



## RANCH OF WHISPERING SHADOWS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

*Solitaire Stevens, the Whistling Waddy, and his fighting pard, Dismal Day, head for a rip-snorting bullet jamboree!*

**T**O the left of the two horsemen, trees and brush grew thick at the side of the road, while on their right was rolling rangeland. There were rain clouds in the sky and it was a cool night for July.

"Why we're headin' for this Diamond C ranch," said "Dismal" Day. "Didn't Jim Carson say what was wrong, Solitaire?"

"No," said "Solitaire" Stevens. "He just wrote me that he needed help and asked me to come at once. I showed yuh

the letter when I got it a week ago, Dismal."

"Shore," said Day. "But I thought mebbe you might have remembered some reason for Carson being in trouble since then."

"Haven't been able to think of any yet," said Solitaire.

He began to whistle softly and musically. The tune was "The Old Folks At Home." It was a habit of his and had brought him the name of "The Whistling Waddy."

The two riders were a salty pair. Stevens was tall, dark-haired and square faced. He wore two guns with the holsters tied down to the legs of his chaps. He was fast on the draw, and a dangerous man to meet.

Dismal Day was small and stocky and might have been any age from forty to fifty. He had traveled with a circus in his younger days, as an acrobat and a clown. He wore one gun. Both men were clad in the rough garb of the range.

For the last year they had been wandering around the cattle country, working for various spreads, then riding on, in search of new adventures.

Solitaire abruptly stopped whistling, halted his horse and sat staring at something off the road. Dismal went on for a short distance, then rode back.

“What was it?” he asked.

“A white figure on a white horse,” said Solitaire. “Rode behind that big boulder over yonder.”

Even as he spoke, an eerie looking horseman appeared from behind the big rock, clearly visible in the pale light of the stars. The figure was that of a man, dressed in white, even to a white Stetson. But where his face should have been was a pale blotch.

Then the horse and rider vanished behind a thick clump of trees. Solitaire continued to stare at the trees for a few moments.

“Did yuh notice the hoss, Solitaire?” Dismal asked nervously.

“I did,” said Solitaire. “It was white.”

“That ain’t what bothers me. It didn’t make no noise—not a sound.” Dismal sighed mournfully. “I got a feelin’ we’re headin’ into trouble. Mebbe that ghost hossman is a warning, Solitaire.”

“It’s plumb strange.” Solitaire picked up his reins, “Come along, Dismal. The Diamond C is only five miles further on.”

“Suits me,” Dismal said. “I’d rather be other places anyway.”

AS they continued their journey, Dismal sent apprehensive glances back over his shoulder.

They rounded a bend, then halted abruptly. An Overland stage stood at the side of the road. One of its front wheels was smashed against a boulder, and its four-horse team stood with their heads drooping. Up on the top of the coach sprawled two motionless figures, apparently the driver and the express guard. There was no one else around.

“Looks like a holdup,” said Dismal gazing at the coach. “Told yuh that we were headin’ into trouble, Solitaire.”

The Whistling Waddy sniffed the air for the scent of gunsmoke, but detected no sign of it. He dismounted, climbed up on the top of the coach and examined the still forms.

“Both dead,” he called down. “Driver shot in the head and the guard right through the heart.”

Dismal also swung out of saddle. He went to the coach, opened the nearest door and peered in.

“No passengers,” he said. “If there were any, they shore ain’t here now. That’s funny—” He disappeared inside the coach, and struck a match.

“What’s funny?” demanded Solitaire, climbing down off the top of the stage.

“Here’s a man’s black Stetson and a woman’s purse,” said Dismal as he stepped out of the coach with the hat and bag in his hand. “Looks like there were at least two passengers.”

He handed over the woman’s purse. Solitaire opened it and drew out a small roll of bills, a handkerchief and a crumpled letter.

“Big hat.” Dismal was trying on the black hat. It was much too large for him

and came down over his ears. "Either the gent who owned this is a big man, or he had a big head. What did yuh find?"

"This letter is addressed to Miss Nancy Parker," said Solitaire as he examined it with the aid of a lighted match. "And it was sent by Jim Carson; his return address is on the envelope."

"Carson," exclaimed Dismal. "What does the letter say?"

"Listen to this, Dismal," said Solitaire as he read the letter aloud:

"Nancy Darling: Your letter tellin' me that you would marry me and were coming to the ranch next week has made me the happiest man in the world—"

Solitaire stopped and hastily put the letter back in the envelope.

