

***JACKSON
GREGORY***

***THE DESERT
VALLEY***

Jackson Gregory

The Desert Valley

EAN 8596547338932

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)

[Chapter XIV](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

[Chapter XVI](#)

[Chapter XVII](#)

[Chapter XIX](#)

[Chapter XX](#)

[Chapter XXI](#)

[Chapter XXII](#)

[Chapter XXIII](#)

[Chapter XXIV](#)

[Chapter XXV](#)

[Chapter XXVI](#)

Chapter I

[Table of Contents](#)

A Bluebird's Feather

In the dusk a pack-horse crested a low-lying sand-ridge, put up its head and sniffed, pushed forward eagerly, its nostrils twitching as it turned a little more toward the north, going straight toward the water-hole. The pack was slipping as far to one side as it had listed to the other half an hour ago; in the restraining rope there were a dozen intricate knots where one would have amply sufficed. The horse broke into a trot, blazing its own trail through the mesquite; a parcel slipped; the slack rope grew slacker because of the subsequent readjustment; half a dozen bundles dropped after the first. A voice, thin and irritable, shouted 'Whoa!' and the man in turn was briefly outlined against the pale sky as he scrambled up the ridge. He was a little man and plainly weary; he walked as though his boots hurt him; he carried a wide, new hat in one hand; the skin was peeling from his blistered face. From his other hand trailed a big handkerchief. He was perhaps fifty or sixty. He called 'Whoa!' again, and made what haste he could after his horse.

A moment later a second horse appeared against the sky, following the man, topping the ridge, passing on. In silhouette it appeared no normal animal but some weird monstrosity, a misshapen body covered everywhere with

odd wart-like excrescences. Close by, these unique growths resolved themselves into at least a score of canteens and water-bottles of many shapes and sizes, strung together with bits of rope. Undoubtedly the hand which had tied the other knots had constructed these. This horse in turn sniffed and went forward with a quickened pace.

Finally came the fourth figure of the procession. This was a girl. Like the man, she was booted; like him, she carried a broad hat in her hand. Here the similarity ended. She wore an outdoor costume, a little thing appropriate enough for her environment. And yet it was peculiarly appropriate to femininity. It disclosed the pleasing lines of a pretty figure. Her fatigue seemed less than the man's. Her youth was pronounced, assertive. She alone of the four paused more than an instant upon the slight eminence; she put back her head and looked up at the few stars that were shining; she listened to the hushed voice of the desert. She drew a scarf away from her neck and let the cooling air breathe upon her throat. The throat was round; no doubt it was soft and white, and, like her whole small self, seductively feminine.

Having communed with the night, the girl withdrew her gaze from the sky and hearkened to her companion. His voice, now remarkably eager and young for a man of his years, came to her clearly through the clumps of bushes.

'It is amazing, my dear! Positively. You never heard of such a thing. The horse, the tall, slender one, ran away, from me. I hastened in pursuit, calling to him to wait for me. It appeared that he had become suddenly refractory: they do that sometimes. I was going to reprimand him; I thought that it might be necessary to chastise him, as sometimes a

man must do to retain the mastery. But I stayed my hand. The animal had not run away at all! He actually knew what he was doing. He came straight here. And what do you think he discovered? What do you imagine brought him? You would never guess.'

'Water?' suggested the girl, coming on.

Something of the man's excitement had gone from his voice when he answered. He was like a child who has propounded a riddle that has been too readily guessed.

'How did you know?'

'I didn't know. But the horses must be thirsty. Of course they would go straight to water. Animals can smell it, can't they?'

'Can they?' He looked to her inquiringly when she stood at his side. 'It is amazing, nevertheless. Positively, my dear,' he added with a touch of dignity.

The two horses, side by side, were drinking noisily from a small depression into which the water oozed slowly. The girl watched them a moment abstractedly, sighed and sat down in the sand, her hands in her lap.

'Tired, Helen?' asked the man solicitously.

'Aren't you?' she returned. 'It has been a hard day, papa.'

'I am afraid it has been hard on you, my dear,' he admitted, as his eyes took stock of the drooping figure. 'But,' he added more cheerfully, 'we are getting somewhere, my girl; we are getting somewhere.'

