

**MAX  
BRAND**

**SILVERTIP'S  
STRIKE**

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# **Silvertip's Strike**

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Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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THE END

# I. — WYCOMBE RANCH

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When Jim Silver came over the last divide, he could see the ranch house among the low foothills, and beyond the foothills was the desert. It looked like a green smudge, an olive-green drab; but he knew that at close hand the green would thin out to a sparse scattering of shrubs, all of which were arrayed in foliage which was no more than a mist, the leaves turning their edges up so as to split the full heat of the sun that would have withered them. He knew that only the toughest grass would be found yonder, and that in occasional tufts which keep a cow steadily walking as it grazes all day long.

Yet in the distance the effect of the rolling desert was green, though it was not the luminous sheen of well-watered country, but rather as grasslands appear under cloud or seen through a fog of dust. To look at that desert made the day seem overcast, though a brilliant sun was shining. The burning weight of it on the shoulders of Jim Silver told him with what force it was shining, and so did the little white streaks of salt that appeared all over the hide of his chestnut stallion where the sweat had sprung out and dried as it began to run.

The band of his sombrero was hot and soggy. He took off the hat, pulled out a bandanna, and mopped the leather band, then dried his forehead and the back of his neck. Now that his hat was off for a moment, one could see the two marks of gray hair above his temples, like small horns breaking through. He had gained his name of Silver or

"Silvertip" from those spots of white hair. He was called "Arizona Jim" and other names as well, but his real name was as much a secret as the wellspring of that quiet smile which was found more often in his eyes than about his lips.

He had the look of a man who is sufficient unto himself and who relies upon greater strength than even that which appeared in his long arms and in his heavy shoulders. Or perhaps it was the stallion—a great, glimmering sheen of gold—that made him seem as much at home on the verge of the mountains and the desert as any hawk afloat in the sky.

The smile which was habitually his disappeared as he marked the gray-white of the ranch house among the hills. For he had no need to pull the letter out of his pocket; he could remember every word that Steve Wycombe had written:

DEAR SILVER: You've always hated my heart.

That's all right, because I've always hated yours, too. But now there's a chance that we can use one another. I'm asking you to come over to see me because I've got as big a job as you ever tackled in your life—and I know that you've had some big ones. Hard cash is what I'm talking about. I pay, and you take, and your job is the sort of hell fire that you prefer to breathe.

Just by accident I've heard that you're drifting north, and that's why I'm leaving this letter in Rusty Gulch in the hope that you may call for mail there.



I want you to try to forget the old days and believe that I'm talking the sort of business that you always like to hear.

Adios,

steve wycombe

Silver recalled the words of the letter, now, as he settled the hat again on his head. And, as the shadow fell over his face, the hazel of his eyes lightened to a flicker of yellow fire, as certain types of hazel eyes can do. For he could remember very well a few of those old days when he had known Steve Wycombe before the inheriting of a ranch had removed Steve from the ranks of the professional gamblers and gunmen.

Wycombe had been half fox and half wolf. He had both teeth and cunning, plus what Jim Silver hated more than anything else in the world—the smooth and ingratiating manner of the born hypocrite.

However, the letter had called Silver across the mountains. He knew that Wycombe might be setting a trap for him, but a great part of Silver's time was spent in avoiding the traps which his enemies laid for him. Besides, there was a ring of sincerity in the words of Wycombe that led Silver to believe that the man might have fallen into a need greater than his hatred; it might be just possible that Steve was willing to forget that day when Silver had shamed him before many men in Gold Gulch.

So, for the moment, Jim Silver balanced the question nicely in his mind. At last, he rubbed the tips of his gloved fingers down the arch of the stallion's neck and murmured:

"Parade, it looks like trouble, it feels like trouble, and it probably is trouble. But all oats and no trouble would make us too fat to work."

He spoke again, and the stallion started down the easy slope at a trot. His rider kept no rein; but, having selected a direction, gave his mind to other things while the horse picked out the way that suited him best. He was not compelled to go over hard beds of rock if he saw going more to his taste to the right or the left; he was not forced straight on through stifling dust if he wished to take a higher route; in all things he was allowed to do pretty much as he pleased, so long as he sailed by the right star, so to speak.

If the man and the saddle had been removed and the horse considered by itself, one might have said that Parade was running wild, such was the height of his head and the free fire in his eye. There was not even a bit between his teeth, but only a light hackamore of braided horsehair. But, though he picked his own way, he remained true to the direction which had been given to him, as though from the first he had seen the low, sprawling line of the ranch house with the spider-webbing of corral fences near it.

