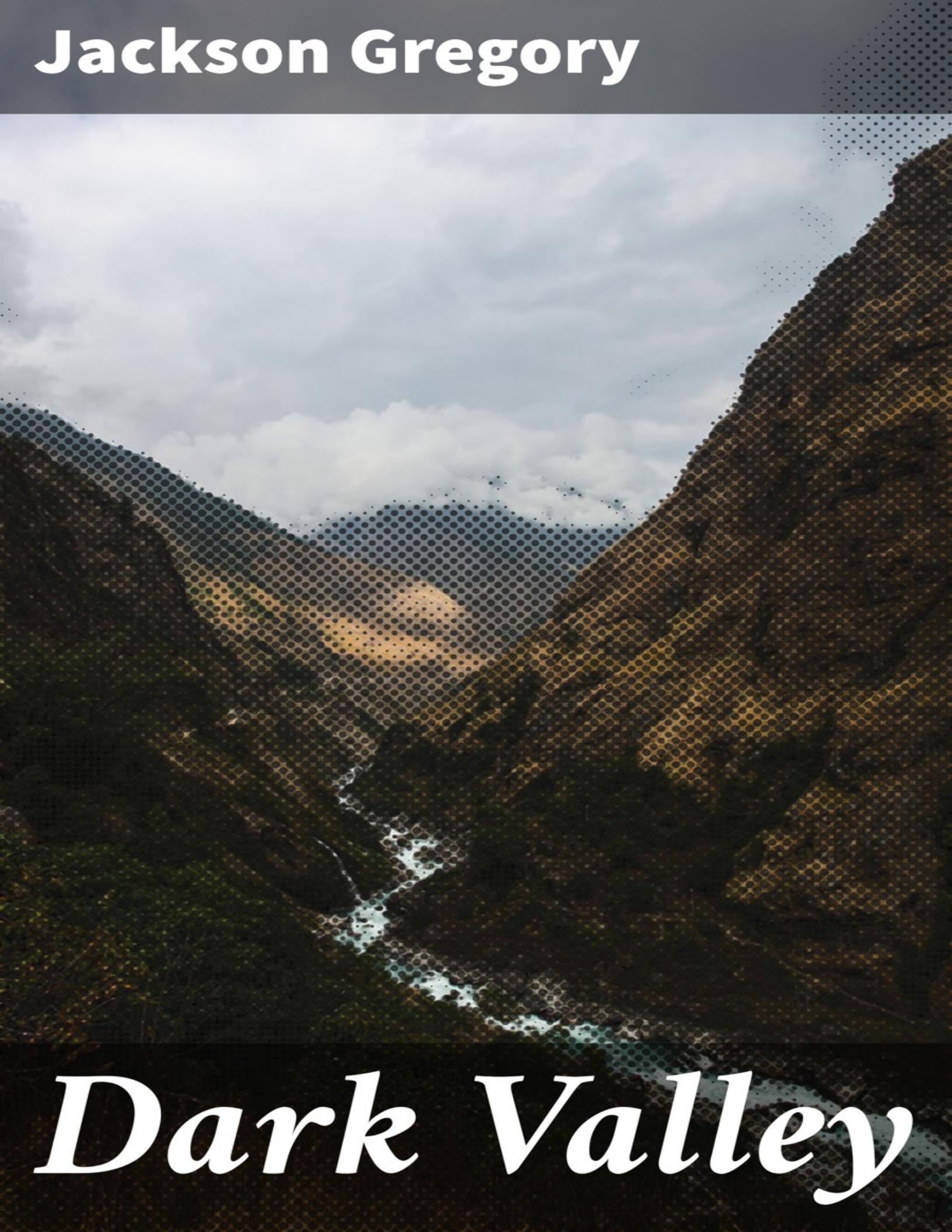


Jackson Gregory

A landscape photograph of a valley with mountains and a river, serving as the background for the book cover.

Dark Valley

Jackson Gregory

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Twice within forty-eight hours the lone rider, coming up like a whirlwind for dust and speed from somewhere in the farther southwest, had been asked his name—and this was in a country and at a time when it was far from customary to put personal questions to a stranger.