'Are we?' she murmured to herself rather than for his ears. And when he demanded 'Eh?' she said hastily: 'Anyway, we are doing something. That is more fun than growing moss, even if we never succeed.'

'I tell you,' he declared forensically, lifting his hand for a gesture, 'I know! Haven't I demonstrated the infallibility of my line of action? If a man wants to—to gather cherries, let him go to a cherry tree; if he seeks pearls, let him find out the favourite habitat of the pearl oyster; if he desires a—a hat, let him go to the hatter's. It is the simplest thing in the world, though fools have woven mystery and difficulty about it. Now——'

'Yes, pops.' Helen sighed again and saw wisdom in rising to her feet. 'If you will begin unpacking I'll make our beds. And I'll get the fire started.'

'We can dispense with the fire,' he told her, setting to work with the first knot to come under his fingers. 'There is coffee in the thermos bottle and we can open a tin of potted chicken.'

'The fire makes it cosier,' Helen said, beginning to gather twigs. Last night coyotes had howled fearsomely, and even dwellers of the cities know that the surest safeguard against a ravaging beast is a camp-fire. For a little while the man strove with his tangled rope; she was lost to him through the mesquite. Suddenly she came running back.

'Papa,' she whispered excitedly. 'There's some one already here.'

She led him a few paces and pointed, making him stoop to see. Under the tangle of a thin brush patch he made out what she had seen. But a short distance from the spot they had elected for their camp site was a tiny fire blazing merrily.

'Ahem,' said Helen's father, shifting nervously and looking at his daughter as though for an explanation of this

oddity. 'This is peculiar. It has an air of—of——'

'Why, it is the most natural thing in the world,' she said swiftly.

'Where would you expect to find a camp-fire if not near a spring?'

'Yes, yes, that part of it is all right,' he admitted grudgingly. 'But why does he hold back and thereby give one an impression of a desire on his part for secrecy? Why does he not come forward and make himself known? I do not mean to alarm you, my dear, but this is not the way an honest fellow-wayfarer should behave. Wait here for me; I shall investigate.' Intrepidly he walked toward the fire. Helen kept close to his side.

'Hello!' he called, when they had taken a dozen steps. They paused and listened. There was no reply, and Helen's fingers tightened on his arm. Again he looked to her as though once more he asked the explanation of her; the look hinted that upon occasion the father leaned on the daughter more than she on him. He called again. His voice died away echoless, the silence seeming heavier than before. When one of the horses behind them, turning from the water, trod upon a dry twig, both man and girl started. Then Helen laughed and went forward again.

Since the fire had not lighted itself, it merely bespoke the presence of a man. Men had no terror to her. In the ripe fullness of her something less than twenty years she had encountered many of them. While with due modesty she admitted that there was much in the world that she did not know, she considered that she 'knew' men.

The two pressed on together. Before they had gone far they were greeted by the familiar and vaguely comforting odours of boiling coffee and frying bacon. Still they saw no one. They pushed through the last clump of bushes and stood by the fire. On the coals was the black coffee-pot. Cunningly placed upon two stones over a bed of coals was the frying-pan. Helen stooped instinctively and lifted it aside; the half-dozen slices of bacon were burned black.

'Hello!' shouted the man a third time, for nothing in the world was more clear than that whoever had made the fire and begun his supper preparations must be within call. But no answer came. Meantime the night had deepened; there was no moon; the taller shrubs, aspiring to tree proportions, made a tangle of shadow.

'He has probably gone off to picket his horse,' said Helen's father.

'Nothing could be more natural.'

Helen, more matter-of-fact and less given to theorizing, looked about her curiously. She found a tin cup; there was no bed, no pack, no other sign to tell who their neighbour might be. Close by the spot where she had set down the frying-pan she noted a second spring. Through an open space in the stunted desert growth the trail came in from the north. Glancing northward she saw for the first time the outline of a low hill. She stepped quickly to her father's side and once more laid her hand on his arm.

'What is it?' he asked, his voice sharpening at her sudden grip.

'It's—it's spooky out here,' she said.

He scoffed. 'That's a silly word. In a natural world there is no place for the supernatural.' He grew testy. 'Can I ever teach you, Helen, not to employ words utterly meaningless?'

