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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.

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.

CHAPTER III.—The four men arrive at the ranch. Herrick announces that his sister, Helen, is coming to the ranch. Hays unfolds his plan for getting possession of the 12,000 head of live stock on the Herrick ranch. He and his lieutenants ride away to drive off the first bunch of cattle. Jim remains behind to shoot it out, if necessary, with Heeseman, Hays' rival among the cattle rustlers. Jim sees a dust cloud, which he is certain denotes the arrival of Heeseman and his gang. He stands with rifle ready.

CHAPTER IV.—Heeseman tells Wall that Hays was once his (Heeseman's) partner and double-crossed him. Herrick delegates Jim to go to Grand Junction to meet Miss Herrick. Jim gets Barnes, a young cowboy with him, to tell her that he (Jim) is a desperado of the worst type. Barnes does so, but the girl treats the information lightly.

CHAPTER V.—On his arrival at the ranch, with Helen, Jim is confronted by Hays, who betrays unguessed interest in the coming of Miss Herrick. Jim tells Hays that Miss Herrick brought a Wells Fargo package, probably of money. Jim goes riding with the Herricks and greatly impresses Helen with his revolver shooting.

CHAPTER VI.—The cattle drives to Grand Junction are started. Jim Wall finds himself falling in love with Helen. He coaches her in riding western style, and finally kisses her. She is angry and dismisses him, but relents and asks him not to leave the ranch. Hays' men return from the drive with the stolen cattle. The leader has sold the cattle and brought back the money. A quick getaway is imperative. Hays tells his men to go on ahead, that he will join them at a certain canyon. The riders arrive at the canyon and to their amazement and Jim's dismay, Hays and a lieutenant are sighted with Helen Herrick—a captive.

CHAPTER VII.—The gang is about to break with Hays over the abduction, but he explains that he robbed Herrick and stole Helen for ransom. Realizing that Helen will be worse off if she falls into Heeseman's clutches, Jim Wall rises on both Hank and his men. Heeseman's riders are discovered in pursuit. After a running battle in which Lattimer, one of Hays' men, is wounded, Hays leads the gang into a canyon retreat, difficult of access and easy to defend—The Robbers' Roost.

CHAPTER VIII.—After camp has been made, Jim seeks out Smoky Sloon, and secures his promise to aid in case Helen is threatened with harm by the villainous Hays. Jim hears a wild cry in the night. Before he dies, Lattimer, who was wounded in the fight with Heeseman, tells Jim and Smoky that Hays has held out some of the money he stole from Herrick.

CHAPTER IX.—In the "roost" the robbers make permanent camp. Jim keeps a watchful eye on Helen. She steals from her tent at night to tell him that she fears the outlaw, Hank Hays. While they whisper, Hank steals upon them. Jim makes him believe that he has sprung a trap from the girl to rescue her. Heeseman's riders are seen approaching and the desperadoes prepare to fight.

"It can't be done. 'I'll give you two-thirds of the money.' 'Hays, I wouldn't take another dollar from you—that you gave willingly.' Jim had turned his left side slightly toward Hays, concealing his right hand, which had slipped to his gun butt, with his thumb on the hammer! For Jim, Hays was as good as dead. 'It'll all be mine, presently,' he replied. 'Holdin' me up, huh?' rasped Hays. 'Learned to be a shore-enough robber, trailin' with me, huh?' 'Hays, I promised Smoky I'd kill you—which he meant to do if he had lived to come back.' The robber's face grew a dirty white under his thin beard. At last he understood, so much, at least, What volumes his stupidity spoke for his absorption! It changed. Jim's posture, his unseen hand, suddenly loomed with tremendous meaning. 'Shore, That doesn't surprise me,' admitted the robber. 'When men's feelin's are raw, as in a time like this, they clash. But I did my share to clear the air. An' if Smoky had come back he'd have seen it different. I could have talked him out of it. . . . Jim, you're shore smart enough to see that, an' you oughter be honest enough

to admit it." "I daresay you could have won Smoky back. He had a fool worship for you. . . . But you can't talk me out of anything."

