

# 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 Sid, 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 Heeseeman. Hays' rival among the cattle rustlers, Jim sees a dust cloud, which he is certain denotes the arrival of Heeseeman and his gang. He stands with rifle ready.

**CHAPTER IV.**—Heeseeman tells Wall that Hays was once his (Heeseeman'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

Next day Herrick did not accompany his sister on the daily ride, a circumstance which, if anything, gave freer rein to her spirit. Jim had concern for her safety. He could not judge well of her horsemanship, because of the side-saddle she rode. Bluntly he expressed of the atrocious thing and said it was worse than the "pancake" her brother rode. But she rode after the hounds just the same, and held her own until she was thrown.

If she had fallen upon rocks or even hard ground she would have been seriously injured, if not killed outright. But when the horse stumbled she hurtled over his head and hit in the sand. Jim was off almost the instant she struck, and he yelled for the cowboy.

"Water, Barnes," he called, as the cowboy dashed up.

"There ain't none close," replied Barnes.

"I'm all-right," spoke up Miss Herrick, weakly. "I came a cropper—didn't I?"

She sat, evidently not hurt, though she clung to Jim's arm. With his scarf he wiped the sand from her face, aware that his hand was not steady. Her hair had come partly loose to fall in a golden mass on her shoulder. She rearranged it and put on her hat, deftly despite gloved fingers.

"Help me up, please," she said.

Jim placed a strong arm under hers and lifted her to her feet. Then something cold and tight within let go, and his reaction was to take refuge in anger. "Miss Herrick, I told you that saddle was no good. It's a wonder you were not killed."

"Oh, don't exaggerate. I've come many croppers cross-country riding at home."

"Barnes, back me up in this," appealed Jim to the cowboy.

"Miss, he's tellin' you true," said Barnes, earnestly. "You was ridin' fast. If this hyar had been stony ground, like it is lots of places, you'd never knowed what hit you."

"I believe I did strike pretty hard," she admitted, ruefully.

"You want a cow-saddle with a double cinch, and overalls," concluded Jim.

"Overalls?" she exclaimed, and she blushed rosily red. "You mean like these blue trousers Barnes has on?"

"Yes. Then you can ride. This is the West, Miss Herrick. You like to run a horse. It's dangerous. I shall have to speak to your brother."

"Don't. I've never ridden astride, but I'll do it, since you are so very fearful about it."

That experience left Jim shaky, probably a good deal shakier than it had left Miss Herrick. But it was not fear for her. Jim reveled in the torturing sensation engendered by contact with this beautiful girl. He shook like a leaf at the staggering realization that when she lay on the ground with her arms spread wide, her hair gold against the sand, he longed to snatch her to his breast. A natural impulse, under the circumstances, but for him—idiotic!

Miss Herrick took to the Western saddle like a duck to water. She could ride. Moreover, that spirit of which she had hinted certainly over-

took her. More than once she ran off alone, riding like the wind; and upon one of these occasions it took the cowboys till dark to find her. That with Hank Hays and Heeseeman there to see her gallop away unescorted! Herrick did not seem to mind.

As far as Jim Wall was concerned, however, these rides with her centered him upon the love which had come to consume him; and the several she took alone were more torturing because they aroused fear of Hank Hays. It could not be ascertained whether or not Hays followed her, but when the day came that Jim discovered Hays had been riding the trails frequented by Miss Herrick, it seemed time to act.

This placed Jim in a worse quandary. To act, for a man of his training at such a time and place, was to do only one thing. But how could he kill his leader upon mere suspicion of sinister intent to kidnap the girl? It was a predicament for a man who had always played fair, alike to honest friend and crooked ally.

Jim paced under his dark sheltering trees, in the dead of night, when he should have been sleeping. Days had passed without his once seeking to avoid disaster; and he had not sought because he knew it was of no use. To wish to be with his blond girl seemed irresistible. More than once he had caught himself in the spell of a daring impulse—to tell Miss Herrick that he loved her. The idea was sheer madness. Yet the thought persisted, and when he tried to shake it the result was it grew stronger in a haunting maddening way.

At breakfast next morning Hays raved about the fact that Smoky had not been there for over two weeks.

"Things air comin' to a head," he concluded, gloomily.

"Reckon they ought to have made two drives by now," rejoined Happy Jack. "I rid down the valley yestiddy eight or ten miles. Cattle thinned out, boss. Any cowboy with eyes in the back of his head would be on to us by now."