But Helen was not to be shaken.

'Just the same, it is spooky. I can feel it. Look there.' She pointed. 'There is a hill. There will be a little ring of hills. In the centre of the basin they make would be the pool. And you know what we heard about it before we left San Juan. This whole country is strange, somehow.'

'Strange?' he queried challengingly. 'What do you mean?'

She had not relaxed her hand on his arm. Instead, her fingers tightened as she suddenly put her face forward and whispered defiantly:

'I mean *spooky*!'

'Helen,' he expostulated, 'where did you get such ideas?'

'You heard the old Indian legends,' she insisted, not more than half frightened but conscious of an eerie influence of the still loneliness and experiencing the first shiver of excitement as she stirred her own fancy. 'Who knows but there is some foundation for them?'

He snorted his disdain and scholarly contempt.

'Then,' said Helen, resorting to argument, 'where did that fire come from? Who made it? Why has he disappeared like this?'

'Even you,' said her father, quick as always to join issue where sound argument offered itself as a weapon, 'will hardly suppose that a spook eats bacon and drinks coffee,'

'The—the ghost,' said Helen, with a humorous glance in her eyes, 'might have whisked him away by the hair of the head!'

He shook her hand off and strode forward impatiently. Again and again he shouted 'Hello!' and 'Ho, there! Ho, I say!' There came no answer. The bacon was growing cold; the fire burning down. He turned a perplexed face towards Helen's eager one.

'It is odd,' he said irritably. He was not a man to relish being baffled.

Helen had picked up something which she had found near the spring, and was studying it intently. He came to her side to see what it was. The thing was a freshly-peeled willow wand, left upright where one end had been thrust down into the soft earth. The other end had been split; into the cleft was thrust a single feather from a bluebird's wing.

Helen's eyes looked unusually large and bright. She turned her head, glancing over her shoulder.

'Some one was here just a minute ago,' she cried softly. 'He was camping for the night. Something frightened him away. It might have been the noise we made. Or—what do you think, papa?'

'I never attempt to solve a problem until the necessary data are given me,' he announced academically.

'Or,' went on Helen, at whose age one does not bother about such trifles as necessary data, 'he may not have run away at all. He may be hiding in the bushes, listening to us. There are all kinds of people in the desert. Don't you remember how the sheriff came to San Juan just before we left? He was looking for a man who had killed a miner for his gold dust.'

'You must curb a proclivity for such fanciful trash.' He cleared his throat for the utterance. He put out his hand and

Helen hastily slipped her own into it. Silently they returned to their own camp site, the girl carrying in her free hand the wand tipped with the bluebird feather. Several times they paused and looked back. There was nothing but the glow of the dwindling fire and the sweep of sand, covered sparsely with ragged bushes. New stars flared out; the spirit of the night descended upon the desert. As the world seemed to draw further and further away from them, these two beings, strange to the vastness engulfing them, huddled closer together. They spoke little, always in lowered voices. Between words they were listening, awaiting that which did not come.

Chapter II

[Table of Contents](#)

Superstition Pool

Physically tired as they were, the night was a restless one for both Helen and her father. They ate their meal in silence for the most part, made their beds close together, picketed their horses near by and said their listless 'good nights' early. Each heard the other turn and fidget many times before both went to sleep. Helen saw how her father, with a fine assumption of careless habit, laid a big new revolver close to his head.

The girl dozed and woke when the pallid moon shone upon her face. She lifted herself upon her elbow. The moonlight touched upon the willow stick she had thrust into the sand at her bedside; the feather was upright and like a plume. She considered it gravely; it became the starting-point of many romantic imaginings. Somehow it was a token; of just exactly what, to be sure, she could not decide. Not definitely, that is; it was always indisputable that the message of the bluebird is one of good fortune.

A less vivid imagination than Helen's would have found a tang of ghostliness in the night. The crest of the ridge over which they had come through the dusk now showed silvery white; white also were some dead branches of desert growth—they looked like bones. Always through the intense silence stirred an indistinguishable breath like a shiver.

