

..... *And Boot Hill Was Still Sacred Ground*



## STRAYS

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**H**E DID not tell us his name. We never knew where he was from, but his drawl and his cowboy clothes all ragged now—suggested Texas. He came hoofing it into the Thompson's Hole camp the coldest night of that cold Wyoming winter, dropped his trappings just inside the saloon doorway, and started running his keen blue eyes over the crowd of miners.

One by one they saw him and fell curiously silent.

"Kid," said the tall gambler that we called the Bishop because he wore black and was educated and a good talker, "kid, you've got plenty of sand in your craw. I

mean, if you walked up from Hackberry with a load like that."

The load consisted of heavy grub pack and cooking utensils, blanketroll, pick and shovel. The kid was little, when you looked at the rest of us, not older than twenty. While he sized up the crowd he kept a hand near the butt of his belted six-shooter. We knew the sign only too well. This young stranger had been mixed in with trouble somewhere.

"I walked up from Hackberry," he told the Bishop. "Took me three days. Diggin's was playin' out down there, and I got to make some money. How is it up here, pardner?"

“Well,” the Bishop said, “it’s been good here. But, mostly, everywhere a man could dig has already been dug, except miles and miles out. That is, everywhere but in our boot hill. We fight over who’s to dig the hole there when one is necessary, since gold is found each time; the last man to cash in here was buried forty feet deep! I’m happy to say that, whatever else we are or aren’t, we do have at least a modicum of respect for the dead. So there’s no straight mining in boot hill. Get it?”

The newcomer smiled a queer smile. “Me,” he said, “I got to make money.” For a moment the silence was heavy. Then he half turned his head to say, “Come on in, Dick. I think it’s goin’ to be all right here for us.”

He’d been holding the door open a crack with an elbow while he looked things over. An old sled dog nosed in and squatted stiffly, wearily at his feet. A dog of that kind was not a very unusual sight there in northern Wyoming. And yet, every man of us fastened his gaze on this one. A drinking, miner rose from his bench and reeled toward him.

“Hiyah, mushalong. Hiyah—shake hands!”

The old dog growled. The kid said, “Stay back, pardner. Dick is afraid you wanta hurt me, and he’ll bite you.”

A big brute, the miner was. He halted, steadied, reached for hardware and bristled. “Yeah, and I’d shoot hell outa him.”

“Before you do that, pardner,” the youngster said, “I’ll shoot hell outa you.”

Afterward we didn’t remember seeing him pull his gun. But there it was, level with his hip and pointed at the miner’s belt buckle. His hand must have been half numb with the cold, too. The Bishop spoke quickly:

“Back to your table, you,” and the big brute was glad to obey. The Bishop smiled for the youngster. “Son, you and the husky make an odd pair. Where’d you get him?”

“This dog?” The kid leathered his weapon and bent to touch the animal’s head. “I woulda froze to death down in Hackberry hadn’t been for Dick. Fust time anybody there had ever seen him. I’d drunk some hombres under the table, and was goin’ to my shack when I fell down and decided it was too much bother to get up and just went to sleep.

“And when I woke cold sober at daybreak, there was Dick layin’ with me, keepin’ me warm—well, not warm, but it was enough to stave the frost off. He was a stray, and I was too, and somehow he knowed it and ‘dopted me. On the rough trail up from Hackberry he petered out two-three times. I’d carry him then. But he ain’t as heavy as he looks. I—”

“You need a drink, kid,” the Bishop said thumbing toward the bar. “It’s on me. Belly up.”

“No. Thanks though. What I need right now,” the youngster said, “is a shack, where I can fix up a bed for Dick here. Know o’ any empty ones?”

“Maybe we can find one,” the gambler told him.

THE gambler walked toward the door, picked up most of the cowboy’s trappings. It was funny, I thought—the dog wagged his tail and licked Bishop’s hand, and we heard the cowboy mutter: “You’ll do to ride the river with, pardner. I sure am a heap obliged.”

