

# FANCIFUL TALES

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# The MAN from DARK VALLEY

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BY

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## August W. Derleth

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As soon as the jury returned the verdict acquitting Jim Everard of the killing of Tom Burt, Mrs. Burt rose and left the courtroom.

Isa Perkins leaned over to Jack Haley and whispered in a voice audible almost all over the room, "That jury's been fixed, or they're afraid of Everard. He's guilty as hell, and everybody knows it."

Both he and Haley got up hastily and followed Mrs. Burt. Outside the building they stopped and spoke to her.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Burt," Isa Perkins said, "we'd sorta like to know what you aim to do."

"I guess I'll stay here for a while," the frail woman replied.

Isa Perkins shuffled uneasily. "Fact is, Mrs. Burt, Jim Everard's pretty sure to try what he's call evenin' up things between you and him. And you in that lonely cabin down the canyon just suits him fine."

"I thought of that," she said. "But I don't aim to move out for a while yet. I think I'll see Jim Everard myself one of these days and fix things with him. I'm waiting for . . . for a man from Dark Valley yonder."

With that she turned abruptly and left them.

"Queer woman," commented Haley dryly. "What was the trouble between her and Jim Everard?"

Isa Perkins shrugged. "I don't put much stock in it, but Jim—he did. Them two, Tom and his wife, they believed in spirits. They sat around a table and talked to 'em. I don't take no stock in such goings-on, Jack, but by George, they found out some things at that. And they talked a lot about something they called estrels or astrels, which was supposed to be a spirit from their own bodies, and they could send it out wherever they wanted it to go. Some people has queer

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"You wouldn't believe in astrals, would you, Isa?" she went on. Again she held up her hands. "You wouldn't say I had very strong fingers, would you, Isa?"

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ideas, and some people swallow 'em. I didn't, but Tom Burt was a mighty nice neighbor, disregardin' his ideas."

Haley nodded. "And I suppose they found out something about young Johnson's death?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," replied Perkins. "They claimed one of them astrals witnessed it. Tom, it was. They said Everard did it, and I gotta admit Everard was the only one who had any reason to rub the kid out. Tom claimed he saw it."

"And so he didn't live to tell it to a jury, that it?" asked Haley.

"That's it. Not that a jury'd have believed it, but I guess Jim didn't like the thought of it. So he got rid of Tom and fixed the jury." He paused for a long moment before he added, "And right now I ain't feelin' that Mrs. Burt ought to be all alone in that cabin. It's too easy for Jim Everard to get at if he takes a notion."

Isa Perkins stood looking speculatively after the dwindling figure of Mrs. Burt. Abruptly he turned to his companion.

"I'll tell you what—are you game to watch that house with me tonight?" he asked. "Say, until the man she's expecting from Dark Valley reaches her?"

Haley hesitated a moment; then he nodded and said, "I'll do it."

There was a light burning in the single western window of the Burt cabin in Lonesome Canyon.

"That's the direction of Dark Valley," Perkins said, looking off into the impenetrable darkness.

"Anybody coming into the canyon from that side will need a light," commented Haley shortly.

The two of them were sitting on a ledge across the canyon from the Burt cabin. Not far behind them the dark forms of their horses moved in the night, and above them a few stars shone coldly in the cloudy sky. A chill wind was sweeping into the canyon from the prairies.

The hours passed in silence. Toward midnight the lights in the cabin abruptly went out.

"She's going to bed," murmured Haley.

Even as he spoke, the door of the cabin swung open, and a figure appeared on the threshold, crossing over, and stood outside. In a moment, two more figures appeared behind it. The three stood for a brief instant in the wraith-like mist rising from the canyon: then they turned and vanished in the darkness along the ridges into the depth of the canyon itself. They were on the trail toward the village.

"Well, I'm damned!" exclaimed Isa Perkins softly. "I never saw anyone head for that cabin."

"Neither did I," Haley said. "But they could've got there before we came."

