

# Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post-office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.  
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# The PHANTOM RIDER

by OTIS  
ADELBERT  
KLINE



*Author of "The Cup of Blood," "The Malignant Entity," Etc.*

**B**IG BILL HAWKINS laid the trap with admirable precision. Every little detail had been worked out with the utmost nicety.

The care-free manner of his partner, Seth Ormsby, indicated that he suspected nothing, though he did seem somewhat puzzled by Big Bill's unwonted loquacity and unprecedented joviality. He had shown a strange lack of enthusiasm when, after a summer of unrequited toil, the prospectors had stumbled on the vein that promised to make them both independently wealthy. During the days spent in preliminary work with a view to replenishing their depleted larder, he had been unusually taciturn, even sullen at times.

As they rode abreast along the trail, followed by the two pack-mules, the foremost of which bore in its saddlebags enough gold dust to purchase the entire general store at Red Dog, Big Bill outdid himself in his efforts to be agreeable. At the same time he was thinking, planning.

Big Bill, a dyed-in-the-wool prospector, had first met Ormsby in the Deer Foot Saloon at Red Dog. He had lived up most of his savings and needed a grub-stake. Ormsby, a wandering cowpuncher out of a job, had the necessary money. Under the mellowing influence of liquor they had struck up a partnership.

The country through which they wandered was an open book to Hawkins, and Ormsby, the newcomer, al-

ways relied on his burly partner when a choice of directions was to be made. It was Hawkins who, in this instance, had suggested they take this new trail to Red Dog, where papers were to be filed and supplies purchased.

Big Bill felt that he had ample reason to hate Ormsby. For nineteen years he had been prospecting in this region, sometimes with a partner, but more often alone. He had managed to find enough pay-dirt to keep body and soul together and had made occasional moderate strikes rich enough to support him in idleness for several months at a time. The thing that stuck in his craw was the fact that when the big strike came—the strike for which he had been hoping, toiling and struggling for nineteen years—he must share it with this greenhorn: this newcomer who couldn't tell quartz from shale. He had gambled the best years of his life for this stake and felt that fortune had cold-decked him when she finally dealt him one royal flush and Ormsby the other. It meant that they must either split the pot or leave it up for a show-down, and Big Bill had resolved on a show-down dealt from his own stacked deck.

"Seems like we're goin' sorta outa the way to git to Red Dog," remarked Ormsby when they suddenly turned at a fork in the trail.

"Not so much," replied Big Bill with studied indifference. "They's a water hole down this way and the animals ain't goin' to be none the worse

off for wettin' their whistles. We got to think of them as well as ourselves. It's a long, hot ride and the other trail is bone-dry."

"Right you are, Bill. I plumb forgot about the poor brutes. A man'll do that sometimes when he's got a full canteen himself."

"You're a hell of a cowpuncher." roared Hawkins. "I don't never forget 'em. They can't run without water no more'n a ottymobile can run without gasoline."

"It's this big strike of ours that's got me kinda loco," replied Ormsby. "I don't know whether I'm horseback or ridin' a airyoplane half the time."

Big Bill did not reply. His eyes were on the trail ahead. The time for action was almost at hand. The sharp curve, now only fifty feet away, was the appointed place.

Nearer and nearer they drew to that curve. Big Bill's gaze did not falter. True, the hands that held the reins trembled slightly, but there was nothing in his expression that might serve to betray his purpose. He was wearing his poker face. The time for the show-down had arrived. He reined back slightly, drew his keen hunting knife, and stealthily severed the lead ropes.

With a vicious kick he suddenly drove his spur into the left flank of his unsuspecting steed. As the horse reared, he pulled on the right rein, jerking the animal against Ormsby's mount. The ledge was a narrow one—the drop only a matter of a few feet. Horse and rider lurched, slipped, and fell into something that received them with a dull splash. A moment later man and beast were struggling desperately in a yielding, slimy mess that threatened to engulf them in a few seconds.

Big Bill's horse galloped swiftly up the trail for more than a hundred yards. By sawing the bit he brought the animal to a prancing walk, then to a dead stop. He turned and rode

leisurely back. The frightened squeals of the mired horse all but drowned the man's cries for help.

