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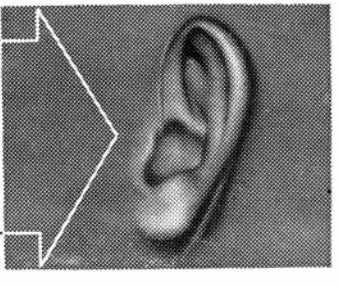

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DEVIL'S ISLAND —NEW STYLE

By

LAURI WIRTA

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(Continued on page 109)

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Ted Palmer Picks:

For Mystery—"The Big Steal" with Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer and William Bendix (RKO).

When a $300,000 Army payroll is stolen, Lt. Duke Halliday (Robert Mitchum) and Joan Grahame (Jane Greer) start across Mexico by car in pursuit of the thief. They, in turn, are pursued by Captain Vincent Blake (William Bendix) who has accused Duke of taking the money. As the chase progresses, the tension continues to mount until the swift, surprise ending. *The plot of the picture gets jumbled, but the thrill-a-minute pace will hold you in your seat.*

• • •

For Comedy-Romance—"The Lady Takes A Sailor" with Jane Wyman, Dennis Morgan, Eve Arden, Robert Douglas and Allyn Joslyn (Warner Bros.).

The lady (Jane Wyman) is president of a national research institute, impeccable, honest and engaged to a stuffy Harvard lawyer (Allyn Joslyn). People begin to doubt her integrity, however, when she returns from a sailboat trip and says that she has ridden with "Davey Jones" in a strange, underwater craft which was stalled by an octopus. Trying to straighten it out by proving that real-life Bill Craig (Dennis Morgan) was the mysterious "Davey" and that his craft was a new Navy underwater tank, is an hilarious task. *This is a daffy picture that will give you a full evening of laughter.*

• • •

For Drama—"The Great Gatsby" with Alan Ladd, Betty Field, MacDonald Carey, Ruth Hussey, Barry Sullivan, Howard Da Silva and Shelley Winters (Paramount).

Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic about the roaring '20s, this film tells the tragic story of Jay Gatsby (Alan Ladd), who became a bootlegger because he thought money could buy everything—even a rich man's wife. In the course of the story, Gatsby tries to crash Long Island society but finds it as false in its way of life as he is in his. In the end, awake at last to his empty daydreams, Gatsby is murdered for a crime he didn't commit. *Spottily played, this film claims its chief interest as a portrait of a wild and dizzy by-gone era.*

• • •

For Adventure—"Slattery's Hurricane" with Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, Veronica Lake and John Russell (20th Century-Fox).

Ex-Navy pilot, Will Slattery (Richard Widmark), now a chauffeur pilot for an importer, meets his wartime buddy, Felix Hobson (John Russell), who is hunting hurricanes for the Navy. He discovers that his one-time sweetheart, Aggie (Linda Darnell), is now Mrs. Hobson. The importer's secretary, Dolores (Veronica Lake), who is in love with Slattery, realizes that he is still interested in Aggie and disappears. While looking for Dolores and straightening out the situation between Aggie, Hobson and himself, Slattery finds that he is unwittingly involved in a narcotics smuggling ring. He finally makes amends by taking Hobson's place on a dangerous mission to locate a particularly vicious storm. *This is an exciting look into the lives of U. S. Navy hurricane hunters.*

• • •

For A Western—"Calamity Jane and Sam Bass" with Yvonne De Carlo and Howard Duff (Universal-International). Technicolor.

Sam Bass (Howard Duff) had never fired a gun before he came to Denton, Texas. He learns fast, though, when the town banker has his horse poisoned prior to the big race of the year. Turned outlaw to recover money from the banker which is rightfully his, Bass takes to the hills with the assistance of Calamity Jane (Yvonne De Carlo). Sam's true love, Kathy Egan, convinces Sam that he should give himself up. When it looks like the jury for his trial will be packed against him by the banker, Sam escapes again with Calamity Jane's help. There's a showdown battle and Sam is fatally wounded. When he asks to be taken to Kathy, Calamity Jane realizes that Sam Bass was never for her. *There's enough action, color and different twists to make this a show that Western fans will want to see.*

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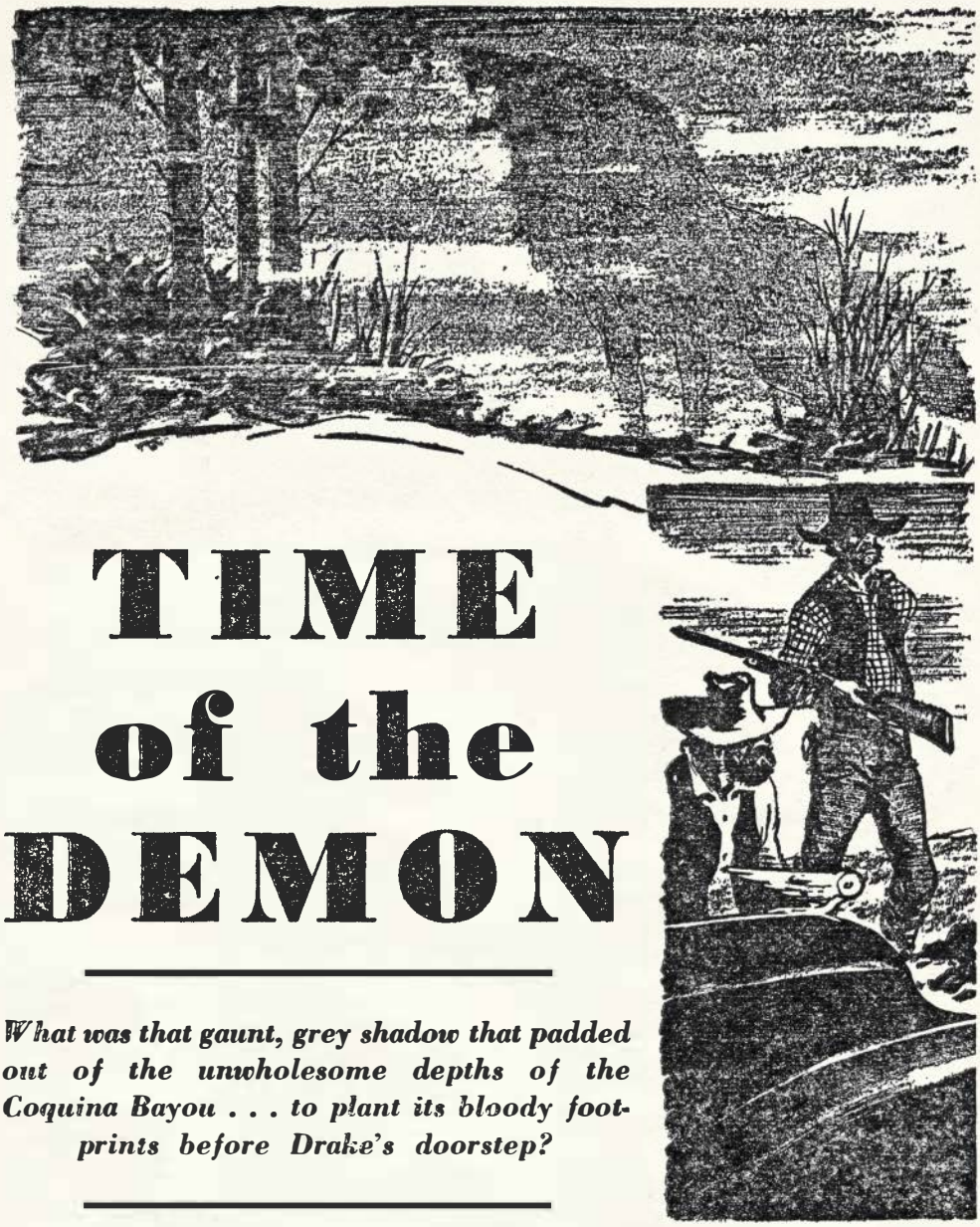


TIME of the DEMON

What was that gaunt, grey shadow that padded out of the unwholesome depths of the Coquina Bayou . . . to plant its bloody footprints before Drake's doorstep?

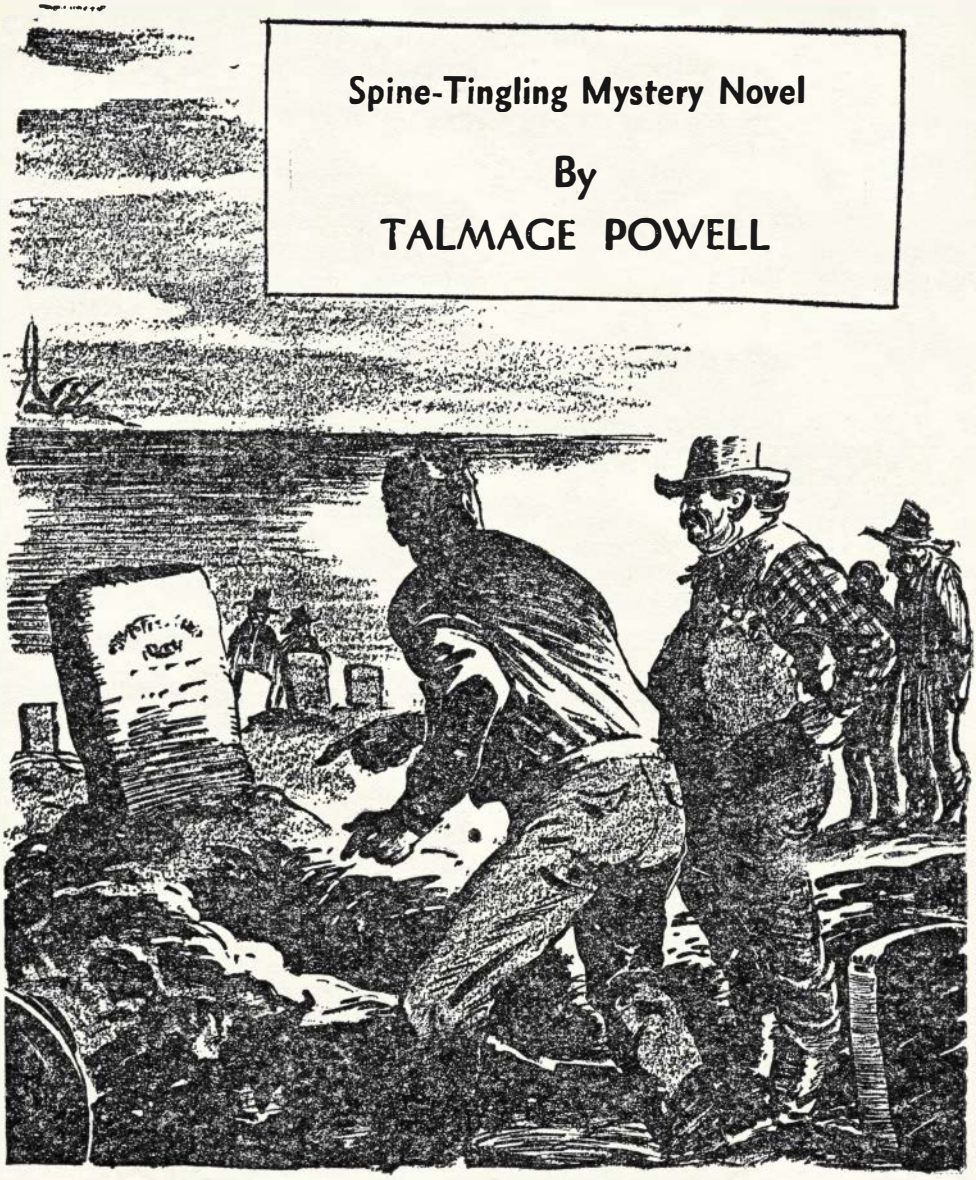
CHAPTER ONE

The Gaunt Grey Wolf

FESS COLLINS was standing at the back door of the house when I went through the kitchen. He was a lean, spare man, his face mostly lantern jaw, beard stubble that was colorless, and shifty, washed-out blue eyes. His thin, sandy hair had been mashed down by his hat and pasted to his forehead with sweat. He stood scuffing his cracked brogans in the dust and slapping his worn, dusty hat

Spine-Tingling Mystery Novel

By TALMAGE POWELL



"Who tried to open that grave?" I demanded of Hunkle.

against the leg of the faded, patched overalls he wore. His bony shoulders carried that dogged droop that speaks of a century of sharecropping, handed down from work-broken father to son.

I stepped out of the kitchen into the bright Louisiana sunlight. "What is it, Fess? Jebba said you wanted to see me."

"Bad trouble, Mist' Drake. Strange trouble. That big grey wolf was seen again."

"Who saw him?"

Collins worried his hat in his hands and licked his thin lips. "I did, Mist' Drake. Just before daybreak this morning. I had just got up. The ground fog was bad. I

could just hear the sound of my trot-line bell down on the bayou. I went over there. The line was acting up in the water. I knowed I'd hooked me a big catfish in the night. I was pulling him in when I saw this shadow, big and grey, slipping in the brush at the edge of the clearing."

I fastened my eyes on Fess, let the silence eat at him.

"I swear to it, Mist' Drake! The mist so bad like that, I thought at first I was mistaken, that it was just mist I was seeing. Then I heard the cracking of them twigs in there and knowed I'd seen the big grey wolf."

His lips were slack; there was almost naked terror in his eyes. And I knew talk had been going around the swamp people. Dark talk, the kind of talk that feeds on the fuel of its own sinister sound. Talk that would bring back into expression legends and tales that seemed never to be forgotten in the bayou country.

It could turn out to be dangerous talk.

I shoved Fess ahead of me, away from the house. I glanced over my shoulder, saw the flash of a white face there behind a window in the house. My lips thinned. This talk, I thought, hadn't started until a week or two after Anton Martel and his wife Lyria had come here as my guests.

UNDER a spreading live-oak tree that cast a pool of coolness even in the heat of the afternoon, I spun Fess around.

"Fess," I said, "you're a liar! You're a rotton, stinking, swamp-rat liar! I want you to remember that. You go spreading talk about a big grey wolf among the croppers, and I'll make you so sorry you'll wish your dirty mammy had cut your tongue out before you were old enough to talk!"

For an instant, his chin came up, that sharp, lean chin that always sagged on his chest. He looked at me and on past me at the house, and hatred and greed and covetousness flared in his eyes. Then it was gone, and his chin sank toward his chest. He twisted his hat in his hands and said, "Yes, Mist' Drake. Then it wasn't the wolf."

"Good! You know I can't have crazy talk going around, upsetting things. We're laying in cane, and we can't let the work get slowed down."

"Then it wasn't the wolf," Fess said, "so it must have been one of the dogs."

I'd started away. His words brought me up short. I turned back toward him. "One of the dogs did what?"

"Dragged a cow down, Mist' Drake. They's over there talking about it now. Over to Coquina Bayou."

I stared into his groveling, yet inscrutable, eyes. From somewhere out of the day, I felt a wash of cold down my back.

"Let's get over there," I said.

We walked. I'm tall, heavy only through the shoulders, rangy like all the Drake men. We've always been good at wringing a living out of the soil, keeping order over the countless acres the first Drake seized when he came to this country. Drakes held on to this land through the Civil War and the hell of what they called Reconstruction. In the old days we were called educated gentlemen; today in some quarters we're called things that are not so nice. But nobody denies our power to endure, and few men will challenge Drake strength.

All the Drakes were gone but me. I'd spent an easy, carefree life up to a short time back when I'd had to come back and take over the plantation. The telegram telling of my uncle's death had caught me in a New York hotel room, getting ready to go out of town with some old school friends.

I'd looked at the yellow paper with the black words and known what it meant. The end of the parties and freedom; no more making women my major occupation. I won't deny that I was sorry. But

I never made the party that night. I was on a plane bound for Louisiana; and there stirred in me a call, strong and undeniable. The call of the Drake lands, the soil where the bones of my ancestors were laid. A new life, a new being lay before me, and I was expectant, surging inside, and glad. I thought of the magic of night over the bayous, of the whispering of the old river that knew more secrets than man would ever know. . . .

Fess Collins was puffing, in a shuffling run to keep up with me. We reached the slight rise overlooking the broad pasture-land that sloped gently downward until it melted into the thick, jungle-like brush walling in Coquina Bayou.

I stopped at the crest of the rise. Fess drew up beside me. A small group of men were gathered at the far side of the pasture. I walked on toward them, across the rich, black-muck land, Fess trailing me.

At the sound of my footsteps, men turned their heads and looked over their shoulders at me. Lean, grizzled, sun-baked men. Men who worked the soil and knew only hardship in squeezing out their living.

They parted as I came up. A Hereford cow lay on its side on the earth, eyes filmed and attracting a wealth of insects, its mouth opened as if to bawl. Its throat had been torn away, and the earth was soaked with blood around it.

There was something unwholesome in the eyes of the six men grouped about the cow. I hunkered beside the animal, looking at the wound. The flesh had been ripped and mangled, as if giant jaws had closed on it and refused to let go. I stood up, some of the heat going out of the day, a film of clamminess over my forehead.

I saw that Gorcy was watching me. It seemed that Gorcy watched everything on the Drake plantation. He was a short, square-shaped man, with a matting of black beard on his face. Sweat glittered in tiny droplets at the base of each hair of his beard. He had a mane of unruly black hair and burning black eyes. There was something violent, half wild, about Gorcy. He was the material, I'd thought a time or two, of which fanatics are made. And he made little bones about hating me with a natural hatred some men have for others who are better off. I knew he read books and his talk was the kind to stir men up.

LOOKING at the stony faces around me, I said, "Who found this heifer?"

"I did," Gorcy said. "I came over to look at that white-face with calf and found her."

"Do any of you know how it happened?"

"It looks like a wolf has tore her throat out," Gorcy said. A muttering of agreement from the other men followed his words.

"There are no wolves in this country!" I pushed up close to Gorcy. "I'll have no more of that kind of talk, Gorcy, from you or anyone else. Don't tell me you believe in this old wives' tale that has started a big grey wolf roaming the bayous, a creature beyond the ken of normal life, normal understanding?"

Gorcy hooded his eyes with their lids. "I believe what I see."

"A dog did it," I said. "I'll examine the dogs. The one that has turned blood-hungry, I will shoot. Any man that repeats or adds fuel to this talk that started a week or more ago will be fired and driven off this land without any further notice. We've got cane to harvest if the lot of us expect to eat next year. Is everything clear?"

They scuffed their worn brogans in the pasture grass, dropped their eyes and said nothing.

"You'll not talk of it even to your women," I added. "And you'll see that

they mention the wolf no more. Gorcy, pick two men to skin that cow. We'll tan the hide. Then bury it and go back to your work."

I turned and walked back toward the house. I could feel the pressure of their eyes on my back.

When I was over the crest of the hill out of their sight, I let my steps slow. I had to admit it myself: A dog had not killed that cow.

In sight of the house, I saw the flash of a white face against that upstairs window again. There for a moment, then gone. I knotted my hands at my sides. In my mind was a sudden wonder, a great doubt.

A shadow, like a thing unholy and loathesome creeping out of the bayous and tangled swamps, was clamping itself over the Drake lands.

I tried to shake off the feeling of foreboding as I entered the house. For a moment, I paused, to feel the security of the old house, to appreciate it. It was built of stone that had been hauled out of the Georgia country many years ago. It had quartered troops in the Civil War. It had withstood time, flood and season. It was a dark, vast, rambling tribute to the Drake who'd built it, the ballroom holding the memories of many light feet, the huge crystal chandelier in the vaulted hall as glittering as the day it had been shipped from Paris. Except for modernizing with electricity and plumbing and the usual repairs, the house was the same as it had always been, like a refuge that would outlast my children's children.

Jebba said, "Chicken gumbo for supper!"

"Fine, Jebba."

I glanced at her, caught her looking at me, a frown on her face reflecting the worry in her eyes.

"We've lost a cow, Jebba."

She rolled her eyes up in her face, turned back to her huge kitchen range. I wasn't sure, but I thought her fat shoulders were shaking and her voice mumbling a dark incantation as I went on through the kitchen.

I thought about Anton, then. Who was he? The friend I knew in Europe? Or, rather—*what* was he?

Then I saw her on the stairs. Lyria. She was well named. She was slender as a gypsy. She was gypsy music caught up in human form, an angular face, deep, dark eyes, liquid in their intensity, hair blacker than night tumbling down about her shoulders.

"I was at the window upstairs," she said. She had been born in Middle Europe. She spoke English with no accent, with only a Slavic slurring of her words. "Something has happened, hasn't it, Norman?"

"Yes."

She came down the stairs, one step at a time, slowly, and I moved up to meet her. The added height the stair gave her put her head on a level with mine.

"Norman," she whispered, "I'm afraid . . ." I reached for her hands, felt her shiver.

"Nothing will happen to you here, Lyria."

"I thought I was over being afraid. I remembered all that Anton had told me about you, how kind and strong you were. I thought when we came here I would never be afraid again."

I could read in her eyes all the fear she'd known. I'd met Anton during the war, in England, where he was training a group of his countrymen. He had lived only for the day of the liberation of his country. But the liberation of that little Middle-Europe republic had been short lived. It was the story of the usual coup, with Anton Martel on the wrong side of the political fence. I never did learn the complete details of his and Lyria's flight across Europe, but I knew their experiences had left their mark. Anton had

written me when he'd arrived in this country, and I'd insisted on them coming down for a while.

I'd found him a man broken in health, shadows in his eyes, his once lean, muscular physique wasted away. He brought something nameless and strange into the Drake house, a thing harbored in the depths of his sunken eyes. But he brought his wife too. Lyria.

I tried not to think of that any more than I could help.

Holding her hands now, I felt my senses swim. Her enormous dark eyes grew in my vision, until almost everything else was blotted out. I'd experienced the same sensation when I'd been out in cold, rainy weather, had come in shaking with a chill and let myself into a tub of relaxing warm water.

There was a pounding in my temples, a dryness in my throat. And she seemed unable to move. The same force gripped us both. My face drifted closer to hers. The pounding in my temples sent up a chant: "It's wrong, Norman. It's evil, unholy. Wrong, wrong. . . ."

But I didn't care. I was going to taste the sweetness of her lips, and the thought of it sent a tide of weakness flooding over me.

Then I saw Anton standing at the head of the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Stranger in the House

ANTON'S face was like a skull hovering in the shadows at the head of the stairs. Out of the skull two dark lights glowed—his eyes.

"Norman," he said.

I passed Lyria, conscious that she took in a breath, trying to mask the emotions that for an instant had flooded in her face.

Anton seemed not to have noticed how we had been standing on the stairs. "Norman," he said, "I'd like to borrow your car this afternoon. I want to drive into New Orleans for some books." He repeated, "Books," as if only a part of him were dwelling in Anton's body. Again that thought returned to me. There was a numbed queerness about him, a breathlessness, like a man on the verge of some startling discovery, or a man about to experience a strange ecstasy for which there are no words to describe.

I knew that Lyria was looking at him and shivering. I thought of the way he prowled his room at night, pacing back and forth, back and forth. Twice, very late, I had heard him slip from the house. Once I had followed him. He'd moved out across the fields in the night, stopping two or three times like a person with only a vague sense of direction. He'd held his hands to his temples, gazed about vacantly, then gone on. I had lost him in the cane fields. On the way back I'd taken a more direct route to the house, passing Gorcy's shack. A light had burned behind Gorcy's window. Gorcy seemed never to sleep, and to know everything that went on.

To say that Anton was strange was putting it more than mildly. Gorcy had noticed; all the croppers had noticed; the whole countryside had.

"Use the car any time you like, Anton," I said.

"Thank you," he said. "Coming, Lyria?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned toward his room. Too tall, too lean. That was Anton. From old aristocratic stock in whom the blood had worn thin.

I knew a little about Anton's section in Europe, that old, old spot on earth that had spawned tales similar to the Dracula legend.

I laughed out loud. For some reason I had to. I was a modern man, standing in a modern house, in a nation that was

classic for its modernity. So to reassure myself, I had to laugh.

I walked out on the front veranda, thinking of Anton. Remembering words he had said. "There comes a time in pain when it is pain no more, when the body grows numb and the mind seems to exist by itself. It is on this premise that some of the strange cults are based, on the premise that the mind can project itself alone from the body. Such a pain is an actual fact. I know. I experienced it. There in the concentration camp, I sank into such pain."

He'd said those words the first night he'd come here. He'd paused, licked his lips, taken a breath. "If the mind reaches the point where it refuses to record the sensations of the body, then the mind can be said to be existing independently. And it would be but a step from that to have the mind project itself into different forms."

Broken and preyed upon by the memories of his experience, I had thought. Anton had always been a man given to speculation approaching the mystical, and his experiences in Europe seemed to have aggravated his condition.

I stood in the hot stillness of the afternoon, and I knew what the countryside was afraid of. I knew the very land feared the coming of darkness.

A moon slipped into the sky that night, big and yellow as cheese. There was a hush in the air, night creatures creeping and crawling in the bayou muck. Away in the distance I could hear the low, dirge-like singing of a group of Negroes. Gathered about some cabin door. Wondering what the night was holding.

I had a rifle in my hand, loaded and on full cock, when I crossed the crest of the hill overlooking the sloping pasture. The brush screening the bayou in the distance was a solid wall of shadows The small herd of cattle was grouped down at the far end of the pasture, one of them bawling every now and then. I crossed the pasture, looked at the fresh earth where the dead cow had been buried. Perhaps those bovine creatures ahead of me could still smell the blood and sense the approach of rending death.

I set the rifle against a tall pine that dripped shaggy Spanish moss. I took a bottle of insect repellent from my hip pocket, smeared it over my hands, wrists and face. I would make a night of it if necessary.

I WAS picking up the gun when I saw his face over in the shadows. The sudden sight of it tightened my heart for a second.

"Gorcy!"

"Guarding your cattle, Mr. Drake?"

"You've got a hell of a nerve coming here. I might have shot you."

Gorcy stepped out of the shadows. There was a gun in the crook of his own arm. "Did you examine your dogs, Mr. Drake?"

I said nothing There was black insolence and hatred on Gorcy's face. I thought, failure has poisoned him. He writhes in a blind mental anguish when he compares his life with mine. One of these days Gorcy will have to go. . . .

"Get back to your cabin, Gorcy. I'll not have armed men prowling my fields. Somebody will shoot at a shadow—and the shadow will turn out to be somebody else."

Gorcy didn't move, stood spread-legged, that gun in his hands. Then finally he turned. "All right, Mr. Drake. They're your lands. But it's my family, my wife and little daughter. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them, even at the price of killing one of your dogs!"

I watched him stalk off in the night. I was shaking. I wondered why I hated Gorcy so. It was such a natural thing, a thing bred in the very air.

I took a turn around the pasture, went

back to the house. A woman was sitting in the big living room when I entered. She was slouched in a club chair, a drink in her hand. She was tall, slender, with long, straight blonde hair. She was dressed in jodhpurs and low-cut white silk blouse. There was careless snobbery in the way she clouched in the chair. She was Ethelene Winters, of the Winters plantation. She had been educated in the most snobbish schools in the East. She had everything money could buy—and she was miserable.

But she was lovely, in a cold, cruel way.

"Damn you, Norman," she said. "I thought you were coming to see me."

"I've been busy. There's been—"

"There's been Lyria," she said. She stood up, set the glass down with elaborate casualness. "Kiss me, Norman."

She held her arms up to me, moved toward me. There was something hypnotic in her green eyes. She kissed me, with cold fire, and my blood stirred, sluggish and thick, like the stirring of dark bayou water.

When she stepped back, her laugh tinkled, cold and remote in the room. "Do you see what you've been missing, Norman?"

She laughed again, and I noticed what a thing of abrupt angles her face was. A slight shifting of the angles here and there and she would have been homely, but in Ethelene the effect had been blended so that she was lovely in a way no other woman could ever be lovely.

"You see, Norman?" she said. "You can't escape me! For a long time I hated you because my parents and your uncle made their smug plans for us, and I wouldn't have a husband crammed down my throat that way."

She moved back to me until her green eyes were close and I could hear the soft, sibilant sound of her breathing. "Now I've changed my mind, Norman. That Lyria. That soft, calf-eyed, whispering little weasel! I won't surrender what I want to her! She's not for you Norman. You'd get sick of her pussyfooting in a month's time. You need a woman who understands this country, who'd help you keep the croppers where they belong, who ride the same kind of wild, devilish horseflesh you ride.

"Norman, darling, I'll get you if I have to sell my soul!"

I DREAMED that night of a big cat stalking through the darkest recesses of the swamps, and when I looked in the cat's eyes, I saw Ethelene laughing at me.

I woke sodden with sweat. It was early, but already muggy heat had crawled over the flat, sun-scorched face of the earth.

I listened outside Anton's door, heard nothing. I wondered if he'd found the books he'd wanted in New Orleans. From the window of my room while I was dressing I had seen my coupé sitting out in the drive, dusty and mud-spattered, the way all cars look in the swamp country. From Anton's door I moved to Lyria's. I could hear her moving about in her room. If she was already up, she'd be down shortly. I wanted to see her. I wanted the sound of her voice to erase the dream I'd had last night of a stalking cat.

I was unprepared for the sight that met me in the kitchen. The stove was cold, and there was Jebba, an old straw hat with dusty artificial flowers set awkwardly on her head, her suitcase in hand.

She rolled her eyes in her face, said, "I'se leaving, Mist' Drake."

"But why, Jebba? I thought you liked it here."

"I cain't stay with that thing!" She pointed toward the door. I crossed to it. She had opened the door back into the kitchen. The bright morning light glinted on the dark brown stain near the bottom of the door.

"The mark of the demon!" Jebba said. "I cain't stay 'round that mark! I'm leavin', Mist', Drake."

"Jebba, Jebba," I said. "There are feeble-minded, in-bred morons back in the swamp who would believe such things, but you've never been that kind."

"Never before," she agreed. "But last night from my window, I seen the big, grey shadow. And today I find the footprints. You got to believe that! See them for yourself."

I followed her out into the yard, looked where her emphatic finger pointed. There in the dust were big, indistinct tracks, but if you looked carefully you could see they were tracks like those made by an enormous dog.

I put my hands in my pockets to keep Jebba from seeing their trembling.

"They're Bruno's tracks, Jebba."

"But Bruno—that big dog, he chained."

"I let him run loose early last night to exercise him."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Just the same, if'n it's all right, I take a little vacation down to my sister's in N'Orleans."

She hesitated, then laid her hand impulsively on mine. "I'se sorry, Mist' Drake. I wants you to know it ain't on 'count of you. Guess, one by one they'll all be dropping away from you—'less you git rid of *him!*"

I knew she meant Anton. And I knew with a jar how thin is the crust of our civilization, how easy for a shadow, nameless in the night, to strike a chord of jungle terror in man's mind.

I knew what it might cost for me to keep Anton—and Lyria—here.

"I'se sorry, Mist' Drake! But I see that set to your jaw. I know you a man who cain't be driven. But don't let it lead you to trouble!"

As Jebba waddled away, I knew that soon talk of the blood on my door would be added to the whispers of the grey wolf shadow. Terror would spread and the focus of terror would be this house.

I thought of Anton and wondered what to do. I knew that he was seeking, searching, for some bizarre secret that had clutched his whole mind.

"Beyond a certain point of pain," he had said, "the mind lives independently. If the mind can do that under one set of conditions, another set of conditions might be found which . . . " He had never finished that sentence. But I knew now what he had been trying to say.

It would seem that the best course of action would be to send Anton packing. But could you hold one-time friendship so lightly? And there was Lyria. My thoughts spun. Friend's wife or not, I would take Lyria if I could get her.

I HEARD the sound of footsteps and turned as Lyria entered the kitchen. The morning light made a black glory of her hair. But she was wan, tired, as if she hadn't slept much.

"Good-morning, Norman."

Looking at her, I remembered that moment on the stairs yesterday. I had never kissed Lyria; I had never known until yesterday for sure how she might react if I tried.

I kissed her now. I kissed her in the stark silence of the kitchen, with the muggy swamp heat of the morning swathing us. And when I released her, I saw that she was crying a little.

"I never wanted it to happen, Norman!"

"But I did," I said. "I wanted it from the first moment I saw you."

"But you're Anton's friend!"

"Sure—Anton's friend. But is that . . . thing upstairs really Anton?"

Her eyes grey large, liquid. She whispered, "We mustn't speak of him that way, Norman."

"Why not? You're thinking the same thing!"

She put her hands up to her temples

and almost screamed. "Yes, yes, yes! I hate him! I can't stand the touch of that vacant-eyed thing. I married him out of pity and I've paid a thousand times for it. I married him because I thought he was dying and saw no harm in giving him a week or a month of happiness. And, I'll have to be honest, I knew that as a political refugee he would be able to get to America. I knew he had it arranged. It seemed a way . . ."