"Why, fer Gawd's sake—when I'm givin' you all the best of the deal?" "Because I want the girl," thundered Jim.

A great astonishment held Hays stricken. Through it realization filtered. "That! That was it—all the time!" he gasped.

"All the time, Hank Hays," replied Jim, steadily, and it was the robber's eyes, pale fires no longer, that he watched for thought and will.

Still he saw the violent muscular quivering which slowly diminished to freeze into rigidity. He had struck the right chord. In whatever way possible, Hank Hays loved this woman. However it had begun, the sordid, brutal thing had ended in Hays' worship of the golden-haired sister of Herrick. Jim read this in the extraordinary betraying eyes; and read more—that it had been Helen the robber had fought for, not his lost caste with his men, not the honor of thieves. It was this that accounted for the infernal blaze of unquenchable hate, of courage that death itself could scarcely have stilled.

All this immediately coalesced into the conscious resolve to act and kill! As the robber sprang up Jim's first shot took him somewhere in the breast. It whirled him half around. His gun, spouting flame, tore up the gravel at Jim's feet. A terrible wound with its agony, a consciousness of its mortality, added to the overwhelming ferocity of jealous hate, gave the man superhuman physical activity. He whirled, bounding the other way, and so swiftly that Jim's second shot missed him altogether. Hays' gun was booming, but it was also describing the same curves and jerks as his body. Then as passion gave place to desperate need and the gun aligned itself with Jim, Jim's third shot destroyed aim, force and consciousness. Hays' demonic face set woodenly. The gun, with hammer up, dropped to explode. And the robber lodged against the slant of wall, dead, with the awfulness of his mortal passion stamped upon his features.

It was over. Jim breathed. The hand which held his gun was so wet that he thought his blood was flowing. But it was sweat. "I wish—Smoky could—know," muttered Jim, over a convulsive jaw. He shoved Hays off the wall.

Wiping his face, Jim staggered to the rock and sat down. Spent and heaving he sat there, his will operating on a whirling mind. It was over—the thing that had had to come. All dead! Loyal and faithless robbers alike. What to do now? The girl! Escape from that hellhole, soon to be besieged again! He must pack that very hour and ride—ride away with her.

"Jim—oh, Jim!" came a cry from the back of the cave. "Helen—it's all—over," he called, hoarsely.

She appeared in the opening. "Gone?" she whispered. "Yes, gone—and dead." "I—saw—you . . . is he—dead?" "You bet your life," burst out Jim, his breast oppressed.

"Oh, help me out!" He ran to assist her. She came sliding out, to fall on her knees, clasping Jim with fierce arms. Her head fell against him.

"Get up," he ordered, sharply, trying to lift her. But she was more than a dead weight. "God bless you! Oh, God bless you!" she cried. The voice was husky, strange, yet carried the richness and contralto melody that had been one of Helen's charms.

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed, agitated. "Jim, you've saved me," she whispered. Jim's hands plucked at her arms, caught them.

She loosened her hold and raised her head to look up at him. He saw only her eyes, tearless, strained in overwhelming gratitude.

"No—not yet!" he blurted out. "We must hurry out of this."

She arose, still clinging to him. "Forgive me. I am selfish. We can talk some other time. I should have realized you would want to leave here at once. . . . Tell me what to do. I will obey."

Jim stepped back and shook himself. "You kept me from thinking," he began, ponderingly. "Yes, we must leave here. . . . Put on your riding clothes. Pack this dress you have on—and all you have. Take your time. We're safe for the present. And don't look out. I've got to bury Hays and the men."

"My spirit wouldn't faint at that," she replied. "I saw you kill the wretch—and I could help you bury him."

