

VALLEY OF THE SUN

Frontier Stories by
LOUIS L'AMOUR



BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON SYDNEY ~~AUCKLAND~~

VALLEY OF
THE SUN

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For information address: Bantam Books.

ISBN 0-553-09962-0

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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WE SHAPED THE LAND WITH OUR GUNS

We moved into the place on South Fork just before the snow went off. We had a hundred head of cattle gathered from the canyons along the Goodnight Trail, stray stuff from cattle outfits moving north. Most of these cattle had been back in the breaks for a couple of years and rounding them up was man-killing labor, but we slapped our iron on them and headed west.

Grass was showing green through the snow when we got there and the cattle made themselves right at home. Mountains to the east and north formed the base of a triangle of which the sides were shaped by creeks and the apex by the junction of those creeks. It was a good four miles from that apex to the spot we chose for our home place, so we had all natural boundaries with good grass and water. There were trees enough for fuel and shade.

The first two weeks we worked fourteen hours a day building a cabin, cleaning out springs and throwing up a stable, pole corrals, and a smokehouse. We had brought supplies with us and we pieced them out with what game we could shoot. By the time we had our building done, our stock had decided they were home and were fattening up in fine shape.

We had been riding together for more than six months, which isn't long to know a man you go partners with. Tap Henry was a shade over thirty while I had just turned twenty-two when he hit the South Fork. We

had met working for the Gadsen outfit, which took me on just west of Mobeetie while Tap joined up a ways further north. Both of us were a might touchy but we hit it off right from the start.

Tap Henry showed me the kind of man he was before we had been together three days. Some no-account riders had braced us to cut the herd, and their papers didn't look good to me nor to Tap. We were riding point when these fellers came up, and Tap didn't wait for the boss. He just told them it was tough, but they weren't cutting this herd. That led to words and one of these guys reached. Tap downed him and that was that.

He was a pusher, Tap was. When trouble showed up he didn't side-step or wait for it. He walked right into the middle and kept crowding until the trouble either backed down or came through. Tall and straight standing, he was a fine, upright sort of man except for maybe a might of hardness around the eyes and mouth.

My home country was the Big Bend of Texas but most of my life had been lived south of the border. After I was sixteen the climate sort of agreed with me better. Tap drifted toward me one night when we were riding herd up in Wyoming.

"Rye," he said, that being a nickname for Ryan Tyler, "an hombre could go down in those breaks along the Goodnight Trail and sweep together a nice herd. Every outfit that ever come over this trail has lost stock, and lots of it is still back there."

"Uh-huh," I said, "and I know just the right spot for a ranch. Good grass, plenty of water and game." Then I told him about this place under the Pelado and he liked the sound of it. Whether he had any reason for liking an out-of-the-way place, I don't know. Me, I had plenty of reason, but I knew going back there might lead to trouble.

Two men can work together a long time without really knowing much about one another, and that was the way with me and Tap. We'd been in a couple of Comanche fights together and one with a Sioux war party. We worked together, both of us top hands and neither of us a shirker, and after a while we got a sort of mutual respect, although nobody could say we really liked each other.

Our first month was just ending when Jim Lucas showed up. We had been expecting him because we had seen a lot of Bar L cattle, and had run a couple of hundred head off our triangle of range when we first settled. He was not hunting us this day because his daughter was with him, and only one hand. Red, the puncher, had a lean face and a lantern jaw with cold gray eyes and two low, tied-down guns.

Lucas was a medium-built man who carried himself like he weighed a ton. He sat square and solid in the saddle, and you could see at a glance that he figured he was some shakes. Betty was eighteen that summer, slim but rounded, tan but lovely, with hair a golden web that tangled the sunlight. She had lips quick to laugh and the kind that looked easy to kiss. That morning she was wearing homespun jeans and a shirt like a boy, but no boy ever filled it out like she did.

Right off I spotted Red for a cold ticket to trouble. He stopped his horse off to one side, ready for disturbances.

"Howdy!" I straightened up from a dam I was building across a beginning wash. "Riding far?"

