

THE LONESOME SWAMP MYSTERY

A
HAL KEEN
Mystery
Story

HUGH LLOYD

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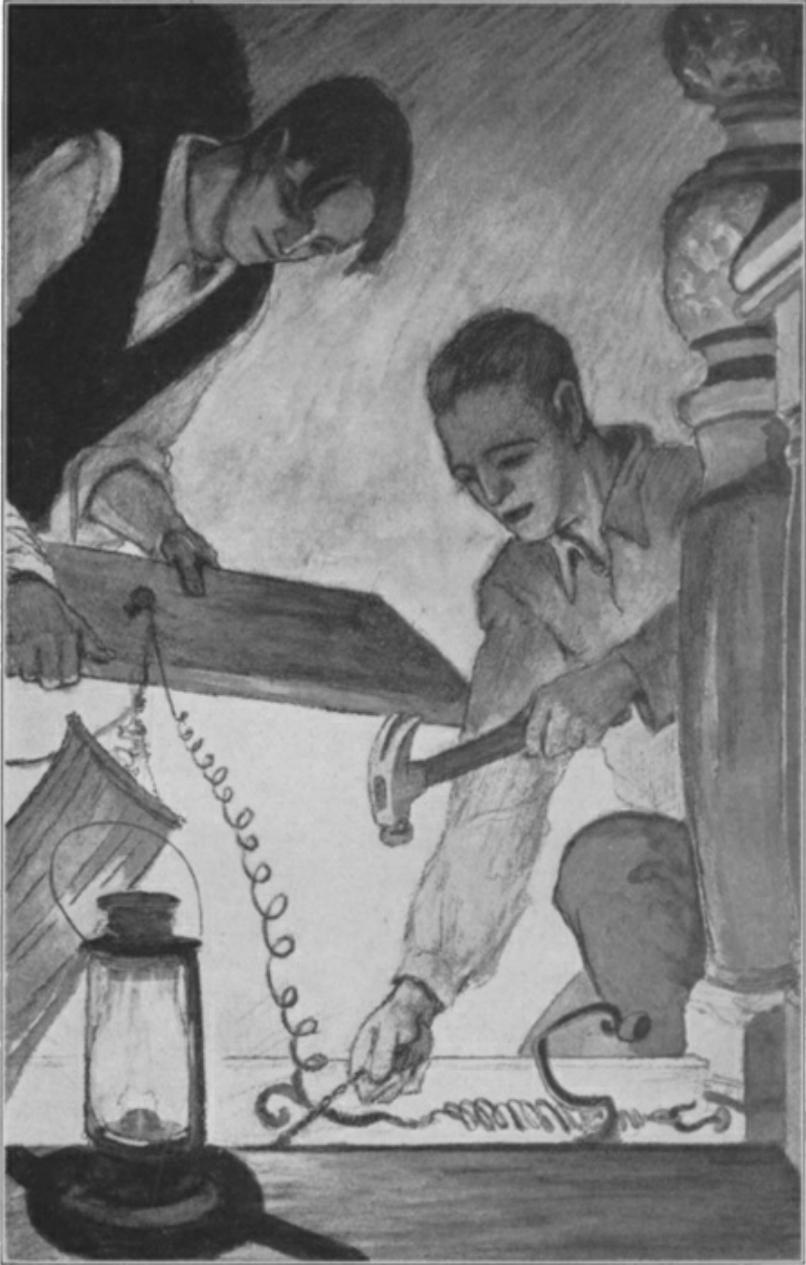
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THE LONESOME SWAMP MYSTERY



HAL POINTED DOWN INTO THE CAVITY——

A HAL KEEN MYSTERY STORY

THE LONESOME SWAMP MYSTERY

By

HUGH LLOYD

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"THE HERMIT OF GORDON'S CREEK,"
"KIDNAPPED IN THE JUNGLE," ETC.

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THE LONESOME SWAMP MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

STORM

Storm clouds had been gathering since sunset and now in the gloaming they were massed and ready to loose their pent-up fury upon valley and hill. Wind whistled and screamed along the concrete highway, but so far, Hal had managed to keep his trim, sport roadster just ahead of it. Suddenly, a deafening peal of thunder rolled over the Ramapo and its frowning green hills stood out in bold relief as lightning flashed across the murky heavens.

The velvet shadows on either side of the road were full of dismal sounds and eerie echoes. Trees bent their leafy heads before the masterful gale and the rustling foliage moaned in a strange, small voice. Then, as the rain swept down from the mountain, they noticed the car ahead blinking its rear light on and off like an evil red eye in the dusk.

Hal switched his lights on full and sounded his horn twice, notwithstanding the fact that the car ahead was at least five hundred feet distant. He was not taking any chances in a storm, he told himself.

The echo of the melodious warnings had not died away, however, when two answering blasts from the car ahead sounded through the howling storm. Then the rear light blinked its evil red eye again, twice; three times in all.

Hal glanced at his uncle who was sitting beside him, eyes fixed ahead and frowning thoughtfully.

“Strikes you as being strange too, Unk?”

“It does,” Denis Keen answered, straightening up in his seat. “They’ve turned in somewhere there, Hal. No doubt they just wanted to warn you of it, thinking perhaps you couldn’t see them in this driving rain. By the way, I’m getting rather soaked.”

“Here too. I’m terribly sorry, Unk. I must remember to put those curtains back in their place the next time I dust the car. I always do it, but this morning I must have been in a hurry and just forgot. They’re on the bench in the garage.”

“Where they’re not doing us a bit of good,” Denis Keen interposed smilingly. “Well, I left Washington last night, vacation-bent and a good soaking is what all vacationists must expect sooner or later. Now or never, eh? Your mother will be worried if she discovers those curtains in the garage. She won’t rest until she comes to the conclusion that we’ll both be down with summer colds by tomorrow.”

“Maybe she’ll come to the conclusion that we’ve both been able to get

under shelter somewhere,” Hal said hopefully.

“Maybe she’ll be right,” said Denis Keen suddenly. He put his hand on Hal’s tanned arm. “Stop a minute—I’ve got an idea. There’s a road in there—see?” he asked, peering past some old stone ruins to the left.

“Looks like a little country lane to me,” observed Hal.

“Certainly it is. It widens out, though, beyond the first bend. It’s the Lonesome Swamp Road—runs past a dismal section bearing the same name. The place has quite a history. Guess you don’t remember it, eh?”

“The road? No. I haven’t even any idea of where we are. How are you so sure, though, Unk?”

“You forget that your mother and I were born and brought up in this region. As children, your father and mother and myself had lots of fun on berrying parties out at Lonesome Swamp. Guess there isn’t a native living who knew the Ramapo any better than we did. Well,” he added with a reminiscent sigh, “we’re getting wetter all the time, Hal, so you better turn in. Eight miles will bring us to the cottage of an old fellow by the name of Cyrus Price. You don’t remember that name either, eh?”

“Nope,” Hal answered, intent upon turning his roadster about. He pointed to two freshly made ruts in Lonesome Swamp Road. “Guess that car ahead turned in here too.”

“Looks that way. Few people know of its existence, it’s so isolated and remote. Only the old timers including your mother and myself, of course, remember that the name of Lonesome Swamp was a byword with the American people.”

Hal was for once indifferent to the promise of an interesting anecdote, for his whole attention was centered upon the slough that the storm was making of Lonesome Swamp Road. He switched off his dashboard lights and let the gathering night engulf them.

The headlights glared over the streaming ruts and the car bumped steadily forward. In places the road was so narrow that the trees all but arched overhead and their overhanging boughs more than once lashed torrents of rain across the faces of the two shelter seekers.

“Of course it’s a very bad road,” said Denis Keen apologetically. “Neglected terribly, eh? But then what can one expect in such an unfrequented place! Main thing, it’ll serve some purpose to us tonight. Besides, we can take a short cut down another lane after we leave Cyrus Price’s cottage.”

“To Ramapo?”

“Mm. If I remember rightly it cut off about ten miles when I was driving a buggy.”

“That’s nothing to shout about if that lane isn’t in any better condition than this one,” Hal chuckled.

“Don’t you care, Hal,” said Denis soothingly. “We’ll be at Price’s before very long and we’ll dry out thoroughly.”

“I hope so,” Hal said, ruefully surveying his soaked, white polo shirt. He brushed back from his high forehead a streaming lock of red, curly hair. “Dripping into my eyes, running down my nose—what a night!”

A deafening peal of thunder drowned out his uncle’s response. For a few minutes they rode on feeling very small in contrast to the great roaring voice of the elements. Then they became aware, almost simultaneously, that the freshly made tracks of the car ahead were no longer to be seen.

“Must have turned in, huh, Unk?”

“Apparently. I didn’t seem to notice just how far back, did you? No? As far as I can remember there’s nothing but bypaths—not a road crosses this one. I’m certain of....”

The figure of a man stepped suddenly into the glare of the headlights. He raised his arms, waving them just as Hal jammed down the brake and pulled the emergency.

“That you—” he called in hoarse accents. He ran up to the roadster, shading his eyes as he ran.

“Who did he say?” Hal asked his uncle.

“I didn’t catch the name either.” Denis Keen leaned over the side of the car and shouted, “What is it, my man?”

The man stopped short at the sound of his voice and they caught a flashing glimpse of flat features and small, blinking eyes filled with surprise. The next second he was gone, vanished into the darkness and storm as if he were a part of it.

“Gol darn it, Unk!” said Hal vehemently. “Did we see a frog-faced man, or didn’t we? Did we hear him call to us, or didn’t we hear anything?”

“I’m wondering too, Hal. It was a most singular thing. Where did he come from? Where did he go?”

“Wouldn’t I like to know!” said Hal. He leaned over the side of the roadster. “Darkness to the right of us; darkness to the left—darkness behind and....”

A short, muffled whistle sounded above the gale, but was quickly spent in the storm’s renewed activities.

CHAPTER II

A TALE OF LONESOME SWAMP

“Now what do you suppose that was?” Denis Keen asked as he looked about.

“Don’t I wish I knew!” Hal exclaimed. “What do you say we nose about, Unk?”

“And get our feet so wet we’ll live up to your mother’s expectations?” his uncle returned. “I guess not. Not for all the mysterious strangers in the world, Hal. I won’t be guilty of abetting such foolishness. You just step on the gas there and let’s get to Price’s as fast as is possible on this road. I actually feel chilled sitting in all this rain.”

“Then it’s a question of comfort versus curiosity, huh, Unk?”

“Exactly. And comfort is going to win out, I can tell you that. I’m soaked just enough to be dictatorial.”

“Atta boy, Unk,” Hal laughed good-naturedly. He started the car again, adding, “Anything you say. I dragged you out on this ride this afternoon and it’s up to me to get you back in as good condition as I can. But I can’t get it out of my head that there’s something queer on Lonesome Swamp Road.”

“You’re not the first to say that, Hal. It is reputed to be haunted, you know. In point of fact, the old timers will tell you that the whole region is infested with ghosts.”

“Go on, Unk!”

“That’s what is said. You don’t suppose I would countenance any such nonsense though, do you? I haven’t been on this road since I was twenty years old. That was the day they dragged Price’s Mill Pond for Dorkas Sharpe’s body. He committed suicide just a month to the day that his father, Eli Sharpe, was murdered. They never found Dorkas’ body. Some said he must have put a stone around his neck and that he sank into the quicksand that covers the bed of the pond. Others put forth the theory that his body must have floated on to the rapids and so to the river into which it empties.”

“Mm,” said Hal, shifting back into second because of a particularly deep rut, “murder, suicide! Do you mean to tell me that that all happened around here? When did it happen and where’s Price’s Mill Pond?”

Denis Keen’s light blue eyes twinkled through the darkness.

“How you do get started at the least suggestion of mystery!” he teased. “Well, on this occasion even I wouldn’t blame you. I got started myself when it happened, particularly because of the circumstances surrounding the whole

weird tale. I was just about your age then, and equally as gullible.”

“Aw, Unk! Not as bad as that. There’s lots of things that even I don’t swallow.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Denis chuckled softly. “But to get back and answer your question—Price’s Mill Pond is so called because of an old grist mill that Cyrus Price ran about thirty years ago. It overlooked the pond of course and was situated not one hundred feet from the cottage. But it burned down and as he hadn’t any insurance to cover it, the loss was irreparable.”

“And this fellow’s cottage we expect to dry out in shortly, huh?”

“Yes. He lives alone—farms, fishes, etc., to keep body and soul together. His life has been most tragic; nothing but death, loss, heartache and disappointment. He’s lived two heartbreaking lives in one. I’ve often wondered how he could bear to stay in that little cottage of his, for the position of the house is such that he must needs see the desolate Sharpe Mansion every time he looks up the hill. And what a commanding hill it is! One can’t help glancing up there if only because of its bleak, forbidding aspect. Cyrus Price must find it doubly forbidding, I should think. You’ll see why after we pass down the hill, leaving the mansion behind. I used to find that the thought of the tragedy haunted me all the way down to Cyrus’ cottage. And on a night like this—well, it revives old memories, brings them back with a lucidity that is startling.” He stared hard into the darkness. “Ah, we’re leaving the woods behind, Hal. That means we’re all set to climb the hill. She’s pretty steep, I warn you.”

Hal got a good start, though a fresh onslaught of rain and wind obscured everything but the streaming ruts which were illuminated by the headlights. Had it not been for the obviously tremendous effort that the engine was making he wouldn’t have known where they were going, uphill or down. Beyond the shining screen of light was a dark gulf into which the rain was slashing. It gave him a queer, shivery feeling.

“And so we’re soon to pass the famous Sharpe Mansion, huh, Unk?” he asked, gladdened at the sound of his own voice.

“Yes,” answered Denis Keen musingly. “The Sharpe Mansion—deserted and boarded up these twenty years. That and the whole estate which takes in this whole region back to the highway has been hanging fire in the courts all this time. The law has been loath to declare Dorkas Sharpe dead as his body has never been found. But now I understand they’re about to decide that nothing but Dorkas’ ghost will ever haunt Lonesome Swamp again.”

“I should think so,” Hal laughed. “I wouldn’t want to rise up alive from Price’s Mill Pond after lying there for the past twenty years. Whew! What decided Dorkas to hie himself out of this vale of tears?”

“His father’s tragic ending, of course. Dorkas had been a wilful,

spendthrift, dissolute son and his father's sudden death brought a remorse that was worse than sickness. He brooded over it, began acting queerly and finally the trustees of the estate got a letter from him one morning telling them that he could not stand it to live any longer. He said that the memory of seeing his father lying murdered was too much for him to carry through life. He would put an end to memories, he wrote, particularly the memory that he himself had failed to be a dutiful, grateful son. The remorse was too much, now that he could not tell his father he was sorry. He would walk out of life, he concluded—down to the Mill Pond and on to a life beyond.”

“And so they dragged the Mill Pond?”

“But to no avail. Dorkas made certain that not even his body should be dragged back to this mortal coil. And a good job he made of it, I guess. In any event, the estate will probably be given over to Glen Stuart, an orphaned grandchild of old Eli Sharpe's who was living with his eccentric grandfather at the time of the murder. He was only five then, poor youngster, and the courts sent him out west in the care of some relatives. He's been there ever since. Let me see—he must be twenty-five years old now.”

“I must have just about made my bow to this dizzy old world, then, huh? Think of me squawking like mad and cooing in a crib while all that excitement was going on! Boy, the things a baby misses! But what gets me is that I've lived so near Lonesome Swamp all my life and never heard of it.”

“It's because human beings are forgetful. Time accomplishes what we don't and Lonesome Swamp and its tragedies were all but forgotten before you were three years old. It is such a sequestered locality that it is only natural a motor-going public should never know about it. Part of it runs through swampy road as its name indicates, and the other part is this terrible hill.”

“Which is enough to make it sink into oblivion,” Hal agreed heartily. He was having a time of it then—the sounds emanating from his motor were ominous and they had already stalled twice. “The distributor, Unk,” he explained worriedly; “rain like this and a road like this aren't helping it any. You see, it's right in the front where it gets the full brunt of the rain. And going uphill like this with the wind against us, the fan just sucks in all the water coming our way, consequently the whole engine will be soaked and we'll stall for quite some time, that is, until she dries out. I hope we can make this Price's place before she gets too much water.”

“Let us hope so, Hal. I fancy I see an outline of Sharpe's garden wall. If so we won't be so much longer in getting to Price's. You won't get so much water going downhill, will you?”

Hal shook his head and strove to feel hopeful. But they were just crawling along then, struggling toward the summit of Lonesome Swamp Hill.

But at last they got there with the engine sputtering and laboring along at a

snail's pace. Hal forgot his annoyance at this, however, for a sudden blinding flash of lightning lighted up the entire hill and he saw a narrow turret raising its gaunt head high into the storm-blackened night. In the flash that followed, he saw the crumbling garden wall, and the house, all but hidden in the undergrowth behind it, seemed to rest uneasily on its creaking foundation. He couldn't help but liken the structure to some gaunt old witch and the still more gaunt turret made an admirable dunce's cap on her weather-beaten old head.



A SUDDEN BLINDING FLASH OF LIGHTNING LIGHTED UP THE ENTIRE HILL.

He confided this impression to his uncle immediately. Meanwhile the motor had stalled completely and he fussed and fumed but to no purpose.

“Looks as if we’ll have to hie ourselves through yonder gate and up the walk and then on to Sharpe’s veranda. The bus won’t yield an inch before she dries. What say, Unk, shall we?”

“How long will that take, Hal?”

“Fifteen minutes—maybe more, maybe less. All depends on how soaked she is. Bad as we are, huh? Price’s place too far for us to walk it?”

“It is in this storm. Perhaps three-quarters of a mile—perhaps a mile.”

“Then we’ll wait till we can ride. Think he goes to bed early?”

“I sincerely hope not, Hal. Since we’ve done so much talking about it, I’m anxious for you to meet and talk to him.”

“Why, anxious?”

“Because he was twice tried for the murder of Eli Sharpe.”

CHAPTER III HAUNTED?

“*Murdered Old Sharpe?*” Hal had risen from behind the wheel and got out of the roadster. He pointed toward the gaunt house vaguely outlined now in the stormy darkness. “*In there? Murdered him in there?*” he asked incredulously.

Denis Keen nodded and got out of the roadster on the other side.

“I’ll tell you all about it, Hal—from the beginning. But let’s get out of this and under some partial shelter at least. I’m too soaked to think of anything else at present. Sharpe’s veranda will give us ample protection. It was built for three generations of the family to gather on at once. Come! Will the car dry out standing just as she is?”

Hal nodded and hurried after his uncle through the creaking gate and up the broken flagstone walk. Neither of them spoke a word, feeling awed by the imperiousness of the storm’s harsh voice as it swept through the weed-choked garden. Tragedy had laid a heavy hand upon the place—everything seemed weighted down with black memories.

On either side of the walk, they were assailed with wet, waving weeds and the low, overhanging branches of trees. More than once, Hal struck out instinctively as the foliage brushed over his wet cheeks and murmured mournfully past his ear. He could only liken it to some bodiless, spectral hand reaching out from the dim, dead past and trying to detain him from going further.

There was a hush in that long deserted garden that made itself felt despite the blustering of the storm. Hal sensed it with every step and wished heartily that his uncle would talk, for he, himself, felt suddenly unable to utter a word. Before them, the narrow house with its crazy turret loomed up out of the darkness like a sentinel of Death.

