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Short
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Tales



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THE MESILLA FILES

SHORT TALL TALES

Night of the Lantern

By Theo Clifton



Night of the Lantern

The old-timers in Mesilla will tell you that most legends begin with a grain of truth and grow larger with every telling. They will also tell you that some stories grow because nobody has ever managed to explain them.

This is one of those stories.

The tale begins during the summer of 1878, when Billy the Kid was still a young outlaw moving across the New Mexico Territory. In those days, Mesilla was a lively place filled with merchants, ranchers, soldiers, travelers, and the occasional man who preferred not to answer too many questions.

One warm evening, a dust storm swept across the valley and settled over the town like a blanket. By midnight, the streets were empty except for a few lanterns burning outside the saloons and shops surrounding the plaza.

According to the story, an elderly merchant named Esteban Morales was preparing to close his store when he noticed a rider entering town from the east.

The horse moved slowly.

The rider carried a lantern.

At first, there seemed nothing unusual about it.

Then Esteban noticed the light.

It was blue.

Not pale blue.

Not moonlight.

A deep, strange blue that seemed to glow without flame.

The rider stopped in front of the store.

When he stepped from the saddle, Esteban recognized him immediately.

Billy the Kid.

The young outlaw removed his hat and asked a peculiar question.

"Sir," Billy said, "can you tell me how to reach the other Mesilla?"

Esteban laughed.

"There is only one Mesilla."

Billy shook his head.

"No. There's another one."

He pulled a folded map from inside his coat.

The paper was old and stained, as though it had survived many years in the desert.

Billy spread it across a barrel beneath the lantern's glow.

Esteban later swore that the map showed roads he had never seen.

There were buildings where no buildings existed.

Canyons appeared where the land should have been flat.

Most disturbing of all, a second Mesilla appeared on the map several miles west of town.

The place was marked only by a symbol.

A circle.

Four lines.

And strange markings surrounding it.

Years later, researchers would note that the drawing closely resembled what became known as the Mesilla Veil Symbol.

At the time, however, Esteban simply thought the boy had gone mad.

Billy asked if anyone in town knew where the map had come from.

Esteban said no.

Billy folded the paper and stared toward the dark Organ Mountains.

Then he said something the merchant would never forget.

"I found this map in a place that shouldn't exist."

Before Esteban could ask what he meant,
Billy climbed back onto his horse.

The blue lantern swung from the saddle.

The strange light illuminated the street.

And then Billy rode away.

Most stories would end there.

This one does not.

The next morning, several townspeople
reported seeing unusual tracks leading west
from Mesilla.

Not horse tracks.

Not wagon tracks.

Something else.

The marks crossed arroyos and rocky
ground where no trail existed.

A small group followed them.

Among them was a ranch hand named
Miguel Torres.

According to his account, the tracks led
toward a canyon that does not appear on
any known map.

The men followed the trail until late afternoon.

There, deep among the rocks, they discovered something extraordinary.

A lantern.

Blue.

Still glowing.

No horse.

No rider.

No sign of Billy.

Only the lantern.

The men argued over who would touch it first.

Finally, Miguel picked it up.

The moment he did, the flame vanished.

The blue light disappeared.

The lantern became an ordinary rusted metal lamp.

Some wanted to take it back to town.

Others wanted nothing to do with it.

In the end, they left it where it lay.

When a second party returned several days later, the lantern was gone.

No one ever found it again.

Months passed.

Then strange rumors began to spread.

Travelers claimed they had seen Billy riding through the desert long after he should have been elsewhere.

A rancher reported watching a lone rider carrying a blue lantern near the Organ Mountains.

A stagecoach passenger swore he saw Billy standing beside an abandoned trail that vanished into the darkness.

Most dismissed the stories as imagination.

After all, Billy the Kid was becoming famous.

People claimed to see him everywhere.

Yet one final account keeps the story alive.

He watched as it approached.

The figure carrying it appeared to be a young man on horseback.

The rider paused atop a ridge.

For several moments he simply stared toward Mesilla.

Then he turned west.

The light vanished.

When the surveyor investigated the location, he discovered something scratched into a flat stone.

The symbol matched the one from Billy's mysterious map.

Years later, Sheriff Tomas Ortega would include a sketch of that same symbol in one of his notebooks.

Decades later, Captain Voss would encounter similar markings during his own investigations.

And still later, researchers at the TRC Research Center would classify the symbol as one of the earliest known references to the Mesilla Veil.

As for Billy the Kid?

History records that he died in Fort Sumner in 1881.

Most historians agree on that fact.

The people of Mesilla, however, occasionally tell a different story.

They say that on certain nights, when the moon is low and the desert wind is silent, a rider can sometimes be seen crossing the old plaza.

The horse moves slowly.

The rider wears a black hat.

And hanging from the saddle is a lantern glowing with a strange blue light.

He never speaks.

He never stops.

He simply rides west toward a destination known only to him.

Toward the Other Mesilla.

Toward the place beyond the veil.

Whether the story is true, nobody can say.

But if you find yourself alone in Old Mesilla after midnight and happen to see a blue light moving through the darkness, the old-timers offer one piece of advice.

Don't follow it.

Some roads lead to places that were never meant to be found.

