

# MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE :-:

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## Johnny Wolf and His Bank

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"Gold!" he half sobbed. "Whole barrels of it!"

THE sun rested on the far edge of the prairie like some mighty dome made small by distance. A brisk, cool wind, full of health and vigor, swirled over the face of the land, playing a morning song in the grasses, and rising and falling in a dreamy, lonely howl through the openings of the shack.

It was a day with a tang of wildness to it—an invitation to adventure, an urging to action. Yet to the man who sat his horse before the cabin it was a black day. He looked about him with all the bitterness of a last farewell in his heart.

There was the little shack of rough cottonwood boards covered with tar paper; beyond, the barn, a rude structure of logs—logs that were hauled many a mile from the distant Missouri; nearer at hand, a sort of bower, vine wrapped, brocaded with morning glory blossoms. Other flowers bloomed around the shack, showing a woman's hand. It was not much to look at, this estate, but every board and log, each blossom in the doorway and furrow in the field, was a hieroglyph; when these were properly placed together they told the whole history of two people's lives for five happy years.

But little to lose, perhaps? Everything, that was all.

The woman came to the door. Hard work had rubbed the bloom of her earlier beauty off, but she was still good to the eye.

"You must take some coffee with you, Jack; it's a long ride, and the way you're feeling, you'll be plumb tuckered agin you git there."

"Coffee goes, old lady," replied the man.

She came out with the lunch and tied it on the saddle, then looked up at him with agony in her twitching mouth and reddened eyes.

"I hope you can do something with that man, Jack. Tell him what hard luck we've had—the hail cutting down the wheat just before you was going to get it insured, and the fire burning up the binder. Don't you think he'll give us a little more time?"

The man dropped her hand and gazed out on the great sweep of prairies.

"No, Sally, I don't," he answered. "There's more pity in a coyote than that man. We're gone, old girl; let's try to take our medicine. Don't git scared while I'm away. Good-by!"

She drew him to her for one long kiss, then raced into the cabin without a glance behind.

Flashes of fire ran through Jack Halstead's head as he cantered across the springy sod. He even drew his revolver and fondled it.

"If I had you in front of me now, Mr. Money Lender," he said, "I reckon we could fix up that mortgage business without any trouble." On the heels of that thought came this one: "Why not do it, anyhow? What is the life of such a creature worth?"

One well placed shot might teach the breed that it wasn't safe to crowd a poor man to desperation. Halstead's face was a danger signal as the heady sense of the power that lay in the palm of his right hand possessed him, but suddenly the fell and rapt expression was plucked off like a mask.

"It ain't to be thought of," said he; "for what would Sally think?"

He could not keep the tail of the serpent still. It would flutter across his mind's eye, but the reptile itself was dead. "For Sally's sake, he can do what he pleases, and say what he pleases; I won't raise a hand agin him," thought he, and even at the moment came a picture of the money lender—to give him the euphonism, the banker—on his knees, sweating with fear, begging for his life, and so attractive was it that Halstead had to put it away with main strength.

Three miles away from home he descended the draw that opened on Good Heart Coulee, and at the bottom came face to face with a giant Indian.

"Well, hello, there!" cried Halstead, a bit confused at the encounter. He had been so lost in the traveling of his own mind that he had been deaf and blind to surroundings, and this huge figure seemed to have risen through the ground.

"Hello, Mr. Halstead!" returned the Indian.

"Why, darned if the feller don't know me!" said Halstead to himself, astonished. He looked searchingly at the stranger. A man not less than six feet and a half in height, almost massive in build, and in the full heat of young manhood. "If you've got anything agin me, I see bad times ahead," mused Halstead. "You're about the most of a man I ever see stood on end, and, good Lord, but you're got up fine!"

On the black block of hair in which the Indian's face was set rested a white hat, the band of which was braided silver, as thick as a woman's wrist. He was bare to the waist, but across his chest, almost as broad as a door, there hung a string of metal trinkets, silver crescents and spangles, and, still more wonderful, a row of double eagles. Silver armlets gleamed out on the ruddy skin. His blanket, which had fallen to his hips, was of beautiful texture.

He rode no pony; it was an American horse, and a good one at that, which carried his weight. Bridle and saddle were heavy with silver. All in all, here was the acme of the savage gentleman.