Five broad steps led up to the porch; three of them were already in the last stages of neglect and splintered audibly under Hal’s firm step. The sound caused him to shiver a little. A loose shutter somewhere on the house slammed, startling them both.

“Next thing I’ll be telling myself the durned place is full of ghosts—haunted!” Hal laughed.

“As a matter of fact, the old timers all say it *is!*” chuckled Denis Keen. “It has borne the reputation since it was built fifty years ago. Old Eli’s second wife, who was then a delicate young woman of about thirty, fell down the main stairway and was killed the first night she spent in the newly-built

house.”

“Whew!” Hal ejaculated. “This house hasn’t done anything but make things happen, huh? What a history!”

They clattered over the porch and around on the veranda. There they drew close to the French windows whose shutters were tightly drawn. Denis slapped his hands against his wet clothing and nodded.

“We ought to dry out a little. At least the rain won’t hit us here. Wish I had a coat though—I’m rather chilly.”

“So am I,” Hal admitted. “But when it comes to a wish nearest the heart—mine is for a flashlight! Couldn’t do more with a match in this wind than just get a light on a cigarette.”

“You’d be lucky to do that much. Why wish for a flashlight?”

“Just to snoop about a bit. Thought maybe I’d find some loophole by which we could crawl inside these dusty old diggings. The place has kind of got under my skin, Unk! I’m inspired to explore a real haunted house!”

“You would be,” Denis chuckled. “Thank heavens we are without a flashlight! I haven’t your explorer’s fine appreciation of dusty, haunted houses. Besides, I find the memories of those days twenty years ago are still vivid and prevent me from wanting to linger here any longer than is necessary. You’re thrilled by the place and I’m saddened by it—there’s the difference between youth and approaching middle-age.”

“I suppose so, Unk,” said Hal sympathetically. “Gosh, I realize how you must sort of live an episode like that all over again even if you weren’t connected with it in any way.”

“Ramapo was a tiny village in those days and Lonesome Swamp seemed nearer to us, I guess. In any event, we felt, all of us, very close to it in that time of tragedy.”

Hal nodded, drew a package of cigarettes out of his back trousers pocket and lighted one. While the tiny flame of the match still flickered, he critically surveyed the rust-colored shingles at his back, then turned and poked at the shutter at his elbow. To his surprise it yielded slightly, just enough to cause two of the wooden cross-strips to clatter out of place and down on the veranda floor. He glanced quickly at the little aperture which the fallen cross-strips had made in the shutter.

“Cross-strips are rotted with age and disuse,” said Denis, picking one up from the floor and examining it. “Wonder the whole shutter didn’t come down when you rattled it—guess the whole business is about ready to fall away at that. Time and weather are relentless with the house deserted, particularly this one. She’s exposed to all the elements standing as she does. See something in the opening of that shutter?” he asked, suddenly noticing Hal’s intent scrutiny.

“Just a horizontal area of dusty French window,” Hal smiled, turning

around. “Gloom within as well as gloom without, hey? It’s the queerest house I’ve ever seen; so narrow, so high. The rooms must be like coffins.”

“Not quite, but they’re pretty narrow for a house built so high. Pretty odd architecture, I dare say. Even the main door is almost to the back of the house—look!” Denis motioned to a high, narrow door some thirty feet farther along the veranda. “Looks pretty stout though, eh?”

“Pretty much,” Hal admitted. He drew twice on his cigarette, then blew out a coil of smoke with one breath. “Whose idea was this Gaunt House?”

“A splendid name for it, certainly. It was Old Eli’s long-cherished idea, I was given to understand. He designed it and built it.” Denis laughed. “He was an architect and builder of the Gaunt period.”

“And how! Well, I’m glad he’s not of this period anyway. Somehow I feel safer with his kind safely murdered. Golly, he must have been eccentric, Unk.”

“Notably so. He inherited a large fortune from his father, turned it into cash and bonds, then quickly proceeded to build this queer house where he said he could guard it instead of entrusting it to the care of banks. Consequently, he built this place in such a way as to have a view of the surrounding country. People said he slept daytimes and sat up in the turret with his money at night watching for some chance thief who might amble up the hill. I don’t know how true it is.”

“Good Lord! His wife was lucky to be out of his way.”

“Everyone thought so, too. Poor thing, she had never set foot inside the house her eccentric mate was building until the day they moved in. And that was around after sunset and she was either on her way upstairs or on her way down when she met her death. She had a weak heart and the sounds she heard so frightened her that she dropped in a faint, fell all the way down the stairs and broke her neck. She died that night.”

“What sounds did she hear, Unk?”

“The sounds that everybody hears the moment they step in the house or attempt to go up the stairs. As one steps along, one hears strange footfalls just behind or just ahead. Sometimes it sounds like the footsteps of a superman following you up or advancing toward you. The walls quiver and shake, and in bad weather like tonight the desolate moans one hears in the house—well, there were several of us back in the old days that kept vigil with those ghosts. Two nights we made of it without seeing anything but our own vivid, youthful fancies. The trustees of the estate learned of these secret trysts of ours in the apparently closed house and set about making certain that it was securely locked and shuttered. And it has been locked ever since.”

“But what meaning is there to all those noises you heard?”

“I believe no one has answered that, Hal. It’s inexplicable. But we heard the noises just the same. I’ve never forgotten that experience.”

“I shouldn’t think you could. Do you think those noises are going on all the time—right now?”

“It’s very likely. There’s some reason for it and we would have found out if the estate trustees hadn’t interrupted our eager explorations. But don’t for a moment think I ascribe it to any supernatural cause. I don’t! We live in a material world, Hal, don’t forget that for an instant.”

“I don’t,” said Hal mildly, ruefully surveying the fresh downpour that lashed against the veranda. Thunder clanged and rolled over Lonesome Swamp Hill, sounding like an army in chains. Suddenly he glanced up at his uncle. “How does Cyrus Price come into all this—how did he come to be accused of murdering Old Sharpey?”

“It happened on a night much like this one,” Denis Keen began, “thunder and lightning and rain—squalls of short duration with calm intervals that were even shorter. Just like it is now....”

Hal became aware of a decided lull in the storm even as his uncle spoke. The dripping atmosphere had, for a moment, become as still as the proverbial tomb, when suddenly there came to their listening ears an eerie, clanging sound followed by a long, dismal moaning. The storm, not quite spent, however, drowned out this doleful moan by renewing its former activities.

Hal glanced up at his uncle and their eyes met.

“You mean to tell me that that’s what it’s like?” he asked in a hushed, fearful tone.

“That isn’t even the half of it, Hal,” Denis Keen chuckled. “Just wait till the next lull. Perhaps you’ll be entertained with the next in the category—The March of the Ghosts, we fellows used to call it. It sounds like people walking back and forth, up and down stairs—all over the house. Very spicy program you’d call it.”

“I dare say,” said Hal soberly, and betook himself to the veranda rail where he sat astride. “And about the night of the murder?”

“Dismal beyond words,” Denis Keen continued. “It was proven at Cyrus Price’s trial that he left his cottage bent on revenge—murder if necessary.”

“I’d almost agree with him if he walked all the way up here on a night like this,” Hal said with a deep, rumbling chuckle.

CHAPTER IV

A MISER AND HIS SON

“And you’d almost agree with him when you hear how Eli Sharpe had tricked poor guileless Cyrus into signing away all that he had in the world—his cottage and his acre of land surrounding it. Eli wanted that land, he had always wanted it for he owned every inch of Lonesome Swamp but that piece of Cyrus’. The fly in the ointment, however, was that he wanted it for almost nothing.”

“Why did he want it so badly?”

“Because with the whole of Lonesome Swamp in his possession, the county would buy it and dig a reservoir. It’s a fine site for one; you’d agree if you saw it by daylight. Cyrus knew nothing about the negotiations—Eli Sharpe was particularly interested that he be kept in ignorance of it. He didn’t want the county to talk business with Price—if there was any profit to be made from the Mill Pond parcel, he wanted to make that profit himself. He’d buy it from Cyrus and sell the entire region to the county at a huge profit. And he did!”

“And poor Cypress or Cyrus or whatever his name is, found out that he’d sold his property to Sharpe for next to a drop in the bucket, huh?”

“Exactly. The very night he found out he set out for here with Lem, his son, who was then but eighteen. They were great pals, Cyrus and Lem, they had only each other, for Mrs. Price died very young. It was only reasonable to expect then that they both should share an intense hatred for Eli Sharpe; a hatred that couldn’t be appeased unless the real worth of the property was given them. It came out at the trial that Sharpe hadn’t even given Price in cash what he had agreed to give. Instead he shoved off on the poor fellow two deeds to some worthless lots that were half under water in the lowlands.”

“And right off the bat they came up here and knocked Old Sharpey in the whiskers that very night, huh?”

Denis smiled.

“Not off the bat nor in the whiskers, Hal. There were some heated arguments first. They were in the library, this room here with the French windows.”

Hal looked at the long shuttered windows and then at the aperture made by the rotted cross-strips. Somehow this little opening fascinated him, and though it showed nothing but the horizontal strip of dark dusty glass, he could not take his eyes from it.

“Well,” said Denis continuing, “Dorkas comes into the tale at that point. He related very distinctly at both trials that he was in bed and asleep on the third floor in his bedroom when he was awakened by the sound of voices keyed in an angry pitch. He got into his slippers and bathrobe and had started to descend the long, narrow stairway when he heard his father cry out. The next moment there was a heavy thud, he heard running feet, the slamming of the main door and by the time he got downstairs and into the library, there was nothing to be seen of Lem. Cyrus, on the other hand, he found standing bewildered over the dead body of Old Eli. A blood-smeared andiron lay at his feet. Dorkas said he was so enraged that he felled Cyrus with one blow.”

“Whew! What a night that was!” Hal observed.

“Terrible. Cyrus Price has never recovered from that blow either. When Dorkas hit him he fell with a terrific thud onto the hearthstone. He was unconscious for two whole days and when he came to in Ramapo Hospital the police realized that they would never learn who killed old Eli—whether it was Cyrus or Lem, or both. Be that as it may, Cyrus’ head injury has made it impossible for him to talk of anything for more than a few minutes at a time. He has lucid moments, such as he had at the trial, when he will tell you that Old Eli enraged Lem and him that night by laughing in their faces when they accused the old miser of having cheated them and tricked them. Lem, he said, then started for the old man, but he interfered, and being a healthy, husky man of about forty-five then, he was able to do it.”

“Some tussle!” was Hal’s comment.

“But Old Eli, not being satisfied yet, laughed at him some more and I guess that did the trick. He said he knocked the old man clear off his feet—threw him down. And when the old fellow didn’t move, Cyrus commanded Lem to get out of the mess. That’s all he could ever tell about it. Said he never could remember Dorkas coming into the room at all and swore that he never laid a hand on the andiron, much less killed Old Eli with it. The court claimed that he did use the andiron in a moment of terrific rage! Anyway, they’ve never found or heard of Lem since and the jury disagreed twice over Cyrus. So there you are.”

“But the money and the bonds, Unk—Lem supposed to have taken them?”

“Of course he took them. Dorkas said that when he went to bed he left his father in the library counting out his money and looking over his bonds. So Lem took the whole business and skipped. Certainly Cyrus never saw a penny of it. He barely ekes out a living as it is. Dorkas would have had nothing but this house and the worthless tracts comprising Lonesome Swamp. The county withdrew their option for the reservoir. They dug one up Orangetown way. So that’s that.”

“How about old Price, then?” Hal asked. “How is it he’s still got his

house?”

“The trustees of the Sharpe estate were induced by a band of sympathetic citizens to make some concession to poor Cyrus in that matter. He was given the right to live rent free in his little cottage the rest of his natural life.”

“And that’s the end of the story,” Hal murmured glancing back toward the long shutter.

“Hardly, Hal. It won’t end until something is heard of Lem. There’s bound to be some news of him some day. No doubt he’s squandered Old Eli’s fortune by this time. Money got by those means is always squandered and you know what that means. Lem’s bound to come to grief sooner or later—a murderer and a thief. Oh, I know you’re thinking Old Eli deserved what he got, but the fact remains that a human life was taken. There’s always a better way than murdering a man for revenge. Besides, Lem forfeited what sympathy he might have had from the public by deliberately turning thief and running away, leaving his father to face the music alone.”

“Looking at it that way, he wasn’t very sporting,” Hal admitted. “Still it would be interesting to hear exactly what Lem could say about it. I suppose it was he who cracked Old Sharpey over the bean with the andiron, huh?”

“That’s what everyone thought likely. My private opinion has always been that Cyrus knew that and sent Lem away, taking all the blame upon his own shoulders. Well, Hal, do you think your distributor is dry by now?”

Hal nodded, but his eyes were on the shutter opening. He was leaning forward a trifle then, and his full, generous lips had parted in astonishment.

“Why, Hal—what is it? What do you see?” Denis asked in a hushed voice.

Hal pointed to the shutter.

“A light, Unk,” he whispered close to his uncle’s ear. “There was a light or the shadow of one reflected in that library. It came on and went off while you were talking. I saw it through the opening of that shutter. Saw it as plain as anything. It sort of flittered through the dark room and hit that bit of windowpane that we can see. Looked to me like as if it came from a flashlight.” Suddenly he stopped and leaning forward, gave his uncle a nudge. “It’s on again, Unk—*look!*”

Even as he spoke the bit of dusty windowpane caught the reflection of a flickering yellow light from within.

CHAPTER V

A LIGHT

They stared hard at it for a moment, fascinated, yet perplexed. The rain had almost ceased and the thunder was but a distant rumble for the storm had veered eastward, headed for the Jersey coast, leaving the dripping Ramapo region in a silence that was breathless.

Water dripped from a rusted, broken gutter that hung askew from the veranda roof. Occasionally Hal felt the moisture of it on his arm as it splattered on its long journey from the roof to the sodden ground below. But he seemed not to even feel it, so intent was he upon the still flickering light within the house. The silence, too, had intensified with the complete passing of the wind and so still was the eerie world about them, that they could hear the water dripping from the trees out on the road.

In the wake of this awesome hush they heard from within the house the moaning sound so freighted with despair and loneliness. Then there followed the clang-clanging noise which was accompanied by the tramping sound which Denis Keen had spoken of. Hal likened it to an army of spectral prisoners rushing about and constantly seeking some means of escape from that dusty, tragedy-ridden house.

Through all these weird manifestations the reflection of the light still remained upon the dusty pane. Hal made a small gurgling noise in his throat and put both feet upon the veranda floor.

“These ghosts didn’t include a light in their phenomena twenty years back, did they, Unk?” he asked seriously.

Denis Keen shook his head and rammed both hands deep in his trousers pockets.

“Not a light did we ever see while we kept vigil,” he said softly. “The sounds are as ghostly as ever, though. It’s queer, Hal—*devilishly queer!* I mean that light.”

“The whole blamed business is queer—gives me such creeps that I’m shivery all over. What do you make of it? Think somebody’s got in there—what would be there to rob anyway?” Hal moved swiftly toward the shuttered windows, breathless, expectant.

“The house and its furnishings are there just the same as when Old Eli was murdered. Dorkas never touched them and as the estate hasn’t been settled, the trustees have left them untouched also. Everything’s been under lock and key. The windows on this lower floor, besides being shuttered, are barred and

bolted from the inside. The upper floors are likewise protected with barred windows.” Denis moved forward with Hal.

“What about the doors, Unk?”

“Both front and back entrances are protected with grilles, which were opened by a special lock which Old Eli himself devised. The keys to fit them are no doubt held by the trustees. Dorkas took his to his death.”

Hal was trying the library shutters then, shaking them forcibly. They yielded no more than an inch or so, however, and he turned his attention to the main doorway. But that too, was securely locked and after the remaining veranda windows had been tried and the back entrance examined without result, they walked back again on tiptoe, mystified.

“No cellar entrance?” Hal whispered.

Denis Keen shook his head.

“Only from inside. Its stairway comes up into the back hall—I remember that clearly, because I almost fell down that whole stony flight in the dark the first night we stayed here. I was trying to locate that devilish, moaning sound—anyway, Hal, I am certain no one’s gained an entrance on this main floor. Too, it would be impossible unless it was forced with explosives. And we’ve seen with our own eyes that nothing’s been touched. Everything’s locked and barred as tight as a drum, eh? And as for the upper floors, one would have to have a ladder. And there’s not a ladder in sight!”

They had stopped before the library windows again and Hal was running his long fingers through his curling red hair.

“Then unless one of the trustees happens to be inside on a tour of inspection....” he began.

“Trustees don’t go on tours of inspection at night—particularly on such a night,” Denis interposed softly. “And if they did, they would certainly have heard us rattling the shutters and banging at the grilles. Someone would have put in an appearance by this time. Besides, Hal, the trustees are two real old men now and spend their summers up at their camps in Maine, so your mother told me the last time I was visiting Ramapo.”

“That’s that, then. You’ve swept away the hobo-robber theory and the trustees suggestion is a wash-out. There’s nothing left to think but that the intruder is an illuminated ghost. Don’t laugh, Unk—times do change you know, even in this ghosting business. Maybe they’ve taken to carrying flashlights around with them in defiance against the old order of things. A number of medieval ghosts I’ve read about, carried candles dripping with blood....”

“Hal, don’t!” Denis protested. “Such talk at such a time. Use common sense about this business.” Suddenly he stopped and stared at the opening in the library shutter. “Look, Hal—look!” he exclaimed, pointing toward the bit

of dusty windowpane.

The reflection of the light was no longer there.

CHAPTER VI TWO STRANGERS

They did not stir from the spot for ten minutes, watching intently for the possible return of the queer yellow light reflected on the glass. But it did not come and the bit of dusty windowpane continued to show itself like a dark, blank eye behind the shutter.

Denis Keen stirred first.

“Now that we’ve come to a spectral decision, shall we go on to Price’s?” he asked with a faint chuckle. “Of course it’s impossible to attempt routing ghosts out of a home that’s always been theirs.”

“It just isn’t done, Unk,” Hal grinned, then grew serious: “But all fooling aside, it’s so queer and puzzling that it makes me mad. What makes me still madder is that we wouldn’t be allowed to break in and find out things if we could.”

“Then we better get right on to Price’s. The car ought to be dry but I’m not, and I’d like to get this shirt of mine dry enough to afford me some comfort on the way back to Ramapo.”

“All right, Unk,” Hal said with a note of regret in his voice. “I’ve clean forgotten that I’m soaking wet and I’d be willing to put it out of my mind for the rest of the night, if you were game to stick it out here with me and see what happens!”

“Stay here all night! Hal, that’s ridiculous. Besides nothing would happen that hasn’t happened in the past fifty years since this house has been built. The tramping of ghostly feet, the clanging of invisible chains and the moaning of voices long since stilled in life—it goes on day and night, year in and year out. You don’t suppose it would be any clearer to your mind just because you stayed out on this porch all night and listened! You’d come away in the morning just as puzzled as we young men were twenty years ago! Even then we considered it a sign of mind deterioration to accept these ghostly noises as supernatural phenomena. And yet....”

“And yet is right, Unk! And yet I’m not going to give in to this spirit business either! The whole thing has me started. I’ll chuck it for tonight on account of you and Mother. She’d be worried stiff if we didn’t get back by midnight, after all this storm. But boy, I’m coming back here some night soon, believe me! This Sharpe Mansion business may have stumped the public for fifty years, but I’m not so easy. The place will be all washed up when I get through investigating it. These ghosts won’t have a leg to stand on, Unk. I

mean it, too!”