I tilted her chin up with my fingers. "You're kind and generous, Lyria. Don't berate yourself because you wanted something out of the marriage too!"

"But he's so different now! As if he really isn't Anton at all. As if his mind is dwelling . . ." She caught the words up short, and we stood staring at each other.

"Norman," she whispered, "his talk of the mind dwelling independently—could he have learned something that no man has learned before?"

She was trembling until her teeth chattered. I licked my dry lips.

"Lyria, you've got to keep a grip on yourself."

"Don't rationalize for me, Norman! For over a thousand years and longer, men talked of splitting the atom. It was the most fantastic dream ever to occur to the mind of man. Only crackpots and dreamers ever believed there was a chance it would be done. Yet it has been done. The fantasy of today is the fact of tomorrow, Norman. I don't know what he's been doing in that room. He told me he wanted a room alone, that he would be quieter, rest easier. But now I've got to go in. I've got see what he's doing.

"I'll go with you."

She almost ran up the wide, spacious stairway. I was beside her. She knocked at Anton's door. There was no answer. I tried the door, found it locked.

"I've got a ring of keys in my room," I said. "I may have a master key that will fit."

When I came back with the keys, Lyria hadn't moved. She watched as I tried the keys. Finally one of them threw the bolt.

The room was dark, close, hot, the blinds drawn. There was a faint stench in it, like something rotting. I glanced at Lyria as I threw open the blinds and windows.

Anton's things were scattered about the room. He hadn't let Jebba in the room to clean up in three or four days, and dirty socks and shirts, cigarette ashes and wadded-up pieces of writing paper were creeping to possession of the room.

"Did he say anything to you about where he was going?"

"No," Lyria said.

"Have you seen him since he came in from New Orleans?"

"Yes, last night. I heard the car drive up. I heard him enter. There was yellow mud all over his shoes and trouser cuffs. I stopped him out in the hall. He looked at me for a long time. In the silence and near darkness over the hall, he scared me. I asked him where he'd gotten so muddy. He looked blankly down at his shoes. He muttered something and went on in to his room. I wanted to follow him, Norman. He looked like a man harried to madness, who needed a kind word—but I was afraid. What is that you have there?"

"Some of those books he's been bringing in. Some of the notes he's written."

THE BOOKS scattered on the bureau were very old, judging from the appearance of their cracked leather bindings. There was a thin volume by V. Steuben: *Study of the Warlocks of the Black Forest.* There were thicker, heavier books bearing ponderous titles in English, French and Latin. I knew Anton had been to all the libraries of New Orleans and to all the dusty book shops in the old Quarter.

Then I turned to the sheaf of paper covered by his violent large handwriting.

"His writing?"

Lyria bit her lip, nodding. "Let me see the notes, Norman."

We read them together. As we read, shadows in the corners of the room came alive, and an icy bond of nameless fear grew between us.

Anton apparently had gone deep into the study of werewolves. The first of his notes was a simple definition: "Werewolf: A person capable of assuming a wolf's form."

Below the definition, Anton had written:

> Were-people. In Respect To Science. Science is nothing more than the law of averages, of chance. Gravity, for example, has worked thus far; hence gravity can be expected to work tomorrow. Viewed from the law of chance, the existence of were-people is scientific fact. They have existed; they will continue to exist. In all cultures, almost without exception, there abound tales of were-people. However isolated one culture from another, the legend of the were-men is almost universal over the face of the earth. It is in the widespread-ness of the legend that the law of chance begins to operate. In India we find that the were-animal is the tiger. In ancient South America it was the jaguar. Over all Europe it happened to be the wolf. The thing to note is that the legend is found in these different regions without, apparently, common root. One further thing to note is the fact that the worst enemy of man in India is the tiger, in South America the jaguar, and in Middle Age Europe the wolf. Always, the were-animal appears to be the *natural* enemy of man.
>
> The ability to change the form and inherent cravings and intentions takes place in two ways: from enchantment outside. or by the *will and power* inherent in the were-man himself. This gathering of the force of will is nothing more than the concentration of mind. It is the transference of mind to another medium. There is among ancient scholars the assumption that this phenomenon is the result of the existence of mind independent of human form, the brain force addling the eyes of the beholders and leading them to believe they have seen the form as a wolf, jaguar or tiger.

I tossed the papers back on the bureau. "Don't read any more, Lyria. I'm sorry I let you read that much."

She looked at the things scattered about the room, at Anton's things, and from the look in her eyes, her thoughts might have been back in Europe, enduring the rain and cold, terror-laden nights of hiding at his side.

"I think I have known," she whispered. "I think I've known for some time. We'll have to find him, Norman, and take him away from here. A good psychiatrist . . ."

When she looked up at me like that. I couldn't refuse. Softly angular face, dark liquid eyes, putting their hope and faith in me. A lost creature in a strange big land. And that maternal drive that had led her to help him across Europe had hold of her now. Duty and sacrifice. Some people gloried in such things.

"You see, Norman? I can do nothing else."

"Okay." I let go of her hands, let my hands drop to my sides. "If we can find him, I want you to go the limit and get him out of your system."

"You're good, Norman!"

"Not good. Just selfish."

As long as Anton lived I thought, he'd stand between me and her. There was something about him that stirred the maternal pity in her. Not love—but while he lived this feeling would be in her, the feeling that she had cheated him in marrying him and must atone, the feeling that he would be helpless without her.

Anton, I decided, would be in the way as long as he lived. Maybe that wouldn't be too long, though.

CHAPTER THREE

The Silent Grave

ETHELENE WINTERS was in the lower hall when Lyria and I came down the stairs. Ethelene looked flushed and out of sorts, as if she'd been drinking heavily the night before. But she was no less beautiful. She was wearing a

halter and shorts, revailing the sleek flat muscles of her supple body. She looked at Lyria, and hatred grew dark and bleak in her green eyes.

"I see you still have your charity wards, darling."

Lyria whitened. I said "Please. Ethelene!"

She shrugged. "Give me a cigarette. And tell Jebba I want some coffee strong and black and heavy with chickory."

"Jebba isn't here. She's taking a vacation."

"Really!" Ethelene bent her head to light her cigarette from my lighter. "Then she hasn't gone to the grave?"

I stared at her. She laughed. "I thought you knew everything that went on around here, Norman. Or has your attention—" she turned her green gaze on Lyria—"gotten wrapped up in the lady here?"

"What grave are you talking about, Ethelene?"

"Norman, honestly you're slipping! Three-quarters of the parish already knows, is already on its collective way there—while you stay shut up in this house, your ears closed to the talk of the people who will leave your cane to rot in the fields! But one really couldn't expect Lyria to be of help in—"

"What grave, Ethelene!"

"Oh. Old man Crowder's. He died three days ago, remember? I think you'd better get over there with me, Norman. Anything that concerns the parish concerns this plantation."

I turned to Lyria, but before I could speak she said, "I understand, Norman. You have to keep your workers in the fields. If there's trouble, you'd better go."

"That's damn sweet of you," Ethelene said. She turned, and her slim body flashed through the front door.

I climbed into Ethelene's yellow con-

vertible beside her. She drove. The top was down. The air that washed over us felt as if it had come out of a steaming oven.

She didn't talk much on the way over to the parish graveyard. Her scathing contempt, though, for Lyria Martel was a thing to be felt. I watched Ethelene's hands on the wheel, deft, sure. She drove the way she rode a horse, the way she drank liquor, and the way she beat a servant when the servant displeased her. She did everything thoroughly, for all her conceit and snobbishness, motivated only by her own whims and desires.

The car slewed down the gravel road, heedless of people plodding along it. There was a thin trickle of those people, all streaming toward the parish burying ground. White and black, they jumped when they heard the roar of that car behind them. If she had hit one, I think Ethelene would have been concerned first for the damage to the car.

"You see what I mean, Norman?" she said, indicating the people. "You've stayed in that house so much you don't know what's going on. Darling, you need me."

"Do I?"

"And you're going to have me," she said, turning her green eyes on me.

We were in sight of the cemetery then; it stood on a hill outside the parish village of Traxel. In this part of the country, if you have money you usually bury your dead in your private mausoleums above ground. If you havn't that kind of money you plant them in the ground, and if the grave sinks, indicating the spongy earth has sucked the coffin down, you try not to think about that scar on the earth where a grave has once been.

Ethelene blasted the horn, demanding passage through the gathered people. She drove right up to the edges of the first graves. Knots of men stood about here and there, stopping their muttering when they saw us.

"The Crowder grave is over that way," Ethelene said. She blasted the horn again, driving down between two rows of graves. I knew those men in their loose, worn overalls didn't like it, but Ethelene didn't give a damn. To her they weren't men. They were machines to harvest cane, squeeze out the juice in the mills under the long, rusty tin sheds that dotted our acres, and boil the juice down to sugar.

"The last time a thing like this happened," Ethelene said, "was in my grandfather's day. I've heard them talk about it. They finally decided that whoever opened the grave had been after a jewel the old woman who'd been buried had owned. The jewel had been in her family for years. Even though they were croppers, she'd clung to it. And she'd made them promise as she lay dying that it would be buried with her."

WE NEARED the spot where the grave had been desecrated. Hunkle, the parish constable, spotted us and hurried over to the car as fast as he could push his fat. His face was bloated, sagging, interspersed with a lacing of red, thread-like liquor veins. His dull blue eyes were bloodshot. He was bald when he removed his hat and sidled up to the car.

"Howdy, Miss Winters, Mr. Drake. A bad thing here."

"Who tried to open that grave?" I said.

"We don't rightly know yet," he said. "There's big claw marks in the earth. A big dog might have done it. Or some of the rowdier boys from the village might have rigged up something out of stiff wire to dig like that, playing a kind of joke on us."

He waited, seemingly pleased with his deduction, but Ethelene and I didn't applaud.

"I tell you," Constable Hunkle said, spitting on the ground, "they's boys in town'd do a thing like that, just for the

hell of it." That's the truth, Mr. Drake."

Hunkle spat again. "'Course," he said, reddening, "they's some in the crowd saying a big grey wolf thing did it, hungering after human flesh."

"Well, don't let them congregate any longer," I said, "and talk that kind of stuff!"

"I was thinking the same thing myself, Mr. Drake."

"Then get to it!"

"Yes, Mr. Drake, I'll get right at it."

"Tell them," Ethelene said, "that any man from the Winters place had better be back at his job by noon!"

"I certain will, Miss Winters. Just as you say. Right away, Miss Winters!"

I saw Gorcy and Fess Collins. Seeing them together wasn't unusual. They'd grown up in neighboring cabins, hunted and fished together. Gorcy, I supposed, was a kind of inspiration to Fess Collins. Fess would have given his right arm to be more like Gorcy.

I met Gorcy's eyes. I remembered him carrying a gun in my cow pasture. In his black, half-wild stare I sensed that he was charging me with his safety and the safety of his household, that he would hold me personally responsible for anything that happened. Because of Anton. I was harboring Anton, and Gorcy connected Anton's appearance with the strange things that had begun to happen. He might not have believed in werewolves, but I had the feeling that Gorcy blamed the Big House for everything that had happened.

Ethelene started the motor, twisted the wheel. One front wheel of the car sank in the soft edge of a grave as she turned the convertible around. She drove out, leaving Hunkle's harsh voice behind us. Hunkle was laying down the law to them. And when he was speaking to croppers, Hunkle could get plenty tough.

At the house, Ethelene stopped the car. "Get rid of her soon, Norman. Her and that crackpot husband. Get rid of her, or I'll come over and claw her calf eyes out."

I looked at Ethelene. She wasn't joking.

LYRIA had breakfast on the table when I went in. I told her briefly what had happened. I didn't see any way around it. She went dead white, and neither of us mentioned Anton's name until after breakfast.

We set out that morning, searching for him. First to the village. We couldn't ask direct questions without the danger of setting off a spark of talk. Traxel was like a little town built around a powder keg. Everybody was talking about the grave business, and there was some drinking going on.

We searched all that day. I loosed Bruno, and he trailed Anton across to Coquina Bayou and there lost the spoor. We couldn't pick it up again. There were so many countless vast acres of black water and tangled undergrowth where a creature could watch and avoid capture.

We could do nothing more. Any hint of Anton's disappearance might lead solid groups of men, armed and with lanterns, out into the swamps to conduct a task similar to ours. If that happened, God help Anton.

Just after dawn the next morning, Lyria knocked on the door of my room. She had to hammer on the heavy oak panel to get me awake. I sat up, groggy with sleep, fumbling for a robe. I heard her voice out in the hall, speaking my name.

I stumbled across the room, opened the door. Her face was flushed in the early light that seeped in the hallway.

"Norman!" she said. "Norman, I've found Anton!"

"Where?" I said.

"In his room. I woke early. I intended to fix you some breakfast. I looked in Anton's room just as a matter of course—and there he was."

I padded down the hall behind her in my slippers, knotting the belt of my robe. She flung the door of Anton's room open, and we went in. He was sprawled on the bed, fully dressed in slacks and shirt. His shoes were wet, caked with mud. His clothes were wrinkled, sour with the stink of the swamp. Matted beard covered his thin face.

I gripped his bony shoulder in my hand and shook him. "Anton!"

He stirred. After a moment, he opened his eyes. They were tired, bloodshot. At first he didn't seem to recognize us, he was that tired and sleepy.

"Anton, it's Norman and Lyria. You know us, don't you?"

He shifted his gaze then, looking at our faces. "Very . . . tired . . ."

"I know. And you can sleep. As long as you like. But let's get you in some clean pajamas."

He sighed, coming more awake. Lyria dropped to her knees beside the bed. I tried not to see the tenderness in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Anton," she whispered, "you're back and that's all that matters."

Yes, her charge was back. Her nervous, high-strung temperamental little-child charge. Anton, it was obvious, filled a deep need in her.

"I'll help you," I said. "Up we go."

"No," he murmured. "It was beautiful. The night was so deep, so vibrant with strange, untold secrets. I was free! Freer than I'd ever been before. I felt as if I could run farther, faster, leap higher than any man." As he remembered, his eyes glistened with a dark ecstasy.

"Leave me alone with him, Norman." Lyria said. "I'll get him ready for bed."

I hesitated, then slipped out of the room. I decided to go down and get some coffee going. I had just reached the shadowy lower hall, chill yet from the mists of night, when I heard a hammering on the front door.

I opened it to find Constable Hunkle standing there. He was wheezing, his sagging jowls quivering.

"Mr. Drake, there's more hell to pay," he cried.

"Come in," I said. "What's happened?"

"It's Gorcy. Gorcy's wife, that is. She was attacked this morning just before dawn when she went down to her spring house to get butter for breakfast. Gorcy heard her scream. When he reached her on the path, she was dying. Her throat . . . had been ripped open by a pair of mighty powerful jaws. . . . You got a drink around here? That was a terrible unpleasant sight, Gorcy's wife."

I ushered Hunkle into the living room, poured him a drink. He took it gratefully.

"I figured I better warn you, Mr. Drake. From what they told me, his neighbors, Gorcy has done blowed his top, but good! Said he just left his woman lay, walked in his shack, and came back out with his gun. Said his face was enough to give a body heart failure, the way it set and them burning eyes. He didn't talk much, but it was like a boil a long time in festering had busted in him. He blames you for what happened, Mr. Drake. Said the Drakes had lived on other men's sweat and toil for many a generation, but not even a Drake was privileged to keep a dog that would do a thing like that, not when the dog had given previous warning of his blood-hunger. Gorcy said it was one time he was going to show that a cropper woman was at least as good as a dog."

"But Bruno has been chained up all this time."

"I ain't give the words as mine. Mr. Drake," Hunkle said hastily. "I would never side against no Drake, no sir! But I figured you needed warning."

"I'll remember it, Hunkle. Pick up Gorcy. Throw him in your pokey until he's had time to cool off. The man's been a

trouble maker a long time. The year before my uncle died, it was Gorcy that stirred up the trouble among the croppers when the crop failed because of the drouth. It's been Gorcy whispering, pounding it in the croppers' ears that they are born in misery and die that way, Gorcy always with black hate and rebellion in his heart. He should have been run off the land long ago."

"He certain should, Mr. Drake. A less fair man than you would have done it, too."

"Well, you get him, Hunkle. I don't want—"

A shadow fell across the the room, and Hunkle and I turned. Gorcy was standing in the doorway, a rifle held loosely in one hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Night Walker

I TOOK one look at him, and knew the death of his wife had finished driving Gorcy mad. All his life he had been working at going mad, I thought. Eating his corn pone and chitlings—and thinking of roast turkey in the Big House. Blaming the Big House for everything, every time a cropper woman died in childbirth, despising and hating Drake clothes, Drake manners, the colleges and universities and trips to Europe opened to Drake children. Wanting his hands around Drake children's throats when he looked in the faces of his own offspring.

It was all there in the mad expression across Gorcy's heavy, beard-matted face.

"I guess your flunky Hunkle has told you what happened, Drake," Gorcy said thickly. "You knew that dog had blood-hunger. You knew it when he pulled down that cow. But the safety of your dog meant more to you than the safety of the cropper people!"

"Gorcy . . ." I shot a glance at Hunkle, but the constable was shaking so hard I wondered if he were going to faint. "Gorcy, how do you know it was Bruno?"

"Tracks! One thing a cropper is good

at. We get practice, Drake. Practice tracking varmints of the brushland in the winter when our grub runs low. There were tracks beside my wife's body, Drake —tracks that led here."

I thought then of Anton. If I told Gorcy and he didn't believe, it would do no good; it would only lead him to think that a Drake had finally turned weasel and tried to talk his way out of a jam. If I told Gorcy and he did believe, then he would shoot Anton. He was hell-set on seeing the death of the creature that had killed his wife. There was that craving, that wild, fierce hunger to strike back this one time, in Gorcy's eyes. His satisfaction would come not so much from the act as from the inner meaning with which he would interpret the act.

"*You* are going to kill that dog, Drake," he said quietly.

There was a space of silence, broken only by Hunkle's breathing. Then I shrugged, moved toward the door. Gorcy moved aside. He was holding his rifle loosely, almost with contempt. I tried to flash a message to Hunkle with my eyes, but he kept his hand clear of the revolver hanging at his side. He wasn't having any of Gorcy face to face. With a posse before him to bawl orders at, Hunkle might have been a different man. But there was no posse; there were only Hunkle, myself, and a man gone mad.

Gorcy followed us across the yard, around the house, up the short incline. Bruno stood huge and grey in the early morning, a big mongrel my uncle had raised from a pup just before his death. I'd always liked Bruno because he was a one-man dog and recognized only me as his master.

He whimpered softly, sitting on his haunches, ears erect as I neared him. He was chained beside the big white dog house I'd had built for him.

"Gorcy," I said. "See the chains . . ."

"Quit stalling! I see only that he could have been chained any time. I just see that he's big and grey, the only dog in the countryside big enough to drag a woman the size of my wife down. And I seen the tracks, not losing them until I reached that stretch of hardpan at the edge of the pasture yonder. Now I reckon to see him die!"

Gorcy gestured at Hunkle. "Shuck that gun from around your middle."

When Hunkle, scared speechless, had obeyed, Gorcy said, "Now go in that toolhouse and bring out a sledge hammer. Leave the door open so I can watch what you're doing in there."

"Gorcy," I said, "that's the law you're ordering around."

"Do you think I give a damn?"

Hunkle shuffled toward the toolhouse. He was cautious in every movement, and a few moments later he was crossing the stretch of earth between us and the toolhouse, a heavy sledge hammer in his hands.

"Give the sledge to Drake," Gorcy said.

I felt the weight of the hammer shifted to me. I saw Hunkle move quickly back. I saw Gorcy edge closer, standing spread-legged, his rifle gripped across his legs.

I raised the sledge. Bruno looked up, sitting on his haunches, patting the earth with his tail.

I felt sweat soaking my shirt to my back.

"Now!" Gorcy said. "*Now!*"

I brought the sledge down. Down and around hard. And let it go. Gorcy screamed. I dropped flat on the earth. I glimpsed the sledge striking Gorcy's left arm, knocking him back, almost causing him to lose his gun.

If Hunkle had moved then, everything would have been all right. But Hunkle didn't budge a muscle. He was a quivering, fat mass of terror.

I lunged at Gorcy, tripped and stumbled on Bruno's chain, as the big dog

growled and leaped for Gorcy. Bruno hit the end of the chain with a snap that slammed his body back to the earth.

Reeling back, teeth bared, Gorcy fumbled the rifle up in his right hand. His left arm was hanging limp, and he used the rifle like a pistol. The flat crack of the gun echoed over the countryside. I felt the slug slam my head, knocking me back, putting pinwheeling stars in my vision and sending my senses roaring toward a black, empty pit.

Hunkle's sudden shout echoed in my head like a voice ringing in a dark endless cavern: "You've kilt him! You've kilt the master of the Big House!"

"Stand back, Hunkle! Stand back!"

Then the pounding of Gorcy's footsteps, fading away. Silence. A paralysis gripped me and my senses tried to fight their way up out of the blackness.

I heard incoherent words, knew Hunkle had kneeled beside me. I groaned, and he was silent. Then he said, "Mr. Drake, Mr. Drake! By hell, you're alive!"

By inches I fought the blackness back, opened my eyes. I could feel blood running down the side of my face. I stared at Hunkle's bloated, sweating, pasty-grey face. "I'll get you in the house," he mumbled. "In the house."

He half dragged me toward the kitchen door. There was a rush of movement beside him, and then Lyria's voice: "I heard the shot."

Together they got me in the house. I shook them off in the kitchen, slumped down in a chair. I could feel blood dripping off me onto the floor.

The dizziness began to ease. Lyria's fingers worked over the wound. "A scratch," she said, "along the cheekbone."

"It certain looked for a second like he was done for."

"Hunkle," I said, "get Gorcy. Get a posse. Comb every inch of the swamps."

"I'll sure get him, Mr. Drake. By hell, he can't do this and get away with it. Attempted murder, that's what it is."

"Just get him," I said. "Put a watch on Fess Collins' shack. Gorcy's arm is hurt. He's got no money or food. Fess is his best friend. He might try to make it there for Fess' help."

"I'll get him," Hunkle promised. "I'll make Gorcy sorry he was ever born." Hunkle blustered out.

I FELT Lyria's fingers, cool and soft, as they worked on my face. She pressed the edge of the adhesive against my cheek. "There! At least the wound is clean. Norman . . . why? Why did Gorcy do it?"

She slipped down in a chair near me, her eyes on my face, her hands clutching mine.

Slowly, I told her. When I was through, Lyria slumped back. "I've got to take him away, Norman. In these modern times we can't believe in . . . werewolves, can we? I refuse to believe that Anton had anything to do with Mrs. Gorcy's death. Some wild dog, out of the swamps . . ."

"Of course he had nothing to do with her death!" I assured her.

"But he's mentally sick, isn't he, Norman? While you were downstairs and I was in the room with him, getting those muddy clothes off him, he began talking. Of death. Of the ecstasy of it. Of the glorious sense of self-power a man might endure with the power of death in his hands." She shivered. "I should have had him under the proper care long ago, Norman, but I didn't realize fully what that trip across Europe had done to him, how it had weakened him."

Our eyes locked, held for a moment. "Later," I whispered. "Let's talk about it later, Lyria."

She let my lips rift almost to hers; then she put her fingers across my mouth. "Not now, Norman. Don't spoil it, please. I—I'd better go back up to him."

I watched her leave the kitchen. My head was throbbing like an oversized bass drum. I plugged in the percolator. After coffee, I felt better.

My fields were deserted that day. In the afternoon, when my legs steadied under me, I made the rounds, through the acres of cane, towering higher than a man's head. Down across the pasturelands. Over stretches where vegetables were planted. I found Gorcy's poison working. Sullen, sharp-chinned faces watched the approach of the mare I was riding. Slatternly women gathered their offspring about their skirts, silent as I talked with their men in barren cabin yards. Everywhere the word was given them: Tomorrow the fields. Gorcy was to be forgotten. Gorcy's wife would have burial, and that would end the matter.

I didn't go near Fess Collins' place. I figured Hunkle had sense enough to have hidden lookouts covering the place, and I didn't want Collins to go in the fields. I wanted him at home, where Gorcy might get to him.

Through the endless talk and endless riding, Lyria stayed in my thoughts. Lyria, up there in the room with Anton. . . .

Long, late shadows were falling when I left the last cabin. I pulled the mare up in the sandy road, watching the approaching dust cloud. A car rolled up to a stop in the dust. Hunkle pushed his fat, sweating face out of the open window of the car.

He spat on the earth, grinned hugely. "I been chasing you from three cabins back, Mr. Drake. Figured," his voice swaggered, "you'd like to have the news,"

"Gorcy?"

"Gorcy," he nodded. "You was right. He made a try for Fess Collins and help. He was like a dog gone mad, cornered, snarling, cursing. We had to shoot him—couldn't take chances of getting my own men killed, so I issued orders to shoot first and talk later." Hunkle's eyes turned hot and bright as he talked about it.

The news didn't lift me. I looked at Hunkle and compared him to Gorcy. I thought: In a way he was worth a dozen of you, Hunkle. Though we were born in different worlds, I could understand Gorcy. That was his trouble—the world he got born in, with his brain and his feelings. And now the twilight shadows are creeping over the earth and Gorcy is dead and Gorcy's child will grow up in a house of strangers. And something in Fess Collins will have died, too, because Gorcy was his friend, and what strength he had Collins borrowed from Gorcy.

Hunkle was grinning at me, and I forced myself to grin back.

"Don't worry any about the next election, Hunkle."

He smirked, said to feel free to call on him any time, and drove on.

A starless, moonless night had fallen over the earth by the time I reached the big Drake house. Rain began falling in big, fat drops. The wind moaned, a thing lonely and lost, over the faces of the bayous.

I quartered the mare, fought the falling rain and rising wind from the barn down to the house.

MY CLOTHES were steamy with the hot rain when I entered the living room. I stopped dead in my tracks. Ethelene Winters was slouched in a chair, a drink near her hand. There was only a single lamp burning, casting long shadows over the room. The wind was crying and wailing about the house, dashing gusts of rain against the windows.

In Ethelene's eyes was a reflection of something akin to the rising storm outside. The green fire of her eyes and the silence of the house clutched at me. I said, "Where's Lyria?"

"Gone," Ethelene whispered. "Gone with Anton."

"You sent them away?"

"I came to see you, Norman. You were gone to see your croppers. She talked of treatment and care Anton needed, and I lied to her. I told her you had seen me, had wanted to help her, had sent me here to send her away. You had done it that way, I said, because it was the most painless way. She cried, but she took the money I gave her, which I said came from you, and let me call a hospital in New Orleans. Then she let me drive her and the dazed scarecrow to the station in Traxel. I just managed to get her a compartment and make train time."

I walked toward Ethelene slowly. She gazed at me, and I at her, and there was a long silence. "You hell cat," I said.

"Don't call me names, Norman. She was wrong for you. She would have ruined you. She left you a note."

I took the note from Ethelene's outstretched fingers. I read:

> Dear, dear Norman—Mere words can never thank you for the help you have been to us. I know the plans you fashioned in your mind, for you and me, but it couldn't ever be right as long as Anton lives. The responsibility I undertook can't be cast lightly away. . . .

I crushed the note in my hands. Ethelene stood up, moved close to me. The storm shook the house.

"Hate me now, Norman. Hate me so fiercely it all burns out quickly. Because it's in the cards, Norman—you and me, together always!"

She turned quickly. "I'll fix you some dinner. Sit down. Have a drink. Relax. Tomorrow get some servants in. Make Jebba come back. See to your fields, Norman!"

I watched her leave the room. Then I walked over to the window and listened to the hammering beat of the rain. Never had rain been more violent, never had night over the Louisiana swamps been darker.

Ethelene and I—well, why not? Why try to fight against it? She'd said she would sell her soul to have me; why struggle against it? I'd never have Lyria as long as Anton occupied the place in her mind that he did. It was why I'd used the drugs on him, why I'd used the hypnotic powers that come to the Drake men on him, why many nights I'd used the passkey I had to his door and exerted those powers, breaking his will an inch at time. Weakened as his struggles in Europe had left him, I might have succeeded. I might have broken him, convinced him that he was something horrible from be-

(Continued on page 110)

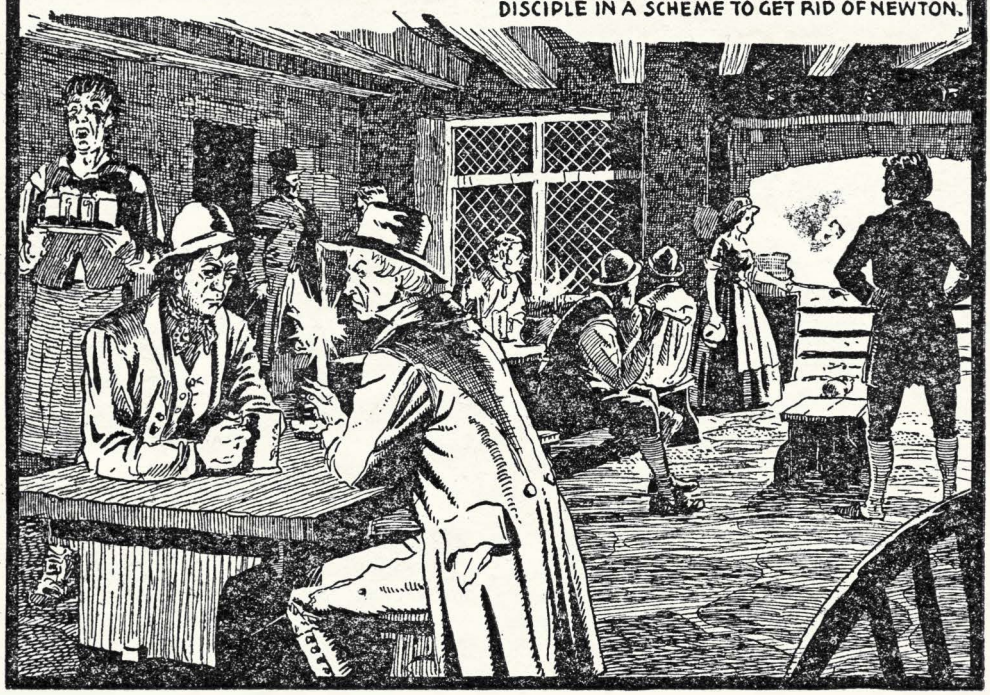
Adventures into

DEATH ABOVE & DEATH BELOW

CURSES ARE MEANT TO DRIVE ONE MAD--OR TO KILL! JOHN NEWTON HAD EVERY REASON TO BRING DOWN THE BLOODIEST CURSE ON HIS KILLERS, YET---

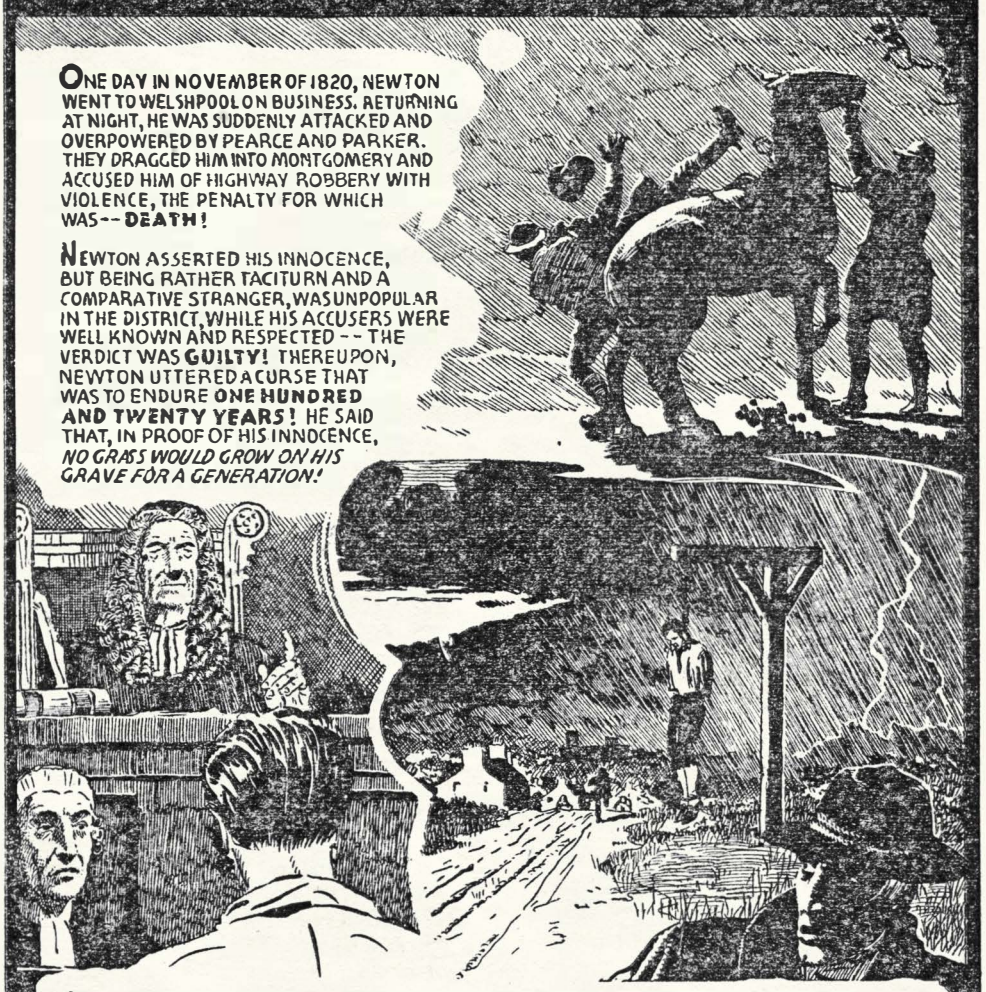
NEWTON ARRIVED IN WALES EARLY IN THE 19TH CENTURY TO BECOME MANAGER FOR THE ESTATE OF A MRS. MORRIS, A WIDOW, WHO WAS IMPOVERISHED. IT WAS THOUGHT LOCALLY THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO SELL HER LAND TO MAKE ENDS MEET. THOMAS PEARCE, A RUTHLESS MAN, WAITED IMPATIENTLY FOR THE CRASH, THEN HE PLANNED TO GRAB UP HER PROPERTY ON HIS **OWN** TERMS. BUT HIS HOPES WERE DASHED BY NEWTON, WHO RECLAIMED THE ESTATE AND BROUGHT ITS INCOME UP TO ITS FORMER LEVEL.

