

STRANGE TALES

OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

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*A wolf stood howling
on the top of the hill.*

Back Before the Moon

By S. Omar Barker

ON a little meadow slope of the Hidden Valley (*El Valle Escondido*) that lies like a sun-smile back of the black woods of the Upper Vallecitos, stands a great cross built of red stone at the edge of the weird timber. This is in the *Rio Arriba* country of New Mexico, where all the world is still outside, and where there are said to be strange, strange sights every night of a moon for those with eyes to see them. Here, then is how the red stone cross came to be. If you had seen it

you would want to know. And old Oliborio Baldonado, the gray-beard, squatting in the sun beside his adobe in Canoñcito, would tell you, as he told me:

Eligio Jaramillo came riding down out of the black woods from the Valle Escondido, and all the little cañons were running belly-deep in snow water to stop him. There were black bogs where the firs had hoarded great piles of winter ice only to soak up the spring trails into

sucking vats that swigged and pulled at his horse's legs. The Rito itself, mod-

Eligio learns the queer way of a
Cross in the black woods.

est and clear-eyed in summer, boomed now through its red stone box like the wrath of *Mi Tara Díos*, and then came swinging out in a twist of muddy-watered death into the three-cornered cove where Eligio must cross it.

Ah, the reckless doom of spring in the backland wilderness of the Hidden Valley country! One day there was the silence of deep-folded snow, and the next the growl of baby torrents loping down the hills to join the roar of wild, new water out to sweep destruction down the slanting cañon and strew it in the fields below.

A great pine, tricked by a suddenly faithless earth at its spring-stirred roots, renounced the sky and came swooshing down without warning across the path of the dark horseman and his black horse struggling down out of the black woods from Valle Escondido; and in flare-eyed terror at this weird treachery of his own mountains, the pony reared and swung his mud-covered body in futile struggle back up the hill.

BUT Eligio's eyes widened only a second in sudden alarm. Then into their blackness came again the deeper fear that drove him wallowing in mud, like some haunted soul in despair, down the sweeping slopes of the mountains toward Vallecitos. He jerked his *caballito* back down the hill, spurred him to flounder around the fallen tree and on again down the slipping trail to the river, snaking down the steep cañon in coils ten feet deep and fifty feet from edge to edge—the river he could not hope to cross.

Yet Eligio would cross it, for it was a fear worse than a death-fear in his heart that urged him on.

Back in a squat cabin with a flat dirt roof, on a long grass slope

tipped up to the sun—the lone homestead of the Hidden Valley—Erslinda lay in a fever. Erslinda, little brown-eyed sister of the angels, with the rude heart of her father so soul-bound to her own that two little tears from her eyes—*ay! que preciosos!*—would half break it, and bring his rough brown face quivering against hers. Erslinda, at eight years already the image of *la madrecita querida*, the dear little lost mother who had left them and gone to be with her *Tata Díos*. Thus the simple love of the rude sheepman for his daughter!

Eligio had left her, dying perhaps, with her two brothers, good brown mountain lads who knew what the sheep were saying when they cried out at night, and who did not mind talking to mountains alone in the moonlight, but who must run and hide when a stranger would drop into the *Valle* from somewhere in the world.

The two good brown boys were with her; and one, Toribio, perhaps would be down on his knees asking with *Tata Díos* to leave her with them; and the other, Juanito, holding fast to her hand. And Eligio battling down through the black woods to Vallecitos, the whip of fear lashing him behind and one tiny gleam of hope to lead him: one little *cruc de Jesus*—one wooden crucifix on the altar in the *capilla* at the village. If only Padre Onésimo would give him that and he could fight back to Erslinda before the red moon would turn white over the tops of the firs and the little coyotes come out talking their queer way on the hill-tops!

A DOCTOR? Oh, yes, there was a doctor in the village, too: old Pantureaux with his black bag and half-white whiskers. Eligio would see him for medicine,

but, after all, what could one hope from a mere *médico* in such a case?

Three days ago, Toribio had come crying to the cabin, and sure enough when Eligio went out with him, there was old Chango, the biggest goat, standing on a stump inside the *fuerte-corral*, upright like a man and preaching to the flock.