“Obviously, Hal,” Denis chuckled. “But the fact still remains that you have a pretty proposition on your broad shoulders. Do you intend to use nitro-glycerin when you make your grand entrance?”

“Nope, nothing so radical, Unk. I’m going to go about it in a perfectly legal manner. I’m going to get on the right side of one (or both, if necessary) of the trustees and get those keys. I’ll get ’em if I have to go up to Maine.”

“Good boy!” Denis applauded. “You’ve simply swept all argument aside. And now how about starting for the car?”

Hal followed his uncle down the broad steps in silence. They hurried along the broken flagging dodging the dripping foliage at every step. Then when they had almost reached the garden gate, they heard the sound of a car laboring up the steep hill.

“Let’s stay where we are, Unk!” Hal hissed. “Let’s see who it is.”

“But whoever it is, they’ll see your car parked opposite this gate,” Denis reminded him. “It won’t be any surprise....”

“I know, but it’s too late to do anything about it now. That car’s made the top of the hill already—hear it? You said no one came this way unless they had business in this region! Well, I want to see who’s got business around this neck of the woods.”

They crouched behind the ivy-covered gate and waited. Hal squinted through one of the upper interstices and saw two powerful headlights trained on his own roadster where it stood out of the ruts and under the trees opposite. Suddenly they heard the shifting of gears, the car lumbered along in low speed and when it drew alongside the roadster, it stopped.

It was a coupe, Hal saw, and was occupied by two men. The windows were open for the sound of their voices floated out on the still, damp air.

“Now what do yer suppose that’s doing here?” asked one, with a hoarse, rumbling voice.

“If yer wanta find out so bad, git out an’ nose aroun’ that house o’ spooks in there. Yer came near gittin’ yer nose into trouble once—this time you’ll be sure ter do the trick!”

“Who wants ter git inter trouble, hah? Ain’t I got enough on my mind that we sails up and down the pike waitin’ fer a clear coast fer this guy Lem? An’ he don’t show up after us layin’ low in them gloomy woods fer over an hour!”

“Yeah, an’ through the worst storm I ever seen. Well, ain’t yer better be gettin’ along an’ tellin’ the old man we either missed this bloke Lem or he missed us? Besides this roadster here looks ter me like the one yer gave the signals to and held up in the woods thinkin’ it was Lem.”

“Yeah, it does, come ter think uv it. More like it’s one o’ them spook fanciers what the old man says sometimes drives up here on windy, stormy

nights so's they can hear that moanin'. But the place is barred up worse 'n the big house so there ain't no chance of 'em doin' much but listen from the outside. Still, like you say, we better beat it 'fore they come pilin' out, hah?"

"Come on, put yer foot on it!" was the harsh reply.

Soon the car was rumbling down the hill toward the Mill Pond. Hal and his uncle stood up and hurried out to the roadster. The engine started almost immediately.

"One of them was Frog Face," Hal remarked as the car started forward. "I'd remember that face anywhere even a hundred years from now—thick lips, flat nose and bulging eyes! So they were out waiting for Lem, huh?"

"So Lem's expected home!" Denis was saying, as if he had not heard Hal's remarks at all. "It sounded as if they expected him to come in a car like yours, Hal. Wonder if this is his first visit since...."

"It would seem so, considering all the trouble Frog Face went to, to wait for him so he could signal him a clear road. Maybe I'm wrong, Unk, but it seems to me that they wouldn't be so careful if Lem had been making visits home all this time without being discovered. Continued safety breeds carelessness and this expected visit of Lem's bears all the earmarks of careful planning, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does, Hal. Your deduction couldn't be better. I, too, am convinced that this is Lem's first visit home since the murder."

Hal got the roadster under way, gave a furtive glance back at the dark, gaunt mansion, then undertook to try and get as near the coupe's tail light as he possibly could.

"Funny," he said half aloud, "that Lem Price should be expected home just tonight."

CHAPTER VII THE COTTAGE

The coupe was getting farther and farther away from them. Finally its tiny red tail light could no longer be seen. Denis Keen explained this.

“There’s a decided curve in the road at the foot of the hill, Hal. They’ve rounded it and are now pretty well on their way to Cyrus’ place. No doubt those two men are very close friends of Lem’s whom he’s sent on here as a sort of advance guard, eh?”

“Something like that, Unk. Only I wish I could catch up to them. I’d like to arrive at Price’s about the same time they do. I don’t want to miss anything.” Hal laughed.

“You seldom do. In any event, we won’t be far behind them. I have an idea it will be rather embarrassing for Cyrus for us to pop in just when he’s expecting Lem.”

“Is that charge of murder still hanging over Lem’s head?”

“Indeed it is! The state stands ready to prosecute him just as it did twenty years ago.”

“Then it’s sort of up to us as citizens to tip off the cops, huh?”

“If you can do it, Hal. We’re supposed to, particularly myself as one of the government’s model boys, eh?” He chuckled ruefully. “I’ll be just as well satisfied if I don’t see anything or hear anything from Cyrus which can justify my reporting my findings to the State Police. It would be a pretty heartbreaking thing for Cyrus to have urged Lem to come home after all these years, only to find that the police were waiting on the doorstep. I prefer not to be the one to start stirring this old tragedy out of its coffin. It ought to be buried for good and all. Why, I’ll feel like a vulture if I have to do it.”

“Then, don’t, Unk! Let’s not stop at Price’s, huh? Let’s keep going right on as if we didn’t see anything and heard less! It’s done, you know.”

“I know, Hal. But I’m a law-abiding citizen and my calling demands that I must never forget it and never allow others to forget it, either. It’s my duty to question Cyrus, now. My conscience would never stand for slackness in a matter of this kind. I was just trying to express the hope that perhaps....”

“This Lem they were talking about was some other Lem, huh?” Hal interposed.

“Exactly what I meant, Hal. But I’m very much afraid....”

“So am I. Let’s not think about it, though. Guess we’re almost at the bottom of this blamed hill, huh?” he asked looking into that gulf of darkness

beyond the headlights. “We seem to be going easier, anyway, Unk.”

“We are. Indeed, here we are near the curve,” Denis said with a wave of his hand. He indicated to the right of the road a whitewashed cow fence. “Here the curve begins, so take it easy.”

Hal did so and they rounded it without incident. Out of the darkness then loomed a shadowy cupola which Denis Keen explained was the top of the old mill ruins.

“That is, it must be almost ruined,” he said. “It was headed for it twenty years ago anyway. It boasted two rooms I remember. A picturesque sort of place.”

Hal looked out but he could see nothing except the shadowy outline of the place. A little distance farther on, a light gleamed out of the darkness which grew brighter as they neared it.

“The lamp is burning in Cyrus’ sitting room,” Denis observed softly. “It faces the road this way.”

“I was hoping it was the lights of the coupe facing us,” said Hal.

The cottage itself soon became illuminated by the roadster’s headlights and as they drew nearer Hal saw that it was ivy-covered, with rose-bushes bordering the little path up to the front door.

“Peaceful and simple looking place, Unk,” he observed as he steered the car off the road and onto a graveled space that bordered the lawn. “Who’d think that there had ever been anything but happiness!” He switched off the power.

“Sh!” Denis laid a detaining hand on Hal’s arm. “Notice anything?”

“Yes. The coupe isn’t anywhere around here. Evidently we were wrong, huh?”

“I hope so.” Denis looked around. “The road’s pretty straight from here on for a distance of about two miles. Seems to me that car would have to have terrific speed to put such distance between us in this short time. I can’t see a sign of her tail light, can you?”

“No. Maybe she’s traveling without one now.”

Denis Keen got out of the roadster without saying anything further about it. Hal knew, however, that it was no indication he had dismissed the subject from his mind. He knew his uncle only too well.

“Old Price is in and about anyway,” Hal observed as they went up the path. The light gleaming through the little curtained windows seemed to radiate cheer and hospitality. “What sort is this old fellow anyway, Unk? Is he very much off in the upper story?”

“No. He’s just forgetful at times, I’ve heard. Rambles in his talk and that sort of thing. Grins a great deal of the time. Don’t know whether it’s a result of his head injury or whether he just forces it to cover up the vacant look he

sometimes gets when he's off his guard. But here we are, Hal!"

Denis leaned forward and rapped the black metal knocker against the shining white door. They listened for the old man's footsteps intently, but not a sound did they hear. After a few minutes they heard a cat meowing somewhere in the cottage.

"Must be in the kitchen," said Denis. "I mean the cat. Wonder if Cyrus is asleep? Take a peek in the sitting room windows, Hal, will you?"

Hal did so. He got a glimpse of a huge armchair with white doilies, great gilt-framed family portraits lining the faded walls, and a mohair settee. A marble-topped table on which stood the lamp occupied the center of the small room, but that was all. No human presence graced it.

"Well, Unk, he's not in there anyway."

"I'll go round and try the kitchen door, then. You stay here in case he's been upstairs and comes down to open in front." Hal waited, but Denis soon came back reporting no success. The back door was tightly closed and apparently locked, also the windows all around. Hal reminded his uncle that the sitting room windows had not been tried and they proceeded at once to see what success lay in this direction. The third one yielded to Hal's energetic push.

"Think it's all right for us to crawl in, Unk?" asked Hal.

Denis pursed his lips a moment.

"Open it wide and shout in, Hal. You've got a voice to waken the dead."

"Thanks, Unk. Maybe old Price is deaf. Such things happen to old men."

"Yes, I hadn't thought of that. Still, you shout your darndest!"

Hal's darndest caused his uncle to put his hands up to his ears to protect himself from future deafness. In point of fact, he declared when the echo of it was finally spent, that his head would ring with the sound for years to come.

"Well, you can't say I didn't do my darndest, Unk," Hal laughed. "After that it's pretty conclusive that Old Man Price is asleep, or deaf, or...."

"Let's get on in through this window, Hal," Denis interposed. "I don't like the looks of this at all."

CHAPTER VIII

A SEARCH

Hal stepped into the sitting room. A faded and worn red carpet covered the floor and across this he walked, purposely making some noise. Denis, close at his heels, followed the example.

“The March of the Ghosts up at Old Sharpey’s place hasn’t got a thing on us right now,” Hal laughed. “What a racket! Old Price must certainly be dead or dead to the world if he can’t hear us now, huh? Well, what’s next on the programme?”

Denis frowned thoughtfully, and walked to the right of the room, where he opened a door. As it swung open, Hal could see a narrow, dark hall and a narrow, short stairway leading to the upper floor.

Denis stepped out, beckoning Hal.

“We’ll go upstairs and investigate first,” he explained. “I’ll use up the few matches I have. No use disturbing the lamp.”

They went up noisily, calling the old man’s name in loud, resounding voices. But in each of the two old-fashioned bedrooms no sign of him could be found. Hal looked behind one of the marble-topped washstands and shook his head soberly.

“Cypress isn’t holding out on us there, either, Unk,” he grinned.

Both beds were untouched and looked immaculate in their snowy-white coverlets. Denis used up the matches he had and took some of Hal’s before he was fully convinced that the old man was not to be found upstairs.

They reached the lower floor again, Denis leading the way through the hall and back to a door at the rear. As he opened this, they saw two bright crescents like a pair of eyes staring down at them from the ceiling of the dark room. This light, reflected on a highly polished aluminum pan hanging on the further side of the room, made a sort of spectral mirror in which Hal suddenly saw himself.

He stepped past his uncle, struck a match and saw that the two crescents had been made by the tipping of stove lids to check a banked coal fire for the night.

“So this is the kitchen and still no Cypress,” he remarked wryly, and holding the match above his head feebly illuminated the small room with its freshly scrubbed floor and shining stove. Too, there was a square table with a bright, red cloth.

Denis Keen looked about thoughtfully, his hands dug deeply in his pockets. Suddenly he glanced toward a small door near the back entrance.

“That goes down into the cellar, Hal,” he said thoughtfully. “We’ll go down and look there too. But first step to the front hall door, eh? See if it’s locked from the inside.”

Hal did as he was told, returning in a second.

“Key’s in the lock, Unk.”

“The same as in the back entrance here,” said Denis Keen nodding toward the door. “Singular thing. But let us get on down below.”

The cellar was as immaculately kept as the rest of the house. A coat of whitewash had recently been applied to the walls and covered a large fruit closet built at the further end. The door of this Denis opened.

“Nothing here,” he observed, turning away from it almost immediately. “Guess poor Cyrus hasn’t had much use for a fruit closet since his poor wife died. All the shelves at the back have been taken down, notice it, Hal?” he asked, as he saw his nephew snooping in the spacious closet. “No doubt he’s made good use of the lumber when he’s been put to it for firewood during some hard winter.”

“Looks like it,” Hal commented, and lighting a match for himself, held it down close while he idly inspected a clump of dirt that had been tracked about the cupboard.

“Let’s go up in the sitting room and talk this thing over, Hal,” Denis called. “I’ve never been so puzzled in my life. The only decision I can reach, is that Cyrus climbed out the same window that you and I came in.”

“But why should he have done that in his own house?” Hal said, sauntering out of the closet. “I’d rather fall out of a door than fall out of a window any time.”

Denis chuckled in spite of himself. They sauntered past a row of apparently empty barrels near the stairway, gave them a cursory glance and went on up to the kitchen.

“Don’t you think this is most extraordinary, Hal?”

“I sure do, Unk. It’s so blamed queer that it gives me almost as shivery a feeling as Old Sharpey’s place. The only thing’s missing is the ghosts and their usual bunkum. I’m for staying right here in this kitchen and drying out my things by this nice, cozy fire. That’s what we had in mind when we decided to come here, wasn’t it?” He lighted another match.

“Hal, forgive me. I had almost forgotten that I was crying the same thing a few moments back. I declare this thing had me so puzzled, I’ve thought of nothing else. We’ll transfer the lamp and make ourselves cozy in here, eh?”

“It’ll make me feel happier, Unk, I can tell you that. I never feel comfortable in the light of a match.”

Denis set down the oil lamp in the center of the kitchen table. The room seemed immediately transformed and the bright clean cloth set a cheery note of

warmth and hospitality. Hal slipped off his damp clothes, spread them over a high-backed chair, and set it before the glowing stove.

“Darned if it doesn’t seem like winter, Unk,” he said sitting down on a rocking-chair nearby. “Here are the windows all closed and little Hal’s hugging the stove in the middle of August. Boy, but it feels good.”

“A storm like that’s enough to make a fire welcome down in the tropics,” Denis agreed and arranged his own wet things on another chair. Then he lighted his pipe and sat down, comfortably.

Hal got out a cigarette, sliding down in his chair until his long, slim legs made great dark shadows the full length of the room. His well-shaped head with its mass of red curling hair was well-defined in the yellow lamplight and now and then as he rocked back and forth, an expression akin to amusement lighted his deep, blue eyes. Denis noting this, quizzed him.

“Are you going to tell me that Cyrus Price is in this house despite the fact that we’ve searched it from top to cellar?”

Hal leaned forward and an errant lock of hair tumbled down across his high forehead. He shook it back with a swift motion of the head.

“How did you guess it, Unk?” he grinned.

“I didn’t guess it, Hal. I merely knew that you had arrived at some such ridiculous conclusion as that. I always know when I see that expression in your eyes. I suppose you’re going to try and convince me that Cyrus is hiding in the keyholes.”

“Hardly that, Unk. Nothing so small. It would be just as easy to say that he’s hiding behind that aluminum pan over on the wall there.” Suddenly his face grew serious. “I haven’t any definite proof that Old Citrus or whatever you call him, is in the house, but I’ve got a pretty strong hunch and that’s good enough for me. Besides, Unk, how could he go out and then come back and put keys in both back and front doors? Now don’t spring that climbing out the window theory of yours....”

“I’m not, Hal, but at least it’s more plausible than your idea. How could the man possibly be in this house when we’ve searched it from top to cellar. And there’s not a room nor a closet we’ve missed, Hal, I assure you. I was through this house a dozen times when poor Cyrus was awaiting trial, and I know it thoroughly. So where in heaven’s name do you suggest he’s hiding. Surely not those barrels? He would have to squeeze himself....”

“I tell you it’s only a hunch with me, Unk,” Hal protested. “I couldn’t say why, nor even where I think he is. I just have the feeling that he’s not stepped out either of these doors nor that unlocked window, that’s all. Seriously, I don’t know either, where he could be hiding that we haven’t looked.”

“Which doesn’t get us any place at all.” Denis turned round on his chair and stared idly at the stove. “He fixed the fire for the night, you see. When

people in the country do that, it means they're going to bed, or intend to go shortly."

"Just the way I thought when I said I can't believe he's left this house. He wouldn't bank the fire for the night, lock the doors and windows, light the lamp and then go out!"

"That is indeed very strange."

"Unk, I'll make a bet with you," said Hal sitting suddenly upright in the rocker. He lowered his voice. "How about it?"

"What is it?"

"I bet you a dollar that Cyrus Price is holding out on us and that five minutes after he hears my roadster drive away, he'll be standing in this very kitchen."

Denis Keen laughed outright.

"How can I take such a bet when we'll have driven off in the roadster and can't see him standing in this kitchen five minutes after?"

"That's easy, Unk. I'll drive off in the roadster and you can stay right here. I'll give you time enough to surprise him, making it impossible for him to do any more disappearing acts, then I'll come whizzing back like the dickens."

Denis Keen chuckled loud and long. "Perhaps you think Cyrus is hiding outside one of the cellar windows, eh, Hal?"

"Not this little boy, Unk. There aren't any windows! I used my eyes when I was down in the cellar and I noticed that there wasn't even a peephole—just an old-fashioned country cellar—the kind where rattle-snakes get in."

"Exactly, Hal, and good boy! Well, you seem to have something on your mind and no doubt it's worth trying. I've got too much sporting blood in me not to let you try your wings."

"Then you'll take the bet?"

"Indeed I will!"

"You're on, Unk! Hand me my clothes!"

CHAPTER IX CYRUS PRICE

Denis Keen watched his nephew with some amusement and sat quite still twining and intertwining his long, thin fingers. Hal got into his wrinkled but dry polo shirt and started for the door.

“Any orders, Hal?” came the whispered question, drily.

“Nope, just sit where you are,” Hal grinned. “Listen and look toward that cellar door, Unk!” He added in the merest whisper: “Keep as quiet as if you weren’t here, of course.”

Denis suppressed a chuckle and nodded, and watched Hal go into the dark front hall. Then the door closed noisily, footsteps crunched hurriedly down the gravel path and soon the soft whir of the roadster’s motor could be heard. But after a moment the kitchen snuggled comfortably in its own warm silence and the only sound Denis could hear was the croaking of the frogs at the Mill Pond.

Suddenly he turned his attention to the cellar door just opposite. A skeptical smile lighted his fair, lean face and now and then he would put up his hand and brush it musingly over his thinning, sandy-colored hair.

After a few minutes his gaze wandered toward the old-fashioned sink just under the further window. A shelf projecting high above this contained divers objects of culinary importance, not the least of these being a battered blue alarm-clock which was smudged here and there with bits of flour, now hardened with age into cement-like mounds. Cyrus Price, Denis concluded, was nothing if not an accurate cook.