"Shore. Haven't I kept them workin' up here. But I've no control over this hossback ridin' after hounds. Pretty soon Herrick will be chasin' down Limestone way. Then the fire'll be out."

"Hank, he wouldn't know the difference," interposed Jim.

"Aw, I don't care," replied Hays, harshly, and that finally intimidated much. "Wait till Smoky's outfit shows up!"

Every morning when Jim rode down to the corrals he fell back under the spell of something sweeter than wine. The sunny hours with the sage flat ahead, the fragrant pines, the baying hounds, and always out in front this bright-haired girl, were vastly different from the dark hours when the day was done. Nothing could be truer than that this utterly incongruous and bitterly sweet situation could not last. In moments of humility, engendered by the higher emotions this girl aroused, Jim clasped to his breast the fact that he was protecting her from worse men.

Barnes and another of the cowboys had taken the horses for the Herricks up to the house. To Jim's honest dismay he espied Helen riding ahead, with the cowboys behind leading her brother's mount. Herrick was not coming. The hounds bounded and cavorted about her, keen for the chase.

Miss Herrick looked far less proud and unattainable in the boy's riding garb she had adopted. Moreover, it had transformed her, yet her femininity appeared more provokingly manifest than ever.

Barnes turned Herrick's horse over to a stable boy, and with his companion fell in behind Miss Herrick, who rode out upon the valley. Jim rejoined them, and they trotted their horses together.

"Why didn't Herrick come?" asked Jim.

"He was rowin' with Heeseeman," replied Barnes, soberly.

"You don't say! What about?"

"Reckon I don't know. They shet up as I come along," returned the cowboy. "But I seen enough to calculate somethin' wrong. They was on the porch. Herrick looked sort of peevish. He didn't want his sister to go huntin' today, I heard that. An' she said right pert she was goin'."

Jim complied expeditiously enough, but in doing so he accidentally touched her. Something like fire shot through him at the contact. Under its stimulus he looked up to say a few more words to her, words to mitigate his offense and protest his sincerity. But they were never uttered. She had bent over to fasten a lace of her boot, and when Jim raised his head it was to find his face scarcely a foot from her red lips. Without a thought, in a flash, he kissed them, and then drew back, stricken.

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The cowboys took the lead, then came Miss Herrick, while Jim brought up the rear. It was a long, gradual ascent up to an open ridge.

Here the hounds jumped a herd of deer. Despite the yelling of the cowboys they dashed up the ridge with a chorus of wild yelps and barks. They all passed out of hearing.

Jim caught up with Miss Herrick, who waited in an open spot among the pines. Flushed and disheveled, with her sombrero on the pommel, panting from the arduous ride, she made a distracting picture.

"Hunt's off for us, Miss Herrick," said Jim.

"Too bad! But wasn't it fun—while it lasted?" she replied gaily. "Let us rest the horses. I'm out of breath myself."

Jim dismounted to tighten his saddle cinches.

"Wall, take a look at my cinches," she said.

"May I ask you not to call me Wall? I must remind you I'm no butler."

"Pray pardon me," she rejoined, in surprise. "I presume I should address you as Mr. Wall?"

"Yes, if you're too stuck up to call me Jim," he said.

She lifted her chin and deigned no reply. And that infuriated him.

"While I'm at it I'll tell you this, too," he went on doggedly. "You must not ride around alone again. I've had no chance to speak with you. But I told your brother. He laughed in my face. He is a fool."

"Mr. Wall, I will not listen to such talk," she spoke up, spiritedly.

"Oh, yes, you will," he flashed, striding over to her horse. "You're not in an English drawing room now, confronted by a disrespectful butler. You're in Utah, girl. And I am Jim Wall."

"That last is obvious, to my regret," she returned coldly. "Will you please be so kind as to tighten my cinches? It will be the last service I shall require of you."

"Thank the Lord!" ejaculated Jim, in grim heartiness. "All the same I'll tell you. If you were an American tenderfoot, it wouldn't be hard to make you understand. If you were western, you would not need to be told. But as an English lady of quality, who thinks her class, will protect her anywhere, you need to be jarred. . . . It's wrong for you to ride around alone on this range like any wild tomboy."

"Why?"

"Some of these men might kidnap you for ransom."

"Nonsense," she retorted, contemptuously.

"What do you say, Miss Herrick, when I tell you that Hank Hays has been watching you from the ridges, riding the lonely trails, bidding his chance to waylay you?"

She paled at that.

"I don't believe it," she said, presently.

