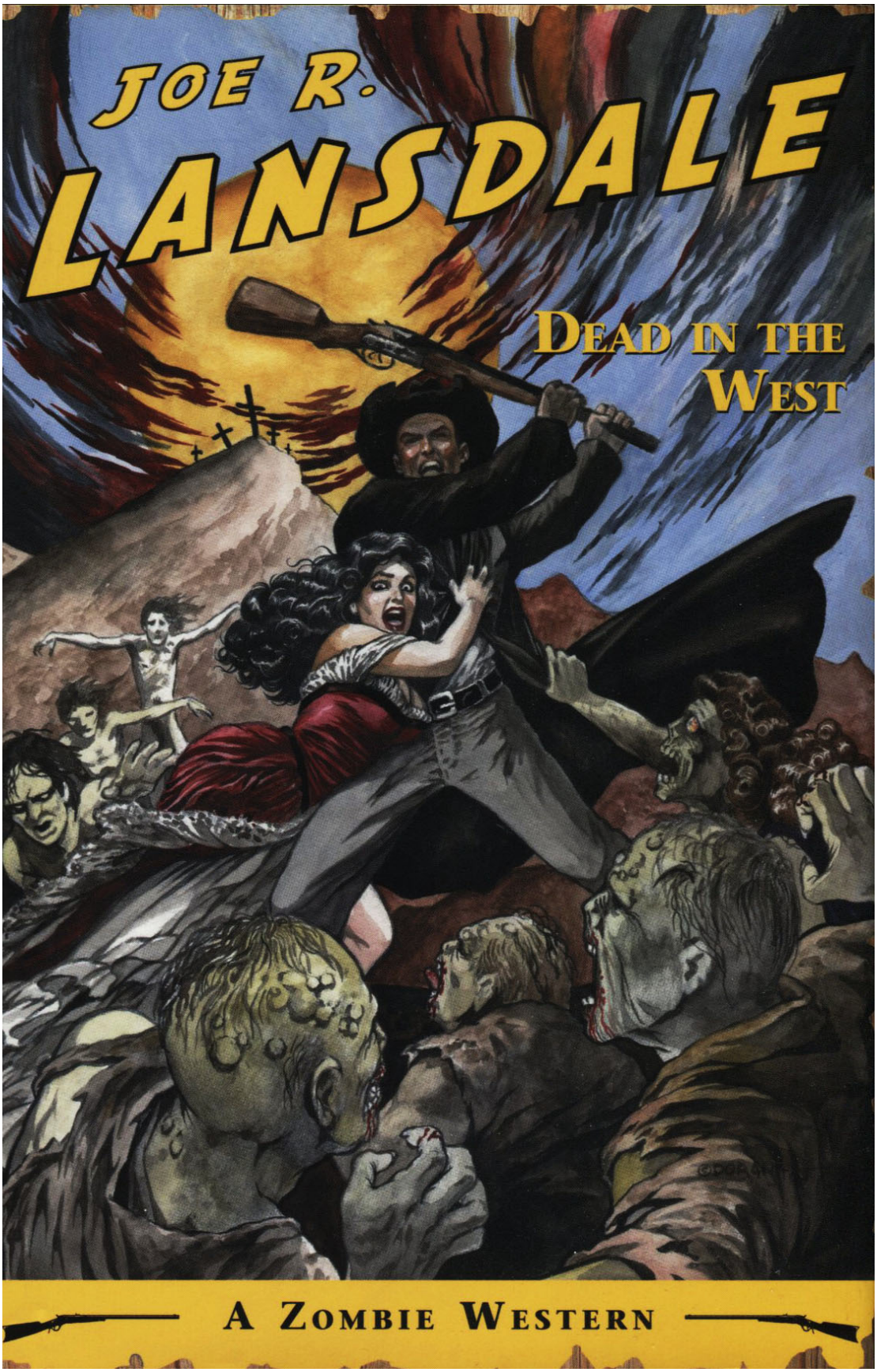
JOE R.
LANSDALE
DEAD IN THE WEST
A ZOMBIE WESTERN

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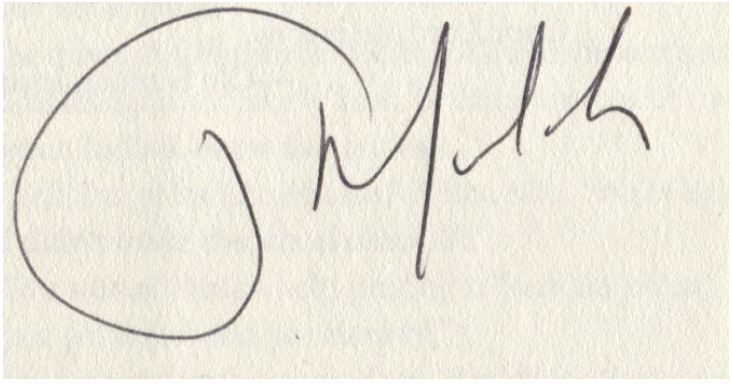
DEDICATION

The original version of this book appeared in ELDRITCH TALES #10-13. It was a tribute to the pulps. Especially WEIRD TALES. This considerably revised version is a tribute not only to the pulps, but to comics like those in the infamous EC line and JONAH HEX (the early ones), and perhaps most of all, B-brand horror movies like: CURSE OF THE UNDEAD, BILLY THE KID VERSUS DRACULA, JESSE JAMES MEETS FRANKENSTEIN'S DAUGHTER, and the like.

The first version of DEAD IN THE WEST was dedicated to Al Manachino. This version is for my brother, John Lansdale, who made many suggestions I followed, and some, if he'll forgive me, I did not.

So, this is your book, John. I hope you like it.



The hour hath come to part with this body composed of
flesh and blood;
May I know the body to be impermanent and illusory.

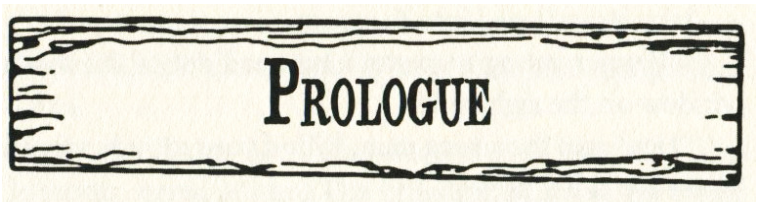
—*Tibetan Book of the Dead*

And we were not able to detain Lazarus, but he gave himself a shake, and with all the signs of malice, he immediately went away from us; and the very earth, in which the dead body of Lazarus was lodged, presently turn him out alive.

—*Nicodemus 15:18* (A Lost Book of the Bible)

From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-legged beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us.

—Old Scottish Invocation



Night. A narrow, tree-lined stage trail bends to the left around a clutch of dark pines. Moonlight, occasionally blocked by rolling clouds. A voice in the distance, gradually becomes audible.

"You goddamned, lily-livered, wind-breaking, long-eared excuses for mules. Git on, you contrary assholes."

• • •

A stagecoach came barreling around the bend, the lanterns on either side of the driver's seat swaying like monstrous fireflies. It gradually began to slow, amid much cussing, and finally it was brought to a stop alongside the road near the East Texas pines.

The driver, Bill Nolan, turned to look with his one good eye at his shotgunner, Jake Wilson. Nolan wore a patch over the eye an Indian arrow had put out.

"Well, hurry for Christsakes " Nolan said. "We're late."

"I didn't make the wheel come off."

"You weren't much help putting it back on either.... Will you get down and pee already?"

Jake dropped to the ground and started for the woods.

"Hey" Nolan yelled. "Why you got to go so far?"

"Ladies present."

"You don't have to piss in the coach, you goddamned idiot."

Jake disappeared into the woods.

A dapper young man stuck his head out of the coach window on the right side.

"Hey," said the young man. "Mind your mouth, mister. There are ladies present."

Nolan leaned over, looked back and down at the young man. "I keep hearing that," Nolan said. "Let me tell you something, Mr. Tin Horn Gambler. The lady sitting next to you there, Lulu McGill, would suck and blow your asshole for four bits."

The gambler's mouth fell open, but before he could reply, a feminine hand jerked him back, and Lulu's attractive red head appeared.

"Goddamn you, Bill Nolan," Lulu said. "I ain't never done the like for no four bits, and you know it. Right now, I'm a lady."

"You don't say."

Lulu was pulled from view, and the gambler's head replaced hers. "She's not the only woman on this stage," the gambler said.

From inside the coach came Lulu's shrill voice. "You saying I ain't a lady now, asshole?"
"And there's a young girl," the gambler continued. "If she weren't asleep, mister, you'd already have me to deal with. Hear?"

Nolan's right hand dipped quickly, and when it reappeared, it held an ancient Walker Colt. He pointed it at the gambler.

"I hear you," Nolan said softly. "But whisper, will you? I'd hate for the little girl to wake up and you to have to try and be a hero. I'd have to blow your stupid head down the road a piece, and we wouldn't want that, would we? Now get back inside there and shut up!"

The gambler's head moved quickly out of sight.

Inside the coach, the gambler picked his derby from the seat beside him and put it on at a less jaunty angle than usual.

Across from him, the attractive brunette, Millie Johnson, stared at him. The little girl, Mignon, lay asleep in her lap. Beside him, Lulu practically fumed.

He chanced a glance at her. Her temper had reddened her face to match her hair.

"Ain't you the top dog," Lulu said.

The gambler looked at the stage floor.

• • •

Nolan put the Colt away and put a cigar in his face. He took out his turnip watch and popped

it open. He struck a match and looked at the time. With a sigh, he put the watch away and looked in the direction Jake had taken.

There was no sign of him.

"Why couldn't he piss in the wind like a real man," Nolan mumbled.

He lit his cigar.

• • •

Jake shook the dew off his lily, began buttoning up.

As he turned to start back to the coach, he saw a rope dangling from a nearby tree. He had not noticed it before, but now with the moon out, he could see it clearly. He went over and touched it, tugged on it.

It was a hangman's noose, and well tied. Someone had dangled, and from the looks of the blood on the noose-dried but not ancient—not too long ago. Maybe yesterday, or even last night.

He slid his hand along the noose and was rewarded with a slight rope burn.

"Owwwwww."

He put the wound to his mouth and sucked.

As he turned from the rope, a large spiderlike creature scuttled from an overhead limb down the rope to where Jake's blood mixed with the hemp. The spider-thing lapped the fresh blood.

The creature changed. Became larger, dropped from the rope, curled on the ground, and changed more. When the transformation was complete, it moved quickly into the woods.
Jake never heard or noticed. He walked until he was almost to the road, and just as he was about to break out of the woods into the clearing, a shape rose up in front of him. A man-shape.

Jake opened his mouth to scream, but he never got the chance.

• • •

Nolan yawned.

Damn. He was getting sleepy. Real sleepy.

He tossed the dead cigar butt away.

He got a fresh cigar and a match. He pulled out his turnip watch, struck the match, and held it close to the watch face to check the time.

A huge, long-nailed hand reached over his, snuffing the flame, crushing the watch and Nolan's fingers in one motion. The sound of watch and fingers breaking was very loud. But not as loud as Nolan's scream, brief as it was.

The passengers came next.

Later, in the deepest part of night, a time when the moon had finally been concealed by the dark clouds and the stars were as dull as blind eyes, the long overdue stage from Silverton rolled into Mud Creek, a dark poncho-swathed driver with pulled-down hat at the lines.

No passengers stepped from the stage. There were no friends or relatives there to meet them. No one was aware, except for the driver, of its arrival. It had been given up for the day a good time back.

The horses snorted and rolled their eyes with fright. The driver set the rusty brake and tied off the lines, alighting to the ground gentle as dust.

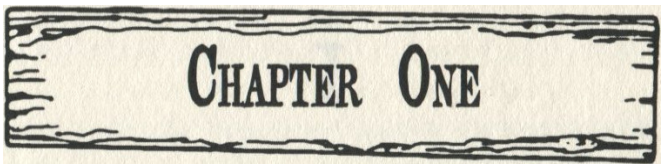
The man walked to the back of the stage and threw up the cargo flap. A long crate stuck out at an awkward angle. He pulled it free, lifting it to his shoulder. Then, as if the crate were no more than a stick of stove wood, he ran down the middle of the street toward the livery, his boots throwing up little, short-lived dust devils behind him.

A hinge creaked, went silent. Now there was only the sound of the stage team snorting and a distant roll of thunder beyond the gray-black, East Texas woodlands.

I

THE REVEREND

BUT HE KNOWETH NOT THAT THE DEAD ARE THERE.
—PROVERBS 9:18



H e had come down out of the high country: a long, lean preacher man covered in dust, riding a buckskin mare with an abscessed back, a wound made by hard riding and saddle friction against dust and hide.

Both man and horse looked ready to drop.

The man was dressed in black from boots to hat, save for a dusty white shirt and the silver glitter of a modified .36 colt Navy revolver in his black sash waist band. His face, like many men of the Word, was hard and stern. But there was something definitely unGodlike about the man. He had the cool, blue eyes of a cold killer—the eyes of a man who had seen the elephant and seen it well.

In his own way, he was a killer.

Men had dropped before the blast of his .36 Navy, their last vision being thick, black smoke curling upwards from the mouth of his shiny revolver.

But in the Reverend's eyes, to his way of thinking, each had been in need of the sword stroke, and it had been God's will. And he, Jebidiah Mercer, had been the Lord's avenging hand. Or at least it seemed that way at the time.

As Jeb often told his tent congregation: "Brethren, I kill sin. I am the good right arm of the Lord, and I kill sin."

And there were the times when he did not feel so righteous. But he had learned to put these thoughts aside, swamp them with his own interpretation of God's word.

It was the break of day, and as Jeb rode—slowly— wearily—toward Mud Creek, morning slipped in on the breath of a cool wind as the birds sang in symphony.

Stopping on a velvet-green rise of grass above the town, Jeb—like some saint from on high—looked down. Down on clapboard buildings lined on either side by thick forest.
A tumbleweed thought, one that often rolled by, came to him: East Texas, a hell of a beautiful sight, a long missed home.

Tilting his broad-brimmed hat forward, the Reverend urged his buckskin on, down into the town of Mud Creek, down to plant the seed of his rambling ministry.

He came into town slow and easy, like an on-the-watch shootist, instead of a holy messenger of the Lord.

When he came to the livery he dismounted, looked up at the sign. It read: JOE BOB RHINE'S LIVERY AND BLACKSMITH SHOP.

"Whatchawant?"

When he looked down from the sign, he was confronted by a shirtless youth wearing a floppy hat and baggy suspenders supporting wool trousers. The boy looked sullen and bored.

"If you don't think it'll tire you out too much, I'd like my horse groomed."

"Six bits. Now."

"I want him groomed, not shampooed, you little crook."

The boy held out his hand. "Six bits "

The Reverend reached into his pocket and slapped the money into the boy's palm.

"What's your name, son? I'd like to know who to avoid from here on out."

"David."

"At least you have a fine biblical name."

"It ain't all that good."

"It isn't all that good."

"Hell, that's what I said. You're the one that's all blazed about it."

"I'm talking about your English. ISN'T is acceptable. AIN'T is not."

'"You talk funny."

"I return the compliment."

"You look like a preacher to me, except you got that gun."

"I *am* a preacher, boy. Name is Jebidiah Mercer. Reverend Mercer to you. Perhaps you'll groom my horse sometime between now and tomorrow?"

The boy was about to speak when a big man wearing overalls, a leather apron, and a disagreeable expression appeared from the interior of the livery. As he approached, the Reverend saw the boy tense.

"Boy talking you to death, mister?" the man said gruffly.

"We were just making a deal on the grooming of my horse. You must be the owner?"

"That's right. Joe Bob Rhine—he charge you two bits like he was supposed to?"

"I'm satisfied."

David swallowed hard and looked at the Reverend for a long moment.

"Boy's like his mama," Joe Bob said. "A dreamer. You have to beat respect into him. Damn sure wasn't born with it" He turned to David. "Boy, take the man's horse. Get to work."

"Yes sir," David said. Then to the Reverend. "What's her name?"

"I just call her horse. Mind you that she has a saddle rub on her back."

David smiled. "Yes sir." He started removing the saddle.

"I'd like to board her for a while also," the Reverend said to Rhine. "Is that convenient?"

"Pay when you pick her up."

David handed the Reverend his saddle bags. "Thought you might need these."

"Thanks"

David nodded, took the horse, and went away.

"Where's the best place to stay?" the Reverend asked Rhine.

"Ain't but one." Rhine pointed down the street. "The Hotel Montclaire."

The Reverend nodded, tossed the saddlebags over his shoulder, and started up the street.

III

The sign over the weathered building read: THE HOTEL MONTCLAIRE. Six sets of windows looked down at the street. Each was shaded by a dark blue curtain. All the

windows were open and the curtains billowed in the light morning breeze.

Already the breeze was turning warm. It was August in East Texas, and save for the wee-morning hours, and an occasional night breeze, it was hot as a bitch dog in heat, sticky as molasses.

The Reverend took a dusty handkerchief out of his inside coat pocket and wiped his face. He removed his hat and wiped his thick, black, oily hair with it. He put the handkerchief away, his hat on, stretched his saddle-worn back, and went inside the hotel.

A man with a belly like that of a foundered horse, snoozed behind the register desk. Sweat balled on his face and streamed down it in dusty rivulets. A fly buzzed and tried to land on the snoozing man's nose, but could get no braking. It tried again—circled and found a perch on the fat man's forehead.

The Reverend bounced his palm on the desk bell.

The man popped out of his slumber with a start, sent the fly buzzing away with a wave of his hand. He licked his sweaty lips with his tongue.

"Jack Montclaire, at your service," he said.

"I would like a room."

"Rooms are our business." He turned the register book around. "If you'll just sign in."
As the Reverend signed. "You caught me sleeping. It's the heat.... Uh, six bits a night, clean sheets every three days.... If you stay three days."

"I'll stay at least three days. Meals extra?"

"Would be if I served them. You'll have to eat over to the cafe." Hoping against it, "Bags?"

The Reverend patted his saddlebags, then counted out six bits into Montclaire's hand.

"Much obliged," Montclaire said. "Room thirteen, top of the stairs to the left. Enjoy your stay."

Montclaire turned the register book around, moved his lips over the Reverend's name.
"Reverend Jebidiah Mercer?"

The Reverend turned around. "Yes?"

"You're a preacher?"

"That is correct."

"Ain't never seen no preacher that carries a gun before."

"Now you have."

"I mean, a man of the Holy Word and peace and all...."

"Who ever said keeping the law of the Lord is peaceable work? The devil brings a sword, and I bring a sword back to him. It is the will of the Lord and I am his servant."

"I suppose."

"No supposing about it."

Montclaire looked into the red-rimmed, killer-blue eyes of the Reverend and trembled. "Yes sir. I wasn't trying to tell you your business."

"You could not."

The Reverend went upstairs to leave Montclaire staring at his back.

"Sanctimonious sonofabitch," Montclaire said under his breath.

IV

Up in room thirteen, the Reverend sat on the sagging bed to test it. It would not be comfortable. He got up and went over to the washbasin, removed his hat, washed his face and then his hands. He was tedious with his hands, as if there were stains on them visible only to him. He dried meticulously, went over to the window to look out.

Pushing a curtain aside, he examined the street and the buildings across the way. He could hear hammering coming from Rhine's blacksmith shop, and below a wagon creaked by with squeaky wheels. Out in the distance, just at the edge of town, he could hear faintly the noises of chickens and cows. Just a pleasant little farming community.

Voices began to buzz in the street as more and more people moved about.

A team of mules in harness was being giddyupped down the street—their owner walking behind them— directing them out of town toward a field.

Seeing the mules sent the Reverend's thoughts back twenty years, back to when he was a ragtail kid, not too unlike David at Rhine's livery. A kid dressed in overalls, walking behind his minister father as he plowed a big team of mules, cutting tiny grooves into a great big world.

The Reverend tossed his saddlebags on the bed. He took off his coat, slapped dust from it, and draped it over a chair. He sat down on the edge of the bed, opened one of the bags, and removed a cloth-wrapped package.

He unwrapped the whisky bottle, bit the cork out, and put it and the cloth on the chair. Next he stretched out on the bed, his head cushioned by a pillow. He began slowly tilting the whisky, and as he did, he saw a spider on the ceiling. It was tracing its way across the room, supported on a snow-white strand that connected with other strands in a corner of the room, twisted and interlocked like the tedious weaving of the mythical fates.

A muscle in his right cheek jumped.

He switched the bottle to his left hand, and his right-hardly aware of the desire of his brain—quick-drew his revolver and calmly shot the spider into oblivion.

V

Montclaire was beating on the door.

Plaster rained down from the ceiling and fell on the Reverend's impassive face.

The Reverend got up, opened the door as he stuck the Navy back in his sash. "You okay, Reverend?" Montclaire said.

The Reverend leaned against the doorjamb. "A spider. The devil's own creatures. I cannot abide them."

"A spider? You shot a spider?"

The Reverend nodded.

Montclaire moved closer to the doorway for a look inside. The sun was lancing through a slit in the curtains, catching the drifting plaster in its rays. It looked like a fine snow. He looked at the hole in the ceiling. There were legs around the hole. The bullet had punched the big spider dead center and the legs had stuck to the ceiling, glued there by spider juice.

Before pulling his head out, Montclaire saw the whisky bottle setting beside the bed.

"You got him, I hope," Montclaire said sarcastically.

"Right between the eyes."

"Now look here. Preacher or not, I can't have people shooting up my hotel. I run a nice

respectable place here...."

"It's an outhouse and you know it. You should pay me to stay here."

Montclaire opened his mouth, but something on the Reverend's face held him.

The Reverend reached into his pocket and took out a fist full of bills. "Here's a dollar for the spider. Five for the hole."

"Well sir, I don't know..."

"That's respectable spider bounty, Montclaire, and it's my head beneath the hole if it rains."