"My God, Bill, it's quicksand!" shouted Ormsby.

Hawkins dismounted leisurely and walked to the brink. Taking a plug of tobacco from his pocket, he bit off a hunk, chewed for a moment, then spat into the bubbling, slimy mess beneath him.

"Damned if it ain't," he said. "Hang on for a minute and I'll throw you a rope."

With studied deliberation he turned and gave his attention to the coiled lariat that dangled from his saddle. He seemed to be having trouble with the knots.

"Hurry, Bill, for God's sake!" cried Ormsby. "It's up to my waist already!"

Big Bill continued to pull at the tangled lariat. Somehow, with each pull, the knot grew tighter. At length he turned. Ormsby had succeeded in loosing his own rope and was trying to throw it to him. The slimy ooze was up to his armpits. Of his horse nothing could be seen but the foam-flecked nostrils. These disappeared as he cast the rope. It fell at the feet of Hawkins.

"Grab hold of my rope, Bill. I think I can crawl out on it."

Big Bill stooped slowly and picked up the slime-smared rope. Then, with a vicious laugh that was almost a snarl, he hurled it in the face of his victim.

The deadly quagmire had reached Ormsby's chin. A look of blank surprise came to his face. It was followed by one of hatred and revulsion as the sinister purpose of his partner was revealed to him. He tilted his head backward for a last sobbing inhalation.

"You dirty coyote," he gasped. "You murderin' yaller dog. I'll get you for this if I have to break out of hell to do it. I'll—"

His speech was cut short by the mounting quicksand. A slimy hand waved for a moment above the surface, clutching claw-like at the empty air. Then it, too, disappeared.

Big Bill surveyed the bubble-strewn surface of the quagmire, apparently unmoved. The only remaining trace of his revolting crime was Ormsby's half-submerged Stetson, which had fallen a few feet from where its owner went down. He sank it from sight with a carefully aimed rock fragment. Then he turned his attention to the waiting animals.

The two pack-mules watched him unconcernedly, their long ears drooping limply, as he picked up the ends of the lead-ropes and knotted them together. He vaulted into the saddle and rode to the water hole, only a few rods distant. When the beasts had drunk their fill, he set out with all haste for Red Dog.

THE blood-red sun was poised just above the western horizon when Big Bill rode into the village. After seeing that his animals were properly bedded and fed he removed the heavy sacks of "dust" from his saddle-bags and hied to Bonnell's General Store.

"Hello, Bill," greeted Dave Bonnell, peering over his silver-rimmed spectacles as the burly prospector strode through the door. "Where's yer pardner?"

Big Bill laughed a bit nervously.

"Skipped out a coupla weeks ago for parts unknown," he replied. "Took most of the grub with him, too, the damned skunk! But the joke's on him. Day after he left I struck pay dirt and staked out a nice little claim for myself. I want you to weigh in this dust for me and fix up my papers."

The ancient counter trembled with the impact of the two heavy bags which he suddenly placed before the astonished storekeeper.

Dave Bonnell weighed the gold dust with wide-eyed wonder.

"You shore hit pay dirt this time, didn't you, Bill," he remarked. "Want any cash on this or just a receipt?"

"Gimme about a hundred cash and a receipt for the balance," replied the prospector. "I 'low to ride over and file claim in the mornin'. Think you can fix my papers up this evenin' so I can git an early start tomorrow?"

"Have 'em ready for you by the time you get through with your supper," said Bonnell. Aside from being a storekeeper he was a notary public and justice of the peace.

Bill ambled over to the Deer Foot Saloon for a couple of shots of whiskey as an appetizer. Then he went into the adjoining cafe, where he tucked a huge beefsteak, a half dozen eggs, French fried potatoes, coffee, and a piece of pie under his belt. After lighting a long black cigar he returned to the store. Bonnell had the papers ready for his signature. He removed his hat, raised his right hand in solemn oath and affixed his name.

"Well, so long, Dave," he muttered, when Bonnell handed him the documents. "See you tomorrow afternoon."