"The letter is right personal. No need readin' it."

"Looks like the girl was coming here to marry yore friend Jim Carson," said Dismal "She was on the stage. Wonder where she is now?"

"I don't know," said Solitaire. "And it worries me."

"What had we better do?" asked Dismal.

"Head for the ranch," said Solitaire, putting the letter back into the purse. "Jim Carson can send someone into town to report the stage holdup." He went to his roan, placed the bag in his saddle roll and mounted. "Let's go."

Dismal hid the black hat in his blanket roll and climbed into saddle. At that moment there came the sound of galloping hoofs from the direction Stevens and Day had been heading, and four riders swept into view and halted not far away. They were all cattlemen and heavily armed. A big, broad-shouldered man seemed to be the leader. He glanced at the deserted stage, then scowled at Solitaire and Dismal.

"What happened here?" he demanded. The three other riders stopped close behind him, their faces grim.

"I'm Solitaire Stevens, and this is Dismal Day," said the Whistling Waddy. "You can see what happened. We found the stage like this. Who might you be?"

"Lance Keene is my name," said the big man. "I own the L Bar K outfit about five miles south of here." Keene glanced at the dead men on top of the coach. "Looks like more of the Phantom Horseman's work."

"Who's the Phantom Horseman?" asked Solitaire.

"No one is shore about that," said Lance Keene. "But I figger he might be Jim Carson. Nobody has seen him since the Phantom Horseman first appeared a week or so ago, after Carson got into trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" demanded Solitaire, a hard note in his voice.

"Carson was a thief and killer," said Keene. "Reckon he always has been crooked."

"That's a lie!" snapped Solitaire.

**K**EENE snarled and grabbed for his gun, but froze as he found himself covered by a Colt in the Whistling Waddy's right hand.

Dismal's gun as suddenly was covering the three men behind the owner of the L Bar K. They also lost all interest in gunplay.

"Never seen such impulsive gents," said Dismal sadly.

"Reckon I talk too free," said Lance Keene quietly. "Didn't know Jim Carson was a friend of yores, Stevens."

"You know it now." Solitaire dropped his gun back into the holster. "And if he's disappeared I aim to find out what happened to him and why."

“Some folks claim Jim Carson was back of the rustlin’ that’s been goin’ on around here,” Keene said. “They say that Seth Grant caught Carson stealing some stock and Carson killed Grant. There was no one around when Grant’s body was found.”

“Which doesn’t prove that Carson did it,” said Solitaire.

“No, it don’t.” Keene glanced at the men behind him. “Joe, you and Ed ride into town and report the stage holdup to the sheriff. Lem, you and me will head back to the ranch.”

Two of Keene’s men rode off and Keene and the other man headed back in the direction from which they had come. They paid no further attention to Solitaire and Dismal who leisurely continued their journey.

“We do meet the strangest folks,” said Dismal. “Take Keene and those three hombres with him—I’d say they were a dangerous bunch of gunslicks.”

“And yuh might be right,” Solitaire said. “Jim Carson’s no rustler or killer. Keene was lyin’ about that.”

They rode on. Presently Solitaire discovered that the men ahead had disappeared. He listened and could no longer hear their hoofbeats.

The Whistling Waddy glanced at Dismal Day, who nodded.

“Yep, they’ve plumb departed,” said Dismal.

Solitaire swung his horse off the road, heading into the brush and trees for concealment. Dismal followed him closely.

“I’ve got a suspicious nature,” Solitaire said. “This is a nice night for drygulchin’.”

They rode on through wild range country. Black shadows loomed about them, formed by trees and big boulders. Solitaire was conscious of an air of hidden

menace in the stillness of the night.

“There’s a lot of things I’d like to know about Keene and his three men,” Solitaire said finally. “Where were they headin’ in such a hurry? How come they weren’t interested in the passengers on the stage?”

“Right good questions,” said Dismal. “Always did say that with yore brains and my beauty we make a team. Also they didn’t seem surprised that the stage driver and guard were dead.”

Solitaire nodded.

“I’m wonderin’ why.” They circled around until they again reached the road about a mile beyond. The road stretched ahead of them, white and deserted in the moonlight. Soon they discovered a wagon trail and a tree with a board on which the name of Diamond C Ranch had been burned in big letters.

“That’s helpful,” said Dismal, gazing at the sign.

Solitaire led the way along the wagon road until they passed through an open gate. Beyond, the buildings of a ranch loomed in the pale light. The Diamond C ranchhouse appeared to be deserted. The windows of the bunkhouse were dark. No horses moved in the cavy corral.