He watched idly the hands on the little clock. The hour was ten, and even as he looked the minute hand completed its cycle of sixty seconds. Hal had been already gone about three minutes. If he were to hold him down to his wager of Cyrus putting in his appearance in five minutes ... but it was all so absurd! And he felt himself just as absurd for having taken the bet. They had so thoroughly searched the house.... Price wasn’t, couldn’t possibly be under that roof.

He was so preoccupied with this thought that he did not hear the soft footfalls on the cellar stair. It wasn’t until the knob on the door began slowly to turn that he was actually aware of someone about to enter the kitchen.

It gave him an odd sensation to see the door slowly open. His eyes were full of incredulity and as the white head and bent, rotund figure of the old man appeared he found it almost impossible to open his mouth and speak.

Cyrus Price was equally surprised, for his thin, quivering lips parted with astonishment. His hands, gnarled and thin, hung aimlessly at his sides and Denis could see the pulsation of his body through his worn, blue denim garments.

“Cyrus! Mr. Price!” Denis heard himself saying. “Don’t you remember me—Denis Keen? Denis Keen from Ramapo?”

Cyrus’ watery gray eyes had a startled look as he slowly shook his head.

“You’re the Denis Keen what went to Washin’ton? Ter be one o’ them detectives fer the gov-ment?” he asked in a high-pitched voice that trailed off in a sort of little scream.

“I’m that Denis Keen all right. You haven’t seen me for twenty years. Since....”

Cyrus’ wrinkled face darkened and he bit at his under lip. He shook his round head violently a few times as if to shake away completely all thought of those troublous times, then turned his watery eyes upon Denis questioningly.

“You got in, hey?”

Denis nodded and explained how he and Hal had got in the house. In point of fact, he explained all of their movements since, with the exception of the wager, and that he lied about gracefully.

“We had searched the house for you from top to bottom, and we were fearfully worried, Mr. Price. On account of the doors being locked we couldn’t imagine what had happened. My nephew, Hal, just thought he’d take a spin down the road thinking perhaps he might see you.” He smiled reassuringly at the old man. “I hated to go until I had some assurance that you were all right.”

Cyrus Price narrowed his lids until it gave his white, shaggy brows a wild, peculiar aspect. His mouth twitched and his gnarled fingers clutched at his worn blue denim trousers. There was something almost sullen in his manner when he said,

“I was down cellar. I knowed all the time you and that tall young man was here. I didn’t show myself cuz I didn’t want ter talk. I ain’t likin’ strangers much since.... I wa’n’t knowin ’twas the Keen boy from Ramapo after all these years.”

“I suppose not,” said Denis looking keenly at the old man. He deliberately reopened the subject. “Odd that we didn’t see you down in the cellar, Cyrus. My nephew and I searched pretty thoroughly—that is, all except a few barrels which we didn’t bother overturning.” He laughed, feeling a little foolish under the old man’s sullen stare.

“I was down cellar all the time,” Cyrus almost screamed with a decisiveness that was not lost upon Denis. The issue was closed as far as the old man was concerned.

Denis caught the soft whirring of Hal’s motor coming back along the rough

road. Presently, he heard it grind to a stop over the gravel in front.

“Heard anything at all from Lem, Cyrus?”

The question was like a bombshell. The old man’s white, lined face reddened, whether with guilt or despair Denis had no way of knowing. Certainly he seemed to be going through the utmost depths of emotion, for his voice sounded shrill and tense when he finally answered.

“*Lem!*” he screamed looking into the space above his questioner’s sandy head. “I ain’t heerd, no I ain’t! It’s misery-like that name *Lem* is ter me. It’s misery every time I’ve heerd it. An’ folks can’t seem ter let me ’lone ’bout it. ‘How’s *Lem*—yer heerd from *Lem*?’” He brushed a gnarled hand across his wrinkled forehead. “That’s all folks ask me fer—ter give me more an’ more misery!”

“Cyrus, my poor man!” Denis protested, “I hadn’t any idea it affected you that way. I wouldn’t have asked—it was just by way of sympathy. Really, I’m sorry!”

Cyrus Price slipped into a chair heavily, wearily. He covered his face with his hands and groaned through his fingers.

“*Lem!*” he muttered more to himself than to Denis. “I ain’t heerd frum him, no I ain’t!”

“We shan’t say anything more about it, Cyrus,” said Denis soothingly. “I should have known better.”

Just then he was conscious of someone standing behind him. He turned around and saw Hal framed in the doorway, a look of amusement in his deep blue eyes.

CHAPTER X

A HUNCH AND A PACT

Cyrus was still at the table when they left the cottage, his face buried in his hands and with no apparent thought about his departing visitors. He had said not a word to Hal; in point of fact, he gave no sign that he had even been aware of his sudden appearance. Denis thought of this as he glanced back through the curtained window.

He looked thoughtful when he joined Hal in the roadster a moment later.

“I’ll have to get back to Washington in a few days, but I mean to come and visit Cyrus again before I go. You must make it a point to visit him now and then, Hal. Poor old man, what a life he must lead, eh? Nothing but tragic memories and the continual reminder of Lem.... For goodness’ sake, what on earth can you find amusing in my remarks, Hal?”

Hal’s handsome face was bright with a smile as he leaned slightly forward over his dashboard lights. His fingers hesitated on the switch.

“Not a thing in your remarks, Unk,” he grinned. “Honestly. I do feel terribly sorry for Old Citrus and I will certainly make it a point to hop in on him often—Mother and I, hey? I just laughed to think how easily I won that bet from you—that’s what made me grin when I popped in on you and the old fellow, that’s a fact.”

“I’d almost forgotten that wager—I’d almost forgotten how surprised I was to see him come up from the cellar! I was so affected by his extreme emotion that I forgot entirely what brought the whole thing about. Well, I must admit you’ve thoroughly won your dollar. In fact, there’s something almost uncanny in the way you predicted old Cyrus’ appearance in the kitchen within five minutes. You must have had some definite proof ... *those barrels?*”

“I didn’t examine them any more than you did, Unk. As I told you before it was purely a hunch. Besides Old Citrus would look darn funny climbing in and out of one of those barrels. And yet ... anyway, I had a hunch he didn’t want to see us for some reason or other, and hid out on us as he told you.”

“Hmph! That’s plausible—his part of it I mean. It’s quite reasonable to suppose that an old man harassed as he’s been with curious strangers, would want to keep out of their sight as much as possible. But how you guessed.... Well, Hal, you’ve completely floored me with your hunch this time. It’s evoked in me a certain admiration for that time-worn alibi of yours—*the hunch!*”

“Thanks, at last, Unk! I always hoped that some day I’d be able to impress

you.” Hal was grinning widely, until a movement over in the direction of the old mill attracted his attention. He wouldn’t have seen it had it not been for the shaft of light penetrating between that stretch of ground which separated the cottage from the undergrowth surrounding the ruined mill. A clump of trees bordered this growth and it was here that the light ended and the forbidding gloom began.

“And it’s right there that I saw something move,” Hal whispered to his uncle. “Something came out, then backed in between those trees. It was like a flash, but I saw it just the same.”

Denis Keen chuckled heartily, got out his pipe and filled it. When he put the match to it he glanced sideways at his nephew and winked.

“Of all impressionable people, Hal—you’re one. You won’t rest until you find some conclusive evidence tonight, will you? Your imagination’s received too much firing, I think.”

“You saw the light up at Old Sharpey’s place the same as I did, didn’t you, Unk?” Hal retorted good-naturedly. “You heard what Frog Face said as well as I did. And as for Old Citrus—as sorry as I feel for him, I can’t exactly swallow that sob stuff he gave you about not hearing from Lem. He waxed too indignant about your asking him a perfectly natural question. Oh, I don’t care even if he’s not quite up to snuff in his noodle. There’s something that doesn’t click and that’s the way I feel about it.”

“You mean you think Cyrus lied to me about Lem?” Denis took two short puffs on his pipe and sat back. “Hal, I wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Then I wish I could unsay it, Unk. Old Citrus is such a pathetic old duck he’s gotten under your skin, that’s what. And you don’t want to think he was acting. You want to believe what you want to believe, don’t you?”

“No doubt. You see you couldn’t visualize in your wildest dreams this man Cyrus Price twenty years ago as the man you saw just now. A gulf of tragedy, suffering and despair separates the two periods in his life. That old bromide, ‘I knew him when....’ happens to mean much in this case. I did know Cyrus Price when he was in the flush of life and I’ve seen him tonight with but one vestige of life left to him—his shrill, despairing voice crying out against this court jester of our human kingdom—Fate. He’s had just about all he can stand, and if he’s acting in the hope that he will blind us to the real facts and thereby save himself one last remnant of happiness—well, let him have it, I say! Let him see this son whom tragedy and the law have kept from him all these years.”

“I see what you mean, Unk. In other words, we haven’t seen anything at all—we don’t suspect anything, hey? If Lem is home or is coming home you’re disinterested.”

“Not that, Hal. I couldn’t in conscience do that. I would have to report it if I had conclusive evidence that Lem was coming home or was home. What we

heard those men in the coupe say wasn't conclusive—they merely mentioned some Lem, not *Lem Price*. Call it rationalizing if you will, but I prefer it to having to be the man who shuts off Cyrus' last chance for happiness. Let some one else do it if they find it out. In any event, it won't be you or me, will it?"

"Not while I'm conscious, Unk," said Hal with deep feeling in his voice.

Denis put out his hand and shook Hal's firmly.

"That's that," he said. Then: "And I've changed my mind about coming back here to visit Cyrus before I go to Washington, Hal. I prefer not to. There might be something I'd see or hear to upset my present resolve and I don't want that to happen. What I don't see or hear won't bother my conscience and I prefer to go back to duty with my mind as it is. And so help me, it's the first time in my line of duty that I've been so affected! But it is said that there comes a time in every good sleuth's life when sentiment is stronger than duty. This must be my time, eh?"

"Looks like it, Unk," said Hal sympathetically. "After all, I did a little bit of theorizing myself, remember that. Old Citrus' word is as good as ours, isn't it? He said he didn't hear from Lem—well, then he didn't! Besides we didn't see anything more of the coupe, so that knocks that theory of mine to pieces too. They were simply waiting for another Lem, and that's all there is to that."

"Exactly, Hal." Denis was puffing contentedly on his pipe once more.

Hal turned on his spotlight then, to turn around. He started the car, fixed his light to his own satisfaction and shifted the gear in reverse. As the car slid back into the roadway, the glaring spotlight swept past the clump of trees bordering the old mill ruins and revealed for a flashing second, a parked coupe, darkened and all but hidden in the undergrowth.

Hal glanced quickly at his uncle, but was satisfied that he alone had seen the coupe. It was just as well, he reasoned. Denis would be compelled to throw all sentiment aside if he knew that the coupe was there, and report all that he had heard to the police. Now that chance was past—even now the roadster was speeding back along the road toward Ramapo.

And he was glad, notwithstanding the feeling he had that Cyrus Price's last happiness would be an ephemeral thing at best.

CHAPTER XI

A TRAVELER

A fresh downpour of rain greeted them before they were half-way to Ramapo. It gave promise of being a steady rain, however, and Hal assured his uncle that there was little danger of them being delayed again by a wet distributor.

“It’s the kind of storms like the one we had before, that does that sort of damage,” he explained. “High winds driving the rain against the radiator. It never happens during a steady rain like this one. Well, we’ll be home in twenty minutes. There’s the dinky light of Upper Ramapo Station right ahead of us—notice?”

Denis Keen did notice and he felt singularly glad to be near a lighted and paved community. Even though the hour was late and all Ramapo dwellers were in their beds, he felt that just the knowledge of their presence there would be comfort enough. After the dismal solitude of Lonesome Swamp, he told Hal, any place would seem cheerful.

“I was thrilled by the eerie place when I was your age, Hal,” he said reminiscently. “Now it depresses me terribly. Not a bright, sparkling electric light through the length and breadth of the place, besides that wild storm we were in back there. Your little Upper Ramapo community may have the peace and tranquillity of a graveyard, but it’s like the Gay White Way in contrast to Lonesome Swamp.”

“Oh, I agree with you there, Unk,” said Hal, applauding his car because he didn’t have to shift in taking the hill to Upper Ramapo station. “Lonesome Swamp is about the most solemn place I ever was in and that’s saying a whole lot, hey? But we’ve left it behind and we’ll soon be home.”

“And get thoroughly dried out in your mother’s lovely, comfortable house. A cup of coffee, steaming hot, wouldn’t go badly, eh?”

“I hope to tell you, it wouldn’t.” Hal watched indifferently through his streaming windshield, the sprawling railroad station of Upper Ramapo loom up out of the rain. Also he noticed vaguely the tall figure of a man pacing up and down under the small, yellow light. He yawned. “Well, I kind of hoped that something would come of our visit to Old Sharpey’s place tonight, but it doesn’t hold out any great promise, does it?”

“Why, what were you expecting, Hal?”

“I thought there might be some way we could get in there—nose around a bit like I told you. I’ve got a hunch there’s a rich field for surprises in that

gloomy dump.”

“And I told you I felt the same way twenty years ago, Hal,” Denis chuckled. “Look what we got out of our explorations—we were almost arrested for trespassing on private property!”

“I know—that’s what I say! Nothing can be done till I get the permission of those old geezers of trustees. And who wants to wait and travel back and forth to Maine before tackling the job! Boy, I’m in the mood tonight to break into Sharpey’s—I might not feel so crazy about it after I got back from Maine. I like to do things when I’m in the spirit. But what’s the use—nothing exciting ever happens to me near home! I always have to put distance in between to start the ball rolling. There was just the suggestion that I might have had a little excitement to break the monotony of a dull summer vacation at home, but now....”

“I wouldn’t tempt the gods too much, Hal,” Denis interposed, smiling. “They might overhear and decide to give you more than you bargained for.”

“And wouldn’t I hate that!” Hal laughed. “I’ve never had too much yet—but never fear, Unk, nothing so good has ever happened within a couple of hundred miles of this place. Not to me anyhow.”

They were nearing the top of the hill then, and had passed by a few darkened houses within the exclusive Upper Ramapo district. The station was just beyond and as the car swung into the roadway opposite, they heard a deep male voice calling to them.

“There’s a young man that seems to want us, Hal. He’s over on the platform under the light.”

“Oh,” said Hal, remembering the pacing figure he had seen when he had first started up the hill. “Seems to be having some kind of difficulty the way he’s waving his hands. Wave back to him, Unk.”

Denis did as he was told and Hal, without bothering to turn the car about, backed her the length of the road and straight up to the station platform.

A young man in his early twenties and of about Hal’s height, stepped out from his surrounding baggage and smiled amiably. The genuine brilliance of the smile was not marred by the dark slicker and dark felt hat he wore. Hal felt at once that his was the kind of smile one could see in the darkest dungeon.

“I wonder if you people could answer a question for me!” he said, stepping close to the roadster and leaning lightly on the door on Denis’ side in the friendliest manner.

“Of course,” said Denis Keen.

“Bet your life!” Hal echoed, liking this stranger at once. “What’s the burning question?”

“Is Upper Ramapo really as dead as it looks and sounds?” asked the young man, whimsically.

“Not quite, fellow,” Hal laughed. “People just go to bed early around here—there’s nothing else to do. That’s not a biased statement either, even if I do live only five minutes’ ride from here. I know it to be a fact. It’s a community where that mossborn ‘go to bed with the chickens,’ and ‘the early bird catches the fish—or worms,’ or whatever they catch, got its memorable start. But it’s not dead—you see I’m spending the summer home, and that’s one definite reason for its not being dead.” He grinned.

“He also spends his holidays here,” Denis said chuckling. “That’s definite reason number two.”

The strange young man laughed and pushed his hat back from his forehead a little. Dark eyes gleamed down at Hal and Denis.

“I got in from the west a few days ago,” he explained, “and I’ve been doing New York from end to end. Then tonight it was so gloomy and dull.... I’ve had enough of shows and I wanted to do something different. I came from the west to attend to some business up here so I thought I might as well do it on a rainy, stormy night as any other. And here I am! I left the city on the seven-fifty train—I was the only passenger to get off at Upper Ramapo, and I’ve been here ever since looking in vain for a cab, a chance pedestrian, or the merest glimmer of a light in one of these dark, magnificent houses. After two hours of it I came to the conclusion that everybody had died, that the town itself was dead.”

“Nope, it isn’t quite as bad as that,” Hal assured him. “We know a place that has this one beaten ten thousand ways, don’t we, Unk? We just came from there in all that storm so we can give the information first hand.”

“Where can there be such a place—a place more dead than this one?” asked the young man with a hearty laugh.

“A place called Lonesome Swamp,” Denis answered promptly. “And I assure you, young man, my nephew does not exaggerate its dead state one bit.” And without anticipating the astounding answer, he jokingly asked, “You’re not, by any chance, planning to go to Lonesome Swamp, are you, young man?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” said the young man.

CHAPTER XII

GLEN STUART

“Well, I’ll be darned!” said Hal.

Denis Keen seemed speechless and was able to do nothing but stare.

“I’ve been warned that Lonesome Swamp wasn’t a place of sunshine and laughter,” the young man smiled, “but I didn’t count on it being this bad! What’s the matter with it?”

“It depends on the individual point of view, I guess,” said Denis finding his tongue at last.

“And Unk’s point of view is a little bit affected by memories,” Hal explained. “Tragic memories at that. So don’t get discouraged.” He grinned broadly. “If you care about it, tell us your plans, hopeful and otherwise.”

The young man brushed a hand across his darkly-tanned face.

“I don’t know how well you people are acquainted around here,” he began.

“Quite well,” Denis interposed. “I’m a native even though I claim a residence here but two weeks out of the year. And Hal, my nephew here, well, as he’s already boasted, his holidays from college are all that keeps this town alive. Nevertheless, we both keep pretty much in touch with the news of this region through Hal’s mother.”

“I see,” said the young man and for a moment turned his attention upon Denis. “You’ll pardon me, sir, for saying so, but I’m guessing your age to be around forty.”

“There’s nothing to pardon and your guess is right—pretty nearly,” Denis said pleasantly.

“Then you’ll remember the Sharpes if you were a native here twenty years back,” said the young man quickly.

Hal and his uncle gave a visible start.

“I see you both know the name.”

“We both know the name and the story,” said Denis. “And as you surmised I was an eager and sympathetic native when the tragedy was being aired. Yes, young man, I took as much interest in the Sharpes and the Prices as if I had been an active participant.”

“Then all you need to know is my name. The rest you’ll understand. I’m Glen Stuart, sir, grandson of Eli Sharpe.”

“Get out!” said Hal.

“I wish I was well out of it, right now,” said young Stuart ruefully. “It didn’t sound very attractive in the beginning, but now....” He spread his well-

shaped hands deprecatingly.

“You don’t remember your few years of life with your grandfather, eh!” Denis Keen asked.

“Darn little. Just a few vague memories—my grandfather, thin and scowling and always threatening to throw me in the Mill Pond if I wasn’t a good boy (that, of course, is a vivid remembrance), and the house so gloomy and cold and full of queer noises that used to chill me to the bone when I lay in my bed and listened in the dark. That’s all I remember with the exception of Uncle Dorkas who stood at my bed one morning and said that a very sweet lady was coming to take me out west and that she’d be kind to me.”

“And you went, do you remember that?”