"You'll be wantin' some grub and things, I suppose."

"Yeah. Plenty of things. So long."

"So long, Bill."

LATE the following afternoon Big Bill rode back from the county seat, the sole owner of the richest claim that had been filed in that office for many years.

He had often wondered how it would feel to be wealthy. Time and again he had planned the things he would do should he ever strike it rich. Now that the big moment had arrived, however, his thoughts were chaos. For one thing, he had promised himself

plenty of wine, women and song. As Red Dog afforded only the first mentioned article and it would be necessary for him to inhabit that village for some time to come, he decided that the time for indulgence was at hand. Accordingly he drew up before the Deer Foot Saloon, carelessly tossed his reins over a hitching post, and strode through the door, oozing affluence.

The wine was, of course, only figurative. Big Bill looked on wine as a woman's drink. He liked his liquor and liked it straight. He swaggered up to the bar and planked a twenty-dollar bill on the counter before the astonished eyes of Joe McGinnis, the porcine bartender.

"Whadda ya got that's good and strong, Joe?" he asked.

"Well, we got some Old Crow, some Arkovcet that'll proof about a hundred and twenty, and some Three Star Hennessy and—"

"Gimme Three Star, and see what the rest of the boys will have."

The motley crew of cowpunchers, prospectors, sheep herders, card sharps and others of doubtful occupations or no occupations at all, voiced their various wants in no uncertain terms. When they were served they drained their glasses, chousing "'S lookin' atcha," "Here's how," and "Happy days."

Convivial companionship was not lacking after that, especially since Big Bill, in view of his recent prosperity, insisted on buying a lion's share of the refreshments.

By ten-thirty, however, the crowd began to thin out. Many of the roisters lurched out to their waiting steeds, some singly, others in small groups. A few who had imbibed too freely lay with heads resting on tables or lolled back in their chairs, oblivious to the drunken songs and ribald jests that went up from those who were able to hold to their moorings before the bar.

Big Bill tossed his last twenty-dollar note under the nose of the bar-keeper.

"Givesh nozher drink, Joe," he said gravely. "What t'ell y' standin' there like damn Dumb-Isaac for? Ja 'ear me? Shed jam Bum-Isaac. Shwatcha are, too."

"You had enough, Bill," said Joe. "Here; put your money in your pocket and go on to bed."

"Had nuff did I?"

Big Bill glared hostilely at the bartender.

"Gesh I know when I got 'nough. Gimme drink."

"You'll get no more to drink to-night. Not here, anyway."

"Shay. Who t'll shink you're talkin' to. Do I get a drink 'r don't I?"

Big Bill was getting ugly. His hand stole toward the forty-five that hung at his hip. The revelers on either side of him stepped back in sudden alarm.

"You heard what I said. Take your money and get out."

The forty-five roared and broken glasses tinkled in a shower behind the bar. It roared again and a hole appeared in the mirror, surrounded by spoke-like cracks that radiated in all directions.

The sheriff, who had been enjoying a sociable game of draw poker in the back room, poked his head and gun from between the double doors at one and the same time.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" he roared.

Big Bill had a wholesome fear of the law. The sight of the gun and star almost sobered him. Panic-stricken, he dropped his forty-five, rushed out through the door and flung himself upon his horse.

The sheriff ran after him, but was stayed by Joe Vienza.

"Let him go, Jack," he said. "They's nobody hurt and we can make him pay for the glasses and mir-

ror tomorrow. He's rich enough to buy this whole town now."

**BIG BILL**, galloping hastily along the village street, felt sure that he was being pursued. He spurred his horse until the blood spurted from its gashed sides, and tried to think. What was it he had done? For the life of him he could not remember. Everything was hazy up to the time the sheriff had appeared. Suddenly his hand touched the empty holster. He had used his gun. Perhaps he had killed a man.

Killed a man! The thought persisted. Yes. He had killed a man only the day before. And that man had sworn — what was it he had sworn? The exact words of the dying Ormsby came back to him with amazing vividness.

"I'll get you for this if I have to break out of hell to do it."