“Kind of gives me a creepy feelin’,” Dismal moaned softly.

“Me, too,” said Solitaire. “But it’s probably just our imagination.”

“Nope,” Dismal said. “I haven’t got any imagination.”

They dismounted in front of the ranch house and tied the reins of their horses to a hitching post. The wind blew against their faces as they climbed the creaking steps of the porch. The jingle of their spurs seemed loud in the silence.

Up on the porch Dismal stood staring and Solitaire also halted. To the ears of the two men came the sound. It was made by a rocking chair that was rocking steadily

back and forth.

"There's nobody in the chair," Dismal said nervously.

"It's just the wind," Solitaire answered as he grinned.

"Un-huh," said Dismal. "Or the Phantom Horseman left some of his folks around here."

Directly in front of them the open front door of the ranchhouse gaped like a yawning black mouth.

"Hello, the house!" Solitaire shouted loudly. "Anybody home?"

**H**IS voice died away. Wind moaned, carrying dampness with it as it blew against his face. There was a storm coming. Rain was in the air.

"Go away!" came a strange whisper. "Get yore hosses and ride before it is too late!"

Dismal jumped. Solitaire looked around quickly, trying to decide from which direction the whisper had come.

"Who spoke?" Solitaire demanded.

From the darkness inside beyond the door there came the sound of slow, deliberate footsteps.

Solitaire and Dismal waited tensely at the doorway.

A match flickered inside the house, and they caught a glimpse of a tall, shadowy form as a hand held the match to the wick of an oil lamp. Light flooded the interior of the ranchhouse.

Rays from the lamp disclosed a long-faced, dark-haired ranchman who was a stranger to the Whistling Waddy. He wore two pearl handled guns in tied-down holsters.

"Sorry to keep yuh waiting," the stranger said. "I was asleep."

"This is the Diamond C, isn't it?" asked Solitaire.

"Yes, this is the Diamond C," said the tall man. "I bought it from Jim Carson a

while ago. My name's Hackett—Chuck Hackett."

"Solitaire Stevens is my handle," said the Whistling Waddy. "And this is my pard, Dismal Day. Came here lookin' for Jim Carson. He's an old friend of mine."

"You came too late," said Hackett. "Carson cleared out of here in a hurry. But come in anyway."

He turned and led them along the hall into a big and comfortable looking living room, where he lighted another lamp.

There was a sofa and three comfortable chairs in the room. Over in one corner was a desk and a big table where the lamp stood.

Hackett carefully drew down the window shades as Solitaire stared at a pair of woman's traveling gloves and a gunbelt beside the lamp on the table. There was a Colt still in the holster of the gun belt with a Diamond C branded on it.

"Solitaire Stevens," Hackett repeated, returning from the windows. "That name is familiar. You're known as the Whistling Waddy." He looked at Solitaire with new interest. "Sit down, boys. I've heard quite a bit about you, Stevens."

Solitaire smiled and sank into a chair, while Dismal settled into another. "So Jim Carson sold out to you."

"That's right," said Hackett. "I had been anxious to buy a ranch and the Diamond C was just what I wanted."

"What made Jim leave in such a hurry?" Solitaire asked.

Chuck Hackett smiled.

"There's been some talk of Carson being a mysterious night rider called The Phantom Horseman. No truth in it, but it worried him a lot."

"Guess it would." Solitaire glanced at the gloves and the gun-belt.

Hackett's eyes followed the direction of the Whistling Waddy's gaze. He frowned.

“My wife has been quite ill,” he said. “She’s upstairs sleeping soundly. Poor girl, she’s been ill. I had my men clear the horses out of the corral so that noise wouldn’t bother her.”

“That’s too bad,” said Solitaire. “Hope my yellin’ didn’t bother Mrs. Hackett.” He rose to his feet. “Well, since Jim Carson ain’t here, I reckon we’d better be headin’ back to town, Dismal.”

There was a framed photograph standing on the desk. Solitaire casually moved over and looked at it. It was a picture of a pretty blond girl and across it was written: “With love from Nancy.” He turned to Hackett. “This yore wife?”

“That’s right.” Hackett nodded. “We’ve only been married two years.”

“Right pretty girl.” Solitaire moved toward the door. “Let’s go, Dismal.”

Hackett followed them to the front door and stood there watching as they mounted their horses. He waved to them as they rode away and closed the front door of the ranchhouse.