The Bishop took youngster and dog to his own shanty, and kindled a fire in the little sheetiron stove for them. He went back to the saloon then, rustled up a stud game, before midnight had won a better shanty for himself. The next morning he moved into it.

This entire day was so cold that scarcely anybody left the camp except to drag firewood down from the surrounding hillsides. Mostly the population of Thompson's Hole hung around the saloon, drinking, playing cards, and fighting for sheer love of it. The following day began in the same fashion.

The big brute miner who had almost locked horns with the stray cowboy came in at noon. He took his binge on fast. Always when he did this an exaggerated idea of his badness took possession of him, and he became very funny to the rest of us. Some of his big talk then would have put tales of Paul Bunyan and the famous blue ox to shame.

After having refused a drink because—he said—there was no vinegaroon or stinging scorpion or tarantula in it, he turned from the bar with an ultra-serious mask on his thick face and addressed the house:

“Yeah, I'm mean. I was sired by a Bengal tiger and nussed by a grizzly bear. Raised on snake and wildcat meat, washed down with crocodile blood, with broken glass in carbolic acid fer dessert. When I was five years old I played with elephants and rhinoceroses, and leopards and lions which had the hyderphoby, and hippopotaymuses. At ten I was totin' around a cliff in one hand and a Californy redwood in fother to throw at jackrabbits. When I was fifteen I had a heap o' fun ketchin' up railroad tracks and tyin' 'em in bowknots, and kickin' the tops offa mountains. At twenty I combed my hair with a giant cactus and shaved with a broadaxe—made a good livin' sellin' my day-old beard fer railroad spikes.

“Anybody here want to fight?”

Always he finished with that, and always we laughed at him. But this time there was somebody who didn't know. The stranger kid, it was, he had just

stepped in. Until now, I hadn't seen him that day.

“Take him on!” the kid barked. “Why don't some of you take him on? If you don't, I will!”

He was queerly desperate. The big miner sobered rapidly, and his voice was low: “I didn't aim to be the one to tell it, young'un. Bishop here, he woulda figgered I was tellin' jest fer spite. But you've a sorta called my hand. Listen, Bishop, you and everybody. You 'member this kid said he had to make money? He said that twicet, the fust night he come. Well, he's been minin' our boot hill, there amongst the graves o' the dead. I seen him!”

“I don't believe it,” the tall, black-clad gambler said.

Every eye was on the ragged cowboy. He was white under his coppery tan. If he had denied it—but he didn't. There was a rumble of angry voices, for boot hill was all that they held even half sacred; not one of them but had a friend lying up there.

“Go see,” the Bishop said to the man who stood nearest him. “We'll wait until you get back.”

**B**UT the others weren't going to wait. Whiskey helped here, of course. A rope appeared, and there was a slip noose in one end. The kid ducked into a corner, his back to the logs, gun out and leveled at his hip.

“Come on,” he invited, and he was gall bitter. “Come on. I'll not cross old dark river by myself.”

“Hold the deal!” called the Bishop.

Ordinarily he was the law in Thompson's Hole. But not now. The mob spirit had those drinking miners. They began to move nearer and nearer to the ragged cowboy, not directly toward him but around the walls. He would get a

couple of them. Three or four, maybe. Well, that'd be all right.

"Hold the deal!" the gambler kept saying.

They would stop for a minute or so, then go on inching toward that level and ready old range six-shooter. I'm telling the world, each man of us must have lived a week in the little time that had passed when the gambler's messenger came back.

"What about boot hill?" yelled the Bishop.

The place was so still that the falling of a pine needle would almost have made a noise. The messenger's words bared the heads of us all and broke every heart for the stray cowboy.

"The kid told us his old dog was in bad shape, Bish, remember? Well, it'd died, and he was only buryin' it up there with human folks. The wooden tombstone said: "Hear lays Dick he was A Dam good Dog."