"That's true," Montclaire said. "But I run a respectable hotel here, and I should be compensated for...."

"Take it or leave it, windbag."

Looking indignant about it, but not too indignant, Montclaire held out his hand. The Reverend put the promised bills there.

"I suppose that is fair enough, Reverend. But remember my customers pay for peace and quiet as well as lodging and...."

The Reverend stepped back into the room and took hold of the door.

"Then give us some peace and quiet." He slammed the door in Montclaire's face.

Montclaire took his money and went downstairs, thinking of better things to do with it than repair a hole in the ceiling of room thirteen.

VI

He had killed the spider because it was part of his recurring nightmare. So bad was this night dream, he hated to see the sun fall down behind the sky and die in shadow, the time of sleep to draw near.

The dream was full of warped memories. They flashed through the depths of his mind like ghosts. And the most terrifying part concerned the spider—or spiderlike thing. It was as if it were supposed to represent or warn him of something.

One full year of that dream with the pressure of its darkness growing heavier each time. And it was as if it were pushing him, guiding him toward some destination, some destiny he was to fulfill.

Or perhaps it was nothing more than the shadows of his dying faith, trying to collect themselves once again into a solid lie.

But if there was something to them, guided by heaven or hell, he felt deep in his bones that that something was to be found here. In Mud Creek.

Why he was not certain. Certainly God had long ago given up on him. If this was to be his last showdown, God would not be on hand to aid him.

He tried not to think about it. He took a sip of his whisky.

He looked at the ceiling. "Why has thou forsaken me?"

After a minute of silence a grim smile parted his lips. He lifted the bottle upwards as if in toast.

"That's what I thought you'd say."

He drank a long drought of his liquid hell.

VII

Slow and easy—the contents of the bottle disappearing with the slow light of the sun—the Reverend drank, headed toward that dark riverbank where he would board the black dream boat that sailed into view each time he stupored himself to sleep.

The bottle was empty.

Groggy, the Reverend sat up in bed and reached for his saddlebags and his next coin of passage. He took out another bottle, removed the cloth, spat away the cork, and resumed his position. After three sips his hand eased to the side of the bed, and the bottle slipped from it, landed upright on the floor—a few drops sloshing from the lip.

The curtains billowed in the open window like blue bloated tongues.

The wind was cool-damp with rain. Thunder rumbled gently.

And the Reverend descended into nightmare.

There was a boat and the Reverend got on it. The boatman was dressed in black, hooded. A glimpse of his face showed nothing more than a skull with hollow eye sockets. The boatman took six bits from the Reverend for passage, poled away from shore.

The river itself was darker than the shit from Satan's bowels. From time to time, white

faces with dead eyes would bob to the surface like fishing corks, then drift back down into the blackness leaving not a ripple.

Up shit river without a paddle.

The boatman poled on down this peculiar river Styx with East Texas shores, and along these shores, the Reverend saw the events of his life as if they were part of a play performed for river travelers.

But none of the events he saw were the good ones, just the dung of his life, save one—and it was a blessing as well as a curse.

There on the shore, in plain sight—unlike the way it had happened in a bed in the dark of his sister's room— were he and his sister, holding each other in sweaty embrace, copulating like farm animals. In his memory, it had always been a sweet night like a velvet embrace, there had been love as well as passion. But this was lust, pure and simple. It was not pleasant to look at.

He tried to look away from the next scene of the play, but his eyes remained latched. And before the boat sailed on, he watched his father materialize and discover them, and he heard his father curse them and damn them both. Then his younger self was bolting for his pants and leaping (it had been a window in real life) outwards and away—to run along the banks of the river, until his form grew dark and fell apart like fragments of smoked glass.

And the boat sailed on.

The last year of the Civil War (a kid then) fighting for the South and losing, knowing too much about death at the age of eighteen.

The men he had slain (dressed in blood-spattered Yankee uniforms) lined up along the bank to wave sadly at him. If it had not been so painful, it would have been comical.

Other scenes: round after round of ammunition exiting through the barrel of his Navy, first as a cap and ball revolver, then later as a converted cartridge revolver, round after round until he could hit nickels tossed into the air and split playing cards along the edge by shooting over his shoulder while holding a mirror in his other hand.

The men he had slain outside of war—those who had pushed him, and those who he had eliminated for their sins against God—lined up along the bank now to smile (sometimes bloody smiles) and wave bye-bye.

(Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.)

He could not look away. He watched the dead men recede into darkness.

More of his life came up in acts and scenes along the river. All of it was shit.

He turned to look at the opposite shore, and the play there was no better. It was the same as the opposite bank.

Sail away.

And now—ahead of him—surfacing from the water, as always, was the worst part of his dream.

Spidery legs broke the surface of the water—too many legs for a true spider, there were ten—wriggling. And then the bulbous body surfaced with them: a giant spiderlike thing with huge red eyes that housed some dark and horrid intelligence.

The spider was as wide as the river. Its legs brushed the banks on either side.

The boatman did not veer. He poled stiffly on.

The Reverend reached for his gun. And it was not there. He was butt-ass naked, shrivel-dicked and scared.

He wanted to open his mouth and yell, but he could not. It was as if fear had sewn his lips shut.

The spider made him tremble, and he could not understand it. Size or not. Red, evil eyes or not. He had faced men, sometimes three at once, and he had sent them all to hell on their shadows, and not once, not even for a fraction of a second, had he known true fear. Until now, in these dreams. (God, let them be dreams.)

The Reverend found that he could not look away from the spider-thing's eyes. It was as if they were swollen with all his sins and weaknesses.

The boat sailed on.

The spider-thing opened its black hair-lined maw, and the boat sailed into its mouth, and as the bow of the boat and the boatman disappeared into the black stench of the creature, the Reverend lost sight of the red eyes, and then all he saw was blackness, and that blackness closed out the light behind him and he was one with hell—

He awoke sweating.

He felt cold and trembly as he sat up in bed.

Lightning was flashing consistently. It was bright enough to be seen through the thick

curtains, and when the wind billowed them out, it could be seen even more clearly. The curtains flapped at him like wraiths with their tails nailed to the wall. Rain blew in the window, onto the bed and the toes of his boots. The boots glistened in the lightning flashes like wet snake hide.

Rolling out of bed, he picked up the whisky bottle and took a long drink. It did him no good. It did not feel warm against the back of his throat, and it left no glow in his belly. It might as well have been sun-warmed water.

He went to the window, started to close it, but changed his mind.

He stuck his face out of it into the rain and the wind, as if inviting lightning to reach down from the sky and shatter his head like a pumpkin.

The lightning did not take the bait.

The rain washed his hair into his face, joined the sweat and tears there, dribbled down his shirt front and the back of his collar where the hair flipped.

"Can I not be forgiven?" he asked softly. "I loved her. Deep-down and honest solid, same as any man loves any woman. We were not cow and bull copulating in the meadows. It was love, sister or not. Do you hear me, you old bastard, it was love?"

Suddenly he laughed at himself. He was sounding Shakespearean, or like some of that bad poetry he had read by Captain Jack Crawford.

But the humor did not hold.

He lifted his face to the heavens again, let the rain strike his eyes until they hurt. "For the love of Jesus, oh Lord, forgive me my weakness of the flesh. Test me. Try me. I would do anything for your forgiveness."

As before, there was no answer.

He went back to the bed and joined the bottle. The rain was blowing in violently now, coating the ends of the sheets. He didn't care.

As he sipped, he thought of his life and how he had lived it. It seemed nothing more than a dark, dirty lie.

There was no God. His sermons were words to fill the air and float about like puffs of ragweed.

He slid down the bed and reached his Bible from his coat pocket. It was a well-thumbed edition. Long ago he had lost his passion for it. Sermons were his bread and butter,

nothing more. He realized it had been that way for some time.

Stretching out on the bed again, he lay with his back against the headboard—the bottle in one hand, the Bible in the other. He sipped from his bottle.

"Lies," he yelled abruptly, and with all his strength, he tossed the Bible toward the window with, "Take this, you heavenly bastard!"

His aim was off. It did not go through the open part of the window as he had planned. It hit high up, and even before the glass broke, he knew he would be buying a new one for fat Montclaire.

The glass shattered, and the Bible flapped out into the night like a multiwinged bird. Then, even as he watched, it reached a point of darkness beyond his vision, and as he was bringing the whisky bottle to his lips, it came flapping back through like a homing pigeon. It struck the bottle, and shattered it, dealt him a stunning blow to the face. Glass from the bottle cut his chin and blood dribbled down.

He sat completely upright.

In his lap lay the Bible. Open.

A droplet of blood dripped from his chin and landed in the left-hand margin of Revelations 22:12.

He read it.

AND BEHOLD, I COME QUICKLY; AND MY REWARD IS WITH ME, TO GIVE TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING AS HIS WORK SHALL BE.

Another drop hit next to verse 14.

BLESSED ARE THEY WHO DO HIS COMMANDMENTS, THAT THEY MAY HAVE RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE, AND MAY ENTER IN THROUGH THE GATES OF THE CITY.

Slowly, the Reverend closed the book.

There was a lump like a hairball in his throat. He and the bed reeked of rain and whisky, and there was also the faint aroma of his blood.

He worked the lump from his throat and fell on his knees beside the bed, hands clasped.

"Thy will be done, oh Lord. Thy will be done."

Still on his knees, he prayed for an hour, and it was the first time he had done so in a long time and deeply meant it.

Later, he cleaned himself at the basin, and shook the sheets free of glass, undressed, bedded proper.

Before he drifted off, he wondered if he would be worthy of whatever test the Lord had prepared for him here in Mud Creek.

It did not matter. Whatever it was, he would try with all his might.

He slept.

And he did not dream.

VIII

With the sun kicked out and a gold doubloon moon rose in its place—a moon that shone down with a bright, almost unnatural hue on Mud Creek and the surrounding countryside—the nightwalkers began to walk.

The livery gave up its tenant—the padlock dripping off into the dirt like melted butter, only to fall to the ground whole again, and finally to return locked and solid to its place.
Just outside of town at the Furgesons, their little month old girl died. Next morning, amidst much wailing, it would be attributed to natural causes.

A few yard pets disappeared, though one small dog was found the next morning with its belly savaged. The way it was torn up wolves were suspicioned.

Certainly there had been a wolf howling last night.

From the sound of it, a large one.

• • •

And it was almost time.

• • •

IX

Next morning the Reverend cleaned his suit, and put on a fresh shirt from his saddlebag, spit-polished his boots.

He did not start his morning with a swig of whisky this time. He truly craved bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee.

He went over to Molly McGuire's for breakfast.

The cafe was bustling, noisy.

Waitresses moved back and forth from kitchen to table like ants from harvest to home. They carried plates of flapjacks, bacon and eggs, pots of steaming coffee.

From his vantage point in the doorway, the Reverend saw one old codger grab a handful of a waitress' ass. She slapped it away in a professional manner, set the fellow's plate down without losing her smile.

At a table against the wall, he spotted the sheriff's badge. It was pinned on a broad-shouldered man of medium height and a sadly handsome appearance. That was the man he needed to see.

The sheriff was sitting at the table with a considerably older man who looked as weathered as an Indian's moccasins.

There was an empty table next to them, and as they were talking briskly back and forth, waving their hands about, he decided to take up that position until a good opportunity presented itself.

When he was seated, he strained an ear for their conversation. He was not even aware of the habit. He had learned it long ago. When traveling from town to town, preparing a sermon, he liked to eavesdrop on what was said. Sometimes it gave him the ability to work into his sermon a message that an individual would recognize. If he heard some man gloating over how he was dipping his wick into another man's wife, he would speak his sermon in such a way that the man might think God had given the preacher inside information.

It came in handy when the offering plate was passed. With their guilt boiled to the surface, the repenters (at least for that moment) would put in heavily, trying to buy off God.

As of last night, the Reverend had decided he would return to the original inspiration of his sermons. Desire to spread the gospel. He was God's boy again, and preaching purely for coinage to afford whisky was no longer his design.

Yet old habits—like eavesdropping—die hard.

"Well," said the older man to the sheriff, "I guess that means you ain't come up with

nothing?"

"Not a thing. I rode out the stage trail this morning. Didn't see hide or hair of the passengers.... Could have been Indians, I guess. Or robbers."

'"You're grabbing at farts," the older man said. "Matt, you know well as I do there ain't been no Indian trouble around here in years. 'Cept maybe that medicine show fellow and his woman, and we took care of that problem."

"You hung him. Not me. I wasn't there."

"Judas didn't nail up Jesus either," the older man said with a mean smile. "Cut the holy-on-me shit, boy. You gave him to us. It's the same thing. And it ain't nothing to feel guilty for. He was just an Indian and that gal was half nigger at the least."

"He was an innocent man."

"Like the feller said, 'only good Injun is a dead'n'. And I'll second that on niggers, greasers, and half-bloods."

The Reverend noticed that Matt's face drew up in disgust, but he said nothing.

"All right," the older man continued. "It wasn't Indians, and it damn sure wasn't no robbers. Didn't you say the bags wasn't bothered with?"

Matt nodded. "Shitty robbers, I'd say. Polite like too. After they got the folks off the stage and hid them, they was nice enough to bring the stage on in, set the brake, and leave it in the middle of the goddamned street. Hell, I don't know why the lazy sonsabitches didn't just go on and feed the horses."

The two sat silent for a moment, and the Reverend took this as his cue. He stood up and stepped over to their table.

"Excuse me" said the Reverend to the sheriff, "I'd like a word with you."

"Speak ahead. This here is Caleb Long. Sometimes he's a deputy of mine."

The Reverend nodded at Caleb, who examined him with a look of wry humor.

Turning back to the sheriff, the Reverend said, "Sheriff, I'm a man of God. I travel from town to town teaching and spreading the Word...."

"And filling your offering plates," Caleb said.

The Reverend looked at Caleb. Considering that for some time that was exactly what he

had been doing, he could not find it in himself to anger. He nodded.

"Yes, I admit that. I'm a man of God, but like you, I must eat. But I do bring something with me besides a sermon. I bring the Word of our Lord and eternal salvation."

"You fixin' to pass the plate now, Reverend? If so, don't push it my way. I don't buy nothing I can't see."

"I suppose I get a might carried away when the subject of the Lord is brought up," the Reverend said.

"You brought it up," Caleb said.

"So I did."

"Pardon me," Matt said, "but Reverend, do you think we could cut through the horseshit here and get down to cases? What can I do for you?"

"I would like to rent a tent, and with your permission, hold a night of gospel singing, prayer, and bringing lost souls to Jesus." Glancing at Caleb. "And passing the offering plate."

"It's all right by me," Matt said, "but we have a preacher.

He might not take too kindly to an outside Bible yacker. And as far as I know, he's the only one around these parts with a tent like you want. He used to travel-preach too."

"That a fact," the Reverend said.

"You go down the street," Matt pointed in a southerly direction, "till you come to a church, and Reverend Calhoun lives in part of it. You tell him it's okay by me if it's okay by him."
"Thanks," said the Reverend.

Caleb stood, tossed money on the table for his breakfast. He lifted one leg and cut loose with a loud fart.

For a moment the cafe went quiet. Customers stared at him.

Loud enough for everyone to hear, Caleb said, "Don't let it slow you none, folks. My mama didn't teach me no manners." He turned to Matt, "See you," then to the Reverend, "See you in church, preacher boy," and he went out.

"Unusual sense of humor your friend has," the Reverend said.

"He's a little unrefined."

"I suppose that's the word for it."

"He was trying to embarrass you."

"He did the job nicely"

"He hates preachers. One raped his mama when he was a boy."

"And what about you? Do you hate preachers?"

"Are you an honest-to-God preacher?"

"I am."

"Then do me a favor, say a little prayer for me. I think I need one."

Matt stood up, tossed money on the table, and went out.

When he was gone, the Reverend said softly, "I will."

X

After breakfast, the Reverend paid up and started out the door. As he opened it, a beautiful dark-haired woman came in. The Reverend was stunned. She looked just the way he figured his sister would look now. He stood in front of her for a moment too long before stepping aside to let her pass.

As she did, she smiled and he tipped his hat.

Behind the woman was an elderly man with cigar-ash colored hair, glasses, and a glance that could drop a buffalo at fifty paces.

The elderly man took the woman's arm, walked her to a table. When they were seated, he turned to look back at the Reverend who was still dumbly holding the door.

The Reverend nodded, and as the woman smiled at him a second time, he hastened out.

As he walked toward the church, he had a sudden sinking in his stomach. He knew the woman was not his sister. They were not twins in appearance, but she certainly reminded him of her, and the old lust of her memory rose in his loins.

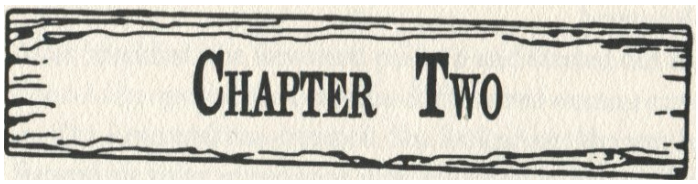
Was the woman one of God's little tests?

If so, she was a good one. He was as shook as an Indian rattle.

As he passed the livery, he saw David standing in the doorway grooming a horse. David waved. The Reverend waved back and continued down the street, the image of the woman still burning in his brain.

• • •

Unheard by David, when the Reverend walked by the livery — in the loft, hidden beneath loose hay — a crate had shifted ever so slightly in the Reverend's direction, as if it were a compass needle trying to point true north: the Reverend.



When the Reverend came to the end of the street, smack dab in the middle of it was a large white church with a large white cross sticking up into the sky. Out beside the church was a slope-off house, and beside that was a fenced-in garden, and in the garden, working furiously at weeds with a hoe, was Reverend Calhoun.

Jeb knew he was a Reverend at a glance. Like his father, Calhoun wore a constant mask of stern Baptist conviction. He worked at the weeds in his desperate little garden like the Lord himself chopping down sinners.

Calhoun lifted his head, leaned on his hoe, and wiped his sleeve at his sweaty forehead. As he did, he laid eyes on the Reverend. He frowned slightly from habit, went to lean on the fence surrounding his garden.

The Reverend leaned on it as well.

"Good day, sir, I'm Reverend Jebidiah Mercer. I've come to ask you a favor."

"A favor?"

"One that any good Christian could not refuse."

"We'll see about that," Calhoun said.

"The sheriff gave me permission, if it's all right with you, to hold a night of gospel here in Mud Creek. He wanted to be sure you agreed, as he didn't want there to be conflict, though I hardly see how there could be conflict between us—two men of God."

"That so?" Calhoun said.

The Reverend smiled. He seldom did that of his own free will, only out of habit when he was after something he wanted. He felt as if his silver-tongued approach was not doing much good against this old preacher dog.

"He also said that you had a tent, and I would need a tent. I'd like to rent it for the preaching."

"I haven't given you permission for any preaching yet. *You* did say the sheriff said he wanted you to have my permission, did you not?"

"I did at that. I'm willing to pay nicely for the rental of that tent, by the way."

"How nicely?"

"You name it."

"Six bits."

"A popular price," said the Reverend. He reached in his pocket for the money.

"I choose the night you preach."

"I wouldn't want it to conflict with your services. You choose the night."

"Very well, Saturday."

The Reverend stopped the hand with the money.

"Saturday? Now Reverend Calhoun, I want to abide by your wishes, but that is the worst night of the week. The saloon will be filled."

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Mercer."

"Reverend Mercer."

"Take it or leave it."

Frowning. "I'll take it." The Reverend slapped the money into Calhoun's outstretched palm.

Calhoun counted it out, slipped it into his pants pocket.

"You sure you're a preacher?" he asked.

"Don't I look like one?"

"You don't see that many with a gun. Carrying a pistol is hardly part of the Lord's work, Mr. Mercer."

"Reverend Mercer."

"It seems mighty peculiar that you carry a revolver like a common gunslinger, you supposedly being a man of peace,"

"Who said the Lord's work is peaceful? Sometimes it's necessary to bring a sword to deal

with the infidels... or a gun...." Smiling. "Besides, you haven't heard any of my sermons. I have to have something to persuade attendance with."

If Calhoun caught the joke, he didn't show it. "Would you like to get the tent, Mr. Mercer. I have work to do."

"Right. The tent."

II

The interior of the church was sparse. Rows of pews, a pulpit on a raised platform, and behind it on the wall: a huge, crude, wooden cross bearing a cruder Jesus of the German grotesque school.

Dead center of the middle row of pews was a door. Calhoun led the Reverend there and opened it. He reached inside, took hold of a kerosene lamp, and lit it. He turned up the wick and they went down a row of creaking stairs.

The Reverend could see a high window to the rear covered with a thick curtain. Light crept through it. Though the room was deep, the roof of it was still on a level with the rest of the church. It appeared that at one time there had been a second floor, but it had been torn away to make room for all the things stored there, stacked atop one another like dog turds.

There were boxes, barrels, bundles, and crates. Against the wall—covered in dust—was a rack of Winchesters, double-barreled shotguns, and a couple of ancient Sharps rifles. Near them, were several crates marked AMMUNITION and ARMS.

"For a man who dislikes guns," the Reverend said, "you certainly have a few on hand."

"Don't be snide with me, boy.... When they first built this church it was used as storage, and as a sort of fortress against outlaws and Indians.... Well, we never really had much of either. The guns are still here, and there are bars on most of the windows. Come next year, I'm taking the bars out, and I'm going to see if I can't get the town council to move all this out of here. I could put the space to better use."

"What's in all these other crates?"

"Tools. Some clothes. Odds and ends. Pistols and ammunition."

The Reverend walked over to the gun rack and looked. Though some of the guns had spots of rust on them, they looked to be in pretty good shape. The dried-brick walls must have been pretty air tight.

"Here's the tent, Mr. Mercer."

"Reverend Mercer," Jeb said turning.

III

He had a relapse.

After he and Calhoun dragged the massive tent upstairs, and the Reverend hired a wagon to haul it over to The Hotel Montclaire, then hired a fistful of boys to help him carry it up to his room, he saw the woman again.