Individual bushes assumed grotesque shapes; when she looked long and intently at one she began to fancy that it moved. She scoffed at herself, knowing that she was lending aid to tricking her own senses, yet her heart beat a wee bit faster. She gave her mind to large considerations: those of infinity, as her eyes were lifted heavenward and dwelt upon the brightest star; those of life and death, and all of the mystery of mysteries. She went to sleep struggling with the ancient problem: 'Do the dead return? Are there, flowing about us, weird, supernatural influences as potent and intangible as electric currents?' In her sleep she continued her interesting investigations, but her dreaming vision explained the evening's problem by showing her the camp-fire made, the bacon and coffee set thereon, by a very nice young man with splendid eyes.

She stirred, smiled sleepily, and lay again without moving; after the fashion of one awakening she clung to the misty frontiers of a fading dream-country. She breathed deeply, inhaling the freshness of the new dawn. Then suddenly her eyes flew open, and she sat up with a little cry; a man who would have fitted well enough into any fancy-free maiden's dreams was standing close to her side, looking down at her. Helen's hands flew to her hair.

Plainly—she read that in the first flashing look—he was no less astounded than she. At the moment he made a picture to fill the eye and remain in the memory of a girl fresh from an Eastern City. The tall, rangy form was garbed in the picturesque way of the country; she took him in from the heels of the black boots with their silver spurs to the top of his head with its amazingly wide black hat. He stood

against a sky rapidly filling to the warm glow of the morning. His horse, a rarely perfect creation even in the eyes of one who knew little of fine breeding in animals, stood just at its master's heels, with ears pricked forward curiously.

Helen wondered swiftly if he intended to stand there until the sun came up, just looking at her. Though it was scarcely more than a moment that he stood thus, in Helen's confusion the time seemed much longer. She began to grow ill at ease; she felt a quick spurt of irritation. No doubt she looked a perfect fright, taken all unawares like this, and equally indisputably he was forming an extremely uncomplimentary opinion of her. It required less than three seconds for Miss Helen to decide emphatically that the man was a horrible creature.

But he did not look any such thing. He was healthy and brown and boyish. He had had a shave and haircut no longer ago than yesterday and looked neat and clean. His mouth was quite as large as a man's should be and now was suddenly smiling. At the same instant his hat came off in his big brown hand and a gleam of downright joyousness shone in his eyes.

'Impudent beast!' was Helen's quick thought. She had given her mind last night a great deal less to matters of toilet than to mystic imaginings; it lay entirely in the field of absurd likelihood that there was a smear of black across her face.

'My mistake,' grinned the stranger. 'Guess I'll step out while the stepping's good and the road open. If there's one sure thing a man ought to be shot for, it's stampeding in on another fellow's honeymoon. *Adios, señora.*'

'Honeymoon!' gasped Helen. 'The big fool.'

Her father wakened abruptly, sat up, grasping his big revolver in both hands, and blinked about him; he, too, had had his dreams. In the night-cap which he had purchased in San Juan, his wide, grave eyes and sun-blistered face turned up inquiringly; he was worthy of a second glance as he sat prepared to defend himself and his daughter. The stranger had just set the toe of his boot into the stirrup; in this posture he remained, forgetful of his intention to mount, while his mare began to circle and he had to hop along to keep pace with her, his eyes upon the startled occupant of the bed beyond Helen's. He had had barely more than time to note the evident discrepancy in ages which naturally should have started his mind down a new channel for the explanation of the true relationship, when the revolver clutched tightly in unaccustomed fingers went off with an unexpected roar. Dust spouted up a yard beyond the feet of the man who held it. The horse plunged, the stranger went up into the saddle like a flash, and the man dropped his gun to his blanket and muttered in the natural bewilderment of the moment:

'It—it went off by itself! The most amazing——'

The rider brought his prancing horse back and fought with his facial muscles for gravity; the light in his eyes was utterly beyond his control.

'I'd better be going off by myself somewhere,' he remarked as gravely as he could manage, 'if you're going to start shooting a man up just because he calls before breakfast.'

With a face grown a sick white, the man in bed looked helplessly from the stranger to his daughter and then to the gun.

'I didn't do a thing to it,' he began haltingly.

'You won't do a thing to yourself one of these fine days.' remarked the horseman with evident relish, 'if you don't quit carrying that sort of life-saver. Come over to the ranch and I'll swap you a hand-axe for it.'