"That's my question." Lucas looked me over mighty cool. Maybe I looked like a sprout to him. While I'm nigh six feet tall I'm built slim and my curly hair makes me look younger than I am. "My outfit's the Bar L, and this is my graze."

Tap Henry had turned away from the corral and walked down toward us. His eyes went from Lucas to the redhead and back. Me, I was off to one side. Tap wore his gun tied down but I carried mine shoved into my waistband.

"We're not riding," Tap replied, "we're staying. We're claiming all the range from the creeks to the Pelado."

"Sorry, boys"—Lucas was still friendly although his voice had taken on a chill, "that's all my range and I wasn't planning on giving any of it up. Besides"—he never took his eyes off Tap Henry—"I notice a lot of vented brands on your cattle. All I saw, in fact."

"See any of yours?" Tap was quiet. Knowing how touchy he could be, I was worried and surprised at the same time. This was one fight he wasn't pushing and I was sure glad of it.

"No, I didn't," Lucas admitted, "but that's neither here nor there. We don't like outfits that stock vented brands."

"Meaning anything in particular?" Tap asked.

Quiet as he was, there was a veiled threat in his tone now and Jim Lucas seemed suddenly to realize that his daughter sat beside him. Also, for the first time he seemed to understand that he was dealing with a different kind of man than he had believed.

"Meaning only," he said carefully, "that we don't like careless brands on this range or small outfits that start that way."

Tap was reasonable. More so than I had expected. "We rounded those cattle up," he explained, "from the canyons along the Goodnight. They are abandoned trail herd stock, and we got letters from three of the biggest outfits giving us title to all of their stuff we can find. Most of the

other brands are closed out or in Montana. We aim to run this stock and its increase."

"Maybe. But run it somewheres else. This is my range. Get off it."

"Maybe you take in too much territory?" Tap suggested. "My partner and I aren't hunting trouble, but I don't reckon you hold any deed to this land from the government, the people, or God. You just laid claim to it. We figure you got your hands full, and we lay claim to the triangle of range described."

"Boss," Red interrupted, "I've seen this hombre somewhere before."

Tap did not change expression but it seemed to me that his face went a shade whiter under the tan. Betty was looking worried and several times she had started as if to interrupt.

"We can be neighbors," Tap persisted. "We wanted our own outfit. Now we've got it and we intend to keep it."

Lucas was about to make a hot reply when Betty interrupted. She had been looking at me. Everybody else seemed to have forgotten me and that pleased me just as well. My old gray hat was ragged on the crown and my hair hung down to my shirt collar. My buckskin pullover shirt was unlaced at the neck, my jeans were patched, and my boots were weather-worn and scarred by horns.

Betty said quietly, "Why don't you and your friend come to the dance at Ventana Saturday night? We would all enjoy having you."

Jim Lucas scowled and started impatiently as if to speak, but then he seemed to see me for the first time. His mouth opened, but he swallowed whatever it was he was going to say. What held him I do not know but he stared hard at me.

"Sure," I replied to Betty, "we would be glad to come. We want to be neighborly like my partner said. You can expect us."

Lucas wheeled his horse. "We'll talk about this again. You've been warned." He looked at Tap when he said it, and then started off with Betty beside him.

Red lingered, staring at Tap. "Where was it," he said, "that we met before?"

"We never met." Tap's voice was flat and hard. "And let's hope you don't remember."

That was more of a warning than I ever heard Tap give anybody. Usually, if you asked for it he just hauled iron and then planted you.

We started for the cabin together and Tap glanced around at me.

"Ever sling a six-gun, Rye? If war comes we'll have to scrap to hold our land."

"If it comes"—I pulled off my shirt to wash—"don't you worry. I'll hold-up my end."

"That gal . . ." he commented suddenly, "really something, wasn't she?"

Now, why should that have made me sore?

Saturday morning we shaved early and dressed for the dance. It was a long ride ahead of us and we wanted to get started. When I got my stuff out of my warbag I looked down at those worn and scuffed gun belts and the two six-shooters. Just for a minute there, I hesitated, then I stuffed a pair of old jeans in atop them.