The first occasion had been at the little cow town of Agua Verde. He had tarried there over night. After stabling his horses—he rode into town on a glorious red-bay stallion, the most superb piece of horse flesh Agua Verde had ever seen, and was followed by two led relief horses, likewise high-headed, savage-eyed and clean of line—he ate hungrily at the lunch counter, then repaired to the Green Water saloon. Within twenty minutes he had joined four men playing stud-poker. Within another twenty minutes he had proved himself the hardest player of the lot, and all played hard and fast, with an outer though perhaps deceptive semblance of recklessness. The men with whom he played called one another familiarly Al and Smoky and Gaucho and Temlock. The time came when one of them, quite friendly about it, asked:

“An’ you, Stranger, what’ll we call you?”

The stranger stared at him with a pair of intensely black eyes which were not in the least friendly. He employed the long fingers of a brown muscular hand to sharpen the already needle-pointed ends of a small mustache that was as black as his eyes, and took so long in answering that it

began to seem that he wasn't going to answer at all. But finally he said, in an even, low-toned voice which had spoken only when necessary tonight and never above that hushed monotone:

"You can call me Willie, if that'll help any, or even Sitting Bull, or, say, Robinson Crusoe, and you won't even have to smile."

He used gold pieces for counters—fives, tens and twenties—and appeared to have an ample stock; an hour or so after midnight when the game broke up he went off to bed with considerably more gold than he had sat in with. He was out of town and away, none knew where, long before day had brought any other in Agua Verde awake.

The next night late he rode into the mountain town of Fiddler's Gulch. At the "hotel," so proclaimed in the drunken-looking, malformed letters on a split board over the door, he was handed a pencil and a dirty sheet of paper and requested to register.

The way the stranger looked down along his nose at the hotel keeper was like sighting along a rifle barrel. When he demanded curtly, "What the hell?" it was with reason. This was worse than asking a man casually what his name was. Here you were required to set it down in black and white, and it might be used against you.

"Sheriff's orders," he was told by a disgusted landlord. "Ol' Dan Westcott's a-gittin' an ol' man's notions, I reckon. Every hotel in Rincon County's got orders straight from him, an' if you know Dan, or ever heard about him, you'll likely know he's apt to raise seven kinds o' hell with any man that don't do things his way. Me, I tell him things is comin' to a

purely pass. It's unreasonable in the firs' place; it puts a hotel man to a lot of extra trouble; it's aimin' at a free American's constitutional rights, an', hell, Stranger, mos' folks can't write anyhow. You can, I'd say?"

The stranger, though he accepted pencil and paper in a way which smacked of reluctance, stood scowling at the two a long while as though hesitating to commit himself in any way; a man might have looked like that if he couldn't remember his name or didn't know how to spell it. Finally he muttered something under his breath and wrote in a hurrying scrawl that it would take a better man than his host to read:

"Bolt Haveril. From Texas."

In his room he lay down with his boots on, smoked and stared frowningly at the cracked ceiling for a couple of hours. He removed his boots only to make his way noiselessly downstairs. No one saw or heard him go.

Later he was seen and talked with by a couple of cowboys on the southern slopes on the Big Bear Mountains when he hailed them to ask a question. It appeared he had ridden out of country familiar to him; he wanted to know how to get to Dark Valley.

They looked him over from the peaked crown of his hat to the spurs on his boot heels; they took full stock of the gallant red-bay stallion he rode, the two scarcely less splendid horses he led, the gun he wore low at his side and the carbine across his saddle, and they told him what he wanted to know. He was still a good fifty-sixty mile from Dark Valley, and he'd think it a lot longer before he got there, as the going got tougher all the way; it was up yonder

where the mountain tops were mistily purple against the sky. And the younger of the two cowboys added:

“They don’t welcome strangers much in the Valley. Me, if I was you, unless I was a friend of Duke Morgan’s, I’d pick me somewhere else to go.”

The man who had signed himself Bolt Haveril from Texas, nodded and rode on. The two cowboys continued on their way but now and then turned to look back until he was over the ridge; in Fiddler’s Gulch they reported him to Sheriff Dan Westcott. Old Dan asked his questions so shrewdly that by the time they were answered he had a pretty fair daguerreotype of the lone rider. He scratched a leathery jaw, tugged at a snow-white walrus mustache, spat at a horn toad scurrying to cover as though it had read the look in his eye, and admitted complacently:

“I’m sort of glad he’s put most of Rincon County behind him, and I’m sort of damn gladder I didn’t happen to meet up with him. Pleasant sort of a cuss, wasn’t he?”