Helen sniffed audibly and distastefully. Her first impression of the stranger had been more correct than are first impressions nine times out of ten; he was as full of impudence as a city sparrow. She had sat up 'looking like a fright'; her father had made himself ridiculous; the stranger was mirthfully concerned with the amusing possibilities of both of them.

Suddenly the tall man, smitten by inspiration, slapped his thigh with one hand, while with the other he curbed rebellion in his mare and offered the explosive wager:

'I'll bet a man a dollar I've got your number, friends. You are Professor James Edward Longstreet and his little daughter Helen! Am I right?'

'You are correct, sir,' acknowledged the professor a trifle stiffly. His eye did not rise, but clung in a fascinated, faintly accusing way to the gun which had betrayed him.

The stranger nodded and then lifted his hat for the ceremony while he presented himself.

'Name of Howard,' he announced breezily. 'Alan Howard of the old Diaz Rancho. Glad to know you both.'

'It is a pleasure, I am sure, Mr. Howard,' said the professor. 'But, if you will pardon me, at this particular time of day——'

Alan Howard laughed his understanding.

'I'll chase up to the pool and give Helen a drink of real water,' he said lightly. 'Funny my mare's name should be Helen, too, isn't it?' This directly into a pair of eyes which the growing light showed to be grey and attractive, but just now hostile. 'Then, if you say the word, I'll romp back and take you up on a cup of coffee. And we'll talk things over.'

He stooped forward in the saddle a fraction of an inch; his mare caught the familiar signal and leaped; they were gone, racing away across the sand which was flung up after them like spray.

'Of all the fresh propositions!' gasped Helen.

But she knew that he would not long delay his return, and so slipped quickly from under her blanket and hurried down to the water-hole to bathe her hands and face and set herself in order. Her flying fingers found her little mirror; there wasn't any smudge on her face, after all, and her hair wasn't so terribly unbecoming that way; tousled, to be sure, but then, nice, curly hair can be tousled and still not make one a perfect hag. It *was* odd about his mare being named Helen. He must have thought the name pretty, for obviously he and his horse were both intimate and affectionate. 'Alan Howard.' Here, too, was rather a nice name for a man met by chance out in the desert. She paused in the act of brushing her hair. Was she to get an explanation of last night's puzzle? Was Mr. Howard the man who had lighted the other fire?

The professor's taciturnity was of a pronounced order this morning. Now and then as he made his own brief and customarily untidy toilet, he turned a look of accusation upon the big Colt lying on his bed. Before drawing on his boots he bestowed upon his toe a long glance of affection; the bullet that had passed within a very few inches of this adjunct of his anatomy had emphasized a toe's importance. He had never realized how pleasant it was to have two big toes, all one's own and unmarred. By the time the foot had been coaxed and jammed down into his new boot the professor's good humour was on the way to being restored; a man of one thought at the time, due to his long habit of concentration, his emotion was now one of a subdued rejoicing. It needed but the morning cup of coffee to set him beaming upon the world.

Alan Howard's sudden call: 'Can I come in now, folks?' from across a brief space of sand and brush, found Professor Longstreet on his knees feeding twigs to a tiny blaze, and hastened Helen through the final touches of her dressing. Helen was humming softly to herself, her back to him, her mind obviously concentrated upon the bread she was slicing, when the stranger swung down from his saddle and came forward. He stood a moment just behind her, looking at her with very evident interest in his eyes.

'How do you like our part of the world?' he asked friendliwise.

Helen ignored him briefly. Had Mr. Alan Howard been a bashful young man of the type that reddens and twists its hat in big nervous hands and looks guilty in general. Miss Helen Longstreet would have been swiftly all that was sweet

and kind to him. Now, however, from some vague reason or clouded instinct, she was prepared to be as stiff as the fanged stalk of a cactus. Having ignored him the proper length of time, she replied coolly:

'Father and I are very much pleased with the desert country. But, may I ask just why you speak of it as your part of the world rather than ours? Are we trespassing, pray?' The afterthought was accompanied by an upflashing look that was little less than outright challenge.

'Trespassing? Lord, no,' conceded Howard heartily. 'The land is wide, the trail open at both ends. But you know what I meant.'