Then I slicked up. My hair was long, all right, but my black broad-cloth suit was almost new and tailored to fit. My clothes have to be tailored because my shoulders are so broad and my waist so slim I can never buy me a hand-me-down. With it I wore a gray wool shirt and a black neckerchief, and topped it off with my best hat, which was black and flat-crowned.

Tap was duded up some, too. When he looked at me I could see the surprise in his eyes, and he grinned. "You're a handsome lad, Rye! A right handsome lad!" But when he'd said it his face chilled as if he had thought of something unpleasant. He added only one thing. "You wearing a gun? You better."

My hand slapped my waistband and flipped back my coat. The butt of my Russian .44 was there, ready to hand. That draw from the waistband is one of the fastest. There was no reason why I should tell him about the other gun in the shoulder holster. That was a newfangled outfit that some said had been designed by Ben Thompson, and if it was good enough for Ben, it was good enough for me.

It was a twenty-five-mile ride but we made good time. At the livery stable I ordered a bait of corn for the horses. Tap glanced at me.

"Costs money," he said tersely.

"Uh-huh, but a horse can run and stay with it on corn. We ain't in no position to ride slow horses."

Betty was wearing a blue gown the color of her eyes, and while there were a half dozen right pretty girls there, none of them could stand with her. The nearest was a dark-eyed señorita who was all flash and fire. She glanced at me once from those big dark eyes, then paused for another look.

Tap wasted no time. He had crossed the room to Betty and was talking to her. Her eyes met mine across the room, but Tap was there first

and I wasn't going to crowd him. The Mex girl was lingering, so I asked for the dance and got it. Light as a feather she was, and slick and easy on her feet. We danced that one and another, and then an Irish girl with freckles on her nose showed up, and after her I danced again with Margita Lopez. Several times I brushed past Betty and we exchanged glances. Hers were very cool.

The evening was almost over when suddenly we found ourselves side by side. "Forgotten me?" There was a thin edge on her voice. "If you remember, I invited you."

"You also invited my partner, and you seemed mighty busy, so I—"

"I saw you," she retorted. "Dancing with Margita."

"She's a good dancer, and mighty pretty."

"Oh? You think so?" Her chin came up and battle flashed in her eyes. "Maybe you think—!" The music started right then so I grabbed her and moved into the dance and she had no chance to finish whatever she planned to say.

There are girls and girls. About Betty there was something that hit me hard. Somehow we wound up out on the porch of this old ranch house turned school, and we started looking for stars. Not that we needed any.

"I hope you stay," she said suddenly.

"Your father doesn't," I replied, "but we will."

She was worried. "Father's set in his ways, Rye, but it isn't only he. The one you may have trouble with is Chet Bayless. He and Jerito."

"Who?" Even as I asked the question the answer was in my mind.

"Jerito Juarez. He's a gunman who works for Bayless. A very fine vaquero, but he's utterly vicious and a killer. As far as that goes, Bayless is just as bad. Red Corram, who works for Dad, runs with them some."

Jerito Juarez was a name I was not likely to forget, and inside me something turned cold. Just then the door opened and Tap Henry came out. When he saw us standing close together on the dark porch his face, in the light of the door, was not pleasant to see.

"I was hunting you, Betty. Our dance is most over."

"Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't realize . . . !"

Tap looked over her head at me. "We've trouble coming," he said, "watch your step."

Walking to the end of the porch, I stepped down and started toward the horses. Under the trees and in the deep shadows I heard voices.

"Right now," a man was saying, "ride over there and go through

their gear. I want to know who they are. Be mighty careful, because if that Tap is who I think he is, he'll shoot mighty fast and straight."

Another voice muttered and then there was a chink of coins. In an open place under the trees I could vaguely distinguish three men.

The first voice added, "An' when you leave, set fire to the place."

That was the man I wanted, but they separated and I knew if I followed the two that went back toward the dance, then the man who was to burn us out would get away. Swiftly, I turned after the latter, and when he reached his horse he was in the lights from the dance. The man was a half-breed, a suspected rustler known as Kiowa Johnny.