He had come out of the hotel onto the sidewalk with the boys, and he was paying them each—six bits of course—when he saw the dark-haired woman who looked like his sister crossing the street with the elderly man.

She was holding the man's arm firmly, and she turned and looked in the Reverend's direction.

It was a good distance between them, but it was as if the Reverend could feel the aftereffect tingling of a close-strike lightning bolt. It made his groin ache and-his soul feel bad.

He went upstairs, locked himself in his room, and masturbated to the woman's image.

Then he got back on the whisky.

There was yet another bottle in his saddlebags, and he took it out and resumed his drinking position on the bed. He felt totally unworthy of the second chance God had given him. He had messed it up. Here he was, once again, with the devil juice which he could not handle, and here he was lusting after his sister or a woman who brought her to mind, throbbing his manhood with his hand like a schoolboy. He had the willpower of a rabid dog.

He knew the night would come and with it would come the dreams—the boat down the river of hell with the spider-thing at the end.

There was a knock on the door.

The Reverend was amazed to find that he had thrown the whisky bottle to his left hand and drawn his Navy from his pants as easily as he had drawn his lily out earlier and stroked it until it gave dew.

He rolled over to sit on the edge of the bed.

He put the whisky bottle on the floor, stood, and put the revolver and himself in his pants

again.

There was another knock.

"Hold your horses," the Reverend said.

He opened the door.

Looking up at him was David from the livery.

IV

"Don't tell me," the Reverend said. "The price of my horse has gone up another six bits, and I have to supply the currycomb."

David ignored him, sniffed.

"Smells like a drunk's nest in here—and maybe like you been greasing your axle."

"A boy your age should know," the Reverend said, somewhat embarrassed that he had been found out.

"Yeah, but I got an excuse. I'm too young for women."

"What can I do for you?"

"I thought you preachers didn't approve of strong drink."

"I don't, but I drink it anyway. Medicinal purposes.... Something I can do for you, or you just come by to give me a temperance lecture?"

"You don't seem quite as pert and godly as you did yesterday, if you don't mind me saying so, Reverend." David smiled broadly.

"Would you like me to wipe that smile off your face?"

David quit smiling. "No thanks."

"Then for the sake of heaven, get on with it. What do you want, before I die of boredom?"

"That gun you carry. You any good with it?"

"I generally hit what I aim at, even if I throw the gun at it."

"Yeah, you look like a man that could do that—I want a shooting lesson."

The Reverend took hold of the door as if to shut it. "I don't give lessons, boy. Get your pa."

"He don't teach me nothing but hard work."

"Builds character, good day."

"I'd pay you."

"You'd pay me to teach you how to shoot?"

David nodded.

"Why do you want to learn so bad?"

"Something a man ought to know, I reckon. Papa says I ain't much at doing things a man ought to do. Says I'm short of hard work and the ways of a man."

"You're just short, that's all. You're a boy."

"Says I'm like my mama—a dreamer."

"My father said the same thing of me."

"Did he?"

"Among other things."

"Can I quit standing out here in the hallway?"

"I guess."

David came in, and the Reverend closed the door, sat back on the bed. David stood.

The Reverend picked up his whisky and took a swig.

"I wouldn't have figured you for a drunk," David said.

"Appearances are deceiving," the Reverend said, and drank again.

'"You look—I don't know—special. Like you really are the right hand of the Lord—you know?"

"No."

There was an awkward silence.

"Look, I'll give you a shooting lesson," the Reverend said. "Tomorrow morning. But I don't want your money. I want a favor."

"Name it. Anything."

"Slow down. Don't agree to anything until it's been explained to you. You might be sending your head to Old Glory on a one-way ticket without meaning to. Hear me out."

The Reverend nodded at the tent on the floor.

"Got a sermon to do Saturday night. I'll need some boys to put that tent up for me. I hired me some to bring it upstairs, but I didn't like their work. I did most of it, and I sure don't want a bunch of loafers when it's time to put it up."

"I can do that. I know some good workers, I..."

Holding up a hand. "Wait a minute. I also need some boys to pass out a few bills I'm going to have the paper office print up. They'll announce the sermon's time and place. Can I depend on you to get those passed around and tacked up around town?"

"You can."

"Good. Now run along. I've got a headache."

David nodded. "Reverend—you've probably had enough whisky, don't you think?"

"I'll be the judge of that. Now get out before I bounce you out."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, one other thing. While I'm giving you this shooting lesson, while we're out in the country, I'd like to get you to help me to cut a few poles for the tent." The Reverend stood. "And here, take some money and rent us a wagon from your pa. Tell him I'm hiring you for some work. He'll like that. Make him feel good to know you're out there sweating."

"Let's see," David said. "Cut some poles, put up a tent, pass some bills out, and rent a wagon—want me to just go on and preach your sermon for you, Reverend?"

"Very funny. A regular Eddie Foy. Now go."

David went.

The Reverend closed the door, sat down on the bed again, and picked up the whisky bottle. It was halfway to his lips when he thought of something David had said. "You look—I don't know—special. Like you really are the right hand of the Lord..."

"Damn me," the Reverend said, and stood up.

Carrying the bottle with him, he walked over to the window and looked out. He saw David crossing the street, a few pedestrians.

He turned and looked in the mirror. He did not like what he saw. He turned back to the window and poured the whisky out of it, then using his gun butt, he broke the bottle and tossed it in the trash box.

Returning to the mirror he examined himself again. He didn't like what he saw any better, but he had made a decision. No more whisky to bind him like chains. He would do God's bidding. He would be what David had called him: "the right hand of the Lord."

Suddenly, the Reverend slammed a fist into the mirror and shattered it, cutting his hand in the process. He had said and done all this before.

He held the injured hand over the washbasin and looked at his shattered reflection. Somehow, that looked better to him. 'Tm trying, Lord, I'm trying."

He washed his hands clean in his slow, ritualistic manner, as if ridding himself of some foul slime he could feel and smell but could not see.

And then it came to him. If the dark-haired woman was a test, David had been an aid from the Lord. A dose of strength. He was not lost after all.

He looked in the mirror again, and this time he laughed, and thought: "Staying in this damned hotel is going to be expensive."

V

In a crate, in the loft of Rhine's livery—another lay in slumber—away from the light, wrapped in euphoria, an inner-clock beating away the minutes of daylight, ticking them off until nightfall.

That was when it would all begin.

Long about sundown, Joe Bob Rhine called it a day.

He sent David home ahead of him. He wanted to walk home by himself and not have to hear any foolish kid chatter. It had been a rough day.

As Rhine closed the doors of the livery, slipped the big, gray padlock into place, the last of the sun played out and gave it up to the dark. And when the lock clicked into place, Joe Bob thought he heard something move in symphony to the sound—something like a creaking noise.

Horses, most likely.

Rhine trudged toward home, a house at the end of the street just behind the barber shop. He was hungry as a fresh-woke bear. He hoped that woman had something on the table. He was too tired to slap her around tonight.

Shortly after Rhine made his way into his house full of the smell of beans and cornbread, the livery doors trembled ever so slightly. The padlock fell off the door without unlocking, thumped in the dust. The doors blew open with a gust of ice-cold wind, and the wind tumbled down the street.

The livery doors closed. The padlock jumped into place, and all was as it had been.

Almost.

II

The dog was a night hunter. Belonged to no one. Padded its way through the darkness, down the streets of the town, ever watching, ever alert.

Sometimes people shot at it, because the dog was known to be vicious, its one purpose in life was to scavenge, to dig in garbage, and attack small livestock.

One year it had wiped out the entire population of old man Mather's rabbit hutches and killed his prize boar hog—no easy feat.

It had bitten a young boy who had tried to hit it with a stick, and chased every dog in town away with their tails between their legs. For a year now, it had dodged bullets, rocks, and oaths. It was smart. It was a survivor.

During the day, the dog laid low. Hit town about sundown, when most people were about their suppers, and the saloons hadn't had time to crank up good. It was a good time to scavenge. And tonight, the dog was working its favorite place. The alley behind Molly McGuire's Cafe. There was generally plenty of tasty garbage there, except on Fridays when Uncle Bains brought his wagon around and hauled it all off.

But tonight was a good night. He could smell chili and hard biscuits and soggy flapjacks. The dog climbed up on a wooden trash box and pushed it over. It made a loud thud and its contents puked into the alley. The dog did not rush to eat, though its mouth was watering. It watched the back of the cafe, turned to look down both ends of the alley. No one was coming.

The dog ducked its head into the box, used its teeth and forepaws to move paper and tins aside so it could get to the good stuff. First off, the dog found a flapjack with syrup and a spot of chili on it, and wolfed that down. Soon the dog was lost in his appreciation of what had been left for him, and by the time the dog knew something was amiss—it was too late.

Wasn't just the smell that alerted the him. Something else, a sixth sense. The dog pulled its head out of the box for a look.

He raised his hackles and his loose mouth folded back to reveal long, yellow, foam-flecked fangs. A low growl came from his throat.

A shape moved in the shadows.

The dog didn't like this at all. He had not felt what he was feeling now since he was a pup.

Fear.

But fear was a thing to overcome. The dog was a survivor. He was big and he was strong. Teeth snapping, the dog leaped for the shape.

The dog yelped once before dying.

III

Nate Foster was Mud Creek's town drunk, and he was the neatest drunk in creation. He wore a black Prince Albert coat (hundred degree weather or not), striped, stovepipe trousers, and a crisp derby hat to perfection.

He was already six bottles of beer and two bottles of whisky ahead of every other drunk in town. That was because he had a two-hour start on most of them, and he could easily afford it. Unlike the other drunks, Nate Foster—king of Mud Creek's drunks—was also the town banker, and he made a rather good salary at it.

Tonight, Nate was particularly rolled up and pulled tight, feeling no pain. He had gotten started earlier than usual, and the whisky had been potent.

Now that he was well lubricated, he was about his nightly stroll (the school mistress, Bessie Jackson, called it his nightly wobble) toward Molly McGuire's where he would order a steak and hash browns, hold the gravy but plenty of biscuits. Then he'd be ready to tie on a real drunk.

He was nearly to the cafe when he felt the urge to urinate.

Piss first. Eat later.

Moving at a slightly faster wobble, Nate slid down a narrow alley that led to the larger one behind Molly's. No sooner had he made the alley, unbuttoning his pants as he went, than he tripped over something and went down hard, pissing all over himself.

"Goddamn," he muttered, and pushed up on his elbows. A gorge of beer and whisky almost forced its way up.

Nate rolled over on his right side to see what he had tripped over. There was a dark shape at his feet.

He reached into his pocket, produced a match, and with great deliberation, and after many tries, struck it on his thumbnail.

He bent to place the match closer to the heap. It was a dog. That big dog that had troubled the town so much. And God almighty, its throat was ripped out.

Nate didn't feel so drunk anymore. He stood quickly, and as he did, he had the terrible sensation that someone, or something, was watching him.

He licked his lips and turned, slowly.

Nothing.

Just the alley wearing its shadows and a thin light like a straight razor's edge sliding out from beneath the back door of Molly McGuire's.

But the sensation did not go away.

Nate wasn't so curious he wanted to stay in the alley and find out what it was. He turned to head out the way he had entered.

And ran right smack dab into a big man's chest. Nate looked up. The face of the man was shielded by a great, flat-brimmed, black hat. It looked like... but it couldn't be....

The man bent closer, and now Nate could see the Indian's face, not clearly, but enough to know who it was.

"You," Nate said.

"Howdy," said the big man.

Nate tried to scream, but instead of a scream, he got a spout of beer and whisky puke that splattered on the chest of the big Indian.

"Not nice," the Indian said. "Not nice at all."

The Indian's hands shot out and clutched Nate's Prince Albert. He pulled Nate to him, and bent his face down close to Nate's and smiled.

IV

Ten miles outside of Mud Creek, in the forest at the edge of the stage-line trail, a long, slender white hand pushed up through the soft forest soil.

Nearby, other hands pushed up through the dirt.

After a moment, Millie Johnson had the soil worked away from her face—what was left of it. She had both hands free and was scraping the thin layer of dirt from her body.

Bill Nolan had already managed.

He sat bolt upright like a jackknife springing open. A wad of dirt slipped out of his empty eye socket. Nolan reached up absently and pulled his eye patch back into place over the hole.

Next to him the dirt quivered like a ground hog working, and up popped the gambler.

Nolan, with his broken right hand, slapped out at the gambler, striking him in the face.

The gambler, whose neck hung at an awkward angle because there was a plug out of it big as a fist, growled.

Nearby, Lulu came out of the ground. Her dress was ripped from bodice to groin. One of her breasts was missing. It looked to have been ripped, or gnawed off. She didn't mind. She stood up.

Jake popped up, dirt raining off of him. And clinging to his chest was the little girl, Mignon. She slipped off and fell to the ground like a bloated tick. She lay there on her stomach for a moment. The back of her dress was ripped open and so was her back. Her spine was visible.
All of them stumbled out to the edge of the trail and began to walk.

Toward Mud Creek.

V

Sheriff Matt Cage sat at his desk drinking coffee.

The door opened and Caleb came in.

"Sit down, you old fart face," Matt said.

"Don't mind if I do.... If you got something besides that cat piss to drink."

Matt smiled, opened a desk drawer, and produced two shot glasses with one hand, and with the other he pulled out a bottle of redeye.

Caleb sat down on the opposite side of the desk. "Now you're talking," he said.

Matt started to pour the whisky. He filled one shot glass, and as the first splash went into the second, he hesitated. There was a fly in the bottom.

"I see it, and don't let it stop you," Caleb said.

Caleb reached out, put his hand over Mart's, and poured the shot glass full. He took the glass and sipped. Matt frowned.

"When I lived with the Indians," Caleb said, "may they all die off terribly and may God's people take their places— when a fly lit in the stew that was just extry meat. You just stirred that rascal in. Ain't lost the habit yet. What makes me healthy."

"God almighty, Caleb. Why do I stay around you?" "I reckon it's my natural charm." Caleb took a big gulp of the whisky, wiping it and the fly out.

"Do her again " Caleb said. Matt poured.

When the glass was full, Caleb raised it in toast. "Here's to women with legs just like I like 'em. Feet on one end, pussy on the other" They drank.

"You know," Caleb said, wiping his mouth with a filthy sleeve, "tonight reminds me of the night we hung that Injun. It's great hanging weather out there. Crisp and cool." "Don't start it, Caleb."

Caleb reached into his shirt and pulled out a pair of female ears on a strand of leather around his neck. "Put it away," Matt said. "Getting squeamish in your old age?" "Sick of seeing it, that's all." Matt stood. "I'm going to make my rounds." Matt took his hat from a wall peg.

"You do that," Caleb said. "Me, I'm going to sit right here and keep this bottle company." "Good place for you. You might even catch a fresh fly or two. And Caleb, do me a favor. Don't drink out of the bottle."

Matt went out.

Caleb picked up the bottle and took a long, deep swig.

VI

Standing in front of his office, Matt looked down the street. Caleb was right. For some odd reason this night did remind him of the night the Indian was hung. He should have killed Caleb that night. He couldn't understand what it was about the man that had him buffaloed. Why he even treated him like a friend. He was scum. Ate flies, had no manners—and what he had done to the Indian's woman.... He was glad he hadn't been there to see it. In fact, he had tried to stop it.

Matt squinted his eyes and looked down the street. That night came back to him clearly. He was standing right there where he was standing now when they came for the Indian and his woman.

Caleb was in front of the pack, holding a bowie knife. "Let us by, Matt," he said. "This ain't none of your affair. We want that Indian and his nigger, and we aim to have them." "I can't do that" he had said.

And that was when David Webb stepped forward. He looked a total wreck. He had been crying. "He killed my little girl," Webb screamed. "He's a murderer. You're supposed to be sheriff. Mud Creek's sheriff. If you know what justice is, let us have him."

And Matt had stood firm for a while, his hand on the butt of his revolver.

But then he had looked at Caleb and Caleb had said, "'You're protecting a murdering Indian and a nigger. Where's your guts, Matt? Step aside!" And he had.

They had entered the jail, taken the keys from the wall, and pulled the Indian and his mulatto wife from the cell.

And when the crowd came out of the jail, they were practically carrying the Indian and the woman, and the Indian, held tight as he was, turned his head toward Matt and said almost casually, "You'll not be forgotten."

The crowd pushed into the street, tossed the man and woman into a wagon, bound them hand and foot. The driver clucked to the horses, and the wagon was off, the crowd running behind it.

Except for Caleb. He walked over to Matt and tossed the keys at the lawman's feet. "You did the right thing, boy."

Then Caleb was off at a trot behind them.

• • •

The night of the hanging faded before him, and Matt stepped off the boardwalk and began his rounds.

VI

Matt liked the night rounds. It was his favorite part of the job. It made him feel as if he owned the town. He nodded at people he passed, though as usual, there were few out. Most were home or at Molly McGuire's or The Dead Dog Saloon.

He came to the saloon and looked in over the bat wings. It was a small crowd. They all looked hot and tired.

Zack, the bartender, looked bored and crabby at the same time. There was a drunk asleep under the table at the back, and the Dead Dog's only saloon girl was leaning against another drunk at the bar. The bar drunk had his head on the counter and was asleep. The girl looked sleepy and downright sick of the whole mess. At a table, four men played a lackluster game of cards.

Zack saw Matt at the doorway, cupped his hands in a come-hither wave.

Matt smiled, shook his head, and went on.

Matt went down the street, checking locked doors, making sure everything was sound. When he came to the alley that led back to Molly McGuire's, he hesitated. He heard a sound, like something meddling in the trash boxes out back.

Probably that damned dog again.

Matt pulled his revolver. This time, he'd get that bastard. He started to creep down the alley. A moon shadow became visible. It was the slanting shadow of a huge man wearing a broad-brimmed hat. It looked uncomfortably familiar.

Matt froze.

He cocked the revolver and stared at the shadow.

"Who's there?" he said. "This is the sheriff—Who's back there?"

Silence. But the shadow did not move.

Matt inched forward.

"You are not forgotten " came a voice. Or was it a voice? It had almost sounded like the wind.

But there was no wind.

"Who's there, I said?"

And then the shadow quivered and melted and reformed. It was no longer the silhouette of a big man with a broad-brimmed hat. It was the shadow of a wolf.

Matt blinked, started backing up the alley, holding the revolver before him. The shadow moved and swelled in size.

Matt broke and ran out of the alley, turning too quick to dart into Molly McGuire's, but going up the street as fast as his legs would carry him.

And then he felt stupid.

He stopped. He didn't look back. He just stood in the street. He had not heard a voice. That had been the wind and his imagination. There was no man-shape becoming a wolf-shape. He had seen the shadow of the dog all along, the dog that had troubled the town for a year now. He was getting jumpy. Maybe Caleb was right. He was getting squeamish.

But then he heard something behind him like the padding of feet.

All I have to do, he told himself, is turn, and there will be that big yellow dog, and I will shoot his brains out, and it will be over.

But he found he could not turn. He was afraid of what he would see—and deep down, he knew it would not be the big yellow dog, or for that matter a true wolf. It would be something else.

He started walking briskly up the street toward the church.

The padding behind him had stopped momentarily, as if examining him, but now it had picked up again. Whatever it was, it was big. And he could hear the sound of breathing. Matt broke into a run.

The street was empty, not a soul in sight. There was only the church at the end of the street, calling to him as if it were a beacon, its white cross standing high on its roof peak, throwing a black-shadow cross into the street.

Matt's breath was coming in bursts now, and so was that of whatever was behind him, and he could sense that it was almost on him, ready to leap and take him down, and he found a second wind and ran harder, and then his side felt as if it were about to burst, but he still ran, and he thought he could feel the hot, damp breath of his pursuer on the back of his neck.

His hat came off. His breath was coming in gasps now. He was almost to the church.

The buildings on either side of him seemed to lean out and push—hang at strange angles over his head. And there didn't seem to be as much light as usual, and no sounds, other than his own breathing, and the breathing of whatever was at his heels.

And then he was in the shadow of the cross, and it was as if he had been struck by a warm wind. He ran up the church steps, and when he was at the church door, he wheeled—the revolver held before him—and he saw—

—nothing.

Just the empty street with his hat in its center. There was nothing wrong with the buildings. They grew at proper angles and did not hang over the street, and there were just as many lights as usual, and in the distance he could hear the buzz of voices at Molly McGuire's, and someone had finally decided to play the piano at The Dead Dog Saloon.

Matt leaned against the church door and got his breath. His face became less tense and finally turned humorous. He collapsed on the top church stoop and laughed at himself. He slipped the revolver back into its holster.

"Nothing," he said. "Not a goddamned thing."

But at that moment there came a long, haunted howl that filled the street, and the howl gradually began to sound like a hoarse and hateful laugh.

VII

After a little while, the sheriff cautiously walked away from the church and picked up his hat. When he was about to put it on his head, an involuntary cry escaped his lips.

The crown was bitten neatly out of it.

Hat in hand, the sheriff ran back to the jail.

VIII

The dead gambler was the best walker, but Millie was no slouch—even though she had lost a shoe.

The others were doing their best, and Millie was doing better, but the gambler had long legs and a good stiff stride.

He was moving way out ahead, as if he were trying to win a race.

As the night moved on and the sky lightened, the others slowed down, but not the gambler.

He walked faster.

Millie veered off into the woods and out into a field until she saw the shape of a house. She no longer truly recognized that it was the house where she lived with her sister, Buela, nor did she guess that Buela was worried sick about her, wondering what had happened to her and the stage. In Millie's mind there was only a reptilian pattern, and she followed it.

No lamps burned in the house. It was silent. The sun was easing up over the horizon like a sneaky, blond baby raising its head.

The woman with one shoe came to the root cellar. She looked at the house and sensed the human warmth there and felt hungry.

She looked to the horizon. The blond head was coming up faster, strands of light, like fine lines of hair, were lightening the lower edge of the sky.