Could a man break out of hell, or wherever his spirit might chance to go? Could the dead return to wreak vengeance on those who had wronged them? He wondered, then urged his horse forward with renewed frenzy as the sharp clatter of hoof-beats sounded close behind him.

It seemed, however, that with the first staccato click of those pursuing hoofs the horse needed no urging. The frightened beast leaped forward with ears laid back and nostrils distended as if running for its very life. But despite the speed he was making, the increasing distinctness of the sounds behind him told Big Bill that his pursuer was gaining on him—gaining with amazing rapidity.

He expected to hear a command to halt or feel a bullet between his shoulder-blades at any moment. He feared to go on, feared to stop—even feared to turn and look at his pursuer. The suspense was nerve-racking.

Well. It would soon be a matter of his life or that of the sheriff. Un-

doubtedly he had shot a man and, if taken for it, would surely swing. His forty-five was gone, but he still had his derringer. With an oath he snatched it from his pocket and swung in the saddle. His pursuer was less than fifty feet behind, and Big Bill seldom missed at fifty feet.

He raised the tiny weapon and fired. Then, seeing that the bullet had not taken effect, he cursed and fired again. His pursuer came on, sitting bolt upright in the saddle, apparently unmoved.

There was something strange about the appearance of the oncoming man and beast—something terrifying, appalling. He had not noticed it at first, but the realization suddenly burned itself into his consciousness. The horse was strangely familiar and the man—only one man he had ever known wore his Stetson creased thus and at that peculiar, jaunty angle. And that man was dead—murdered. Again the words of the slain Ormsby came back to him:

"I'll get you for this if I have to break out of hell to do it."

He strained his eyes in an attempt to pierce the semi-darkness. Suddenly the moon peered from behind a rapidly-moving cloud—and he *knew* . . .

The derringer dropped from his nerveless fingers. A queer choking feeling paralyzed his throat. He passed his hand before his eyes and looked again. The vision persisted.

Nearer and nearer came that silent, relentless pursuer. With a shudder of horror Big Bill saw that he or it was uncoiling a lariat.

The loop widened, whirled about that ghostly head and shot through the air. Big Bill ducked, then uttered a shriek of mortal terror that ended in a gurgling, agonized wail as the rope settled and tightened about his throat. For a moment he felt himself dangling in empty air—then all went black . . .

**E**ARLY the following morning two cowpunchers from the Bar L Ranch rode into Red Dog. One carried an extra saddle and bridle, the other the rapidly stiffening body of Big Bill Hawkins.

They were quickly surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers, foremost among whom was the sheriff.

"Where'd you find him? What happened?" asked the sheriff, as two men assisted in lowering the corpse to the ground.

The cowboy whose horse had borne the body dismounted.

"Dangdest queerest thing I ever seen," he said. "We found Big Bill and his horse lying at the bottom of a ravine. Bill was dead and the horse had broken both forelegs, so we shot him."

"But what killed Bill?"

"As near as I can make out, he was roped and strangled. There's a rope burn around his neck and he don't seem to have no broken bones or other injuries."

"Who follered Big Bill out of Red Dog last night?" demanded the sheriff, facing the crowd.

"No one follered him," volunteered a prospector. "I seen him come out and ride away alone."

"Whoever got him," continued the cowboy, "must've left in an airship."

"An airship? What do you mean?"

"Well, me and my pardner went up to the top of the ravine to try and find out what happened. We saw the tracks of Bill's horse where he had come runnin' up and plunged over the edge. Beside them was the trail of another horse that ended in a four-track slidin' square like your bronc' makes when you rope a steer."

"And where did they go from there?"

"That's just the point. We hunted high and low and circled the place for a hundred yards in every direction. *There wasn't a single track of horse or man leading away from the place where Bill Hawkins died!*"

*Note.—"The Malignant Entity," a fascinating pseudo-scientific story by the author of the above tale, appeared in the mammoth May-June-July Anniversary Issue of Weird Tales. Copy will be mailed by the publishers on receipt of fifty cents.*



BROSNATCH