Stepping into the open, I said to him, "You ain't going noplace to burn anybody out. If you want to live, unbuckle those gun belts and let 'em fall. And be mighty careful!"

Kiowa stood there, trying to make me out. The outline of me was plain to him, but my face must have been in shadow. He could see both hands at my sides and they held no gun, nor was there a gun in sight. Maybe he figured it was a good gamble that I was unarmed. He grabbed for his gun.

My .44 Russian spoke once, a sharp, emphatic remark, and then acrid power smoke drifted and above the sound of the music within I heard excited voices. Kiowa Johnny lay sprawled on the hard-packed earth.

Wanting no gunfights or questions, I ducked around the corner of the dance hall and back to the porch where I had been standing with Betty. The door that opened to the porch was blocked by people, but all were looking toward the dance floor. One of them was Margita. Moving among them, I touched her arm and we moved out on the floor together.

Right away she knew something was wrong. She was quick, that girl. And then the music stopped and Jim Lucas was standing in the middle of the floor with Sheriff Fred Tetley.

"Kiowa Johnny's been killed," Tetley said. "Looks like he had a fair shake. Who done it?"

Tap was right in the middle of things with Betty and I saw Red frown as his eyes located him. Almost automatically, those eyes searched me out. He was puzzled when he looked away.

"Had it comin' for years!" A gray-haired man near me was speaking. "Maybe we won't lose so many cows now."

"Who killed him?" Tetley demanded irritably. "Speak up, whoever it was. It's just a formality."

My reasons for not speaking were the best ones, so I waited. Lucas put a hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"Best forget it, Fred. His gun was half-drawn, so he made a try for it. Whoever shot him was fast and could really shoot. That bullet was dead center through the heart despite the bad light!"

His eyes went to Tap Henry, and then momentarily, they rested on me. Margita had me by the arm and I felt her fingers tighten. When she looked up at me she said quietly, "You saw it?"

Somehow, something about her was warm, understanding. "I did it." My voice was low and we were a little apart from the others. "There are good reasons why nobody must know now. It was quite fair." Simply, then, but without mentioning Red, I told her what I had heard.

She accepted my story without question. All of them at the dance knew every effort would be made to run us off South Fork, so my story was no surprise. Some women could keep a secret and I was sure she was one of them.

That we were on very shaky ground here both Tap and I knew. It was not only Lucas. As the biggest of the ranchers, and the one whose actual range had been usurped, he had the most right to complain, but Bayless of the Slash B was doing the most talking, and from what I had heard, he had a way of taking the law into his own hands.

Tap joined me. "You see that shooting?" he asked. Then without awaiting a reply, he continued, "Guess he had it coming, but I wonder who did it? That's the kind of shooting Wes Hardin does or the Laredo Kid. Heard anything?"

"Only that Johnny had it coming. He was the kind who might be hired to dry-gulch a man or burn him out."

Tap glanced at me quickly, but before he could speak, Betty hurried up to us.

"You two had better go," she whispered. "There's some talk around and some of the men are hunting trouble."

She spoke to both of us, but she looked at me. Tap shifted his feet. "What do you expect us to do?" he demanded. "Run?"

"Of course not!" she protested. "But why not avoid trouble until I can talk some sense into Dad?"

"That's reasonable, Tap. Let's go."

"If you want to back down"—his voice was irritable and he spoke more sharply than he ever had to me—"go ahead and go! I say face 'em and show 'em they've got a fight on their hands!"

The contempt in his voice got to me but I took a couple of deep breaths before I answered him. "Don't talk like that, Tap. When a fight comes, I'll be ready for it, only why not give Betty a chance? Once the shooting starts there'll be no more chance."

Two men shoved through the door followed by a half dozen others. My pulse jumped and I grabbed Tap's arm. "Let's get out of here! There's Chet Bayless and Jerito Juarez!"