As he went over a winding trail out of the clean brown of the sun-burned mountain slopes and into the dry mauve of the desert, Jim Silver took heed of the grazing cattle, true desert types rather roached of back and down of head; lean, active creatures which could forage actively and use their legs to go from pasture to water, even at a gallop. Off to the left, four or five miles from the house, he saw the sheen of a body of water where the spring rains had been dammed up in a "tank," and trailing out of the distance were dust clouds



that rapidly approached the lake. Those were cattle on the run for moisture, and the sight of them at once told Silver the dimensions of the Wycombe ranch.

As far as the eye could reach, all of this land belonged to Steve Wycombe, and, no matter how many acres were needed to support a cow, there was enough mileage to give pasturage to a big herd. Therefore, one important fact was assured—that Wycombe had enough money to be in big trouble. For, if money is the root of all trouble, the size of the root is apt to gauge the size of the trouble.

The hands of big Jim Silver slid up inside his coat and touched the handles of the two oversize Colts which hung in spring holsters under the pits of his arms. He glanced down, also, at the Winchester which fitted into the saddle holster that sloped down under his right knee.

The ranch house was split into two wings, one section to give bunks for the hired hands, and the other for the occupancy of the owner; the kitchen was in the small link that joined the two. A windmill, whirring, moaning, clanking, arose on great skeleton legs of iron.

The possibility of digging down to water was enough to explain the presence of the house on this site. As he came closer, Silver could hear the plumping sound of the stream as it fell with a regular pulsation into the galvanized-iron tank near the mill. He thought instinctively of the days of calm when that wheel would not turn and when the long-handled pump would have to be used instead. Just inside the first corral there was a long line of troughs. If the tanks that held spring rain went dry, the cattle could be watered—in part, at least—from these troughs.

Silver went into that corral and slipped the hackamore off the head of the stallion. Parade was instantly eye-deep in the sparkle of the water. Silver watched the boluses of water glide rapidly down the throat of the horse. Again and again the dripping head of the horse was tossed up so that he could look around him, certain proof that he had known what it meant to run wild and fend for himself.

Silver put his hand on the neck of the horse, smiling, and after that Parade drank steadily, with eyes at peace, switching his tail and shrinking his hide to get off the flies that came swarming. As he finished drinking, the door of the house jerked open. A man with a pearl-gray sombrero on the back of his head, wearing a bright-yellow shirt and an unbuttoned vest, stood on the threshold for an instant; then he shouted, "Silver! Hi!" and came hurrying.

That was Steve Wycombe. Silver, watching him, knew that he could have remembered the man by the swagger of his walk and the cant of his head. A woman appeared in the dimness of the interior of the kitchen, from the door of which Wycombe had gone out. She stood close enough to the sunshine for Silver to see that her hair was bright and that her face was young. Then she closed the door.

Perhaps she was Mrs. Steve Wycombe, poor girl!

Wycombe came up with his head to one side, nodding, smiling. He had projecting upper teeth so that he could only grin broadly with a great flash of the teeth or else hang his upper lip in a crooked sneer. The grin was very broad, just now.

There is something about buckteeth that makes a man look young and innocent. That was the appearance of

Wycombe, in the main, except that his eyes could be pocketed up in wrinkles that were not always lines of mirth. He was not bad-looking, but he wore his hat like a tough, and he had his blond hair combed down over his forehead so that he had to keep tossing his head to throw back the lock out of his eyes.

"Old boy Jim Silver!" he said with emphasis.

He came up and took Silver's hand and held it through a long moment. He was one of those fellows who stand close when they speak to a man, and use their eyes up and down. That was the way he scanned Silver.

"You haven't shrunk any!" he said. "Come on in and put yourself outside a drink. I've got some seventeen-year-old rye. When I say seventeen, I don't mean seven. I'm glad to see you, you big steer!"

"I'm putting up the horse first," said Silver. "That the shed? Or do you keep all your saddle stock out?"

"That's the shed. Come along," answered Wycombe. "This is Parade, eh? He looks as though he could move. That's a shoulder! That's as fine a shoulder as I ever saw on a thoroughbred!"

"Watch yourself," said Jim Silver. "He'll take your arm out by the roots, if you don't."

"Savage, eh?" asked Wycombe. His step back was as swift as that of a dancer. The whole man became suddenly quick and light, and that reminded Silver of sundry unlucky fellows who had discovered the deftness of Wycombe's gun hand too late. Doctors were of very little use after Wycombe had made his play.

They put up the horse in the shed. Silver unsaddled Parade, rubbed him down with some big twists of straw, and selected the best hay he could find in the mow of the shed. There were no oats; he poured crushed barley into the feed box.