PEARCE DEVELOPED A FIERCE HATRED FOR NEWTON AND KNEW OF ONE OTHER WHO HAD REASON TO HATE HIM. HE WAS ROBERT PARKER, A YOUNG FARMER IN LOVE WITH MRS. MORRIS' DAUGHTER, WHO PREFERRED NEWTON. PEARCE APPROACHED PARKER AND FOUND A READY DISCIPLE IN A SCHEME TO GET RID OF NEWTON.



the UNKNOWN

BY— Frederick Blakeslee



ONE DAY IN NOVEMBER OF 1820, NEWTON WENT TO WELSHPOOL ON BUSINESS. RETURNING AT NIGHT, HE WAS SUDDENLY ATTACKED AND OVERPOWERED BY PEARCE AND PARKER. THEY DRAGGED HIM INTO MONTGOMERY AND ACCUSED HIM OF HIGHWAY ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE, THE PENALTY FOR WHICH WAS-- **DEATH!**

NEWTON ASSERTED HIS INNOCENCE, BUT BEING RATHER TACITURN AND A COMPARATIVE STRANGER, WAS UNPOPULAR IN THE DISTRICT, WHILE HIS ACCUSERS WERE WELL KNOWN AND RESPECTED -- THE VERDICT WAS **GUILTY!** THEREUPON, NEWTON UTTERED A CURSE THAT WAS TO ENDURE **ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY YEARS!** HE SAID THAT, IN PROOF OF HIS INNOCENCE, *NO GRASS WOULD GROW ON HIS GRAVE FOR A GENERATION!*

NEWTON WAS HANGED IN THE SUMMER OF 1821 DURING A THUNDERSTORM AND WAS BURIED IN MONTGOMERY CHURCHYARD. IT IS NOT RECORDED WHAT THE REACTIONS WERE OF THE JUDGE, JURY AND THE TWO SCOUNDRELS WHO HAD SENT NEWTON TO HIS DEATH WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT THAT, INDEED, NO GRASS *WOULD* GROW ON HIS GRAVE.

FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS, SEVERAL ATTEMPTS WERE MADE TO BREAK THE CURSE BY PUTTING DOWN FRESH SOIL AND SEED, BUT WITHOUT SUCCESS. FINALLY, IN 1852, TURF WAS LAID ON THE GRAVE. THE GRASS OVER NEWTON'S HEAD DIED AT ONCE, THE REST DIED IN A FEW MONTHS, LEAVING THE GRAVE AS BARE AS EVER.

NEWTON'S BODY HAS LONG SINCE BEEN DUST. PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THIS, THE CURSE LOST ITS POWER. SINCE 1886 THE GRASS HAS BEEN SLOWLY COVERING THE GRAVE UNTIL, IN 1941, ONLY A SMALL BARE SPOT COULD BE SEEN DIRECTLY OVER NEWTON'S HEAD -- *THAT SPOT WAS IN THE FORM OF A DISTINCT CROSS!*

"Go away, damn you!" Harry roared. "You're dead!"

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

Above the howling wind, the dead woman's voice sounded . . . calling Harry Ludon to his . . .

LAST RENDEZVOUS

HE FOUND her twenty feet from the foot of the orchard after the second day of the January thaw.

Obviously she had fallen face down in the snow and had frozen there, her body arched. He saw the fleck of color against the snow as he came around the side of the corn crib. He was a heavy man, a big, wide-faced, unsmiling man in his early forties.

He recognized the color of the pajamas, the red rayon pajamas she had ordered

from the catalogue, the ones that had both irritated and amused him. They had amused him because, with her wide eyes and unruly hair, the shade of fresh honey, she had looked like a little girl dressed up in her mother's evening gown. They were too sophisticated for her, and a shade too large. They irritated him because they made him think of the sly looks, the nudges, that had been exchanged when he had announced that he was marrying the eldest Cassidy girl.

He stood by the corn crib and his eyes misted in pain and cleared again and it was obvious to him that she was indeed dead. He turned and smashed his fist against the weathered grey boards of the corn crib. A board cracked under the blow, and back in the barn a startled horse whistled and stomped.

The warm wind had funneled under her, clearing away the snow. Her forehead was against her left wrist, her right arm straight out in front of her.

He went to her and touched her shoulders. The sun had thawed them and they were softening. Her knees were frozen to the ground. When he lifted her the knees of the red pajamas were torn free. In the frozen position she fitted into his arms and he took her to the house, careful not to strike her outstretched arm against the frame of the kitchen door, as he was afraid it would shatter, and he knew that if it did something taut within him would also break.

The deep freeze, its motor humming, was in the shed off the kitchen. He put her on the couch in the living room, went to the bedroom closet and took the puffed quilt that had been one of the things she brought with her. He took the quilt to the shed, took the packages of meat from the freezer, spread the quilt inside. Breathing heavily he went back, picked her up, brought her out to the shed and set her tenderly inside the freezer on the quilt. Her face was as white as the snow, her short upper lip lifted so that the even white teeth showed. Her eyes were shut, the lid faintly blue. Her hair was caked to her head.

After shutting the freezer lid he went back into the kitchen, sat heavily at the table and stared for a long time at the scarred top.

THE BLIZZARD had come in early December. The sixth. It had started in the middle of the morning, the wind screaming out of the northeast, driving the snow in flat horizontal sheets.

At noon the ground was covered. She had found him harnessing Blue, the strongest horse. He remembered how she had shouted against the wind.

"You're not going to try to go to town, Sam!"

He had put his arm around her and together they had gone back into the warmth of the kitchen. He had smiled at her and rumpled her hair. "Got to, Fran. Very important."

"I was raised here, Sam. This is your second winter. You don't know how bad it can get."

"This is something that has to be done," he said.

And it did have to be done. It was her birthday, the following day. And there were hardly enough ways to show her how right the marriage was for him. In spite of the way the sly looks had been exchanged. She would be twenty-three.

After she made him promise that if it got too bad he'd stay in town, she agreed to let him go. It would have been foolish to try to take the truck. He knew that by nightfall the road would be blocked. But a man with a horse and light sleigh could get through.

He remembered the bleak look of the town when he had arrived, the lights on in the stores in midafternoon, people leaning against the wind and the sharp snow, coat collars turned high.

Rannigan had saved the bracelet as he said he would. He took it out of the safe. Oblong pieces of milky jade mounted on silver. She loved green.

"Fran'll go for this," Mike Rannigan had said.

The cold bit deep and Sam had gone to the Fowler House, to the warmth of the cellar bar. When he was ready to go the wind had increased to the point where he was afraid to try to make it. And so he had gone back to the bar, glad of the warmth, but worrying about Fran alone in the house.

Besides Bert Fowler, who tended his own bar between laughing at his own jokes, there were four. Harry Ludon and Karl Bostra were both farmers like himself. Ludon lived a half mile beyond him, by himself. He was a tall, seamed man of thirty, of small amiability and a sharp tongue. Bostra lived with his drove of young ones on the other road beyond town. Steve Bracey and Les Dareen were townies.

Sam remembered that Ludon had gotten very drunk. Ludon had made a suggestive remark about the most obvious talents of the "Cassidy girls" and Sam, with a sudden anger that had surprised him, had knocked Harry Ludon sprawling. Ludon's shoulder and elbow had hit the brass spittoon at the end of the bar, tilted it so that it disgorged its contents on the sleeve of his leather jacket.

Harry Ludon had struggled to his feet and walked out, his shoulders stiff.

In the moment of silence that followed Bert Fowler said, "Cheer up, fellows. Maybe Harry'll freeze to death on the way home."

That was one of Fowler's jokes that had drawn a general laugh.

Three hours later, at midnight, the wind had died. Sam had been glad to give up his idea of staying in town, and he had gotten Blue from the stable and had set out.

It had been a laborious trip back, as three times he had to flounder around to Blue's head, kick at the drifts and pull on the headstall until Blue could plunge free. A mile from home the storm had begun again.

At last, through gaps in the flying snow he had seen the glow of his light, had led Blue to the barn.

THE KITCHEN DOOR was banging idly in the wind and the house had the chill of a tomb. He remembered the fear, how he had stood in the kitchen and shouted her name, had searched every corner of the house and then all the outbuildings. With the gasoline lantern casting a white glow he had tramped around and around the house, trying to pick up a trail that must have disappeared within seconds of the time it was made.

Near dawn he had at last looked in her closet, had found that her bag was gone and quite a few of her clothes.

The empty bottle on the kitchen table explained some of it.

He knew then what they had meant by those sly looks and those nudges they had exchanged. The Cassidy girls.

And he had been the fool who refused to listen.

The storm continued during the morning and he drank himself into a stupor He awoke on the kitchen floor some time during the night, cold and stiff. After clumsy efforts to build a fire, he took another bottle and went up to bed. On the second day, when the storm had at last stopped he awakened to hear the anguished bawling of the unmilked cows.

The bracelet had been still in his pocket. He found it and flung it out into the snow.

Of course, everybody in the surrounding country side had known all about it within a week. He saw it in their eyes the few times he had to go to town for supplies.

Poor Sam. She was one of the Cassidy

girls, you know. Tough on him. But he should have listened to us. He should have known better. You just don't marry Cassidy women.

The hate had been heavier than he could bear. By discreet questioning he had found that no man had left the area. That meant that Fran had just sickened of him, had set off on her own.

But sitting there at the kitchen table in the silent house now, he knew that he had been right and they had all been wrong.

And he knew he had to start over again in his mind and decide what had happened.

It was really very easy. Ludon had made it home that night with two frostbitten ears and the toes on his left foot frozen. He had lost two of the toes.

Fran must have gone to bed to wait for him. That would make it about ten that Harry Ludon had arrived. Fran would have left a light. Ludon would have seen the light and remembered that it was Sam who had smashed him in the mouth, dirtied his sleeve and humiliated him. Well, the Cassidy girl was alone, and he, Harry Ludon, would prove that what he had said about them was true. And she was a pretty little thing. A good quick way to be warmed on a blizzard night.

And so Harry Ludon had stamped the snow from his boots on the back porch and Fran had come flying down the stairs to greet her husband. And found Harry Ludon there, leering, waiting for her.

Somehow she had gotten away from him and had run out into the night. Harry Ludon had waited for the cold to drive her back in. He had found a bottle and had drunk heavily. At last he had realized that she would not be back, that she had been out longer than a person could live, dressed as she had been dressed.

And Harry Ludon began to savor the taste of the word *murder*. With cunning he had packed her suitcase with her clothes and had left. Let Sam think his flighty young wife had left. It was but a short walk in the other direction to the railroad tracks beyond Ludon's place. Any person with a light could flag the southbound train at eleven.

Each fragment of the story fitted together.

Sam lifted his heavy face and stared bleakly out the window. There was no proof. Nothing to go on. No basis for calling the law and demanding that Ludon be punished. By now Ludon would have disposed of the last trace of the bag and the clothes.

The sheriff would say, "But, Sam, maybe she heard a sound from the stock and went out to see if they were okay. Then a squall came up and she lost the house."

"Went out barefooted? Without a coat?"

"Well Sam, you know how the Cassidy girls are. Flighty."

No, there was no recourse in the law. Not yet.

IT WAS on that same day that Sam searched the big catalogue, made out an order blank, took it down to the village and sent it off, along with a money order.

It took ten days for the order to be filled. The package was left off at his mail box. It wasn't a large package.

That night, when large wet flakes of snow were falling softly, he started up the truck and drove five miles to the Cassidy place.

Mrs. Cassidy, a beefy woman with dyed yellow hair and a fast tongue, took his hand in both of hers as he came in. "I can't understand it, Sam. A man as good as you are. She was always the best of my girls. It wasn't like her to do a thing like that. All she's done is make it twice as hard for the other girls and . . ."

But Sam was looking beyond her to where a slim girl with a piquant face, with hair like fresh honey, sat curled with a magazine in a big frayed chair.

Sam pushed by Mrs. Cassidy and stood heavily over the girl and said, "You're Helen, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Go and get dressed. You're coming with me."

"Now listen to me," Mrs. Cassidy shrilled. "You needn't think that just because Fran hurt your stiff-necked pride you can . . ."

Sam turned toward her and the look on his face stilled her words. She could not remember ever having been silenced in that way. Sam turned back to Helen. "Don't get the wrong idea. I want to show you something and I want to talk to you."

Helen looked at him for long seconds, then went into the next room. Sam walked out and sat in the truck. She came out in a very few minutes and climbed up beside him. He liked it that she didn't ask any questions or seem apprehensive.

He took her out to the shed and lifted the freezer lid and then dropped it in time to catch Helen in his arms and let her sob against his chest.

She sat at the kitchen table and he told her what he had guessed. Then he took her to the bedroom and showed her what he had purchased. He explained carefully what he wished to do and at last she nodded. Something about the set of her young jaw told him that she would do it well.

THE BLIZZARD came on the second of February. On the evening of the third, Sam, carrying two bottles, staggered onto Harry Ludon's back porch and hammered on the door. Ludon, a pipe in his mouth and a look of surprise in his eyes, opened the door.

Sam wavered in, thumped the bottles on the kitchen table and said, "Harry, lad, this is no night for man or beast to drink alone. So I decided to bring over some good cheer and share it with you."

Harry took his pipe out of his mouth "Nice of you, Sam. I didn't expect this sort of thing . . . from you."

Sam smiled broadly. "Wanted to apologize, lad. I was a damn fool to hit you when you were telling me the truth "

He saw the suspicion go out of Harry Ludon's eyes. Ludon looked approvingly at the bottles, got two jelly glasses from the shelf over the chipped sink and set them on the table. Sam shucked off his coat, poured two generous glasses, lifted one and said, "To the truth, Harry."

"To the truth, Sam," Harry said, and drained his glass.

The wind swirled around the frame building, whining under the eaves, changing direction to hammer at the building from a new angle. Snow pellets rattled off the window and the kitchen stove roared and glowed cherry red.

Sam poured drink after drink, watching

the color come into Harry Ludon's cheeks, a sparkle into his eyes.

The thinner man's mouth loosened and when he laughed he showed the teeth stained yellow from the pipe. And he laughed often.

Sam sat with his back to the window. Harry was laughing, his eyes pinched almost shut. Suddenly the laughter stopped. The man's breath went out of him and his eyes went wide. He was looking over Sam's shoulder. A trickle of saliva ran from the corner of his mouth.

"Look!" Ludon gasped.

Sam turned slowly and looked out the window and then back at Ludon. "Look at what, man?"

"Her. She's . . ."

The voice mingled with the wind, it shrilled high, quavering, decending, *"Harry! Harry Ludon!"*

A quiver went up the back of Sam's neck. He leaned over to pour Ludon another drink. Ludon said, "You heard that."

"Harry," she called, "Harry Ludon . . ."

"I heard the wind," Sam said easily.

"Don't joke with me, Sam," Harry said. His eyes showed white all around the iris, like a spooked horse.

"This liquor isn't that bad," Sam said, and he laughed.

"She's back at the window!" Harry yelled, his voice pitched too high.

Sam turned and saw again the flash of red, the fresh honey hair, windblown.

"H-a-r-r-y!" the voice called. Much louder. Fran's voice.

Harry Ludon ran to his shotgun in the corner, grabbed it, tore the door open and yelled, "Go away, damn you! Go away! You're dead!" The steel throat of the shotgun was feeble against the blast of the blizzard.

"H-a-r-r-y!" the voice called. Receding.

Harry Ludon went down the steps in his shirtsleeves, across his dooryard.

The swirling snow concealed him. Then there was a rift and Sam, standing in the doorway, saw him again, climbing over the fence that edged the drive.

The gun spoke again, its voice almost a whisper against the storm.

Sam put on his coat, took the lantern he had left on the porch, the gasoline lantern, and lighted it. Then he turned out the house lights and went out into the yard.

THE CRAZY ANGER left Harry Ludon when he ran into the bole of the tree. He could hear no sound. The wind seemed to tear the alcohol out of him, and suddenly he was cold. The cheap liquor had done it. Fran was a mirage, something that came out of his own head.

He felt sick and dizzy, and he was suddenly conscious of the icy blasts that staggered him, that bit through his thin shirt. There was no sound but the scream of the slanting wind, nothing to see but the grey of the tree trunk, the swirl of snow.

He held the shotgun in the crook of his arm, put his fingers under his armpits to warm them. He turned and he could not see his own footprints.

In sudden panic he lurched back in the direction he had come. He stumbled and fell, the shotgun sliding away from him. He pawed with numb fingers at the drifting snow and could not find it. Cursing, he regained his feet and went on. The fear

(Continued on page 111)

Behind him, Crandall heard the corpse laugh.

By DAY KEENE

THE LAUGHING DEAD

Like Mary's lamb, everywhere that Crandall went . . . the corpse was sure to go. . . .

ONE MINUTE the man was alive, striding briskly down the right-hand shoulder of the road. A moment later he was a mass of bloody, broken flesh tossed up against the rail of the cement culvert. If any spark of life remained in the body, it wasn't Joe Crandall's fault. He'd meant to kill him. It was something he'd wanted to do for months. He had lived with his hate so long that what he did was as normal a gesture as mixing his peas with his

mashed potatoes so they wouldn't roll off his knife.

The first snow of winter had fallen. It was the second year he'd seen snow. Crandall didn't like it. Snow was cold, almost as cold as the east wind howling down out of the mountains. The trees in the orchards he'd passed were denuded of leaves. Their twisted bare branches writhed across a stingy sliver of white moon hung in a starless sky.

As the rear wheels of the pickup truck jolted over the body, Crandall thought he was going to be sick and forced himself to think of home. Maybe he could now. Maybe, with Burke dead, Ellie would agree to sell the farm. Back home there was no snow. The wind was soft and warm and whispering through palm fronds. A man didn't have to fight the ground for every bite he put into his mouth. As long as he had a patch of corn and collards, a few hogs, a fishing pole and a rifle, a man could live like a king and hardly have to turn his hand from one day to another.

Here a man began and finished his chores by lantern light. He grew what he ate during three short growing months or he didn't eat at all. The other nine months of the year he spent huddled up to a stove, spending good money for heat that the sun furnished for nothing back home.

It didn't make sense to Crandall. His thin fingers trembling so badly he could hardly grip the wheel of the truck, he wondered if Burke was dead but was afraid to turn back to see. The big man with the booming laugh should be dead. Crandall had been doing fifty miles an hour when he had smacked him into the culvert with the improvised two-by-eight bumper bolted on to the front of the pickup.

Bumper. That was a good name for it. Some of Crandall's panic left him. His thin lips twisted in a furtive smile. He'd *bumped* Ellie's cousin, all right. He bet he'd broken him up plenty. No man could be smacked into concrete like that and live.

HIS FEAR and nausea subsided, to be replaced with an animal cunning. His own place was only another quarter of a mile up the road. Ellie would see the lights of the pickup and come out on the porch the way she always did and know he had taken the east road out of town. But if he were to turn right at the crossing and come in from the other way, not even Ellie would know he had passed anywhere near the body. The sheriff would put it down as a hit-and-run accident. Through tourists made a speedway of the road.

He turned right at the crossing. The high-ridged side road that circled his land was slippery, and Crandall had all he could do to keep the pickup from skidding into the ditch. Why people *wanted* to live in such a place was beyond him.

His troubles, he decided, had begun when Ellis had inherited her maternal uncle's farm. Nothing would do from then on but they move north and live on it. Ellie had claimed that she was tired of decent folks looking at her "slanch-wise" and calling her poor white trash behind her back. The farm had always earned her uncle a very comfortable living. There was no reason why, with a little gumption and "git-up," they couldn't do as well. The first spring hadn't been too bad. It had reminded Crandall of an exceptionally cold Florida December. But summer had been hell. For one thing he wasn't used to doing twelve months work in three. It had been hustle from dawn to dark. Then there had been Ellie's second cousin Burke.

A big man with a booming laugh, if ever a man knew every-thing, Burke Peters did. And for all that Ellie denied it, the big man had been sweet on her from the start and she was sweet on him. It was Burke says this and Burke says

that and Burke did this and Burke did that until a man was hard put to call his bed his own. Not that there had ever been anything bad between Burke and Ellie. Ellie had been too afraid of him for one thing. too churchy for another. They'd taken their liking out in looking. But it was there. Crandall was thankful now that he had been smart enough never to call them on it except in a joking way. Once Burke's body was found no one would suspicion him. He'd feel as bad about it as Ellie. Why shouldn't he? He and the dead man had been friends, the best of friends.

He smacked his thin lips as he reviewed the scene just passed. The minute the familiar red-and-brown-checked mackinaw and bright red hunter's cap had shown up in the headlights of the pickup he had known what he was going to do.

"And I done her."

His words were accompanied by little puffs of vapor as he turned into the driveway of the farm from the opposite direction in which he had been traveling when he had run the big man down. The yard had been neat and trim when they had moved into the house. Now, even under its coating of snow, it was littered with junk. A rusted riding cultivator, the pile of new shingles that Ellie had bought with her egg money but he hadn't gotten around to putting on, a rusted boiler he'd picked up on the town dump with a vague idea of sawing in half to form two watering troughs.

A slim, big-eyed, blonde woman in her middle twenties, Ellie came out on the side porch as always. But this time in addition to the shawl she had thrown over her head she was carrying the deer rifle that had come with the farm.

The short hairs on the back of his neck crawling, Crandall stopped the pickup. "What's the idea of the gun?"

Little puffs of vapor emphasizing her words, she said, "Burke phoned just after you left. Two men, both of them killers, broke out of the jail at Parsons." She added, "And Burke says they both are bad 'uns and might just head this way."

CRANDALL was relieved. The news was old to him. He'd heard it down at the pool room over two hours ago. The boys had joshed about the sheriff's concern. Both escaped men were big-time city killers and there was about as much chance of them trying to hide out in an isolated farm community as there was of him learning to like snow. Their escape had been engineered, and both men by now were probably lolling in the back seat of a high-powered car headed for Chicago or St. Louis.

He chuckled. "Well, if you see 'em, you shoot 'em. Could be you'll get a reward. Burke didn't come over tonight?"

Ellie shook her blonde head. "No. But he said he might come late to try to talk you into going hunting with him tomorrow."

"Oh," Crandall said. "I see."

He drove the pickup on into the barn and, switching on the light, examined the front of the truck carefully. The right fender was dented slightly but there was no blood on it or on the two-by-eight with which he had replaced the metal bumper.

Burke was going hunting, all right, but it wasn't for jackrabbits. The big man was hunting a grave. His farm was just below the culvert and he had probably been on his way up here when Crandall had smacked him.

Satisfied there was nothing to connect him to Burke, Crandall slid the barn door shut and scuffed a fresh path through the snow to the house. Let it snow all it wanted now. He wouldn't have to put up with it much longer. Now, with the menace of Burke removed, if Ellie refused to sell out and go back where they belonged he'd beat her into it. The

thought pleased him. He hadn't dare lay a hand on her since they'd come north. And she had a beating coming for making him work as she had. What with making him wash before he came to the table and insisting he use his fork instead of his knife to eat, Ellie had gotten so uppity there was no living with her. But all that would be changed now.

He slept better than he had in months. When the alarm clock went off at four-thirty he even considered staying in bed and to hell with the stock. But it was too soon for that. There must be no change in the daily pattern of his life that might make anyone, especially Ellie, suspicious that he had done Burke in. Even if she was his wife, feeling as she did about the dead man, Ellie would be the first to blab her mouth to the sheriff.

"He done it," she would say. *"He run Burke down account of Burke was good to me and he was jealous."*

Fumbling through the cold dark for his clothes, he slipped into them and padded downstairs in his stocking feet to light the fire. The kitchen fire lighted, he found his bottle of corn in the buttery and let a quarter-pint of the liquid fire run down his throat. Then, stoppering the bottle, he put on his boots. Ellie was stirring in their room now, making a great splashing in the water in the bowl she'd had to break ice to get at. By the time he slopped the hogs and milked she would have breakfast ready, eggs and white biscuits and sausage and pie, instead of the grits and blackeyed peas and white pig pork and maybe a mess of fried bream that stuck to a man's ribs. Consoling himself with the thought that it couldn't be too long now, he picked up his lantern and closed the kitchen door behind him.

For a minute he thought he was going to scream. Then all he felt was cold. He had never been so cold. He was almost as cold as the flesh of the body on the back porch over which he had stumbled. He recovered his lantern with an effort and got to his feet, forcing his knees to hold him. The dead man was lying on his side, his face a mass of clotted and frozen blood, the index finger of his outstretched right hand pointed at the kitchen door as if even in death he was trying to identify the man who had killed him.

Crandall looked beyond the body at the yard. In the yellow glow of the lantern it was a trackless carpet of white. There was no way he could tell if the dead man had been carried or if he had walked the half-mile from the culvert. Overcoming his natural revulsion, he felt the flesh again. He was dead all right. He had been dead for hours. The brown-and-red-checked mackinaw was stiff with frozen blood. The whole front of his face was mashed in. He must have died almost instantly. He *had* to have died almost

instantly. Dead men couldn't walk. Yet here he was.

FEAR heated his cold sweat until Crandall could feel it burning down his spine. This was the sort of tale the negroes told around their smudge pots at night. Dead men couldn't walk. No one had seen the killing. No one could have any reason to bring Burke here and dump him on his doorstep. There wasn't a track in the yard or in the two-inch-deep snow on the steps. Yet here the dead man was.

Only one thing was clear in his mind. He had, somehow, to get rid of the body before Ellie saw it. She would scream and cry and raise hob and call the sheriff. And Crandall wanted to examine his truck by daylight before the sheriff took a mind to. Blood might have spattered on the tires or axle or side or any of a dozen places he hadn't thought to look last night.

Blowing out his lantern so Ellie couldn't see him in case she looked out their window, he fought the dead man up onto his shoulder and staggered swiftly through the snow down the path to the barn. The dead man weighed once again what he did. The body refused to conform to the curve of his shoulder and almost overbalanced him twice before he reached the barn. Sliding the lower middle door open, Crandall laid it on the cement between the horse stalls and cow stanchions, just under the hay chute. Then, still breathless in his haste, he climbed the stairs to the mow and forked hay down on it until it *had* to be covered.

His inner clothes were soaked with sweat when he descended the stairs again. Now, what to do with the body? That was the big problem. He couldn't leave it where it was. He couldn't take it back where it had been. How it had gotten onto his porch no longer mattered. All he wanted was to be shed of it again.

He almost tripped over old Maude's twin colts that had somehow gotten out of their box stall and were frisking in the center aisle. Lighting his lantern, he found the light switch and flooded the lower floor of the barn with light. The dead man's body was well covered with hay. He turned his attention to the box stall latch he had neglected to fix. All it needed was a new hasp.

He started down the aisle toward the tool box when the sliding door screeching open stopped him in his tracks. Her shawl clutched in one hand, Ellie was holding something bright and shiny in the other. His eyes misted with sweat, Crandall couldn't make out what it was. Then he realized it was the milk pails.

"You forgot the pails," Ellie said.

Crandall snatched them with one hand and lifted the other to give her a good one for scaring him as she had. Then he remembered the body under the mound of hay. He didn't dare mistreat Ellie until he had gotten rid of the body. She might talk. She would talk. When she did talk her tongue might as well have hinges. And the sheriff was no fool.

He thanked her ungraciously and began to carry fodder to the cows, damning the still-loose colts as they got in his way. Ellie reminded him, "If you had fixed the hasp when Burke told you it was loose, they couldn't get out of their stall."

Damn Burke. He was dead. Why hadn't he stayed mashed against the culvert? Crandall said he would fix it after he'd milked.

The blonde girl eyed the huge mound of hay. "You going to feed all that hay to two horses, Joe?" She looked at the work team halter-tied in their stalls. "Burke says—"

Crandall controlled his voice with an effort. "I know. He says I overfeed the team. But I don't aim to feed 'em all that. Now you go back to the house and git breakfast." *I'll tell her I'm hungry,*

he thought. *That will be a good touch. A man who's killed another ain't supposed to have an appetite.*

He opened his mouth to tell her, and the words froze in his throat. One of the colts in frisking around had uncovered the dead man's pointing finger. The whole hand was plainly visible. And it was still pointing at him.

HIS KNEES turned to rubber. Fear froth flecking his lips, unable to hold the bushel basket of fodder any longer, he set it down on the hand, kicked the colt in the rump, and pushed Ellie out the door. He realized he was shouting but couldn't control his voice.

"Git out. Git out of here. Git back to the house and git breakfast." In his anxiety to get her out of the barn before she discovered the hand, he slapped her, hard.

Hot tears sprang to her eyes. "You can't treat me like that, Joe. Not any more. All I wanted to do was help. I'm a goin' to tell Burke you hit me."

"That's right. You tell him," he shouted at her. He slapped her again. "Meanwhile, git for the house—and quick!"

She ran sobbing up the path their feet had made. Through the lighted window of the kitchen he saw her go directly to the phone and crank it.

That's right, he thought. *Call Burke. But you won't git him on a phone. Hit'll take a preacher to talk to him now.*

He closed the door and was sick in the corner by the grain box. It was the first time in his life his morning quarter-pint of corn had ever backed up on him. Now he *had* to get rid of the body. It couldn't be found in his barn or on his farm. It couldn't ever be found, or both Ellie and the sheriff would think that he and Burke had fought and he had mashed in Burke's face with a shovel or maybe a mattock or any of a dozen farm tools.

Mounting the barn stairs again he examined the front of the pickup in the growing light. There was the dent in the fender—nothing more. There was no blood or any pieces of human tissue or hair plastered to the wooden bumper, the axle, the fender or the tires.

Once, and if, Burke's body was discovered, he couldn't claim that it had been an accident. No one would believe him. Then there was the little matter of how Burke had gotten from the culvert to his back stoop. Cracking the big door open, Crandall looked out at the carpet of snow. The only marks on it were those that his and Ellie's feet had made from the back stoop to the barn.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he closed the door, put the colts back into the box stall, locked it securely with a new hasp, then forced himself to milk the cows.

Somehow he had to get rid of the body. But how?

He considered dismembering, burning, burying it. All had their disadvantages. He hadn't a sharp enough knife for the first, and when he'd finished he would still have the pieces to dispose of. It took a lot of fire to burn a body. To burn it properly he would have to saturate it with gasoline and burn it along with something big, something like the barn. If he burned it along with the barn he would have to remove his stock first or suffer too big a loss. The barn was insured but the stock wasn't. And if he turned out the stock some fool would be sure to ask why he had turned out his stock on such a bitter, freezing, winter day with all possible forage covered with a foot of snow. To bury the body he would have to dig. And this far north, even this early in the winter, the ground was already frozen to a depth of at least a foot. He could pierce the crust and dig a grave in the unfrozen ground under it, but there would be no way to break up the frozen surface

clods. They would stick up through the snow like so many sore thumbs. Burke Peters was well liked. As soon as it was discovered he was missing, the whole countryside would turn out to look for him. The first searcher noticing the clods would become suspicious.

