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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 Hank's 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 unusual 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 rides on with Hank and his men. Heeseman's riders are discovered in pursuit. After a running battle in which Latimer, 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 Slocum, 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, Latimer, 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 spurned a bribe from the girl to rescue her. Heeseman's riders are seen approaching and the desperadoes prepare to fight.

A flash of joy leaped up in Jim at her words, but he had no answer for her. He led on, away from that broad, fresh trail, into an unknown region. And it seemed that this point of severance had an inscrutable parallel in the tumult within his heart.

The sun set in an overshadowed sky and storm threatened all around the horizon. Far north the thunder rolled, and to the south faint mutterings arose. Jim could not hold to a straight course. He wandered where the lay of the land permitted. Rising white and red ground, with the mounds of rock falling, and green swales between, appeared endless and forlorn. He began to look for a place to camp.

At last, as twilight darkened the distant washes and appeared creeping up out of them, Jim came to another little valley where scant grass grew and dead cedars stood up, spectral ghosts of drought, and on the west side a low caverned ridge offered shelter. He led over to this and, dismounting, said they would camp there. Her reply was a stifled gasp, and essaying to get out of her saddle she fell into his arms.

CHAPTER XII

To Jim Wall it seemed a miracle that he did not snatch Helen to his breast. Like a wind-driven prairie fire his blood raced. He set her upright on the ground.

"Can you stand?" he inquired.

She essayed to, and, letting go of him, plainly betrayed her spent condition. Jim helped her into the shallow hollow under the rock.

In the quarter-hour before dusk he had unpacked, hobbled and fed the horses, built a fire and put water on to boil.

He carried his bed under the shelf and unrolled it, changed and doubled the blankets and folded the tarpaulin so that it could be pulled up in case rain beat in.

The fire sent a ruddy light into the cavern, and all at once Jim discovered that the girl was watching him.

"Are we safe here?" she asked.

"God only knows! I think so—I hope so. It's a lonely desert. Our enemies have gone the other way. They know they nearly wiped out Hays, and they'll try again with reinforcements. They knew Hays had a fortune in cash—and you."

To his concern and discomfiture, she ate very little. She tried, only to fail. But she did drink her coffee.

"You'll pick up," he said hopefully. "Sleep, though, is more necessary than food."

"Jim, I can't pull off my boots," she said later. "Please help me."

She was sitting on the bed when Jim took hold of the boot she elevated.

"Look to see if you have any blisters," he said. "I'll bathe your feet in a little cold water and salt."

Bringing a pan of water, he knelt before her.

"Don't stand on ceremony, Helen. Stick out your foot. . . ."

She put out her small feet. Jim lost no time in pressing them down into the cold salt water. Then he rubbed her feet until they were red.

"Put your stockings back on and sleep in your clothes," he said. "Before you crawl in, I'll bring a hot stone."

"Ooooo!" She stretched out with a slow, final movement and pulled the blankets up under her chin.

Almost instantly she fell asleep with the flickering firelight upon her face.

Jim walked out, to find the horses close to camp and making out fairly well on the grass. He patrolled his beat between the flickering fire and the sleeping girl, heedless of the rain, sleepless for hours, on guard. And after that when he slept it was with one eye open.

Toward dawn he got up and rolled his bed. The air was raw and cold, blowing a fine rain in his face.

By the time breakfast was cooking daylight had broken. Finding a thin, flat rock Jim placed Helen's breakfast upon it and carried it to her bedside. Then he called her.

"I've brought some food and strong coffee," he said.

Jim repaired to his own breakfast, after which he wrapped up biscuits and meat to take on the day's ride.

She pulled on her boots, and crawling out and straightening up with slow, painful effort she asked for a little hot water. Jim fetched it.

Free then to pack, Jim applied himself with swift, methodical hands.

She mounted unassisted. Jim helped her into the long slicker.

"It'll be a tough day," he went on. "But we're starting dry. Hang on as long as you can. We absolutely must get out of these brakes."

With that he lined up the pack animals, and they were off.

Jim traveled as best he could, keeping to no single direction, though the trend was northerly and following ground that appeared passable. The pack horses led. He followed them, and Helen brought up the rear.

The rain fell all morning and let up at intervals. Then black clouds gathered, and a storm, with thunder and lightning, burst upon them. Water ran in shoots off the rocks.

At length the fugitives came to a veritable river at which the lead horse balked. Bay, however, did not show any qualms. So he put Bay to the task. The big horse made it easily, with water coming up to his flanks. Whereupon Jim rode him back, after which the pack horses, intelligent and sensible, essayed the ford.

Then Jim returned for Helen.

"I'll carry you while you hang on to your bridle," said Jim, riding close to the gray. He had to lift her sheer off her horse and around in front of him, where he upheld her with his left arm.

They made it, with the splendid horse staggering out under his double burden just in the nick of time.

"You are doing fine. We have come eighteen or twenty miles. But I don't like the look ahead."