How could I miss that lithe, wiry figure? Betty Lucas gave me a swift, measuring look of surprise. Tap shook my hand from his arm and shot me a glance like he'd give to a yellow dog. "All right," he said, "let's go! I can't face them alone!"

What they must be thinking of me I could guess, but all I could think of was facing Bayless and Jerito in that crowded room. And I knew Jerito and what would happen when he saw me. The crowd would make no difference, nor the fact that innocent people might be killed.

Betty avoided my eyes and moved away from my hand when I turned to say good-bye, so I merely followed Tap Henry out the door. All the way home he never said a word, nor the next morning until almost noon.

"You stay away from Betty," he said then, "she's my girl."

"Betty's wearing no brand that I can see," I told him quietly, "and until somebody slaps an iron on her, I'm declaring myself in the running.

"I don't," I continued, "want trouble between us. We've rode a lot of rivers together, and we've got trouble started here. We can hold this place and build a nice spread."

"What about last night?" His voice was cold. "You took water."

"Did you want to start throwing lead in a room full of kids and women? Besides, fightin' ain't enough. Anybody with guts and a gun can fight. It's winning that pays off."

His eyes were measuring me. "What does that mean?" That I'd fallen in his estimation, I knew. Maybe I'd never stood very high.

"That we choose the time to fight," I said. "Together we can whip them, but just showing how tough we are won't help. We've got to get the odds against us as low as we can."

"Maybe you're right." He was reluctant to agree. "I seen a man lynched once because he shot a kid accidental in a gunfight." He sized me up carefully. "You seemed scared of those three."

We looked at each other over the coffee cups and inside I felt a slow hot resentment rising, but I kept it down. "I'm not," I told him, "only Chet Bayless is known for eight square killings. Down Sonora way Jerito is figured to have killed twice that many. That Jerito is poison mean, and we can figure on getting hurt even if we win."

"Never figured them as tough as all that," Tap muttered. Then he

shot me a straight, hard glance. "How come you know so much about 'em?"

"Bayless," I said carefully, "is a Missourian. Used to run with the James boys, but settled in Eagle Pass. Jerito—everybody in Sonora knows about him."

The next few days followed pleasant and easy, and we worked hard without any words between us beyond those necessary to work and live. It irritated me that Tap doubted me.

On the fourth afternoon I was stripping the saddle off my steeldust when I heard them coming. A man who lives like I do has good ears and eyes or he don't live at all. "Tap!" I called to him low but sharp. "Riders coming!"

He straightened up, then shot a look at me. "Sure?"

"Yeah." I threw my saddle over a log we used for that and slicked my rifle out of the scabbard and leaned it by the shed door. "Just let 'em come."

They rode into the yard in a compact bunch and Tap Henry walked out to meet them. Bayless was there, riding with Jim Lucas, but Jerito was not. The minute I saw that I felt better. When they first showed I had stepped back into the shed out of sight. There were a dozen of them in the bunch and they drew up. Bayless took the play before Lucas could get his mouth open.

"Henry!" He said it hard and short. "You been warned. Get your stuff. We're burning you out!"

Tap waited while you could count three before he spoke. "Like hell," he said.

"We want no nesters around here! Once one starts they all come! And we want nobody with your record!"

"My record?" Tap had guts, I'll give him that. He stepped once toward Bayless. "Who says I—!"

"I do!" It was Red Corram. "You rode with that Roost outfit in the Panhandle."

"Sure did." Tap smiled. "I reckon not a man here but ain't misbranded a few head. I ain't doing it now."

"That's no matter!" Bayless was hard. "Get out or be buried here!"

Lucas cleared his throat and started to speak.

Tap looked at him. "You feel that way, Lucas?"

"I'm not for killing," he said, "but—!"

"I am!" Bayless was tough about it. "I say they get out or shoot it out!"

Tap Henry had taken one quick glance toward the shed when they

rode up, and when he saw me gone he never looked again. I knew he figured he was all alone. Well, he wasn't. Not by a long shot. Now it was my turn.

Stepping out into the open, I said, "That go for me, too, Chet?"