“I surely do, sir. My aunt came for me and took me out to Washington where I’ve lived all this time. She was my father’s sister and she treated me like her own son. I’d almost forgot I had ever seen this part of the country until a few weeks ago when I was notified that the courts had dumped the whole of Lonesome Swamp on my neck. The trustees had got sick and tired of being responsible for it, my aunt told me, and so they pushed it through the courts and had Uncle Dorkas declared legally dead.”

“And so here you are to look over your possessions, hey?” Hal asked.

“Here I am,” Stuart grinned. “After the history Aunt told me was attached to them, I didn’t yearn to take them over. But they’re mine and I’m responsible for them, I understand, so I thought I might as well come and get it over with. Besides, it’s easier to get away from the ranch in the summer than in the winter. I’ve charge of my aunt’s ranch.”

“Cowboy Stuart, hey?” Hal teased. “Just the same, I’m tickled pink we met you. The question is, what can we do to help you? I really mean it—don’t we, Unk? We want to help.”

“We most certainly do, Stuart. We’re glad to render you any service it’s possible to give. Surely though, you hadn’t meant to come up here and spend the night in your grandfather’s house—*not tonight?*”

Glen Stuart squared his powerful shoulders and smiled.

“Yes, *tonight*. Why not? It’s as good as any other night, I thought, particularly because it’s so gloomy. I thought I might as well get the low-down on this ghost business that aunt said was well known around here. Nothing like a stormy night for that, hey what?”

“I must say I admire your courage, young man,” said Denis. “Not that I’m at all credulous about the supernatural aspect of the mansion. It’s just the idea that a lone young fellow like yourself should be willing to spend a rainy night like this in that barren place. Why it hasn’t even gaslight—your grandfather wouldn’t have anything but lamps. And the plumbing—it’s ancient.”

“I’m not only going to spend one night,” Glen Stuart said smiling; “I’m

going to stay there until I can dispose of the property for good and all. I don't want it—I want to get it off my hands and get back to Washington before winter sets in. Of course, I can't say I'm tickled to death over spending any night there alone, but I wouldn't have the nerve to ask anyone to stay with me in that dismal....”

“Now, listen, Cowboy,” Hal interposed with a grin, “it doesn't take any nerve to ask *me* to stay with you. Besides, I've already invited myself—before you came into my life a few minutes back. The only hitch to it was, I was discouraged because Unk told me I'd have to go and get the key and permission from the trustees up in Maine. And I wanted to go tonight. This spook business has been burning me up. I hadn't thought about sojourning at Lonesome Swamp any longer than was necessary to rout the ghosts, but I'll make you a proposition, Stuart—I'll go back there tonight and stay with you until you sell out or college opens. You on?”

Glen Stuart's hand had already reached Hal's and they sealed the proposition with two hearty shakes. Meanwhile Denis was protesting vehemently.

“Surely this absurd thing won't go into effect tonight! I say it's downright inhospitable, Hal, not to ask Stuart to stay with you at least for tonight! In fact, you ought to insist upon his spending all his time with you instead of urging him to go to the Mansion at all. Why the place hasn't been aired or dusted for the greater part of twenty years. Hal, it's unthinkable and here you are inviting yourself along in the bargain like some barbarian!”

“The fact that it hasn't been aired or dusted for twenty years makes it all the more attractive, doesn't it, Stuart?” Hal asked with a sly wink at the young man. Glen Stuart laughed heartily and nodded.

“Darned if it doesn't, Keen,” he said. “I don't know whether it's that or your sporting way of proposing to come along that attracts me the most. In any case, I must say I'm interested. I can't wait to turn the key in that lock since you've made it sound as if it were a lark we're about to embark on.”

“Then they've sent you the keys too—*boy!*” Hal was enthusiastic. “All right, Cowboy. I'll help you stuff your luggage in the rumble seat, then you can squeeze in alongside of Unk. We'll spin up to the house and talk this over after a hot snack, hey? Righto.”

“It seems to me you haven't much left to talk over,” said Denis Keen resignedly. “It's settled, I gather, that you and Stuart mean to rush in and rout the Mansion ghosts before dawn tomorrow, come what may.”

“Aw, not as quickly as that, Unk.” He winked at Stuart. “We mean to get them started, that's all.”

“And what we start we finish!” said Stuart, laughing.

“Then I hope it's finished to the satisfaction of everybody concerned,”

Denis said.

“It won’t be anything else but!” said Hal with all the hope of his twenty years.

But that was something that even he could not foresee.

CHAPTER XIII

A MIDNIGHT DISCUSSION

They were sitting around the tea-table munching sandwiches and drinking hot coffee—Mrs. Keen, Denis Keen, Hal and Glen Stuart. A log crackled merrily in the fireplace—it was an atmosphere that most people would be contented to linger in. But not Hal.

“I’m for getting there about one-thirty or two, what do you say, Glen?” he asked getting up and pacing the room restlessly. He puffed furiously on his cigarette as he talked. “Don’t you think that’s about the witching hour?”

“Certainly, Hal. Whatever you say,” said Stuart good-naturedly.

“Hal, I simply won’t have you taking a guest out of this house by force!” Mrs. Keen said in her sweet, mild voice. “And that’s what you’re doing—taking Mr. Stuart back to Lonesome Swamp at this unearthly hour against his will! He would much rather spend this damp, rainy night here with us. I’m sure he would! Think of it—opening a house at such an hour after it’s been closed for twenty years! You’ll be sick.”

“I’ll be sick if you try and talk me out of it, Mom,” said Hal with an ingratiating smile. “Now be a good sport and talk favorably of it, hey? It’ll be a lark for the Cowboy and me.”

“And don’t speak of Glen Stuart as *the cowboy!*” Mrs. Keen admonished with a faint smile. “It’s nothing short of rudeness.”

“Go on—he likes it,” Hal protested. “Don’t you, Cowboy?”

“It’s great,” Glen laughed. “I’m for Hal, Mrs. Keen,” he added sincerely. “He’s turned the biggest burden I’ve had in my life into an amusing adventure. I mean it! I looked forward to it with dread and I should have made a mess of it if I had to stay there alone. But now ... well, I’m determined to carry it through successfully because of your adventurous son. And as for him insisting on starting the project tonight—he’s discerning enough to see that it’s a task that must be grappled with at once, or not at all. I agree with him that it’s better to enter Grandfather’s dismal house enthusiastically tonight, than to wait until tomorrow when we’re feeling lukewarm about it. So tonight it shall be, with your kind permission, Mrs. Keen!”

Mrs. Keen, slim, graceful, and with her light hair turning white at the temples, rose from the table. Laughter lighted her bright blue eyes.

“It does sound as if it might be something of a lark,” she admitted, “and I don’t suppose you boys will do much sleeping tonight anyway. You’ll be too busy exploring, I guess. Still, don’t overdo things, Hal—I know to what limits

your enthusiasm sometimes extends.” Suddenly her thoughts turned practical and she added, “You’ll need linen and blankets and provisions. Well, let’s get out to the pantry first.”

“Bet you’d like to come along, Unk, wouldn’t you?” Hal asked, noting his uncle’s abstracted expression.

“Frankly, I would, Hal,” Denis answered, just as the front door bell rang. He hurried to the door and came back waving a telegram. “For me,” he explained, reading it as he crossed the room. “They’ve given me a little investigating to do while I’m on my vacation here, so that means I can’t join you boys. I have the job of tracing two men who were last seen above Orangetown. Counterfeiters of the famous Yates gang. Bickford Yates (Bick for short) and his closest henchman, Coly Murford.”

“Weren’t some of that famous Yates gang sentenced to a long term in Atlanta here only a short time ago?” Mrs. Keen asked, hesitating at the pantry door.

“Absolutely,” said Denis. “They were caught red-handed out in Kansas in a lonely spot. Bick Yates and Coly Murford escaped almost miraculously just as the raid was taking place and they haven’t been seen since, or even heard of until this telegram. Of course there’s no doubt that someone helped them get away. They’ve been wise not to try to get rid of any of their phoney paper. But sooner or later they weaken. They usually run to the Series of ’27 and ’28, serial numbers Z9874621K and P874322M. Well, I’ve got my work cut out for me, vacation or no vacation. Be thankful, Hal, and you too, Glen, that you’ve nothing more difficult on your minds than to determine the cause of supernatural manifestations in the Sharpe Mansion tonight! And as for Glen getting rid of Lonesome Swamp, any alert real estate man will be only too glad to take that burden from his shoulders.”

“I guess you’re right, Mr. Keen,” said Stuart hopefully. “Right now, like Hal, I’m interested in spooks alone.”

Denis laughed and reached for the percolator.

“And now that we’re about to embark on our chosen adventures, we’ll drink one last hot cup of coffee to our individual success!”

They all agreed and drank with much gusto. Hal added a few appropriate words to the toast with his usual spontaneity.

“Here’s hoping that Yates comes our way, thereby saving Unk a lot of time and worry. It would be so much more relief to find that the ghost with the light turned out to be Bick Yakes,” he added gaily. “There’s nothing like having one’s head ghost a full fledged counterfeiter, human and alive. Well, here’s hoping, people!”

They drank with solemn countenances and eyes full of laughter. Denis put down his cup first.

“The only flaw in your theory, Hal,” he said, “is that Sharpe Mansion was built and was reputed to be haunted thirty-five years before Bick Yates saw the light of day. Also, it’s a well-known fact in my department that Yates has a holy horror of the supernatural—he’s superstitious to the *nth* degree. No, I don’t agree with you that your head ghost will turn out to be Bick Yates. He wouldn’t go in that house of Sharpe’s if it meant saving himself a full term in Atlanta.”

“Then we’ll have to scout around and think of some other likely person for our head ghost, hey Cowboy?” Hal asked.

“Not so fast,” Glen begged him. “Let’s wait until we get right on location before we come to any decision. By that time, the head ghost may take it into his head to decide for us. Who knows?”

Who, indeed!

CHAPTER XIV

WELL-LAID PLANS

They set off in the roadster amply supplied with bedclothes and provisions. Glen Stuart protested at the latter, declaring that Mrs. Keen was too hospitable and that they had enough to feed a house full of ghosts besides themselves. Hal cried down such objections, saying that they might need it for such a purpose after all.

And so they found themselves, shortly after midnight, speeding across the tracks at Upper Ramapo station and heading down hill. By the time they reached the heart of the hills and had turned southwest in the direction of Lonesome Swamp, Hal and Glen were fast friends. There had been an interchange of thought, the whole story of the Eli Sharpe tragedy had been reviewed in detail and Hal wound up with his own and his uncle's experiences of that night. Lem's expected return to the fateful scene seemed to make a greater impression on Stuart than anything else that had been discussed.

He was thinking about it as the roadster sped on through the rain toward Lonesome Swamp. There was but little wind, and now and then his pleasant, deep voice sounded very clear and distinct above the running motor.

"What was this Lem like, Hal?" he asked after a time. "Did your uncle describe him to you at all?"

"A powerful chap, Unk said." Hal wriggled back in his seat more comfortably for they had struck a stretch of fairly good road. "He told me all about him as we rode back from Price's cottage. Lem was about my size, so I understand—he weighed about two hundred and twenty pounds even then. Had a bright red scar across his forehead—he fell when he was a kid. He was fair and had light blue eyes and a rather sullen disposition. Hated his lot in life and was always grumbling about his father's inability to set him up some way so's he could make a barrel of money. Unk said that was well known up and down Ramapo, that's why no one seemed terribly surprised that he took advantage of the murder to run off with your grandfather's money."

"Then he got what he wanted," said Stuart. "But what a mess! One hardly knows who to blame. Grandfather, a scoundrel and a cheat, old Cyrus his murderer, Lem, the thief and Dorkas a coward."

"What about yourself?" Hal queried. "You were the injured one. Done out of your inheritance and having to start life on a tragedy."

"Nothing like that at all, Hal," Stuart assured him. "I've had happiness with

my aunt that I would never have known with Grandfather. Now I have full charge of her ranch and some day I hope to buy her out. What more could I ask in life? And as for the tragedy, Aunt saw to it that I quickly put that behind me as I grew up. I had almost forgotten it until last week. So don't waste your pity on me. The only thing you can do is to wish me luck on the sale of Lonesome Swamp. I could use that money to buy Aunt out. It would put her on her feet in her old days—the place is pretty heavily mortgaged and it worries her sick I know.”

Hal wished him the best of luck with Lonesome Swamp, but somehow he could not rid his mind of the thought of Cyrus Price, aged and bent under the weight of years of misery and loneliness. Now, in the evening of his tragic life, was he to lose the home for which he had so dearly paid? Somehow it was unthinkable. Moreover, it would be inhuman, for the old man was now bereft of the power to earn a living and there would be nothing ahead but the almshouse. Hal told Glen about it.

“And you had the idea I'd see the old fellow come to that?” Stuart asked.

“How could I tell? I didn't know how you'd feel about him. After all, he was accused and tried for the murder of your grandfather. Blood is thicker....”

“I know, Hal, but it isn't true in this case. Sometimes I've been almost thankful to the Prices for changing my destiny, notwithstanding that I don't believe in the taking of human life for any reason whatsoever. Grandfather deserved what he got and that's the plain truth of the matter. He was a parsimonious, callous old man whose god was gold. Aunt said he thought about it and lived for it until it affected his mind, she thinks. In any event, he made life miserable for my mother who was his only daughter and who died when I was born. Grandfather was furious because my father was just a poor, struggling clerk from New York and my grandmother who had encouraged the match and the subsequent marriage, came in for her share of condemnation. Grandfather declared the whole thing was done to take his money. In fact, he thought that every being he met and talked with had designs on his fortune and he lived in mortal fear that someone more clever than himself would in some manner trick him out of every cent he had hoarded. My Aunt said it was whispered about that he was simply callous over Grandmother's death. Then he married again, you know.”

“Unk told me something of the kind. He said there was even some suspicion as to the way the second wife died.”

“I know it. That's why I can't even pretend to feel that Grandfather's untimely end was a loss to me. He haggled my father into a nervous breakdown which caused his death right after my mother's.... I know only one person to whom he was at all kind.”

“Your Uncle Dorkas?”

“Yes. With him he went to the other extreme when Uncle Dorkas was a real young chap—so my aunt says. He spoiled him and petted him and when he had reached the age to do something worth while in life, he was too dissolute and lazy. Then Grandfather wouldn’t give him anything more. Boy, what a family! But anyway, Hal, you just ease your mind where poor old Cyrus is concerned. I’ll gladly make him a present of his cottage and the Mill Pond. There’s enough acreage in Lonesome Swamp to set me up with a pretty penny without grabbing the old man’s only refuge.”

“Then that’s settled,” said Hal, smiling. “Glen, you’re a prince.”

“A prince of paupers,” Stuart laughed. “But all joking aside, Hal, I’d like to find Lem if for only one reason.”

“What’s that?”

“To get the deeds to the property. Everything was in that strong box, you know. I’ll have an awful tussle without them. It wouldn’t even be so bad if Grandfather had ever consulted a lawyer. But he didn’t even trust them because he thought they’d have designs on his fortune too. So here I am. I’d give anything to know where that strong box is at this moment.”

Hal nodded in agreement and guided the roadster around the bend in the road. Just below them shone the little light from Price’s cottage.

“Looks as if poor old Citrus is still up,” he observed.

Stuart said nothing but looked away into the darkness. For some time he stared idly at the black gulf which the Mill Pond made between that thin rim of lamplight and the woods in the distance. But suddenly this whole scene melted into the night, becoming a part of its vast abyss before he could bring himself to realize what had brought it about. Hal put it into words.

“Price’s light just went out, Cowboy. Notice it?” The car dipped down and onto the Lonesome Swamp Road proper. In two minutes they would be passing Cyrus Price’s cottage. Hal nodded, inspired by a new thought. “Guess he’s gone to bed, Glen. It’ll give me a chance to do something I wanted to do when Unk and I started away from here before.”

“You mean find out about the coupe parked in there by the Old Mill?”

“That’s what. I want to see if it’s still there. We can park this roadster on a little way and sneak back nice and easy. It’ll only take us a minute.”

“I believe you,” Stuart chuckled. “Judging from the speed we’ve been making so far, I’ve got the greatest respect for your idea of a minute.”

CHAPTER XV AN EXPLORATION

At Stuart's suggestion they parked the car at the foot of Sharpe's Hill. Both were dressed for the weather and enjoyed sauntering back along the dark, wet road. The frogs were quiet now and the silence of early morning pervaded the entire countryside. They saw nothing more to startle them than a wild rabbit scrambling across the road.

"Think old Cyrus will watch for your tail light to go up the hill?" Stuart wisely asked. "He'd have a fine view."

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you think he'd bother to stay up and watch? Oh, I know it's unusual for a car to come this way at all. You've absorbed what Unk told you too about the isolation of this place. But it's so late and the old fellow must be pretty tired. I shouldn't think he'd be able to hold his eyes open to watch whether or not we kept going right on up the hill and over."

"Let's hope that's the case," said Stuart. "After all, we're doing nothing worse than snooping...."

"On *your* property," Hal interposed. "Don't forget it's yours until you hand over the deed to poor old Citrus. Anyway, I like the idea of it being yours right now. It gives me a better feeling about snooping."

"And I don't feel it's mine at all, Hal. I wouldn't want to feel it. But as I said before, we won't be doing anything. Aren't we almost there?"

Hal nodded and put his finger to his lips. Presently, he struck off from the road and entered the high grass, beckoning Stuart to follow.

Soon they came to the clump of trees bordering the old mill. They hesitated, looking to the right where the neat little cottage was but dimly outlined in the rain and darkness. There was not a sign of anyone about there.

Hal led the way cautiously and moved through the trees with no more sound than the crackling of brush underfoot. This gave Stuart a little uneasiness, for several times he put a detaining hand on Hal's arm.

"It's all right, Cowboy," Hal whispered in his ear. "No one can hear us in this rain, besides we haven't a light so they can't see us. What's there to be nervous about?"

"It's not what's over there," Stuart whispered, "it's what might be here."

Hal chuckled and pulled his companion forward with him.

"There it is right under our noses and there's not a soul around," he said pointing to the little car parked between the two farthest trees. "Let's take a

look!”

Stuart suffered himself “to be led by the nose,” as he afterward put it. They approached the car cautiously and their first discovery was that the rear license plate had been removed. On going around to the front they found that the same was true of the front plate.

“What’s the idea, I wonder?” Hal said, pushing back his soft hat and rumpling his hair in front.

Stuart shrugged his broad shoulders.

“You wanted to see where your friend Frog Face came from, hey?”

“Just exactly. Wait a minute—I’ll look inside,” said Hal, and put one foot upon the running board preparatory to opening the door of the coupe.

Suddenly Stuart motioned frantically, leaned over and pulled him forcibly behind the tree nearest them. Standing there breathless, they heard the sound of twigs broken underfoot. It was not more than fifteen feet distant.

Then without warning they heard the crack of a rifle.

CHAPTER XVI

THREE SHOTS

Hal ran because Stuart ran. Also it seemed the wisest thing to do under the circumstances. They hadn't any way of retaliating—the foliage and rain and darkness obscured everything and their would-be attacker seemed to be taking advantage of it.

Another shot was fired before they had gone fifty feet!

They stumbled over indistinct stumps and tripped mostly over their own hurrying feet. It was impossible to see more than three feet ahead. Stuart, in an endeavor to keep under cover of the trees, had gone into the thick of the woods, instead of toward the roadway.