"And you'll go on riding alone when it suits your royal fancy?" he queried witheringly.

"That is no longer any concern of yours," she replied, at last stung. "But

"It just happened. I—I don't know—"

She swung her leather quirt and struck him across the mouth. The blood spurted. The leap of Jim's fury was as swift. He half intercepted a second blow, which stung his neck, and snatching the quirt from her hand he flung it away. Then his iron clutch fastened in her blouse. One lunge dragged her out of the saddle. He wrapped his other arm around her and bent her back so quickly that when she began a furious struggle it was too late.

His mouth hard pressed on hers, stilled any but smothered cries. There was a moment's wrestling. She was no weakling, but she was in the arms of a maddened giant. Repeatedly he kissed her lips, long, hard, passionate kisses.

Suddenly she collapsed heavily in his arms. The shock of that—its meaning—pierced Wall with something infinitely more imperious and staggering than bitter wrath. He let go of her. There was blood on her lips and cheeks; otherwise her face was like alabaster.

"I think I must have been in love with you—and wanted to protect you—from men worse than myself," he went on, huskily. "I hope this will be a lesson to you. . . . Your brother was crazy to come here—crazier to let you come. Go home! Go before it's too late. Make him go. He will be ruined shortly."

She wiped the blood from her cheeks, and then shudderingly from her lips.

"You—did that—to frighten me?" she presently whispered, in horror, yet as if fascinated by something looming.

"Get on your horse and ride ahead of me," he ordered, curtly. "Now, Miss Helen Herrick, one last word: Don't tell your brother what I did to you till after I'm gone. . . . If you do I'll kill him!"

She lifted a glove lying on the ground. Jim made no effort to recover it. His horse had grazed a few paces away, and when he had reached him and mounted Miss Herrick was in her saddle. Jim let her get a few rods in advance before he followed.

The excess of his emotion wore off, leaving him composed, and sternly glad the issue had developed as it had. The situation had become intolerable for him. It mocked him that he had actually desired to appear well in the eyes of this girl. How ridiculous that one of a robber gang should be vain! But he was not conscious that being a thief made any difference in a man's feeling about women. He knew that he could not command respect or love; but that in no wise inhibited his own feelings. Strange, he had indeed fallen in love with Helen Herrick.

She rode on slowly down the ridge without looking to right or left. Her gaze appeared to be lowered.

The ranch-house came in sight. Miss Herrick saw it and halted a moment, to let Jim catch up with her.

"Can you be gentleman enough to tell me the truth?" she asked.

"I have not lied to you," replied Jim.

"That—that first time you kissed me—was it honestly unpremeditated?"

"Miss Herrick, I don't know what to swear by. But, yes, I have. My mother! I swear by memory of her that I never dreamed of insulting you—I looked up. There your face was close. Your lips red! And I kissed them."

They went on for perhaps ten paces, as far as the road, before she spoke again. "I believe you," she said, without a tremor of the rich, low voice, though it was evident her emotion was deeply stirred. "Your action was inexcusable, unforgivable. But I should not have struck you with the whip. . . . That, and your passion to frighten me, perhaps justified your brutality. . . . I shall not tell. . . . Don't leave Star ranch."

For an instant Jim felt as if he were upon the verge of a precipice. But her change from revulsion to inscrutable generosity called to all that was good within him.

"Miss Herrick, I'm sorry, but I must leave," he replied, sadly. "I'm only a wandering rider—a gunslinger and a member of a gang of robbers. And I was mad enough to fall in love with you. . . . Forget it. . . . Go home to England. But if you won't do that—never ride out alone again."

He spurred his horse and galloped down the road, by the barns and across the court, into the lane that led along the brook. Suddenly he espied a compact group of mounted riders coming down the road beyond Hays' cabin. They bestrode bays and blacks, and there was that about them which drew Jim sharply up with a fiery thrill. Smoky's outfit!

Hays stood out in front of the cabin, bareheaded, his legs spread apart as if to anchor himself solidly, his hands at his hips, his sandy hair standing up ruffled like a mane.

"Huh! The boss isn't mad. Oh, no!" soliloquized Jim. "Small wonder. Smoky's outfit has busted loose, or is going to—Well, now, I've a hunch there's luck in this for me."

Jim made for the bridge and, crossing, looked up to see the horses of Smoky's outfit standing, bridled down, and the riders up on the porch. Jim mounted the steps.

Hank Hays sat upon the bench, his shaggy head against the wall, his pale eyes blazing at the row of men leaning on the porch rail.