“Friendly as a rattlesnake,” said the younger cowhand. Then, eager with youth, he asked, “He was the feller all right that you was lookin’ for—that Mex gent they called Don Diablo. Wasn’t he, Dan?”

“Reckon,” said Dan, while the older cowboy regarded him curiously, thinking that the sheriff might be aging after all, as some said, seeing how he inclined to garrulosity today. “Reckon,” repeated Dan. “Passed this way yestiddy; stayed here over night ’nd crept out with nobody telling him *adiós*. Signed himself Bolt Haveril, from Texas. Well, at that he might of signed himself Jeff Davis.”

"Now what?" demanded the young cowboy. "Seems like he's headed for Dark Valley, an' the lower end of Dark Valley's in Rincon County, ain't it, Dan? Goin' after him?"

"Reckon," said Dan Westcott, and looked sly. He was sly, a seasoned old fox, as all who had cause to know him agreed. "But, being it's late now, I won't start until sun up. Likewise I'm oiling up my old bear rifle tonight, being as it's the longest-range shooting iron in the county, so's when me and this *hombre* meet up it'll be with plenty room between us. And now, as the feller says, seems like I've paid you back in full for all the information I've extracted out'n you, and in case there's any more knowledge you're craving, you know the way to Dark Valley."

"No more cravin', Dan," grinned the young cowboy. "From what I hear, Dark Valley's easy enough to find, but it's something sort of diff'rent findin' your way out ag'in! S'long, Dan. An' while you're oilin' up your ol' bear gun, better brighten up your sights a speck."

"Reckon," said Dan. "S' long."

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Bolt Haveril rode hard all that day, changing his saddle several times with a mind to saving his horses, sparing the bright red stallion especially, but seeming to have no thought to spare himself. From every rise he turned to look back, his eyes narrowed, hard, watchful; he was suspicious too of the wild country which he was penetrating so deeply. Most of all his vigilance had to do with the rugged uplands straight ahead, the lofty blue spires which cast their shadows down into the somber confines of Dark Valley.

One would have said that here passed a man who rode full tilt into some great hazard, who knew it and yet only pressed on the harder for his knowledge. Down yonder, sweeping upward from the gently sloping country on this nether side of Fiddler's Gulch, he had given the impression of a man in rapid flight from something following on behind, dogging him—Sheriff Dan Westcott, perhaps, or in any case the law which he represented. That impression at no time ceased to emanate from his carriage, for he never gave over those searching backward glances, but something else and new was added. It was as though he was not only driven but pulled; as though the impatient haste which marked his flight was a twin with that other haste which made him seem eager to hurl himself along into some bright danger.

It was only dusk in the mountains when he came to the high plateau, knife-edged in steep cliffs on one side, which

marked the southwestern rim of Dark Valley. And all at once and for the first time his haste gave place to an idling sort of leisureliness. He stopped and threw down his bed-roll near a creek which, a hundred paces from where he elected to camp, spilled itself down in a feathery cascade some hundreds of feet into the valley below. He rubbed down each of his three horses and seemed to enjoy the task; he watered them, watched one after another roll luxuriously, gave each a handful of oats, staked them out to graze and then proceeded unhurriedly about his own affair of creature comfort.

He made his fire close to the brook. With no breeze blowing, with the air as still as unstable air can ever be, his smoke stood up like a gray tenuous column against the slowly purpling sky; it could be seen for miles. He placed an iron skillet on three convenient stones; he carved thick slices of bacon and set them frying; he dug out of his kit a black iron pot which would hold twice as much as your two cupped hands, and made coffee in it. And between whiles he found time to roll a cigarette and squat on his high heels and sing to himself. He sang like a man crooning a lullaby. You would have thought him at peace. It was all about a little white dove with tender red feet that flew in at his window—first the window of his house, then the window of his heart, for the little white dove came from Her. "*La palomita de mi Morena!*"

The inflection which he gave the Spanish words was pure Mexican. A stranger would have found it hard to decide whether he was Mexican or American. His speech down there in Agua Verde and again with the cowboys on the

flank of the mountain sounded like that of an American from Texas. His mustache was of an order popular below the border; when he touched up the ends, as he seemed to have a fondness for doing, now and then he revealed in its entirety a small new moon of a scar, knife-made.