She opened the root cellar door, climbed down the short length of steps, closing the lid behind her.

It was not root cellar country. Too much ground wetness, and it had been abandoned and allowed to fill up with brackish water.

Millie didn't mind. She didn't mind anything but the rays of the sun and the gnawing agony in her brain that told her she must eat—and soon.

She lowered herself slowly into the water until it swirled over her head. A water moccasin swished quickly out of the way. Dirt and maggots washed from her hair and flesh and floated to the top as she kept sinking, DOWN, DOWN, DOWN, until she resided at the bottom of the cellar, and there was not even a dark ripple.

• • •

A short time before dawn, the others stopped altogether and scrambled for the soft dirt alongside the stage trail. They began frantically digging shallow graves with their bare hands.

They crawled into their little holes and began raking the leaf mold over themselves, finally pulling it over their faces and squirming their hands inside.

But not the gambler. He had long since left them behind and had passed the sign that read:

MUD CREEK.

IX

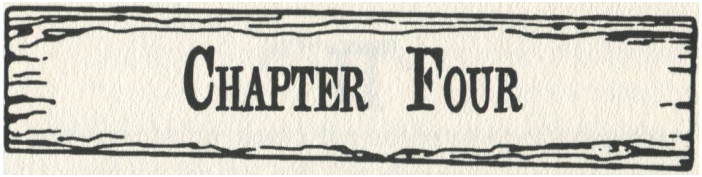
Just before sunrise, the livery doors flapped open like great bat wings spreading—the padlock spinning to the dirt.

A chill wind blew inside, and the doors closed shut after it. The padlock was back in place.

II

THE GATHERING

AND *CLOSE YOUR EYES WITH HOLY DREAD/FOR HE ON HONEY-DEW HATH FED/AND DRUNK THE MILK OF PARADISE.*
—COLERIDGE



Shiftless, the Reverend stood before the broken mirror dipping his hands into the washbasin. He scrubbed them, washed his face, toweled dry.

He walked over to the window and looked out.

It was almost sunup. The gray sky had been severely ruptured with pink and red.

A man was coming down the street. He walked fast, but oddly. As if he had a case of rickets. He reached the saloon, grabbed the door that closed over the bat wings, and tugged. It was locked.

• • •

The sun was fully up now, and a wave of light washed down the street. When it struck the man at the saloon door, he let out a little shriek. Wisps of smoke curled up from the top of his head and hands.

The man tugged harder at the door latch.

His arm came off at the shoulder and out of his sleeve. The hand still clutched the latch firmly, and the arm jutted out—bloodless and white.

The man stood looking at it for a moment, then he pried it loose with his free hand and put it in the deep pocket of his coat. It stuck out of the pocket from elbow to nub.

The man began to hasten up the street. He tried every door he came to.

Finally he moved into the middle of the street and fell face down.

The Reverend raced downstairs.

II

The Reverend ran over to the fallen man and bent down. The body was smoking. The arm that was sticking out of the coat pocket was wilting like a limp dick. It finally puddled into the coat pocket and onto the street.

The Reverend, not eager about it, reached out and touched the gambler's neck for a pulse. There wasn't any. The Reverend startled at how strange the flesh felt. He pulled his hand back and looked at it. Putrid smelling flesh clung to his fingertips like mold. He quickly wiped it off in the dirt.

A hand reached down and grabbed the Reverend by the shoulder, surprising him.

The Reverend wheeled, standing as he did. His hand went for his constant companion: the Navy revolver in his sash.

The revolver was suddenly out, cocked, and planted against the nose of the elderly man he had seen in the cafe with the beautiful woman who reminded him of his sister. And the woman herself stood nearby, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Whoa!" the elderly man said. "We're good Samaritans like yourself. We saw him fall. Lord, but you're fast."

The Reverend lifted the gun from the old man's face and uncocked it. As the old man dipped from view to examine the body, the Reverend had a full look at the woman. She was even more beautiful than he had thought. The Lord just kept throwing her at him.

He turned to look at the old man, who, like the Reverend, had touched the body and was wiping his fingers in the dirt.

"Damndest thing I've seen," the old man said. "He smells as if he's been dead a week."
"He was walking," the Reverend said crisply.

"Don't mess yourself, son. I know that. I said we saw him fall."

The body had gone to hell now. It was smoking and parts of it had collapsed inside the clothes. The head had lost a lot of flesh but was mostly intact. But now the skull itself was starting to bubble.

The old man stood up. "Wait here," he said. "I'll be right back." He ran across the street to the doctor's office.

"A little late for that," the Reverend called, but the old man ignored him.

"He's the doctor," the woman said.

The Reverend glanced at her, then back to the old man who was unlocking the doctor's office and going inside.

"He's also my father."

The Reverend turned around—found he could only say, "Oh." He was staring at the woman, and he could not help it. It seemed impossible for him to make his eyes look away.

The doctor returned. He was pushing a wheelbarrow, and handed one shovel to the Reverend.

"What's this for?" the Reverend said, pushing his Navy into his waistband and holding the shovel with his other hand.

"Shovel him into the wheelbarrow, fellow—and try not to get too much dirt with him," the doctor said.

The doctor scooped up a shovelful of the flesh that had oozed out of the dead man's collar—flesh that had once been a neck. The body was really in bad shape now, and only the skull remained solid, though it was now devoid of hair and flesh—that lay in a prickly puddle about the skull. Flies swarmed all over the gooey stuff like raisins on pudding.

The Reverend, hesitating only slightly, began to scoop up the dead man and toss him into the wheelbarrow.

III

The doctor waved the flies off the mess and wheeled the wheelbarrow full of globby man-parts and stained suit into his office. Behind him came the Reverend and his daughter.

They moved through a waiting room, down a short hall, and turned right. Inside it was dark. The doctor lit a lamp and turned up the wick. The room was a lab. There was a long table in its center. There were racks on the walls, and the racks were filled with glass canisters, test tubes, and the like. Some of the glassware contained colorful liquids. On a table next to the wall was a microscope and all manner of instruments. The windows were curtained with dark blue cloth. You couldn't tell if it was day or night outside.

The doctor saw the Reverend looking around.

"I like it cozy," the doctor said. "I didn't get your name."

"Reverend Jebidiah Mercer. Pardon me if I don't shake hands."

"I feel the same. You can wash over at that basin. This is my daughter, Abby, and I'm Doc Peekner. Most folks just call me Doc."

"Good to meet you," the Reverend said, then thought of the circumstances of their meeting and felt silly. "You ever see anything like this before, Doc?"

Doc shook his head.

"Could it be some form of leprosy, Dad?" Abby asked.

"No. Nothing like that.... God, will you look at this mess? This man looks to have been dead for weeks, but we know better. We all saw him walking."

"If it's some kind of disease," the Reverend said, "we could all have it."

"Not me," Abby said. "You touched him—you and Dad—not me."

"Concerned, isn't she?" Doc said. "Here, wash your hands over there. I've got some chemicals I can pour on them too."

The Reverend did as he was told. Abby poured fresh water from a pitcher into a basin for him. When he finished and toweled dry, Doc poured the chemicals over his hands and he let them air dry.

"All right," Doc said. "Why don't you two make yourself comfortable in the office there. Have some coffee. I'm going to put this mess on the table, wash up, and join you."

"Sure you won't need any help, Dad?" Abby asked.

"I'm sure."

Abby and the Reverend left the room and went to the front where Abby built a small fire in the wood stove for coffee. She opened the office door to neutralize the heat with the outside air, but even though it was early morning, it was already hot and didn't help much.

As she poured water and scooped coffee, the Reverend noticed that, for all her aplomb, her hand was shaking ever so slightly. He mentioned it.

"You found me out," she said. "I thought I had a constant professional air."

The Reverend held up his hand. It quivered ever so slightly. "You're not the only one."

She smiled. It was a very nice smile.

"I've been around death since I was a child " Abby said. "It was inevitable with my father, a doctor, that I would be exposed to it. I've been his nurse since I was in my teens. I was on hand when my mother caught the fever, and we labored to save her and couldn't—but I've never seen anything like today."

"Me either."

When the coffee was ready, she got cups out of a desk drawer and poured for herself and the Reverend. When she handed the Reverend his cup, he noted the aroma of her, and he felt the damnable fire in his loins.

He was both disappointed and relieved when she moved away.

She sat down on the desktop, crossing her legs casually beneath her long skirt. The Reverend thought it was the sexiest movement he had ever witnessed. She picked up her coffee and sipped, looked at the Reverend over the top of her cup.

The Reverend found he could not take his eyes off of her again.

"You got something on your mind besides coffee, Reverend?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. You're a very attractive woman."

"I know. Every man in town has told me. I thought maybe you'd have a fresh approach."

"I suppose not."

"You never did answer my question, not really. Do you have something on your mind, Reverend?"

"Maybe. But I'm not sure it's proper to mention it."

"Don't be such a stuffed shirt, Reverend."

"Calling me Jeb would help."

"Jeb then."

"I think I'd best be going."

"You haven't finished your coffee, Jeb. And Dad will want to speak to you."

The Reverend sipped his coffee almost frantically. "I really should run." And then he remembered he had a legitimate excuse. He was supposed to give David a shooting lesson. In all the excitement he had forgotten about it. He told her about his and David's plans.

"Sounds wonderful. What say I invite myself along? We can have a picnic." She smiled at him. "I just love to see a grown man sweat, and it looks to be a hot day."

The Reverend didn't know what to make of Abby. He was considering some sort of reply when Doc stepped into the room.

"More coffee?" Doc asked.

Abby smiled and said, "Sure." She put her cup down and poured Doc a cup. Doc sat behind his desk and sipped. He looked thoughtful.

"Never saw anything like that," he said. "Never. I don't think it's a disease of any kind."

"What could it be then?" the Reverend asked.

"I don't know" Doc said. "I've got some ideas—but they're just ideas."

"Well, what are they?" Abby asked.

"I'd rather not say right now. Might make me seem more foolish than I am."

"I doubt that," Abby said with a grin.

Doc grinned back at her. "Not a word until I've consulted some books."

"Dad, the Reverend and I were just discussing going on a picnic—weren't we Reverend?"

The Reverend didn't know what to say. He hadn't been discussing anything. Abby had brought it up, and the subject had not been properly mined out when Doc stepped into the room. Yet, there seemed no getting away from Abby. It was as if the Lord was throwing her at him. And if that was the case, there would be no escape. And lastly, he had been alone too much of late. Maybe David and Abby's company was what he needed to clear the air.

"Yes," he said. "We thought that might be a nice idea."

"Sounds capital to me " Doc said.

"And maybe afterwards, the Reverend would like to drop by the house for a cup of coffee," Abby said. "Then you could tell us what you found in those books you're going to consult."

Doc looked at Abby and grinned. "I may not have anything to say then, but," he turned to the Reverend, "I'd enjoy having your company, Reverend. Why don't you come by. I'd have a chance to talk to someone besides the townsfolk. We're all talked out with each other. There isn't even a decent corn crop to discuss this time of year, nothing but the weather. And that can be done in a word—hot. Maybe you and I can find something new to talk about."

"Maybe," the Reverend said. "And I'll give your invitation some thought. I'm not exactly

sure when we'll be back. This is sort of a work picnic for me—if that's all right with Abby."

"Fine," she said. "Long as I don't have to work."

"You don't," the Reverend said.

"That's good," she said, then winked at Doc. "My old man works me hard enough."

"I have a young man to meet," the Reverend said, and he told Doc about David and the tent poles.

"Never keep a young man waiting, I always say," said Abby. "I'll get the picnic things, but first, let me walk you outside.

IV

Abby walked the Reverend out to the street.

"I really do hope you'll come for coffee later," Abby said.

"After today you may have your fill of me," the Reverend said.

"I doubt it."

The Reverend was beginning to feel comfortable with Abby, as well as attracted to her. He even found himself smiling a lot. It was something he had done so little of in the last few years, it made his face hurt.

They looked up. Across the street, in front of the hotel, a wagon was parked. David was sitting on the seat looking at them. The boy looked as if he had swallowed a bug.

"I'll get the picnic lunch," Abby said, and she touched the Reverend's arm before turning away and heading down the alley by the doctor's office.

The Reverend walked over to David and looked up at him on the seat.

"She's going, ain't she?" David said.

"If it's okay with you," the Reverend said.

"Even if it ain't okay, right?"

The Reverend considered a moment. "I thought, if she didn't work out, you and me could use her for target practice."

Though he tried not to, David smiled.

V

When Abby returned with the picnic basket and they loaded up, David relaxed. It was hard not to around Abby. She was comfortably disarming and in constant high spirits. Something the Reverend and David were not. It did their pessimistic souls good to have her around. As the Reverend drove the wagon out of town, he could not help but feel slightly like a family man taking his wife and son on an outing. It was a nice and disturbing feeling all at once.

They took the stage trail and followed it out three or four miles and pulled over to the edge of the road. The Reverend examined the woods.

"Hope you brought a sharp axe?" the Reverend said.

David said, "I brought two of them. One for you. One for me."

"Good," the Reverend said. "I'll show you how it's done."

"That'll be the day," David said.

"Boys, boys," Abby said.

• • •

The Reverend and David chopped, skinned, and loaded trees until noon. Abby sat in the shade and read a dime novel that made her chuckle out loud from time to time.

For lunch—they spread a checked blanket on the ground, and Abby got out the picnic basket. They ate fried chicken, home cooked bread, and drank from a jug of tea in which most of the chipped ice had melted. It was all very good.

The Reverend was surprised that things went so well. He and Abby had much to talk about. Books for one. They had both read a lot, though she had a taste for dime novels which he did not care for. David also fit in, but not from the book angle. He had read little to nothing. But he had a ready wit and knew all the dirt on the townsfolk, and Abby encouraged as much of it out of him as she could.

The whole thing was pleasing, and the Reverend found that he was wishing he could make this trio permanent. But then he didn't wish too hard. Most things he wanted out of life turned to dust in his hands. He felt as if he were some sort of Jonah, and that everything and everyone he touched and cared for would be soured or destroyed. If he got

his wish, it would merely be for as long as it took him to make it all go bad.

It was a hell of a curse for a man whose life was based on bringing happiness and salvation to others. He himself never got to taste of the well-water he poured. And if he stayed about too long after pouring, then he would somehow taint the well. Never failed.

"Now" David said, "how about that shooting lesson."

"What's the hurry?" the Reverend said.

"I'd just like to shoot that damn gun," David said.

"I guess that's reason enough," the Reverend said. "One more glass of tea and then we'll start."

"You told him that already," Abby said.

"So I did," the Reverend, said pouring a glass of tea, "but I have to do it this time. This is the last in the jug."

VI

While the Reverend, Abby, and David were so engaged, Cecil—one of the cooks for Molly McGuire's—went out back to toss the morning grease, and saw a pair of feet in shiny shoes sticking straight up out of the big, wooden trash box.

He put the grease on the ground and looked into the box. The trash that belonged there was all over the alley. There was just a man and a big yellow dog—the one that had been such a nuisance all year.

Cecil was two hundred pounds on a six-foot frame. He wrapped his bulging arms—both tattooed with anchors from his time in the navy—and pulled. The body wouldn't come free.

The blood in the box bottom had congealed and stuck to the top of the corpse's head. The body was also wedged in with the dog.

Cecil got a fresh grip, grunted, and pulled.

This time the body came free, leaving a mess of its scalp and hair in the bottom of the box.

Cecil tossed the body to the ground. Other than the neck which lolled loosely, the body was as stiff as a board. The tongue hung out of its mouth, and it seemed a foot long, and it was as dark as a razor strop.

"That's who I thought you was," Cecil said, looking at the corpse. "Morning Banker—you being dead ain't nothing personal."

This was a variation of what Nate had told Cecil when he foreclosed on his farm last year. His words had been more like, "You being broke ain't nothing personal. Just doing what I have to do."

"You look good as I've seen you," Cecil said absently. "In fact, you look better than I've ever seen you, you old fart."

Cecil, sensitive as he was, scratched his balls and looked in the box again. He could see the dog more clearly. It looked as if it had been wadded up into a ball. Its muzzle was mashed like a squeeze box into its head, and both its eyes were sticking out on tendons like strange insects. The dog and Cecil stunk of shit.

Cecil got a cigar out of his white shirt pocket-occasionally the ash from his stogies revealed itself in the cafe's chili—and lit up. He usually waited for the evening to smoke the one cigar he bought a day, but hell, this was kind of a celebration. That damned mutt had turned over his last trash box, and good old Nate Foster—resident banker, drunk and full-time horse's ass—had foreclosed on his last farm.

Cecil went back to the cafe, had himself a drink of cooking sherry, then went out front to tell the sheriff (who was having lunch with Caleb) about poor old Nate.

VII

The dog stayed in the box, but they took Nate over to the undertakers and sent for Doc.

When Doc got there, Nate didn't look any better. The sheriff, the undertaker Steve Mertz, and Caleb stood looking down at the corpse.

"Think he's dead, Doc?" Mertz said with his usual mirth.

"I reckon he's just holding his breath," Caleb said. "But that trick with his tongue out like that will throw you."

"Oh for Christsakes," Matt said, and walked out of the room.

"I tell you," Caleb said, "that boy is getting squeamish."

Doc paid no attention. He bent to look at Nate's face. An ant crawled across Nate's left eye. Doc brushed it away. He gripped the man's head and turned it.

"Neck's broken, ain't it?" Caleb said.

"Yep," Doc said. He looked at the bruise on Nate's neck and a deep, jagged wound just under it.

"Guess the dog did that," Mertz said.

"Right" Caleb said. "Then old Foster smashed the dog's muzzle halfway through his skull, wadded him up, tossed him in the trash, jumped in after him, landed on his head, and broke his neck,"

"Well," Mertz said. "The dog could have bitten him."

"Shut up, both of you, will you?" Doc said. "I can't hear myself think. Maybe the dog bit him after he was dead."

"How'd he get his neck broke," Mertz said.

"It could have been a big man done it," Doc said. "Only he'd have to have been a really big man, and the strongest man I've ever seen to do what he did to that dog's body. Anyone that knew how could have broken Foster's neck."

"I seen a big nigger who fought bare-knuckle once, and he could have done that" Caleb said. "No trouble."

"Don't suppose he lives around here?" Doc said.

Caleb smiled. "Kansas City."

"And I thought we were going to save Matt a lot of work. Do me a favor, Caleb, take a walk. You're stinking the whole place up."

Caleb grinned again and lifted his hat in mock salute. "Glad to oblige, Doc, and I'll remember you."

"In your prayers, I hope," Doc said.

When Caleb was gone, Mertz said, "It don't do to piss Caleb off. He's onery and he don't forget."

"To hell with Caleb."

Doc looked the neck over some more. "What gets me is the rip," he said. "I suppose a crazy man might have done that."

"A man?"

"Ever seen a man with rabies, Mertz?"

No.

"Ugly stuff. Gets to his brain. Gets so he can't stand light and is thirsty all the time. Gets to where he'll bite like a dog. Has crazy strength—like ten men."

"You mean Nate was bitten by a man with rabies?"

"I didn't say that.... But it doesn't look like a dog bite. Though, to tell the truth, it doesn't look all that much like a man's bite either. I'm just thinking out loud is all."

"If it ain't animal and it ain't human, what's that leave?"

Doc grinned. "Plants with teeth."

"Well, I think the dog did it" Mertz said.

"And as Caleb said—who mashed the dog and tossed it in the trash after Nate was dead? A man that knows what he's doing, or one that's mad strong, could have killed Nate after he killed the dog. He could have grabbed Nate's head just right, twisted it, and bit him. Especially if he was mad with rabies."

"That's what you think?"

"Just thinking out loud. I'll make out the death certificate. Call it broken neck, loss of blood. Means of death unknown."

Doc put on his hat and went out.

VIII

David did as the Reverend told him. He took some short sticks and placed them across the stage trail and back near the woods. He stuck them into the dirt about two inches and let three inches of stick show above ground.

From where the Reverend stood, across the trail with his back to the trees on that side, it was a fair distance for a pistol—especially shooting at such small and shady targets.

David finished with his task, went over to join the Reverend who held the revolver at his side. He stood by the Reverend and looked across the way. It took him a moment to locate the sticks.

"Can you even see them?" David said.

"I'm not that old yet, son."

"You got enough bullets?"

The Reverend looked at David. "More than we'll need." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out two small boxes of ammunition. "Enough for a small-size army— but we won't shoot that much."

"Are you men going to shoot or talk those sticks to death?" It was Abby. She had folded up the picnic remains and put them in the wagon.

"Good point," the Reverend said, and smiled at her. My heavens, he thought, I have not been this happy in years.

The Reverend pulled his eyes away from Abby with difficulty. She looked wonderful standing there watching, her hands behind her back, her eyes bright.

"Okay, son ," the Reverend said. "This is a .36 Navy revolver. 1861 model. It has been converted from cap and ball to modern ammunition."

"Why not just buy yourself another one? Pa says a .45 is the thing to have."

"This one has done well by me. I like the feel of it. A gun is more than its caliber. In fact, a gun is the man who holds it."

The Reverend cocked the revolver slowly, lifted it, and fired.

One of the sticks went away.

He did this five more times and five sticks went away.

"Good shooting," David said, "but it's pretty slow."

"I'm teaching you to shoot, not fast draw."

"But I want to learn that too."

"Go and put up some more sticks."

David did as he was told. While he worked, Abby and the Reverend looked at one another but said nothing. It was getting so nothing needed to be said, and even the silence was comfortable.

David came back and stood by the Reverend. "My turn?"

"Almost." The Reverend loaded the revolver and put it in the sash at his waist.

And then he drew. David almost saw it. There was a blur of the Reverend's hand, then the gun was gripped, pointing, being cocked, and the first round barked, and the first stick went away, and the gun was cocked again, and fired and again and again until the air was full of acrid smoke. All the sticks were shot off at ground level.

"God almighty!" David said.