Hal finally found the way out of their troubles by striking a path which brought them out onto the road within two hundred feet of the roadster. Even with the tail light blinking so cheerily ahead, they did not slacken their pace for the ominous sound of running feet was still too close at hand.

Hal opened the door of the curtained roadster and clambered in breathlessly. He had the engine going by the time Stuart came up and swung his tall, muscular frame upon the running board. At the same moment, the third and last shot crackled through the rainy air.

Stuart gave a sort of squeak, but Hal had pulled him forcibly in and shut the door in a flash. The next second they were speeding up Sharpe's Hill with no thought but to put distance between themselves and their unseen enemy. Not a word did they exchange until the roadster came to a stop before the Sharpe gate.

"Wonder if we're safe even now?" Hal reflected glancing through the little window at the back of the car.

"I'd like to know why not!" Stuart said wearily. "I'm on my own ground and we can meet this sneaking assassin right here if he's got the nerve to come. But he won't! That kind always prefer to fight in ambush."

"Cowboy, we ought to have a gun, do you know that?" Hal asked seriously. "Something seems to tell me that we should have at least a thirty-eight calibre. Either that or we'll give up this project tonight and go back to Ramapo so the police can be notified."

"I couldn't go back to Ramapo tonight for love nor money, Hal," Stuart declared listlessly. "I'm so tired that that gloomy mansion in there appeals more to me than the whole state police."

Hal glanced at his companion, a little puzzled. Stuart had seemed lively

enough before their rather breath-taking flight through the woods. But then, perhaps he wasn't as strong as he seemed. Certainly it was enough of a flight to test the wind of any fellow, he concluded.

"How about parking this bus right inside the garden, Glen?" he asked.

"Fine," Stuart agreed without any apparent enthusiasm. "We won't have so far to carry the stuff."

Hal glanced at him again, curiously. He was going to say something, but Stuart climbed laboriously out of the roadster and trudged slowly toward the gate. He pushed both sides open with his shoulder, then waved with his left hand.

Hal steered the car in carefully and turned it about so that he would not have any difficulty in getting it out in a hurry. Stuart stood by, watching indifferently, then pushed the gate shut in the same manner that he had opened it.

"How for the big kick of opening up the dusty and moth-worn castle, hey?" he called to Hal who was getting out of the car.

"Righto. I've got no less than four flashlights, did I tell you, Glen? I had two and Unk crammed in two more. So we've got two each, hey? Plenty of light to see where we're coming and going. Tomorrow we can see how the lamps can be put in order and by tomorrow night we'll have this darned place ablaze with light—what ho?"

Stuart was laughing in spite of himself. "I hope it's a safe blaze, Hal. But say, how about unlocking the castle first and see how the land lies before going to the trouble of carting our baggage in? We may have to dust a space to put it down."

"Good suggestion, Glen. Now how about the key to the castle?"

Stuart was already fumbling in his left hand pocket. Hal noticed that his movements were decidedly awkward, but again said nothing for the young man had already drawn out a bunch of keys.

"Here, Hal," he said, "I'm going to let you do the honors. Pick out the two longest keys on the bunch. One fits the front door, grille and all, and the other opens the back entrance."

Hal took the proffered keys, flashed on one of the lights to pick out the desired one, and noticed that Stuart's face looked wan and pale in the bright light.

"Feel sick or anything, Glen?" he asked solicitously.

"Nothing to worry about," the other laughed. "Now how about getting that grille...."

The gleaming light shifting slightly in Hal's hand suddenly fell on Stuart's shining wet sleeve. Hal started, then stared, for there was a distinct hole in the rubberized material and from it oozed a stream of blood, running from above

the elbow down to the hand.

“Glen!” he cried. “Why, you’ve been wounded! *You’ve been shot!*”

CHAPTER XVII

INDECISION

Stuart deliberately laughed, raised his left hand and gave Hal a playful push.

“It’s nothing, you nut!” he said, with a nonchalance that did not deceive Hal. “Just a flesh wound. It clipped me as I got on the running board that time. I’m a little weak from bleeding, that’s all.”

“That’s all? Isn’t that enough? Glen, you’re a brick! Never saying a word. I thought there was something funny that you acted so tired and weak all of a sudden.” He reflected a second, then hurried to the roadster. “Come on you Cowboy,” he said decisively. “I’ve a first aid kit in my baggage. After I look your arm over, I’ll decide what next should be done.”

“Just like that!” Stuart mocked. Nevertheless he obeyed Hal’s orders promptly and had his arm bared for inspection at once.

It happened that he had not underrated his wound. The bullet had not lodged deeply and was quickly located. Hal removed it, sterilized the wound and had it bandaged up in ten minutes’ time.



THE BULLET HAD NOT LODGED DEEPLY AND WAS QUICKLY
LOCATED.

“My red cross-eyed nurse,” said Stuart soberly. Then as Hal helped him back into his slicker, he reached out and gave him a grateful pat on the

shoulder. “Thanks a lot, Hal. You did it like a professional. Now what’s the verdict?”

“We’re going to let the police in on this,” Hal answered stoutly. “I’m taking you back to my house for the night. After I dump you into bed, I’m going to take my bus straight down to the cop’s place on the turnpike.”

“You’re doing nothing of the kind, Hal,” said Stuart promptly. “I’m as sore as you are that anybody should snipe at me like this, but I’m going to find out the meaning of it before the whole world’s let in on it. Can’t you understand, Hal, how unpleasant such publicity would be for me just as I come to take possession of this property?”

“There’s something in that,” Hal conceded. “But you can’t let this Indian in ambush go scot free. If you don’t want publicity, I can’t blame you for that, but someone else is likely to be sniped at. To keep it quiet is only endangering someone else.”

“I know, Hal. I’ve thought of that. But no one will be endangered because we’re going to visit Cyrus tomorrow and air this business thoroughly. I think we’ll get some satisfaction out of it.”

“I hope so,” Hal said skeptically, “but from what I’ve seen of Old Citrus, he’s an unknown quantity. Anyway, Stuart, you’re the one that’s been wounded and you’re the one that would have to push it. But I’m with you as far as unpleasant publicity goes. It certainly would go big in the papers.... Eli Sharpe’s grandson shot by mysterious stranger as he goes to take possession of murdered man’s property after twenty years. Whew! What headlines they would make, hey? Gosh, Glen, I don’t blame you, honestly I don’t! We *will* see Old Citrus tomorrow or bust!”

“Then that’s settled!” Stuart said, obviously relieved. “From what you’ve told me, I have a feeling that Cyrus Price isn’t exactly ignorant about this affair.”

“Same here, Cowboy. And what’s more, I have a hunch that there’s a whole lot more behind it than the mere shooting. You’re going to ask me if it’s Lem, hey? Well, it looks darn funny, but I’ve learned from experience not to count on anything or anybody. It just doesn’t make sense that Cyrus Price should snipe at snooping strangers to keep them from finding out that Lem is home.”

“Do you really think we were just sniped at, Hal?”

“I don’t know what to think. It was a queer experience, so queer that I’m still kind of up in the air about it.”

“I’m not,” said Stuart convincingly; “I feel it in my bones that those shots were fired at us to kill.”

“Then by gosh, we’ll find out why! And what’s more we’ll find it out ourselves.” The idea seemed to appeal to him more as he thought of it. “Why

not?"

"That's talking!" Stuart exclaimed. "And now for the grand opening of Sharpe Castle, hey?"

"Go to it!" Hal laughed.

CHAPTER XVIII

SPECTRAL COMPANIONS

Hal pushed the door wide into the entrance hall and let his lights gleam in all four corners. Carpet, faded and worn and thick with dust, covered the narrow passageway floor and the stairs, which were built in the exact center of the house. An old combination hatrack and umbrella stand stood just inside the doorway, its fixtures tarnished with disuse and boasting but one lone brown derby (vintage of nineteen hundred and ten). It depended from its tarnished hook rather uncertainly as if wearied beyond measure with its years of continuous hanging.

“Grandfather always wore brown derbies,” Stuart’s voice boomed at Hal’s ear. “I remember that better than I do Grandfather himself.”

Hal jumped. Glen’s voice completely unnerved him for the moment. The derby had an almost sinister attraction for him and he could not rid his mind of the notion that perhaps Eli Sharpe would some day return for his hat, shake off its twenty year accumulation of dust and walk out of the gloomy house forever.

“Door to your immediate right is the library,” Glen informed him in the same loud voice. “Door to the extreme end leads through the pantry and into the kitchen, and the doors at either side of the stair lead into the dining room and sitting room respectively.”

“I could hear you if you talked ten times lower, Glen,” said Hal. “Still, I don’t suppose there’s any reason why you shouldn’t shout in your own house if you want to.”

“Don’t call it *my* house. Ugh, I don’t like it at all!”

“I gathered as much by the way you stand half out and half in. It doesn’t smell as musty as I thought it would,” Hal said observing the many depressions along the dusty carpet and up the narrow stairway. “Notice that, Glen?” he asked, pointing to them. “Someone’s been in here, and recently at that!”

“The trustees possibly. Maybe they opened the windows from the inside and aired it out a bit in anticipation of my inheritance. Ha! That’s a joke,” Glen said, critically surveying the faded and colorless paper which still clung tenaciously to the walls. The high ceiling, however, looked beyond repair for its plaster hung like huge icicles in midair from one end of the hall to the other. This condition they later found was prevalent throughout the gloomy house.

“Well,” said Hal, playing the lights up and down the stairs, “let’s decide on

what room we deposit our baggage, hey? The library seems the most likely room, being nearest.”

“That’s the room....” Stuart began, making a wry face.

“I know, Cowboy! You don’t mean to tell me you’re nervous? Or feeling weak from that wound?”

“Neither, Hal. The wound’s forgotten. It’s just that the sight of this terrible place revives memories that I thought were forgotten.” He straightened visibly. “Of course I’m not nervous—it’s only because I can’t push back the things that are crowding into my mind right now.”

“Boy, I understand, Glen. And how! I should have thought of that. It’ll wear off, though. Forget it and tell yourself there’s nothing so dead as the dead past. Nothing can revive it, believe me! We’ve got it on the ghosts even—we’re alive and they’re not! So cheer up, Cowboy. That’s why I think it’ll be good for us to camp in the library right off the bat. Set your light and put it in the hall. I’ll use mine to explore in here.”

He pushed against the dusty door and it yielded. Suddenly the long, narrow room seemed to spring to life in the gleaming lights. High-backed chairs with their dust-laden covers, an antique desk with its chair standing aside as if someone had just risen from it, and a few chromos placed at intervals above the bookcases. A high mantelpiece over the fireplace was adorned with hunting trophies and below it was an andiron and bellows looking sullen with disuse.

As Hal stepped across the worn carpet the floor emitted a queer ringing sound. He shuddered and stopped instantly, to hear Stuart behind him laughing.

“This is just the start, Hal,” he said. “This room comes back to me too. It made that creepy noise way back when....” Suddenly his eyes lighted on the andiron. “I see they’ve left that all just as it was.”

Hal looked, following the line of Stuart’s gaze and saw that a great dark stain streaked the carpet bordering the fireplace. He turned away and forced a smile at his companion.

“It might have been ink, Glen. Anyway, forget it and let’s get our baggage in here, hey? Just now I’m wondering about the light that Unk and I saw when we were out on the veranda there. Somehow I got the impression that it came from the hall. Yet I had to push open the door, didn’t I!”

“And how—as you say. What do you say we go right on upstairs and look around first? After that we can bring in our stuff. If anyone’s broken in here, we’ll soon know it. The kitchen and the rest of the place we’ll look into last.”

They went out into the hall together, Hal stepping on the stairway first. His two feet had no sooner come firmly down upon the second step than he was startled by the sound of someone coming heavily downstairs.

He glanced up, but saw not a soul. Then he turned to Stuart who was

standing just behind him.

“You’ll never see anyone coming down either, Hal,” the young man said in answer to his silent question. “It’s always been so—I’m remembering all these queer things, one by one. Guess I got used to it being reared here from infancy, but now it’ll get on my nerves. I remember asking Dorkas once what made the noises in the house. I must have been to someone else’s house visiting and noticed that they hadn’t the queer noises we had. Anyway, Dorkas said that it was the thousand devils in Grandfather always stalking through the house. He laughed and laughed over that answer, but I never felt quite as safe after that. I was always scared to death to go to sleep.”

“Where’d you sleep, Glen?” Hal asked, still hesitating on the second step.

“Third floor. Uncle Dorkas and I slept in the two adjoining rooms in front. Grandfather had a bed up in the turret. But we won’t go up there tonight, Hal, hey?”

“No,” Hal answered promptly. “I’m not burning to go up in the turret tonight. If we get through the bedrooms and the rest of the house, I guess we won’t have done so badly.”

Boldly then, Hal again began his ascent, with Stuart faithfully behind. And though the invisible walker trod each step in response to theirs they paid no heed and arrived safely at the second landing.

CHAPTER XIX A DISCOVERY

Hal stepped boldly along the second floor hall, but stopped almost instantly. The floor shook under him as if a quake were undermining the entire structure. Stuart beckoned him into the room nearest at hand and was already holding open the door.

“What you’ve heard is the second story exhibition, Hal,” he explained. “Fortunately it only happens in the halls and not in the rooms. The third floor hall groans as if someone were in a death agony. The lower floor hall at the back is where you’re amused by invisible prisoners dragging invisible chains in their wake and at intervals allowing them to drop with nice little sounds. Supernatural or not, Hal, it’s not pleasant to hear. Don’t ask me to explain any of it. No one has yet. What surprises me is that I should have so completely forgotten this horrid place and was willing to come back here alone. Gosh! I couldn’t have stood it alone.”

There was a chill damp in the place that Hal could feel. Somehow he could not find it in himself to laugh off Stuart’s obvious repugnance for the place. In point of fact, the self-same feeling was creeping into his own mind and his enthusiasm was not what it had been an hour or two back.

They passed through a succession of bedrooms with their gaunt, walnut beds and ghostly, starched counterpanes, yellowed with age and gray with dust. Walnut dressers and washstands with their age-yellowed doilies and towels, glowered sullenly in the sudden bright light.

Through it all, Hal had the feeling that he was profaning the dead. Each time the light swept over a dusty bit of furniture he was seized with the guilty thought that he had dragged some unwilling soul from the sanctity of a well-earned grave. And surely, he thought, the whole place had earned a better ending than this—it was as if the house and all its furnishings so long dead were forever denied the right to a peaceful burial.

“Makes a fellow think it’s a house from the gay nineties dancing into one’s nightmare, heh?” Stuart said with a shudder. “I don’t like it at all, Hal! One can almost smell the musty lace. It’s as if these things are standing around after all these years and grinning like corpses that haven’t been buried.”

“Boy, you’re getting into a fine state,” said Hal. He kept to himself the fact that he had been thinking much the same thing. “We’ll get on upstairs. Suppose we sleep up there?”

Stuart shook himself out of his mood and forced a smile.

“It’ll be better than sleeping down here,” he said vehemently. “At least I was used to it up there. Rooms are just the same—same furniture too. Grandfather must have bought it wholesale.”

“He must have had wholesale ideas on architecture too,” Hal said, feeling a sense of comfort in hearing his own deep voice in the dead silence of the rooms. “What he ever built so many narrow bedrooms for is beyond me.”

“Everything’s narrow about the place,” said Stuart with disgust. “Even if he is dead I can’t help saying that he was narrow too.”

“He won’t hear you saying so, Glen.” They were laughing again as they shut the bedroom doors and started for the third floor. The invisible stair-walker again made a descent, but Hal was getting used to it and he talked as loudly as possible to keep out the eerie sound.

“No bathroom in this dismal dump, hey, Cowboy?” he almost shouted.

“Absolutely none!” Stuart shouted back. “I’ve vague memories of being chilled to the bone while I stood in a small tin tub in my bedroom. Those were the happy days.”

“I don’t think!”

They were still shouting empty talk when they reached the third floor hallway. Hal withstood the spectral groaning of it quite stoically, refusing with alacrity Stuart’s joking proposal to ascend the stairway to the turret which wound up from the back of the dark hall.

“Not tonight, Cowboy!” he yelled. “On to the front bedrooms.”

Stuart again led the way, though Hal was directly at his heels. Consequently, as the light flooded the narrow room they saw, simultaneously, that someone had been occupying it. The bed, rumped and unmade, had been slept in recently.

“We have,” said Hal with a gaiety he did not feel, “a stranger within our gates!”

CHAPTER XX

HAL HAS AMBITIONS

“Perhaps that’s past tense, Hal,” said Stuart hopefully. “Perhaps it’s *hadhad* a stranger within our gates’! Anyway, we haven’t seen or heard anything of him yet. Goodness knows, I wouldn’t begrudge any poor hobo a bed in this awful place. I’d feel sorry for him to think he felt compelled to stay here.”

“Maybe that explains the light,” Hal said thoughtfully. “Still that wouldn’t explain how he could get in, huh? You must have the only keys, from what Unk told me.”

“I know—I know. That’s what puzzles me. We’ve found all the windows locked and shuttered securely so far. Perhaps we’ll find some clue on the lower floor or in the cellar.”

“Unk said that there wasn’t any means of entering that way. One has to get in from the back hall and so out...”

“I remember,” Stuart interposed. “That’s right. Anyway, we’ll traipse down and look.”

Hal was nothing if not a courageous young man, but even he could not stand a trip through the Mansion’s lower back hall without feeling an icy tremor shake his very being. Chains clanged, dropped behind him and before him, and he shouted with relief when he followed Stuart into the kitchen, musty as it was.

They did not linger there very long, but padded swiftly over the cracked and soiled linoleum, past the kitchen table and its half-dozen chairs, past the iron sink with its aged, rusted pump and out into the mice-ridden cupboard. They were relieved, however, to find that no spectral sound greeted their descent into the choking damp of the cellar.

Great patches of mildew lay about, boxes and papers yellow with age cluttered up the entire place. Mice scurried into obscure holes at their approach and hundreds of slugs wriggled off into the darkened areas. Hal thought he saw the outline of a rat leaping behind a coal bin, but he could not be certain for he almost bumped into the hot-air furnace which occupied the middle of the cellar floor.

“Imagine heating a barn like this with that thing,” he said, viewing the rusted device with more loathing than curiosity. A coating of slime on it emitted a dank, choking odor.

“Man, let’s get up out of this!” Stuart said with something like a snort of

disgust.

“Little Hal’s right with you, Cowboy. This is one place we’d never have missed if we’d never seen it.”

They were up the stairs by that time, hurrying now into the high-ceilinged dining room with its formidable oak furniture and huge fruit pictures buried deep in cobwebs on either wall. The tall sideboard, heavily laden with cut glass, had in one of its fruit bowls a tiny, petrified looking object that somewhat resembled a ball. It was a sort of reddish color flecked with bits of yellow and as Hal passed out of the room and into the sitting room, the conviction remained with him that the object must have once been a luscious, fair-sized orange.

The sitting room revealed nothing but a profusion of mohair furniture, gilt chairs and terrible family portraits. Cobwebs swept across their faces, and with their noisy intrusion a mouse ducked into the center of the settee where it had dug itself a comfortable nest. Heedless to say, they did not disturb the tiny creature, but swung out of the room with all the haste possible.

“Hal,” said Stuart seriously, when they had again reached the front hall, “I’m staying here tonight, and tonight *only*—see? I wouldn’t do that only...”