Smoky was lighting a cigarette, not in the least perturbed, but his eyes had a hard, steely gleam. Brad Lincoln sat back on the rail, eyeing the chief with a sardonic grin. Mac appeared more than usually ghoulish; Bridges and Sparrowhawk Latimer betrayed extreme nervousness.

"Hello, men. What's the mix? Am I in or out?" returned Jim, sharply.

"I reckon you're in," replied Slocum. "Hank is the only one that's out. . . ."

"I certainly shall ride when and how I please."

"Then you're as big a fool as your brother," declared Jim hotly. "Here I am, the only man in this Star outfit with honesty enough to tell you the truth. And I get insulted and fired for my pains."

She sat her horse mute. Jim laid a strong hand on her pommel and shook it.

"Your saddle's loose. Will you oblige me by getting off?"

"I can ride it back," she rejoined, tclly.

"But your blanket will slip out. The saddle might turn with you."

She removed her foot from the stirrup. "Tighten the cinches then—and hurry."

Jim complied expeditiously enough, but in doing so he accidentally touched her. Something like fire shot through him at the contact. Under its stimulus he looked up to say a few more words to her, words to mitigate his offense and protest his sincerity. But they were never uttered. She had bent over to fasten a lace of her boot, and when Jim raised his head it was to find his face scarcely a foot from her red lips. Without a thought, in a flash, he kissed them, and then drew back, stricken.

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Hays, Jim, catch this." He drew a dark green bundle from a bulging pocket and tossed it to Jim—a large, heavy roll of greenbacks tied with a buckskin thong.

"Yours on the divvy, Jim," went on Smoky. "Don't count it now. There's a heap of small bills inside an' if you untie them hyar there'll be a mess. But it's a square divvy to the last dollar."

"That's a hefty roll, Smoky, for a man to get for nothing," observed Jim, dubiously.

He then noticed that a roll of bills, identical with the one he had just received, lay on the floor.

"You double-crossed me!" burst out Hays, at length.

"Wal, thet's accordin' to how you look at it," retorted Slocum. "Things came up at Grand Junction. We seen some of Heeseeman's outfit. They're onto us, or will be pronto. So we jest took a vote, an' every one of us stood for one big drive instead of small drives. An' we made it. Your buyers swore they was short of money an' would pay twelve dollars a head. Talk about robbers! Wal, I took thet an' said I liked it. . . ."

"You disobeyed orders."

"Put it up to Jim, hyar. What do you say, Jim?"

Thus appealed to, Jim addressed Hays point-blank.

"Smoky's right. If you meant to clean out Herrick, that was the way to do it."

"Aw—shore, you'd side with them!"

"I wouldn't do anything of the kind if I thought they were wrong," retorted Jim, angrily. Here was a chance to inflame Hays that he jumped at it. If the robber could be drawn into a fight, when his own men were against him, the situation for the Herricks could be made easier for the present.

"You'd better shet up."

"I won't shet up, Hays. Someone has to tell you. And I'm that fellow. There's no hand out against you in this outfit. Never heard of a bunch of riders who'd work like dogs while the boss was twiddling his thumbs and talking mysterious."

"I ain't ready to leave Star ranch an' now I'll have to!"

"Why ain't you ready?" queried Smoky, curiously. "Our work's all done. We've cleaned out the ranch, except for a few thousand head. We've got the long green. You ought to be tickled to death."

"I'm not through here," replied the robber.

"Smoky, why don't you ask Hays what this mysterious deal is?" queried Jim, sarcastically.

From a cornered lion Hays degenerated into a cornered rat. Jim sank a little in his boots while his upper muscles corded.

"Hank, what's got into you?" queried Smoky.

"Smoky, the boss is up a free," said Jim, caustically. "He means to rob Herrick all right. But that's only a blind. It's the girl!"

"The gold-headed gurl we seen you drivin' hyar?"

"Yes, Herrick's sister."

"Haw! Haw! So thet's what's eatin' you, Hank?"

Hays had reached his limit and probably, but for Smoky's mirth, would have started hostilities. He hesitated, but there was a deadly stare in the eyes he had fixed on Wall.

Smoky got between them. "See hyar, Hank. So that's the deal? An' you'd do fer pore Jim hyar jest because he's onto you? . . . Wal, if you're so keen as thet to draw on somebody, why, make it me. I started this. I dragged Jim into it. An' I ain't goin' to let you take it out on him."

Then Hank Hays came back to himself.