Having dined as languorously easeful on the bank of the stream as an ancient Roman on his cushioned couch, he constructed a slender *cigarillo* of some rich, black tobacco penciled into a thin white paper, and slouched over to the cliff edge to look down into the valley. Just then he was as Mexican as Santa Ana.

Dark Valley was well named. It was a deep-cleft place which saw a deal more of shadow than of sun, a somehow ominous and sinister long, crooked and in spots dankly depressing gorge, cliff-bound. From where Señor Bolt Haveril stood one could see but the lower, narrower end of it at all distinctly, so did its writhings about rocky promontory and abutment conceal its other portions. A riotous small torrent of a river, obscured mostly by overhanging alder and aspen and mountain red willow, crookedly traced the crooked valley's entire length, to slip away unseen through a dark ravine; it had entered the upper valley, also unseen from here, by spilling down in wild, ever windblown cascades from a higher pass. Here and there the valley was so narrow that two men could have called back and forth to each other from the tops of the cliff walls, but there were also widenings affording pasture lands and even richly fertile small meadows, high in grass and field flowers and, where infrequently cultivated, in garden crops.

Bolt Haveril stood some few brooding moments, his tall black sombrero swung from a finger by its chin strap, the evening breeze ruffling his black hair, his cigarette dangling and his eyes as somber as the dark valley so far below him. He gave a hitch to his belt, sagging with its low-slung gun, turned his back on all this and returned to his camp site. He pulled off his boots, put down a piece of grimy canvas, spread a gray blanket on that, used his saddle for a pillow, rolled himself into his coverings like a cigarette, pulled his hat low over his eyes and lay still.

In the dawn he awoke and stretched and lay regarding the pale apple-green of a stretch of sky through the pines; he watched it turn to green-gold, then to the gayer, brighter hues of full sunup. Presently into the clean morning sky stood the high column of his campfire smoke, frankly unhidden like last night's. Breakfast unhurriedly done, he took up his carbine and, before saddling, turned back on foot the way he had come yesterday.

And now again he moved guardedly, like a man sensing danger all about him. Some three or four hundred yards along the return trail was a nest of big boulders through which he had ridden last night. Stooping his tall form and running swiftly across the open space intervening, he came to a stop behind the rocky barrier and peered forth down trail as though not only suspicious of pursuit but inclined to be confident of it. Keeping his rangy body pretty well concealed, though the high crown of his sombrero and the nose of his rifle did briefly show themselves over the top of a boulder, he prepared to wait, as patient as a cat that has already smelled its mouse.

The mouse in this case, however, was a fox—a long-legged, two-legged, gray old Rincon County fox known across a pretty wide sweep of territory as Sheriff Dan Westcott. He showed up, advancing cautiously and on foot himself, quite like Señor Bolt Haveril in that, on the farther rim of an opening in the Bear Mountain timber like the one across which Bolt Haveril had so recently advanced, and he too came to a halt behind the convenient barricade offered by a fallen pine. That he had seen the smoke of Bolt Haveril's fire was unquestioned; Dan Westcott was far too vigilant, far too shrewd-eyed to have missed it.

The two men spied each other at almost the same instant. The sheriff, with his long-range rifle raised threateningly, shouted a shrill command:

"Hi there, you! I got the drop on you! Come out peaceable or I'll blow your damn' head off!"

"*Que quiere usted, Señor?*" the other called back to him. "W'at you say? Who you want?"

"You, damn you, that's who I want! A feller that they call Don Diablo, down beyond Laredo."

The man in the big sombrero behind the rocks laughed at that.

"Me, I'm Bolt Haveril, from Texas," he called back. "American, not Mex. You got the wrong man, pardner."

"Like hell, I have!" shouted old Dan. "You're Don Diablo, real name Juan Morada, all right, and you're coming along with me—"

The carbine, as steady as the rock itself on which it rested, made answer for its owner and cut the sheriff's words short off. It was a neat piece of shooting, all things

considered, for the early light was tricky among the pines and there were splotches of sun quivering among shadows which seemed to breathe like live things; though the bullet left Dan Westcott unscathed it carried his hat off his head with a hole drilled through the crown.