Finished milking, he grained the team but couldn't bring himself to lift one forkful of hay from the mound covering the body.

Damn Burke Peters. If he had the body home there were a dozen ways he could dispose of it. He could bury it in soft sand. He could put it on a 'gator slide. He could weight it good and take it out in the Gulf and drop it to the sharks. He could stuff it into a hollow, fallen log and inside twenty-four hours the varmints and the ants would pick it clean.

Drop it to the sharks. There were no sharks here in this river. But the river was swift and deep. And Dead Man's Bend, a gouged-out pool caused by jammed debris, cut the lower corner of his land. Anything swept under the jam stayed there. He could put the body in the pole wagon, tell Ellie he was going to dig a load of the damn marl she was always after him to spread on the east twenty because she said Burke said it was deficient in lime, and dispose of the body before he returned with his load of marl.

THE MORE Crandall thought of the idea, the better he liked it. No one would suspicion his digging marl on such a day. The fool farmers who lived hereabouts dug for it every spare moment they had during the winter and spring. The marl was there in the creek and river beds for the digging, and the land did need lime.

He carried the milk pails to the house and set them in the buttery for Ellie to run through the separator after she'd served his breakfast.

Her eyes were red and swollen, but his breakfast was on the table. He scowled at the table as he sat down. She was getting so uppity now she even set out cloth to cover up the wood and had spent God knew how much of her egg money to buy saucers and cups and plates to match. The trouble with Ellie was she didn't know her station. But once he'd gotten rid of the body, and the excitement about Burke Peters disappearing had died down, he would take that out of her. He would whop her black and blue until she came to her senses. Then he would sell the treadmill she'd inherited, throw a few pots and pans in the pickup and point the nose of it south. What with the money the land and stock would bring, he could stay drunk the rest of his life and never have to turn a hand except to hunt and fish.

Amused by her reddened eyes, he asked her what Burke had said when she had told him he'd hit her.

The girl admitted, "Burke didn't answer his phone. He's probably out with the posse looking for those two men who broke out of the jail at Parsons."

Stuffing eggs in his mouth, Crandall grunted, "Prob'ly."

Burke Peters was a deputy sheriff. Burke was a scientific farmer. Burke had been a war hero. Burke was everything he wasn't. *Burke was dead.*

The thought pleased Crandall more than he had been pleased in eighteen months of dressing up every Sunday just because Ellie said nice people went to church. A laugh welled up inside of him, and he almost choked on his eggs. The funniest part of it was that Ellie was so in love with Burke that she couldn't sleep nights, and she was too good and too dumb to know what was the matter with her. If the positions had been reversed, if he'd have been Burke, he'd have had her two weeks after they had moved north. But Burke was as big a fool as she was.

He wouldn't even *think* of making love to another man's wife.

Finished with his breakfast, Crandall exchanged his laced high-tops for a pair of rubber waders. Ellie wanted to know what he was going to do.

"Dig a load of that marl you and Burke are always yapping about," he told her. "Could be it might do that east twenty some good."

"Oh, it will, Joe," Ellie assured him. "Burke says—"

He slammed the back door on the rest of her sentence. He was finished listening to what Burke said. And Burke was finished with talking. Let the big man try to laugh his way out of this one if he could. Stopping at the granary, he picked up a long-handled shovel and a pick and carried them with him to the barn. Harnessing the team was a matter of minutes. He was glad the pole wagon was on the floor above.

The team harnessed, he uncached a Mason jar of corn and took a big drink to nerve himself for the task of moving the body. It still was frozen stiff, although the pointing arm was beginning to thaw a little. Avoiding looking at the blood-stained mask that had been a face, he wrestled it onto his shoulder and climbed the stairs with it. Halfway up, the extended arm fell and rapped his back sharply.

Crandall gritted his teeth to keep from screaming. He was drenched with sweat again, and trembling, when he finally had the body in the bottom of the wagon and covered with a half-dozen old grain sacks. He used the pick and shovel to weight them, then went back downstairs for the team.

ELLIE was in the back doorway shouting something when he drove them out the door. The wind had shifted and whipped most of her words away, but he caught the words "sheriff" and "posse."

Cupping his hands, he shouted, "Tell the sheriff I'd like to but I ain't got time. Tell him I'm busy digging marl."

He hitched the team to the wagon and drove out of the barn and down the snow-filled lane toward the creek that crossed his land to join the swift-flowing Black River just above Dead Man's Bend. His sweat-sodden clothes froze almost as soon as the wind struck him. He had to stand to drive, and the jolting poles jarred his spine. He wished he'd brought the Mason jar with him. He would be lucky if he didn't catch his death of cold, before this thing was over. He almost wished he had resisted the impulse to run down Burke. But he hadn't. Now he *had* to get rid of the body.

It was slightly warmer in the creek bottom. The high banks cut some of the wind, but Crandall doubted if he would ever really be warm again. The team

stopped at the edge of the shallow creek. He urged them across and drove directly to the tree-lined river.

The swift water lived up to its name. It was dark and ugly looking. Here and there he could spot a cake of ice torn loose from a frozen bank somewhere. Getting out of the wagon, he picked up a clump of wood and dropped it into the water. It bobbed and revolved slowly for a moment, then, caught by the current, dipped down and under the pile of debris jammed in the bend .

Breathing hard, he lifted the body from the wagon and realized with a sinking of his stomach that he had forgotten to bring anything to weight it with. He looked up, startled, as a branch cracked in the heavy growth of trees on the opposite bank. But he could see nothing. It was only the cold, he decided. There would be no hunters out today. If the two men who had broken out of jail had really headed this way, every able-bodied man in the country, with the exception of himself, would be whooping it up with the sheriff's posse. They would make a holiday of it. He felt a sudden kinship for the two men. He hoped they not only got away but killed a few of the posse in the process.

Working swiftly now, he filled one of the grain sacks with good-sized rocks and tied it to the dead man's ankles with strips cut from another sack. Then, sweat blinding his eyes, he tried to pick up both the man and sack—and couldn't. He'd made the sack too heavy. Working with cold-numbed fingers he removed some of the rocks and tried again. This time he could barely lift the combination, but he hadn't the strength to throw both body and sack far enough out into the river to catch the current.

Carrying them in his arms, he waded cautiously into the water above the bend. Now it was up to his knees. Now the water had reached his thighs. He took another step and slipped, pushing the body from him as he fell. When he came up, spluttering with anger and spitting water as he scrambled back toward the safety of the shallows, he saw the current nudge the partially exposed body out into the deep water. It revolved once as the chunk of thrown wood had—and disappeared. At last he was rid of that damned body!

Both cold and fear forgotten in his exultation Crandall resisted an impulse to whoop. He had fixed Burke, but good. What was more, he had gotten clean away with it. No one could prove a thing now. The big man's body wouldn't be found until old Gabe blew his horn. He waded back toward the bank, feeling his way carefully. He couldn't be any wetter or colder, but rid of the body now, he was fearful of stepping in a deep hole, filling his hip boots with water and being dragged down to join Burke in the darkness of Dead Man's Bend.

He was reaching for an exposed root to pull himself up on the bank when he heard the laugh. It was deep and booming and mocking.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha," he heard Burke laugh.

Crandall had been wrong. He could be colder. Fear crept into the marrow of his bones and froze it into icy needles. He wished he had paid more attention to the stories he'd heard about 'han'ts,' about men who couldn't be killed, and being killed, were seen in places miles distant from the scenes of their alleged deaths.

He had killed Burke on the culvert. The dead man had gotten up and walked a half mile to lie down on his back stoop. Walked without leaving footprints. Now he had thrown him weighted into the river. The current *had* to sweep him under Dead Man's Bend. And still he laughed.

Behind him, Burke laughed again, *"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."*

HIS NECK creaking like a rusted oarlock, Crandall turned his head. He was afraid to look. But he had to.

Just this side of where the black water rushed under the pile of jammed debris the long-billed red hunter's cap and the red-and-brown-checked mackinaw were bobbing up and down. The dead man's arms rose and fell as if he were slapping his thighs at some colossal joke. He laughed again.

Insane with fear, Crandall looked in the shallow water for a rock to chunk at it, and a stranger stared back at him. There was another man on the bottom. Then he realized what he was seeing. When he had fallen with the body he had lost his hat and his hair had turned snow white with frost.

Snatching up a rock, he drew back his arm to hurl it at the laughing dead man —and the man disappeared. Crandall started to breathe then caught his breath again as the familiar mackinaw bobbed up just this side of the jam and the dead man, resting his elbows on a log, allowed the swift current to tug at his legs and lower body until he was almost lying on his back, his battered features raised to the sky in an attitude of prayer.

"Pray, damn you!" Crandall screamed.

He hurled rock after rock at the body. Some of them struck it. Most of them missed. But at least the dead man didn't laugh again.

Floundering in the shallows, Crandall found a fallen sapling and, reaching across the water with it, tried to dislodge the body and push it under the jam. The elbows refused to be dislodged. The stout cloth on each arm, caught on snags, resisted the faint force he could exert with a pole.

Then Crandall heard the dogs and the voice. Both came from upriver. Both belonged to the local sheriff. The dogs merely yapped as hounds will when they are puzzled.

The voice said, "I misdoubt he'd wallow through this snow. But we'll search down to the ford below Dead Man's Bend, then cut across and pick up Crandall."

Crandall's ears sensitized by fear magnified the last three words until they drowned out everything else. The sheriff was going to pick him up. The sheriff knew. *Somehow the sheriff knew that he had run down Burke in cold blood, and he was going to pick him up.*

He started to flounder up the icy bank to where his team was waiting. Then native caution restrained him. *If there was no body, if somehow he still could get rid of the body before the sheriff and his posse reached the bend, the law might know he had killed Burke but it wouldn't be able to prove it.*

The sheriff was still a good ways upriver. The wind had carried his voice. He had, perhaps, five minutes to get rid of the body. And five minutes would be sufficient if only he had the nerve. His hands clumps of ice, he stripped off his boots and his sodden fleece-lined windbreaker and allowed the current to carry them downstream. What he proposed to do was risky. But it was his only chance. He didn't want to die. He couldn't stand to be locked up for the rest of his natural life, even his dreams haunted by the knowledge some other man was enjoying Ellie. And Ellie was young and pretty. Ellie would marry again as soon as she was shed of him. Now, waist deep in the icy river, it was small consolation to know she'd loved him, that she had tried to make him a good wife.

Crandall clenched his teeth to keep them from biting his tongue and dived into the dark water. Anyway, Ellie's next husband wouldn't be Burke Peters. He would shove him and his laugh down to hell if it was the last thing he did.

The force of his dive carried him almost to the other bank and into water he

could stand in despite the buffeting of the current. So far, so good. The bottom rock cutting the soles of his feet to ribbons, he made his way to the edge of the tangle of logs and roots forming Dead Man's Bend and edged out toward where the body clung in deep water, still staring up at the sky but no longer laughing.

The current was tugging hard at his legs and he had almost reached the body when he heard the sheriff's voice again.

"Funny fellow, Crandall. Smart as a whip in a lot of ways."

Someone else said, "But shiftless. I damn near died when you said his wife told you that he was digging marl on a day like this."

Still someone else said, "It takes all kinds. Some of us like to work hard. And some just like to set."

A half-dozen men laughed. Crandall looked expectantly at the dead man. Burke always joined in a laugh, but he wasn't laughing now. Maybe he had only imagined that he had heard him laugh. Dead men couldn't laugh. But then neither could they walk.

HOLDING on with one hand he reached out with the other and tried to tug the sleeve of the mackinaw free. It was caught on a stout snag and wouldn't give.

It was only a matter of minutes now before the sheriff and his posse would reach the bend. Desperate, even the biting cold of the water forgotten, Crandall reached across the dead man and pulled himself into a position where his chest was pressed to the back of the mackinaw. His additional weight counter-balanced the pull of the current and the dead man stood erect in the water. Some of the strain lessened, Crandall tugged one sleeve free, then the other.

The body, no longer snagged on the jam, came alive in the current. Pushing himself back and away from it with one hand, Crandall tried to force it under the water with his other hand. It refused to be pushed under. Instead, despite all he could do, it began to turn in the current like a swimmer treading water and he realized suddenly why it had bobbed up and down just before it had snagged on the jam. The rotted grain sack hadn't been able to hold the weight of the rocks he had loaded into it. Combined, they had held it down but as rock after rock had slipped through the rotted bottom of the sack, the body had bobbed like a float on a fish line being nibbled at by shiners.

"Damn you, go under!" he panted.

He shoved again and the body turned to face him. The mask of clotted blood had been washed away by the water. The sightless eyes were only an inch from his own. He could see the man's nose had been badly broken even before it had been smashed into the culvert. Most of the front teeth in the grinning mouth were gold. *But whoever the man was, he wasn't Burke. He was wearing Burke Peters' mackinaw and cap, but he was a total stranger.*

The sodden arms tossed by the current embraced Crandall in a grisly hug. Stifling a scream, he used the last of his strength to push it down and under. Caught by the full suck of the water rushing under the jam, the body disappeared.

For a long moment Crandall lay panting, holding onto the log to keep the pull of the current from sending him after the stranger.

He could see the whole thing now. The reason the sheriff had known the two men had headed that way was because the man he had killed had broken into Burke's place and stolen a change of clothes. The man must just have left Burke's place when he had run him down on the culvert. He had probably been hopeful of hitching a ride by posing as a back-country farmer when the improvised bumper had struck him. And he hadn't

died right away. There had been enough strength in his broken body to crawl and drag himself to the nearest house in search of help.

An early-morning fall of snow would explain away the fact that there had been no tracks. He had been foolish to allow the absence of tracks to panic him. He had been equally foolish to think he had heard the man bobbing in the water laughing. Burke was with the posse. Of course. It was Burke's laugh carried by the wind that he had heard. But when another member of the posse had low-rated him, Burke hadn't laughed. Burke was too much of a man.

Crandall could almost hear Ellie saying, "Burke says it isn't right to low-rate a man lessen you know all the facts of the case."

Sudden, unreasoning rage seized Crandall. *Damn Burke.* This was all Burke's fault. Once he was back on shore again and had thawed the ice out of his bones, he'd kill him for sure this time. His ferret-sized mind added Ellie to his black list. He would kill Ellie for shining up to Burke the way she had. But he would be very clever about it. He would do it in such a way that the law would never suspicion him. Then he would sell the farm and stock and head back home alone.

If only he wasn't so cold. He tried to shift his hold on the icy log to which he was clinging to inch his way back toward shore. His cold-numbed fingers slipped. Before he could scream the pull of the current sucked him under. He bobbed to the surface still trying to scream and spat out black water instead. His flailing arms caught at the log but there was no strength in them. He was no longer standing erect. The current had pulled his legs under the jam. He was lying on his back just as the stranger had, his face tilted toward the sky.

Upstream, not more than two hundred yards away, but still around the bend, the sheriff asked, "Ain't that Crandall's bay team and pole wagon over there on the other bank? My Gawd. Don't tell me that fugitive from a palm tree is trying to dig for marl in six feet of river water."

Burke's laugh, good natured, friendly, drowned out all the others. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."

It was, except for the gurgling of the river, the last thing Crandall heard. The current tugged even harder. Now only his nose and one hand showed. Then, too cold to fight any longer, he allowed the remembered fabric of life to slip through his fingers and he was gone. Only a short-lived ripple on the black, swift-running water showed where he had been. He had only one consolation. It would be warm—very warm—where he was going.

BLOODY NIGHT!

By

LARRY HOLDEN

CHAPTER ONE

The Visitor

THE BUZZER went off like a hatful of insulted bees. Somebody had a heavy thumb out there, and if there's anything I hate it's an eager beaver at the doorbell. I threw down my paper just as Nora stuck her lovely head through the kitchen doorway.

"If you paid the bills on time, Steve," she giggled, "this wouldn't happen."

I strode for the door, growling, "I'll

Chilling Murder Novelette

With a smile as wide as his face, who could dislike Benjy? Even when he brought his grisly gift. . . . Even when his long, shining knife went **flick . . . flick. . . .**

His breath hissed between his teeth as he raised the heavy knife. . . .

settle his bill for him, all right, whoever's ringing that damned bell!"

I flung open the door. It was a tall, blond kid in gabardine slacks and a brightly figured sportshirt. He looked like a fullback, and when he turned on that wide, engaging grin, the anger died inside me.

"Have a heart, son," I said mildly. "That's the only doorbell we've got."

His grin widened and he unplugged his thumb. "Miss Ellen Duncan live here?" He had a nice voice, a voice with a laugh in it.

"It isn't Miss Ellen Duncan any more," I told him. "It's Mrs. Steve Moir—and that's me."

"Congratulations." He kept right on grinning. "I got a letter for her."

"Fine."

I held out my hand, but he shook his head.

"It's for her," he said.

I started to get sore, but right away I saw how ridiculous it was, so I told him to come in, and called to Ellen in the kitchen, "Special delivery for Mrs. Steve Moir. *Very* special."

I winked at the kid, but he didn't get the joke—or didn't like it. He gave me a freezing, arrogant glance, but just then Ellen walked into the room and he turned on the grin again. He dug in his shirt pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

"Just for the record," he said. "You *are* this Ellen Duncan, ain't you?"

"Mrs. Steve Moir," I snapped. He was beginning to get under my skin.

"I *was* Ellen Duncan," said Ellen solemnly, keeping a straight face.

The kid said, "Okay," and handed her the note as if it were the deed to Fort Knox.

Ellen gave him a brief smile and unfolded it. Her face went very still. Then it turned the green of walking death and her eyes burned. Her throat corded up as she fought to control herself.

I cried, "Ellen! For God's sake, honey, what's the matter?"

Her hands were shaking so hard that the paper rattled. The green faded from her face, and two spots of high red glowed on her cheekbones. She tore the note across, then across and across again. She walked to the fireplace and threw the fluttering bits into the ashes. She faced me, and her mouth was thin and hard.

"It's from my father," she said harshly. "He's living in a bar some place. He wants me to come and see him."

I shouted, "Your *father!* But he's—he's dead. He's been dead for twenty years."

She shook her head woodenly. "That was never proved. He ran out on mother, and it killed her. Maybe he was ashamed to show his face again. He's alive, all right. I know his handwriting."

I could feel excitement start to bubble in me. Bruce Duncan alive. It was like saying, Rembrandt's alive. Yeah, Duncan was a sculptor and he was that good. What I don't know about art would fill the Grand Canyon, but when I saw one of Duncan's pieces, it was so damn beautiful that I got a lump in my throat just looking at it.

I said eagerly to Ellen, "Get your coat and let's go."

"No, Steve," she said, "I'm not going."

"Not going?" I stared at her. "Look, honey, aside from the fact that—"

Her chin came up and her hands knotted. "Stop it Steve. I'm *not* going to see him. My mother didn't die for five years after he left her—but she was dying every minute of that time. She loved him. She made her bedroom a shrine for him. His tools were there, his sketches hung on the wall, even bits of marble he had worked on. He killed her, Steve, and"—she took a breath and her eyes glittered—"if I saw him face to face, even now, *I'd kill him!*"

The temperature of the room dropped forty degrees. I tried to warm it up.

"Look, honey," I said. "He was a louse. Okay. So was Wagner. And Edgar Allen

Poe was a lush. So what? They were artists. As people, I wouldn't give you a dime a dozen for them, but the things they created belong to the world."

I MIGHT have gotten to her, but right at that point the blond kid had to stick in his two cents.

"The guy's been talking about you for weeks, Miss," he said. Then slyly, "He's got a wad of dough he wants to leave you when he kicks off. If a guy wanted to leave me his dough, I wouldn't care if he was the biggest louse this side of Hoboken. Right, Cap?" He cocked an eyebrow at me.

I opened my mouth to tell him to shut up, but it was too late.

Ellen's eyes widened and she screamed, "Stop it, stop it, stop it!" She covered her ears with her hands and ran across the room into the kitchen, slamming the door.

The kid stared after her as if he thought she were nuts. He turned to me, grinning.

"Don't take it so hard, Cap," he said. "She'll snap out of it."

I said, "Maybe." I didn't want to discuss it, certainly not with him. He bothered me. "Where's Mr. Duncan staying?" I asked.

He gave me a glance of amused contempt and hooked his thumbs in his belt. "Say, what's all this about Old Loony being an artist or something?" he asked curiously.

"Old Loony?"

"Yeah. That's what we call him. Sometimes he ain't all there. Know what I mean? But if he's an artist, that explains it." He laughed. "He must of made a wad of dough in his day, eh?"

"He did all right."

"I'll bet he did. Some of those guys get a couple of thousand for just one magazine cover. That ain't hay."

He looked like a nice, clean-cut college kid, and talked like a stevedore. And his attitude was a little cockeyed. That shouldn't have bothered me, but it did. Maybe that's why I decided to put him in his place, to show him one of the really beautiful things Ellen's father had done.

It was a head, and it stood on our mantel. It was called "Dancer." The face was lifted in strain and ecstacy, and though the body wasn't there, you could see that she had just left the ground in a wild, glorious leap.

I pointed at it. "That's one of the things Mr. Duncan did."

He swaggered over and lifted it down before I could stop him.

"Don't bust a gut, Cap," he said, grinning. "I won't bust it. Is this supposed to be good?"

"One of the best things he did."

"You don't say." Then, pleasantly, "I don't think it's so hot. It wouldn't look like that."

I smiled. Now he was an art critic. "All right," I said, "what should it look like?"

"Well, it wouldn't be smooth like this,

no matter how clean you took it off. It'd be all raggedy, kind of." He rubbed his hand under the smooth neck. "See what I mean?"

It took me a minute. He meant that if a live girl had been decapitated, the raw end of the neck would have been ragged and bloody—and, for some reason, he made it so graphic that my stomach turned right over.

"Oh, put it back," I said irritably. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

He grinned. He looked at the piece again, shook his head and replaced it on the mantel—arrogant, superior, contemptuous. *He* knew how it should look. *He* knew all about it. Sure. The young jerk. He yawned.

"Well, so-long, Cap," he said. "I'll be—"

I said, "Wait a minute. I'll go back with you. I'd like to talk to Mr. Duncan. I'll get my coat."

He put out a brown, muscular arm and stopped me before I could get to the hall.

"He told me to bring *her*," he said, jerking his toward the kitchen door. "He didn't tell me to bring you or anybody else. See what I mean, Cap?"

"See here," I said, "you're going to take me and—"

"Don't be like that, Cap." He gave me a shove that sent me back into the room, flailing and digging my heels. "I'll be back in case she changes her mind."

He gave me that big, happy grin of his and sauntered out. I checked the angry impulse to go running after him. Maybe I could beat him into taking me and maybe I couldn't—but it sure wouldn't have been pretty for Ellen if she looked through the window and saw the pair of us slugging it out on the front lawn. Instead, I went into the kitchen.

SHE WAS sitting at the table, her arms out before her, her face white and suffering. Right away I changed all my ideas about trying to talk her into anything. I swung a chair over beside her and put my arm around her.

"Forget it, honey," I said. "You don't have to see him if you don't want to. The hell with him."

She closed her eyes. "Steve," she said, "I didn't know I could hate him like this. It's all come back—the way mother grieved to death, everything. I want to kill him, Steve. I can't bear the thought of his being alive, and mother being dead. I want to kill him."

I murmured, "Sure, sure, honey—but that's all past now. What good would killing do? You'd be letting him ruin your life—our lives. It's not worth it, honey."

She acted as if she didn't hear me. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes getting bigger and bigger. "You didn't know my mother, Steve." There was an hysterical vibration in her voice. "She was very lovely and kind and gentle. She was out of her mind when she died, crazy. She started dying when he walked out on her."

Her hands convulsed on the table and she pushed herself half up out of her chair. She cried, "Steve, I hate him, I *hate* him! I want to see him dead. I want to see him die in suffering the way she did."

I pulled her down into the chair. She was quivering in anguish. "Let me go, Steve," she panted. "Let me go, let me go!"

I slapped her sharply across the cheek. She froze, deathly pale, then slumped against me and started to cry. I didn't say anything. I just held her tightly and let her tears wash out the poison. The rigidity melted then, and she turned her face into my shoulder. The sobbing gradually subsided. Then she dried her eyes on my tie, and we both laughed.

"I'm sorry, Steve," she said meekly. "I won't do that again."

"Hell," I said, "you have to blow off when the steam pressure climbs, otherwise you'd crack a cylinder."

"Who was that handsome boy who brought the note, Steve?"

"A character," I said. "A real character."

I told her what the kid had said about the neck of the "Dancer," but I made it humorous. There is nothing so gruesome but that a touch of laughter can't take the grue out of it. I made the kid sound like a regular clown, a real comic—but all the while I had the uneasy feeling that he was a long way from being that. *I* was the one who was the clown. Anyway, we had a good laugh.

"Good grief," said Ellen, giggling, "what does he think art is, a chamber of horrors? Say, let's eat, Steve, then go to the movies. What would you like for dinner?"

I told her, and we had it, and then we went to the movies.

That was where I should have used some sense, and didn't. The dinner had been very gay, and when we got to the movies, there was the picture we'd both been wanting to see for a long time—"Snake Pit." I should have turned her right around and taken her to see Bob Hope or Danny Kaye, but did I use my head? Hell, no. Not big-brain Moir. We saw "Snake Pit."

Ellen was very quiet as we walked home. I had plenty to say, but I said it all to myself, and even the mildest of it couldn't have been printed.

CHAPTER TWO

Bloody Gift

IT WAS Ellen who saw the small package on the doorstep as I fumbled for my key. She bent, picked it up and held it to the light.

"It's for me," she said, wondering. "A package."

"A soap sample?" I asked.

Brother, how wrong I was!

She sat in the wing chair beside the fireplace to open it while I went into the kitchen to build a drink. I had gotten no further than the ice cubes when I heard her shriek at the top of her lungs—shriek after shriek. It froze me to the marrow. I dropped the ice tray, jumped over it and sprinted back into the living room.

She was crouched in a corner of the chair, her hands over her face, and from behind her hands came quivering little moans. Her head rolled from side to side. The unwrapped package and an opened note were lying on the floor at her feet. As I stopped to pick up the note, I saw what had made her shriek.

A finger.

A freshly severed finger, the index finger of the left hand. I snatched up the note. It said:

> My dear child,
>
> I am enclosing one of my dearest possessions. Benjy says you refused to come to see me. I can hardly blame you for that, but I hope the enclosed will persuade you to change your mind. I am old and not well. My only wish now is to see you once before I die.
>
> Your loving father

I scooped the finger in the note and strode out into the kitchen with it. I wrapped it in a newspaper, stood undecided for a moment, then went outside and dropped it in the garbage can. On the way back to the living room I grabbed up the rye bottle and a glass.

Ellen was hunched in the chair, her hands inert in her lap. Her eyes were wide with shock. My hands were unsteady as I sloshed a good four fingers of rye into the glass. For a moment I had a glimpse of how hate could tear you apart. It went roaring through me, raging to burst out, and in that moment it seemed that only one thing could relieve the pressure—killing Duncan!

The violence of it scared me. I'd never wanted to kill anybody before. Sock them in the jaw, sure. But not kill. My mind re-

coiled then from the thought. It wouldn't help Ellen if I got myself sent to the chair.

However, it gave me a terrible insight into what Ellen was going through, not for just one burning moment, but time and time and time again.

I knelt beside her chair and said gently, "Drink this, honey. It's an old family remedy, prescribed by old Doc Moir himself."

Obediently, she took the glass in both hands. She drank it in long, mechanical swallows, as if it were water. I tried to get her to drink another one, but she pushed it away.

She looked at me and said dully, "He drove my mother crazy, Steve. He drove her out of her mind."

I said quickly, "Not purposely, honey. Not—"

"Yes." There was no emphasis, just stark conviction. "And he's trying to drive me out of my mind, too, Steve."

"No, honey. He's crazy himself. Can't you see that? He isn't sane. He's flipped his lid. You should be sorry for him."

"I'm going to kill him, Steve. He's bad, he's evil."

If she had screamed or ranted, I could have quieted her, but she just sat there and talked in a low, toneless voice. She sounded as if she were beyond argument, as if her purpose had crystallized. I shivered.

I grasped her hands. "Listen to me, honey," I said. "That's not the way. The thing to do is have him committed to an insane asylum, have him put away where he can't hurt anybody."

"No. He'd get out of it some way. He's brilliant. He'd fool them." She stood up. "I don't want to talk about it. I want to go to bed."

I knew enough to shut up. Arguing just stiffened her. But I did make her take a bromide.

I lay awake after I got into bed, staring into the darkness, remembering Duncan from all the pictures I had seen of him. He had a long face, thin and sensitive, with a lean blade of a nose and a wide, mobile mouth.

I dozed and the face mocked and jeered at me as I strugggled with sleep.

Then suddenly I was wide awake. A hurried shadow passed between me and the window. My heart started to thud and cautiously I put out my hand and felt for the lamp between our beds. The flood of light froze Ellen in the act of zipping her skirt. She already had on a sweater, stockings and shoes.

"Couldn't sleep, honey?" I tried to keep my voice casual. I was scared, but I didn't want her to see it. I slid out of bed and fumbled my feet into slippers.

She didn't move. She stood perfectly still. As she watched me, a crafty expression crept into her face and veiled her eyes.

"I was just going for a walk, Steve," she said. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"I couldn't sleep either. I'll walk along with you."

For a flickering instant something flamed in her eyes, as if she hated me, too. Hated me for waking up and catching her.

"Don't bother getting dressed," she said coolly. "I've changed my mind. I'm going back to bed."

Watching me from the ends of her eyes, she undressed and went back to bed.

She said, "Good-night," then pulled up the covers and turned her back to me.

It didn't hit me hard until she did that. She was telling me that I was an outsider now—one of the enemy, if you want to put it that way.

I DIDN'T go to the office the next morning. I called my partner and told him to handle things for a while.

He said, "Okay, Steve."

I didn't have to explain. He was a good guy.

At breakfast Ellen's face was tense,

hard. She didn't seem surprised that I hadn't gone to work. When she wasn't watching, I stared at her as if I had never seen her before. She had her mother's rather fragile delicacy of features, plus an extraordinary sensitiveness that she had gotten from her father. And that was the explanation of why a thing like this could affect her so deeply and strongly.

She was friendly, but withdrawn.

It would take time, I told myself. Time had healed her before and it could heal her again.

I went outside, but before I did I locked the back door and the cellar door. I was routing out the voracious dandelions that were eating my front lawn when I heard the familiar voice again.

"Hiya, Cap, feeding the worms?"

I looked up and there was the blond kid, Benjy, grinning down at me.

"Did you bring that package that was left here last night?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"Do you know what was in it?"

"A present, wasn't it?"

"That's right," I said. "But we don't want any more presents like that. You can consider this a warning, because the next time you come around with something like that I'm going to break your neck!"

He grinned like a kid who's being scolded for something he didn't do. "Aw, Cap," he said, "why get sore at me? The guy slipped me a few bucks to deliver a package. That's all I know about it."

"Suppose," I said, "I slipped you a few bucks not to deliver any more."

His eyebrows went up and he thought it over. He shook his head. "Don't be a chump, Cap." There was something derisive in his grin. "If it wasn't me, it'd be some other guy. Look, why don't she just go out and see the old bat? That's all he wants."

"No."

"Think it over," he said. "Loony's got a hatful of dough he's gonna leave her, but he wants to see her first. What's so tough about getting left a sack of the old moo?"

"If he left her the money," I said, "we'd donate it to the Society For The Prevention Of Sculptors."

He shook his head again. "I don't get it." He sprawled on the grass in front of me, carelessly flicking at the dandelions with a long, foreign-looking knife he was carrying.

"So she hates the guy," he said. "What the hell—there's lotsa guys I hate, but I don't let them get between me and a buck. See what I mean, Cap?"

"I'm not letting her go, Buster, so you might just as well tell Duncan to forget it."

He looked at me from under his eyelashes. "She's sore about her old lady, eh?"

"I'm not letting her go," I repeated.

"Cap," he said softly, "if she hates the

guy bad enough, she'll go, and you won't have nothing to say about it. She'll go if it's only to slit his throat. See what I mean?"

I felt a cold web of fear tighten on my face. He was right. I could watch and watch, but I had to close my eyes some time.

"You're a pretty shrewd onion," I said. "You've got everything figured out. But what's your interest, anyway? What're you really getting out of this."

"A hundred bucks to bring her," he said, grinning.

"I'll give you two hundred to stay away."

"Cap," he said pityingly, "you're just being a chump. To a guy that loves a buck as much as me, that's pure gravy. I'll take your two hundred. Sure. But it won't buy you nothing. I'm only telling you this because I feel sorry for you."

