

Lone Star Stories

Speculative Fiction and Poetry

The Hangman Isn't Hanging

by Jay Lake

The Dunes south of the San Luís Valley is a death trap for white man and red alike. Only the hardiest and wiliest Adventurers can trade across them sands. Not Mormon nor Texian nor even them Russian bastards can track a man there neither. Only a right smart Injun or a Chinee witch doctor can take you down there. And them monsters in the sky, what goes without saying. But cross La Veta pass and there's the Wet Mountain valley, prettiest country God ever laid His finger on.

-- Journal of Jed "Spade" Wolters, mountain man, ca. 1850

Courtesy of the Founders' Collection of the Denver Temple Library,
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Red Eyes Parker was leading a string of pack ponies two days north of the Burrista trading post at the far south end of the Wet Mountain Valley when they began to spook. Loaded down with ironwork and kitchenware, the ponies were louder than mission bells.

Parker cursed inventively in a mixture of French, Spanish and Ute. He halted to calm them one by one, stroking the muzzle of each pony and whispering the names of their mothers. Then he scanned the scrubby pines that surrounded the trail. There wasn't much underbrush but the lay of the land was sufficiently rough to hide an army of *Americanos*, *Mormonistas* or worse.

Eyes closed and mouth open he breathed deep. His ears brought him nothing. There should have been mountain bluebirds, scrub jays, woodpeckers -- this was not a quiet forest. His nose brought him...

A mix of rot and blood and cold bone. Something dead or dying.

Perhaps.

It was the "perhaps" that worried him.

Reluctantly, Parker hopped off of his horse Poquito, telling the mount to watch over the ponies. He took his axe and his crutch and followed the odor. Faint stirrings of breeze led him stumping up an embankment away from the pony line to a point where the smell was much stronger. He looked down, studying a ravine which opened on the far side of the ridge.

There was an angel amid the stones at the bottom. The black of its skin and wings blended with the shadows around it. Parker's hand flexed for his absent musket before he realized the creature was folded into an impossible position down there.

Angels could be slain. It had been done. But he'd never heard tell of someone fighting one of the white God's creatures to a standstill

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