A yell burst from the old sheriff as he leaped to better cover:

“You danged long-eared jackass! You come damn’ near nailing me that shot, don’t you know it? Now—now jus’ suppose you take this!”

Thereafter no words were squandered. Dan Westcott cut loose with a string of bullets which screamed as close to the man behind the rocks as any man could listen to with the least pleasure. There had been a flash of white teeth, a broad and even good-humored sort of grin with a touch of sheer diablerie about it when Bolt Haveril had shot off the sheriff’s hat; there was no more grinning as Dan’s flying lead came so uncomfortably close. For ten minutes the two alternately held their fire, to peer out guardedly, and blazed away. At the end of that time, with a good dozen shots fired on each side, the duel came to an abrupt end.

Neither man made any attempt to assure himself that any of his many bullets had done the work for which bullets are made. Old Dan Westcott said to himself smugly, “Well, that job’s done,” and on all fours crept back among the pines, getting to his feet only when safely away, hastening back to his horse and riding again southward. He didn’t so much as turn to look over his shoulder.

The other man emulated Dan Westcott. He went to his horses, saddled and made his pack, mounted and rode

north toward the upper end of Dark Valley. He went slowly, frequently abandoning the dim trail to ride circuitously through the trees and buck brush, and was again the man of yesterday in that he was forever peering into shadowy places, glancing back over his shoulder, keeping a hard brown hand close to the grip of a belt gun. Always he kept Dark Valley at one side, a sheer-dizzy drop below; at times he rode close to the cliff tops, at other times, seeking the more solitary and more devious way, he was as far as half a mile from it. When he had traveled a little more than half way between points marking the valley's lower and upper ends, he gave over looking behind him; he said curtly to the red stallion:

"Well Daybreak, we ought to be out of Rincon County by now and getting into Juarez County. Happens every county has got its own sheriff; it's Dave Heffinger up this way. They say he favors a sawed-off shotgun loaded to the muzzle with buckshot."

He rode so slowly that the stallion Daybreak, supercharged with fierce energy, was in a lather from chafing restiveness; he champed his restraining bit and, save for the firm hand on his reins, would have jerked his head around many the time to snap with bared teeth at his master's leg. The other horses, the smoky roan and the sorrel, were also fretful from restraint, wetter with perspiration than if they had had their morning run. But the rider fought the three of them down to slow progress and gave every appearance of treating Juarez County and its lawful overlord, Dave Heffinger, with respect equal to that he had observed toward Rincon County and Dan Westcott.

He came abreast of High Gap, the main pass leading down into the somber deeps of Dark Valley, and to the first fence he had seen. Here, too, he came of a sudden on a road that was less a road than a winding clear-way through the pines, gouged with two wheel ruts. He gave no evidence of any intention to turn into this road, down toward the padlocked gate vaguely glimpsed through a screen of laurels, but was pushing on toward a brushy mountain flank above when a shout rang out, commanding him:

"Get your hands up, Don Diablo! I've got you covered with both barrels! If you start filling your hand I'll blow you clean to hell!"

Instead of filling his hand or doing the other thing, namely lifting both hands, empty, Bolt Haveril promptly elected a third line of action. As he dropped his carbine he pitched headlong out of the saddle, and the hidden shotgun roared—both barrels together making a reverberating thunder in the rocky defiles of the mountains. Yet it remained that a second time that morning Bolt Haveril went unscathed. He struck the ground rolling and was still rolling when he brought up against the padlocked gate under the laurels. As if of its own volition an old walnut-gripped forty-five had got into his hand; he saw a puff of white smoke drifting lazily away and started shooting.

And then an odd thing happened, the sort of thing which folk, for lack of a better name, term a coincidence. He caught a glimpse of a man's hat—a new pearl-gray Stetson this time—and, though the man who wore it got safe away that day without a bullet through his head, still the hat of Dave Heffinger, sheriff of Juarez County, was ruined. And a

second time a sheriff let out a yell, this one throaty with rage.

The man crouching at the gate permitted himself a grin, one that twitched a pointed black mustache in such fashion that the small new moon of a scar flashed into full instead of semi-eclipsed evidence. But the grin vanished as swiftly as it had flashed into being. Close behind him, not three swinging paces away on the other side of the gate, was a third man, and he spoke now in a measured, deep-toned and peculiarly surly voice:

“Well, Stranger? What’s the trouble?”