Idly he reached out with the knife and snipped off the head of another dandelion, then another and another. Very dexterous, very sure. I don't know why it should have fascinated me, but it did. Flick, flick, flick—just the heads. It was silly, but I couldn't help thinking of the way he had talked about chopped-off heads the day before.

Flick, flick, flick.

"Damn it," I said, "put that thing down! Where'd you get it, anyway?"

"This?" He looked at the knife with surprise. "That's a Phillipine bush knife. I bought it from a guy that didn't have no use for it."

"And you have, I suppose?"

He shrugged. "You never know."

I heard the front door open and I jumped up. Ellen marched across the lawn. Her face was white and twitching. The kid jumped up and gave her a big, happy grin. She stared at him.

"Tell my father . . ." her voice came out all splintered. She tried to go on, but her throat convulsed.

It was a terrible thing to watch, and there was nothing I could do because the fight was all inside herself.

"Tell my father," she started again in a higher key, "that if he . . . persecutes me any more, I'll have him . . . arrested."

She turned and fled back into the house. The kid scratched his head and slid a glance at me.

"Seems like something backfired." His grin was rueful.

"If you need any assistance getting out of here," I said, "I'll be glad to boot you in the tail."

He stepped back and his eyes slitted. "Always kidding, ain'tcha, Cap." His hand darted. The tip of his knife caught my tie halfway up and—flick—cut it off. He laughed and strode jauntily down the walk.

I turned and went into the house so I wouldn't have to stand there watching him swagger down the street.

Ellen was waiting for me in the hall. She said, "Oh, Steve." She put her hands to my cheeks and kissed me. She was pale, but she looked more her own self. Everything was going to be okay now. I knew it. But that's intuition for you.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Statues

THE NEXT DAY was Sunday—a rainy, low-slung Sunday. Nothing ever happens on a Sunday. You sit around and read the papers or you listen to the radio, but nothing ever happens. It's just a lazy, drowsy hole in the week.

The rain didn't let up all day, and by late afternoon it started blowing a gale. The trees bent and groaned under the heavy load of wind, and the rain splattered against the windowpanes. It was getting chilly, so I went down into the cellar to start up the furnace. Ellen was in the kitchen peeling potatoes when I went through.

"Build us some martinis, honey," I said, "and remind me to tell you I love you when I come up."

"Why is it," she asked, looking up from her potatoes, "that men are more amorous in the kitchen? Is it the food that makes them so loving?" She winked. "But I'll remind you, and don't think I won't."

Whistling, I went down into the cellar. Of course, the furnace was full of ashes, and I had to shake it down and dig them out.

Vaguely I heard voices upstairs, but I thought it was the radio, and anyway, I was too busy. I had to chop wood and shovel coal and stand around until I was sure the fire had caught. There were other sounds upstairs, too—footsteps, a door closing—but it was all very remote and unimportant compared to getting that damn furnace going. And it was Sunday. Nothing ever happens on a Sunday. It was at least a half-hour before I went upstairs again.

I knew something was wrong the minute I stepped into the kitchen. Ellen's half-peeled potatoes lay deserted on the table, and there was a cold draft blowing through, as if a window or a door had been left open.

I called sharply, "Ellen!"

An empty house has a peculiar hollow sound, a kind of muffled echo. I strode into the living room and called, "Ellen!" again. There was no answer. I felt the first stab of panic and I sprinted into the hall.

The hall door was wide open and the rain was driving across the floor, soaking the hooked rug. She was gone. I might have run, panting, from room to room, but the sight of that drenched rug stopped me like a concrete wall. It was one of the things she really loved. She'd never, willingly, have let the rain pelt in on it.

As I moved forward mechanically to close the door, I saw it—an open cardboard box on the console table beside the door. In the box was a small figurine of a woman—completely smashed. I did not have to be told that Duncan had sculptured it. Even in the bits I could see the delicacy and artistry that marked every piece of marble Duncan put his chisel to.

Beside the box was a note. I didn't touch it. I wouldn't have touched it if my life had hung in the balance. I bent over and read it.

> My dear child,
> This is a small figurine I made of your mother. This is the way I like to think of her . . .

I couldn't read any more. It was as diabolical as his sending her his severed finger. A figurine of her mother—smashed. Ellen would never have done that. He had sent it to her that way as a symbol of how he had smashed her mother's life.

For a moment I went stark, raving mad. I ran out into the rain in my shirt sleeves and stood in the middle of the street yelling, "Ellen, Ellen, Ellen!" The street was empty. There wasn't even a parked car on it.

I ran back into the house and straight up into our bedroom. I jerked open the bottom drawer of the mahogany chest and emptied it on the rug. There had been a gun there, a .38. We had always joked about it. Ellen called it the arsenal. It had been there for years, never used. It wasn't much of a gun, but a bullet from a twenty-dollar gun can kill just as surely as a bullet from a two-hundred-dollar gun. The .38 was gone now.

I did not have to imagine what state of mind Ellen was in after seeing that smashed figurine of her mother and reading the note that went with it. And I did not have to imagine what she was going to do with the gun.

I JUMPED up and clattered downstairs, then had to turn and run upstairs for my raincoat. As I swooped down the stairs

again, swinging my arms into the coat, a thought hit me.

I hadn't the faintest idea where she had gone.

I grabbed up the note, but there was nothing there to help me. It slobbered on, hypocritically, and ended, "your loving father." I tore it to bits, threw it on the floor and stamped on it, cursing him. There had been nothing in the other note, either, no clue, nothing.

I thought of the first note then. Ellen had ripped it up and had thrown it in the ashes of the fireplace. I went down on my knees on the hearth and clawed through the ashes until I had all eight pieces of the original note. As carefully as I could with shaking hands, I assembled them like a jigsaw puzzle on the rug. It started the same as the others: "My dear child. . ."

Dear child! If he'd been there I'd have torn out his throat with my bare hands. Dear child! I skipped rapidly throught it, grinding my teeth. I found what I wanted in the last paragraph:

> Benjy Kevin has been kind enough to take this note to you. I am living in a shack near his bar in Tawsecus. He will show you the way . . .

Tawsecus. That was across the river—a sprawling, pig-farming town on the raw fringe of the Meadows. The Meadows, miles and miles of salt marsh, a jungle of reeds, drainage ditches, muck-holes. That was where Duncan was living.

I don't know how long it took me to find Kevin's Bar in the telephone directory. Hours, eons. My hands shook so hard I was barely able to turn the pages, and the sweat ran off me, dripped into my eyes, off the end of my nose, into my mouth, and it was as bitter as a burst gall bladder. I finally had to use the edge of an envelope to pin down the address. My trembling finger was useless.

Kevin's Bar, I Old Tawsecus Road. . . . Right on the river bank.

I remember pushing the Chevvy up to ninety across the highway, and I remember the blood running down my chin from my bitten lip, but I don't remember much else.

Tawsecus Road was the old turnpike, untraveled since the bridge had been torn down. It had been paved with Belgian blocks, but the thrifty township fathers had torn those up and sold them, and the road was nothing but a mud trap.

It was dark now, and somehow the thunder that followed me like a growling dog made it seem even darker, despite the slashes of lightning that split the leaden sky.

I pushed the Chevvy as hard as I could, but I couldn't get better than fifteen miles an hour out of it in that bog. I slipped and skidded and swayed and crawled ahead, the headlights stabbing the night.

A man came slogging through the mud as I passed him, he shouted, "If you're going to Kevin's, bud, it's closed." I stepped harder on the gas pedal and threw up a fountain of mud. He swore at me, but his voice was lost almost immediately in a snarl of thunder.

My windshield was a Niagara and I almost rode up the front steps of Kevin's Bar before I saw it. The lights were on, but it was locked. I jumped out and ran up the porch. I peered in a side window and hammered on it. I kicked at the door until it roared like a bass drum. But nothing happened.

Then I remembered. Duncan wasn't there. He was in a shack near there. Near. Near could mean anything. To the right was the river, and I could hear it tearing at the old bridge. Not there. To the left was the muddy stretch of Old Tawsecus Road.

My coat flapping open, I staggered through the mud around the back of the bar. A path led crookedly through twelve-foot reeds to an alley. I had to walk with my head bent, driving ahead into the pelt-

ing rain as hard as I could go, sobbing for breath. To the right of the path was a ditch, swollen and bubbling, steep-sided—a death trap if I slipped into it. I could never climb up those slippery banks if once I fell. But I didn't give a damn. My legs burned and my lungs were on fire, but I lurched and lunged, trying to peer ahead from under my brows.

Then a pinpoint of yellow light appeared ahead, a window. I plunged toward it.

BENJY saw me before I saw him. He was standing at the window, staring in. He turned and put his finger to his lips. He shook his head. The rain streamed down his face.

"It's okay, Cap," he whispered. "She had a gun, but I took it away from her. They're talking now, and they're getting along like peaches and cream. Take a look."

He stepped aside and, grasping the windowsill, I raised myself on tiptoe and looked through the window.

It was a stark, bare room, but neat. Very neat. Like a monk's cell. There were shelves and shelves all around it with figures on them, and there was a modeling table, but all I saw at that moment were the tall, emaciated man on the army cot and Ellen standing beside him.

She was erect and tense, and I could see the white of her knuckles as she held her bag to her breast. Her mouth had thinned to a pencil line. Duncan was talking to er. He was so weak that he was barely able to raise himself on one elbow. His yellow, wasted hand was held out to her in entreaty. His face was so bare of flesh that when he moved his mouth it had the wooden, jerky action of a puppet. His chin kept sagging to his chest, and he had to summon all his strength to keep on talking.

Between the rolling thunder and the heavy drumming of the rain on the corrugated roof, I couldn't hear a word he was saying, but there was tragedy there. I could see that. In his gaunt eyes and in the slow dissolution of Ellen's enmity.

Her eyes became larger and darker. Her lips parted and trembled. Her face softened in horror and pity—and then, suddenly, she went down on her knees beside the cot and buried her face in the faded khaki blanket. Duncan stroked her hair and the tears streamed down his bony face. He murmured to her and gestured at the shelves that ringed the room. She looked up and, as I gaped, kissed him tenderly on his withered cheek.

Benjy, beside me, said savagely, "That's it, Cap!" and something thudded against the left side of my neck. I went down in the mud as if I'd been clubbed. I wasn't out, but I couldn't move a finger.

Grinning, he bent, hooked his fingers in my collar and dragged me around the

shack to the door. He kicked it open and hauled me inside. He kicked the door closed. I could hear and see, but I couldn't move. Benjy stood grinning, his legs apart, slapping that awful knife of his against his calf.

He looked at Ellen and said pleasantly, "Old Loony tell you what's he's leaving you, Miss?"

She cried, "Steve!" and started toward me.

Benjy put out his hand and shoved her back. "Nix, sis," he said. "He ain't hurt —not yet!" His laugh was low and still pleasant. "And he won't be if you just tell me where Loony's got all that dough stashed away. Know what I mean?"

Ellen wasn't even listening. I was hurt and she wanted to come to me. She darted around the modeling table, knocking the heavy, round-headed mallet to the floor.

She whimpered, "Steve! Oh, Steve. . ."

Benjy caught her easily by the arm and flung her back.

"Take it easy, sis," he said, grinning. "The minute you tell me where Loony's got his dough stashed you can slop over him all you want. Otherwise. . ." His knife flicked up and a line of pain darted across my cheek. "See what I mean, sis?"

Ellen moaned and tried to get past him, but he held her, laughing.

"That's enough now, sis." He was enjoying himself. "I went to a lot of trouble getting you out here. I tried to get Loony to tell me where he had it hid, but he was a little stubborn, or maybe a little too rum-dumb. He wouldn't tell nobody but you. I could of worked on him, but it's easier this way. Now, if you want little Stevie all in one piece, just tell me what I wanna know and we can part friends. Know what I mean?"

I strained to move. My hand turned over, but that was all. Behind Benjy, Duncan had struggled upright on the edge of his cot. He looked like a sitting skeleton. His legs quivered as he pushed himself away from the cot. He raised his skinny arms and, with a croaking cry, fell on Benjy. His weight wasn't enough even to stagger the kid. Benjy flung Ellen from him, turned and brought the heel of his hand up under Duncan's chin. The old man fell to his hands and knees. Benjy's breath hissed between his teeth as he raised his heavy knife and he grunted as he brought it down with all his strength.

Duncan's head hit the floor with a dull plop, and he came to rest wearily against the foot of the modeling table. Benjy turned him over with the toe of his shoe and laughed.

The galvanizing horror of it jumped into my arm, and my hand closed around the handle of the heavy, round-headed mallet that Ellen had knocked to the floor. As Benjy bent over Duncan's head to pick it up, I lunged at him, swinging. A skull was never meant to withstand a mallet that could drive a chisel into marble. Benjy sprawled across Duncan's trunk with a shriek that rose to the quivering peak of ultimate terror and pain.

I stood swaying and looking down—and passed out.

WE HAVE donated Duncan's legacy to the Museum of Modern Art. It was not, as Benjy thought, a wad of dough. Not as he thought of dough—though it was actually invaluable. There were at least a hundred busts and figurines of Ellen's mother, twenty years of work, a treasure far beyond Benjy's greediest dreams—but he had been too much of a barbarian to realize it.

There was more than one tragedy in that collection of sculpture. Duncan had not deserted Ellen's mother—she had thrown him out. There had been one woman too many, one love affair that hit too hard. He had gone into voluntary exile, and she, in turn, had grieved her life away. He had loved her and had

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She drew the line tight and cut off the surplus with a knife. There! she told herself. Everything was ready now.

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

NIGHTMARE LADY

It scared Aunt Fanny the way her dreams came true. Especially . . . since tonight she expected to dream that Gerald would die. . . .

FANNY CORRLES put her cup down in the saucer carefully. Her fingers were trembling.

"But, Gerald," she said—it didn't do to get excited when you were talking to Gerald; it excited him—"but, Gerald, don't scientists believe in such things? I mean in prophetic dreams and so on. That man Dunne, for instance, and didn't Dr. Rhine write about it? They take it seriously, those scientists. Like telepathy."

Across the breakfast table her brother glowered at her. "Telepathy!" he said, puffing out his lips. "Prophetic dreams! Why not mystic pentagons? No reputable scientist would even investigate such foolishness."

Oh, dear, he was putting her to rout again. "But I really did dream about it, Gerald," she said. "I really did." She was

trying to keep from sounding pleading and hurt.

"Bah! I never heard such nonsense in my life. You make these things up, Fanny, so you can ride yourself on how important you are."

He halted. Under the table, Lady, the old setter, stirred uneasily. In a moment Fanny felt the silken head pressing against her knee. She reached down and began to fondle the dog's ear; Lady was always frightened when Gerald was cross.

"Oh, I know you," Gerald went on bitterly. And then came the familiar, painful words Fanny had been waiting for: *"Fanny, you're a fool."*

He pushed his chair back heavily from the table and got up. Fanny heard him, after a moment, stumping down the stairs.

He was going out to work in the garden. Fanny remained seated, her lips pressed together. Why did it hurt her so? "Fanny, you're a fool." He'd said it in the first week she came to live with him after Sally's mother died, and how many times since? Hundreds and hundreds in eighteen years, and every time the same pain all over again. She was too sensitive. She sighed.

And she really had dreamed it. She'd dreamed that Marsh's chickens, across the street, had got into Gerald's garden and pecked the tomato plants to pieces, all except one. The dream had amused her. Marsh was so careful to keep his chickens penned up that the very idea was ridiculous.

Then Gerald had come into the kitchen while she was getting breakfast and had told her, his heavy face pale with indignation, that Marsh's gate had been left unlatched and the tomato plants were gone, ruined, all except one.

FANNY got up and began to clear the dishes away. It was a great nuisance, having the kitchen and one of the baths and her bedroom on the lower floor, while the dining room and the rest of the house were upstairs. But Gerald had insisted that it was more economical to build with the garage under the roof with the rest of the house, and of course that dislocated things.

She'd hoped, when they came out to California, that they could have a little Spanish house near Los Angeles, among the geraniums in the sun. But Gerald had liked it better around the bay, and it would be convenient for Sally when she started to the university. Gerald was sure to give in and let Sally go.

Lady padded after Fanny down the stairs and followed her into the kitchen. Fanny gave her her breakfast and then let her out the back door. Poor thing, her muzzle was getting quite grey, but she still liked to lie outside while Gerald worked.

Fanny Corrles began on the dishes. After she got the kitchen straightened out, she'd plan dinner for day after tomorrow when Sally would be home again. Sally was so appreciative of what one did, it was a pleasure to plan. Ice cream with chocolate sauce, and—

Fanny heard a frightened yelp outside and then a burst of cursing. She opened the window and looked out.

Lady was going around the corner of the house, her tail tucked between her hindquarters, and Gerald was waving his hoe and swearing at her. While Fanny watched, he picked up a rock and threw it accurately. Lady yelped again and ran even faster. Oh, dear. Fanny listened apprehensively until she heard the rhythm of Gerald's hoe begin again.

She closed the window and went back to her thoughts. What a darling Sally had turned out to be. a lovely girl. And yet, from one point of view, she'd had so little to become a darling from. Gerald had been disappointed in her at birth—he hadn't wanted a girl—and Martha, her mother, had died when Sally was a few

weeks old. Fanny had worried about Sally a lot when she quit her teaching job—she had loved teaching—and came to take care of her.

Jack had been sixteen then, and really, if Sally was a darling, the credit was all his. He'd seemed to realize Sally's situation, youngster though he was, and set out to remedy it. His sister's first wobbling steps had been taken toward his arms; he'd brought her dolls and toys; and later, when he began to go with girls, he'd demanded of all of them that they make friends with Sally. She had never been a nuisance to him, the kid sister; in a way, he'd been more of a father to her than Gerald ever had.

The chop-chop of the hoe ceased. Fanny heard the back door open and Gerald start clumping up the stairs. He ought to be more careful; he was getting so heavy, and only last week he'd twisted his knee in the bathtub. He'd roared at Fanny when she suggested liniment. But the stairs were so steep; he really should watch his step. After a moment he came clumping down again.

Yes, Jack had been a splendid boy. Fanny felt the tears beginning to sting in her eyes. He was dead now, killed early in the fighting in Italy. Sometimes she felt, in flashes of disloyalty, that Gerald had never cared for his son before the posthumous medal came. Jack had been reticent, and they hadn't known until he was killed that it was the second decoration he'd received. Gerald often spoke of him now, always with pride.

Sally had never really got over his death. She still came out of her room occasionally with her eyes puffed and red. She was so fond of Lady, Fanny thought, not only because she loved animals in general, but also because Lady was a link with Jack. Jack had brought her the puppy when Sally was only six, and she and Lady had romped and played and grown up together.

THERE was a noise in the garden, a sort of sharp crack. It made Fanny jump. She couldn't identify it, and though she told herself she was foolish, she gave in to the nervousness she'd been feeling all morning. She dried her hands on her apron and went to the door.

She didn't understand what it was. Gerald was holding his rifle, looking down at something on the ground. As Fanny started toward him he looked at her with an expression she wasn't used to seeing on his face—embarrassment, perhaps, and guilt.

"I put her out of her misery," he said, his voice a little high. "She'll be better off."

She? What did he mean? Fanny felt sudden horror clutch at her heart. She hurried toward him, almost running, pushing her glasses up on her nose.

She looked down at the object on the ground when she got up to him. Her heart gave a sick, terrified lurch.

"Oh, Gerald," she said weakly. "Gerald . . ."

"Now before you start taking on, Fanny," he said, "let me tell you what that dog did. She lay down on that tomato plant, the only one I had left, and crushed it flat, broke it off at the stem. And besides"—his tone was growing more self-confident— "what good was she? Too old to hunt or have pups. You know yourself how much she suffered from rheumatism. It was an act of kindness, really, to put her out of her misery."

Lady. She was dead. No more wagging tail, no more smooth tongue to lick her hand. And Sally . . . Fanny wanted to throw herself down by the body on the ground and cry endlessly, heartbrokenly, like a child.

"Oh, how *could* you, Gerald?" she asked, speaking from some deep bitterness. "How *could* you do a thing like that?"

He stiffened. "Fanny, you're a fool," he said. "I fed that dog for twelve years.

If you think so much of her, you can bury her yourself." He laid his rifle down, picked up the hoe and began working again. Chop-chop. Chop-chop.

Fanny looked about her almost wildly. She felt light-headed. Then she bent and picked up the heavy, still-warm body. There was a neat round hole between the eyes. Gerald was an excellent shot.

The body felt awkward in her arms. From the toolshed she got a spade and, trailing it behind her, walked over to the fence on the edge of the lot.

She was not used to working with a spade and she kept spilling dirt back in. When the hole was big enough she laid Lady gently inside.

Gerald was looking the other way. Quickly, before he could see her, she broke off handfuls of calendulas from the straggly plants and heaped them up to cover the dog. Then she began to throw dirt back in the hole.

She pressed the mound down gently with her hands. She knelt creakily, looking down at it.

Wasn't there—mustn't there be—some excuse for what Gerald had done? Blinking down through her bifocals at the grave, Fanny felt she couldn't go on like this, her mind shrieking accusations against Gerald for his senseless, wanton cruelty. There must be something which would excuse him, if she could think of it.

It was true, Lady had had rheumatism. But Sally had been treating her for it with aspirin and the heating pad, and she had improved so much. She could have lived for years.

Sally was wonderfully clever about such things. Ever since she had stopped playing with dolls there had been a steady stream of animals to the house for her to cure. She bandaged paws, set bones, lanced abscesses, took stickers out of eyes. She had even made a little gadget from a flashlight and a mirror so she could see inside a dog's ear and remove the painful foxtails that sometimes lodged there. She loved and understood animals, and they responded to her. What was she going to feel when she heard her father had shot her dog?

Fanny could't tell her about it. She'd say that Lady had been run over by a speeding truck. Sally would be hurt enough, anyway, without knowing that Gerald . . .

No, there was no excuse for him. He had put Lady to death in blind rage, from stupid cruelty. No excuse at all. Fanny stood up, brushing the dirt from her dress.

She was so quiet at lunch and supper that Gerald asked her several times whether the cat had got her tongue. He seemed to want to talk, to tell her about his gardening. But somehow she didn't have anything to say.

While she was clearing away the supper dishes, there was a knock at the door. She went down the steps carefully, holding onto the rail, until she was at the bottom of the long flight.

It was one of Sally's boy friends. "Is Sally back yet, Miss Corrles?" he asked eagerly.

"No, Edward, I'm sorry. She won't be home till the day after tomorrow."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "Well, will you give her this when she comes?" He handed the bottle he had been holding to Fanny. "Tell her I'll be seeing her." He went off down the walk.

He was a nice boy, Fanny thought, though a little stupid and slow. She unwrapped the bottle, pushed her glasses up and read the label. She began to smile.

Sally's boy friends all learned eventually that the road to favor with her lay in presenting her with something which would be useful in her amateur veterinary work. Edward had brought Sally a bottle of lotion marked, "For Mange."

Fanny put the bottle on a shelf and went up the stairs again for the dishes. When she had cleaned up, she was con-

scious of something still left undone. Oh, yes, letting Lady out . . . She turned out the light and went into her own room. She would go early to bed.

It was easy enough to undress, to get between the sheets. But she couldn't get to sleep. She kept hearing Sally's "But where's Lady?" and her answer. Sally's eyes would open wide, and then her face would pucker up. And Fanny would have to try to comfort her with lies. Oh, she must stop thinking, she must go to sleep.

SHE SLEPT heavily at last, and when the alarm went off it took her nearly five minutes to rouse herself. She had been having such a nice dream about Sally. What had it been? Oh, yes.

She began to pull on her clothes. She had dreamed that Sally was going to the university, just as she had planned, and was taking all the courses she had marked in the catalogue—zoology, botany, chemistry. Sally had always talked so seriously about what she would need as a preliminary to the coveted V.M.D.—Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. It had been a remarkable dream, detailed and clear, not mixed up and silly as dreams usually were.

It had cheered her up. As Fanny brushed her hair she felt convinced that the dream was going to prove true, no matter what Gerald said. Sally would get to go to college; everything was going to be fine.

Gerald ate heartily that morning—two waffles, a lot of bacon and four eggs. She did hope he wouldn't have indigestion; it made him so cross.

He came plumping down the stairs while she was scalding out the sink and yelled at her from the hallway. When she went out he pushed a magazine at her and pointed at a page.

"Isn't that a good idea, Fanny?" he demanded expansively. "For Jack's medals, I mean."

Fanny pushed her glasses up with the back of her damp hand and looked. It was an advertisement, something about paperweights. Some firm was mounting servicemen's medals under glass, with a metal base, to serve as paperweights.

"It says to send them by registered mail," Gerald explained. "I think I'll get the medals off today. I'll have the gold base, of course."

"But won't it be expensive?" Fanny asked. She had caught the words, "With solid gold base, $75.00. Plus twenty percent federal tax."

Gerald looked annoyed. "What you can't seem to realize, Fanny," he said, "is that the best is none too good where Jack is concerned."

He closed the magazine and started upstairs. His back had a stiff, offended look. Fanny returned to cleaning out the sink.

How odd Gerald was, open-handed, even extravagant, in some things, and rigidly economical in others. He was willing to spend—let's see, it would be $180 with the tax—on getting the medals made into paperweights, but he had already objected to Sally's going to the university on the ground that the tuition, fifty dollars a semester, was too much.

Fanny took her apron off. She didn't really much like the idea of the paperweights. No doubt it was all right, but—well, those medals stood for an enormous expense of body and spirit alike. Jack had got them by displaying bravery where bravery was difficult—bravery against a background of hunger, mortal weariness and cold, a background arched over with the never-ceasing fear of injury or death. Jack had been killed in action; and now his medals were going to be paperweights on Gerald's desk in his little den.

Well, it was Gerald's affair. She saw, as she hung her apron up, that the windows were dirty and decided she'd better wash them. She put her apron on again and got out the cleaning things.

Once or twice Gerald shouted some-

thing at her, but she hardly heard him. She was absorbed in thoughts of Sally. Fanny would have to watch to be sure she got enough recreation and didn't work too hard. In high school she had got such good grades, never anything below a B. Fanny was quite sure that Sally was going to the university; her dream had been perfectly clear.

ABOUT five, Gerald brought in one of the chickens he had got from Marsh as compensation for the injury done his garden and asked her to dress it for supper. They had a nice meal—fried chicken and salad and sponge cake with cream. Even Gerald said that Fanny had become a good cook in the years she had lived with him, though she hadn't cared a pin for such things while she was teaching. Yes, it was a nice meal, but Fanny was too tired, and in some way too excited, to want to eat.

"What's the matter?" Gerald asked as she pushed back her plate.

"Oh, I guess I'm too tired to be hungry."

"When Sally comes back from her visit she can help you with the housework," Gerald said, chewing. He put more potatoes and gravy on his plate.

"She won't have much time when she's going to the university." It had slipped out; Fanny hadn't meant to bring the subject up.

Gerald looked at her under his eyebrows. "I'm not at all sure that Sally *is* going to the university," he said.

Fanny saw she must be very careful. "She's counting on it," she replied, keeping her voice low.

"I don't think I can afford the tuition," Gerald answered. He spooned salad out of a dish.

"It's not much, Gerald, really. And I'm sure Sally would be willing to get a part-time job to help out."

He finished the food on his plate. "What's she want to go to college for, anyhow?"

Was it a trap? Gerald knew the answer. "Why, she'll have to get her degree before she can be a veterinarian. You know, Gerald, she's planned on that ever since she was a little girl."

"Umm." Gerald pulled the sponge cake to him. "You don't realize, Fanny, that Sally's only a girl. What's the use of educating her? She'll just get married and have kids."

It was foolish to argue with him. Fanny tried to keep herself from answering. "Of course she's a girl," she replied, too quickly. "I hope she'll marry and have children; she wants to, I know. But, Gerald, why shouldn't she do something, too? It would be dreadful not to let her go to school. Sally is a very unusual, a very talented girl."

"That doesn't change the fact that she's a girl." He spoke with his mouth full.

"Jack would want her to go, Gerald. He always encouraged her."

"Jack made mistakes; that was one of them. This is just a notion of hers. I don't want her to go."

He didn't want. In a moment Gerald was going to say, "She can't go." Fanny felt rising panic. She must stop him before he said it. He was so stubborn that once he had committed himself he would never, never change.

Hurry, her mind said. *Hurry.* Don't let him say it. And then, in her panic and haste, she made the irrevocable mistake. "But, Gerald, she's *got* to go! Why, last night I *dreamed* she was going to the university!"

Gerald shoved back his plate. "What a *fool* you are, Fanny," he said. "If I needed one thing more to show I'm right, it was that remark of yours. You're educated, you've even taught, and yet you believe in prophetic dreams. Pah!"

He cleared his throat. "I want to say this to you, Fanny, and then I don't want

the subject of Sally's education mentioned again.

"As long as Sally is my daughter and lives in my house, she'll do as I say. And I say she's not going to the university; that's final."

He pushed back his chair. After a moment Fanny heard the scratch of the match in the living room as he lit his after-dinner cigar.

He would never change his mind, Fanny knew.

WEARILY Fanny began to gather up the dishes. She had ruined everything. The dream that had made her so confident was nothing but a dream, and Sally . . .

Fanny felt a flare of hope. Couldn't Sally get a job and support herself while she went to school? There was a co-operative boarding house in Berkeley where she could stay. It would be difficult, but Fanny could help her out a little. She had a couple of rings that might fetch something, and she might be able to fool Gerald about the housekeeping bills.

No. No, it would never do. Sally was so sweet, so good, and her very sweetness and goodness would keep her prisoner. She would never, Fanny saw sickly, defy Gerald's expressed wishes. She was all too dutifully aware that he was her father. Sally would do housework faithfully, try not to mope—and eat her heart out. Like me, Fanny thought, her mind going to the teaching she had given up. Like me. In the end, Sally would marry to get away from home. Gerald would not oppose her in *that*. No doubt she would marry Edward—Edward, who was a nice boy but a little slow and stupid, the quintessence of the commonplace.

Fanny felt dreadful. She put down the dishes and went over to her sewing basket. She was trying to move quietly. After a moment's fumbling she found a spool of heavy-duty black cotton thread. She unwound a length and tested it between her hands. It wasn't strong enough for what she had in mind.

She picked up the dishes again and went carefully down the stairs. She would think of something, she was sure. There must be something in the house that she could use.

While she worked in the kitchen, dumping leftovers and scraping plates, her mind revolved the problem. She knew exactly what she needed, something light but strong, and . . .

She ran hot water into the dishpan. Light, but strong. She scalded the glassware, struggled heroically with the soot on the pans. Kerosene, no matter what Gerald said, was dirty to cook with. Light, but strong. Fanny turned out the light and went into her bedroom.

From her closet she got out her old suitcase and opened it. Inside was the little green moire case with clothesline, tiny clothespins, and long, sharp, glass-headed nails. She had bought it years ago so she would have a way to dry her underwear when she was traveling. You drove the glass-headed nails in wherever it was convenient and tied the clothesline to their heads.

The clothesline was exactly what she had been looking for. It was as strong as ever; she tested it, pulling on it with all her strength. And the slender, glass-headed nails were just the thing for fixing it in place. But the color of the line was wrong. It would be bound to show up against the dark wood of the stairs.

Fanny sat down on the bed and thought. She had the answer in a little while. There was always soot on the grates of the kerosene stove; she would rub it into the clothesline until it was dark enough. That should do it.

Fifteen minutes later Fanny Corrles stood at the bottom of the stairs. She held a kitchen knife in her right hand; in the

(Continued on page 112)

"I've killed you once, you know," he said. "Are you going to follow me forever, darling?"

THE CORPSE CAME BACK!

By

LIX AGRABEE

HE SET the phone into its cradle. Carefully, so carefully that it was as if he were doing it in slow motion.

Then he sat and stared at it in horror.

Lenore had called him. Lenore, his wife.

"Hello, darling. I miss you so much that I simply had to call you. Do you miss me, even a little?"

His hand had knotted about the phone when she first spoke. Now the phone chattered beneath his agonized fingers. Brightly. Affectionately. Horribly.

"I'm lonely, dear. Everything's so quiet here. But I'll be home soon. Very soon. See you, darling!"

Ned Bellerose could well believe that the dead return. . . . But still—it was quite a shock to get a telephone call from the woman he'd just killed!

And with that gay, grim promise she'd hung up.

Now he stared at the phone, transfixed, frozen with sheer fright and unbelieving terror.

For it couldn't be Lenore. Who knew better than he that it couldn't be Lenore?

He had killed Lenore only that afternoon. She was dead. He knew that she was dead.

So now he looked about the room, striving to pull reason from unreason, to make sense out of something that was crazy and senseless. There was some explanation. He had only to—to what? His teeth chattered foolishly, uncontrollably, for a minute.