"I won't need you," replied Jim, constrainedly, and wheeled away. Madly he rushed to and fro, while he searched the dead robbers, to find their money and valuables in a pile. Then he dragged them to the brink of the wash and toppled them over.

Action had begun to steady Jim, if not compose him. He shoved all the money into his saddlebag. Next he packed every one of his shells. He might be attacked again in that hiding place. Then he selected supplies for two packs and filled them, not forgetting a few utensils.

His next move was to strap blankets and saddles on the two gentlest horses. Those he led back to the cave, where he packed them. After that he had only to saddle Bay and the gray horse Helen had ridden there. Suddenly he thought of Smoky. If

he had been alone, or with another man, even a helpless one, he would have taken time to find that strange and faithful robber and have given him decent burial. But he would not leave the girl.

While he stood there, trying to think what else to do, he remembered a sack of grain that Hays had packed from Star ranch. He found it half full and tied it on the lighter pack.

He hurried back to the girl, calling: "Are you ready?" "I've been waiting," she said, and came swiftly out. The rider's costume brought out the rounded grace of her form. She had braided her hair. The sombrero he remembered shaded her face.

"Where are your veil and long coat?" asked Jim, seeing her as on that unforgettable day. "He burned them," she answered in a stifled voice.

"Get into this." And he held his slicker for her. It enveloped her, dragged on the ground.

"We're in for storm. Rafny season due. You must keep dry." Turning to the gray horse, she mounted.

"Ride close beside me where there's room. Just ahead where there's not," he directed her.

Jim tied the halters of the two pack animals to their packs, and started them off. Then he vaulted upon Bay—the first time for many weeks. The horse pranced, but steadied down under an iron hand and heel.

Helen looked back as one fascinated, but Jim bent stern gaze ahead. "I would destroy this canyon if that were in my power. Come," he said.

They rode up out of the oval, driving the pack horses ahead. The rain was now falling heavily. On the gravel ridge to the west Jim saw a dead man lying prone.

Soon they entered the wide, shallow wash, in the sand of which Jim espied footprints filling with water. They rode out of the tail of the storm and into a widening of the wash, where it reached proportions of a small valley. Scrub cedar and brush and cactus began to show, and patches of sunflowers on low, sandy knolls. They passed the cove where the riders' horses had been left. Broad and deep was the trail to the south.

"Are you all right?" Jim queried. "Oh, I did not know I could feel rapture again. Yes, I am."

"You're dizzy. Just the same, to me, while you can. . . . Give me your hand. Don't talk. But look—look! You might see what I do not see."

They rode at length to a canyon head, down which the hoof tracks turned.

"We came this way by night, but I remember," she said. "Do you dare to follow them?" "We must not."

"But that is the trail to Star ranch!" "Yes, on the way of desperate men, and across that Dirty Devil river. These summer rains. It will be in flood. I would not be able to get you through."

"You know best. But just to be free . . . to see my brother, Bernie! It is unbelievable."

Jim Wall looked away across the brakes. Presently he said, "I will try



Her Reply Was a Stifled Gasp.

to find a way out of this hole. The country is strange. I'll be lost soon. But somewhere up out of here—we'll find a lovely canyon where there is grass and water. I must not run into cattlemen; robbers are not my only enemies. I don't want to be hanged for—saving you."

"Hanged! Oh, you frighten me!" "I didn't want to tell you. It is no sure thing that I can safely elude the rest of Heeseman's outfit. If I try to get out through the brakes. It'd be far safer to hide you a while—south of here, out of the way of riders."

"Take me where you think best," she said tremulously. "When you get out, you must go home to England."

"I have no home in England. Bernie is my only kin, except very distant relatives who hate the name of Herrick."

"Then go to a country as different from this naked, stony wilderness as day from night. Where it snows in winter, and in spring there are flowers, birds, apple blossoms. . . ."

"No, I shall not leave," she replied positively. Continued Next Week