They could hear strange words past understanding and when Chango saw them coming there was a sudden red-fire circle around him, and as it died away the old goat leaped down among the herd, saying "ba-a" in his own language again. A puff of heat came blowing past their ears that could have only been the breath of the very devil.

That night Juanito saw a great wolf go flying out of the trees the way a lost soul would fly, for when he came against the white moon there was blue fire in his mouth and he dropped down suddenly and stood howling on a rock at the top of the hill.

Thus the weird doom of a haunted springtime up in the Valle! When that night was half-way into dawn, two coyotes, slim wolf brothers of *el Demonio*, sat on a hill and set up a mad fandango to drive back the sun, and over across the valley one answered like a call from another world. Eligio knew the Voice, and it said: "Erslinda, Er-rs-li-i-in-da!" over and over. As he lay like a dead man listening he heard the little brown daughter moan softly in her sleep, but when he muttered a swift *Ave María* she was silent again; and outside the two coyotes went *yip-yirr-uping* back into the woods.

THAT morning Erslinda arose a little quieter, yet well and clear-faced as ever; but one mother goat was dead on her knees in the

fuerte, and when the brown boys had milked the others and Erslinda drank some of it, moon whiteness came over her face and the fever began to take her. Juanito looked in her cup and sure enough, there, for a second, was the outline of a face marked in blue pinpoint bubbles of milk.

It was a devil's spring and a devil's fever that had come to the Valle Escondido, and Eligio Jaramillo came riding down out of the black hills for that little token of *Nuestro Salvador* that would save his daughter—if not from death, at least from the *Diablo* who would take her soul away. Three weeks before, he had gone up with Erslinda and the two brown boys and a few goats over the frozen snow and winter-dead river, making ready for summer until the mad water should all have run out of the hills and he could bring his sheep up for the new grass. But now he must leave the Valle and battle down to Vallecitos for the cross that had cured Macario Romero of the fever and saved Jose Adán that time of a doomed spring in the Valle Alamoso.

The Rito was a monster across his path. It swished down the cañon in a current so swift that every wave arched its back and leaped to keep up with its fellows like *un lobo* anxious to be in at the killing. The muddy rider knew it would be death, and yet, with the talking sounds of the hills behind him and the great fear in his heart, he urged the black horse to its edge. Black Choto groaned, but stepped into the torrent, for he knew his master. Two steps brought his head into the waves. The horse knew death when he saw it, and he saw it then. Yet not so close but that a lunge and a mad pawing of water brought him streaming and quaking back to the bank. Eligio's heart was a

second without beating, for he knew poor Choto could not carry him across.

YET he would cross. Twenty steps above, where the mad water came tearing out of the box cañon, it was narrower, and at the edge of the bank, the curled fingers of the flood clutched at the roots of a tall blue *pinoreal*. If he had an ax he could chop it, and it might swish down and catch on the other bank, for it was long enough. But Eligio had left the Valle half in stupor from the dread in his soul and had not been fore-minded. He tried pushing the tree. It swayed a little, for the water had loosened its roots, but it did not fall. A dozen little *piédritas* and a single block of black earth where he had disturbed the anchor of the tree tumbled into the stream, *y no más*.

The black horse stood like a slim statue back a bit from the bank, and Eligio looked at him without hope. Then suddenly he was at the saddle, unbuckling the lasso that always hung there. It was a long rope, light and tough and made of *magüey Mejicano*, the way the cowboys like. Eligio could throw it, too, with a swish that would fetch up whatever he caught in a quick surprise.

Now it was no running horse he must rope, but the snag root of a big log lying like clusters of dead snakes across the Rito. He threw with all his might and the slim string of *magüey* kirtled clear across the water, though it did not catch. But it was long enough. It dropped down into the water and dragged off down the stream, but Eligio pulled it to him with swift hands and a spark of *esperanza* came into his heart. For now he would cross the river. It remained for him but to throw the rope swiftly and surely.