"You don't know me, Mr. Halstead?" queried the Indian. He spoke excellent English, and it was evident that he was pleased at the lack of recognition. "Once you take care of little Indian boy, so high," he continued, sweeping his long arm down till it was a matter of three feet from the ground. "You call him Johnny Wolf."

"You ain't little Johnny Wolf!" cried Halstead. "By gosh! You simply ain't!"

"I am little Johnny Wolf."

"Well, for heaven's sake! Well, I'll be—Say, what on earth have they fed you on? Boy, I'm mighty glad to see you. Where did you come from? Sally won't know what to make of it. If you ain't growed, then I never saw growing. Good Lord, you're as big as a church steeple! How are you, boy, anyhow?"

"Good—leelah ouashtay—every way," replied the Indian. He looked straight at the other. "I hear it is not good with you," he concluded.

"Now, how did you hear that, Johnny?"

"We Injun, we have way. It is true?"

"Yes, it is true enough, John," said Halstead sadly. "I'm a busted flush."

"That's why I come. As quick as I can, but it is a long ride. Now we fix that."

"Why, what do you mean, Johnny?" stammered Halstead, a sudden big hope throbbing in his throat.

"I have bank," responded the Indian. "You get all the money you want."

"Bank? Surely not!"

A peculiar smile crossed the red man's face. "Private bank," he said.

The other caught the look—it worried him. "You haven't taken to the road, Johnny?" he asked anxiously.

The Indian laughed outright, a great roar of laughter from the bottom of his lungs. "No, no! All square, Mr. Halstead! You come with me."

"John, I'll go you, whatever it is—but is it a long trip? Because, I'd like to give Sally the word, if so be."

"No, not far; and you must speak to nobody—never speak!

That all I ask. You promise that?"

"I don't know what this all is no more than the man in the moon, but you ain't the kind of feller to look at that would take up a man's time with nonsense. Yes, I promise."

"Good! Now come."

They rode the rest of the day

They clambered over the blocks of sandstone until, in the niche of a valley, they came upon a water worn cave. There they waited, the Indian holding up his hand for silence.

Not suddenly, but still coming on them unawares for all their watchfulness, that dreary cry trembled forth from the cave. It had a

boulder strewn, steep, and treacherous. In two hours' riding they came to a lift of ground the size of a hill, but the shape of a mountain. And when they were near enough to discern its features, they heard the wail of the night before, striking intermittently on the ear.

"That one yell all the time,"

muttered Halstead. "Lord, what a hole!"

"There!" cried the Indian. He stood at his full height, the candle held over his head, and pointed to a square stone box, apparently hewn out of the country rock, about six feet long, and half as wide. A thick slab of stone covered it. Both walls and box exhibited rude carvings.

"My bank," said the Indian. "Lift that up!"

Halstead put his hands beneath the slab and heaved for all his two hundred pounds were worth, but nothing budged. The Indian chuckled. "Here, I show you how," said he. One fling, and the slab was flapped back like a blanket. "You don't eat enough meat. Now look!"

The request was unnecessary. Halstead was staring with all his eyes at the satiny, soft, yellow, shining heap within.

"It ain't gold!" he cried with a sort of savagery. "I'll take my oath it ain't gold!" As he spoke he sank on his knees beside the sarcophagus and thrust his hands into the mass. The great weight of the handful was unimpeachable testimony. "Gold!" he half sobbed. "Whole barrels of it! And gold!"

Over his head three great eagles, their heads pointing to the east, were carved in the rock walls, pointing to that east from which the gatherers of the treasure had been driven by the mountain tribes, leaving behind them in huge earthworks the proof that their ancestors had held the land through the long perspective of time to where the mastodon lurched through the forest of strange trees.

Here in the caves this vanished people had gathered the yellow metal, which was the most appropriate symbol of their god, the sun. More fortunate than their fellows, the cliff dwellers of the south, they had fallen in with a kindly race, the Mandans—a people with hazel eyes, who had many Welsh words in their tongue; hence, they could work without fear of their neighbors, living in dread of the occasional incursions of the fierce Sioux.