He turned sharp around at the voice and stared at me. My hat was pulled low and the only gun I wore was that .44 Russian in my waistband. I took another step out and a little bit toward the trail, which put Bayless in a bad spot. If he turned to face me his side was to Tap. "Who are you?" Bayless demanded. He was a big blue-jowled man, but right now the face under those whiskers looked pale.

"The name is Tyler, Chet. Ryan Tyler. Don't reckon you ever heard *that* name before, did you now?" Without turning my head, I said to Tap, but loud enough so they could all hear me. "Tap, if they want to open this ball, I want Bayless."

They were flabbergasted, you could see it. Here I was, an unknown kid, stepping out to call a rancher known as a gunman. It had them stopped, and nobody quite knew what to say.

"Lucas," I said, "you ain't a fool. You got a daughter and a nice ranch. You got some good boys. If this shooting starts we can't miss Bayless or you."

It was hot, that afternoon, with the clouds fixing up to rain. Most of the snow was gone now, and there was the smell of spring in the air.

"Me, I ain't riding nowhere until I've a mind to. I'm fixing to stay right here, and if it's killing you want, then you got a chance to start it. But for every one of us you bury, you'll bury three of you."

Tap Henry was as surprised as they were, I could see that, and it was surprise that had them stopped, not anything else. That surprise wasn't going to last, I knew. Walking right up to them, I stopped again, letting my eyes sweep over them, then returning to Bayless.

"Why don't you get down, Chet? If you go for that gun you better have solid footing. You don't want to miss that first shot, Chet. If you miss it you'll never get another.

"You aimed to do some burning, Chet. Why don't you get down and start your fire? Start it with a gun like your coyote friend did?" Without shifting his eyes, Bayless stared, and then slowly he kicked one foot out of a stirrup. "That's right, Chet. Get down. I want you on the ground, where you don't have so far to fall. This hombre"—I said it slow—"paid Kiowa Johnny to burn us out. I heard 'em. I gave Johnny a chance to

drop his guns and would have made him talk, but he wanted to take a chance. He took it."

"You killed Johnny?" Lucas demanded, staring at me. "He was supposed to be a fast man with a gun."

"Him?" The contempt was thick in my voice. "Not even middling fast." My eyes had never left Bayless. "You want to start burning, Chet, you better get down."

Chet Bayless was bothered. It had been nigh two years since he had seen me and I'd grown over an inch in height and some in breadth of shoulder since then. My face was part shaded by that hat and he could just see my mouth and chin. But he didn't like it. There was enough of me there to jar his memory and Chet Bayless, while fast with a gun, was no gambler. With Jerito or Red there, he would have gambled, but he knew Red was out of it because of Tap.

"Lucas," I said, "you could be riding in better company. Bayless ain't getting off that horse. He's got no mind to. He figures to live awhile longer. You fellers better figure it this way. Tap and me, we like this place. We aim to keep it. We also figure to run our own cows, but to be fair about it, anytime you want to come over here and cut a herd of ours, come ahead. That goes for you—not for Bayless or any of his gun-handly outfit."

Chet Bayless was sweating. Very careful, he had put his toe back in the stirrup. Jim Lucas shot one glance at him, and then his old jaw set.

"Let's go!" He wheeled his horse and without another word they rode away.

Only Red looked back. He looked at Tap, not me. "See you in town!" he said.

Henry called after him. "Anytime, Red! Just anytime at all!"

When the last of them had gone he turned and looked at me. "That was a tough play, kid. S'pose Bayless had drawed on you?"

"Reckon he'd of died," I said simply enough, "but I didn't figure he would. Chet's a cinch player. Not that he ain't good with that Colt. He is—plenty!"

Walking back, I got my rifle. "Gosh amighty, I'm sure hungry!" I said, and that was all. What Tap thought of it, I had no idea. Only a couple of times I caught him sizing me up. And then the following night he rode off and I knew where he was riding. He was gone a-courting of Betty Lucas.

That made me sore but there was nothing I could do about it. He sort of hinted that Margita was my dish, but that wasn't so. She was all