"I don't know," commented Wycombe. "Take a slick horse like that, and it's like a slick woman. Needs a lot of caring for. I don't know that it's worthwhile. Take a mustang, you throw a rope and climb on and ride as far as you want. If the bronc is used up, throw it away; it doesn't cost anything."

"Parade will stand the rough use, too," answered Silver. "But a horse is like a gun. It's better clean."

"Yeah. But when you need a gun, you need it," observed Wycombe.

"Times when I've needed Parade," said Silver, smiling.

Wycombe looked at him with a sudden seriousness, his upper lip crookedly suspended on his buckteeth.

"You've been through it, all right," he said. "You've seen everything that a man can see."

He added, rather sharply: "You used to hate my heart. What about it, Jim?"

"We can all be wrong, Wycombe," said Silver coldly.

They went back to the house in a silence, with a shadow between them; but when they reached the place, Wycombe winked and nodded.

"Want you to see something," he said, and opened the door to the kitchen.

The girl with the bright hair sat in a corner by the window, peeling potatoes. She had one pan in her lap, another on the floor beside her. She stood up, holding the

pan between her elbows, smiling at the stranger the way Western girls are supposed to do. She had a good, straight smile, and her eyes were a stain of blue in her face. To Silver she seemed almost beautiful, which was as much as he seemed able to say about any woman.

"This is Esther Maxwell," said Wycombe. "Shake hands with her, Jim. She don't need an introduction to you. She knows about Jim Silver. Everybody knows about you. How big does he look to you, Esther?"

She kept right on smiling at Silver, as he stepped forward.

"My fingers are all sloppy from the potatoes. I can't shake hands," she said.

"How big does he look to you?" insisted Wycombe.

Silver glanced sidelong at his host.

"He looks so big," said the girl.

Wycombe, laughing, led the way into the next room, put his back against the door as he closed it, and winked and nodded at Silver.

"That doesn't wear the Wycombe brand, yet," he murmured, "but it's going to, boy! Pretty slick, eh? You see her dolled up for a dance and you see something. Works like a Chinaman, too."

He walked on, tapping himself on the chest, his teeth flashing.

"All for me, brother," he said.

He led the way into the next room.

"Office," he said. "All the papers and everything. Here's where little Steve works the brains; the cowboys have to work the hands."

He kept on laughing as Silver ran his glance over the square box of a room. There was one overstuffed chair in it that looked out of place, like a fur coat on a summer day.

"Sit down there while I crack open the hooch," said Wycombe. "It's going to open your eye for you, brother. But tell me first what you think of that."

He hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

"She's a pretty girl," said Silver.

"She's pretty and she's handsome. She's a performer, is what she is. All mine, brother. All for me!"

He continued to chuckle as he took a bottle out of a cupboard and filled two whisky glasses. "Just take a sock at this," he said.

Silver tasted it with his eyes studiously aslant. He smiled in honor of that noble liquor, not of his host; then they drank together.

"Now what?" asked Silver. "This is good stuff. But now what?"

Wycombe slowly thrust out his lower jaw as he answered: "Two hombres want to lift my hair. Two real bad boys. They've already started on the way. They might arrive here any old time. But when they come, they're going to find your guns working for me!"

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## II. — THE FOREMAN

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Wycombe held the glass in his right hand with his forefinger pointing out from it at Silver, fixing him in place, preventing speech.

"Don't talk," he said. "Wait till I get finished. Don't say 'No' till you understand why you ought to say 'Yes'! You remember me out of the old days. But I'm different now. I'm no tinhorn gambler, these days. I can play for stakes. And what do you think that life is worth to a rich man?"

"You're handy with a gun," said Silver. "Take care of yourself."

"I'm handy. You bet, I'm handy. But I'm bright, too. I'm so bright that I know when the other fellow has the high hand. And two high hands are going to be sitting in against me, before long."

"How high?" asked Silver.

"Straight flushes!" said Wycombe.

Silver sat up in his chair a little.

"I'm all right in a fight, but I'm not that right," said Wycombe. "I know it, and they know it. That makes it bad. I know they can beat me, and they know it, too. None of us are in the dark. That's what makes it bad."

"That makes it bad," said Silver.

"They're coming for me with all the cards in the world," went on Wycombe, "and they think that they've got the pot already; but I'm switching things on 'em. They're going to find me sitting against their two straight flushes with a royal flush. And that's you!"



He kept on jabbing his forefinger in the direction of Silver.

"If you see white water ahead, take a trip," said Silver.

"For my part, I'm busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"I'm traveling."

"You are always traveling. Where?"

"Up the line," said Silver, with a vague gesture.

"No, you're not. I've got it in my pocket."

"What?"

"Your price."

"Perhaps you have," said Silver coldly.