"Damn fool, you!" he chided himself. But his drink slopped over as he raised it to his mouth.

"Who knows?" he demanded of the room. The fog trickled wispily into the low-raftered summer cottage. The rye splattered the floor as he ran to the window suddenly, pulling at it with strangely clumsy fingers in his haste to get it down. And all the time the fog swirled at the window, almost seemed to beckon him somewhere. Somewhere? To the lake?

The lake. He shivered involuntarily. Then he tucked common sense about his cowering fear. He was scared. Sure, he was scared. Why not? Someone knew. Someone had to know, to mimic her so cleverly, so fiendishly. But—who? And how could they know?

He went back over it all, holding gracefully slender, almost feminine fingers to his weak, thin-lipped mouth, working at

the trembling lips, sliding the smoothly supple hands up to cover the scared blue eyes.

"HEAR that, darling?" Lenore called. She thrust a tousled, lemon-yellow head out the door, looking at him as he lounged on a beach mattress beneath a shady tree.

"Ned Bellerose! You hear me, I know you do!"

And then a lithe, well-rounded female launched herself at him, laughing.

Trying to cover up, he thought, hating her. Trying to pull the wool over his eyes, make him think there was nothing between her and that fellow, that pseudo-artist, who hung around sketching, or pretending to, while he eyed her with a hang-dog look. And she liked it. Oh yes, she liked it. Pretending all the time not to notice anything. Looking blank and puzzled when he took a dig at her about it. But no more. No more. He'd fought for security too long to let it slip out of his hands now. He'd taken too many chances. And so, before it got out of bounds, he'd . . .

She lay in his arms. "Didn't you hear? There's a heavy fog coming in from the lake, all along the north shore. The weather thingamajig has issued warnings about it. I'll have to call off that trip to town I'd planned. The highway's too dangerous, curving along the lakeshore as it does, hugging the rocky stretches. When I don't call in at Polly Printess' she'll know I've changed my mind—she wasn't even sure that she'd be going in today."

She tugged her blouse down into sleek-fitting shorts, put her slim, straight legs up and surveyed them with honest admiration.

"Not bad, eh, honey? Love your wife?"

I love your money, he told her, silently. I love the things it can buy. I thought I loved you, but I don't any more. You don't fool me any more, Len, that's the trouble. I know you now for the cheap, conniving little baggage you are. But before you can take your money away from me—because I know now that you must be checking up on my town trips, investigating, finding out what I do when I'm away from you for several days—before you can do that, why, I'll take *you* away from your money. And it can

"Once upon a time," he said, "There was a little backwater girl who got rather difficult . . ."

be done. Quite safely. Once before—but his mind shied away from that.

IT WAS comparatively easy to get the chloral hydrate into her. Just a little, in a Bitters cocktail. Just enough to make her doze off, so that it would wear off quickly, because he didn't intend her to die that way.

And it was easy to get her into the car, after buttoning the matching white-linen skirt over the shirt and shorts, strapping blue sandals on her bare brown feet, slinging a blue shoulder bag over a little square shoulder, pulling a comb through the sunshine curls. Oh, he knew women's clothes well enough. He'd always had an eye for them. And the women, too.

There'd be no mistake about anything. He was playing for big stakes.

He should have waited until evening, of course. He'd known that. But—he'd been afraid. And there'd been no one in sight

along their north shore section, or out on the lake. He'd even used binoculars.

He looked at her as she slumped back on the car seat, her head back, mouth slightly agape, breathing shallowly.

"I'll tell you the truth now, darling. Why I hated the water, though you thought it was just because of the rocky cliff edge along here and that I wanted the easy luxury of a good beach front. I chose to let you believe that. But it wasn't true.

"You see, once upon a time there was a little backwater town, and a little backwater girl who after a while got rather difficult. Of course, she'd got in a rather difficult position, I must admit. And—well, there was a misty night, somewhat like this one is going to be, and we were walking along, we two, by the overgrown shores of the old town river. Strangely enough, she fell in. And stayed in. At least until a week or so later when the townfolk decided, after a coroner's report, that for evident reasons she'd committed suicide. Of course I'd left town by that time, but naturally my name had never been linked with hers.

"There was nothing else to do. She threatened my security. And I had plans, all centering around one thing. Money. Which was why you delighted me when we met. Because a lot of money centered around you, and you were a pleasant focal point."

She stirred sluggishly, then slept on. He drove down the lake road, up to the rocky ledge overhanging what Lenore had called their own private little harbour.

Huge, lake-washed boulders thrust great shoulders up above the waves, and between them and the shore beneath the ledge was a quiet stretch of water. It, too, so Lenore said, was rock strewn, but there was a good sandy bottom to it, and the makings of a good beach beneath the overhanging ledge. He didn't know. He'd never gone near the lake. The broad expanse of water made him feel uncomfortable.

Before he placed Lenore in the car he put the windows up tightly, carefully. He wanted no breeze to wake her from her induced slumber. Then, at the water edge, he stepped out, pulled her over behind the wheel and shut the door. No need to worry about fingerprints. They'd both used the car.

He'd be kind of stuck without a car for a few days. Lenore had left the other car in town the last day she'd been there, coming back with Polly's brother. Or *had* it been Polly's brother? More than likely it had been Mac Dixon, the casual, lanky artist boy friend.

He bristled angrily at the thought.

But after sufficient time had elapsed, he would put in a few calls, then become alarmed at her continued absence. Yes, she had insisted upon driving in against his express wishes, for the fog had been heavy above the road. And then there would be an investigation, and then, finally, she would be found in the car beneath the ledge, beneath the water, where she had driven. A regrettable accident, but one easily understood. A pity, yes. And he so lonely without her!

And, of course, he was the only heir. A happy combination of circumstances.

THE AUTOMOBILE had gone over easily. He'd been almost surprised. And then he had stood for a good five minutes after the water had closed over the top of it.

No, there was no chance that she had escaped. She was dead. Well, then?

He rubbed his eyes. They ached. His head ached. He got up and paced the floor, took a quick drink as he passed the liquor cabinet, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and forgot to put the bottle down again. He clutched it in his hand, then, looking at it, set it on the table with a shamed gesture.

He threw himself on the big daybed in front of the fireplace, on his back, his folded arms beneath his head to keep them from trembling.

There was, of course, a logical explanation. Mac Dixon, in other words. There was no one else. He had been devilishly clever, mimicking Len as he had. But Len herself had told him how very clever Mac was.

"He does illustrations for several weeklies," she'd announced, wide-eyed. "Polly told me—her brother knows him well. Those are regular assignments. Then he does a lot of free-lance work, too. But he's really serious about his art. He—"

"Really, Len, you bore me. I haven't the slightest interest in the man. Or—have you?"

"Ned!"

She'd looked shocked and stunned.

"Perhaps you've forgotten, Mr. Bellerose, but it just so happens that there's a Mrs. Bellerose. And I'm the lucky gal."

She'd tucked her hand in his, laughing, but serious, too. "Ned—please have more confidence in your own charms!"

* * *

Now, with sudden decision, he went to the phone.

"Ned?" Mac Dixon seemed pleasantly but sleepily surprised. "Sorry if I kept you waiting, but I went to bed early."

Okay, he could play the game, too.

"Just wondered if Lenore had dropped in there on her way to town. Hated to see her leave in this heavy fog."

"Lenore? Good heavens, man, you don't mean she made the trip after all! Far too dangerous—you should never have let her do it."

The casual tones had become shocked, gently reproving. If it was acting, it was darned good.

Now he felt unsure. The rye had hit him pretty hard. Perhaps he'd downed more of it than he thought. Had she really phoned? Or was it—he was no longer sure. Panic gripped him. There was no doubt about it, his nerves were all shot tonight. The lake. The fog. And, more than anything, the watercolor of Lenore that Mac had done, pinned up with thumb tacks above the card table. Looking at it for the first time, a week ago, he had known that the sandy-haired, sandy-skinned man loved his wife. He'd betrayed it in his work, in some indefinable fashion. Had she loved him, too? It hardly mattered now.

"Ned? Ned? Are you there?" Worry and tension were evident now.

He was lost in a fog of doubt and apprehension. Had he given himself away? But no—he was a fool, that was all. He knew now what had happened. He had fallen asleep on the couch there, looking at the watercolor of Lenore, curls yellow against a blue sky, against blue-green waves, against a rocky ledge. And, yes, perhaps he had a guilty conscience. No more rye. Not after tonight. Tonight was—well, different.

"No," he went on, answering Mac's hurried questions, "there's really no way of getting in touch with her tonight. I was a bit worried, naturally, but I'm sure everything is all right. She's phoning tomorrow. What did you do today?"

Mac relaxed, reassured. "Went to the bluffs to do some landscape stuff. Ended up sleeping most of the day with my hat over my eyes. Woke up with fog trickling through my ears. Came back and crawled back into bed. Guess I'm getting a cold."

"Well, if I had the car I'd take a hooker over for you—that's what you need. See you, fellow. Come over for a barbecue with us next week. Len and I have planned a big affair."

His hands were damp after he put the phone in place. He wiped them on his pants, rubbed them together, then, with

swift decision, picked the bottle of rye up, sat on the side of the daybed and kicked his shoes off. Slumped there, the bottle dangling from limp hands between his knees, he watched the miniature amber waves wash against the sides of the bottle. Suddenly he cupped his hands about it, shutting them from sight, tilted the bottle to his dry lips and drank deeply.

Perhaps it was an hour later. Perhaps only five minutes.

There was a furtive scratching outside the window. A sort of slow, wet dragging, as though the fog had taken a body to itself and was pressing up to the window, watching him with hungry, wistfully forlorn eyes.

He listened incuriously and shifted the bottle listlessly to the other hand. Then he was drunkenly alert, trying to pierce the grey fog curtain hanging outside, lurching to his feet, swaying like an erratic pendulum as he watched. Yes—there was a whiter greyness there! Yes—it was like slim white fingers that groped blindly in an effort to raise the window! Yes, it—

He stumbled and fell, and then he was there, fear forgotten, the window pushed up, as he tried to pierce the mist.

There was nothing there. He leaned out, palms spread to balance himself, laughing insanely now that calm sanity had come to him, knowing as he did so that he must pull himself together, and, as soon as possible, pull out of the whole thing. He'd been worrying too much, what with this damn Dixon showing up, threatening all the pleasant security he had wrapped about himself. He'd been afraid, afraid that the poverty he had known as a boy was to be a part of his adult life. He remembered waking one night, muttering and tossing about, to discover that Len had his head cradled maternally on her shoulder, murmuring to him tenderly, the way a woman does to a frightened boy, and he had been ashamed, hating her suddenly for never knowing what it was like to be hungry, to have to wear clothes that were shiny when they were supposed to be dull, and dull when they were supposed to be shiny.

HE SLEPT, and even in his sleep, rye-drenched as it was, she laughed down at him, lemon-yellow curls gleaming like golden coins melting in the sun—yellow

coins that ran into his hands, then melted, and ran right through them, while he scrambled on hands and knees, gathering them up . . .

He snorted and gasped for breath, pulled the knitted afghan from his flushed, perspiring face. The knitted afghan. How many hours Len had sat and laboriously knitted the cursed thing!

"Gran taught me to knit," she'd explained gravely. "And so I—I want to—"

"Perpetuate the rare talent?" he'd asked dryly.

"I want to be able to teach my children."

He'd shivered. Children! Runny-nosed little creatures who eyed one with a condescending, calculating manner.

The afghan. He pushed it away disdainfully, kicking it off to the floor, his stomach and head protesting as he moved. He laced his hair with drowsy fingers, dug them into his eyes, stared through them hatingly at the picture of Lenore.

He stared.

The picture.

Lenore.

It was no longer the picture. It was Lenore herself. She sat in shadow, the white of her play suit splotching the dusky corner, the lemon-yellow curls splattering the chair back as she rested her head there. As though she were tired. The slender curves of her flowing along the comfortable lines of the chair. Completely relaxed. Completely at ease. Completely at home, as though she had never been away. As though she had never been dead. As though she were not dead.

It was not true, of course. And so he shut his eyes and kept them shut. Then he opened them again.

He had strapped blue sandals on her brown feet. The blue sandals were there. The little brown feet were there, too.

His eyes went up to the figure, trying to pierce the gloom, trying to visualize the curve of the short full lip, the tilt of the lightly freckled nose, the serenely merry eyes. She had never known what it was like to pull the tattered heel of a stocking down into the back of a worn shoe. To wear a jacket when it was too hot, because underneath one had a sweater with no elbows in it, or a shirt with cut-off sleeves.

"Lenore?"

There was no answer. She slept the sleep of the uncaring dead.

"Lenore? Darling?" Tentatively. He was drunk. He was crazy. He was one or the other, but one thing he did know, and that was that she was dead.

Now she stirred. Or had she? Yes—the blonde head was tilting, turning, like a woman waiting to be kissed, eager for caresses. So often he had gone to her, as he went to her now. What was there to fear? Only harsh reality, and she was no longer real, except, so it now seemed, to him.

Perhaps when one killed one had to kill again and again. Perhaps the victim rose from the dead, a restless undead, seeking retribution.

"I've killed you once, you know," he said now, looming over the limp figure. "Are you going to follow me forever, Len? You shouldn't be here, you know." He said it almost tenderly, as though trying to convince a backward child, lurching drunkenly as he reached out to her.

And then the mists of rye were dissipated, and he was coldly alert, leaping around, his back against the wall, as he pulled her before him.

At the same moment that his hands touched her warm breathing body, heard the shallow, trembling intake of breath, saw the slow tears glistening down the round cheeks, he had known. And, knowing without knowing, he sought to protect himself.

A strangely frightening Dixon stood now beside the door, and behind him

(Continued on page 113)

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

Man-made justice, traditionally blind, supposedly unswayed by emotion, has off and on come up with some weird decisions. Among the strangest is the disposition of the Grace Tripp case in England. Grace was a maid in the household of one Lord Torrington. One night, while his lordship and family were out, Grace's fiance, Peters, decided to rob the place over Grace's protests. One of the other servants interrupted him, and Peters stabbed him to death. Grace loyally ran away with her man.

Both were caught and brought to trial. Peters promptly confessed; Grace refused to say a word against him. As a reward the jury set Peters free—and hanged Grace as an "accessory after the fact!"

One of the most astounding executions in modern times was meted out to Abdul Hamid II, Turkish calif, in 1909. When his brutal regime was overthrown by a reform element, which sentenced him to death, he evoked an ancient Turkish law which forbade expressly the "spilling of blood" of any member of the caliphate, and so stumped his executioners.

While he was still in jail, Abdul developed a curable stomach tumor, demanded an operation. His adversaries promptly obtained an injunction forbidding the operation, on the grounds that it constituted "spilling" of his sacred blood—and Abdul died a slow, agonizing death in prison!

Next time you buy French lace or linen at a surprising bargain, give a thought to Jean Lenoir, the obliging ghoul of Paris. This friendly little man, pitying the mendicant dead, had a habit of digging them from Potters Fields and arraying their bodies in the most gorgeous and expensive fabrics and jewels. He did not desire publicity for this charity—but he got it unexpectedly when one of his accomplices was detained at the port of Boston, U.S.A. for mourning too many sisters and brothers whose bodies he seemed to be continually and sadly bringing from France.

And so the final shipment of duty-free imports was confiscated by customs—but no one knows where the earlier ones are. Have you looked at your imported treasure lately?

Back in 1928, Dr. Charles Foley, health commissioner of Havre de Grace, Md., was faced with the most tragic dilemma that ever confronted a physician. Called to treat 14-year-old George Stone, suddenly taken ill in school, Dr. Foley became morally certain that an attempt had been made to poison the boy. He notified legal authorities, but since he had found no trace of the actual poison used, no action could be taken.

Not until George died was it definitely established through a post-mortem that he had been murdered with strychnine—by his own mother! At her trial it was also established that she had similarly eased out of this world both her in-laws, another son, her husband, and a visiting child—the last probably by accident. Her motive in the other cases was insurance.

Gripping Suspense Novelette

WHILE

Wherever he went, they would be there, lurking in the shadows, waiting. . . . For they were patient men, that evil trio, and the time would yet come, they knew, when the sands of his courage would run out . . . and the bloody, magical Stone of Eli, that hung like a millstone around his neck, would be theirs. . . .

"A man shouldn't be as scared as you are," she said. "Sometimes people get scared of just . . . shadows."

the KILLERS WAIT...

By BENJAMIN SIEGEL

CHAPTER ONE

The Gem of Death

I WAS tired with a weariness that had been accumulated in grains, like lead poisoning. I looked up and down the still-black streets for a sign of a hotel. It was too close to the river where I had just got off the ship. I began to walk toward the center of town.

This was the city, and by tomorrow the thing would be ended. I would deliver what I had; I would have kept my prom-

ise. I recognized a figure across the street. It was too dark to see his face, but I was sure. I could stand no more of it.

I ran. He heard me and followed. I flew as in a nightmare with fear tingling in my loins. I could run no farther. I huddled in a doorway trying to stifle the sound of my panting.

He came along carefully, the hunching of his shoulders showing his awareness. I waited until he was just past the doorway and I jumped at him, striking as hard as I could with my knee in the small of his back. He went down without a sound and I punched at his neck and shoulders. He lay sodden and it was like striking for practice at a sandbag.

I got to my feet and stood over him, gasping out the release of the rest of my fright. They had a singleness of purpose, the three of them, of whom Brown, at my feet, was the least. One more day . . .

I left him lying there and walked on quickly. I felt curiously dulled as if the hysterical release had sapped me of feeling. A girl passed me, her heels tapping out her hurry. I looked after her and thought how long it had been since I had talked to a woman. I heard footsteps behind me. Of course, Brown would not have been alone.

I PUSHED down panic with the muscles of my jaw. The streets were becoming lighter and there would be a hotel. The footsteps seemed closer. I hurried after the girl who had turned into another street. I came abreast of her at a street lamp to lessen her fear at being accosted.

"Please, Miss, I need help."

She had a thin face under loose blonde hair. Her cheekbones were defined under the light. Her voice was taut with suspicion. "What can I do?"

"Get me indoors somewhere. Please. Quickly."

She looked at me sharply, without fear. I looked back. I thought I heard the footsteps again and I turned and listened. Something in my face decided her.

"I'll be sorry, I suppose, but come on."

We walked a couple of blocks and she steered me into a doorway. A dim light was burning in the hall. She climbed the stairs. I waited a moment near the door, listening, and then I followed her. She was waiting at the top of the landing. As I came up she opened a door and I followed her in.

She put a light on, a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. The room was very large. There were canvasses scattered about, several completed paintings hanging on the wall. There was a barrel of clay in one corner and on the other side a studio bed. One side of the room contained a sink and a couple of chairs and a table.

"Welcome," she said. "Sanctuary." She sat on the couch and looked at me, her head a little to one side like a puppy. "God, you're scared."

"Sure I am." I felt, ridiculously, that I would begin to totter if I stayed longer on my feet. "Mind if I sit?"

She moved over and I sat beside her on the couch. I looked around at the paintings. "Yours?"

"Yes. This used to be my studio; then I got poor and now I live here. You see any you like?"

"Well, no." They were conventional waterfront scenes.

"Thanks."

"Although"—I pointed to an abstraction in splashes of bright color— "that's about the best thing here."

"Sure. I thought I'd be able to sell some of those others." She looked at me. "How do you know about this stuff?"

"Oh, I really don't. I just like to look."

"What are you scared of?" she said suddenly

"Some people."

"Cops? Have you done anything you shouldn't have?"

I grinned. "You're not harboring a criminal."

She shrugged. "Anyway, you look all in. If you'd care to stretch out for a while . . ."

Without a word I rolled onto the bed between her and the wall. My legs throbbed and my head felt empty and spinning. I felt her hand on my forehead and then I felt nothing.

I was awakened by her hand on my shoulders, shaking me gently. Bright sunlight was streaming through a skylight. I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead and closed my eyes hard and opened them again. "Did I sleep here all night?"

"You sure did." She looked tired. She still wore the same dress.

"I'm terribly sorry."

"It's okay." She smiled. She was really pretty. I wondered how the fact could have escaped my notice before.

She said, "I'll be back soon. Wait."

I REMAINED on the bed because one night was not enough to make up for all the sleepless, harried days. She came in again with bundles. She said, "I'll have some breakfast in a little while."

I lay watching her. She moved around the place with a nervous efficiency. It was very pleasant to be in a room with a woman. I breathed deeply, and when the breath came out it sounded like a sigh and I grinned twistedly to myself.

She put a pot of coffee on an electric stove and some bread and butter on the table. As she was reaching in the closet for cups she said casually, "There's a man across the street that seems to be watching the house."

My good feeling vanished like the artificial thing it had been. "What's he look like? How long's he been there?"

"He was there when I went down. I asked the grocer and he had noticed him too because he doesn't look the kind of man to hang around this part of town. But I don't see what you're nervous about; he's harmless looking enough."

"Is he short and paunchy, with rimless glasses, and dressed very neatly?"

"Yes, that's him. Do you owe him a bill or something?"

"Yes, a bill. Only I'm not going to pay it."

"If I can help you, I will."

"Why should you want to? I should think you've done enough for me already."

"I haven't done anything." She poured the coffee and sat down at the table. "Have something to eat. It's not much, but it helps you start a day."

I forced myself to sit and eat what I could because, as she said, it helped to start a day.

She said, "What's your name?"

"Johnny. What's yours?"

"Anna." She buttered a piece of roll and handed it to me. "A man shouldn't be as scared as you are. Probably the reason isn't as big as you think. People get scared over shadows."

"These aren't shadows." The coffee was fine. "You're a good cook, Anna."

She shrugged. She seemed genuinely not to like compliments.

"Anna, I could use your help."

She looked at me as if I were a kid scaring myself with bogies. She said patiently, "I'll help you, Johnny. What do you want me to do?"

"I'm going to leave something with you. When I leave, I'm going to be followed. If I can shake them, I'll get back here tonight."

She looked at me with the beginning of a tolerant smile at the corners of her mouth. "Who do you think you are, Dick Powell in 'Cornered' or something?" Then she got serious. "I'm sorry. But you look so awfully concerned about this thing, whatever it is. What *is* the big secret?"

"It's not really a secret. But I've no time to tell it to you now. You mustn't think this is a joke. As a matter of fact,

it might very well be dangerous to you."

"If it's really dangerous, why would you let me take the risk?"

I looked steadily at her. "Because it's more important to me than your safety, I suppose. So I'll just be going, and thanks very much for your hospitality. You've been very wonderful and if I can ever—"

I got up and moved to the door. She beat me to it. She said, "I'm sorry. I'm not too bright. Give me whatever it is, and I'll take good care of it. And when you come back tonight I want the whole story."

I took out something that looked like a piece of rock, with a pearlish sheen to it.

"Is this it?"

"Yes."

Now she looked at me as if I were really crazy.

"I know," I said. "Just do what I ask, pretend it's as valuable as I say it is. Will you?"

"I will. But you'd better have a good story later."

I WENT out. I was worried that I had done a stupid thing leaving the stone with her, but when I came out and saw Smith, and he saw me, I was glad I didn't have it on me. Smith was a name I had given him. I didn't know what he was called. There were three and Brown was the only one I had known. I called this one Smith and the third one Jones.

I went across the street to him and he smiled at me and said, "Hello, Johnny. You left London in a hurry. I wasn't even able to say good-bye. I have news for you. Your friend Brown is in a hospital. He's very sick."

"Good," I said.

"You're too impetuous, Johnny." He smiled again. He had a plate that did not fit him very well, and his lips stretched grotesquely as he kept clicking his teeth into place. He was a short man in a grey business suit and conservative tie. He was bald headed, mild looking, ordinary.

He took out a fat wallet. "We don't want to keep up this game any longer, Johnny. This is for you if you'll turn over the stone to us." He counted off a stack of bills. "A thousand dollars, Johnny. Can you afford to turn that down for—just why is it you've been so stubborn?"

"I promised a man," I said. I walked away. I didn't look behind me, but I knew what was happening. The same thing had happened in London, and in Marseilles before that. I'd be followed until they saw their chance. Twice they had taken me and twice they hadn't found the stone. And this time it wasn't on me to find.

I stayed in the crowded sections. I walked through department stores and rode in subways. But once I walked too close to the sidewalk and a car pulled up silently and I was thrown inside before I could run or struggle. They knew how. I felt the kind of relief that comes when a thing too long pending finally happens. But the stone wasn't on me. It went through me like a song.

Smith was in the car and Jones and a couple of others probably just hired for the day. Smith just smiled and performed his lip-stretching stunt. Jones said, "Welcome home, Johnny."

He was a spare, ascetic-looking man. He was in front, driving, and Smith was beside him. In back with me, their arms linked with professional sureness through mine, were two of the gorilla-types that Jones and Smith never seemed to have much trouble in finding.

We rode swiftly through the streets and finally stopped in an old unused alley that formed the back of a row of dismantled factory lofts. Jones got out and opened a door with a key. They bundled me out behind him. We went into a room and down a short flight of steps into a kind of subcellar. The gorillas threw me into the room and I broke my flight by skinning my arm against the rough wall.

Jones and Smith followed us in and Smith said, simpering, "Here we go again, Johnny."

I said, "Look. I don't want to get beaten. It'll be for nothing. I haven't got the stone. Why don't you just search me?"

"We'll search you," said Jones. He gestured and the gorillas went through me. They tore up the lining in my jacket and trousers. They went through my underwear and ripped apart my shoes. When they got all done Jones said, "Well, where did you leave it?" He had a low, serious voice. Everything he did was grave and measured. He didn't scare me the way Smith did. Jones was logical.

"You don't expect me to—"

"Sure we do," said Smith. "Sure we do." He jerked his chin at one of the men, who hit me in the belly. I've never been hit like that before. A rod of pain stabbed through to my back and black, shooting pockets cushioned my eyes. Through it I said, "You'll never get it. I left it—"

CHAPTER TWO

Journey Into Terror

THEY let me come back to myself without doing anything more. There was a difference in their attitude. They seemed satisfied. I got frantic.

Jones said, "Thank you, Johnny. Let's go, boys."

They left me. What had I told them? That I had left the stone with—whom? I hadn't used her name. Then I felt sickness grip my stomach. They had had the house spotted. This wasn't my town. I didn't know anybody else. I got into my tattered clothing as best I could and went out.

I didn't know where I was. I walked and turned corners and looked at street signs that meant nothing. A kid came along and I asked him how to get to the river. He told me and I began to run.

It wasn't like being in a car. It took a long time and it seemed longer. I cased the block but they weren't around. I stopped downstairs to catch my breath. They couldn't have known. They didn't know who Anna was. I went upstairs.

Everything in her room that was breakable was broken. She lay in a corner near the wreckage of the table. Her thin body was curled up as if to ease itself of pain. She was blurred in the red film of my eyes. I knelt beside her and saw that she was breathing. I carried her to the mattress, slashed apart and on the floor, and put her on it. I went out for a doctor.

It took me too long to find him and when I did he grumbled about coming right back with me. He was a harassed little man with no sympathy for the poor that constituted his practice. I got rough with him because the image of Anna's beaten body was a rawness in my conscience.

I hurried him before me into the room. Anna lay where I had put her. She was breathing shallowly and moaning. The doctor gave her a cursory examination and once I wanted to hit him because I thought he was handling her too roughly. He showed no surprise at the condition of the room. Probably in this neighborhood it was not unusual.

He replaced his instruments and closed his satchel. He said, "There is no serious injury. She's bruised and will be very sore for a couple of days but she'll get over it. Two dollars."

I gave him the money and shooed him out. I wet cloths and put them on Anna's forehead and held her hand and muttered penitently. She opened her eyes and regarded me gravely and then she smiled. It was so open and trusting and completely healthy that I felt a surge of gratitude for having seen it.

"Those shadows," she said, "play aw-

fully rough. I should have believed you."

"I'm so sorry, Anna."

"Don't be. It's my own fault. I thought you were making it up. I didn't know how serious it was." She shifted her position and bit her lip. "No," she said. "I'm all right. The doctor was right; I'll get over it in a couple of days. Well, maybe I shouldn't have been so stubborn."

Up to that point it had been only concern for her. Suddenly I remembered and I remembered too to be surprised that I had not thought of it first. "The stone," I said.

She dropped her eyes. "I tried, Johnny. Believe me. But—oh, Johnny, I'm sorry."

"It's all right." It wasn't, of course. Delivering that stone had developed into a purpose for being. And yet, as much as I hated myself for thinking so, I was conscious of a slight relief. At least they were through with me.

Anna said softly, "Would you like to tell me about it? I mean, I'm curious, of course, but maybe there's something we still can do."

I touched her hair. "You're a funny gal. I'll make all this up to you somehow" —I gestured at the wrecked room—"but what's this about something 'we' can do?"

"I'm kind of involved now," she said softly. "If you don't mind."

I laughed without humor. "I don't mind. There isn't much that's left to be involved in."

"Tell me," she said.

I LEANED on my elbow on the mattress and began to tell her. It was as if I were telling a story that had happened to someone else.

"I'm a merchant seaman. I was on the *Albatross* when she went down — you probably read about it. Another guy and myself were stranded on the ship with the nearest boat a hundred yards off. This guy—we called him Eli although that was just an approximation of his name which was a funny foreign-sounding one. He was a little wiry man of some kind of Oriental extraction. I never found out what kind and it didn't matter. He was a hard-working sailor and a good friend."

Anna said, "You keep saying 'was.'"

"Yes, he's dead. We had to jump, and the sea was covered with burning oil. The idea was to swim underwater and make a hell of a lot of threshing when you came up for air to scatter the burning part. I hit my head on something when we jumped. God knows how the little man did it, but he got me to the boat. When they pulled us in I was all right, but he was nearly burned to a cinder. Still, he managed to stay alive for a couple of days until we got picked up.

"He kept calling for me from the sick bay. I guess he knew he was going to die and something was worrying him. I went to see him and he was lying all bandaged up. He looked like a sick monkey. I don't say that disrespectfully—that was the way he looked, a thin, wrinkled face peering out of the mountain of bandages they had him in.

"He had this stone in a bag around his neck. The bag was leather and charred but still holding. He couldn't move, but he asked me to take the stone out and I did. Then he gave me a name and address and I wrote it down and he asked me to take the stone there. That was all there was, a simple request from a guy who had just saved my life. He didn't tell me why the stone was important and I didn't ask. About an hour later he was dead."

Anna had been listening intently and now her eyes filled with quick tears. I was a little surprised and then I felt proud of her because that was the way I felt too. I leaned forward quickly and kissed her. Her eyes got round and she said, "Go on, Johnny. Tell me the rest."

"It didn't seem so important to me then. I would deliver the stone when I could and that would be the end of it. But then

a couple of other people made it important. There was a seaman on the boat whose name was Brown. I didn't know him very well, just enough to know I didn't like him. A big, burly guy who liked to bully. He saw the stone. He asked me whether I knew what kind it was and I didn't. He said he'd like to buy it from me and I told him it wasn't for sale. He got pretty insistent. I figured it must be worth a lot of money, the way he badgered me about it all the time. Finally, I had to tell him off and he knew he couldn't get it any other way, so he tried to steal it one night.

"I caught him going through my pockets and we had a tussle. I didn't make out so well—he was as strong as an ox and dirty. But he didn't get the stone.

"I kept out of his way, and one day we docked in Marseilles and we had a week's liberty. That's where Brown got in touch with a couple of friends of his. They got to me one night in a hotel near the docks. They wrecked me a little, but I still had the stone. After that, with Brown sailing along with me to tip them off, they followed me. They caught up with me once more in London but I was lucky again.

"By this time I was beginning to get an obsession about the stone. Delivering it safely had become the most important thing in the world to me. I was happy with the thing. I could feel it burning me, making me important.

"And then I came here, and now . . ."

"And now?"

"Now—licked, finished. I don't think I'll need this any more." I took out the scrap of paper on which I had written the address. *Mrs. Tulit Asan. 19 Crown Street.* I rolled it up into a ball.

ANNA yelled and grabbed it from me. She smoothed it out carefully.

"What do we need it for?" I felt sickened and drained. "I certainly haven't the guts to call on that woman, whoever she is, and tell her that I had something very valuable and important for her but I haven't got it any longer."

Anna thought. The line of her jaw seemed very finely molded to me and I liked the way her eyebrows tried to meet in her concentration. The more I looked at her the less I thought about the stone except for a deep, nagging feeling that I tried to ignore.

"It's hopeless," I said. "I haven't got the faintest lead to them; they're swallowed up and disappeared. Assuming, that is, that I could get the stone back even if I knew where to find them."

"How about the police?"