Bolt Haveril didn’t turn. His eyes were still concerned with the patch of buck brush and the scattered rocks over which the white puff of smoke had drifted. But he answered.

“Trouble?” he shot back, and sounded no less surly. “Look at my horses! Stamped, the three of ‘em! And you, whoever the hell you are, if you think I like walking, you’re crazy!”

The newcomer into his scheme of things snorted. Just then came another shout from the man lying hidden in the buck brush.

“Throw your gun, you down there by the gate, and come along with both hands high, or you’re a dead rooster. Me, I’m the law up here, and I c’n see you and—”

Bolt Haveril lifted his gun, but the man behind him said commandingly, “Hold it!” and then raised his voice to call out, “That you, Heffinger?”

“You’re damn right it’s me!” Heffinger shouted back at him. “And you, Morgan, keep out of this. Which Morgan are you, anyhow? Duke?”

"No. I'm not Duke Morgan—"

"Budge Morgan, then! Anyhow—"

"You listen to me, Dave Heffinger!" roared the unseen Budge Morgan. "You're getting too damn' close to Dark Valley and you better know it! Ain't you got it through your head yet that the end of your prowling territory's more'n a mile off from this line fence?"

There was a silence. Then the sheriff said angrily:

"One of these days, Budge Morgan, I'll have me your hide, along with some more Morgan hides, nailed to my barn door!"

"You'd never last long enough to see my hide dry out in a summer sun, Dave," retorted Budge Morgan. He in his turn grew silent a moment; then he called out to ask: "Who is this *hombre* anyhow? What do you want him for?"

"Hell!" shouted Heffinger. "He's that dirty greaser that thinks he's king down on the border, Don Diablo, that's who!"

The gun in the wanted man's hand cut loose with a string of bullets.

"You're a liar, Heffinger," he yelled as he fired. "Me, I'm Bolt Haveril, from Texas."

A hand reached through the gate and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Leather your gun and keep your mouth shut," said Budge Morgan. "Me, I'll step out and have a word with this damfool sheriff. He's off his stamping grounds and he'd better know it."

III

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Budge Morgan put a key into the padlock, opened the gate and went swinging along long-stridedly, a big, black-bearded ruffianly looking man, to a meeting with the sheriff of Juarez County. Bolt Haveril stood up; his own peculiar brand of satisfied smile brought the white crescent of a scar out into the clear like its prototype escaping from under a black cloud.

This time that sudden flashing out of the little new moon might have been construed a romantic omen. He heard a voice, one that had never rung its charges in his ear before, close behind him; and, instantly, if for only an instant, forgetting both Morgan and the sheriff, he whirled about. It was a hushed voice, a girl's, faltering and faint in his hearing yet disturbingly musical.

“I—I don’t know who or what you are,” she said hurriedly scarcely above a whisper. “There’s no time for me to ask, for you to answer, for me to tell you anything. The others are coming—I know they won’t let you go away without taking you to Duke. If you are in the valley tonight—try to meet me, late, at the bridge below the waterfall—”

It was a plea and a command. He got scarcely more than a fleeting glimpse of the girl, so swift was her withdrawal, but his senses were very alert at that moment and registered details sharply. The outstanding impression was one of a new kind of endearing beauty all enwrapped in the mysterious folds of contradictions. Just as at one time she

both begged and dictated, so did she somehow convey to his understanding that she was desperate yet courageous, in despair yet striving to weave despair itself into the texture of hope, that it was in her to be as haughty as a lovely sylvan princess and as soft and yielding as the princess's milkmaid. Then those "others" of whom she spoke, more men from the Morgans' valley, came around a bend of the dark, steep, winding road under the laurels, and he lost sight of her. Lost thought of her, too, as he turned to confront the three stalwart, massive-shouldered young fellows—Morgans all, he judged them, from their build and carriage, from the coarse black hair and dark skin, from the not unhandsome features, from the savage blue eyes. They were demanding of him all at once:

"What's up— What's going on here?— Who the hell are you?"