Helen shrugged and laid aside the half-loaf. Since she gave him no answer, Howard went on serenely:

'I mean a man sort of acquires a feeling of ownership in the place in which he has lived a long time. You and your father are Eastern, not Western. If I came tramping into your neck of the woods—you see I call it *yours*. Right enough, too, don't you think, professor?'

'In a way of speaking, yes,' answered the professor. 'In another way, no. We have given up the old haunts and the old way of living. We are rather inclined, my dear young sir, to look upon this as our country, too.'

'Bully for you!' cried Howard warmly. 'You're sure welcome.' His eyes came back from the father to rest upon the daughter's bronze tresses. 'Welcome as a water-hole in a hot land,' he added emphatically.

'Speaking of water-holes,' suggested Longstreet, sitting back upon his boot heels in a manner to suggest the favourite squatting position of the cowboys of whom he and

his daughter had seen much during these last few weeks, 'was it you who made camp right over yonder?' He pointed.

Helen looked up curiously for Howard's answer and thus met the eyes he had not withdrawn from her. He smiled at her, a frank, open sort of smile, and thereafter turned to his questioner.

'When?' he asked briefly.

'Last night. Just before we came.'

'What makes you think some one made camp there?'

'There was a fire; bacon was frying, coffee boiling.'

'And you didn't step across to take a squint at your next-door neighbour?'

'We did,' said the professor. 'But he had gone, leaving his fire burning, his meal cooking.'

Howard's eyes travelled swiftly to Helen, then back to her father.

'And he didn't come back?'

'He did not,' said Longstreet. 'Otherwise I should not have asked if you were he.'

Even yet Howard gave no direct answer. Instead he turned his back and strode away to the deserted camp site. Helen watched him through the bushes and noted how he made a quick but evidently thorough examination of the spot. She saw him stoop, pick up frying-pan and cup, drop them and pass around the spring, his eyes on the ground. Abruptly he turned away and pushed through a clump of bushes, disappearing. In five minutes he returned, his face thoughtful.

'What time did you get here?' he asked. And when he had his answer he pondered it a moment before he went on:

'The gent didn't leave his card. But he broke camp in a regular blue-blazes hurry; saddled his horse over yonder and struck out the shortest way toward King Cañon. He went as if the devil himself and his one best bet in hell hounds was running at his stirrups.'

'How do you know?' queried Longstreet's insatiable curiosity. 'You didn't see him?'

'You saw the fire and the things he left stewing,' countered Howard. 'They spelled hurry, didn't they? Didn't they shout into your ears that he was on the lively scamper for some otherwhere?'

'Not necessarily,' maintained Longstreet eagerly. 'Reasoning from the scant evidence before us, a man would say that while the stranger may have left his camp to hurry on, he may on the other hand have just dodged back when he heard us coming and hidden somewhere close by.'

Again Howard pondered briefly.

'There are other signs you did not see,' he said in a moment. 'The soil where he had his horse staked out shows tracks, and they are the tracks of a horse going some from the first jump. Horse and man took the straightest trail and went ripping through a patch of mesquite that a man would generally go round. Then there's something else. Want to see?'

They went with him, the professor with alacrity, Helen with a studied pretence at indifference. By the spring where Helen had found the willow rod and the bluebird feather, Howard stopped and pointed down.

'There's a set of tracks for you,' he announced triumphantly. 'Suppose you spell 'em out, professor; what do

you make of them?'

The professor studied them gravely. In the end he shook his head.

'Coyote?' he suggested.

Howard shook his head.

'No coyote,' he said with positiveness. 'That track shows a foot four times as big as any coyote's that ever scratched fleas. Wolf? Maybe. It would be a whopper of a wolf at that. Look at the size of it, man! Why, the ugly brute would be big enough to scare my prize shorthorn bull into taking out life insurance. And that isn't all. That's just the front foot. Now look at the hind foot. Smaller, longer, and leaving a lighter imprint. All belonging to the same animal.' He scratched his head in frank bewilderment. 'It's a new one on me,' he confessed frankly. Then he chuckled. 'I'd bet a man that the gent who left on the hasty foot just got one squint at this little beastie and at that had all sorts of good reasons for streaking out.'