When once more they were on the way Jim gave her a biscuit and a strip of meat. "Eat. The rain will be on us soon."

Late in the afternoon there was a momentary brightening of massed clouds in the west.

They rode down out of these low gravel hills that had limited their sight, into a long, green, winding valley. A red river, surely the Dirty Devil, ran, ridged and frothy, under a steep wall of earth.

"I can't hang on—longer," faltered Helen, faintly.

"I'll carry you. Why didn't you tell me sooner?" reproved Jim. He knotted her reins and dropped the loop over the pommel of her saddle. Then he lifted her off her horse onto his.

So Jim rode on, aware that her collapse and the terrible nature of the desert and another storm at hand were wearing away even his indomitable spirit.

Ragged, red bluff stood up all along his right, with acres of loose rock ready to slide.

They swung in behind the bluff, and then out again to the higher and narrower bank upon which the old trail passed around the corner.

"Whoa, Bay," called Jim hauling up to wait for the gray. "I don't like this place. Don't look, Helen."

As she made no reply Jim leaned back to get a glimpse of her face. Asleep!

"Come on, Gray," he called to the horse behind, and to Bay: "Steady, old fellow. If that narrows round there you want to step sure."

It did narrow. Eight feet, six feet—less! Bits of the steep bank were crumbling away. But the pack horses had gone round. It would not be safe to try to turn now.

Suddenly Jim encountered a still narrower point, scarcely five feet wide. The edge had freshly crumbled. It was crumbling now.

Bay stepped carefully, confidently. He knew horses with wide packs had safely passed there. He went on. Jim felt him sink. One hind foot had crushed out a section of earth, letting him down. But with a snort he plunged ahead to wider trail.

Jim's heart had leaped to his throat. He heard thud of hoofs behind, a heavy, sliddery rumble. Looking back he saw the gray horse leap from a section of wall, beginning to gap outwards to solid ground ahead. Next instant six feet of the trail, close up to the bluff, slid down in an avalanche.

"Close shave for us all!" cried Jim, huskily.

Right at his feet a red torrent rushed with a wrestling, clashing sound from out a deep-walled gorge of splintered, rocking walls.

This was a tributary, a vicious child of the hideous Dirty Devil. It barred Jim's progress. Thirty paces to the fore, on the widest part of the bank, stood the pack horses. Jim forced his startled gaze to the rear. No rider would ever come or go that way again.

Jim dismounted carefully with Helen and, stooping as he moved under the leaning rock, he set her down on dry dust.

"Is it the end for us?"

He did not answer. Folding the slicker into a pillow he laid her head back upon it. Scrambling up, he removed the saddle from Bay and dropped it under the shelter. Then, leading the horse, he stepped forward to where the gray and the pack animals had halted.

The instinct of the horses had guided them to halt behind the only safe spot on the unsafe bank. Jim removed their packs, leaving the saddles on. Without hesitation he poured out all of the grain, about two quarts for each horse. Lastly he jammed the packs under the edge of the boulders and left the horses free to take care of themselves.

He dreaded the coming hours—the night—the—he knew not what.

Jim removed his slicker and folded it into a long pad. As he crept closer the girl stirred again and spoke. He thought she asked if he was there. He placed the slicker in the best available place and covered that with the drier of the two saddle blankets. He pulled the saddle closer. Then he lifted the girl over his lap and covered her with the dry blanket. He leaned back against the stone with her head on his shoulder and his arm supporting her. It was not only that he wanted to keep her dry and warm: he had to have her in his arms while he waited for the nameless terror he anticipated.

This was the climax of the storm that had been gathering for days. Out upon the level desert it would have been serious for travelers; here in this gorge it was a maelstrom. Jim did not expect to live to hear it pass away. Yet he did. And then began the aftermath of a flood let loose upon such unstable earth. The waterfall gradually rose to a thundering, continuous crash. It dominated for a while, until the thousand streams from above poured over the rims to deaden all, to completely deafen Jim.

A sheet of water, sliding over the rock, hid the opaque blackness from Jim's eyes. Any moment now a flood would rise over the bank, and when it did Jim meant to climb higher with the girl, to front the hurtling rocks and slipping sides, and fight till the bitter end.

But many changes as the hours brought, that flood did not rise above the bank. Jim saw the sheet of water fall and the black space of gorge again. He heard the avalanches and the great single bowlders come down, and the furious backlash of the torrent below, and the lessening roar of the waterfall.

The time came to Jim, as if he dreamed, when all sounds changed, lessened, faded away, except the peculiar thrashing of the stream below. And he got to listening for that sound, which occurred only occasionally. For a while the sliding rush of heavy water swept on, suddenly to change into a furious splashing.

At length Jim calculated it was a strong current laden with sand, which at times caused billows to rise and lash their twisting tips back upon themselves. Long he heard these slowly diminishing, gradually separating sounds.

Continued Next Week

Not until "her" death, recently, was the discovery made that Mary Toth, who for 30 years held a position of trust in a Nue-Pest (Hungary) factory, was a man.