He sighted down along his nose at them; all were inches shorter than himself and also he stood on higher ground with the road coming up from the shadowy ravine so steeply to the gate. They were armed and looked truculent; he had his gun in his hand and merely looked dangerous. He answered, not in the least hastening, tending rather to linger on his few words almost with an insolent drawl:

"Me, I'm Bolt Haveril, from Texas. Right up there in the bushes is the sheriff of Juarez County. He mistook me for some old *compañero* of his and cut loose on me. A man you might know—calls himself Budge Morgan—has stepped up there to chat it out with him." While speaking he showed them how a man could roll a cigarette with one hand, a

lovely, lost, and all but forgotten art. "Got a match, one of you boys?" he asked.

Then he saw the girl where she stood partly screened by the leaves of the laurel tree on the roadside bank; her face remained a disturbing mystery under the wide droopy brim of her straw hat. One of the newcomers at the gate saw her an instant first; it was his words to her that drew Bolt Haveril's eyes her way.

"Oh, hello Lady," said one of the three. "You here? Come along with Budge?"

"Yes, Tilford," said Lady. "We heard the shots and hurried."

Another of the three asked swiftly:

"This man here, who is he?"

"I don't know, Camden," she answered. "I don't know anything about him."

"We'll know a lot *pronto*," said Camden Morgan.

The third man spoke up sharply; he was the youngest of the lot but so much like them that Haveril made sure the three were brothers. This one said suddenly:

"Budge, he's up there having it out with that slinking damn sheriff. I'm going up there. What's he saying to Dave Heffinger anyhow? Budge is getting too big for his britches; if he thinks—"

"Keep your shirt on, Rance," said Tilford Morgan, and clapped a big hand restrainingly yet in no unfriendly fashion on his brother's shoulder. "We've all got orders right now to take orders off Budge; it might come in handy to remember that, Kid."

"Hell with orders and with Budge too, and with you, Til, if you try to tell me where to head in!"

He jerked away but, as Tilford only laughed at him, stood where he was. Orders in Dark Valley came straight from Duke Morgan and meant something. So Rance stood glowering and appearing to hesitate, yet not really hesitating at all because he was not yet the man, and perhaps never would be, to clash with the valley's dictator, his father, Duke Morgan.

Bolt Haveril had regarded the trio interestedly all this while, though now and then sparing a glance to the girl who had not stirred from her place under the laurels. Now, however, his attention was drawn from these to yet another man coming up along the overshadowed roadway, appearing around the bend in the road about which the others had come. From this man's appearance he judged that here at last was a man who was not a Morgan.

He was younger even than Rance Morgan, darker than any of them, unlike them in build, too, being very slender, with slenderness's catlike grace. He wore his dark hair long; his face was fine and narrow, an acetic face if a face can be that and frankly evil. There was a sort of sleek, sneering elegance about him; his boots were of carved reddish-brown leather, oiled and polished and kept free of dust; his belt was heavy with silver *conchas*; his gun was pearl-gripped; the big white silk scarf about his lean dark throat was knotted with foppish care.

Yet a Morgan he was, though those other Morgan men chose to consider him only a half-Morgan; that was because, though Duke sired the lot of them, the youngest, Sid

Morgan, was by another mother. She, when twenty years ago Duke Morgan had stolen her from her border home, bringing her into his valley to become his second consort, had been one of those startlingly lovely little animals of mixed Mexican-Indian blood who at wide-eyed fifteen are like little mystified dark angels. Sid Morgan, though as much Morgan as any of them, was also the son of the Southern Teresita.

He appeared to see the girl first of all, half hidden as she was in the laurels' shade. He greeted her with an odd taunting sort of gayety as vicious as the swish of a whiplash, having the trick of speaking his words laughingly yet nonetheless with a sting in them, calling to her in a voice as musically soft as ever sang sentimental ditties to a Mexican guitar:

“Oho, my little Cousin Lady is here already too! To be in at the kill? To see the dogs pull the gallant stag down? Or why, Lady? Maybe to make pretty eyes at some new and handsome stranger?”

As Lady stiffened, to regard him through narrowed, darkening eyes, there was nothing of the soft yieldingness of the milkmaid about her. Her lips, berry-red from youth and health and vigor and the outdoor life she led, opened for a swift retort, but she checked herself, lowered the dusky fringes of her lashes like one drawing down the window shades against an unwelcome sight, and thus did her best to eliminate Sid Morgan from her scheme of things.

He stood a moment chuckling and regarding her as though she amused him mightily, then lounged on upgrade and to the gate.