"What about them? Smith and Jones—I don't know who they are but I'm sure they could put up a better front of being a respectable citizen than I could. Why, I couldn't even prove that the stone was my responsibility, or even that it ever existed."

"We've got to think. There has to be something."

I watched her again. Her face was too thin, and she was a lot younger than she first appeared. I wondered what she liked to eat and what she did for entertainment and what books she liked.

Finally she said, "What happened to the third man, this Brown that you told me about?"

"Brown? I got to him the night I met you." Smith had told me . . . "Wow!" I said. I got up and turned around and sat down again and slapped my hand on the mattress.

She watched me eagerly. "What—what did you think of?"

"Well, it's an idea. Brown's in a hospital. Somewhere in the city."

"Oh," she said. "Let's go." She made an effort to get up. I reached out to her, half to help, half to keep her from moving.

"You're in no condition to—"

"I'm all right," she said impatiently. She got up stiffly and experimented with

her muscles. "A little sore, that's all." She went to a bureau and took out some clothes. "Turn around."

I studied a painting.

"Okay." She had put on a simple black dress that made her pale blondeness stand out startlingly.

"Now what?"

"The hospital. Let's find it."

"Sure. There are hundreds in this city, I guess." Coming out of nothing, it had seemed like a good idea.

"How about getting to the cop that patrols this area? He'd maybe give us an idea."

That seemed sensible. We went out and began walking, looking for the policeman. He was hard to find. We questioned enough people to give the impression that a riot had been in progress. Finally we saw a cop walking slowly ahead of us. We stopped him.

"We need help," I said.

"What's the trouble?" He was a veteran of street-corner battles and wife-beating and petty thievery, and he was ready with a weary capability to accept what we had brought him.

"Well, what we need is information. A friend of mine was hurt near here last night, beat up, and he was taken to a hospital only we don't know which one."

"If he was picked up in this area, that'd be the Liberty Street Clinic. That's about ten blocks from here."

We thanked him and I shared Anna's excitement as we left, walking rapidly. We found the hospital and went in to the information desk. A tired nurse told us they had no record of anyone named Brown.

"Wasn't anyone brought in after a street brawl?"

"Sure," she said wearily. "We get a dozen every night."

"You've got to help us," said Anna.

"I'd be glad to if I could. Where was your friend hurt? Maybe I can check the ambulance record if he was brought in that way."

Anna mentioned the neighborhood and she looked it up.

"We did have a call there. He was picked up at four this morning. Didn't give any name, and no identification. Stayed in the emergency and then shifted to Ward Eight. You can go up and see if it's your friend."

CHAPTER THREE

Room 208

I DIDN'T want to stay to ask the nurse just where the ward was for fear she'd begin asking questions we couldn't answer. We went through some doors and along a corridor and I asked an intern. We got to it and opened the doors. There were about ten beds on either side. I went down the aisle looking for Brown.

I saw him in the end bed, lying with his face to the wall. Anna and I stood beside him for a while without saying anything. Then I said, "Hello, Brown."

He didn't move at all and I thought that he hadn't heard me. Just before I was about to speak again he turned around very slowly as if it were a great effort for him to move. He looked up at me blankly for a moment and then he smiled, showing his yellowed teeth. He said, "You show up in the queerest places, Johnny."

I said, "Ran into a little bad luck, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Some snake jumped me. I wonder who."

"They got the stone, Brown."

He looked at me sharply and one canine bit at the edge of his lip. "When?"

"This morning."

"They haven't been around," he said.

"Of course not. Did you expect them to?"

He didn't say anything, while maggots of doubt began to work at him.

"You were a jerk," he said. "You and I could have worked together. You never should have tried keeping it all to yourself. My God, that stone's worth more than you could ever spend alone."

"Is it?"

"Don't you know, not yet? Man, that's a big diamond. Couldn't you tell just because it wasn't cut?"

"I was beginning to wonder. Now—well, I could think of a couple of other reasons for getting it back."

"Yeah. Well, it's too late now." He lay back and closed his eyes. Anna came close to me and gripped my arm tightly. After a time Brown opened his eyes again. "This is a hell of a time to be laid up."

"What made you think you could trust them?"

"Look, Johnny. I never had anything against you, except your being stubborn. So I'm gonna do something for you. You came here figuring to steam me up and get me to tell you where to find them, right?" His bared teeth showed how funny he thought that was. "Okay. So I think I'm double-crossed and I'm gonna help you out—that's the way it's supposed to work, right?"

"Right," I said. "That's the way it's supposed to work."

He lay back and began to laugh and the laughter turned into a paroxysm that he couldn't control so that his body shook as if in a fit and tears formed. I waited while it passed and he lay gasping weakly.

"The funny thing is," he said, "that that's just what I'm going to do. I can't move out of here. Maybe they've ditched me. If they have, I'd rather you had the stone, anyway. If you're crazy enough to give it up the way you said, okay—and if you get smart enough to want to spend the rest of your life in luxury, I've got a feeling that you'd see that I got fixed up, too. No, don't make any promises. I got that feeling and it's enough for me. Anyway, I don't feel like bargaining."

Anna couldn't wait longer. "Where are they?"

He looked at her. "You mixed up in this, too? You'd better be careful of Johnny here. He's always getting into trouble." He began to laugh again but he controlled it. "And he ain't even been in any trouble at all yet until he tries to get that stone back."

"Tell me where they are, Brown."

"No, not yet. I'm going to give them another chance. Another day. You be back here tomorrow and if they haven't shown by then, I'll tell you where to find them."

A day of waiting seemed to stretch ahead of me with weights on my nerve endings. I started to try to make him change his mind but I held myself back.

We went out and back to Anna's room. I spent an hour getting it into some kind of order. Then we had lunch together and she said, "Why don't we try to forget what's on our minds. We've got a day to wait with nothing to do. Can't we maybe go to a movie or something?"

So we spent a day as if we were just ordinary people.

THE NEXT DAY we went back to Brown, and when we came up to him he looked at us with his eyes glittering and his face set. He said, "Smith came to see me today. The dirty, bald-headed crook. He said you got away from them. Then he said they'd keep in touch with me."

"Well," I said, "you remember how it was supposed to work."

"Sure. They're in the Dickson Hotel on Nineteenth Street. That's all I can tell you. And good luck."

But I was already at the end of the ward, with Anna half running to keep up with me.

I stopped at the station to pick up a bag I had checked and I took it back to Anna's room. I took out a Mauser and checked

the clip and threw a cartridge in the chamber. Anna watched me, scared, but she didn't say anything.

We took a bus to the hotel. I thought how funny it was to be involved with an object of such wealth and not even to be able to afford taxi fare. We went into the lobby. It was a cheap hotel, grimy and poorly serviced. The room clerk was sitting on a chair propped back against a wall, his balance maintained by the back of his neck. He was reading a magazine that was more pictures than print. I described Jones and Smith.

He looked at me blankly. I took out a dollar bill and folded it small so it could have been a ten. His blankness of expression faded a little to reveal his normal stupefied look. He said they were in Room 208 on the second floor. I asked him whether they were both in and he said he was sure one was. He wanted to know whether I was a friend of theirs and I said why sure I was. Anna and I walked upstairs.

I told her to wait for me and I knocked on the door. There was no word from the inside and I knocked again. Then I said, "Room service."

I was watching the knob, or I wouldn't have been aware of it, but the door began to move very slightly. I put my weight against it and crashed into the room. I had pushed Smith aside. I didn't give myself time to see if there was anybody else there. I smashed my fist against Smith's mouth and he went down. His plate flew out of his mouth, and because I hated him I ground my heel on it. I had the Mauser out but Smith was alone. He sat up, holding his face. His glasses were still on. Without his teeth his jaw was grotesquely caved in. I hit him with the back of my left hand and his glasses flew off. I stepped on them, too. I drew back my foot and he said, "No. Wait." I had to guess at the words.

I said, "I can't wait. The stone." I kicked him in the belly, not hard enough to damage him too much.

"The stone," I said, and I prepared to hit him with the pistol.

He was sobbing. He said, "My partner has it. He'll be here soon."

"You're lying." I hit him with the flat of the pistol butt.

Then something hit me. I almost blacked out but went down and rolled out of the way. I looked up and saw Jones standing there with a strange, surprised look on his face. Then he crumpled to the floor. Standing behind him was Anna, her outstretched hands holding the remnants of a flower pot. She was crying.

I just sat on the floor for a while, looking up at her. I got up and took the shattered pot from her and tossed it aside and I said, "Anna."

Her face creased and the tears stopped and she said, "Johnny. He hit you."

I PUT my arms around her and she clung to me and I put a finger under her chin and lifted it. Her eyes were starry from the tears and she looked like a little girl. I kissed her. It tasted salty. I forgot Jones and Smith and the stone.

I heard a movement and turned. Smith was crawling like a wounded animal. I pushed Anna aside and I went to him. He groveled and drew his knees up. That reminded me of how I had found Anna after they had mauled her and I felt the same mixture of weakness and rage and I wanted to hit him again. Anna touched my arm and it passed. She said, "One of them must have it."

I knelt beside Jones and rolled him. His wallet contained a lot of money and a card with his real name of it. Neither interested me. In the inside pocket of his jacket, in a handkerchief, was the stone. I put it in my pocket. I looked down at the wreck of Smith and at Jones, who was beginning to groan. I felt good. Anna touched my back tentatively and I turned

a little to her and our arms were tight around each other. I kissed her and it didn't taste salty any more. I felt as if I were in an elevator shooting skyward.

We went out. We took a bus through the part of the city that was crowded and filled with the sound of many tongues. 19 Crown Street. I said, "In a half-hour it will be out of my hands and we'll close that book and open a new one."

We were directed through a tenement where kids ran around in queer castoffs and the air was touched with the smells of cooking I had never tasted.

A woman opened the door at my knock. She was small and colored like Eli, but her skin was not the wrinkled leather his had been. She had on a long, black dress and there was a black kerchief over her hair and fastened beneath the chin. I told her who I was and why I had come. She listened impassively and asked us inside. A little light came through the lowered shades. The air was oppressive with a sadness that came in slow waves from her tiny black-clothed figure.

I took out the stone and laid it on the table. She picked it up and touched it to her forehead and then to her lips and put it back on the table. An infant cried. She went out of the room and came back carrying a child that was also wrapped in black. She gestured toward chairs for us and she sat down too.

She said, "You have been a good friend to my brother."

"Brother?" I said. "Aren't you Mrs. Asan?"

"Mrs. Asan is dead," she said. She rocked the baby gently in her lap. "A month ago. She died in childbirth."

"Is that the child?" I asked.

She shook her head. "The child died, too."

I touched the stone. It lay dull and worthless looking, like something you kick idly as you walk along a country road. "Did you know about this?" I asked.

"It has been in our family for many years. The father keeps it. When he dies it is passed on to the eldest son. Since the first of them it has been like that. Eli was the last of the male Asans."

"It's worth a lot of money," I said softly.

She seemed to shrug, but her shoulders didn't move. "It contains many lives."

(Continued on page 114)

THE CRIMSON POOL

Paris Police Commissioner Gustave Macé mixed a Guillotine Cocktail with a pitcher of water . . . and a dead man's blood. . . .

ONE of the most bizarre cases in the files of the Paris police department began a few years ago when the patrons of a certain Parisian restaurant began complaining about the taste of the drinking water. The worried proprietor decided to investigate his well. He lifted the cover and found, floating on the surface, two human legs.

The limbs were that of a man, and through bits of clothing still clinging to the flesh the police were able to identify them as belonging to one Pere Désiré, a young man who had been reported missing several weeks before.

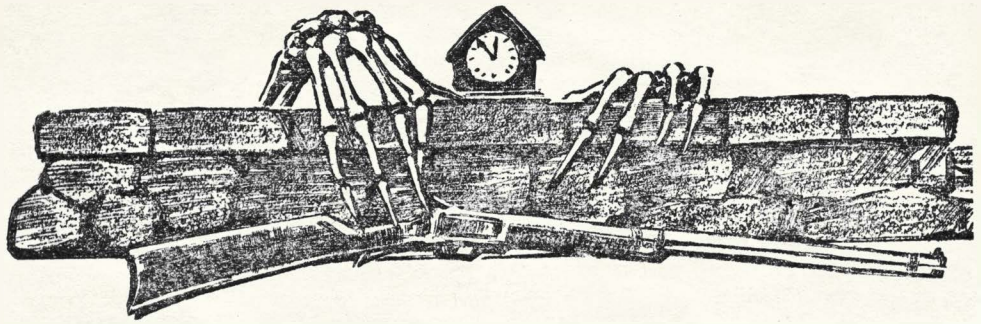
Commissioner Gustave Macé of the Paris police was assigned to the case. He began by checking the slain man's background and, from his banker, obtained a list of his possessions. List in hand, he checked Désiré's effects. The room had not been ransacked, the commissioner noted; the thief knew exactly where to find the securities. To Macé this meant that the thief, who in all certainty was also Désiré's murderer, was on intimate terms with the murdered man.

The police continued searching the house, beginning with the cellar. The cellar contained two casks of wine, and when a thirsty detective pulled one of the bungs he was surprised to find a cord attached to it. Pulling up the cord he found a sealed metal container at the other end. Inside the container were the missing securities. Continuing to search in the cellar, the police found a collection of saws and razor-sharp knives, flecked with blood.

"Well," the commissioner told his men, "I think we can continue on the assumption that the killer lives in this house and dismembered him somewhere on the premises. But where? Not here in the cellar," he mused. "Désiré must have bled quarts of blood. This floor has no blood on it, and it's plain enough it hasn't been scrubbed in years." He scuffed his toe reflectively through a heavy layer of dust. "The body must have been cut up somewhere upstairs. When we find the place we'll have a good lead to our murderer."

Macé's eyes widened a bit in surprise when he recognized one of the tenants. He was a petty thief by the name of Pierre Voirbo, who supplemented his income by serving the police as a stool pigeon "Désiré was my friend," Voirbo anxiously assured the commissioner. "We were neighbors; his room was right alongside of mine. I want to do everything I can to help you catch his murderer."

"Let's go to your room where we can talk privately," suggested Macé. The



By
SKIPPY
ADELMAN

first thing the detectives did upon entering Voirbo's room was to study the floor. Voirbo couldn't restrain a smile of triumph upon seeing this. There was absolutely no sign of blood on the floor, which was made of tile and badly warped with the years. But unlike the rest of the room the floor had recently been given a thorough cleaning.

Commisioner Macé looked about thoughtfully and then turned to Voirbo. "Do you have a couple of towels?" he asked suddenly. "Why, of course!" said Voirbo. He went to a drawer and handed several towels to the commisioner, who slung them over one shoulder. Macé's air of preoccupation increased as he walked over to a large water pitcher. He sloshed it back and forth once or twice and saw that it was nearly full. Pitcher in hand, he sauntered back into the middle of the room. He held the pitcher high. as if about to pour, and then turned and stared meaningfully at Voirbo. Voirbo, puzzled, stared back.

Macé slowly emptied the pitcher onto the floor. Everyone watched in fascinated silence as the water swirled about the warped tiling, finally settling in pools in the floor's depressions. Voirbo gasped and made a break for the door. He was grabbed and thrown into a chair. Macé stooped and gently mopped up the water with Voirbo's towels. Then taking out his knife, he lifted the tiling in the places where the water had settled. The undersides of the tiling were thickly coated with dried blood.

The police took advantage of Voirbo's shocked condition to get an immediate confession. He told how, after learning where Désiré had hidden his securities, he had invited him into his room. There he had clubbed him to death and cut up his body into nine parts. He did so, he explained, because he thought it a good way to dispose of the body without attracting attention. It would have been thought peculiar if he were seen carrying a bundle the size of a man's body out of the house, and the bundle would soon have been tied up with Désiré's disappearance. By taking out one small parcel at a time no suspicions had been aroused.

During the butchering Désiré's blood had settled in pools on the warped floor, just as the water had done. While scrubbing the floor it had never occurred to Voirbo that some of the blood might run into the crevices between the tiling.

Voirbo was finally dismembered himself. His head was hacked off by the guillotine.

Suspense-Packed Novelette of Fear

In the lonely house that already held so much terror for him, John Koski waited for the midnight visitor who would either cure him forever of his fear . . . or kill him!

CHAPTER ONE

House of Death

THE TELEGRAM came at three o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, a gusty, chill April afternoon. It read: YOUR FATHER DIED AT NOON TODAY. IMPERATIVE YOU COME IMMEDIATELY. ROGER ELSON.

Roger Elson was one of the two attorneys in Lando Falls, and he'd been as close to this man he called my father as anyone. He was undoubtedly in charge of the estate. He had handed my foster father's affairs for years.

I didn't want any of my foster father's money, and I didn't want to go back to that big, ugly house in Lando Falls. I'd left it when I was seventeen. It had disturbed my dreams quite often in the ten years since.

Thinking of it now, I felt a chill beyond the chill of the day, and was annoyed.

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

"You shouldn't have come back," he said. "You remember what happened last time, John?"

I was too old and, I hoped, too intelligent for superstition. It was just a big, creaky house, full of shadows, and I'd been very young. There wasn't anything in it that could scare me now.

I looked again at the telegram. Roger Elson was a conservative, aged attorney. He wouldn't use words like "imperative" and "immediately" unless he meant them literally.

I was sitting there in my office, the telegram still in my hands, when my partner, Don Rickert, came in. We have the biggest agency in the state for the best selling car in its class, and we're doing all right, thank you.

"See a ghost?" Don asked, and then he saw the telegram. "Oh, sorry, John. Bad news?"

"My foster father is dead," I told him, "and I don't feel anything at all about that. But they want me up there, and I don't want to go."

"Don't go, then," he said. "He didn't mean anything to you, did he?"

"Just an old miser who worked me sixteen hours a day from the time I was twelve until I was seventeen," I said. "He didn't want a son, he wanted cheap labor."

"And now you're twenty-seven years old and you work eighteen hours a day," Don said, grinning. "And a change of scene wouldn't hurt you."

"This scene would," I said. "The house gives me the shivers. Just thinking of that big, ugly place still bothers me."

He looked at me seriously. "You were a kid, remember. An orphaned kid in a big house with an old man. You're not a kid any more, and the old man's dead. Why don't you take that new club convertible we just got in? Why don't you go up and show the natives what's happened to John Koski?"

"You should have been a psychiatrist, Don," I said, and put the telegram in the wastepaper basket.

"I almost was," he said, "but three years of pre-med was my limit. Seriously, John, you should go up there."

"I'm going," I said.

He nodded. "Good. And don't worry about the business."

There wasn't much to worry about. It had been a seller's market since the war, but our car was still moving well.

I put my desk in order, and Don was still standing there. I asked him, "Why did you change your mind? First you said I shouldn't go if I didn't want to, and then you said I should."

"I thought it might do you good. I see now, John, why you're afraid of any show of affection. The old man made you bitter about things like that."

Don worries about my love life. Don's wife, Rita, has had all kinds of females up for dinner so dear John could meet them. And I'd made a play for none of them. Obviously, to them, I was bitter. It didn't occur to them I might not like any of the models on display.

And they couldn't know about Mary. I'd almost forgotten her in the ten years. Or so I told myself.

I took the new convertible. We had four orders for it, but as I said before, it was still a seller's market.

I DIDN'T push it on the way. Fifty wouldn't hurt her, and I kept the speedometer needle steadily on that figure. I came into the short main street of Lando Falls a little after six.

There was a new drugstore; the rest was at it had always been. The courthouse, for this was a county seat. And Bannister's Dry Goods Store, Mike Pearson's filling station (with a new grease rack), the tavern and Felman's Grocery. And all the faded, small houses set back from the walk on this tree-lined street.

Roger Elson's office was over the new drugstore, and there was a light in the wide, lettered window.

I went up the linoleum-covered steps to

the second-floor hall, and down the hall to where the light was visible through the frosted glass of the door.

Someone said, "Come in," to my knock, and I went in.

Roger Elson hadn't changed much in the ten years. The same thin lips and warm brown eyes in a narrow face. The same sparse grey hair. He was sitting behind his desk, and he rose as I entered.

"Well, John," he said, and smiled at me.

I went over to shake his hand. I remembered the books he'd brought me out at the farm, and how he'd tried to convince my foster father that I should be in high school. If I had a friend besides Mary in Lando Falls, it was this man.

"Sit down, John," he said, and indicated the chair at one end of his desk.

He looked troubled; his voice was quietly weary. He put the tips of his fingers together and stared at them. "Your . . foster father didn't die a natural death, John."

I stared at him. "You mean . . . he was murdered?"

Mr. Elson frowned. "It's not been established. He drank poison, rat poison, in his coffee." He paused. "It may have been self-administered."

I felt some shock, but not nearly as much as I should. I asked, "Wasn't there a note, or some indication—"

The attorney shook his head. "Nothing at all. He was slumped forward over the kitchen table, the empty coffee cup still in his hand. He'd evidently been eating his noon meal."

"There shouldn't be any doubt about it being self-administered, then," I said. "A man contemplating suicide isn't likely to sit down to a meal." Then I thought of something. "But wouldn't one sip of it tell him it was poisoned? You say the cup was empty?"

"That's right. Old people don't have much taste, John. Or he may have gulped his coffee. What I can't understand is how it was poisoned without his knowing it. He must have made it while he was preparing the meal."

"He made enough coffee in the morning for all day," I said. "At least he did when I lived with him. What does the sheriff think?"

"Nobody knows," Roger Elson said drily. "He hasn't made any statement."

"Who is the sheriff now?" I asked.

"Fred Hampel. He was sheriff when you left, wasn't he?"

I nodded. Fred Hampel was Mary's father. Their farm adjoined ours to the south. I said, "What's Mary doing now? I suppose she's married."

"She's not married. She's teaching school, teaching English at the high school here."

There was a silence, and then he said, "There isn't much we can do tonight. We've room at the house, John, and I'd be pleased to have you as my guest."

"Thank you," I said, "but I think I'll stay out at the house."

He looked at me sharply.

"But I'll come for supper," I said. "I'll never forget Mrs. Elson's cooking."

MRS. ELSON hadn't changed, either, a short, plump woman with a perpetually cheerful, constantly rosy face. "You've filled out, John," she said. "You're looking fine." She paused. "And prosperous."

"Thank you," I said. "You're the same as always. You'll never grow old, Mrs. Elson."

"I hope I do," she said. "You're married, I suppose, John?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm still looking."

I thought I saw her glance meaningfully at her husband when I said that, but I may have been mistaken.

We had roast beef and browned potatoes. We had acorn squash and creamed asparagus and home-made bread and hot

apple pie. We had the kind of coffee I hadn't tasted in ten years.

My foster father's death hadn't bothered my appetite any.

Elson and I sat on the porch while his wife did the dishes. The day had changed; the wind had dropped and spring was in the air.

At eight-thirty, I said good-night and left. I cut around in a U-turn and headed back through town, past the courthouse and onto the highway that went past it on the west. I turned south on this road, heading for the farm.

I was twenty-seven years old and as sensible as the next man. There was no reason I should begin to get the jitters. I'd decided this for myself. After all, I could have stayed with the Elsons.

When I turned up the rutted, weed-filled drive, my hands were gripping the wheel too tightly and my eyes were searching the moonlit dimness for a glimpse of the house.

Off to the right I could see the lights of the Hampel farm, but there were no lights in the big, grotesque structure ahead. It had been built in a period of architectural monstrosities, a gingerbready, gabled house of sprawling wings and high-pitched roofs.

I pulled the convertible into the yard and took a flash from the grip in the back. I didn't need it for long. The light switch for the living room was near the door and I snapped it on.

The furniture had been old when I left; it was still there, in the same positions. And I was, for a second, a kid in his teens, a big kid, hardened to work and afraid of the night.

I'd rarely used this door and sat in this room, nor had the old man. We'd eaten in the kitchen. The rest of the time I was working or sleeping. At sixteen, I'd worked the thirty acres he had under cultivation. I'd handled them without help. After I was fourteen, he'd never come out to the field again to do any work.

He'd spent his time in a small study in one of the wings, reading, reading, reading. He'd inherited money. I doubt if he'd ever done much manual labor in his life.

A rat was gnawing in one of the walls. I went through the doorway to the dining room, an immense, unused room smelling dusty and unaired.

There was nothing unused about the kitchen. The walls were grimy with the smoke of thousands of fried meals. The pine floor was grooved with countless trips between the stove and the sink.

He'd lived alone since I left him; the only farming he'd done had been for the two years after my departure. Mary Hampel's brother, George, had worked a few acres for him during that period.

There was a half-inch of solidified grease in the huge iron frying pan, still on the stove. There was part of a loaf of uncut bread on the oilcloth-covered table.

There was no coffee pot in sight, no dishes on the table. I sat next to the table, facing the window, looking out at the moonlit night.

I wasn't John Koski, the orphaned boy who'd made good. I was John Koski, whose immigrant parents had died young, who was big and strong for his age, and could do a man's work at thirteen.

I heard the rat gnawing again, and I thumped on the floor with my heel. The gnawing continued. I pounded with the flat of my hand on the table, shaking the floor.

The gnawing paused for only a few seconds, then continued as persistently as before.

This was foolish, coming here. This wouldn't prove anything, except that the child was father to the man. I could have stayed with the Elsons until the old man was buried, and then gone back to civilization.

Again I could hear Mary Hampel say-

ing, "Talk, talk, talk—what good will that do? You're big and strong. You can find work in the city. You don't have to stay here. You're a *man.*"

She'd been fifteen and I seventeen, but I was a man, to her. God knows I was big enough, if not smart enough.

I could hear myself saying, "What do I know? What could I do?"

"You know how to work, and that's what you'll do. Only you'll be paid for it. *Paid. Money.* If you weren't a scaredy-cat . . ."

"I'll go. I'll go tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? Why not tonight?"

I'd gone that night. I'd found a job within a week as grease monkey at the biggest garage in town. From there to mechanic, to floor manager, to salesman.

I'd written to Mary for two years, and then she'd gone away to college. She worked her way, too, to a master's degree. Now she was back here teaching.

I wondered if she were still the little spitfire she'd been. And if George was still the slow-witted bully he'd been. And her father? I guess he was all right. He hadn't liked my hanging around Mary so I might be prejudiced about Sheriff Fred Hampel.

I thought I heard a footfall in the living room, and I turned that way and called out "Who's there?"

There was no answer.

The living room was lighted, but I hadn't put on any lights in the dining room, and I'd have to pass through there. Do you know what nyctophobia is? It's fear of the darkness. Do you think an otherwise normal gent of twenty-seven years and two hundred pounds could be afflicted with anything as childish as that? He can.

I sat in the wooden kitchen chair and called, "Who's there?" again.

There was no answer. There was no sound. Even the gnawing of the rat had stopped.

Nerves. I'd been working too hard. I'd always worked too hard.

I still had the flashlight in my hand. I snapped the switch, stood up and went quickly to the dining-room door. Its beam moved along the walls, highlighting the faded design of the grey paper, sending elongated shadows of the chairs reaching for the ceiling.

There was nothing in this room, nothing alive, and I walked through swiftly, and into the living room.

A man stood in the front doorway, a fat man with a fat face and light blue eyes. Sheriff Fred Hampel. He had a gun in his hand.

CHAPTER TWO

Coiled Killer

HE SQUINTED at me a second, and then recognition came to his eyes. "It's John—John Koski?"

"That's right, Sheriff."

"I came kind of quiet," Hampel said. "I saw the light and thought there might be—well, some prowler or something. Come up for the funeral, John?"

He was holstering the gun. He seemed nervous.

"Yes," I said, "I came for the funeral."

"You're not staying here?"

"I'm staying here," I said. "I didn't hear your car, Sheriff." He didn't scare me any more. He wasn't a big, fierce man to me now. He was just a country sheriff, out of Joe Miller, and shorter than I was.

"I didn't bring my car," he said. "I was out walking and noticed the light."

He hadn't come the front way. I could see the drive from the kitchen window. I didn't say anything.

"Kind of a shock to you, I suppose," he said, "about the old man."

I nodded. "The fact he was murdered was a shock."

He frowned. "Well, that hasn't exactly

been established yet. The old man had no enemies, really, and a prowler wouldn't be likely to use poison. A club, now, or—"

"It was a shock to me, learning he'd died by poisoning," I said, to end that discussion. "I got a wire from Roger Elson this afternoon, and I came right up. He told me about the poison tonight."

"I see." He expelled his breath between his fat lips. "Well, there's no use talking about that. John, why don't you come over and stay at our place? He was an old man, you know, and I doubt if you'd find any clean bed linen for a guest. Never had anybody come in to clean, and . . ." He broke off.

"I appreciate your offer, Sheriff," I said, "but I've already turned down the Elsons' hospitality. I prefer to stay here."

He was frowning. I had the idea, somehow, that he didn't want me to stay here. I didn't, either, actually. I was being bull-headed, but if I stayed here tonight it would be a big step toward the cure of my nyctophobia. I didn't want to fear anything.

He didn't press the matter. He said, "Hear you've done right well in the city, John."

"Fairly well," I said. "I'm in the automobile business, and we've had some good years since the war." I paused. "I understand Mary's teaching at the high school here."

He nodded. "Smart girl, Mary is. I always say she must get her brains from her mother's side of the family."

I wouldn't argue with him on that. I asked, "How's your wife?"

"She's been ailing," he said. "She looks a little better since winter left us. Didn't get out much, this winter."

"And George?" I asked.

"George we haven't heard much from," he said quietly. "Joined a carnival, you know. Was the strong man. George was always mighty strong."

And thick, I thought, but didn't say. I'd fought with George one memorable afternoon, right out in the back yard here. What a pounding he'd given me! Because I wouldn't stay away from his sister.

The sheriff had turned and was facing out toward the yard, looking through the open doorway. "Well, you can come to breakfast, John. Ma and Mary'd be glad to see you, I know, for breakfast." He'd turned again to face me.

"I'll be there for breakfast, thank you," I said. He hesitated. Then he nodded, smiled, and his fat form went waddling out onto the porch. I went to the doorway and saw him take off over the fields toward home.

The rat started gnawing in the wall again, and I picked up a chair on impulse. I checked myself in time and set it down again, feeling foolish, feeling seventeen years old and overworked. And dumb. Lord, how dumb.

There was no reason for me to dislike Fred Hampel. A girl of fifteen on a farm needs watching. And I'd been a persistent lad. There was no reason for me to dislike George Hampel. I'd probably been belligerent enough to make the fight necessary.

Mrs. Hampel I remembered dimly, a thin and quiet-voiced woman in clean cotton dresses.

I sat in the faded living room, listening to the rat gnaw, feeling the oppression of the house closing in, feeling the tenseness growing in me, the loneliness that had been my companion of the night.

I stirred myself finally, picked up the flash and went through every room in the house.

LESS than half of them were furnished and I wondered if the old man had run out of money and had been forced to sell the furniture for grocery money.

I'd never known his wife; she'd died before I came to the farm, long before.

She'd died as a young woman, married to a wealthy, older man, and the story was that he'd loved her beyond reason. I couldn't picture him loving anybody.

But he'd never changed the position of the furniture, and I'd seen her picture, still in the study. I came back to this room after my tour of inspection.

It was on the first floor, and he had changed the furniture a little in here. Just enough to make room for a steel cot against one wall.

The sheets were a dark grey; the blankets felt gritty. I wouldn't sleep here. I looked around at the books lining two walls of this room and realized he hadn't been consciously cruel. He'd just lived in his own world. Indifference had been his vice.

I wondered if the book still open on the desk had prepared him for what happened. It was *Beyond The Grave.*

I went back into the living room and decided on the couch. I got my topcoat from the car for a blanket. There was no lock on the front door, so I propped one of the kitchen chairs under the knob.

I paused for seconds in front of the light switch before snapping it. They're just mechanical contrivances to most people. To me they symbolize freedom from fear.

The shadows from the trees in the yard made a moving pattern on the floor of this quiet room. The moonlight was brighter now, and I could make out the shapes of the furniture. There was a breeze from the south, and I heard again the huge oak bough rubbing against that side of the house.

How often, in the old days, had that wakened me in the night? No matter how familiar a sound is, an overactive imagination can read all kinds of meaning into it.

I forced my mind from the past. I thought of Don and his wife, and I remembered Don's conversation in the office. *"I see now why you're afraid of any show of affection,"* he'd said.

Affection was one thing I certainly didn't fear. I'd never felt enough of it to bring me to the altar. Maybe the reason for that was close now, in that farmhouse to the south. And maybe not. Ten years is a long time. A person can change in ten years.

The rat had stopped gnawing. The breeze was dying. I'd forgotten how quiet the country can be. There wasn't a sound anywhere. The couch was too short. My legs were cramped, and I swung my feet over the edge of the couch.