“I know, Glen, old top! Boy, you don’t have to make any excuses to me. I’m fed up with antiquity. And if it wasn’t that Unk would have the laugh on us, I’d speed back home before you could say hello.”

“Just how I feel,” Stuart agreed, holding a flashlight in his left hand and nursing his right one. “Only thing for us to do, Hal, is to get a couple of clean sheets and blankets that your mother gave us and leave the rest out in the car. We’re not camping here after dawn, believe me.”

“No matter what you say I’ll agree with you,” Hal said comically. “Suppose we sleep in the bed that our unknown chum has so recently deserted? There’s something more inviting about that room and that bed because ... well, because it’s at least been touched by a human being lately. Don’t you feel that way about it, Glen?”

“Do I! You took the words right out of my mouth. Who wants to sleep in those other stark, dead-looking beds? Not me, nor you either! Heaven bless our unknown chum for rumpling up at least one bed.”

“Somehow it’s the only room in the house that doesn’t give me the creeps,” said Hal, about fifteen minutes later. They had secured the bedclothes from the car and had trudged up to the third floor for the second time that early morning. Stuart was remaking the bed.

“It feels airier and I don’t notice that terrible musty smell that we got in all the other rooms,” he said. “Even the bed seems all right,” he added straightening the last blanket in its place.

He crossed the room to the nearest window, gave it a tug, and up it went.

He tried the three other windows in the room and all yielded easily.

“That shows this room has been aired all right,” he said confidently. “Well, it’s made it a whole lot more comfortable for us tonight. I may be puzzled about our predecessor, but I’m not angry—I’m grateful.”

“Same here,” said Hal, once more his old gay self. “Who cares for stormy skies....” he sang in his deep bass, as he got into his pajamas. “Now that we’re on the third story, above the mildew and the supernatural, I can do some earnest thinking. I’m even getting back my enthusiasm to explore these dopey manifestations as Unk and you call them. Whatever they are, I mean to throw open the shutters in the morning and expose them to the light of day,” he declared with vim.

“Is it the effect of this room that’s produced this renewed ambition?” Stuart laughed and jumped into the ponderous bed.

“Sure. It’s had a very marked effect on my buoyant hopes. Ten or fifteen minutes ago I felt chilled to the bone and fed up on antiquity. But this room....” he hesitated at this point to ask: “I bet there’s never been any tragedy stalking out of this room, Glen, has there?”

“Only Uncle Dorkas,” Stuart chuckled. “He got up out of this bed one early morning, so I’ve been given to understand, and he marched down to the Mill Pond where he committed suicide! That’s the only tragedy that stalked out of here that I know of.” Hal pretended to fall in a faint on Uncle Dorkas’ bed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE STRANGER WITHIN

Notwithstanding this rather discouraging information, Hal's spirits kept up. The bedroom door, being warped, would not shut tightly, and for some time he and Stuart lay and listened to the eerie noises through the house. They talked at intervals, finally succumbing to the drowsiness that stole over them.

Hal fought off sleep even then so that when he finally did slumber, his conscious self seemed to be keeping on the alert. Quite plainly he could hear the dismal clanging in the lower hall and the spectral moaning just outside his door. A cool wind blew in through the shuttered windows and he was vaguely aware of the steady patter of rain. The leaky gutter on the veranda roof made a constant dripping sound which he also heard.

Meanwhile his dreams were fantastic things which had neither a definite beginning nor a conclusive ending. He tossed and turned, was partly conscious that he cried out in his sleep and clung tightly to Stuart's pajama coat, dreaming that he was falling from the turret, clear down the hill to Price's cottage. When he got there his uncle helped him up and told him to hurry home.

Stuart's sleep, too, was fitful. Several times he awakened, sat up, felt for the flashlights under his pillow, then buried his head under the covers to keep out the spectral noises.

At about three o'clock the rain stopped and a deep silence settled over the countryside. The distant hum of crickets and other insect life, the croaking of frogs at the Mill Pond, all floated on the breeze past the Mansion. Hal heard it all, was even dimly aware that the rain had ceased entirely, yet he was not conscious enough of these things to be really awake.

Consequently, when he heard a door slam somewhere he thought he was dreaming it. Then, step by step, he heard soft footfalls on the lower stair accompanied by the ghostly walker who echoed every sound with his own eerie tread.

The second floor hall shook violently beneath him. Hal felt the motion distinctly yet he could not struggle out of his slumber even when he heard the spectral walker accompany the intruder up to the third floor. Step after step he heard them come until the third floor hall groaned dismally.

He tossed frantically in his sleep and tried to cry out to Stuart. But not a sound escaped his lips for he sank deeper into his dreams, yet not relaxing his hold on his conscious mind.

He was aware of the footfalls coming straight to the bedroom and heard plainly the sound of the door being slowly pushed open. Someone entered on tiptoe, walking cautiously toward the bed. He broke out in a cold sweat and struggled frantically with the fatigue that held him in its powerful grip.

It seemed to him that a face bent over him, a face lined and haggard and unshaved. Unkempt hair, dark and straight, fell over the shaggy eyebrows and all but obscured the small, glittering eyes which were looking down at him. The thin-lipped, cruel mouth seemed as if it would open to laugh at his sleeping self, but did not, curling up in a sort of surprised manner instead.

Hal seemed not to be able to do aught but stare back at this stranger. Moreover, he was trying to guess what the rest of the creature was like, whether made of the same substance as his horrible dreams or whether it was vital and real like himself.

With that thought, he struggled out of the last bond that imprisoned him. He was awake, conscious that the face he had been dreaming of was the face he was staring into at that very moment. Impulsively, he gave Stuart a sound kick, then sat up.

“Well?” he asked.

The man turned away and was gone from the room in a flash. Hal sat trying to collect his wits while the stranger rushed down through the house, leaving in his wake a medley of its eerie sounds. It was a full minute before Stuart realized where he was and what had happened.

“I tell you!” Hal was saying. “It must have been our unknown chum. I heard him coming up the stairs, first floor, second floor, third floor. It was sort of in my dreams and yet it wasn’t—you know how that is? Awful! It was as if I was suffocating. Anyway, I dreamed he came in this room, walked across the floor to the bed and was bending over me. All of a sudden I knew I wasn’t dreaming about it at all. I knew I was staring at him, wide awake!”

“We ought to chase him, hey?” Stuart asked between yawns. “We ought to ask him what business....”

“Who’s going to catch him now?” Hal laughed. “Gosh, he went like a shot out of a cannon. Do you suppose he was going to wait and answer my question? Like fun....”

A door slammed somewhere below.

The two young men stared at each other. “He went out the door—how do you suppose he got in?” Stuart asked, wide awake now.

“The same way,” Hal suggested. “I dreamed I heard the door slam just like that. Then I heard him coming up the stairs....”

“The whole thing was just a dream, Hal.” Stuart waved the idea aside and slumped back onto his pillow. “You can’t be certain of anything like that. Besides it wouldn’t be possible! I’m the only human being who’s got the keys

to this moth-eaten shack and I wish it was somebody else than me.”

“Shall we get up and search the darn place again, Glen?”

Stuart was even then slightly snoring. Hal shook him, repeating his question.

“Let the guy who wants to carry off every bit of dust-covered junk in the place!” was the sleepy answer. “I don’t give a good gosh darn, Hal. What’ss ... ss....”

“Aw, go to sleep, you lazy, ambitionless....” Hal was laughing. “How you can sleep after excitement like that is more than I can understand. I won’t close my eyes.”

“Soon’ss ... dawn ... we’ll get ... up,” Stuart sputtered after a lengthy struggle.

Hal shifted down under the covers, rested his head on one elbow and looked at his sleeping companion. For some little while he kept this somewhat uncomfortable pose, wondering meanwhile how he was going to spend the time until dawn streaked the eastern sky. He finally shouted this question into Stuart’s slumbering ear and as it met with not one whisper of response, he gave up in disgust and laid his curly head down on his own pillow to think it over.

In five minutes he was deep in slumber.

CHAPTER XXII

FAIR EXCHANGE

It was mid-morning when Stuart stirred. He opened his eyes and looking through the closely drawn shutters saw the brightest sunlight streaming out of a blue sky. On either side of the Mansion, the green, wooded hills rose out of the mists and far to the west a flock of birds circled, then disappeared among the trees.

He poked Hal determinedly and finally got him awake.

“I think I remember you were the one that didn’t see how I could get back to sleep after the excitement!” he teased.

Hal sat up, rubbing his eyes and stretching his long, muscular arms.

“What was I going to do—sit and talk to myself?” he answered, laughing sheepishly.

“Besides we didn’t get to sleep until such a devilish hour!”

“And woke up at a still more devilish hour,” Stuart reminded him. “What did you do, just dream about that guy or did you really see him?”

“Did you *hear* that door slam downstairs or did you *dream* it?” Hal returned.

“Darned if I know, Hal. I was just about dead to the ears even then, I guess. I don’t remember much except that you kicked me and told me our unknown chum had been bending over you. What’s the whole story—not as you dreamed it, but as you really heard it and saw it after you were awake?”

Hal told him, and notwithstanding the warning, he included the dream.

“Then it was in a dream that you heard him close the door!” Stuart insisted.

“It was and it wasn’t,” Hal argued. “And the long and the short of it is that he couldn’t possibly have come in either entrance. I’m the only human being alive who has those keys, Hal. And it’s an extraordinary lock. It would take an expert locksmith to fit new ones.”

“All right, Glen. But you saw with your own eyes this bed last night. Someone had slept in it! And you saw that not one of the windows in the house but these have been touched in years and years. How then, did the chap get in?”

Stuart grinned and threw up his hands with a hopeless gesture.

“Your theory wins anyway, Hal. Certainly he couldn’t climb in through the shutters or the keyholes, not unless he’s one of our spectral company here.”

“And you don’t believe in the spectral company any more than I do, Glen. I’ll admit it was beginning to get on my nerves last night, but in the broad light

of day, I feel like laughing out loud whenever I think of it. There's some solid, material reason for these queer sounds."

As if in defiance of his ultimatum the third floor hall groaned relentlessly. The young men laughed and went on dressing.

And Stuart, in an initial gesture to this new order of things, started the rounds on the third floor and unloosed every shutter to the morning light.

There was one concession they could not make, however, and that was to eat any breakfast in the Mansion. Consequently Hal got out his camping paraphernalia from the roadster, hunted out some dry firewood and soon had a campfire going in the weed-choked garden. Stuart came out of the house and joined him just as the coffee was bubbling up into the percolator top.

"We'll have coffee and a fried egg," Hal said, busy at his tasks. "Lunch is going to be eaten at Mrs. Keen's in Upper Ramapo—savvy? Hereafter we'll just room at the Mansion, hey Glen?"

"Good idea," said Stuart. "Then you haven't given up the idea of spending another night in this antique shop?"

"You tell 'em I haven't! What's the idea of even thinking I have? I told you before I'm going to get to the bottom...."

"I've got every shutter in the blooming place undone and every window open," Stuart interposed with a discouraged note in his voice. "Even with that much light it seems impossible to make the house cheerful and sunny."

"Cheero now, Cowboy!" Hal teased. "I've an idea that Unk will help you get rid of the place. He knows so many people and the right kind of people too. Another thing, Glen, when we want to chuck this adventure hunt—which it really is—I've got a nice room home with twin beds and a southern exposure. So nothing's as black as it seems." Stuart chuckled and Hal noticed then, for the first time, that he was concealing something behind his back.

"What have you got there—something good or something bad?" Hal asked.

"Neither," Stuart answered smiling. "It's just in between," he said holding out a man's gray golf cap for Hal's inspection. "This is what I found on the hatrack in place of Grandfather's dusty old brown derby. I just happened to see it as I came through the hall."

"Observant chap," Hal said taking it and looking it over carefully. There were no initials in it, no means of knowing who its owner might be. "Our unknown chum must have left it, Glen, huh? Bet he grabbed the derby in the excitement of hurrying out instead of his cap."

"That's what I've figured, Hal. So you're right as usual—even in your dreams. Someone *was* in the house and broke no locks or windows to do it either."

"And they grabbed the derby on the rebound," Hal said with a thoughtful grin. "Well, Glen, a fair exchange you know...."

CHAPTER XXIII

QUESTIONING

They rode down the hill toward the cottage in the full glare of the noon-day sun. The mill pond, blue and sparkling, spread out beyond the cottage and narrowed out until it was lost to sight between the wooded hills. The old mill too, sprawling beneath its tangled ivy, seemed enlarged by the magic of sunlight.

Hal could see it quite plainly as the car came down the slope, see it plainly for the first time. Its old wooden platform leading up to the little brick shanty built onto the mill looked neglected but seemed not to be in a state of decay as the Mansion was. Even Stuart remarked this.

“I’m going to see if Old Citrus minds my snooping in that Old Mill,” Hal declared. “I’ve never been in a new mill, much less an old one.”

“What a lot of irons you have on the fire! Better take them as they come, Hal. Something tells me that old Cyrus isn’t in any mood for snoopers, so we’d better watch our step.”

Hal laughed and waved this advice aside. Later on, he was regretting it, but at that moment, he was too busy parking his roadster on Cyrus’ gravel to think of much else than their immediate plan.

They waited an interminable time for the old man to respond to their repeated knocks at the cottage door. Finally, he put in an appearance after trudging heavily up from the cellar.

“Old Citrus, let me inform you,” Hal told Stuart, “has a cellar complex. It’s a brand new kind. He either hides in one of a dozen sugar barrels he has down there, or curls up on one of the fruit closet shelves. It’s a Sherlock Holmes mind that will solve which one. But here’s the old chap himself.”

Cyrus’ eyes looked dull and reddened as if he had had but little sleep. His small, round head and thin white hair were thrust for a moment in the space between the opened door and the jamb. He looked from one to the other of the young men suspiciously.

“Wa’al?” he asked in a tone that sounded like a groan.

“Do you remember me, Mr. Price?” Stuart asked, gently.

The old man rubbed his eyes, hesitated, then shook his head slowly.

“How should I remember yer when I don’t know yer name even, eh?”

Stuart smiled pleasantly and proffered his left hand.

“I’m Glen Stuart, Mr. Price—Eli Sharpe’s grandson.”

A ghastly pallor stole over the old man’s features. Then, for a moment, he

raised his gnarled hands before his face as if to ward off some expected blow. When he put them down he looked at the young men, bewildered.

“Listen, Mr. Price,” Stuart said softly, “I just came here to say hello. I came up from New York last night to open up Grandfather’s house. You see, I own the property now and....”

“Jest come in an’ set in the settin’ room, eh?” interposed the old man suddenly. “It’s so suddint an’ all.”

“Why, of course,” Stuart assured him. They got seated inside, Hal in a rocker and Stuart sitting half on and half off the old settee. Cyrus sank wearily into the old-fashioned armchair.

“So yer little Glen Stuart growed up, eh?” he said, blinking his weak old eyes in the dim, cool room. “I ain’t seen yer since....” He gulped.

“It’s all right with me, Mr. Price,” Stuart reassured him. “I have nothing but the kindest and most neighborly thoughts of you. Now please don’t distress yourself on that point any more. I came to tell you not to worry about your cottage. I mean to hand the deed back to you as soon as I can find it.”

The old man seemed to want to speak. His thin lips quivered, and it was a few minutes before he was able to talk.

“Yer mean the courts gave yer this hull Lonesome Swamp includin’ the Mansion?” he asked incredulously.

Stuart nodded with his usual brilliant smile.

“Hadn’t you heard? They sent me the keys of the house and notified me of my inheritance last week. So I came on here from Washington.”

“An’ yer say yer’ll give me the cottage like I’ve alius owned it till yer Gran’pop took it frum me?” Cyrus shrieked incredulously.

Stuart assured him that was what he meant to do.

“Yer alius was a good little feller,” said the old man flatly. He glanced at Hal suspiciously.

“Yer was here las’ night with Denis Keen,” he said, blinking his eyes.

Hal acknowledged it with a cheerful nod.

“I met them up at the station,” Stuart explained. “Hal, you know, is Denis Keen’s nephew.”

“He’s the ’tective from Washin’ton. I know!” Cyrus Price seemed to mumble then. “I knew him too when he was a little feller—I knew mos’ all o’ yer ’fore my days o’ misery.”

“I know, Mr. Price, and I’m awfully sorry,” Stuart said sincerely. “That’s why I came right down this morning to tell you I intended you should have the cottage for it belongs to you anyway.”

A light appeared in Cyrus’ eyes and he blinked them steadily at Stuart.

“When kin I git the deed?” he asked suddenly.

“That’s what I’ll have to explain to you, Mr. Price.” Stuart hesitated, then

plunged in. “The deed to this cottage—all of Grandfather’s papers were in the strong box. *The strong box!*” he repeated with a smile. “It was stolen, you remember? Well, you could have that deed right now if I knew where to lay my hands on that strong box. It was in there along with everything else.”

Cyrus Price’s skin looked like parchment. He grasped the arms of the chair and rose unsteadily. His lips were colorless.

“Yer say I can’t git that deed unless yer find that strong box o’ Eli’s?” His voice was reduced to a thin whisper.

Stuart explained that it would make things less complicated if the box were found.

“But the question is—where is it, hey Mr. Price?”

Cyrus took a step forward and would have tottered to the floor had not Hal jumped up and supported him.

CHAPTER XXIV LIES?

“Eh?” he shrieked as Hal helped him back into the chair. “I’m gettin’ old, I guess. Gettin’ old frum my misery.”

“Not as bad as that,” said Stuart sympathetically and winked a warning to Hal. “But there’ll be misery around here again, Mr. Price, if people shoot off any more rifles at me.” He held up his wounded arm for the old man’s inspection. “I was shot last night—it could have been worse. My friend or I might have been killed.”

“Eh?” cried the old man sitting up straight. He was obviously alarmed. “Yer was shot ’round here, yer mean?” he insisted, paling again.

Stuart explained how it had come about, including Hal’s part in the affair.

“We thought maybe Lem had really come home and we were curious about the parked car. There wasn’t any intention on our part to try and make trouble for you, Mr. Price, honestly there wasn’t! We were just kind of excited and wondering if Lem had come. Curiosity.” Stuart smiled.

Hal noticed at once, however, that Cyrus had lapsed into the same sullen silence that he had kept the previous night. His weak eyes seemed not to look at anything nor anyone in particular, but appeared to be directed upon his own private thoughts. Stuart’s voice had the effect of startling him.

“Do you happen to know if it was either of those two men Hal saw in the coupe—do you think it was one of them that shot me?”

Cyrus Price shook his white head sadly.

“I dunno, Glennie boy, I dunno,” he said, his voice reaching its usual high pitch. “Them fellers won’t do nothin’ but make more misery fer me, I’m ’fraid. I told ’em not ter use any guns—I’m afraid o’ guns.”

“*Then you do know them?*” Stuart asked crisply.

“No more’ll I know this Hal boy here,” came the quivering reply. “They come ter me outa nowheres like an’ said how they’ll bring Lem home safe ter see me.” He straightened up in his chair again and faced both of the young men, wild-eyed and distraught. “Yer ain’t a-goin’ ter run ter the police in Ramapo an’ be a-tellin’ on me ’fore I see my Lem, eh?”

