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ROBBERS' ROOST

by
Zane Grey

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Jim Wall, young cowpuncher 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.

CHAPTER II—At the little settlement of Green River, Hays gets into an argument with a gambler called Stud, over a poker game. Wall saves Hays' life by bluffing the gambler out of shooting. With Hays and two other rustlers, Happy Jack and Lincoln, Jim Wall starts out for Herrick's ranch. In camp, the first night out, Jim regrets the step he has taken, but it is too late to turn back.

"Wal, pard, this here is Utah," said Hays, as Jim came up, and his voice held a note of pride. "Round the corner here you can see Herrick's valley an' ranch. It's a bit of rich land thirty miles long an' half as wide, narrow'n' like a wedge. Now let's ride on, Jim, an' have a look at it."

Across the mouth of Herrick's gray-green valley, which opened under the escarpment from which Jim gazed, extended vast level green and black lines of range, one above the other, each projecting farther out into that blue abyss.

"Down in there somewhere this Hank Hays will find his robbers' roost," soliloquized Jim, and turned his horse again into the trail.

Before late afternoon of that day Jim Wall had seen as many cattle dotting a verdant grass, watered valley as ever he had viewed in the great herds driven up from Texas to Abilene and Dodge, or on the Wind River Range of Wyoming. A rough estimate exceeded ten thousand head. He had taken Hays with a grain of salt. But here was an incomparable range and here were the cattle. No doubt, beyond the timbered bluff across the valley lay another depression like this one, and perhaps there were many extending like spokes of a wheel down from the great hub of the Henry mountains. But where was the market for this unparalleled range?

Herrick had selected a site for his home what was undoubtedly the most picturesque point in the valley, if not one that had the most utility for the conducting of a ranch business. Ten miles down from the head of the valley a pine-wooded bench, almost reaching the dignity of a promontory, projected from the great slope of the mountain. Here where the pines straggled down stood the long, low cabin of peeled logs, yellow in the sunlight. Below, on the flat, extended the numerous barns, sheds, corrals. A stream poured off the mountain, white in exposed places, and ran along under the bench and out to join the main brook of the valley.

Somewhat apart from both the corrals and outbuildings on the flat stood a new log cabin, hurriedly built, with chinks still unfilled. The roof extended out on three sides over wide porches, where Wall observed three or four beds, a number of saddles and other riders' paraphernalia. The rear of the cabin backed against the rocks. Jim understood that Hays had thrown up this abode, rather than dwell too close to the other employees of Herrick. From the front porch one could drop a stone into the brook, or fish for trout. The pines trooped down to the

edge of the brook.

Naturally no single place in all that valley could have been utterly devoid of the charm and beauty nature had lavished there, but this situation was ideal for riders. Hays even had a private corral. As Jim rode up to this habitation his quick eye caught sight of curious, still-eyed men on the porch. Also he observed that there was a store of cut wood stowed away under the porch.

"Wal, here we air," announced Hays. "An' if you don't like it you're shore hard to please. Finest of water, beef, lamb, venison, bear meat. Butter for our biscuits. An' milk! An' best of all—not very much work. Haw! Haw!"

"Where do we bunk?" asked Jim, presently.

"On the porch. I took to the attic myself."

"If you don't mind I'll keep my pack inside, but sleep out under the pines," responded Wall.

When at length Jim carried his effects up on the porch Hays spoke up: "Jim, here's the rest of my outfit. . . . Fellers, scrape acquaintance with Jim Wall, late of Wyoming."

That was all the introduction Hays volunteered. Jim replied: "Howdy," and left a return of their hard scrutiny until some other time.

Hays went at once into low-voiced conference with these four men. Happy Jack hauled up the supplies. Brad Lincoln occupied himself with his pack. Jim brought his own outfit to a far corner of the porch. Then he strolled among the pines seeking a satisfactory nook to unroll his bed.

Jim, from long habit, generated by a decided need of vigilance, preferred to sleep in coverts like a rabbit, or any other animal that required protection.

At length he found a niche between two rocks, one of which was shelving, where pine needles furnished a soft mat underneath and the murmur of the brook just faintly reached him. Jim would not throw his bed where the noise of rushing water, or anything else, might preclude the service of his keen ears. There was no step on his trail now, but he instinctively distrusted Lincoln, and would undoubtedly distrust one or more of these other men.

Hays exemplified the fact of honor among thieves. Jim had come to that conviction. This robber might turn out big in some ways. But could even he be trusted? Jim resolved to take no chances.

Not until the following morning did Jim Wall get a satisfactory scrutiny of the four members of Hays' outfit.

The eldest, who answered to the name of Mac, was a cadaverous-faced man, with eyes like a ghoul.

"What you from?" he asked Wall. "Wyoming, last," replied Jim, agreeably.