“Funny that Hackett’s wife would have the same name as the gal that Jim Carson was goin’ to marry,” remarked Dismal, after they were out of hearing distance.

“That’s not half as strange as Jim Carson leaving his gun-belt and gun behind him when he left,” said Solitaire. “I recognized that gun-belt. Jim was so proud of ownin’ the Diamond C that he put it’s brand on most everythin’.”

**D**ISMAL nodded.

I noticed Hackett shore had a right big head,” he said. “Mebbe big enough to fit that black hat I found in the stage.” The little ranny sighed. “Shore, why do I think of such things?”

“Riders comin’,” said Solitaire abruptly. “Quick, back in behind those trees, Dismal.”

They swiftly hid among the trees at the

side of the wagon road, and sat in saddle, listening and waiting. In a few moments four horsemen appeared, heading for the Diamond C. Solitaire watched them pass and saw it was Lance Keene and his three men. The rancher was talking loudly.

“Don’t matter if they did come here,” Keene was saying. “Hackett is too smart to make any slips. Besides—”

The rest of the sentence was lost as the four men rode on. Solitaire swung off his horse.

“Come on, Dismal,” he said. “We’re goin’ back to the ranchhouse on foot.”

“You would do that!” complained Dismal as he dismounted. “Walkin’ plumb disgusts me.”

They ground-hitched their horses and started toward the ranchhouse. They could move silently, for they had taken off their spurs and left them hanging on their saddle horns.

Keeping to the shadows they circled the buildings of the ranch and headed for the big barn.

“Where yuh goin’?” Dismal whispered.

“Got a hunch,” said Solitaire softly. “We’ll play it.”

They entered the barn and searched it by means of matches. In a stall there was one horse—and it was white. Flour sacks were still wrapped around its hoofs.

“That’s why the Phantom Horseman’s mount didn’t make any noise,” the Whistling Waddy said. He pointed to a heap of garments. “And there’s the white outfit that the night rider wears.”

They examined the white Stetson, white shirt, and white riding trousers. There was even a pair of boots that had been painted white—and a hoodlike white mask.

“He shore cottons to white,” said Dismal. He tried on the white hat. It was much too big for him and came down over

his ears.

"That don't seem natural," he said. "This hat is the same size as the black one I found on the stage. How can a gent be two places at the same time-on the stage, yet ridin' around the country as the Phantom Horseman?"

"It might be possible," said Solitaire. "We don't know how much time had passed between the holdup and when we saw the Phantom Horseman. There wasn't any smell of gunsmoke when we got there."

They left the barn and headed for the ranchhouse. The four horses of Keene and his men were standing out in front of the ranchhouse. From inside came the sound of loud voices and boisterous laughter.

"Pore Mrs. Hackett," said Dismal softly. "She just can't stand any noise!"

"Get ready for trouble, Dismal," said the Whistling Waddy. "We're goin' in."

With drawn guns the two cowboys entered the ranchhouse and stole quietly down the hallway. From the living room came the loud voices of the five men and the clink of a bottle against a glass. Hackett, Keene and their three friends were celebrating.

Solitaire and Dismal silently climbed the stairs to the second floor and began to search the rooms. In one they found Jim Carson lying on a bed bound hand and foot. On the table burned a smoky lamp. The owner of the Diamond C was not gagged.

"So you finally got here, Solitaire!" Carson said, relief in his tones. "Was that you who rode up to the front of the house, a little while ago? I was afraid it might be Nancy Parker, the girl I intend to marry. She's due here any time now, on the stage. I tried to warn her. There's an old speaking tube on the wall which leads down to the front porch. I managed to hop over to it and whisper for her to go away.

But I had to be cautious because Hackett was downstairs."

"Speaking tube?" said Dismal. "Oh, I savvy. So you're the feller who whispered!"

"Yes," said Carson. Solitaire had dropped his guns back into the holsters, drew out a jackknife and began to cut the rancher's bonds. "I installed the speaking tube when I built this house."

"Yuh shore startled us," said Dismal. "That whisper scared the life out of me."

**F**REED of the ropes the rancher sat up with a grimace of pain and rubbed his sore muscles. The mention of Nancy Parker had given Solitaire an idea. He left the room to continue his search.

"I've been a prisoner here for nearly two weeks," Carson said to Dismal. "They would release me occasionally, then tie me up again."

Meantime, in the next room, Solitaire had found a pretty blond girl, dressed in traveling clothes, also lying on a bed, bound and gagged. He quickly released her.