But one day the sacred fire flickered out; the Mico dreamed disaster. Wailing and fearful, the people marched out to the plains beyond, leaving all that was dearest to them behind as an appeasement to offended deity, and stepped off the page of history forever. Behind the representative of their exterminators, the Sioux, and the representative of the barely more ruthless conqueror of the Sioux, the Anglo-Saxon, the charred sticks and cinders of that long extinguished fire rested on the altar. Before them was the pure and incorruptible gold—the metal which is the embodiment of ideal qualities, yet only too often has the electrical property of inducing the opposite polarity in those who touch it.

Nothing of the strange history of the stone box held the thoughts of the two men who gazed at it. Their needs and hopes and wishes were all of the present. How it came or whence it came was of little moment. The fact that it was there comprised its meaning for them. The white man stared into the fortune, his jaws set rigid, his breath hissing between his teeth, his eyes devouring it. All the savage lust for power of his race was called up by the sight of its servant. The centuries of effort that had made him a just and law abiding man fell away on the instant; he bounded back to a fellowship with the naked, painted Briton dancing his war dance on the bank of the Thames. Yet it was but a moment of frenzy; he glanced up and met the Indian's smiling face. The look brought back his senses. "Help yourself," said the Indian.

"This thing got any end to it, Johnny?" he asked. The tremendous breadth of his companion shut off the view in front.

"S—st! Don't talk, or I lose my way," replied the Indian. "That shuts me up all right,"

"Johnny," said Halstead, "how did you come by this?"

"Find him, just like you see him. I always fool around this part of country, and one day I come here. Now I have bank—good bank. When I want money, come and get some. I regular Mr. Vankybilt."

"Well, I should say you was!" Halstead stood in thought. The shock of seeing the gold had left him, and his plain honesty and independence rose strong within him again.

"See here, Johnny," he said, "I'm willing to take enough to pay off my mortgage, looking at it as a favor of one old friend to another, and something that nobody need be ashamed of; but I ain't got no idee of the worth of this stuff at all, so if you'll just measure me out fifteen hundred dollars' worth, why, you'll oblige yours truly to the limit."

"Ugh!" said the Indian. "That fool talk. What I do with all that? Wakstahonee! Nothing! I not tell other man, because they make trouble; but you—you take little Johnny Wolf, give him grub, clothes, everything. Now he plenty big Injun, give you everything. You take what want."

"Now, John," protested Halstead, "that won't do. I'm a man grown, and I've got to look out for myself. I can't come sponging on you."

Johnny Wolf put the candle down. He grabbed Halstead by the collar, and laid him on his back gently, but firmly; then he caught him by the heel and pulled off his boot. This he proceeded to fill from the contents of the box. Halstead sprang up and expostulated. "Johnny, stop that! Stop that, now, I tell you! I won't have it; you oughtn't to act that way."

The Indian paid no attention until Halstead attempted to carry his wishes by force. Then he gazed at the white man who was tugging fruitlessly at his arm. He sized up Halstead's puny six feet of stature in serene amusement.

"Little man, go sit down!" said he, and, borne down by the sheer weight of the speech, Halstead did as he was told.

Shortly after, they stood in the bright daylight once more. The Indian was tying the bootful of gold to Halstead's saddle. It was heavier than the foot of a tyrant.

Halstead looked about him and shook his head. "I don't savvy this thing at all," said he. "It seems to me like a queer sort of dream."

"Good dream!" said Johnny Wolf, giving the bootleg a slap. "Dam good dream! You dream that because I not afraid of devils."

"Nor anything else, I reckon, Johnny."

"No, nor anything else," replied the Indian.

They reached the draw behind Halstead's place on the evening of the second day.

"Johnny, I want to ride on a piece alone," said Halstead. "My mind is going like an eight-day clock."

He climbed the rise and looked down upon his home. "Now come, you money lender scoundrel!" he said. "I'm ready for you! And, Sally, my girl, there's lots of little fixings you've been wanting that you can have now as well as not. And, by Jinks, I'll put the whole section in wheat next year, darned if I don't! He searched around the familiar spots. A sudden anxiety seized him. What if anything had happened to Sally? As if in answer, a slender figure, straight and strong, came out of the house, looking about her from beneath her hand.

"There she is, God bless her!" he cried. "Come along, Johnny."

With a wild, triumphant yell he dug the irons in his horse, and he and the huge Indian tore down upon the startled woman.