AND he did. The third time the questing loop caught on a stout snag and held when the middle bellied to a strong tug of the mad water. He tied Black Choto to a bush back from the bank to await his return with *la cruz salvadora* ere the moon would be rising. Then into the water he crept, knotting his hands in the rope and fighting that giant a thousand times his strength with the muscles of a strong little man and the heart of a *león*.

Eligio had come down out of the black woods where a *Lobo-Diablo* had flown across the moon, and he was going down to Vallecitos for a Cross of Jesus to save the child that was his other heart, and he had crossed the Rito because he must!

One step on the bank in safety and he heard the soft sound of a *woo-oooh!* behind him like the blue fire-wolf that had come down from the moon to sit and howl on the hillside, but when he looked back, half in terror, it was the tall blue fir that was swaying down over the river. It came down slowly to rest its stiff upper branches on a gray boulder across the Rito so that its trunk was a stout-bristled bridge over the reaching water that any man might cross. If the tired wet man had only waited—

But now he was over, nevertheless. With the coiled rope around his dripping shoulder he was on his way down the wild-curved road to the *placita*. Now he would run in the swigging mud the few miles distance to the *capilla*, and he would be back across the fir-tree bridge before the moon! *Jesús adorado!*

ELIGIO ran like the cursing old river itself, for here there had been more sun on the road. But even as he went, dodging the black bog holes and talking a

heart prayer to the good Jesus, there was a voice that muttered in the little cañons and a soft sound of doom in the warm-lipped wind; and the black hills talked behind him.

It was where the slanting road comes down by the river and a helpless old trail from the Rito del Espíritu Santo crawls to the west edge of the water, that his tired legs pulled him down to rest for a double breath lest he fall dead in the black mud. And it was when he dropped his head in his leath-ered hands for a dead still moment that he heard the voice that called from over the Rito.

"Amigo! Amigo!"

It was a strange sound. Eligio looked in wonder, for who would be calling from the old trail? Ah, what would the poor sheepman see? Leaning against the white stump of a *troncón*, holding himself up with his arms out on two branches as though he might be a Christ on the Cross was a long-haired man with a curly brown beard on his face, and the black woods behind him. Eligio had not yet closed his mouth from surprise when the man stepped down to the brink of that rabid water and called again.

"Amigo! Friend! Help me to cross this water! I cannot pass it alone!"

Eligio saw that there was the stain of red, like blood, on his blue rag jacket and remembered how he had heard of the old hermit digger of mines back in the red stone hills of the Espíritu Santo, who was like to be standing on his head half of the day because of the crazy way it was.

So Eligio called to him that he could not cross that torrent, worse here than above. For it was only the crazy miner, and Eligio must be running on down the road to the village.

"Your rope! Throw me your rope!" the old man called out now, more insistently.

BUT Eligio was going again and would leave him there, for who would stop to help an old fool drown? He looked back over his shoulder and his heart stopped for a second with his legs. The old man was wading in, arms over his head. He would be lost!

Let him drown! Eligio had battled the clutching hills to come down this far for the *cruz de Jesús*, and he must go on. But it was in his heart now as if there were only one world and one man in it, and he the crazy old man wading out to go down dead in the flood.

The hawk does not flick his wing more quickly than Eligio pulled the rope coils from his shoulder, ran back and whistled the strong *magüey* string across the mad water.

The line looped over the old man, and when he went strangling down under the flood the *borreguero* Eligio caught the rope a turn around a stout white aspen and pulled him up again! It was one *hombrecito* against the whole weight of another and the long-muscled water besides, and there was death in it for one or both if he should slip, for he had the rope wound about his hand and arm like a snake.

Here was another struggle with the roaring Rito, and the sun crawling around west to make long, black shadows of the firs! Eligio pulled and hauled and cursed like *un loco enojado*, and the old *mi-nero* gurgled and fought the water and then went dead on the rope until a whirl caught and swung him past the middle. Eligio pulled him out on the bank like a great dead *trucha*. But the old man was not dead.

THERE were two long, lost hours the sheepman was working with him until he stood up again, and now he would be too late getting back to Erslinda! He tried to run on now, but the *minero* plucked him by the sleeve and said, like one who would know already:

"Where do you go, my friend, and why do I see shadows like the black woods in your eyes?"