"Watch your language, son. The Lord is not nearly so enthused over good shooting as we are."

"Goddamn, you must be as good as Wild Bill Hickok."

"Most likely better" the Reverend said seriously.

"Can I shoot now? I want to try."

"No fast draw yet, just shooting."

David nodded as the Reverend reloaded. "Why no holster? I'd think you'd need one for a fast draw," David asked.

"Too many dime novels, son. Hickok for instance wore a sash. With the sight filed off" the Reverend held up the revolver to show that it had been filed off smoothly, "you don't have to worry about snags. And holsters have a tendency to grab a revolver. A sash or even your belt is preferable—go put up some sticks."

David raced across the way to put up new targets. This time he took a big handful of sticks and placed them in a row. He counted them. Eleven.

He rushed back to the Reverend's side.

The Reverend handed him the gun. "When you get ready, take a death grip on it and point it like a finger. Don't try to aim. Just imagine you're lifting a finger and pointing it at one of the sticks. Your aim is naturally better when you do that. Soft squeeze on the trigger."

David lifted the revolver, cocked it, and fired. He didn't even come close. His round hit the edge of the stage trail.

"You're trying too hard to aim. You've got to become one with the gun. It's got to be like part of you, a metal finger."

"Can I put it in my belt and draw it?"

"Only if you want to lose your manhood." David considered. "You mean I might shoot off my pecker?"

"Precisely."

Abby laughed.

"Sorry, ma'm" David said. "I forgot you were there."

"Quite all right "Abby said.

David pointed the revolver across the trail, cocked, and fired. He did this until the cylinder was empty. None of his shots scored, but each came closer.

He handed the empty revolver to the Reverend. "Damn," he said.

"It takes time and patience," the Reverend said. "After you cock it time after time, get used to the weight, you develop muscles in your forearm, then the gun is like an extension of your forearm." The Reverend raised the revolver and pointed, "and the bullet seems more to come out of you than the gun."

The Reverend reloaded, put the revolver in his sash. Though he was giving David sound advice, he realized too that he was showing off a bit for Abby.

He jerked the revolver free with his left hand this time, cocked, and fired six times in succession. Six sticks disappeared.

"Wow! You are better than Wild Bill Hickok."

"I told you that," the Reverend said.

The Reverend reloaded, put the gun in his sash. This time he drew with his right hand, fired, tossed the gun to his left, fired, and tossed it back and forth that way until six more sticks were down.

Twelve shots altogether: one series of six left-handed, one series alternating, and he had not missed a shot.

Abby applauded.

"Thank you, ma'm," the Reverend said. Then to David, "Go see how close I shaved them to the ground."

David ran across the trail to look.

All twelve sticks were cut even with the ground.

Twelve?

He had set up eleven. He remembered distinctly.

Well, no matter, the Reverend had found a stick. But as David bent to examine the one he had not set up, he noticed it was different from the others.

He scraped around it, and when he saw what it really was, he called, "Reverend. Come quick!"

IX

The Reverend put his revolver away and strolled briskly across the shadowy forest trail.

Abby followed.

When he reached David, he squatted down to examine the stick.

It was not a stick.

It was a filthy, human finger shot off at the first knuckle.

The Reverend scraped around it. A moment later he revealed a human hand.

He kept digging.

Soon he revealed an ugly, dirty face wearing an eye patch — though the patch had slipped and the empty eye socket was filled with dirt and forest mold. A worm twisted in the mess.

"Bill Nolan!" David said. "The missing stage driver."

The Reverend dug the rest of the body free.

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When he had the entire corpse revealed, he said, "Go back to the wagon and get the blanket, David."

David went.

Abby bent down beside the Reverend. The smell of the dead man was strong. "Seems to be our day for dead bodies. What happened to him?"

"I don't know. But someone wanted the body hidden."

David returned with the blanket. The Reverend put it down beside Nolan, then he and David picked him up and put him on it. They folded the blanket over so that the body was covered.

"All right, David," the Reverend said, "let's get him into the back of the wagon."

They carried him over, placed him on top of the tent poles, then with David in the back with the corpse, the Reverend and Abby on the seat, they started back toward Mud Creek.

One of the corpse's hands had slipped out from under the blanket, and direct sunlight struck it. It smoked faintly.

The hand moved slowly back under the blanket.

None of the living saw it.

X

They took Nolan to the undertaker and the doctor was called over.

"Fancy seeing you again," Doc said to the Reverend.

The Reverend nodded.

"You need me back there, Dad?" Abby asked.

"I'll handle it. Keep David and the Reverend company"

The doctor left the others in the front room. He and Mertz went back to look at the body. It lay on a table next to the banker who was naked, cleaned, and stuffed in a tub of ice.

Doc looked at the tub, then back to Mertz.

"Keeps 'em fresh. He isn't going to be buried until tomorrow late. Having a hard time getting mourners. Going to have to pay for some."

"I reckon he can afford it," Doc said.

Doc examined Nolan. He had a crushed hand and what looked like a bite on his neck. He frowned.

"That's just like Nate had—isn't it?"

"More or less," Doc said.

Doc went over the body, stripping it of its clothes as he went. When he was finished, he went to the washbasin and washed his hands, dried them.

"Well," Mertz said. "What's the cause of death?"

"Loss of blood."

"From that wound? It's bad, but not that bad,"

"Nonetheless," Doc said, put on his coat, and went out.

Mertz looked at Nolan and patted him affectionately. "Doc's getting old," he said.

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Mertz picked up Nolan's clothes from the floor and went through them for valuables. He'd done fairly well by Nate, getting a ring and a silver dollar. And he got a wallet. Empty. But a nice wallet. He figured Caleb had profited the contents of Nate's wallet before his body was brought in.

Win some, lose some.

He set about his business.

XI

Doc came out and said, "I know this isn't supposed to be something you say after you look at a corpse, but I'm hungry. Let's go over to the house for something to eat. You coming too, David?"

"No sir, I got to skedaddle. Pa will want me over at the livery the rest of the day. I'll put the poles in the shop, Reverend."

"That okay with your pa?" the Reverend asked. "Yeah, long as you pay him for keeping them overnight," "Figures," the Reverend said. "Very well." David darted for the door, stopped, turned. "Reverend. Can I see you a minute?"

David and the Reverend went outside.

"I just wanted to say," David mumbled, "I had a real good time today." "So did I." "I think you could do a lot worse than Miss Abby. You ought to keep her."

"She's not a fish, David."

"You know what I mean."

"I'll consider it. It'll be up to her."

"Thanks for the shooting lesson."

"You're welcome—and aren't you glad we didn't use Abby for shooting practice?"

David smiled. "Yeah. But maybe she'd have been big enough for me to hit. I'm no good on sticks.

"Practice, that's the key."

They shook hands.

David climbed on the wagon, clucked to the team, and started for the blacksmith shop.

XII

Doc and Abby had a house connected to the back of the office. It was simple, but nice.

Abby fixed beans, tortillas, and coffee, and after they ate, they retired to Doc's study. It was stuffed full of books and the smell of cigar smoke. The study connected directly to Doc's office.

They took chairs near Doc's desk, and he spoke. "I'm not sure I want to tell this, but I've thought on it all day, consulted books, and I intend to consult others. And, Reverend, as a man of God, a man who deals with immortal souls, I think you're definitely the one to hear this. I guess I could have Calhoun over too, but he's an idiot. So, I'll just keep it between the three of us. My daughter already thinks I'm crazy, but she has to live with me. And you, Reverend—there is something about you. You're a man of God, but you're also a realist." Doc nodded at the gun. "What I need right now is someone who is not only knowledgeable of man's soul, but of everyday realities. Reverend, do you believe the dead can walk?"

"What?" Abby said.

Doc didn't answer. He just looked at the Reverend. The Reverend was taken totally by surprise, but finally, "On an everyday basis, no."

"I'm serious," Doc said.

"I thought you might be.... All right. I suppose the dead can walk. Under certain circumstances. Lazarus walked and he had been dead for some time. Dead and entombed."

"I'm talking about the living dead, not returning from the dead."

"Dad?" Abby said, "Are you off your rocker?"

"Maybe."

"'You mean nosferatu?" the Reverend said. "Ghouls? Zombies?"

"Then you know what I'm talking about?"

"Not exactly, but I've read a book or two on folklore."

"Okay. I'll cut through the horseshit. The man who fell apart in the street. He was dead before he fell."

Silence hung in the air like an anvil.

"Dad " Abby said, "that isn't possible "

"I've been telling myself that all afternoon. But I examined the body—pieces of it—under a microscope, performed various tests on it. That was dead, decaying flesh. The sun was speeding up the decay, but I tell you, that man was dead. An examination of the internal organs proved it."

"Dead. And the sunlight was speeding up the decay. Doc, I have to admit, I find that hard to buy."

"Reverend, I am not a quack and I am not crazy. The man was dead, and before he fell. The sun was working on his body, dissolving it like ice cream. There is no such disease known to man,"
"Maybe there is now," Abby said.

"If you want to call being one of the living dead a disease, and I suppose you could. Both of you, hear me out. Reverend, you know I'm on to something. I can see it in your eyes. There is something going on in this town and it runs through it like a cold winter wind. Deny it."

"I can't," the Reverend said. "There is something about this place, and I know, somehow, I'm part of it. I was driven here by the Lord, for what I do not know. But, the living

dead—ghouls? Vampires?"

"Let me tell you something about Mud Creek, Reverend. It's got a curse on it, and I fear everything and everyone in this town is going to die like a bug-stung tomato.

"Reverend, the moment I saw you, I knew you were part of this thing—I don't know how I knew, but I just knew. It was like you were the last ingredient in a stew, the chili pepper. This town is turning rotten, and it has to do with an Indian and his woman."

"Dad," Abby said, "forget it"

"No. I can't forget it. Just listen. Let me tell you what I think, and then, when I'm finished, if the two of you want to call me crazy, walk out of here and hide from me, I'll understand. And Reverend, if you believe me and want to get on your horse and ride out of here and never look back, I'll understand that too. So before you pass judgment on my sanity, hear my story. In fact, I hope you'll tell me I'm full of manure and make me believe it—maybe that's what I'm hoping for most of all."

Doc opened a desk drawer, took out a bottle of whisky and three small glasses. Abby and the Reverend declined.

Doc nodded, poured himself one.

"This will help me tell it," he said, and Doc told his story.

THE DOCTOR'S STORY

About a month ago this wagon rolled into town. It was brightly painted. Red and yellow with blue and green snakes twisting together on the side. At the top of the wagon painted in black were the words MEDICINE WAGON. An Indian was driving the wagon. He might have been mixed with negro. It was hard to tell. I'd never seen the likes of him before. He had shoulders broader than any man I've ever known, and he was darn near seven feet tall.

He had a woman with him. A colored. A high yeller, to be exact. And she was a comely thing. Still, they were an Indian and a colored, and that got a lot of folks in these parts off on a bad foot with them immediately. If they had not been such a curiosity, and things hadn't been so dead around town, they might have got run out the first day they showed up.

The Negress read palms and that sort of thing. The Indian made potions. Not like a snake oil man, but like a medicine man. You know, someone that wanted your money but was trying to give you something for it too. They also sold some harmless things. Love potions and charms. The usual rubbish. But mostly they sold medicine, and it went fast, and I'll tell you why. It wasn't for the reason you'd think. It wasn't alcohol-laced with a bit of sugar and vinegar. It was medicine that worked.

It sort of got my goat, and I'm not ashamed to say it. I'm a trained doctor. Just a country sawbones, mind you, but no slouch either. But there were things this Indian could do, I couldn't even come near doing.

Old Mrs. Jameson had the misery for years. Her hands would knot up like old plowlines. The knuckles would swell, inflame. It would get so bad sometimes the skin would crack. I'd tried all the conventional treatments, and the best I could manage was a bit of relief from her pain. Something to get her through a bout until another came. And it got so the bouts were closer and closer together. The poor woman could hardly open her hands. They looked like broken bird talons.

But when the Indian came to town, and word got around that his medicine worked—everything from taking warts off the face to the curing of the croup—she went over there and bought some salve from him. Up until that point I'd been surprised at some of his cures, but I hadn't seen anything that struck me as miraculous. Then old Mrs. Jameson rubbed that salve on her poor old hands and the pain went away. And she came by to show me how she was doing. As much to gloat and show me up for a quack as anything

else, I guess. But there was no denying. Not only were her hands better, they were starting to cure themselves of the damage already done. In a week's time of rubbing on that stuff the Indian gave her, she had hands like a twenty-year-old. Not only cured of their misery, but soft and pliant and attractive. If you'd had Abby put her hands down beside Mrs. Jameson's, the old lady's would have looked better.

Well, to shorten the story some, that Indian and his Negress came to be looked upon as saints, and the town's attitudes toward coloreds softened considerable. Except maybe for Caleb who hates anything non-white with a passion. But then again, he wasn't sick and didn't suffer any ailment. The man has the constitution of a jackass and the brain to match.

So, that couple was looking lighter skinned every day to folks hereabouts, and they parked their wagon out on the edge of town.

Since there was always someone with something wrong with them, they were doing a land-office business, and things had dried up here considerable. I took a few splinters out of fingers and things of that nature, but anything of importance was taken to the Indian. It got my goat. You live in a town this size, deliver babies, see the old go out, and take care of people's ills all your life, you sometimes develop a self-importance about yourself that you don't deserve.

I went out there to talk to them, and to thank them for all they'd done in town, but the Indian saw right through me. He knew I was there primarily because I was curious, and maybe because I was hoping to latch onto some of his healing secrets. And I'll admit that I was.

But the way that Indian looked at me and smiled made me feel lower than a plump snake's belly, and foolish. And the woman—well, I'm a bit embarrassed to admit this with Abby in the room, but I was attracted to her. Not only was she pretty, but she was unique too. Tallish, with sleek skin like creamed coffee, and her hair was plaited in Indian-like braids. And she had the bluest eyes I've ever seen. They drew you to her. She had a fine figure—pardon me, Abby— and even at my age I felt a stirring I didn't think I was capable of anymore.

It disturbed me. Guess I felt guilty about your mother, Abby. I went away from there and didn't go back. I didn't want that Indian looking down his nose at me, knowing what I was really up to. And I didn't want to have to look at that sleek Negress and know she wasn't ever going to be mine.

I had dreams about her at night, and the kind of dreams you would expect. I loved her so hard—please excuse this talk, Abby, but I have to get the entire story out—I'd finally keel over with a heart attack in her embrace. Then I'd wake up sweating, feeling guilty toward my dead wife—God bless her soul.

I say all this to give you some idea of how impressive the two of them were.

So they'd been here a week, or a little better, and it started to rain. One of those late season drenchers that just wouldn't go away. At first it was welcomed. Crops needed it, and it cooled things off some at night. But pretty soon it was nothing but misery. The streets turned to mud, and the rain just kept coming, and people began to pick up on summer sicknesses, and of course they went to the Indian for help—which he sold them—and then the Webb girl got ill.

I remember when I first heard of it. I wasn't in the office much then. Abby sort of hung around here in case anyone wanted a splinter out, or some such thing, but I had started going over to the saloon to toss a few drinks. Got so I spent a lot of my time there. More than I ever had before. I tell you, I had gone from feeling like a little god with a black satchel to feeling like an incompetent old man who couldn't even match heathen medicine. It may seem crazy to you, but more than once I took that shotgun off the wall over there and put it under my chin and thought about finding the trigger with my toe. When a man gets so he's useless, especially at my age when there doesn't seem to be no turning around or finding another avenue, he begins to think he might just be better off without the worry.

But I guess common sense prevailed, and of course thinking about Abby. And maybe most of all, I figured that there would come a time when they'd just take up and move on, and people would have to come back to me, and gradually I could regain my exalted status as a little demigod.

I was drinking at the bar when David Webb came in, and he looked terrible. He was splashed with mud from all the rain, and his face was haggard. He looked ready to drop.

Being a family doctor dies hard, and I slid up beside him and said he didn't look so good. He said it was because he'd been up nights with Glenda and that she was bad sick and getting sicker.

Course I asked him why he hadn't brought her by, and his face went kind of odd, and he reminded me of a dog that has been kicked and was slinking under a porch.

"Well, Doc," he said. "I just figured the Indian could do better by her," then he spotted someone at a table he wanted to talk to bad and that left me alone, and I got good and drunk.

That night—I reckon it was on past midnight—I heard a banging at the door, and I got up and went to answer, and there stood David and his wife, and he's holding the little Glenda in his arms, and she's as limp as a dish towel. I've seen enough dead people to know at a glance that that little girl was fresh died, but I brought them in, and I did what I could for her—which was nothing. Thing I remember most about that night was hearing Webb cry. Seems he had taken the little girl to the Indian with a lung problem— pneumonia, I

figure—and the Indian sold them some stuff, and they gave it to her and took her home, and she promptly died. That's when they brought her to me. I reckon she'd been dead a couple of hours. About the length of time it took the Webbs to get to town from where they lived.

But to make it all shorter, Webb went crazy. He went over to the saloon, and there were enough drunks and near-drunks there that he got them roused. Caleb got behind it in an instant, and pretty soon he was talking it up big, saying about the treachery of the colored races and such, and a mob started forming. Everything they'd done that was good was forgot in an instant. It didn't matter that they'd darn near worked miracles, this dead white girl was what the crowd needed to turn evil.

To make matters worse, the Indian chose that night to move on, so that didn't look good for them. Looked as if they'd deliberately poisoned the little girl then hightailed it. Least it looked that way to a maddened crowd.

They caught up with the pair, pulled them out of the wagon—after the Indian broke Cane Lavel's neck and smashed Buck Wilson's jaw. I heard it took a dozen men to bring him down, and then they had clubs, pistol butts, and the like to do it with. They beat the woman and burned the wagon.

That's where Matt came in. He got word of the crowd and what was going on, and he rode out after them, fired off his gun, and got their attention. Talked sense to them for the moment and took the couple back to the jail and safety.

But Caleb wasn't a quitter, and Webb didn't care about the law—he wanted an eye for an eye—and so the crowd got worked up again, and they went to the jail and asked for the Indian and the Negress.

Matt tried to stand up to them, but he weakened. Caleb seems to hold sway over him for some reason or another, and the bottom line is—he gave in—and they took the Indian and his woman away. Put them in a wagon and drove them out to the edge of town.

Keep in mind what I'm telling you is what I've gleaned from the stories of others, and it especially gets dim on this area because I think most folks are ashamed of themselves and would just as soon forget it, even though they can't. I like to think too: had I known exactly what was going on, I'd have gotten that old shotgun off the wall and gone out there and tried to stop what was happening. Least I like to think that.

Caleb and some others, they took the woman off in the bushes and raped her, cut her breasts and ears off, mutilated her body, making her scream so the Indian— who was bound hand and foot in the wagon—could hear it. It wasn't all the townsfolk was for that, mind you, but all that were there put up with it, and no one raised a finger to stop Caleb and the others. They were caught up in the storm of the mob.

The woman finally died, and then it was the Indian's turn. They tossed what was left of the Negress in the back of the wagon with him, and Hirern Wayland—who was my main source on this story—said the Indian never even batted an eye. Just looked down at her body then out at the crowd, cold as ice.

They took him out of the wagon, out to a big oak, put him on a horse and put a rope around his neck. He just stared at them.

"We did nothing to you," the Indian told them.

Webb ranted and raved about his daughter and how she was poisoned, and the Indian said, "She's not dead. My woman is dead, but your daughter is not dead."

Webb—knowing his daughter was dead—went crazy, cussed the Indian up one side and down the other, and that's when the Indian put a curse on Mud Creek and all those who lived in it. When he started talking, Hirem said everybody and everything went quiet, except the crickets, and they were building in intensity, like some kind of chorus behind his words. And the Indian said he had the powers, and that he was through with the pale side of them and invited the dark side to his aid. Said the town would suffer.

Words to that effect.

Then he started chanting. Hirem said he didn't recognize any of the words, and he knew quite a few Indian languages and some French-Cajun talk, and it wasn't any of those. He thought maybe it was African or something. He said he remembered a few words, and he told them to me, wondering if I knew what they meant, because he said those words haunted his mind. He said that soon as they were mentioned the wind picked up and the rain came harder and thunder barked.

The words weren't Indian. I don't know their source, but I recognized the words. I have them in some of the books I have here. THE NECRONOMICON, MYSTERIES OF THE WORM, and NAMELESS CULTS. Basically, the words refer to something that at times has been called a Wendigo, a vampire, ghoul, or nosferatu. Sometimes a mixture of all these things. According to my books, these words allow a sorcerer to invite a demon into his body for purposes of revenge. The demon lives for one thing. Revenge. And it gives the dead body it has animated powers beyond those of normal man, while on the other hand, it dooms the individual's soul to hell.

Then the spell broke, Hirem said, and Webb jumped forward, slapped the horse's flank, and it ran, and the Indian dangled. He hardly even kicked at all, but in a heartbeat he was dead. The crickets went completely quiet, and the storm stopped. Then a moment later the storm picked up again. Wind broke tree limbs and tossed them, blew leaves, and the rain came down like buckshot. Lightning cracked out of the sky, hit the body of the Indian, and everything went white.

When their eyes came free of light-blindness, the Indian was gone. The lightning had blown him to hell. There was just the rope smoking, the noose swinging in the wind—and a huge spider—or something that looked like a spider, and it scuttled up the rope into the tree and was gone.

That's when Hirem knew there was more going on here than just a crazed Indian. That spider looked just like a growth on the Indian's chest. Hirem noticed it when he helped toss the Indian in the wagon, and the man's shirt tore, revealing it. At first, Hirem thought a great spider was nested on the red man's chest, but then he saw it was an upraised birthmark: a giant, hairy mole in the shape of a large spider. Or as Hirem put it,"... something that reminded you of a spider."

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When it was all over, Hirem came by and talked to me. He was crazy with guilt. He'd been half drunk and got caught up in the mob. Later on, others told me much the same thing. No excuse mind you, but part of one.