"You're Nancy Parker, aren't you?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "That's right. I'm engaged to Jim Carson. Where is he?"

"He's all right," said Solitaire. "They had him tied up, too."

He stepped to the door and listened. From downstairs came the voice of Chuck Hackett.

"I'm going up and see how the prisoners are gettin' along," Hackett said. "Lance, you come with me."

Hastily Solitaire took Nancy and thrust her into the room where Carson and Dismal were. Then he drew his guns and hastened back to the head of the stairs. Hackett and Keene were ascending.

"That's as far as you go, gents," Solitaire said, covering the two men with

his guns.

"It's the Whistling Waddy!" exclaimed Hackett. "He's found the prisoners."

Keene cursed, then moved so that Hackett was in front of him and made a quick draw. He fired and Solitaire felt the breeze as the bullet just missed his cheek. He couldn't return the fire without shooting Hackett, and the tall man put up his hands.

There were shouts and the pounding of feet. The three other men came rushing to the foot of the stairs with drawn guns.

"Get him!" shouted Hackett. "He's only one man, and there are five of us."

Solitaire fired as one of the men below raised his pistol. The bullet tore into the gunslick's chest. He dropped.

Solitaire was puzzled. Where was Dismal? And Jim Carson? It wasn't like either of them to let him fight this battle all alone.

"All right, Sheriff," came a voice from down in the hall. "We've got the place surrounded. Let's get them."

The men on the stairs stopped uncertainly as they heard the voice. Soon Dismal and Carson appeared beside Solitaire on the upper landing. Carson was unarmed.

"Reach high, all of you," snapped the Whistling Waddy. "Don't move!"

While Dismal and Solitaire covered the five men, Carson went down the stairs and took the guns away from Keene, Hackett and the two desperadoes. The fifth man was dead.

Then the prisoners were herded into the living room.

"Yuh've been smart," Solitaire said, staring at Keene and Hackett. "But not smart enough."

"Yuh'd never got us if the sheriff didn't have the house surrounded," said Hackett bitterly. "We were outnumbered."

"There's no sheriff and posse outside,"

said Dismal with a grin. "That voice yuh heard was me yellin' down through a speakin' tube. I closed the door of that room upstairs before I did it."

"So you were in on this, Keene?" said Carson, staring at the owner of the L Bar K outfit. "I should have realized that you would try to get my spread when I refused to sell it a month ago."

"And shortly after that the Phantom Horseman started riding," said Solitaire. "Folks suspected you of rustlin' and robbin' after that feller Grant was killed. That right, Jim?"

"Right," said Carson. "Then this feller Hackett showed up with some other men and tied me up. That was after I had written to you, Solitaire. Hoped you would help me clear myself of the rustlin' business."

At this moment Nancy Parker came into the room.

"And Hackett and Keene learned that Nancy Parker was coming out to marry you, Jim," said Solitaire smiling at the girl. "So Hackett got on the stage tonight, pretending to be a passenger."

"He did," said Nancy. "And when four masked men held up the stage and killed the driver and guard, Hackett helped me to get away. He brought me here to the ranch and then made me a prisoner."

"Thought so," said Solitaire. "And after he had brought yuh here, I figger Hackett put on the Phantom Horseman outfit and went ridin' around so folks would think it was the horseman who robbed the stage, and would blame it all on the missing Jim Carson."

"It was Keene who planned the whole thing," said Hackett. "He showed me what he thought of me when he used me for a shield while shooting at you from the foot of the stairs, Stevens. He offered me five thousand dollars for this job. Now I can see if he had succeeded, I shore wouldn't

have lived long.”

“Then yuh’ll talk when we turn yuh over to the sheriff?” demanded Solitaire.

“I shore will,” said Hackett. “I didn’t do any of the killin’. Keene and his men did that. They also stole the Diamond C hosses. Keene wanted both ranches; that’s why he planned the whole thing.”

“Why you dirty doublecrosser,” Keene glared at Hackett. “I’d like to beat the living daylights out of yuh.”

“Try it,” snarled Hackett.

“Quiet, gentlemen,” said Dismal with a grin. “Yuh really must show more consideration for Mr. Hackett’s pore sick wife.”

Solitaire smiled and glanced at Carson and Nancy.

“From that letter we found, I reckon that me and Dismal got here in time for a wedding—right?”

“Right,” said Jim Carson, while Nancy nodded and blushed.