"Is this the *hombre* all the shooting was about?" he asked, turning the impertinent scrutiny of his now lazy and always mocking eyes on Bolt Haveril.

No one answered. Bolt Haveril, as watchful as a cat, not to miss so much as the flick of an eyelid of any of them, saw in a flash that all was not loving harmony in this mountain fastness of the Morgans. This languidly swaggering boy hated the girl with all the passionate hate of his badly mixed bloods. She loathed him. And, now that he spoke to the trio at the gate and none answered, Haveril saw that between them and the dark, slenderly devilish Sid Morgan there was a bristling resentment like a high, spiked wall.

Under Sid Morgan's almost paper-thin nostrils was the sketch of a tiny black mustache; it looked like a brief line drawn by a heavy-leaded pencil. He fingered it thoughtfully, was contented with a moment's silence, then spoke again. This time he addressed one man in particular, singling out Tilford Morgan, saying quietly:

"Tell me, Til. Is this the man all the shooting was about a couple of hours ago, and again just now?"

"Seems like it," answered Tilford, as curt with Sid as he had been genial with Rance.

"Who was shooting it out with him the first time?" Sid asked. "Old Dan Westcott?"

"You know as much as I do about that, Sid," said Tilford.

"And just now?"

"He says it's Dave Heffinger."

"Where's Heffinger now?"

"Up there in the brush somewhere, I guess."

"Where's Budge?"

"With Heffinger. Talking to him."

"Dave Heffinger's got his nerve," observed Sid Morgan, still fingering his thin black line of down, still thoughtful. "You'd think by this time he'd know better than to stick his nose into goings-on this close to the Valley."

This was no direct question and Tilford let it go without remark. Sid turned his attention to Bolt Haveril.

"Who is this *hombre*?"

"He says he's Bolt Haveril, from Texas."

Sid addressed Bolt Haveril then, speaking swiftly and in Spanish. What he said was, "You're Don Diablo, that's who you are, my fine friend; and right now, on the jump to save your hide, you are between the sheriff of Rincon and the sheriff of Juarez, like a nut that's going to crack wide open in the jaws of a nutcracker."

"Talking to me?" returned Bolt Haveril coolly. "Put it in English and maybe I can understand you."

Sid had, as one would know to look at him, a peculiarly nasty, sneering sort of quiet laugh.

"Don't understand Spanish, huh? Not a Durango Mexican to begin with, lately a border bandit?"

"Me? American, Texan. A rancher down on the Rio Grande."

Sid could be smilingly thoughtful.

"You look like a Mexican, all right."

Bolt Haveril shook his head and seemed as thoughtful as Sid had ever been.

"You get fooled by the looks sometimes," he said gravely. "Me, I've seen a thing that looked like a cross between a skunk and a snake, but it had two legs and a fuzz that

looked like some day it might grow up to be a mustache, so maybe the thing was some kind of a human."

"If you want to get killed," cried Sid hotly, "if you want to start anything—"

"You came mighty close calling me a liar just now," said Bolt Haveril. "Most places, a man does that just to start a fight, so I got the notion that might be what you're craving. Me, I'm peaceable by nature, likewise accommodating. Whatever you say, Sid, goes with me and goes fine."

"You're crazy! With the four of us here—"

"Shucks!" That revealing grin of Bolt Haveril's showed itself fleetingly. "Why, man, I'm betting you ten to one, and you name the money, that not a one of these boys would interfere—not, anyhow, until they allowed plenty of time and chance to see you wiped out!"

A dark flush came into the boy's face; his right hand was nervous and restless and perhaps tempted and eager and hesitant, all at once. Finally he lifted it, fingering his upper lip.

"Even if you had the luck to kill me, you fool," he snapped angrily, "do you think they'd let you go? You'd be dragged before my father, Duke Morgan—you'd be better off dead before that! I am his favorite son—"

"You're a liar, Sid!" cried Camden Morgan. "And if that is a fighting word and you want to take it up, grab your gun and I'll shoot six holes through your rotten heart!"

"Cam, damn you, shut up!" roared Tilford, and glared at him, then turned to glare at Sid. "You, too, Sid. What's eating you, anyhow?" Then he added, his gust of rage blown away: "Cam, you and Rance poke along up there where