Ah, Eligio would hurry away, but now he must stay and tell him what he asked, for there was no end to the look in his eyes. So he did tell him, even how Chango had preached to the flock up in the Valle and how he had come fighting across the river.

The *minero* gave him a look like the look of a clear blue sky and said: "Who shall say that the little roots are only for the growing of wild grass? Or that uphill is not down to the one who understands?"

Even before he had finished, Eligio was off again down the rough *camino* to the village . . . late . . . late, but with half the fear shadow gone from his black eyes, and he not knowing why.

At the beginning of evening Eligio came over the last hill with the gray sage clumps about him, to look upon the village down by the river where he should find the chapel and the Holy Crucifix.

The black doom came rushing back into his heart when he looked, for the long digging arms of the crowding water had crept out and clutched the old chapel, and the baked mud that was its walls was crumbling like dead faith into the flood. As he ran crying down the hill the last front wall with the great cross upon it tumbled to the *embrizada del agua*, and all the God-fearing people of Vallecitos stood groaning and watching it. . . . All but the good Padre Onési-

mo, for his body was bumping somewhere down the river and his soul flying up to his *Tata Dios*.

Eligio Jaramillo had come down out of the black woods of talking wolves for the *cruz de Jesús* to save his daughter, but the black water he had fought was there before him. Even the good Padre who might have known the holy words to say for making another cross was gone.

ELIGIO was taking back a useless medicine from old Pan-tureaux, now, yet without hope, for how would a little red bottle or white pellets save the girl when there was blue fire in the mouth of a wolf flying across the moon? Now he must go back through the black woods to bury his dead, and his heart under the black earth with her, for he had lost two hours fighting the river for a crazy digger of mines, and the avenging water had been that long before him at the *capilla*.

There was only one word in the woods as he climbed back again toward the Valle, and that was the shouting word of the river in the cañon. Eligio crossed the fir-tree bridge that had fallen for him. The water was singing a wild song beneath him. Now he would step down to die in it, but he must not, for the dead must be buried.

Black Choto was there by the foot of the hill with a strange, joyful voice welcoming his master. His master had no ears for the sound of a poor horse's gladness.

It was slow up the mountain. The moon was white and going west over the black firs when Eligio topped the hill where the little coyotes should be out talking their queer weird way in the night time. But they were not. There was no voice in the woods. Ah, the poor sheepman understood this silence of death in the Valle! For,

why should a devil-wolf be howling now that Eligio was coming back with empty hands—too late?

When he rode into the Valle with the flat black cabin up on the *solana* of it, there was a cry from the marsh by the road and when Eligio looked, it was the old *minero* again, deep in a bank of the melting snow of spring and calling:

"*Amigo!* Friend! Your rope! Throw me your rope!"

ELIGIO would kill him now, for his heart was black with grief. Yet he did not. Again it was in his heart as if there was but one world and one man in it, and he the old man dying there in the moonlit snow; and he looped him again with the *magüey* string he could throw that sure way, and pulled him out flat where the snow was hard.

But he did not raise him up, for now he must ride on up the hill to kiss the dead lips of his Erslinda. *Ay! Jesús!*

It was the boy Toribio who ran out in a swift patter when Eligio came to the cabin, but it was Erslinda, brown little sister of the angels, that stood in the light of the open door and called to him,

her voice singing into his poor heart like the joy of a day that never was.

How could the man listen to his good brown boy telling him something until Erslinda was in his arms and her brown face against his? For they must tell him how a strange miner man with a beard, and with the look of the blue joy in his eyes and red stone stains like blood on his jacket, had come wordless into the cabin, with queer grasses on his brow.

And when Erslinda drank the red drink he brought for her from beneath his jacket the fever left her, and they, falling on their knees at her bed did not see the stranger leave.

IT was in a quiet moonlight that Eligio Jaramillo went quickly searching down the valley for the *minero* he had left lying on the snow. But there was only the print where his clothes had stained the snow like a blood-red cross, to be found.

Ah, the holy calm that follows springtime where Eligio Jaramillo has built a red stone cross in the *Valle Escondido* and the little coyotes go walking their queer quiet way in the night!