairs, and the
tumbling over of a box seat. Stud
and Hays were left alone at the table.

"You're a liar!" blazed Hays, sud-
denly black in the face.

Here Jim Wall thought it was time
to intervene. He read the glint in
Stud's eyes. Hays was at a disad-
vantage, so far as drawing a gun was
concerned. And Wall saw that Stud
could not draw without killing him.

"Hold on there," called Wall, in a
voice that made both men freeze.

Hays did not turn to Wall, but he
spoke: "Pard, lay off. I can handle
this feller."

"Take care, stranger," warned Stud,
who appeared to be able to watch
both Hays and Wall at once. They
were, however, almost in line. "This
ain't any of your mix."

"I just wanted to tell Hays I saw
you slip an ace from the bottom of
the deck," said Wall. He might as
well have told of Hays' irregularities.

"Wot! He filled his ace full that
way?" roared Hays.

"He most certainly did."

"All right let it go at that," replied
Stud, deadly cold. "If you can say
honest that you haven't pulled any
tricks—go for your gun. Otherwise
keep your shirt on."

That unexpected sally exemplified
the peculiar conception of honor
among thieves. It silenced Hays. The
little gambler knew his man and shift-
ed his deadly intent to a more doubt-
ful issue.

"Jim Wall, eh?" he queried, inso-
lently.

"At your service," retorted Wall.

He divined the workings of the little
gambler's mind. Stud needed to have
more time, for the thing that made
decision hard to reach was the quality
of this stranger. His motive was more
deadly than his will, or his power to
execute. All this Jim Wall knew. It
was the difference between the two
men.

"I'm admittin' I cheated," said Stud,
harshly. "But I ain't standin' to be
tipped off by a stranger."

"Well, what're you going to do
about it?" asked Wall, while the spec-
tators of the drama almost held their
breath.

Stud's lean, dark, little hands lifted
quivering from the table.

"Don't draw!" yelled Wall. "The
man doesn't live who can sit at a
table and beat me to a gun."

"H—I—you say," panted Stud. But
that ringing taunt had cut the force
of his purpose.

"You've got a gun in each inside
vest pocket," said Wall, contemptu-
ously.

The gambler let his hands relax and
slide off the table.

Stud shuffled to his feet, malignant
and benten for the moment.

"Hays, you an' me are even," he
said, gruffly. "But I'll meet your
new pard some other time and then
there'll be a show-down."

"Shore, Stud. No hard feelin's on
my side," drawled Hays.

The little gambler stalked to the
bar, drank and left the saloon.

Hank Hays turned round.