Nodding thoughtfully, Isa Perkins said, "That's right." Uneasiness came over him suddenly.

The two of them looked at each other.

"Say," said Isa abruptly, excitedly, "suppose that wasn't Mrs. Burt and the man from Dark Valley. She didn't say anything about two men. There were three people there. By God, maybe Everard had somebody waitin' for her before we came."

Haley caught his breath. "We can settle that in a hurry," he said presently. "We can go down there and see. Only I can't figure out why they waited this long, if so."

They mounted their horses and cut down into the canyon and across. Before the cabin door they pulled up and swung down off their mounts. Perkins reached the door first and knocked. There was no reply. He knocked again. Still there was no reply, and he pushed the door open on a

dark interior. Behind him, Jack Haley struck a match.

They peered into the room, and in the wanly flickering light saw Mrs. Burt sittink oddly at table, her head lowered against her outflung arms. There was aon unnatural stillness n her posture, and Perkins gasped sharply.

As the two of the entered the cabin, the match went out, Haley immediately lit another, sought and found the lamp, still in the west window, and lit it. Perkins went immediately to Mrs. Burt's side. He called softly, thinking she might be asleep, and then, having received no indication of awakening from her, shook her lightly. Then he came abruptly to his knees and started into the woman's face.

Perkins turned a sick face to Haley. "She's dead, Jack," he said.

Haley came to his side, and together they bent over Mrs. Burt.

"What're yo ulooking for?" asked Perkins.

"To see if she's been shot," replied Haley. "There's no wound on her."

For a moment the two looked down on the body of the woman in perplexity. Then Perkins spoke.

"Jack, I'll have to stay here. You run into town and bring out the coroner. Tell hi mshe's dead, and we don't know what killed her. Because someone must've killed her: I don't know what killed her; I don't believe she put out that light."

The clatter of Haley's riding came back to Perkins in the cabin, and presently was lost in the night's silence. He sat for a long time without moving, no sound breaking the stillness save an occasional call from a burrowing owl somewhere beyond. An hour passed, and from the other end of the canyon hoof-beats sounded.

At that moment the body of Mrs. Burt moved. Before Isa Perkins' horrified gaze, Mrs. Burt raised her head, and slowly slid her arms from the surface of the table. In an instant her eyes met his.

"Hello, Isa," she said in a harsh voice.

He was too frightened to speak at once. Then, realizing that it was Mrs. Burt indeed, and no ghost, he said, "My gosh, Mrs. Burt, we thought you was dead!"

She looked at him speculatively for what seemed an endless time. Then she began to smile, and in a soft voice she asked, "You saw me here all the time, Isa?"

"For the last hour," he said, "and Jack Haley, too."

"You could swear I was here, couldn't you, Isa?" she said.

The thought that she had gone mad under the strain of her husband's death and the freezing of his murderer same into Isa's mind, and he stiffened protectively. "Sure, I could swear it," he said.

She held up her hands and looked at them. Then she said, "I won't have to leave the canon now."

"The man from Dark Valley," began Isa.

"He came. It was Tom. He brought Bud Johnson along."

Isa Perkins was thankful for the growing sound of hoof-beasts in the canon. He said nothing.

"You wouldn't believe in astrals, would you, Isa?" she want on. Again she held up her hands. "You wouldn't say I had very strong fingers, would you, Isa?"

Since she looked at him as expecting him to answer, he said, "No, Mrs. Burt."

Even now he heard Jack Haley dismounting outside. Jack was alone. He had not brought the coroner.

The door came open. Jack Haley, meeting Isa Perkins' eyes, gasped, "Isa—Jim Everard's been killed! He was abed, and he was choked to death. Looks like three persons done it, but nobody saw anything."

Mrs. Burt began to laugh, startling Haley. "Nobody saw anything when Bud Johnson and Tom were killed, either," she said in a satisfied voice.

**FINIS**