Hirem told me that they had dumped the Negress' body out at the edge of the stage road, and it was on his conscience. Nothing could be done for her and the man now, but he wanted to see that she got a decent burial.

So we hitched up a wagon and went out there. The storm was really going then. We could hardly see our hands in front of our faces. The body was hard to find, but we finally located it. She'd been skinned, Reverend. Just like a squirrel. We had an old plow crate in the back, and we put her in that and took her off in the woods and buried her. And it was a chore with the rain coming down like it was, and there were all manner of stubborn roots to cut through. But we wanted to make sure the body wasn't disturbed. If Caleb got enough drinks in him, he might want to come for the body, string it up somewhere in town. Hirem said Caleb had already strung the ears on a piece of rawhide and was wearing them around his neck and was saying he was going to make a tobacco pouch out of her breasts.

We finally got the job done and got back to town, and that's when we heard that Glenda was alive.

The medicine the Indian had given her worked. It had made her die and come back to life, cured of the pneumonia. Either that—or her body functions had been in such a catatonic state when she was brought to me—I didn't notice, but I'm a better doctor than that, Reverend. I say the girl died and that was part of how the medicine worked, and before she was cured, the Indian was hung.

That changed Webb's tune. He suddenly believed the Indian's curse. He and his family packed up that night and rode out of here without so much as looking back. And though it

was raining bad, I saw them go, and I could tell Glenda was alive. She was sitting up front on the wagon with her mama holding a big umbrella over their heads. I remember thinking, "I hope she don't get the pneumonia again," and then wondering if the Indian's medicine would permanently prevent that.

Next morning they found Hirem's body behind the saloon. His hand was clutched around a bowie knife. He'd used it to cut his own throat from ear to ear.

Next the stage came up missing. Then there was the man in the street today, falling apart like wet paper. And Nate, the banker. Found out back of Molly McGuire's with his throat torn and his neck broken. Nolan's body. His neck ripped the same way. Loss of blood, but neither of them having a lot of blood on them, or in Nate's case—only a bit was found where he died. I don't know about Nolan, but I'll bet the same. Or did you notice? No matter.

And there was a baby a few days back. I ruled it natural causes. There was a little wound in the small of its back, but it wasn't bad enough for the child to bleed to death-there was only a drop or two on its bedclothes. I figured it had rolled over on an open diaper pin or something.

It all fits the pattern that the books say the demon will follow—a vampiric existence till all his enemies are vanquished. As well as anyone that gets in its way. And even then—it may not be satisfied. The demon may decide to stay in the dead body and use it for as long as it pleases.

Now, before you go back on your word and tell me I'm crazy, let me add just one thing. And I admit, I was sleepy at the time and had all this other stuff on my mind. And I'd been dreaming.

But the other night I was having the dream I told you about. Bedding the Negress until I died of a heart attack. Only it was strong this time. Different. So intense, I woke up sweating.

When I sat up—the window is at the foot of my bed— I saw through a slit in the curtains: a FACE looking in— nose pressed up to the glass. The light was so bad, and I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like the Indian's face, and he had the same expression he wore that day I went over to talk to him and look at their wagon. A superior, knowing look. It was like he was saying with his eyes, "Do you like the dream I sent you?"

I reached for the lamp to light it, but by the time I did, the face was gone.

One last thing. The dream about the woman was the same—except for one major difference. It was her skinned corpse—the way she looked that night Hirem and I buried her—that I was making love to.

Now, tell me, am I crazy?

I don't think you're crazy, Doc," the Reverend said.

"But I'd be a liar if I said I swallow all of this whole. I think you believe what you're saying, but you just might be terribly mistaken."

"As for seeing the face at the window," Abby said, "I believe you, Dad. But it was part of your dream. You feel guilty for what happened to the Indian and the Negress-think maybe you could have stopped it. As for your sexual interest in the woman—that's only healthy. But you feel you must be loyal to mother even in death, and the dreams make it seem you're defiling her memory, cheating on her. Your last dream, making love to the corpse, was a combination of both of those guilts."

Doc's face was slightly flushed. "Possible, I suppose."

"You may also feel guilty about your envy of the Indian's abilities," the Reverend said. "Perhaps, deep down, a part of you feels he got what was coming to him. But all of us have those kind of feelings to one degree or another. You're torturing yourself for nothing, Doc "

And the Reverend thought to himself: I, on the other hand, have plenty to feel guilty for.
"It still doesn't explain the similar wounds on the necks of Foster and Nolan. The man in the street."

"All right, Doc. Let's say that all this is true. What do we do?"

"I'm not sure," Doc said. "But I've come to believe there is more at work here than my guilt or imagination. I believe there really is a curse, and if there's any way of finding out how to deal with it," Doc waved a hand, "it's in these books."

The trio sat silent for a while.

"Hell," Doc said finally. "I feel like an old fool. You're right, of course " He poured himself a shot of whisky and downed it. "It's in my head. All of it."

II

The Reverend and Abby walked outside along the alley that led to the street.

"You have to forgive Dad his mumbo jumbo" Abby said. "He's gotten fanatic about it

since Mama died."

"No apology necessary. I think your dad's a fascinating man." What he was thinking and didn't add, lest Abby feel the need to apologize for him, was that he thought Doc might be onto something.

"Perhaps this is a little undignified, Jeb. But I'd like to see you again."

"You will."

She took his hand. The next moment she was in his arms and their lips pressed together.

It was even better than he thought it would be.

When they pulled apart, he looked a little flustered.

Confused even.

"Bad for your business, huh, Jeb?"

"A Reverend shouldn't be kissing beautiful women in an alley."

She smiled. "Remember, you promised to see me again." "Tomorrow." They kissed again, and the Reverend told her bye. Quickly.

III

Doc knew Abby and the Reverend were struck with each other, and it did not bother him. He was actually pleased. The Reverend impressed him as a good man, though there was a personal streak of torment in him. About what, he did not know, but he understood. He bore a similar scar because of the Indian.

But he didn't think guilt was entirely the problem. He hadn't changed his mind completely. Mud Creek was cursed.

Doc did not go back to his office that afternoon. He had no patients and nothing pressing to do. He combed through his books and made notes. What he found was very disturbing.

IV

The Reverend went back to his room and opened his Bible to Revelations.

The blood drops were still there. They had not been a dream.

He walked over to the window and looked out. It was easing toward evening. Another

hour maybe.

He sat on the bed and cleaned his revolver.

Then he loaded six and made sure his coat pockets were full of ammunition. He didn't know exactly why.

V

Joe Bob Rhine left the livery shortly before dark, leaving David a few chores to finish up, including carrying some old harness up to the loft for storage.

Usually, the loft was of no concern to David. But in the last few days, though he had not consciously thought about it until this moment, he found that the idea of going up there disturbed him.

He found himself even wishing his father were still in the livery, and that was most certainly not a common thought. Generally, anytime he was around his father, he felt ill at ease, never knowing when the man would be angered and fly off the handle—either verbally or physically.

If his father were in the shop, he thought, the idea of going up the ladder with the harness wouldn't be so bad. But being alone with darkness setting in, he felt most uncomfortable.
The horses weren't happy either. They hadn't been for days. They rolled their eyes and snorted and were hard to manage. His pa said it was the weather. That it made them skittish.

Maybe so. But David couldn't remember ever seeing them like this. They didn't seem so much skittish, as just outright scared.

Looking up at the loft, he felt as if eyes were on him, and he sensed something—the word came to him—EVIL.

It was dumb, but that's what came to him. Evil in the loft.

It made no sense. About the evilest thing in that loft were rats. Nothing else.

He told himself that twice, took a deep breath, took hold of the harness, and started up the ladder.

Closer he got to the top, the stranger he felt. As if he was certain something was lurking up there at the edge of the loft, waiting to reach out and clamp down on him. He had a vision of a great hand snatching him about the top of the head, lifting him from the ladder like a hound dog pup, and dashing him to the ground below.

Another step on the ladder, and he thought he heard a creak from above. Like rusty hinges.

And he could smell a dead odor.

Maybe a nest of rats had died up there.

The creak again.

He stopped.

Now he heard nothing. But the smell was strong. Almost overwhelming.

Another step and he was peering over the edge of the loft.

There was an old plow crate up there. Dirt was caked on its sides, as if it had been buried.

And for an instant—a quick instant—he thought he had seen the lid settle down, as if someone were hiding inside the crate and had closed the lid quickly.

He found he could not swallow. He didn't remember that crate.

All he had to do was take another step, then another, and he would be level with the loft. Then he could walk across the loft through the maze of hay up there and hang the harness on a peg against the wall.

That's all he had to do.

But he couldn't.

Pa was going to beat him with a knotted plowline for sure, but he couldn't. There was no way he could move his feet. He felt cold, as if it were the dead of winter. And above all, he felt frightened. It was like knowing a snake was coiled nearby, ready to strike, but you didn't know where it was.

David swung the harness off his shoulder and tossed it up onto the loft as hard as he could, then started down the ladder.

Halfway down he heard the creaking again and stopped.

Looking up, he thought he saw through the cracks in the loft, a set of blazing eyes and the thinnest definitions of a face.

He dropped the rest of the way to the ground, rushed out of the livery, and pushed the doors shut. He slipped the padlock in place, and then, leaning against the doors with his

palms out, he breathed hard.

Placing his ear against the door, he listened. But there was nothing to hear except the horses moving about restlessly.

He thought about the eyes in the loft and felt foolish. Rat eyes most likely. He ought to unlock the padlock, go back inside, and put that harness up right. That's what he ought to do. Spare himself a beating from his pa by hanging the harness up right.

But it was getting darker, and inside the livery it would be darker yet. And he just couldn't bring himself to go back in there.

He began walking briskly toward home.

VI

Darkness had not taken full hold, but it had set in, and fingers of its shadow clutched the town, drawing it slowly into its fists.

And the nightwalkers were almost to town.

And in the livery the horses trembled in their stalls, rolled their eyes to the loft and finally to the ladder, as a shape—fluid as water—descended.

VII

The sheriff, in his office, looked out at the darkening street and locked his door.

He put on his new hat and sat down at his desk, the barred window at his back, got out the whisky and a glass and poured himself a healthy shot.

He wasn't going to make his rounds tonight. No way. In fact, he might never make them again. He was considering moving on. Maybe to West Texas, or Oklahoma. He wanted to be shut of Mud Creek, and fast.

He poured another shot. Then another.

Damn. He couldn't even get drunk.

VIII

When Jim and Mary Glass heard their granddaughter's voice outside, it was more than a pleasant surprise. She had been given up for dead.

They had just been considering how they could tell their daughter and her husband. The

idea of sending a wire or a letter did not appeal, yet they hated taking a wagon trip to Beaumont and telling them face to face that the child had not arrived, and they had no idea where she was.

They felt responsible. It was their suggestion that the little girl come to visit them by stage, and now the stage and the girl were missing.

Until now.

A child's voice, and they knew it was Mignon's, was calling outside their door.

Almost together they rushed the door.

Mary won out and opened it.

There, standing in the early darkness, in the dirtiest clothes imaginable, was Mignon. She held a doll in her hand, her fist clutched tightly about its cotton neck.

"Grandma," the little girl said, and the voice was as cold and hollow as the first blow of winter.

"There's something wrong with her eyes," Jim said as Mary reached out for the little girl, and Mignon went into those arms rapidly, her teeth clamping through her grandmother's neck like a hot knife through butter.

Mary screamed. Blood spewed out of her neck, and she fell back against the doorjamb holding her hand to her throat.

The little girl whipped away from her grandmother and charged Jim. She latched both arms around his right leg and shot her head into his crotch, her teeth crunching into his testicles, ripping his clothes and flesh like rotting sailcloth.

Jim swung his arm around and knocked her across the floor.

At a glance he saw that his wife was dead. The blood flowed from her neck in small streams. Her eyes had rolled back into her head.

He stumbled two steps, grabbed a hat rack for support, and turned toward his granddaughter.

She came running across the floor fast as a cat. She put a foot on his knee and climbed him. She dropped the doll. Her hands went around his neck and her fingers latched together.

"A kiss for grandpa," she said, and her head arched forward, and with a clamp of her teeth

and a twist of her head, she tore his throat out.

Jim collapsed to the floor. He tugged at her some more, but to no avail. He could hear and feel her tongue darting between her teeth, lapping at his blood. Then he heard no more.

IX

When Mignon finished feeding, there was little left of Jim's face.

A few moments later, faceless, he rose. His teeth—

looking like sugar cubes in the midst of tomato pulp with eyes—snapped open and closed a few times. He was hungry.

Mary stood up. Her head hung at an angle, and one side of her dress was bright red.
She walked out the door toward town and the living.

Jim followed.

Then Mignon picked up her doll and went after them.

Grandfather, grandmother, and granddaughter were going into town for supper.

X

Just about dark, Buela heard the singing.

It was bad singing and it was muffled and it was coming from somewhere outside the house. Still, she recognized the voice.

Her sister, Millie.

Buela went outside, carrying a lantern.

"Millie, my God, is that you?"

No answer—just the singing—like a dying bird chirping down in a well.

"Millie, I'm here. Where are you?"

"Hungry," came Millie's voice. "So hungry."

Now Buela had it pinpointed. The voice was coming from the root cellar. But there was nothing but water in there.

Buela suddenly had it. Millie had been lost. Something terrible had happened to the stage, and Millie had been lost. Maybe she was delirious with hunger, half out of her mind, hiding in the root cellar. Down there in that foul water.

Buela hiked up her skirts and rushed toward the root cellar.

"I'll feed you, darling. Just you hang on. I'll feed you."

Buela jerked back the door on the root cellar.

There was no voice or singing now. Just blackness. Lizards of fear scuttled up her body.

"Millie?"

She held the lantern down into the root cellar.

And there was Millie's face, a dirty moon in which worms squirmed. Slime dripped out of her hair.

"My God" Buela said.

Millie's hand shot forward and grabbed the arm with the lantern and yanked.

Buela screamed, but only briefly. She went under the water, and the lantern went out.
But true to Buela's word, she did feed Millie.

XI

The undertaker, Mertz, was at work. He had Nate Foster fixed up and dressed in a suit the sheriff had brought over from the banker's house, and Mertz was of the opinion that Nate had never looked better. He hoped the worms appreciated all this work.

On the other hand, the amount of work he'd put in on Nate had tired him. And considering Nate had about as many friends as a ground rattler, he should have just stuck him in the box and got him buried before he bloated.

Looking at Nolan lying there on his slab, he decided that was exactly what he was going to do with this one. Neither were exactly the sort that drew mourners—though Nate would have some paid-for mourners. They were more the sort that drew flies.

Mertz thought the best move with Nolan would be to strip him of his clothes, wrap him in an old sheet, and put morning early—before he stunk so bad and swole out the sides of his pine box. That had happened to Mertz once at a cheap funeral. He'd stuffed old man

Crider in a box without embalming him and kept him overnight. Next day at the funeral—out in the hot, July sun—the bastard bloated like a whale. Luck had been with Mertz, however, and the body didn't cause the sides of the coffin to break open until after the family left. And stink—it was worse than a week-old rotted string of fish. Mertz and his gravediggers pushed Crider in the hole and got him covered pronto.

Course, Nolan already stunk. And something awful.

Mertz went over and looked down at the body. He was an ugly hombre. Maybe Mertz should at least clean the dirt out of his eye socket.

Nah. In for a penny, in for a pound. He'd just strip him, put him on ice, and get him planted early tomorrow morning. He already had a couple of gravediggers lined up. When that was over, he had Nate's funeral, and he would make some money off that. Even if no one cared about Nate. There might even be a few people come by to gloat.

Mertz turned up the lantern hanging over Nolan's slab, walked around to Nolan's feet, turned his back on the corpse, took hold of one of the stage driver's boots, and tugged it off.

He held the boot down to one of his feet to measure. Nope, not a fit.

He took hold of the other boot and pulled. It wouldn't come.

"Come on, you sonofabitch!"

Nolan sat up on the slab. Dirt dribbled from his eye socket and dropped from his hair.

Mertz quit tugging.

The back of his neck was crawling.

He heard a noise over on the other slab where Nate was dressed out. Glancing that way—in the shadowy light cast from his lantern—he saw Nate swing off the slab.

Kids playing tricks he thought.

But then he caught a glimpse of Nolan sitting up on the slab behind him.

He let go of the boot and turned completely around.

And Nolan grabbed him.

XII

Abby was standing in the doorway of the lab, framed there in her nightgown by the light flowing down the hall from Doc's study. She was holding Doc's shotgun.

"I heard shots—My God, what was that?" Doc looked up from where he was leaning on the table. "The living dead. Just like I told you. Now do you believe me?"

Abby merely nodded. "I—I saw it walking. I couldn't shoot. Not with this—too close—My God. It fell apart."

"Yeah. Now, I've got to get you out of here. Come on get dressed."

XIII

The Reverend smelled rain. He thought perhaps that was what had awakened him.

Whatever, he was restless and could not sleep. He went to the window and looked out.

The rain was starting to come down in big drops. The wind had picked up and it looked as if it might storm.

The Reverend looked at his pocket watch. Late.

He lit the lantern, sat down on his bed, and read from his pocket Bible.

XVI

Once it began, it happened fast. The dead were hungry. They went to the houses of friends, relatives, and enemies. Those of the living who were not completely devoured soon joined in the hungry ranks.

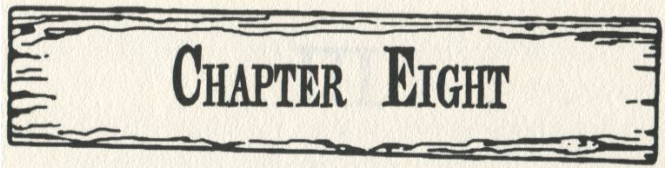
XV

The Reverend decided on a walk. He could neither sleep nor concentrate on his reading. He dressed, dropped the pocket Bible into his pocket, and went downstairs.

III

THE FINAL SHOWDOW

I SAW THEIR STARVED LIPS IN THE GLOAM,
WLTH HORRID WARNING GAPED WIDE...
—KEATS



When the Reverend passed Montclaire, the fat man was sleeping, as usual. On the desk were four greasy plates and the sad remains of a chicken that Montclaire had ravaged.

The Reverend stepped out into the street, and at that moment, as if it were waiting for him, all hell broke loose.

Down the street came David, running at full speed. When he saw the Reverend he began to call out. "Help me, Reverend. Help!"

At a considerable distance behind the boy, the Reverend could see Joe Bob Rhine. He was coming at a quick sort of stumble in pursuit of David.

David practically ran into the Reverend's arms.

"Whoa!" the Reverend said. "You and your father have a fight?"

The boy's face was wet with tears and marked by panic. "He's going to kill me, Reverend. Make me like him. For the love of God, Reverend, help me!"

The idea of slapping a fist into the side of Joe Bob Rhine's head greatly appealed to the Reverend. He didn't like the big bully. But on the other hand, he didn't want to meddle in personal affairs which were none of his business, and violent activity this late at night (or early in the morning, depending on one's outlook) offended his sense of decorum.

But he would see the boy didn't take a beating.

"Maybe I can talk to him." the Reverend said.

"No, no," David said looking back over his shoulder. "He's dead."

"What? Why there he is, boy," and the Reverend pointed at Rhine who was lurching up the street as if his feet were tied together by a short rope.

"He's dead I tell you!"

The Reverend looked at Rhine again, and as he neared, he saw there was blood all over his face and neck. He looked to have suffered a terrible wound. In fact, there were large chunks out of his face and bare chest. The Reverend thought perhaps David had done it in self-defense. An axe maybe. And Rhine, injured (but certainly not dead) was coming for

revenge.

"Look!" David said.

The Reverend turned. Out of the alleyway that led to Doc and Abby's house, a horde of people appeared.

"They're dead, Reverend. I don't know how, but they are. And they can walk—and—they tore my mother apart." The boy broke into a sob. "Broke into our house. Got Ma— tore the guts out of her. And Pa, he—I got out of a window. For Christsakes, Reverend, run!"

More people appeared behind Rhine, They came out of alleys, out of buildings and houses. It was a small army of stumblers.

The Reverend put one hand on his revolver, pushed David up the street before both ends were closed off. They had gone only a few steps, when out of the alley by the Doc's office, came a buggy. Doc was driving, popping a whip, and Abby was sitting beside him, holding a shotgun.

The crowd of dead in front of the buggy were knocked aside by the horses, and the buggy charged into the street.

"Doc " the Reverend yelled.

Doc saw the Reverend and David. He hesitated for an instant, perhaps trying to determine if the two were alive or dead, then he pulled the buggy hard right—raced toward them.

A man grabbed at the buggy wheel then fell beneath it. The wheel went over his neck, breaking it. But when the buggy passed, the man rose—chin dropping on his chest— neck bone sticking jagged out of his nape—and walked.

Doc slowed enough for David and the Reverend to swing in back, then he whipped hard left and started down the street toward the church at a gallop.

A crowd of dead citizens had gathered in their way. As the Reverend pulled his revolver, Doc yelled, "Hit them in the head, only way to stop them."

Abby raised her shotgun and fired. One of the zombies, missing the top of his head, fell to the ground.

The Reverend's revolver barked four times, and in the wink of an eye, four of the zombies were wearing holes in their heads. They fell permanently lifeless to the ground. Doc pulled the small revolver from his belt with his free hand and blew out the eye of a woman as she clutched at the side of the buggy.

A big man (Matthews who owned the general store) leaped astride one of the horses as the buggy rumbled through the crowd, clamped his teeth into the back of the animal's neck. A gusher of blood streamed from the horse, it stumbled, the other horses tangled their feet and went down.

The buggy tumbled over and pitched its occupants. The Reverend came up rolling. The fallen horses kept most of the zombies occupied, the guts of the animals were stretched across the street as the dead battled and tugged for the edibles.