It was at that second I heard the creak of the rear door, the door that led into the kitchen.

I didn't move. I ddin't even reach for the flashlight, there on the floor, an arm's length away. I held my breath, waiting for another sound, a footstep, anything.

Quiet. The almost inaudible sigh of a breeze, and quiet again.

My hand was trembling as it reached for the flashlight. I grasped it, swung around and up to a sitting position, and pointed the beam toward the door to the dining room.

Now I was sure I heard a footstep. Then the back door creaked again, and I was up, heading for the kitchen. Rage drove me, an anger stronger than my fear.

The kitchen was empty, the back door partly open. This door served not only the kitchen but the cellar steps as well, and I sent the beam of the flashlight down the stairs.

The stairs looked worn and rotten to me. I hadn't searched that basement, and I didn't go down now. I could think of a lot of excuses for that, but only one reason. I'd always shunned that musty, earth-smelling place. There were no lights down there. It had never been wired.

I went to the door and flashed the light into the back yard. Just beyond the limits of its ray, I thought I saw a shadow at

the base of an elm tree, as though it were a thickening of the trunk. The moon was behind a passing cloud; I waited for its full radiance.

Then, before it came, I thought the shadow moved, but that could have been imagination. At any rate, there was nothing. The apparent thickening must have been a trick of my eyes.

I went back into the living room, back to the couch, calling myself some unprintable names. I lit a cigarette and sat in the partial darkness.

An hour or so later I fell asleep. Nervous tension can be as tiring as labor.

I WOKE at dawn, aching in the joints and with a dull headache. The house was cold and damp; rain was pelting the front windows of the living room.

There was no sound but the rain as I sat there in the grey light of morning, surveying the room. The kitchen chair was still under the doorknob. Everything was in its accustomed place, and the fears of last night seemed senseless and childish.

In the small bathroom off the study I shaved and washed with cold water. The towels in there weren't anything I'd care to use. I dried my face and hands with yesterday's shirt and donned a clean one

I had planned to walk over for breakfast, but the rain changed my mind. I went out to the convertible, opened the door and started to climb in.

I was the warning rattle that saved me. I'd heard it before in this region, and my instinctive withdrawal was swift.

I saw the beady eyes and the inward curving fangs, and then the thick body hurtled against the glass of the window as the door swung shut. It had been an automatic reaction, that closing of the car door, and had probably saved me from those venomous fangs.

I stood there in the dripping rain, knowing there was no way that rattler could have got into the car of its own volition. He'd been put in there, and for one purpose only.

I could see the burlap bag on the front seat now, and I could see the thick body of the snake coiling partially, its head lifted and facing me.

Both doors locked from the outside and I locked them before starting on foot for the Hampel farm.

I was trembling, more in fear than in anger, but the anger was there, too. This wasn't the work of any phantom of the mind; that was a very real snake and he'd been put there by a murderer.

My feet were soaking wet, my hat brim dripping steadily as I came up onto the low front porch of the Hampel's. The door opened before I could press the button, and Mary stood in the doorway.

The same dark blue eyes and tawny hair, the same slim, straight body. Her voice was lower, a pleasant voice.

"John Koski," she said. "After ten years . . ."

The anger was gone, and the fear, and I could only look at her.

I managed a "Hello, Mary," finally, and a smile. I was trembling again. Don's wife had worked in vain, and this was why.

"I hope," she said, "you've learned enough to come in out of the rain." Her voice was shaky.

"You haven't changed," I said. "Your tongue's as sharp as ever. You haven't changed a bit, Mary, except to grow prettier."

"City talk," she said, smiling. "Oh, John, it's good to see you."

"It's mutual," I said. I took off my hat and topcoat before stepping into the hall. "Little trouble with the car," I said, "so I had to walk over."

There was the smell of pork sausages and of coffee, and then Mrs. Hampel came through from the kitchen.

She shook my hand, and her smile was warm. "You're looking fine, John. I

was sorry to hear about your father."

"It was a shock to me," I said. "Is Mr. Hampel up yet?"

"He's gone out," she said. "Had to go into town for something or other. We're ready to eat right now, John, if you are."

"I'm ready," I said. "It smells wonderful." I didn't intend to tell them about the snake. I could wait for the sheriff.

There were wheat cakes and real maple syrup to go with the home-made pork sausages. There was corn bread and crab apple jelly and unsalted butter and cream thick as cottage cheese.

The talk was of people we'd known, and the kitchen was warm and clean, a contrast to the place I'd spent the night. We were finishing our second cup of coffee when the sheriff came back.

He looked weary, his flabby face sagging with fatigue. I wondered where he could have been at this time of the morning.

He hung his hat on the hook behind the door and went to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.

HIS BACK was to me as he said, "You weren't in the neighborhood day before yesterday, by any chance, John?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"That car's familiar," he said. "Thought I saw one like that in town Tuesday afternoon. Same color, and all."

"It wasn't that one," I said steadily. "That one was delivered to us from the factory on Wednesday."

There was a silence, an uncomfortable silence.

Then Mary said quickly, "And you're having trouble with it already? You'll never sell me one like that, John." Her attempt at a light tone failed to lift the tension in the room.

The sheriff was wiping his hands methodically and thoughtfully. "Something wrong with the car?"

"Ignition must have got wet," I said. "This car was a club convertible you saw, Sheriff?"

"I could have been mistaken," he said. "Lot of those new cars look alike." He sat down at the head of the table and speared some sausages with a fork. "I had to go over and see Mr. Elson this morning, early. Did you sleep upstairs, John?"

I shook my head. "In the living room."

"Thought I saw a light on the second floor," he said. "Weren't bothered last night?" He wasn't looking at me.

I saw the taut look on Mary's face and the paleness of Mrs. Hampel. "No," I lied. "I slept like a baby."

"You started a fire, I hope?"

I shook my head. The furnace was in the basement. I said, "Didn't think I'd need one."

Now he looked at me. "You don't think the car was tampered with, maybe?"

"I didn't take time to find out," I said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a lift back, and we can check it over."

He nodded absent-mindedly.

Mary said, "Well, I'm almost into the taxpayer's time. I've got to run." She put a hand on my shoulder as she went by, and I was suddenly warm.

A minute later I saw her small coupé pulling out of the garage in the rear, and Mrs. Hampel went out with some scraps for the chickens.

I said, "Somebody put a snake in my car last night, Sheriff. A rattler." I paused. "It's still there. That's why I didn't take the car."

He seemed to tense, and then his lethargy returned and he looked at me wearily. "*Put* there? Might have crawled in."

"It carried a burlap bag with it if it did," I said. "You still think the old man wasn't murdered, Sheriff?"

"I never said that." Hampel replied. "I said the cause of death wasn't deter-

mined. That's for a coroner's jury." There was an edge to his voice now, and he looked at me sourly.

He pushed his plate away, finished his coffee and rose. "Let's go and take a look at that snake." He took his hat off the hook. "Haven't seen a rattler around here for over a year."

CHAPTER THREE

Madman on the Loose

HE DIDN'T have any talk to offer on the way over. He seemed to be out on his feet, completely bushed.

When we pulled into the yard he sat there behind the wheel for a few seconds, looking at my car. Then he climbed out on his side and went over toward the wood pile.

I watched him pick up a stick about four feet long and test its strength by pounding it on a chunk of hardwood.

I said, "That's a pretty short stick, and it's a long snake, Sheriff."

"Rattlers don't scare me none," he said easily. "I've killed a lot of 'em."

His lethargy was momentarily gone, and I had the oddest belief that he could turn that weariness on at will, that it was a sort of mask, a deception.

He moved very lightly for a fat man, now. He came over to the car door where I stood, key in hand.

Then I realized my lack of cooperation I said. "Wait, I'll get a stick, too."

He shook his head. "Won't be necessary. Can you see it in there?"

The rain had stopped and some sun was coming through the dripping boughs overhead. In the single ray of warmth coming through the windshield, the rattler was coiled, absorbing the sun.

I nodded, and the sheriff looked in to see it. Then his big hand smacked the glass, and that ugly head swiveled to face us as the tail rattled menacingly.

Again the sheriff smacked the glass, and the head was higher now, the small eyes glittering in the sunlight, missing nothing

"Unlock the door," the sheriff said His voice was calm and quiet, and I felt a quick admiration. There was more to this man than met the eye.

I unlocked the door and stepped back well back.

The sheriff turned the handle slowly watching the weaving head of that killer on the seat. Then he pulled the door open all the way and stood back.

The head was still weaving, but the rattler made no move to strike.

The sheriff's voice was almost a whisper. "Get a chunk of wood to throw in there."

I went over to the woodpile and picked out a light, round bough of birch about a foot long. The white bark was still on it.

I came back and stood about twelve feet from the end of the car door. I threw it underhand, straight at that weaving head.

I saw the coil unwind, and seven feet of snake seeming to stand on its tail as the striking head came out to meet the birch in the air.

I didn't see the sheriff's club until it smacked that striking head, and then the snake was on the ground, writhing, tossing, its rattle like hail on a tin roof.

Again and again the sheriff's club smashed at that battered head. His fat body seemed to shake in rage, and he grunted curses. He was hitting it long after the snake was dead.

When he finally stopped, he was breathing heavily. "I hate a snake," he said hoarsely. "I sure as hell hate a snake." Sweat ran down his face, and he wiped it with one sleeve. He looked at the stick and threw it back toward the woodpile

"You did a fine job," I said, and could think of nothing else.

He expelled his breath and nodded. He

had that weary look again. "I wish you'd stay at our house, John. Or at Elson's. This place is . . ." He shook his head.

He was walking over toward his car, and I walked along. He got in and lowered the window on his side. "If there's some sense to all this, I can't see it. Who'd want to kill the old man? And you?" He shook his head. "And *why*?"

"It looks like a maniac to me," I said. "Rat poison, and then this."

He nodded, looking out through his windshield. His voice was quiet. "And God knows what next."

He ground the starter and in a few seconds he was bumping through the yard in low gear. I turned back to the house and then decided against it. There wasn't anything I wanted in there.

I MADE a very careful inspection of the convertible's interior before I climbed into the seat. I threw out the bag and the piece of birch.

It was beautiful, everything green and fresh, the ploughed earth a rich black in contrast, the sky almost clear. The convertible rode easily over the bumpy tracks, and I came out on the highway.

I meant to go directly to Roger Elson's house, but I had to pass the tavern on the way. If there was one thing I needed, it was a drink.

I had it, and another. The place was quiet and sunny, the bartender amiable. I had another, and some more, and I'm not a drinking man. My legs held up, and my mind seemed clear enough. But I had trouble keeping my eyes open.

I was explaining to the bartender all the virtues that make our car outstanding in its class when Roger Elson walked in.

He looked at me sharply, and then he looked at the bartender.

I said, "I'm all right, Mr. Elson. I've had a bad night, is all. Anything new?"

"Nothing, John," he said quietly. "I've just talked to the sheriff. He told me about—about that thing in your car. I won't have you staying there tonight, John."

I didn't answer him. I wanted to agree with him, but I couldn't, so I said nothing.

"Why don't you come out to the house," he said, "and take a nap? You look worn out, John."

"A good idea," I said, and put a bill on the bar. We went out together.

On the sidewalk he said, "You'll let me drive, won't you? I'll never get a chance to drive anything as nifty as this again."

I nodded, and he got in behind the wheel. There was a lapse in my vision then, and the next thing I knew we had stopped in front of his house.

Now my legs were weak, and the sidewalk was pitching. I felt Elson's hand on my elbow, and the next thing I remember feeling was the cool, worn leather of the couch in his study. I put my face against it and remembered no more.

Once I heard Mrs. Elson's voice, and his answering, "No, no, let him sleep. He probably didn't sleep a wink, last night."

When I finally came back to full consciousness, the room was dim, the house quiet. There was a light cotton blanket over me, and my shoes were off, my collar open.

My mouth felt like a bird's nest; otherwise I was all right. No headache, no dizziness, everything in the room clear, sharp-edged, even in the dimness.

I rose to a sitting position and found my shoes on the floor. I buttoned my collar and tied my tie. The keys were on the desk near the window, and there was a note there, too.

Martha and I have gone to her sister's. We'll be home before eight. Anything you can want is in the refrigerator.

I heard the clock in the front hall chime, and I counted them. It was seven o'clock. I'd slept the day through.

I went into the bathroom and inspected my puffy face in the mirror. I started for the kitchen, and then remembered his saying, "I won't have you staying there tonight, John."

I meant to stay there. The sheriff had killed my snake, but he couldn't kill the dark for me. That was my job.

Hunger dug at me as I went out the front door and down to the convertible. There was no restaurant in town, but I could get something to eat at the tavern

The same man was behind the bar, but there were some other customers in there too. I thought the talk quieted as I came in.

"You put in a lot of hours, don't you?" I said.

He nodded. "You're looking better."

"Something to eat this time," I told him. "And maybe a glass of beer to go with it."

"I can give you a hot beef sandwich," he said.

I had two of those and a glass of beer I felt more like a man. My eyes traveled the row of bottled whiskey along the back bar, and I thought of taking a bottle along A bottle of liquid courage.

I settled, instead, for a double bourbon. and went out again into the lighted street In two minutes I had left the lights behind and was heading south along the highway.

Again, as last night, I saw the lights of the Hampel place, and I thought about Mary and regretted the years I'd wasted away from her.

AHEAD of me, the house looked forlorn and gloomy. It seemed to tower over me, reach me, as I came into the yard.

The flashlight was still in the living room. I went up onto the porch, walked into the living room. I didn't scramble for the light switch but took my time flicking it on—as a normal person would.

Everything was exactly as I'd left it, even to the flashlight still on the floor near the couch. I went out into the kitchen, and the grease was still hard in the frying pan.

But the partial loaf of bread was gone!

And there was a cup on the table, a cup that still held a trace of water. There were crumbs on the table. Somebody had sat there; the chair was facing the window, the chair that had stood at the far end of the table last night. I'd taken the other to prop under the doorknob.

That somebody might still be in the house.

I stood there, trying to decide my next move. One thing I knew, I wasn't going to search the place again. I'd be going to *him*, then, and the advantage is always with the defender.

Let him come to me.

The room was chilly, but I wasn't going down into the basement, either. That was asking for it. There was stove wood here, kindling and paper. The kitchen stove would take the chill out of this first floor.

I reached down for some paper, and the heading on the magazine, there on top, seemed to hit me in the face It was a trade magazine of a sort, and it was the first clue I'd had in this horror.

It identified the killer, for me. It hadn't been there last night, or perhaps I hadn't noticed it. Something that had been said to me yesterday came to my mind, and I tied it up with what I already knew, and there was the picture.

I could have been wrong, of course. I wanted to be wrong. But I didn't think I was.

And he might be watching me right now. From outside, from the next room from anywhere. Here I was, in the light and the killer was in the dark, watching every move I made. For the first time in my life, the light was no friend. For the first time, the dark was an advantage

I turned out the light in the kitchen and went into the living room. Here was the best place in the house to wait. Here on the couch, my back guarded by the wall, facing the three doorways that led from this room.

I turned out the light and sat stiffly on the couch. The sensible thing to do, probably, was to get in the car and the hell out of here. But I knew now what I was facing, and that was a big help. It made all the difference.

I didn't light a cigarette or make any noise. I tried to keep my breathing regular and quiet and my ears alert for every sound. It was cloudy enough to kill most of the moon's brilliance; there wouldn't be much I could see.

I'd brought a stout piece of firewood in with me from the kitchen. It was my only weapon.

I had no track of time; what seemed like hours might have been only minutes. What I was waiting for was the creak of a door or the sound of a footstep on the porch, in the hall, on the floor above.

There was no wind; the silence was absolute, the darkness almost so.

What I heard finally was a creak, but it wasn't a door, it was the creak of a step, one of the basement setps, I would swear.

Minutes, it seemed, I waited for the sound to be repeated, but it wasn't. The next sound was the scuff of a foot, the sound shoe leather would make on the worn, rough pine of a kitchen floor.

Now my breathing was heavier, and I made no effort to control it. My hand gripped the rough edges of the stove wood, and I could feel the sweat breaking out on the backs of my wrists. I could feel it running down my sides and the back of my neck.

There was another creak, and it seemed closer. It seemed to come from the dining room, and I reached forward to pick up the flashlight on the floor.

I KNEW the minute I picked it up that it wouldn't work. I didn't need the futile click of the switch to tell me the batteries had been removed.

I stood up, the stove wood in my hand. This had been a bad move, waiting on the couch. The couch was where he'd expect to find me. I started to edge away from it.

That was when I heard the shoe hit the baseboard of the door, and dimly I could make out the huge shape of him in the doorway. I could hear his heavy breathing.

His voice was quiet, but after all that silence it startled me. "John—is that you by the couch?"

I didn't answer.

"Are you afraid, John? You shouldn't have come back."

"I'm back," I said. "I'm waiting for you. I never thought you'd be a killer."

"You shouldn't have come back, John," the voice went on. "You remember what happened last time, John?" It was a soft voice, with something almost like a whine in it. It wasn't the voice of a sane man.

Then I saw the shape getting closer, and I had the stove wood ready. I weighed two hundred pounds, but I'd be needing the club.

At that second the moon came out in its full brightness and the beard-matted face and gleaming eyes of this mastodon only a few feet away were revealed.

I swung the chunk of wood and saw his big left arm come up to ward off the blow. The club hit him on the forearm, and he shrieked in pain, and I knew the bone was broken.

But his mammoth right hand had me by the throat, and for the second time in my life I was fighting George Hampel. He had me by a hundred pounds, and I wasn't concerned with fair play.

I put a knee where I thought it would do some good, and his grip on my throat loosened. I slammed the top of my head

in toward where I thought his teeth might be.

I felt two of them go, and the swipe he gave me in return sent me sprawling to the floor. I saw him jumping at me. I saw his feet coming for my head, and I rolled frantically and heard him crash the floor, shaking the house.

I was fumbling along the floor for the dropped piece of stove wood when he turned and came at me again. This time my leg went straight up and caught him right above the groin.

I heard him grunt. I saw him pause, and I was up. I brought a right hand up with me, and he slammed back into the couch.

The room was almost bright. His face looked as big as the side of a house. I kept slamming it, kept putting right and left hands smashing at that dirty, bearded face.

I felt a bone go in my left hand, and I kept pounding the right in there. I was still hitting him when the headlights came into the yard. I was still hitting him when the sheriff walked in and switched on the light.

IT WAS later, after he'd put George back in the cell, that the sheriff came into his office to talk to me.

I said, "You had a hunch it was George all along, didn't you? That was why you were watching the place night and day That was why you didn't want me to stay there and you didn't want to call it murder."

He looked at me and nodded. "I had a hunch it was . . . my son. I had a letter from his old boss a week ago asking if George had come home, saying that he'd been acting kind of queer lately, and they were worrying about him. He'd left the carnival a few days before the letter got here." He rubbed his face. "I . . . haven't slept but a couple hours a night this last week. But I didn't figure he'd go to your place."

"Why did he?"

"Well, he worked for the old man, you know, years ago, and the old man didn't pay very much. And George had the idea he was a miser, that there was money, lots of money, hidden around the house somewhere."

"He came back and poisoned him? He put the snake in my car?"

The sheriff nodded. "He was afraid you'd find the money first. And George was always fond of snakes. He wasn't afraid of them. When I heard about the snake and saw the bag I was pretty sure. A rattler won't bite through a bag, you know."

"So I've heard," I said. I looked down at my bandaged left hand and couldn't seem to think of any other words.

"When did you first suspect George?" he asked.

"When I saw the copy of *Billboard* in the waste paper. That's the carnival man's magazine, his bible."

He was rubbing the back of his neck I thought his eyes were wet. He said, "You'll be going back to the city, I suppose, after the funeral?"

"Not right away, maybe," I said. "I'd like to arrange a wedding first, if I can, if I'm not ten years too late and too dumb, as usual."

He looked up quickly, and now I thought there was some happiness in that tired, flabby face. "Mary?" he asked.

"I mean Mary," I said. "If she'll have me."

"She'll have you," he said. "She hasn't been waiting all this time for anybody else." He tried a smile. "And—I'll be glad to see it, John. I'll be needing a son."

"And I've always wanted a father," I said. "There's no sense in hanging around here any longer. Let's go home."

THE END

AFTER reading Talmage Powell's unusual novel, "Time of the Demon" (Page 10 in this issue), the editors of DIME MYSTERY decided to explore further into the subject of werewolves. Those of you still unshaken by Powell's yarn may be interested in learning some additional facts on the subject.

Few of us realize how ancient is the belief in werewolves and similar phenomena. That it existed back in the times of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and probably long before them, is unquestioned. Mention of werewolves crops up frequently in the writings of Plato and Virgil and many others. Virgil, the Roman poet, ascribed the transformation into the wolf form to the action of drugs. Plato tells a story of men eating human flesh at a ceremony in honor of a mythical king of Arcadia, *Zeus Lukaios,* and turning into wolves for nine years.

The process of turning into a beast of prey is known by the technical name of *lycanthropy.* Experts on the subject number three types of lycanthropy. The first type is the form most encountered in stories on the subject. In this type of lycanthropy, the subject actually turns into an animal. His legs turn into paws, his jaw and teeth lengthen, hair sprouts out of his body, and he turns into a real-life wolf—or tiger, or leopard, or jaguar, depending on where this takes place.

In the second form of lycanthropy, nothing happens to the subject's body. However, he falls into a deep trance, during which his soul sneaks out of his body and enters the body of a beast. During this trance, the subject's body mirrors, as it were, the actions of the animal whose soul it inhabits, slavering at the mouth, growling, etc.

The third form of lycanthropy is the only one that science will have any truck with. This concerns the use of hypnotism or suggestion on someone, generally the village idiot, to induce in him the belief that he is an animal. Among the Malayans this process is known as *latah,* and when the poor moron runs around on all fours, killing chickens, the Malayans laugh like mad. It is considered quite a joke.

That not everyone, even among today's more educated people, considers this belief silly can be shown by a couple of incidents reported by authorities. One traveler in the Bonda district of Africa, where the natives believe that men can turn into hyenas, reported having shot a hy-

ena with a gold earring in its ear; and there is a case on record in Sumatra where a Malayan named Haji 'Abdăllah was caught naked in a tiger trap. This last incident is interesting in light of the fact that most tiger traps are set so that it will take several hundred pounds to spring them.

Well, that ought to take care of the werewolf situation for the time being. For those of you with courage enough to face still more of the thrills DIME MYSTERY customarily dishes out, we've put together an unusually spine-tingling issue for next time. Leading the list is a novel by Day Keene, plus thrilling novelettes, short stories and features by Francis K Allan, William Brandon, Ejler Jakobsson, Frederick Blakeslee and many others So perk up your courage and get in line at the newsstand on November 4th. We'll see you then. —*The Editor*

LARRY HOLDEN

(Continued from page 62)

poured out his love in that hundred statuettes of her he had made during the twenty years he lived in that forsaken shack.

He had not cut off his finger and sent it to Ellen. He had not smashed the figurine of her mother that Benjy had brought in the box. He had sent her a ring her mother had given him, and Benjy had substituted the finger—cut from Duncan's hand when Duncan was too drunk to know what was going on. And Benjy had smashed that figurine to work on Ellen's hatred of her father.

It wasn't pretty. None of it was pretty

But something good did come out of it I don't think I shall ever *hate* anyone again as long as I live.

"Never," I said.

"And that goes double," said Ellen soberly.

THE END

(Continued from page 6)

prisons. The agents assigned to study the project were even said to have committed actual crimes in several leading nations, in order to get the prisoners' eye view. When they had returned and submitted their reports, the Turks launched their experiment.

The island of Imrali, in those days, was uninhabited, undeveloped. A group of selected prisoners from Turkish prisons, mostly men who had killed in the heat of passion, made the first landing on Imrali, accompanied by guards whom they outnumbered several times. Under the direction of the guards they built up a model, modern community, with individual homes and facilities for earning their own livelihood.

The prisoners kept their earnings, were permitted marrying privileges with women from the outside, who visited them once a month—in many cases the gals they had gotten in trouble over. Some are lifers, others serve shorter sentences, and when they're released, they usually have normal family responsibilities to tie them down, a trade, and sufficient savings to start them on a routine, normally happy life. Newcomers are not admitted to the island until they've served preliminary sentences in mainland prisons, where they must prove their ability to reform.

Power launches and other transportation facilities are moored along the island's coast line, within easy reach of prisoners—yet there's no record of a single escape. Several instances are on record of dischargees who, hesitant to trust themselves in the outside world they abused, have hated to leave!

All this proves at least one thing—stone walls do make a prison, at least in Turkey.

(Continued from page 29)

yond the grave. I had made a great gamble working on Anton, letting a big, grey shadow be seen over the countryside. I had done it to poison Lyria's mind against him, to lead him finally to kill himself, leaving her to me forever. With a little more time I would have won. Just a little more time.

But Ethelene had stepped in and sent them away.

Now I turned from the window, shadows long and thick about me, the storm beating against the house. Soon Ethelene would know how the grave had come to be opened in her grandfather's day. She would know why the Drake men all traveled widely. She would know why at certain times people who wandered off into the dark and lonely swamps were never seen again.

Anton knew nothing of werewolves. All that stuff had been planted in his room by me, the writing and some of the books, and other books he'd brought in without knowing fully what he was doing, without knowing that another mind was controlling his own. How could he suspect—I was his friend, wasn't I?

But Ethelene would know, very shortly now. She would know how the werewolf takes his mate, by making a tiny wound on the side of her neck, letting his blood mingle with hers; and then she is like him, to roam the misty fields and swamps at his side.

I took a step toward the kitchen, and then another. The storm shook the silent house. On the third step, I left the left shoe; on the next step the other shoe dropped behind. Then the pad-pad-pad of shaggy, grey paws sounded on the carpet, padding across the living room, padding, padding across the dark dining room, padding toward the kitchen—where stood Ethelene. . . .

THE END

LAST RENDEZVOUS

(Continued from page 37)

had made him sweat and the wind seemed to strike through to the bone.

He stood and looked hard, saw the faint glimmer of light through the snow. It heartened him. He thought of the warm kitchen. It wouldn't do to lose that light and die. He knew from the feel of his body that he could not last long with the thermometer at ten below, with the driven snow hammering his numbing flesh.

Once his heart thudded in panic as he lost the light. He stood and waited until there was a slackening in the wind and he saw it again. He went forward eagerly. There was a suspicious numbness in his feet.

When the light was close he broke into a stumbling run, eager for the heat of the chunk stove, eager for life.

He came abruptly to the light. It was a gasoline lantern swinging in the wind, the loop of the handle over the stub of a broken branch.

Harry Ludon suddenly realized that he had not recrossed the fence, that the ground had sloped up rather than down.

There would be warmth in the lantern. He reached for it with eager hands. The bright flame wavered. With the suddenness of a blow the light went out, and all he could see was the glowing wick, an evil red eye in the night.

He leaned against the slender tree Somewhere in the wild night was warmth and safety. But he did not know in which direction.

His knees slowly bent and he sat in the snow at the base of the tree.

Suddenly he realized that he felt warmer. The cold did not bite into him. Sam would not win, after all. The blizzard could not kill Harry Ludon.

Along with the feeling of warmth came a heavy sleepiness. Smiling in the knowledge of his victory, he shut his eyes.

(Continued from page 69)

other she carried a length of the soot-covered clothesline and two of the glass-headed pins, now also covered with soot. She had taken off her shoes, and she carried them with her. Her heart was beating rather fast.

Just as she started up the steps, Gerald turned on the radio in his den upstairs. He was listening to the news. Now he wouldn't be able to hear her even if the stairs did creak.

At the top of the flight Fanny halted. She drove in one of the glass-headed pins on either side of the stairs. She knotted one of the ends of the clothesline around the head of the pin on the left, drew the line tautly across to the right, tied it around the pin on that side, and cut off the surplus with the knife. She had made good strong knots.

FANNY looked at her work critically. The line was certainly invisible even though the light was on at the head of the stairs. It would be no lighter in the morning when Gerald started down, and anyhow he never watched where he put his feet.

Fanny crept downstairs again. In the kitchen she scrubbed the soot from her hands, wrapped the unused line in paper and dropped it in the trash box, and cleaned and replaced the kitchen knife. She took a last look round to be sure everything was in order before she went out.

In her bedroom she began to undress. She took her hair down, folded back the sheets. As she crawled into bed she found herself idly wondering whether she would have one of her prophetic dreams tonight. My, but she was sleepy. She yawned. M-m-m-m. About her dreams, she wouldn't be surprised if she did have one of them. About Gerald. On the whole, she rather expected she would.

(Continued from page 76)

peered a wide-eyed Polly Printess, with her hulking brother blocking the only exit. The only opportunity for escape.

"I was sitting on a rock beneath the ledge, sketching, when the car came over today, Bellerose. And—you didn't know, did you, that there was a bulldozer under that ledge? Every time you went to town she had a fellow working like hell to get a swanky little beach fixed up for you there. Because she—well, I guess she loved you. For some strange reason.

"And it was fairly easy to get the car heaved up and out of there. With the windows up tight, there was lots of oxygen for her.

"She didn't want to do any of this, but we made her do it because we had to have a confession."

IT WAS almost morning now. A dry wind was whipping the fog into wisps and swirls about the window, and he could see the lighter grey of day there.

Flight. Security. There was no security in flight, though, was there? He wished he could ask Lenore. He wished . . .

But there was one security left.

He had always been afraid of being hurt, and yet the glass of the window shattering about him went unnoticed as he hurtled through it. Then he was out, his feet swift upon the sandy shale, his body arched in flight toward the ultimate security.

But an even deadlier fear snapped at his heels, raced with him to the cliff edge, plummeted over with him, wrapping him round and about with nothingness, there on the rocks beneath the ledge, beneath the water.

And it was only at the very last, when it was much too late, of course, that it came to him to wonder about . . . the ultimate security.

(Continued from page 89)

She rocked her child. "Now," she said, "it belongs to you."

I said, "What!" It came out too explosively for the still room.

"Only the males in the family are permitted to have the stone. It is considered unlucky for the women."

I said, "Oh," like a fool. And then, "But this stone is very valuable. You can't give it away just like that."

She smiled. "It is yours. The chain is broken and I may not keep it. It should have died with Eli, but I am glad it is worth something so that you, his friend, may have it."

I turned to Anna, who was sitting, quietly listening. "What shall I do, Anna?"

"If she wants you to have it, then take it. You fought for it."

Slowly the swirling in my head subsided. "I don't know what to say."

She got up. The baby began to cry again in her arms. Anna and I rose too. The woman said, "I must feed the child. I am grateful you brought me word of Eli. And I am very happy that you have been rewarded."

Anna and I went out. The stone seemed to he burning in my pocket and I thought of palaces and kingdoms. I came back to earth to become aware of Anna walking rapidly away from me. I caught up to her and grabbed her arm.

"What's the idea?"

"It's over," she said. "You did your job and you're going to be rich, and I guess that's all."

She wouldn't look at me. I seemed to notice for the first time the shabbiness of her dress and the hunger lines in her face. I felt fiercely happy.

I said, "Don't ever try to leave me again." I held on to her arm tightly and we walked down the street.

THE END

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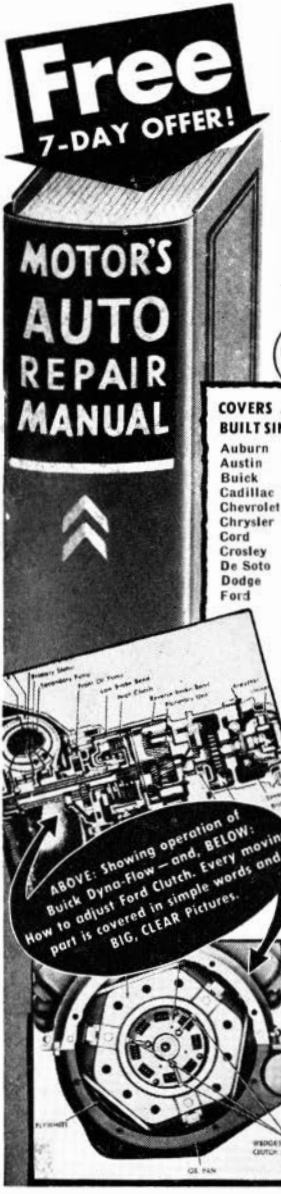

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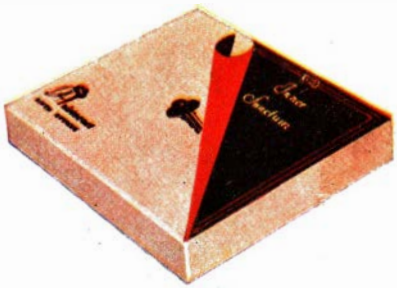

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