A big lizard went rustling through a pile of dead leaves and all three of them started. Howard laughed.

'We're right near Superstition Pool!' he informed them with suddenly assumed gravity. 'Down in Poco Poco they tell some great tales about the old Indian gods going man-hunting by moonlight. *Quién sabe*, huh?'

Professor Longstreet snorted. Helen cast a quick, interested look at the stranger and one of near triumph upon her father.

'I smell somebody's coffee boiling,' said the cattleman abruptly. 'Am I invited in for a cup? Or shall I mosey on? Don't be bashful in saying I'm not wanted if I'm not.'

'Of course you are welcome,' said Longstreet heartily. But Howard turned to Helen and waited for her to speak.

'Of course.' said Helen carelessly.

Chapter III

[Table of Contents](#)

Payment in Raw Gold

'You were merely speaking by way of jest, I take it, Mr. Howard,' remarked Longstreet, after he had interestedly watched the rancher put a third and fourth heaping spoonful of sugar in his tin cup of coffee. 'I refer, you understand, to your hinting a moment ago at there being any truth in the old Indian superstitions. I am not to suppose, am I, that you actually give any credence to tales of supernatural influences manifested hereabouts?'

Alan Howard stirred his coffee meditatively, and after so leisurely a fashion that Longstreet began to fidget. The reply, when finally it came, was sufficiently non-committal.

'I said "*Quién sabe?*" to the question just now,' he said, a twinkle in the regard bestowed upon the scientist. 'They are two pretty good little old words and fit in first-rate lots of times.'

'Spanish for "Who knows?" aren't they?'

Howard nodded. 'They used to be Spanish; I guess they're Mex by now.'

Longstreet frowned and returned to the issue.

'If you were merely jesting, as I supposed——'

'But was I?' demanded Howard. 'What do I know about it? I know horses and cows; that's my business. I know a thing or two about men, since that's my business at times, too;

also something like half of that about half-breeds and mules; I meet up with them sometimes in the run of the day's work. You know something of what I think you call auriferous geology. But what does either of us know of the nightly custom of dead Indians and Indian gods?'

Helen wondered with her father whether there were a vein of seriousness in the man's thought. Howard squatted on his heels, from which he had removed his spurs; they were very high heels, but none the less he seemed comfortably at home rocking on them. Longstreet noted with his keen eyes, altered his own squatting position a fraction, and opened his mouth for another question. But Howard forestalled him, saying casually:

'I have known queer things to happen here, within a few hundred yards of this place. I haven't had time to go finding out the why of them; they didn't come into my day's work. I have listened to some interesting yarns; truth or lies it didn't matter to me. They say that ghosts haunt the Pool just yonder. I have never seen a ghost; there's nothing in raising ghosts for market, and I'm the busiest man I know trying to chew a chunk that I have bitten off. They tell you down at San Juan and in Poco Poco, and all the way up to Tecolote, that if you will come here a certain moonlight night of the year and will watch the water of the pool, you'll see a vision sent up by the gods of the Underworld. They'll even tell you how a nice little old god by the name of Pookhonghoya appears now and then by night, hunting souls of enemies—and running by the side of the biggest, strangest wolf that human eyes ever saw.'

Helen looked at him swiftly. He had added the last item almost as an afterthought. She imagined that he had embellished the old tale from his own recent experience, and, further, that Mr. Alan Howard was making fun of them and was no adept in the science of fabrication.

'They go further,' Howard spun out his tale. 'Somewhere in the desert country to the north there is, I believe, a tribe of Hidden People that the white man has never seen. The interesting thing about them is that they are governed by a young and altogether maddeningly pretty goddess who is white and whose name is Yahoya. When they come right down to the matter of giving names,' he added gravely, 'how is a man to go any further than just say, "*Quién sabe?*"'

'That is stupid,' said Longstreet irascibly. 'It's a man's chief affair in life to *know*. These absurd legends——'

'Don't you think, papa,' said Helen coolly, 'that instead of taxing Mr. Howard's memory and—and imagination, it would be better if you asked him about our way from here on?'

Howard chuckled. Professor Longstreet set aside his cup, cleared his throat and agreed with his daughter.