The Reverend jerked around to David's yell, and there was Montclaire, looking far more active than he ever had in life. The Reverend slammed the barrel of his pistol into Montclaire's head, and David jumped behind the man, hitting him in the back of the knees bringing him down.

David scuttled to the Reverend's side as Montclaire lumbered to his feet.

Abby had lost her shotgun, and Doc, standing beside her with his pistol, was firing steadily, dropping the creatures. His gun would soon be empty.

David darted for the shotgun Abby had lost, grabbed it. The Reverend raced behind him. A little girl David's age charged at them. David, hesitating only a moment, raised the shotgun and fired. The shot hit the girl in the neck and her head flew up. The body whirled in a circle, pumping blood, and finally fell. The head landed in the street, teeth snapping.

David froze, looking at it. The head was trying to bite the ground with its teeth and pull itself along.

The Reverend snatched the shotgun from David, and using the empty weapon like a club, smashed the head.

Now Montclaire and the others were closing in, pushing the Reverend and the others into a tight circle.

"Run for the church," the Reverend said. "It's holy ground."

"You?" David asked.

"Do as I say, boy."

David wheeled, darted between Montclaire's legs, then turned hard left, dropped, and rolled between two others, and he was in the clear. He broke for the church.

The Reverend, swinging the shotgun, was driving them back—like Jesus scattering the money changers.

He worked his way to Abby's side. "Go," he said. "Go for the church." And he swung the shotgun—the stock striking skulls and arms—making a cracking sound against flesh and bone.

The crowd grew thicker, but the Reverend kept swinging and the sea of dead parted, and Abby, Doc, followed by the Reverend (running backwards for a ways, knocking them back) scampered for the church.

They darted up the church steps, clutched at the door latch.

It was locked.

"Calhoun!" the Reverend bellowed. "Let us in." Doc kicked at the door and yelled, "Open up! Now! Calhoun!"

The dead were closing now. The Reverend saw Montclaire in the lead. Greenish drool strung from his lips and almost touched the ground. The Reverend thought grimly: "Even in death, Montclaire is in the forefront when it conies to food."

As the dead neared, all four of the living kicked, hammered, and yelled at the door.

The door did not open. The zombies were at the church steps. The Reverend handed his revolver to David, cocked the shotgun over his shoulder, ready to crush skulls.

But the zombies had stopped at the bottom of the steps. They swayed back and forth like snakes before a charmer, moaning hungrily.

"What's happening," David screeched, holding the revolver stiff-armed before him.

"Holy ground," the Reverend said. "The power of God almighty."

"Don't praise too much," Doc said. "I can guarantee you this. It's going to get worse before it gets better."

The door opened. It was Calhoun, shaking, holding a poker in his hand. His face was white and he looked stupefied.

"I—I heard you," Calhoun said.

They pushed past him, closed the door, and threw the large wooden bar.

Calhoun lowered the poker. "I thought you were— them. They've come twice already, but they stop at the steps—I saw them catch poor Miss Mcfee. She came here for sanctuary, but she didn't reach it—I heard her screams. I opened the door and looked, and she was

looking at me, reaching out. But they had her, biting, biting—for the love of Jesus I couldn't go out there. There was nothing I could do—they ripped her apart—ate her."

"You did the right thing," the Reverend said. "They'd have killed you."

"If you were lucky," Doc said.

They went to the barred windows and looked out. The dead were starting to string around the church.

"Are we safe here?" Abby asked.

"Only for a little while," Doc said. "Until their master comes."

"Master?" Calhoun said.

"The Indian—the curse he put on the town. That's what it's all about, Calhoun."

"I didn't touch that man, or his woman."

"Doesn't matter," Doc said. "From his point of view, we're all guilty. The entire town. And that includes you too, Jeb."

"The Lord brought me here for a showdown, and I'm here," the Reverend said.

"You don't think I'm imagining things anymore?" Doc said.

The Reverend managed a grim smile. "Only if we all are, Doc."

Caleb was hammering on the sheriff's door.

"Matt, let me in. Do you hear? Let me in."

Matt (who had been sleeping on a bunk in the open cell) had heard the commotion outside earlier, seen the Reverend and the others battling up the street, understood what was happening, but he had laid low. He figured if he could hold out until daylight, he might have a chance. And now that asshole Caleb—the bastard responsible for all this—was beating on his door, bringing them right to him. He could see the horde of the dead clutched in the street, moving toward the sound of Caleb's voice.

"Open up, you sonofabitch," Caleb yelled. "I know you're there. Open up! They're gonna eat my ass."

And choke, I hope, thought Matt.

Matt went to the window, looked out. And Caleb was looking in.

"Open up, for Pete's sake," Caleb said.

Behind Caleb, the dead were gathering into a thick wad, moving toward their meal. Matt had a sudden flash that they reminded him of the mob that had been here the night the Indian was hung, and in another way, they reminded him of how the townspeople looked when they gathered in the street for the annual potluck dinner.

"The hell with you," Caleb said. His face disappeared from the window.

Matt hesitated, then ran to the door, threw back the plank, and opened it.

Caleb had his back to him, a revolver in each fist. He bobbed his head to look at Matt, stepped inside. They closed the door and threw the plank in place. "You asshole," Caleb said. Matt didn't answer. "I fought my way clear across town—they're eating people, Matt. And the dead get up and walk."

"I know," Matt said.

Without warning, Matt leaped toward Caleb, grabbed him by the shirt front, flung him over the desk—against the wall. He jerked Caleb to his feet and yelled in his face. "This is your fault, you bastard. You're the one that got the Indian hung. You're the one really done it. You're...."

One of Caleb's revolvers came up through Matt's arms and the barrel touched Matt's top lip.

"Let go. What say?" Caleb said.

Trembling, Matt let go.

And then he caught something out of the corner of his eye. A dead face at the window.

And another.

Then something worse.

Between the two at the window he saw someone crossing the street carrying a large crate.

The Indian.

"Holy Mother of God," Matt said.

Caleb looked.

"Jesus Christ with a wooden dick and shit and fall back, that's the big bastard himself. He looks mighty spry for a hung and lightning-struck fella."

Caleb put one of his revolvers on the desk, opened the other, and began to reload from his gunbelt. "Let's see that bastard eat lead. Now unlimber some of them Winchesters over there or we're dead meat— walking dead meat." Caleb lit the lamp on the desk to provide shooting light.

The Indian had moved to the window. He bent down and looked in. His face was the worse for wear. It looked to be slowly rotting. He set the crate down before the window, and pulled off the lid, leaned it forward.

The woman inside did not look like a woman. She did not look human. Caleb and his mob had hacked away her features and skinned her, so there was nothing left of her former beauty. Membranes covering her stomach had broken open, and a strand of intestine poked out like a shy snake.

Matt, who was loading a Winchester, found his eyes locked on the creature in the box, and he knew immediately who it was, though he had not witnessed her torture.

He looked at Caleb. "You bastard!"

"That's what my old Ma called me too," Caleb said.

The Indian went away from the window.

There was a loud thump at the door.

The wooden bar cracked.

The thump turned to a boom and it was repeated.

One of the Indian's big fists broke through the wood, grappled for the doorbrace.

Caleb leveled his revolver and fired three times into the arm. The bullets struck, went through, plopped into the thick wooden door. The arm still weaved about like a tentacle.

"Toss me that Winchester!" Caleb yelled.

Matt, almost in a daze, did so.

Caleb stuck the revolver in his belt, caught the rifle, cocked it, and fired three quick shots through the door.

The arm stopped.

Momentarily. Now it clasped its palm against the door and pulled. The hinges creaked, groaned, screamed.

The door came off and the Indian tossed it into the street. For a moment he stood framed in the doorway, his dead servants crowding around him for a peek.

Matt loaded a shotgun (after spilling half the box of shells on the floor) and he began to back up toward the open cell.

Caleb had not moved. He fired the Winchester three times. All three shots dusted harmlessly against the Indian's chest.

The Indian smiled.

Caleb fired again. The shot hit the Indian in the left cheek and made a small neat hole but had no effect.

"You shiteater," Caleb said. "Come and get me." Caleb grabbed the barrel of the rifle, swung it over his shoulder, and the Indian—fast as a bullet—moved.

The Winchester came around, and the Indian's big hand grabbed it by the stock and jerked it free of Caleb's grasp. With a wrench of both hands, the Indian twisted the rifle in two.

Caleb went for his revolver.

The Indian caught his hand.

"Not nice" the Indian said." Not nice at all." The Indian squeezed.

Caleb screamed as his hand and the butt of the revolver became one, human flesh and bone welding with iron and ivory.

With a backhand slap, the Indian knocked Caleb down.

Dazed, Caleb looked up. The Indian reached down, took hold of the strand with the ears on it, snapped it free of Caleb's neck.

Turning his head, the Indian looked at his servants waiting impatiently in the doorway. He smiled. "Feed," he said, and the dead rushed in.

Caleb screamed as they descended on him. Teeth snapping at his clothes, throat, and stomach.

He tried to back crawl, but they held him down. He bellowed as an old man's jagged handful of teeth snapped into his arm.

A woman's head struck at the soft part of his stomach, ripped through his shirt, and tore his flesh—deep. An intestine jumped out of the wound in a short gray coil, and then it was in the woman's teeth, and she rose, stretching it, trying to rip it free. Another woman dove at the extended gut, and it snapped in half—the two of them tumbling over the desk in their frenzy to pull it from one another—like two ravenous blue jays squawking over a large, juicy worm.

Hands dipped into the wound, more guts were uncoiled, faces met Caleb's face, and chunks came out of his face and neck. After a moment, bathed in gore, his innards stretched all over the sheriffs office, Caleb finally ceased to scream.

Frozen with fear, Matt had backed into the cell and pulled the door shut. The Indian tied the strand with the ears on it around his neck, walked over, and put his face against the bars.
Matt let go with both barrels of the shotgun. The Indian's head jerked back a foot, then returned to stare through the bars. The shotgun pellets hit him just beneath the nose and down his chest. The little balls of lead dripped out of his flesh and rang on the floor. The Indian's laugh wasn't quite as loud as the slurping and sucking and chewing that was going on behind him.

The Indian took hold of the bars, and slowly, with a smile on his face, he began to bend the bars apart. He put his head through the space he had made and grinned at Matt.

Matt dropped the shotgun, pulled his revolver, and put the gun to his own head. He cocked back the hammer. Closed his eyes. And hesitated.

But just for a moment, then he pulled the trigger.

Matt's hand was snatched away, and the bullet slammed harmlessly into the back wall of the cell, and Matt, his eyes wide open, saw that the Indian was in the cell—holding the revolver's barrel—smiling at him.

The Indian snatched the revolver away. It clattered across the floor. The Indian opened his mouth. His teeth winked silver-white in the dim light made by the moon's beams struggling against the clouds and the rain, and the flickering lamp light.

The Indian's jaws opened wider, and wider. There was a snapping sound as they came unhinged like a snake's. A loud hissing sound came up from the Indian's throat, and the head snapped forward, engulfing Matt from chin to nose.

Matt screamed, and inside the great mouth it made the faintest of echoes as it rushed down the Indian's throat. There was a nauseating crunch as gouts of blood sprayed from

either side of Matt's face.

The Indian, who had been leaning slightly forward, straightened his head, and as he did, he lifted Matt— kicking—off the floor. The Indian shook his head like a dog worrying a bone, and Matt flopped like a wet rag.

A last shake of the Indian's head, and Matt's face came off, and Matt splattered to the floor and slid until his head hit the far wall He was lying face up, and there was no face. His forehead had collapsed, and his ears seemed perched on the edge of a precarious cliff, like inept climbers about to tumble in.

A ragged hunk of flesh poked out from beneath the Indian's big, sharp teeth, and with a quick gulping motion, it disappeared into the maw that was the man-thing's mouth. An instant later the Indian spat out a stream of Matt's teeth, like a sick man disgorging too many after-dinner mints.

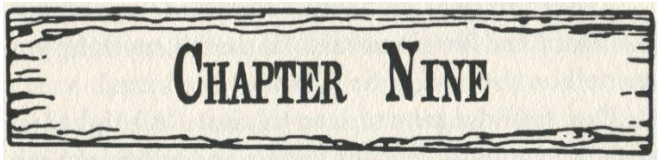
The Indian turned his bloody face toward his followers and smiled to see that Caleb was standing up, guts dripping from his belly, the wound showing backbone in its wet depths as well as a gnawed rib.

Lifting his head to the ceiling, the Indian let forth a demonic howl that sent bloody spittle clear to the ceiling.

The defenders inside the church heard the howl, and for a brief time they stopped ripping up the pews, hammering them over the windows and doors, and listened.

Outside the zombies turned their heads in the direction of the howl as if it were a symphony, and this was the tune that they most wanted to hear.

The howl went on for a long time, and it seemed to the Reverend (paused with hammer in hand, a nail between his teeth, the other hand holding a fragment of pew bottom over a barred window) that it was both a cry of mourning and triumph.



This is how the defenders in the church prepared for the siege to come:

They moved shotguns, rifles, and revolvers from the storage room, loaded them all, armed themselves with some, and placed the others down the pew rows, leaning them against or on the seats, ready to be grabbed up and used in an instant. The trick was to hold ground as long as possible, and if you had to back, you backed down that long aisle toward the storage room—the last stand—and there were weapons on either side of you as you went.

Breaking up the first few rows of pews, they used hammers and nails in a woodpecker frenzy to barricade the door and the windows, and as the zombies had not made another move toward the church, it had given them a good length of time to prepare properly.

Calhoun held a revolver in his hand. "I've never used a gun in my life—I can't abide them."

"Now's the time to learn," the Reverend said. "And learn to like them. They will be your most important companion shortly, I'm sure."

The zombies stood near the windows, looking through the cracks in the slats nailed over them.

"What are they waiting for?" Calhoun asked no one in particular.

"Their master," Doc said. "His word."

"Doc," the Reverend said, "if there's anything you can tell us that might help, now is the time."

Doc found a pew to lean against. "All right," he said. "I'm going to cut the details and tell this quick. I can't explain it, I'm just telling it. The Indian is a shaman, a magician. He put a curse on this town and accepted a demon into his body so that he might live after death and have revenge. The demon gives the Indian powers. This church will hold the zombies for a while, but not if he pushes them. And he will. The power of this church is uncomfortable to him, and he will send them to do his bidding. If they can't, then he himself will come. And the closer it gets to morning, the more likely he is to try himself. When daylight comes, his powers wane. We can find him then and kill him, and there won't be much he can do against us. Sunlight is like poison to him.

"The zombies are like bees and he's like the queen of the hive. They are of one mind. HIS. They can be stopped by destroying their brains. The Indian's magic only works on corpses in which the brain survives. I don't know how or why. No more than I know why some potions might call for a toad's eye or a black moth's wing. But that's the way it is. Shoot them in the head. Crack their skulls good. That's the way to stop them."

"And the Indian?" David asked.

"Not the same. The demon controls his body and keeps him alive, no matter how worse for wear he becomes. The only way to stop him is with sunlight, or holy objects. But the person behind those objects must believe in them. If his faith falters, they'll fail."

The Reverend put his arm around Abby's shoulders, "You're sure about all this, Doc?"

"Hell no," Doc said. "You think I fight ghouls every day of the week? I read it in a goddamned book." He paused. "One other thing. This walking dead business—it's like a disease. One bites you, it's like being bit by a mad dog. Only worse—you become just like them. If you should get bit—I advise you to use the gun on yourself."

II

The town was dead.

And the dead walked.

The Reverend, looking out through a crack in the wooden slats watched them. Once, in San Francisco, he had seen at least fifty rats leave a docked ship by a docking rope, and this reminded him of that time. Red, hungry eyes and all. The zombie that in life had been Millie Johnson appeared at a slit in the window and looked in at the Reverend. She licked her lips with a thick tongue. A stream of stringy snot dangled from her left nostril falling nearly to her left cheek. She moaned gently, as if the Reverend were a prize steak she coveted. Finally, she moved away to prowl about outside the church in search of a better way in, and when she moved, the Reverend saw the Indian.

He was in the middle of the street—walking—a crate on his right shoulder, and the rain seemed to part for him.

Calhoun (who had been watching from the other window) turned away, fell to his knees, and began to pray.

The crowd of dead parted for the Indian, and the Indian stopped near the church steps and set the crate upright. He tore the lid off and revealed the corpse to those in the church.

Doc, now beside the Reverend, said, "His wife— what's left of her."

The Indian turned to the corpse, took off the strand with the ears, and slipped it over the head of the body. He then kissed the blackened, lifeless lips and looked back at the church.

Down the street came more dead. The sheriff, faceless, among them, and Caleb, dragging guts and limping along because most of his right ankle had been chewed through.

The Reverend and the Indian seemed to lock eyes, and Jeb was surprised to feel a wave of pity wash over him for the red man. He too knew how it was to have loved ones taken away, only in his case it had been purely emotional. As far as he knew, his family (though surely his sister had been cast out of it) were alive and well.

Now they were both here: he, God's representative for good, the Indian, the Devil's pawn for evil. Two forces about to meet head on.

But the Reverend did not feel so self-righteous, and he could not look upon the Indian as purely dark and evil.

The Reverend turned to look at Abby. She tried to smile back at him, but the muscles in her face would not quite make the effort. The Reverend was assailed by a sudden thought that made him feel even less self-righteous, if more joyously human. He wished he had taken Abby to bed and known her in the Biblical sense.

It seemed only fair that two people who loved one another and were possibly going to die should have had that experience. Now, unless they survived, it would never happen. He had kept the laws of God, but not the laws of his heart, and he was uncertain if he felt better for having done so.

He looked at David. He felt a kinship for the boy, as if he were his own son.

The boy was sitting on a pew, holding a shotgun, his face smeared with dirt, his hair streaked with the same, and love went out of the Reverend and embraced the boy.

David, perhaps feeling the thought, turned to look at the Reverend, and he tried to smile, managing it only a little better than Abby had.

The Reverend turned to look out the window again. The Indian had not moved and was still looking in his direction, as if his eyes were deliberately tracking in on the Reverend's.

The Reverend looked away. He broke open the shotgun for the fifth time to make sure it was loaded, then he checked his revolver for the fifth time also.

He leaned the shotgun against the wall, put the revolver in his sash, walked over to Abby, and put his arms around her. "I love you," he said abruptly. "Come what may, I love you."

She put her weapon aside, and embraced him, kissed him long and deep—a kiss of love, and perhaps farewell.

For the moment of truth was about to begin.

III

The dead began to ease forward. Very slowly at first. They went up the steps and took hold of the bars in the windows and pushed their hands out to touch the wooden slats. Their fingers wriggled through cracks in the boards and gently tugged and pulled out again.

The church defenders moved back and took position in the wide center row of the church, facing the bolted doors. The Reverend and Doc stood side by side, and just behind and to the left of the Reverend was David, and to Doc's right was Abby, and dead-center-rear was Calhoun, who was shaking so hard you could hear his stiff clothes wrinkle and his teeth click.

Now the window nearest the door creaked as a board was pushed forward, the nails flying from it like bullets, and it fell to the floor. The Indian smiled at them, his teeth colored with blood. He took hold of the bars with his hands and pushed his face close and looked inside.

"Boo," he said.

Trickles of smoke curled up from the Indian's hands where he touched the bars, and he removed them quickly, little bursts of fire blazing in his palms.

The Reverend looked at Doc. "Holy ground?"

Doc nodded. "As long as it's holy to us, it will be holy to him. But they're outside now. It's when they come inside, and you're face to face with them. That's when our faith will be tested. And if his faith is stronger...."

"We'll die."

"Worse."

The Reverend looked at his watch. Dawn was just a little more than an hour away. He had just returned the watch to his pocket when the zombies began to make their move.

The door began to bulge, as if it were a great chest trying to take a deep breath.

Boards across the windows cracked, and faces of zombies took their places, peeking in through the bars. One zombie gnawed madly at a bar, his teeth powdering out of his

mouth as he did. Others wrenched and pulled madly at the barrier.

And now big hands appeared—the Indian's hands, and though they smoked with contact, he jerked— with a nerve grating screech—the bars from the windows one by one.

"Reverend?" David said. He had moved up close.

"Yes," the Reverend said.

"Been nice knowing you."

"Don't count yourself out till the very last, boy. Trust in God and that shotgun. Just tuck it tight against your shoulder and aim for the head. Don't panic. Keep cool, and when you've got off your two shots, load again, backing if you have to. If you're being pushed too hard, forget the shotgun. Pull the revolver and shoot point blank. Got me?"

"Yes sir."

"David?"

"Yes sir?"

"I love you, boy."

"I love you too, Reverend."

"Jeb. You should at least call me Jeb."

"Jeb."

Zombies began to push their way through the windows all around the church.

The Reverend lifted his shotgun to his shoulder. "Hallowed be thy name, oh Lord—and shotgun do your stuff."

The Reverend blew the head off one of the zombies who was writhing through.

The decapitated creature slid backwards out the window and out of view.

And the siege began.

IV

Zombie heads began flying to pieces. The dead were pushing hard and fast, and at first the defenders kept up with them, dropping them as they came through, holding them

back, but there were so many, and they were so constant, that soon the church was full of the things, and they were without fear, for they knew only hunger and the desires of the Indian.

The guns of the defenders roared, and soon the church was constipated with the acrid smell of gunsmoke, and the weapons were hot in the hands of the defenders, but they continued to reload and fire, and it seemed as if they might hold forever.

Bodies were piling in front of them like dog turds, and to their left and right, bodies draped the pews or clogged the narrow aisles between them.

But there was still enough time to reload and keep the zombies weeded faster than they could overwhelm the defenders, and the Reverend felt hope and even thought for a moment that things would be all right—that they would hold until daylight saved them.

Then the door burst open, splinters raining inwards, and zombies tumbled in like little pebbles before a great ocean wave, and the Reverend and Doc tried to hold the front, firing, reloading, but the wave was furious now, and they were surrounded and nerve-wracked, and each time they reached into their coat pockets for ammo there were fewer and fewer shells, and now it was necessary for them to toss their weapons aside (though the Reverend maintained his Navy in his sash) and grab the emergency weapons leaning against the pews.