"First, I've got you because you love a fight," said Wycombe. "I'm talking right out at you, you see? You love a fight for the fight's sake. A lot of people say that you're never in trouble till fools put you in it. But nobody ever killed your list without liking the feel of that last part of a second before the guns are going to be pulled. Answer me straight in the eyes. Do you like it? I mean, when the other fellow's eyes turn red, and he begins to show his teeth at you, and bunch his shoulders over, and his hands start working. Do you like that?"

Silver sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Go on with it," he said.

"Well, I'm going to hook you with the names of the hombres that are coming to lift my hair. Because, when you hear those names, your mouth is going to water. It's the sort of meat you like. It's high! The two of 'em are crooks from away back. They've both done their killings and plenty of 'em. They're stake runners. They start from scratch when it

comes to guns, and one of 'em is Morris Delgas. You know Delgas?"

"I know him," said Silver.

"He killed Rex Walters and Lefty Markham; those are about the best two he killed. But there's others."

"I know what Morrie Delgas has done," answered Silver.

"A nice fly for a trout to rise at, eh? But the other's a shade better, even. The other's that devil of a Harry Rutherford! I don't need to ask if you know that little drink of poison! It wouldn't be healthy for you not to know! A little left-handed streak of misery, is what he is. Some people say he's the slickest hand with a gun that ever fanned a Colt. That's what a lot of people say. I don't know. I'd back you against him. That's all I know. And the money I put down goes into your pocket. Listen to me, Silver. When I say money, I mean it. Big money."

Silver shook his head and stood up slowly.

"Hey!" cried Wycombe. "Don't act that way. Wait a minute. Listen."

"I don't want to listen," said Silver.

"Wait! I'm talking something like this—five thousand apiece. I know you, Jim. You're not small time. For each one of those hombres, five thousand bucks paid on the spot."

"I don't want it," said Silver.

A moment of silence struck between them. Silver heard the ticking of a clock that was not in the room. He heard the buzzing of a big bluebottle that circled around and around the room. He smelled the aromatic sharpness of hot varnish, and knew that his body was covered with sweat, also. Wycombe was staring at him.

"Have I banked on a lame horse? Have you lost your nerve?" whispered Wycombe.

Then his voice came out with a bang. "I said five thousand. I mean it. I'll give you five thousand on account, Jim! Those hombres mean to murder me, I tell you. I'll pay you five thousand advance just to be the bodyguard!"

"I don't want the money," said Silver.

"You mean," shouted Wycombe, "that you don't want any part of my game. You don't want me!"

Silver was silent. He knew that anything could happen now, and he was ready for it, looking fixedly into the eyes of Wycombe and watching the trembling of the upper lip that hung crookedly over the buckteeth.

"I've missed!" whispered Wycombe. He cried out suddenly: "Listen to me. I can't slip up. Listen to me, Jim. I've got ten thousand dollars right here in this room. It's yours!"

Silver shook his head. A whole storm of rage and darkness poured over the eyes of Wycombe. His body trembled. His mouth kept working vainly around the prominence of those big front teeth.

"All right," he said at last, and, turning on his heel, he walked out of the room.

Silver followed him, looking left and right as he stepped cautiously through each doorway. As he went toward the back of the house, he heard the voice of Wycombe ring out ahead of him:

"What the devil do you mean by coming up here and hanging around the kitchen? Get out on the range, where you belong. Foreman? You're no foreman. You're no good.

I've got a mind to fire you on the spot. I'm sick of the pretty face of you."

Silver, stepping into the kitchen, saw Wycombe in the middle of the floor, shaking his fist at a tall, brown-faced youth who stood with his sombrero in the tips of his fingers, his back to the door. On the floor he had just laid the quarters of a deer. Anger had marked the cheeks of this fellow with white, and pure rage was about to burst out of his lips when the girl intervened. She was behind the back of Wycombe, so that only Silver saw her frightened gesture of entreaty. Both hands remained for an instant pressed against her throat while her eyes talked to the foreman.

He took a great breath.

"I thought you folks might want some fresh venison, was all," said he.

He began to turn toward the door. It was very hard for him, Silver could see that, to swallow the string of insults that had just been poured at him. In a sense, Silver felt guilty, because it was plain that Wycombe felt himself enough of a gun fighter to handle this honest cow-puncher, and the wrath which he had accumulated during his interview with Silver was to be poured out now.

It was the girl who had stopped the retort that might have meant gunfire. And, if she had stopped it, most assuredly it had not been because her great concern was for Wycombe.

"I'm going to teach you," shouted Wycombe, beside himself with rage as he saw the other giving way, "I'm going to teach you that your place is out where—"

"Wait a minute, Wycombe," said Silver.