

Title

***The Golden Trail***

***By***

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## ***About this eBook***

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## ***The Golden Trail***

### ***I.***

The pool in the creek was still cloudy when the ranger came to it. Someone had passed through within the last few minutes. The current was not very swift and the pool was slow in clearing. The bandit was only a little way ahead of him, if he was still on the bandit's trail.

"Bud" Jones, corporal in Company F, Texas Rangers, checked his roan, Pepper, and allowed it to drink before he started to cross the creek. He sat upright and alert in the saddle, a soldierly looking figure in his ranger equipment.

There was no attempt at regular uniform, but all the troop wore similar sombreros and high-heeled boots with Mexican spurs. All of them wore double-belts of cartridges for six-gun and rifle, and every trooper balanced his revolver at his right hip with the bowie knife on his left. Bud Jones was the youngest member of the troop and its latest recruit, although he was a corporal, promoted for valor and efficiency.

Now he was trailing a man named Morrissey - "Black" Morrissey - leader of a gang of bandits who were on the rangers' list but who had, so far, by frequent moves, dodged arrest. The ranger service was slowly but inevitably rounding up the western section of the State of Texas, ridding it of undesirables and rendering it fit for settlement by worthy citizens.

Some of the outlaws had been shot, others strung up and left swinging to sturdy oaks in the towns where they had been tried and found guilty. Some had been driven beyond the Rio Grande to seek refuge in Mexico.

But Morrissey and his outfit had remained at large. They were known to have a hideout somewhere, but the rangers had never been able to obtain any definite information as to its whereabouts in the mountain fastnesses.

Bud believed it was not far from Thunder Creek. He hoped that the man he was following - he was pretty sure that it was Morrissey himself - was heading back for this hiding place. It was very likely that there would be other members of the gang there, at any time.

But such odds stimulated Bud rather than checked him. If he had a fault it was what his captain termed his "excess of initiative." Without doubt it often led Bud into difficult situations, but so far he had always extricated himself, though not always without honorable wounds, the scars of which both he and Pepper bore.

Morrissey's last crime had been the daring holdup of a stage and the looting of the express box that held gold specie consigned to the bank at Cedarville. Besides the robbery, murder had been committed, wanton and unnecessary. The driver had held up his hands at Morrissey's command, but the express messenger had made an attempt to get his weapon, checking it when he saw that Morrissey had himself and the driver, both on the front seat, covered.

From then on he had made no resistance but had obeyed the bandit's orders to haul out the box. He had attempted no more than his duty, but his first action seemed to have enraged the outlaw.

After taking from the two passengers all that they had in jewelry and money, he put the gold coin in a gunny sack which, after tying it at the mouth with a leather string, he tied again so as to divide it into two compartments. He flung the heavy, jingling burden across his saddle bow, resting in front of him as he mounted, all the time covering the defenseless occupants of the stage, whom he had lined up on one side of the vehicle, hands above their heads, their weapons thrown into the heavy brush. At the last moment he had cursed the messenger for trying to protect the treasure and deliberately shot him between the eyes.

By the time word got to the rangers' camp, Morrissey had a good start. Bud was detailed for the job by Captain Halstead. Pepper, like the horses of all the troop, superior to any other mounts in the vicinity, began to cut down that lead as soon as Bud had reached the scene of the crime and picked up the sign.

It was as clear to him as the printed words in a book. Morrissey had made no attempt to hide his trail in the beginning, but had evidently urged his horse to top speed. Long before the tracks brought Bud to the mountain road he knew that the outlaw's horse was tiring rapidly.

Not only had it been pushed to its utmost effort through a rough country, but it was carrying extra weight, dead weight in the sack of looted gold. The messenger had not known the exact amount in the locked box. That could not be ascertained until the banking concerns were reached, and Bud had wasted no time in starting the pursuit.

Judging from previous shipments there might be anywhere between twenty and fifty thousand dollars in gold coin. The probability was that the bandit was carrying at least fifty pounds of the precious metal, a serious handicap.

There had been a good deal of travel on the mountain road, and much of it was recent. One set of tracks turned off to follow a trail down to where Bud now sat in his saddle while Pepper wisely slaked his thirst, drinking with caution, hot and blown from the fast and toilsome pursuit.

There had been nothing particularly distinguishing about the tracks. They were those of a shod horse, of a tired horse going with a shortened stride, but that was all. Other tracks on the mountain road looked much the same. The road led to a ford. The creek could also be crossed at this pool. Bud was acting on a hunch that was not without logical basis.

Morrissey would have seen, or known beforehand, that the mountain road was well traveled. In one way, through confusion of tracks, this would aid him; in another, through the possibility of his being met or otherwise recognized, it imperiled him. He had undoubtedly deliberately meant to mix up his sign, but Bud believed that he would take the first opportunity of a side trail.

His hunch told him that Morrissey had crossed the creek, warned him that even now the bandit murderer might be watching him from the thick cover of the woods, waiting to put a bullet into him from ambush.