Sometimes the smoke was so thick a zombie was not visible until his dead face and clicking teeth parted the smoke cloud and pushed near the face of one of the defenders.

Nearly all the killing now was done at point blank. Blood, and brains, and flesh fragments were thick on the floor. The Reverend and the others found their feet slipping in the muck, but still they held.

Now there came a pause in the attack and the gunfire died. Cool, wet wind blew in from the storm, and the smoke clouds roiled and turned clear.

The defenders saw now that the church was full of the dead. They were as thick as seed ticks on a cow's udder.

Outside, at the foot of the church steps, stood the Indian. The fragmented church doors flapped back and forth in the wind like ragged bat wings, giving the defenders a now-you-see-him-now-you-don't view of the man.

The Indian raised his hands to the storm, and little blue tendrils of lightning reached out of the sky and touched them. It was as if he were drawing power from the storm. He opened his mouth, and it grew wider and wider until it unhinged. The horrible, sharp teeth were visible and a sound like a death scream magnified came out of his throat and mixed with the howl of the storm, and the storm became more ferocious. The dead, as if charged

by the Indian's storm charging, began to move en masse toward the defenders.

For a moment (too horrible a moment) the Reverend saw them as people: men, women, and children. There was Montclaire, Caleb, Cecil from over at the cafe, others he had seen about town but who he could not put a name to, and they began to cry out to the Reverend in shrill, ugly voices, cry out for him, a man of God to embrace them and save their souls.

"Pay them no mind," Doc shouted. "They are beyond saving unless the Indian dies."

On came the dead, their voices a litany of names and entreaties, spoken time and time again.

Calhoun turned to see two zombies coming down a row of church pews, pulling aside their truly dead companions, coming with a greater determination than ever before.

Calhoun quick-shot the one in back, missed its head, and blew away the right shoulder of the one in front. He cocked back the hammer on the double barrel and fired again, this time hitting the nearest creature in the head, sending the top of its skull flying off in a spray of brains and blood.

Calhoun broke open the shotgun and fumbled for two shells, trying not to look up at the approaching zombie and the others coming behind him.

His pockets were empty.

He looked up.

The zombie was before him, teeth bared.

Calhoun dropped the shotgun, tried to go for the revolver in his belt, but the foul breath of the zombie froze his hand for a flash-instant too long. The zombie's head dipped quickly, took a chunk out of Calhoun's face. Then, as Calhoun screamed, the zombie hooked both of his arms around the screaming preacher, as if they were lovers, and began biting plugs out of his face like a chicken pecking grit. Abby heard Calhoun scream. She wheeled around, saw the zombie holding Calhoun.

"Sorry," she said, and just as Calhoun turned to look at her, she shot him through the head. He flopped in the zombie's grasp.

The zombie turned his head toward her, as if to express his disappointment at the turn of events, but the only sound he managed, before Abby shot him through the right eye, was a grunt. The zombie and Calhoun melted to the floor.

The dead were swarming like bees. The smoke was getting thick again and it burned the

defenders' eyes. The roar of the guns had nearly deafened them. They could hardly hold the weapons up, their arms were so tired. And still the dead came on. Pushing. Driving the defenders back toward the store room, causing them to lose ground so fast they no longer had time to reload at all. They were forced to snatch up new weapons from the pews (and there were few left), fire them empty, and exchange them for others.

"We can't hold," Abby said.

"Make for the storage room," Doc said.

David and Abby—as if by instinct—turned back to back with Doc and the Reverend, ready to defend the rear, and they walked forward, as their companions walked backwards, fighting all the while. Doc swung the barrel of his Winchester at a zombie who came leaping through the smoke, and the sound of it striking the dead man's skull was as loud as a shot. It was Nolan. His skull cracked open and a burst of brains, like puked oatmeal, spewed onto Doc.

Nolan's falling body parted the Doc and Reverend, pushing Jeb a bit more to the rear, and pushing Abby forward.

The Reverend didn't need a flash from God to know that their defense was falling apart, and it looked as if they would not make the storage room, for now zombies had worked down the pews and were standing before it.

• • •

David's shoulder felt as if it were going to fall off. The shotgun's recoil had worn it raw. He stole a moment to rest his arm.

The shotgun he held had only one round left, and then he had the revolver in his belt, a bit of ammo in his pocket—and all that would be left after that was using the weapons as clubs—and finally nothing more than assholes and elbows until the end—which would not be the end, but a horrible beginning of sorts.

A hand came out of the smoke and confusion, grabbed the barrel of David's shotgun, wrenched it from him, and sent it clattering off into the pews and zombie bodies.

David whirled around to stare into the face of his father. It looked strangely calm, in spite of the face wounds and the splatterings of blood. David jerked the revolver from his belt, pointed the gun at his father.

And froze.

He could not pull the trigger.

Many times he had hated his father to the point of wishing death on the man, but now, when his life depended on it—and he tried to tell himself his father had no real life to lose—he could not pull the trigger.

Rhine grabbed David by the shoulders and shot his head forward, knocking aside the revolver David held. David screamed, knowing what was next and hoping he had the strength to blow his own brains out, lest he too become like the dead. And then there was a shotgun stock between him and the snapping teeth of his father.

Rhine bit a chunk of wood from the stock, and the stock moved back toward Rhine's face. Teeth and blood flew and Rhine went down. The Reverend appeared in his place.

"Move back, boy," the Reverend yelled. "Keep it going."

David came unfrozen, began to use his revolver, but he was moving backwards by inches only. The zombies were thick as buzzards on a dead cow.

Hands came out of nowhere, clutched at the defenders. They knocked them off and kept trying to move backwards—toward the last stand—the storage room. The zombies were like a living, biting wall.

Montclaire, fat and bloody, grabbed Abby by the collars, lifted her off her feet toward his slobbering mouth. Abby cracked the barrel of her .45 across his forehead, hard, and Montclaire staggered. The dress ripped and Abby fell to the floor, crawling over brains, blood, bodies, and spent cartridges, looking for the gun she had dropped.

She found her pistol on Rhine's chest, grabbed for it, but Rhine's hand came up and gripped hers, Rhine lifted his head. His skull was cracked, but the Reverend's blow had not been fatal. Rhine snapped his mouth forward and bit off Abby's thumb.

Abby let out a cry, jerked free, crawfished backwards.

David spilled over her, fell across his father, and rolled. When he came up, Rhine was rising, and Abby's revolver fell from his chest to the floor.

David leaped for it, got it, came up rolling, twisted back to look at his father's face, and this time, he fired. Rhine's nose disappeared and he fell back with a slap.

David spiraled to his feet, tried to help Abby. Zombie hands grabbed both of them. He slugged and kicked his way free, but Abby didn't make it. A zombie slipped in the gore, went down, grabbed Abby's leg, bit through dress and kneecap. Another got her in the small of the back. One bit deep into her shoulder.

Stiff-arming her way clear, she staggered toward David. He got an arm around her waist,

felt her weight slump against him. And then standing in front of them was the faceless sheriff and Caleb (still dragging guts, though most of them had been ripped out).

David shot Caleb in the face, and he went down. The sheriff bobbed his head forward and hit David with the bloody maw that had once been his face. A thick swathe of blood traced David's already powder residue-, blood-, and brain-splattered face, but without teeth, Matt could not inflict a wound.

David shot the sheriff in the maw of his face, and Matt, at peace at last, went down.

Abby lifted her head, and when she did, she saw the Reverend's back. At the same moment, the Reverend turned, and their eyes met. He saw the wounds.

"I love you," she said, and she snatched the revolver from the bewildered David's hands, pushed herself upright, put the cocked revolver under her chin, and pulled the trigger. Like a frightened prairie dog leaping from a hole, her brains jumped out of the top of her head and she crumpled at David's feet.

David reached the revolver from Abby's hands, looked at the Reverend.

"The storeroom," the Reverend managed. "Lock yourself in. You might make it, boy."

"Not without you," David yelled.

The Reverend kicked a zombie back, slugged another aside. "Do as I say, you little bastard."

David shook his head.

At that moment, Doc went down beneath a horde of zombies, and the Reverend, stepping back to avoid snapping teeth, clubbed his attacker in the ivories-shattering them—clubbed again, cracking the zombie's skull, dropping him.

Doc was swarmed. The zombies were on him like a pack of dogs. He cried and twisted his face toward the Reverend. Just before more zombies dropped down on Doc, the Reverend tossed aside the shotgun he had been using as a club, drew his revolver, and shot him in the narrowly exposed part of his head.

Abby and Doc dead, the life almost went out of the Reverend, but then, with the zombies diving for Doc, a path was cleared, and in a twinkling of a second, the Reverend saw the Indian.

The Indian was still standing at the base of the church steps, the storm screeching around him like a great horned owl. Behind him, the Reverend thought he could see the faintest hint of oncoming daylight.

There came a smile to the Indian's face that seemed to say: "I know what you're thinking, and you won't make it."

Snarling, the Reverend darted toward David, who had his back against the storeroom wall, and who, due to Abby and Doc being prey for the monsters, had a short lull in the onslaught in which to gain a breath. He had not tried to go into the storeroom.

Three strides brought the Reverend to the door. He snatched David up, opened the door, and set the boy inside by the scruff of his neck. Stepping in beside him, he tried to pull the door closed, but a zombie's face appeared, and then a hand, and the hand clutched the door and pulled.

The Reverend flicked out a left jab, knocking the dead man back, then he grabbed the door and tried to slam it, but the zombie was not giving up. He clutched the door, tugged, and the Reverend went sailing into the zombie's arms.

Up came the Reverend's revolver, under the zombie's chin. The Reverend fired, the dead man went down (dead for good this time).

And now they were all on him, trying to bite him, take him down like they had Doc, but the Reverend was fast and slippery. He spun, twisted, kicked, punched, cracked out with the barrel of the Navy, trying to find freedom. A kick in the face kept a twelve-year-old boy from biting him, a twist of an elbow hit a man in the neck and stumbled him back, a ducking of his head left teeth to snap air, harmlessly above him.

Then David was beside him, firing his revolver three times—BLAM—BLAM—BLAM—and three zombies went down. It was the space they needed, and the Reverend pushed David back through the door, sending him ass over heels a few steps down the stairs, then the Reverend was clutching the knob with one hand, pushing the Navy into his sash with the other, then he had both hands on the knob, and up came David, grabbing at the Reverend's waist, serving as an anchor.

A zombie's hand was stuck between door and jamb, stopping the closing, and the Reverend, grunting, giving it all he had, and David doing the same, pulled, and the zombie's fingers cracked, snapped, and fell like little sausages onto the top step, and the door went closed, David leaping up to throw the little, weak-looking latch.

Safe.

For a moment.

The door rattled fiercely.

"Single-minded, ain't they," David said.

The Reverend nodded.

"It won't hold them will it?"

The Reverend shook his head, found the lamp and matches on the shelf beside the door, and lit it.

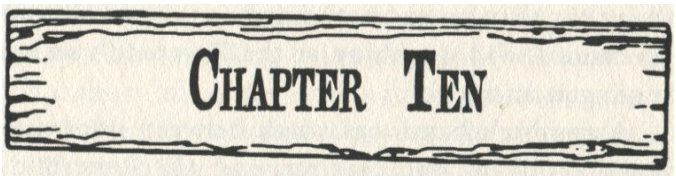
The door rattled steadily.

"We're dead meat, aren't we, Reverend?"

"If we can hold until daylight, we've got a chance. Can't be much longer."

And then he thought: "But how much longer do they need?"

"Come on," he said, "let's go down."



At the bottom of the stairs, the Reverend climbed on top of some crates and leaned toward the curtained window. He flicked back the curtain. The window, like the others, was barred. There would be no sneaky escape route. They were trapped like rats in a flooding ship.

But a flickering of hope surged through him. He could see the first pink rays of morning. He let go of the curtain and climbed down.

"Only way out of here," he said to David, "is the way we came in. But it's almost sunup. We might make it."

The Reverend loaded his revolver with the remaining rounds in his coat pocket.

Altogether, he managed five rounds. "One short of a full house," he said. "And you?"
"Empty," David said hollowly.

The Reverend handed David the Navy.

"No," David said. "You're better with it. I do okay with a shotgun or pistol at point-blank range—but—well, you keep it. And Reverend. Don't let me end up like them— know what I mean?"

The Reverend nodded grimly.

The door stopped rattling.

David and the Reverend looked up the stairs.

"Have they gone away?" David asked.

The Reverend glanced toward the curtain. From where he stood, he couldn't see daylight, only the light of the lantern he had set on a crate.

"I don't think so," the Reverend said.

Then there was a bang like the end of the world. The door at the top of the stairs had split apart, and the tip of the great cross that had hung on the wall poked through.

The cross was pulled out and came back with a terrific wham! The door split completely

open and fell away, except for a fragment that swung out on the one remaining hinge at the top.

The Indian stepped into the doorway, holding the cross. His hands were spilling forth white smoke where he held the cross. Even his boots where they touched the hallowed ground boiled smoke.

But the Indian was smiling. And perched on his shoulder like some terrible parrot, chattering like a monkey, was the little girl with the doll.

Behind the Indian and the little girl, the dead pushed forward, licking their lips, moaning eagerly.

"They're mine," hissed the Indian, and the dead moved back.

The Indian stared at the Reverend for a long moment, as if to show him that the cross and the church were not enough. "Greetings from hell, preacher man," he said, and he tossed the huge cross at the Reverend and David.

The cross struck the floor where the Reverend had stood, and the end of it came slamming down on the last two stair steps, shattering them to splinters.

The Reverend jerked up the Navy and fired, hit the little girl in the forehead, sent her flying from the Indian's shoulder. Her doll came clattering down the stairs.

"How noble," said the Indian. "Saving a little child from hell." Then stretching out the words:

"But who will save you?"

The Indian started down the stairs.

Perhaps it was instinct, the desire to do something, even if you knew it was futile.

The Reverend shot the Indian through the forehead. A hole appeared, but the Indian continued down the steps.

The Reverend saw the spider-thing birthmark on the Indian's chest and knew that this was prophecy of his dream come true. In the dream he had been devoured by the spider-thing, and in a symbolic way, that was about to become a reality.

The Reverend found his eyes latched to the spidery marking, and he felt the terror of the dream again—the long boat with the boatman in black, poling into the spidery maw of doom.

And then a thought came to him. Perhaps, if the Lord had revealed his evil through a symbol in a dream, he had also revealed the evil one's Achilles' heel.

He fired a shot into the spider-thing on the Indian's chest.

But no. The Indian laughed.

Then the Indian moved, like a flash of lightning he moved, and he had the Reverend by the throat with one huge hand, lifting him off his feet, to look him in the eyes.

And behind the dead eyes of the Indian were the blazing fires of the demon, and the Reverend saw the bullet holes in the head, the little pieces of lead shot from Matt's shotgun puckered there, and the rope burn on the neck, and the spider-thing on his chest—the spider-thing that seemed to crawl in the darkness.

The Reverend's breath came in gasps. His tongue protruded. His feet kicked. The gun hung limply in his right hand, plopping uselessly against something in his pocket—

THE LITTLE BIBLE.

Holy objects, if you believe in them, Doc had said, if you believe in them they have power.

Tossing the revolver to his left hand, the Reverend pulled the Bible free with his right hand and pushed it into the Indian's face, calling upon the God almighty in his head, since he had neither the wind nor the tongue for it.

Upon contact with the Indian's face, the Bible blazed, burned out the big man's right eye. Growling, the Indian twisted his head, and his cheek sent the Bible flying across the room, where it struck a crate and fell in a smoking ruin to the floor.

Smoke curled out of the Indian's eye socket, and a sudden cairn came over him. He smiled at the Reverend and said, "Little, little man."

The Indian opened his mouth. His jaw came unhinged.

All of this had happened in seconds, and for part of it David had stood frozen, mesmerized, but now he moved, hammered against the Indian's legs.

The Indian, with a brush of his hand, sent David spinning roughly into a crate, as if he were nothing more than an annoying dog trying to hump his leg.

David rolled to his feet and pulled his jackknife from his pocket. Opening it, he rushed forward, slammed it into the Indian's leg.

The Indian swatted David with his free hand again, this time the blow was so vicious, it knocked the boy against a crate with such force he seemed to drip down the side of it.

The Reverend was losing consciousness. He could see the great mouth opening and the impossible teeth growing, could smell the odor of death churning up through the tunnel of doom—covering him with its stink as if it were an oversized nightcap.

And then, just before all went black, he saw out of the corner of his left eye, a ray of sunlight—just a tiny needle of light, but light, just the same.

Painfully twisting his head to the left as far as the Indian's grip would allow, he saw that by straining his left eye, he could see the rope that held the curtain over the window.

Even as the Indian was about to engulf the Reverend's face, the Reverend lifted his left hand, fired the revolver, missed (there was the sound of tinkling glass), fired again, and cut the rope.

A thin sword of light stabbed in and broadened as the curtain swung fully aside, and the room went from black to golden.

The zombies at the top of the stairs screeched in chorus, not only was light edging in at them from the storeroom, but it had crept upon them, unnoticed, from behind. In a mad scramble they turned to flee. The Indian, who had been diving his head forward for the fatal bite, was hit full in the face by the sunlight, and it was like a blow to him.

Screaming, he thrust the Reverend from him, smashing him into a crate, turned, and started up the stairs, taking marvelous leaps. The Indian's back started to puff black smoke.

"You okay, Reverend?" David asked, helping him up.

"Yeah. Thanks to your distraction."

"I didn't do nothing. That was some shooting."

"Yeah," said the Reverend. "It was, wasn't it?"

He pushed the revolver into his sash and they went up the stairs, slowly.

The church was on fire. Zombies had burst into flames from the sunlight, had heaped up amongst the shattered pews, and had fallen against the walls, setting it ablaze.

The Indian stood in the center aisle. He was trying to make his legs move, but they were melting like candle wax, flowing out of his pant legs, filling his boots.

He dropped to the floor, face first, arms out in crucifix position.

The church was really ablaze now. The walls had caught good and the flames had spread to the rafters. The old roof was creaking threateningly.

The Reverend and David made a run for it, leaping over the dissolving body of the Indian as they went. The Reverend first. David second—

—and one of the Indian's hands shot out and grabbed David by the ankle, pulling him to the floor. Wheeling, the Reverend saw the Indian's ruined, blackened face, the jaws spread, showing teeth through rents in his cheeks, and like some sort of monstrous lizard, the Indian lunged forward—his teeth snapping against David's face.

Too late, the Reverend leaped forward, kicking the Indian's head. The head, like a powdered ball of ash paper, came apart and the teeth scattered like rotten peppermints to join the smoking remains of the other zombies on the blood-slick floor.

When the Reverend turned to look at David (hardly able to do it), the boy was staring at him, a look of horror on his face.

The Reverend dropped to his knees to help him up.

"No good," David said. "I'm a goner. Kill me."

But the Reverend could not bring himself to do it. He knew the thing for him to do was take his empty revolver and smash the boy's head without warning, but he simply could not.

With his arm around David's waist, he helped him outside, avoiding blazing timbers and the burning remains of zombies. By the time they had gotten down the steps, fire had totally claimed the church, and a tongue of flame licked out of the doorway at their backs. The Reverend laid David down in front of the crate that held the Indian's woman, held the boy's head up with his hand.

"Feel weak," David said. "I—I'm so sorry."

Blood was running down the boy's cheek, into his shirt collar.

In a moment, the wound would sicken David to death, then he would live again. Or rather the shell—that had been David—would move. And it would be hungry, ready to bite and spread the Indian's poison.

"For the sake of God, Reverend—Jeb. Don't let this happen to me," David moaned.

The sake of God, thought the Reverend, frozen, unable to move. THE SAKE OF GOD!

That old bastard had certainly gotten his pound of flesh out of this one. Pounds of flesh. He has made everything I touch sour and decay. Defeating the Indian, his evil, was nothing but an empty victory.

"Please" David said.

"Okay, son " the Reverend said, and he got his feet under him, began looking about for something to do the deed with other than his revolver. Something heavy or sharp.

Then it was out of his hands.

David closed his eyes and breathed no more.

The Reverend stepped back, staring at the body, wondering if the Indian's disease could be spread after he was dead.

David's eyes popped open.

The Reverend pulled the empty revolver from his sash. It would have to do after all.

David pulled his feet beneath him, stood. But the rays of the sun were on him, and immediately he began to dissolve. He let out one little screech, caught fire, and fell.

II

The Reverend buried what was left of David behind the church and made a rude cross out of some blackened wood. He put the lid on the crate with the woman's body in it, stacked kindling around it, and set it on fire, burned it until it was nothing more than gray ash that was caught up by the wind and carried away.

He let all the stock he could find in town go free, then he took brands from the smoldering church, worked them to flame, and set fire to the town—lest some monster might be hiding in the shadows of a building, waiting for sundown.

Then, with his horse saddled and a few supplies taken from the General Store, he rode out of Mud Creek.

Up on the hilltop, the same from which he had first surveyed the town, he looked down at the smoking ruins and the little blazes here and there and thought of Abby, Doc, and David. He thought of all the lives— literally gone up in smoke—because of a savage moment on a dark night.

He thought about God and his harsh ways, and tried to figure some answer for it, but none would come.

Finally, he turned the horse, gave it his boot heels, and disappeared into the tall East Texas pines.

III

What the Reverend didn't see was a very large spiderlike thing—the exact shape and size of the birthmark on the Indian's chest—crawl out from beneath the shadowy protection of a fallen church beam and move lumberingly, smoking all the while, puffing up little spurts of flame, toward a large hole that had once been beneath the church and had been the home for a prosperous ground hog.

It tumbled into the hole, out of sight, and a wisp of dark smoke belched out after it to temporarily mark its passing.

Then the smoke was gone and the sky was clear and the day turned hot.