'I am prospecting,' he announced, 'for gold. We are headed for what is known as the Last Ridge country. I have a map here.'

He drew it from his pocket, neatly folded, and spread it out. It was a map such as is to be purchased for fifty cents at the store in San Juan, showing the main roads, towns, waterholes and trails. With a blue pencil he had marked out the way they planned to go. Howard bent forward and took the paper.

'We are going the same way, friend,' he said as he looked up. 'What is more, we are going over a trail I know by heart. There is a good chance I can save you time and trouble by making it a party of three. Am I wanted?'

'It is extremely kind of you,' said Longstreet appreciatively. 'But you are on horseback and we travel slowly.'

'I can spare the time,' was the even rejoinder. 'And I'll be glad to do it.'

During the half-hour required to break camp and pack the two horses, Alan Howard gave signs of an interest which now and then mounted almost to high delight. He made no remark concerning the elaborate system of water-bottles and canteens, but his eyes brightened as he aided the professor in making them fast. When the procession was ready to start he strode on ahead, leading his own horse and hiding from his new friends the widening grin upon his face.

The sun was up; already the still heat of the desert was in the air. Behind the tall rancher and his glossy mare came Professor Longstreet driving his two pack animals. Just behind him, with much grave speculation in her eyes, came Helen. A new man had swum all unexpectedly into her ken and she was busy cataloguing him. He looked the native in this environment, but for all that he was plainly a man of her own class. No illiteracy, no wild shy awkwardness marked his demeanour. He was as free and easy as the north wind; he might, after all, be likeable. Certainly it was *courtois* of him to set himself on foot to be one of them. The mare

looked gentle despite her high life; Helen wondered if Alan Howard had thought of offering her his mount?

They had come to the first of the low-lying hills.

'Miss Longstreet,' called Howard, stopping and turning, 'wouldn't you like to swing up on Sanchia? She is dying to be ridden.'

The trail here was wide and clearly defined; hence Longstreet and his two horses went by and Helen came up with Howard. Hers was the trick of level, searching eyes. She looked steadily at him as she said evenly:

'So her name is Sanchia?'

For an instant the man did not appear to understand. Then suddenly Helen was treated to the sight of the warm red seeping up under his tan. And then he slapped his thigh and laughed; his laughter seeming unaffected and joyous.

'Talk about getting absent-minded in my old age,' he declared. 'Her name did use to be Sanchia; I changed it to Helen. Think of my sliding back to the old name.'

Helen's candid look did not shift for the moment that she paused. Then she went on by him, following her father, saying merely:

'Thank you, I'll walk. And if she were mine I'd keep the old name; Sanchia suits her exactly.'

But as she hurried on after her father she had time for reflection; plainly the easy-mannered Mr. Alan Howard had renamed his mare only this very morning; as plainly had he in the first place called her Sanchia in honour of some other friend or chance acquaintance. Helen wondered vaguely who the original Sanchia was. To her imagination the name

suggested a slim, big-eyed Mexican girl. She found time to wonder further how many times Mr. Howard had named his horse.

They skirted a hill, dipped into the hollow which gave passageway between this hill and its twin neighbour, mounted briefly, and within twenty minutes came to the pool about which legends flocked. From their vantage point they looked down upon it. The sun searched it out almost at the instant that their eyes caught the glint of it. Fed by many hidden springs it was a still, smooth body of water in the bowl of the hills; it looked cool and deep and had its own air of mystery; in its ancient bosom it may have hidden bones or gold. Some devotee had planted a weeping willow here long ago; the great tree now flourished and cast its reflection across its own fallen leaves.

Helen's eyes dreamed and sought visions; the spot touched her with its romance, and she, after the true style of youth, lent aid to the still influences. Alan Howard, to whom this was scarcely other than an everyday matter, turned naturally to the new and was content to watch the girl. As for Longstreet, his regard was busied with the stones at his feet, and thereafter with a washout upon a hill-side where the formation of the hills themselves was laid bare to a scientific eye.

'There's gold everywhere about here,' he announced placidly. 'But not in the quantities I have promised you, Helen. We'll go on to the Last Ridge country before we stop.'

Howard turned from the daughter to consider the father long and searchingly, after the way of one man seeking another's measure.