"Jim's right. Smoky, you're right," he declared, hoarsely. "I'm bullheaded. . . . An' I've lost my bull head over Herrick's sister."

"There. Spoke up like a man," declared Smoky, heartily relieved. "Why didn't you come thet clean long ago? Neither Jim nor me nor any of us blame you fer admirin' thet gurl. And if you'd gone crazy, an' dragged her away into the brakes with us, we'd quit you cold."

Hays bent to pick up the roll of bills.

"Fall to, men. I've got to do some tall thinkin'," he said, and left them. Before they were half finished with their supper Hays entered.

"We're shakin' the dust of Star ranch tonight," he said, deliberately. "Pack up an' leave at once. I'll come later. If I don't meet you at Smoky's camp I'll meet you shore at midday in thet cedar grove above the head of Red canyon."

No one asked any more questions or made any comments. Whatever they thought about Hays' peculiar way of leading his band they kept to themselves. Jim Wall was not greatly relieved, still he concluded that Hays must abandon any plot he might have concocted toward Herrick's sister. At any rate whatever was in Hays' mind Jim could not further risk alienating him or his men. Jim would have to ride out with them. If he stayed behind to spy upon Hays or frustrate any attempt he might make to call upon the Herricks, he would have to kill Hays.

Dusk was mantling the valley when Jim went out. Under the bench the shadows were dark. From the shelter of the pines he looked for Hays, expecting to find him standing guard. But the robber was not on the porch. He was stalking to and fro along the brook, and he was no more watching for Heeseeman than was Jim. His bent form, his stride, his turning at the end of his beat, his hands folded behind his back—all attested to the mood of a gloomy, abstracted, passion-driven man.

"I certainly shall ride when and how I please."

"Then you're as big a fool as your brother," declared Jim hotly. "Here I am, the only man in this Star outfit with honesty enough to tell you the truth. And I get insulted and fired for my pains."

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Whereupon Jim repaired to his covert, rolled his bed and made a pack of his other belongings. What to do with the two packages of bills, this last of which was large and clumsy for his pockets, was a puzzle. By dividing the two into four packets he solved it. Then he carried his effects down to the cabin. All was cheery bustle there. The men were glad to get away from Star ranch. They talked of the robbers' roost Hays had always promised them, of idle days to eat and drink and gamble, of the long months in hiding.

"Wal, you all ready?" queried Hays, appearing in the doorway.

"Yep, an' bustin' to go."

"On second thought I'd like one of you to stay with me. How about you, Latimer?"

"All right," declared Sparrowhawk. In a few more minutes all the men leaving were mounted. The pack animals, with packs gray against the darkness, straggled up the trail.

"Wait at your camp till sunup," said Hays, conclusively. "An' if I'm not there I'll meet you about noon shore at head of Red canyon."

Without more words or ado Smoky led off behind the pack horses, and the five riders followed. Once across the brook all horses took a brisk trot. Jim Wall looked back. Then he saw a bright light on the bench. That was from Herrick's house. An unfamiliar sensation, like a weight of cold lead in his breast, baffled Jim. He knew he was glad never to see Helen Herrick again.

About midnight Smoky turned the pack animals up the slope into the woods, and after a mile of rough going emerged into an open canyon head.

"Hyar we air," said Smoky. "Throw things an' git to sleep. I'll stand first guard."

Jim unrolled his bed beside a rock, and pulling off his boots and unbuckling his gun belt he crawled under the blanket.

Crack of ax and Happy Jack's voice pierced his slumber, both recognized before he opened his eyes. Jim sat up, stretched, and reaching for his boots he gazed around. The men were stirring, two around the camp fire and others among the horses.

"Wal, long past sunup," said Slocum, as Jim approached the fire. "Who was it bet Brad thet Hank wouldn't show up?"

"Nobody," replied Lincoln.

"Jim, suppose you take your rifle an' sneak down an' knock over a deer," suggested Smoky.

Three hundred yards down the slope Jim emerged into the open. There were no riders on the winding, white trail.

Stealthily working back into the timber he soon espied two deer about sixty paces distant, long ears erect. He killed the buck standing.

Upon his return to camp Smoky greeted him with a grin.

"How far to Red canyon?" asked Jim.

"I don't know. About fifteen miles. Don't you remember thet heavy grove of cedars leadin' down into a red hole?"

"Reckon I do. If Hays joins us there it'll mean he comes by another trail, doesn't it?"

"If! So you figger he might not? Course he'd come over another pass. He shore knows trails thet we don't."

"Aw, Hank'll show up on