Jeff Bridges, a sturdy, tow-headed man of forty or thereabouts, had a bluff, hearty manner and seemed not to pry under the surface.

"Glad Hank took you on," he said. "We need one cattleman in this outfit, an' that's no joke."

Sparrowhawk Latimer, the third of the four, greatly resembled a horse thief Wall had once seen hanged.

Hays had said to Slocum, the fourth member of this quartet: "Smoky, you an' Wall shore ought to make a pair to draw to."

"You mean a pair to draw on," retorted the other. He was slight, wiry, freckled of face and hands, with a cast in one of his light, cold-blue eyes. "No!" snorted the robber. "Not on! . . . Smoky, do you recollect that gambler Stud Smith, who works the stage towns, an' is somethin' of a gun-slinger?"

"I ain't forgot him."

"Wal, we set in a poker game with him one night. I was lucky. Stud took his losin' to heart, an' he shore tried to pick a fight. First he was goin' to draw on me, then shifted to Jim. An' Jim bluffed him out of throwin' a gun."

"How?"

"Jim just said for Stud not to draw, as there wasn't a man livin' who could set at a table an' beat him to a gun."

"Most obligin' an' kind of you, Wall," remarked Smoky, with sarcasm, as he looked Jim over with unsatisfied eyes. "If you was so all-fired certain of that, why'd you tip him off?"

"I never shoot a man just because the chance offers," rejoined Jim coldly. There was a subtle intimation in this, probably not lost upon Slocum.

The greatest of gunmen were quiet, soft-spoken, sober individuals who never sought quarrels. Jim knew that his reply would make an enemy, even if Slocum were not instinctively one on sight. Respect could scarcely be felt by men like Slocum. Like a wensel he snuffed around Jim.

"You don't, eh?" he queried. "Wal,

you strike me unfavorably."

"Thanks for being honest, if not complimentary," returned Jim.

Hays swore at his lieutenant: "Unfavorable, huh? Now why do you have to pop up with a dislike for him?"

"I didn't say it was dislike. Just unfavorable. No offense meant."

"Smoky," said Hays, "I won't have no grudges in this outfit. I've got the biggest deal on I ever worked out. There's got to be harmony among us. But Smoky hobbin' up again my new man—that's serious. Now let's lay the cards on the table. . . . Jim, do you want to declare yourself?"

"I'm willing to answer questions—unless they get nasty," replied Jim, frankly.

"You got run out of Wyoming?"

"No. But if I'd stayed on I'd probably stretched hemp."

"Hold up a stage or somebody?"

"No. Once I helped hold up a bank. That was years ago."

"Bank robber! You're out of our class, Jim."

"Hardly that. It was my first and only crack at a bank. Two of us got away. Then we held up a train—blew open the safe in the express car."

"Smoky, I call it square of Wall," spoke up Hays. "He shore didn't need to come clean as that."

"It's all right," agreed Slocum, as if forced to fair judgment.

Hays plumped off the porch rail. "Now, fellers, we can get to work. Herrick puts a lot of things up to me, an' I ain't no cattleman. Jim, do you know the cattle game?"

"From A to Z," smiled Wall.

"Say, but I'm in luck. We'll run the ranch now."

"What'll I do, Hank?" asked Jim.

"Wal, you look the whole diggin's over."

Jim lost no time in complying with his first order from the superintendent of Star ranch. What a monstrous and incredible hoax was being perpetrated upon some foreigner!

Evidently there had been ranchers here in this valley before Herrick. Old log cabins and corrals adjoining the new ones attested to this.

Jim passed cowboys with only a word or a nod. He talked with an old man who said he had owned a homestead across the valley, one of those Herrick had gathered in.

Jim gleaned information from this rancher. Herrick had bought out all



Jim Gleaned Information From This Rancher.

the cattle men in the valley, and on round the foothill line to Limestone Springs, where the big X Bar outfit began. Riders for these small ranches had gone to work for Herrick. He was told that Heeseman, with ten men, was out on the range.

Presently Jim encountered Hays, accompanied by a tall, florid blond man, garbed as no westerner had ever been. This, of course, must be the Englishman. He was young, hardly over thirty, and handsome in a fleshy way.

"Mr. Herrick, this is my new hand I was tellin' you about," announced Hays, glibly. "Jim Wall, late of Wyoming. . . . Jim, meet the boss."

"How do you do, Mr. Wall," returned Herrick. "I understand you've had wide experience on ranches?"

"Yes, sir. I've been riding the range since I was a boy," replied Jim.

"Hays has suggested making you his foreman."

"That is satisfactory to me."

"You are better educated than these other men. It will be part of your duties to keep my books."

"Too tickled that to!"

Continued Next Week

SNOODLES

By CY HUNGERFORD