Hal and Stuart gave him their word of honor that no such fatality would occur through them. That seemed to pacify him greatly for he sank back into his chair and continued, with his eyes half-closed,

“They told me Lem ’ud show up like las’ night an’ they went out up ter the highway ter meet him. Yer see, they’ve knowed him, so they said, fifteen year

or more. So Lem was ter come in a roadster like this Hal boy's here. Anyways, he didn't come, an' they got mad when you fellers came snoopin' roun' ter see what was their license. The one feller what had the rifle was a-watchin' yer all the time he says."

"But what was the idea of shooting? Couldn't they have told us to go on about our business?"

"Sure, that's what I sez ter him. I asked him did he want me ter have more misery by shootin' strangers an' a-gettin' the police here jest when I'm expectin' Lem mebbe? But he sez he's hot-headed."

"Then he hasn't any business with a gun," said Hal stoutly. "Where are these men now, Mr. Price?"

"I told 'em they should go," answered the old man promptly. "I told 'em they should git an' not fetch me trouble. Lem kin find his way home without 'em."

"Then you don't know where the men are?" Stuart asked.

"Eh? No—no. Blessed if I wanter know, Glennie."

Hal glanced at Stuart and winked significantly. Then he got up and walked to the little windows and drummed his long fingers on the half-screen within his reach. All the time his mind had but the one, definite thought.

Cyrus Price was lying.

CHAPTER XXV

A FACE

He expressed this opinion to Stuart presently, when the old man got up and left the room. They could hear him fumbling about in the kitchen getting a drink of water.

“Does his story seem to click as he tells it?” Hal asked.

“It certainly doesn’t,” Stuart agreed. “And I’m sorry he finds it necessary to lie to us about it. Gol darn it, he’s acting suspiciously. There’s no getting away from that.”

“If he was lying to shield Lem, why then should he admit to us that he expects Lem home? Doggone, we’re asking one another and neither of us know! Anyway, Glen, a blind man could see to the flaws in that story. For one thing, he’s shielding that sniper that hit you last night.”

“I sort of half suspected that too, Hal.”

“What a muddle! It does seem we ought to tell the police if he’s trying to protect any scoundrels, huh? But then on the other hand we’ve given our word not to get him into trouble.”

“He seems sincere enough about Lem.”

“Yes, that’s his one strong point. The rest of the thing is lies. Listen, Glen, he has a sort of affection for you because of knowing you in childhood. It’s developed a sort of bond—I noticed it right away. Maybe he’s a little skeptical of me on account of Unk being in the Service. You’ve noticed, no doubt, how he recurs to Unk being a detective in Washington? Well, I’ve a hunch that that scares him skinny and he’s afraid to come clean before me. Suppose I dispose of myself for a little while? I can mope about the Mill Pond and commune with nature. I’ll wait for you till you come out.”

“Hot a half-bad idea, Hal. Go on. Maybe he *is* holding back on account of your uncle. And if that’s all, it would be too bad, because I think it wouldn’t take a whole lot to clear this up if he’d tell the truth. Beat it, now, Hal! I think he’s coming back.”

Hal left the cottage and strolled down the neatly kept path to his car. For a while he fussed about the roadster, tightening up things that were already tightened and doing nothing in general. Suddenly he remembered his threat to look over the Mill Pond and decided instantly to carry it out.

He sauntered over the lawn, lighted a cigarette, and kicked at the grass. Little by little, he covered the distance and was soon half-way between the house and the pond. Somewhere about there he was prompted to glance over at

the Old Mill.

In broad daylight, he discovered, the tiny windows of the rooms at the mill were just discernible through the trees. He could see from where he stood, the dusty panes looking as if they had not been opened for a decade or more. Somehow they attracted him and, as he stared, it gradually occurred to him that he saw a face peering out from one of them.

He stopped still, dug his hands in his pockets and watched, but the face had gone as quickly as it came. Five minutes passed but it did not reappear. And Hal, filled with curiosity, determined in that instant to know the meaning of it.

Even as he thought about it, he was walking toward the mill ruins. What harm, he was asking himself, could there be in exploring a deserted place like that? Deserted? He knew in his heart that he wouldn't be going there if it really was deserted. He was too honest to deny to himself that it was the face that attracted him.

He stumbled through the high weeds, crossed the moss-grown ruins of the mill's wooden section, but stopped short before the wooden steps and platform leading up to the brick portion, which had withstood the ravages of fire and time. He studied it for a moment and decided that old Cyrus must have used the little brick building as an office and shipping room in the mill's hey-day.

He ambled around the weed-grown place and immediately discovered two things. One was that a great deal of the underbrush had been trampled down very recently making a sort of path over to the edge of the wood where the coupe had been parked. The other discovery was that the weeds choking the path to the steps had not been disturbed at all, making it quite evident that the occupants of the car had gone back and forth from the cottage avoiding the mill ruins.

Not having believed old Cyrus' story that his visitors of the coupe had gone, this new discovery left Hal more puzzled than ever. At sight of the face in the dusty window he had instantly thought of it as belonging to one of the men for the disappearance of the car did not convince him for one instant that the men had left Lonesome Swamp. From the first he had believed them to be in the old mill—he still believed that one or the other of them was in there at that very instant. Hadn't he just seen a man's face at the window a moment ago?

How then had anyone entered or left the building?

He skirted the place again to make certain, even walking out to the edge of the pond to see if anyone had come from that roundabout direction. But not a weed surrounding the entire place had been disturbed and he was convinced that not even old Cyrus had climbed those steps since the summer began.

He felt rather silly about the whole thing, wondering if he hadn't just imagined that face at the window? Certainly no one could have entered the

place without leaving some trace along the entire weed-choked path! The more he thought of it the less desirous he was of being the first to disturb that virgin growth only to find when he got up to the mill window that the face was nothing more than the reflection of the sun.

He turned on his heel and walked slowly back over the moss-covered ruins, stopping to watch two frogs that were disporting in the sun-baked pit. Suddenly he heard a whistle, then Glen shouted his name.

He hurried back through the high grass and came out on the cottage lawn again. Stuart was standing at the roadster waving to him.

“What were you doing, exploring again?” he asked as Hal came up.

Hal told him as they climbed into the roadster.

“Honestly, I could have sworn I saw a face there, Glen,” he reiterated. “But like I told you, the weeds stand just as they’ve grown. Doesn’t look as if so much as a frog’s hopped through there. Honestly, I can’t make it out for the life of me! How did you make out with him while I was gone?”

“I didn’t. When he came in the room I told him you hadn’t ever been close to a mill pond in your life and that you wanted to look it over. He seemed on needles and pins and kept looking out the window. When you disappeared through the grass on your way toward the mill ruins, he looked wild-eyed and kept telling me I better go out and call you because you might lose your way if you got into the woods. I didn’t need glasses to see that he was nervous the minute you strolled toward the ruins.”

“Well, that much is interesting,” Hal said starting the car. “He didn’t say anything more about our friends in the coupe, did he, huh?”

“Nothing but to repeat that they had gone. He said he didn’t think they had ever seen Lem in their lives and that they had just used Lem’s name in order to use his hospitality.”

“And that’s the weak point in his story,” Hal said. “Unk and I heard Frog Face and his pal distinctly say they had missed Lem up on the highway. What was to prevent them from going up and meeting him later, huh? We didn’t stay up until broad daylight to watch the Lonesome Swamp road.”

“Lem was supposed to have come in a roadster, hey Hal?”

“That’s what Unk and I heard them say. And that’s what the old man said too. Anyway, Glen, it’s as plain as day that Old Citrus wants us to forget we’ve ever heard or seen Frog Face and his pal. He’s come to the conclusion that he’ll only get himself in deeper by telling us more, so the quickest way to get out of it, he thinks, is to tell us they’ve gone. You know what I think? Frog Face and his pal are shielding Lem for some reason, or they wouldn’t be sneaking up and down highways themselves. Lem is wanted by the law and they know it—they must be wanted or expect to be wanted by the law, too, or they wouldn’t be pals of a fellow in Lem’s shoes.”

“Say, that’s logic, Hal. I didn’t think of it that way. Sort of like, as my aunt says, ‘all soup out of one kettle.’ Instead of old Cyrus having Lem come home with a price on his head, he must also have the added worry of his son’s two buddies who also have prices on their fair skulls, hey? That what you mean?”

“Nothing else but, Glen. Old Citrus isn’t so nervous for nothing. Boy, if Unk knew I knew all this or even thought it, he’d give me a lecture about my duty as a citizen and all that...”

“What would he say if he knew I’d been shot at!”

“He’d say we were crazy not to have reported it to the police right away. That would finish things for him. He was only lenient and sentimental with Old Citrus as long as he didn’t actually see or hear anything. Maybe we wouldn’t have seen anything or heard anything either if we had stayed away and kept our nose out of things. But boy, I just haven’t the will power to do that when I know things like this are going on around here.”

“I know, Hal. I feel the same way. All up a tree, too. I know in my heart the police ought to be told, yet here I’ve gone and given my word to the old man that I wouldn’t tell. Funny, how I’m shielding a man and his son who are accused of having murdered and robbed my grandfather.”

“It’s darn unusual, Cowboy, I’ll say that. But I agree with you somehow. Even with all his suspicious actions, I can’t believe Old Citrus ever killed anybody. As for Lem ... that’s another story. If Old Citrus was to kick off this minute, I’d keep right on to Ramapo and give the cops a tip about Lem.”

“Maybe I would and maybe I wouldn’t,” Stuart said thoughtfully. “It’s funny how we change our opinions when we see and talk to people. Maybe Lem would have the same effect on us as his father does.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Hal. “Meanwhile, I’m going right on to Ramapo.” And seeing Stuart give a start he laughed: “Not to the police, Glen. To Mom’s—for something to eat.”

CHAPTER XXVI

HOME, AND ...

They had no sooner entered the house than Mrs. Keen informed them that Denis had been suddenly called back to Washington that morning. Whether it was on the counterfeiter's case she did not know, but things pointed strongly that way.

"He said he'd be back again not later than the day after tomorrow. When he gets here, he said, he intends to lay hands on this famous Bick Yates or he'll know the reason why. No doubt we shall see some excitement with Denis when that comes to pass."

"Every man to his own worries, hey Hal?" Stuart whispered as they followed Mrs. Keen in to luncheon. "We've got the house to tear apart and see what causes the noises—we've got our unknown chum to think about and catch if we can. And last but not least, there's old Cyrus puzzling the head off of you—I can tell it is!"

"You'd be surprised if you knew how much, Cowboy!" Hal laughed. "If it was just old Cyrus I wouldn't give a whoop, but that coupe, and worse, that sniper last night got me started. By the way, Old Top, how's your arm feeling this morning? Think we'd better look in at the doctor's?"

"Absolutely not! I'd forgotten all about it. You were doctor enough last night, Hal. Must be clean as a whistle for the skin doesn't even feel sore to the touch. Mum's the word about it around your mother, hey?"

"Mum's the word about it anywhere," Hal whispered. "I've got something up my sleeve about this business, Glen. When it starts to roll out, well...."

"I've the feeling you've done some tall thinking," Stuart interposed with a chuckle.

"And how!" Hal breathed just as they came to the dining room.

Luncheon was pleasant and both young men found it a cheerful diversion after the gloomy and eerie experiences of the night before. The Keens' dining room with its half-dozen casement windows looked out over the Ramapo Hills and on three sides of the valley. Hal had always enjoyed gazing out as he ate and watching the divers shades of green that clothed the hills from top to valley and no matter what beautiful scenes he had seen in far distant places, he had never seen anything quite so beautiful as this scene about his home.

"That's because it *is* home to you—your home, Hal," his mother said when he spoke of it. She turned to Stuart. "We always have this same talk after Hal gets back from some particularly interesting journey with his uncle. He's seen

many breath-taking scenes, but he never fails to come home and sit at this table and fall into a reverie over the beauty of the Ramapo Hills. And I always tell him he loves it best because it's home—he's romped and grown up among these scenes."

"Boy, I can understand that," said Stuart. "I feel the same way about Washington. Since I was five years old I've been looking at snow-tipped mountains and now that I'm away, well, a fellow just gets hankering to see the place he's been brought up in."

"Just exactly, Mr. Stuart," said Mrs. Keen. "I've been born and brought up in the shadow of these hills the same as Hal's father and his brother Denis, were. We all long to get back here after a vacation is over, and we all appreciate anew the beauty of our hills. Poor Denis, too, rushes back here from the Capital every chance he gets. And all because it's home. We natives have a little saying that, 'Ramapoans, like the chickens, always come home to roost.' In the majority of cases it happens; in the minority, they come home to die. But they always come back at some time or other!"

"That's a very pretty sentiment, Mrs. Keen," said Stuart. "Sort of like that poem ... 'Home is where the heart is' ... something to that effect."

"In other words," Hal said whimsically, "each native leaves his heart here when he goes away. When they're about ready to die, they've got nothing else to do but come back and get it."

"Hal! How can you joke about such a thing," said Mrs. Keen with a faint smile.

"In my heart I'm not joking about it at all, Mom," Hal grinned. "Matter of fact, it's given me an idea. Pretty good idea, that—every Ramapoan comes back ... some time or other...."

Stuart winked at Mrs. Keen, then turned to Hal.

"What now, Sherlock? Who's come home that you haven't told us about?"

"That's for me to find out," Hal said ambiguously. "And the trouble with this Sherlock, he hasn't got his little old Dr. Watson to help him, so it'll take him a little longer when he has to be on the job alone."

Mrs. Keen smiled condescendingly upon her son. She was used to his moods and meaningless theories and this was just another, to her way of thinking. The stalwart Hal she loved dearly, but even at twenty years and a height of over six feet, she could not think of him as anything but a boy. Consequently, she did not take him at all seriously.

She asked them about their night's rest at the Mansion, and Hal told her, omitting everything that they had seen and heard, save the gloom and damp of the old house and its spectral manifestations.

"We felt quite ragged about it when we turned in this morning," he said. "I, for one could have beat it right home, it felt so darn cheerless. But in the light

of morning ... well, Glen got the shutters opened and all the windows and we came away leaving the place to air all day. We're going to buy a dozen lanterns or so downtown before we start back and we're going to have that house lighted up like a church tonight. A lantern in every other room will be our motto, huh Cowboy?"

Stuart nodded smilingly and Mrs. Keen shook her fair head.

"Then you mean to rout out the ghosts with light, is that it?"

"We'll rout them out somehow, Mom, I can tell you that!" said Hal with a vehemence that surprised her. "I regard myself as a pretty normal person and it burns me up to have a house like the Mansion almost drive me to believe in ghosts when I know in my heart there *ain't* any such animals! I've got to find out what causes those gosh darn spooky sounds! And I *will* find out!"

"Well, you've got my permission, Hal," Stuart said genially. "I'd like to know myself, I can tell you that. So that's the job cut out for tonight, hey?"

"What about that peculiar reflection of light that Denis and you thought you saw in the library last night, Hal?" Mrs. Keen asked out of a clear sky.

Hal and Stuart exchanged significant glances.

"We didn't see any more light, Glen and I," Hal answered truthfully. "We had our own flashlights."

"I was wondering," said Mrs. Keen, "if there was any connection between something I saw in this morning's paper and that light in the Mansion last night." She stopped, thoughtfully, then smiled: "But there wouldn't be ... you and Glen would have been sound asleep in the house at that time. About three o'clock this morning a state trooper who had stopped under some trees on the turnpike to escape the rain for a little while, noticed a coupe parked near the intersection of Lonesome Swamp Road. After a while, a roadster came slowly down the turnpike and as it approached, the coupe began to switch its tail light on and off. Then the trooper noticed that the roadster also began to flash its headlights on and off in a singular manner. He watched..."

Hal could not forbear stealing a glance at Stuart.

"Mm!" he said softly.

"It was a sort of code between the two cars, the trooper guessed," said Mrs. Keen, apparently oblivious of the interruption. "In any event, the roadster came to a full stop abreast of the coupe, there was some whisperings and then the trooper decided to show himself and ask a few questions. He darted out on his motorcycle, but the men in both coupe and roadster simply deserted the cars and fled into the woods. There were three of them—too many for the trooper to hunt out in that swampy section all at once."

"Did he find any of them?" Hal was excited.

"Not any of them," Mrs. Keen smiled. "The trooper waited for the next motorist to pass and they conducted a search in vain. Then the trooper sent the

motorist on to Orangetown for help and he waited alone, guarding the cars and keeping an eye open for the three men. Of course he didn't see them again and when the cars were at last towed on to Orangetown, it was discovered they were stolen."

"Both of them?" Hal asked incredulously.

"Yes," said Mrs. Keen. "It was all in the paper and as I said before, I fancied that perhaps the men might have made their way beyond the woods and up the hill to the Mansion, and seeing it deserted, took refuge there until the scare was over."

"But no one had broken in, Mom!" Hal explained. "Besides, Unk and I saw that light or thought we saw it around nine o'clock."

"Yes, I realize that now. It just struck me as I was reading the article that perhaps such a thing could happen, but I realized that if it was three o'clock this morning, you and Glen would certainly have heard three men trying to break in."

"I'd have heard *one* man trying to break in!" Hal declared. "And no one *broke* in that place during the dark hours because we had the locked windows and shutters to prove it this morning."

"That settles it, then," said Mrs. Keen. "I only mentioned it because it seemed so odd that the incident should occur right there around Lonesome Swamp."

"It's darn odd!" said Hal.

He glanced at Stuart and their eyes met in a questioning stare.

CHAPTER XXVII RESOLVED

“So you thought it better not to let your mother in on the secret of our unknown chum last night, hey Hal?” Stuart asked as they started back for Lonesome Swamp.

“I hope to tell you, Cowboy. Mom would worry herself sick if she knew that the derby grabber got in and out of the house in the mysterious manner he did. And there’s no use worrying her until we find out how and why. Besides, we’ve got real facts enough to think about right now—the fact that Lem and his buddies must be a bad lot to be riding about in stolen cars. It couldn’t have been anyone else, Glen. It wouldn’t be just a coincidence that another coupe was loitering at Lonesome Swamp Road. It was the same coupe—I’d stake my life on that! The roadster business fits in with it too nicely.”

“I say so too. But where do you think they went to? Think they’re really gone as old Cyrus says?”

“Like fun I do. Lonesome Swamp is too fine a hiding place for fellows like them to pass it up when the whole countryside’s watching out. I’d like to find out where the cars were stolen from. We’ll have to come up home in the morning again and see what the paper has to say about it. They’ll know by then, surely.”

“Meantime we’ve got the lanterns to fix for tonight and we’ve got a nice steak to cook for our dinner tonight ... say, Hal, can’t we make a nice wood fire in that kitchen stove and do our cooking in there? It’ll kind of dry out the place, if it isn’t already dried out by the nice air and sunshine that’s been blowing in through the open windows all day. We’ll use your camping outfit ... the cooking things and the dishes of course, but we’ll scrub the kitchen table and eat there. Hey?”

“Sounds all right to me,” Hal answered genially. “I guess it’ll make a difference in that place, being aired all day. And a wood fire in the kitchen stove! Boy, I like wood fires. Anyway, it’ll make it nicer for us to sleep there tonight.”

“If that place *can* be made nice!” said Stuart ruefully. “In any case, there’ll be a little improvement and that’s something. And we’ll be sleepy tonight, Hal. I dare say we won’t care much about what noises are in the darn place.”

Hal laughed aloud.

“I can see, Glen, that you don’t know me at all. I may be sleepy tonight, but that doesn’t go to prove that I’m going to sleep before I find out a few

things. Anyway, we'll take tonight as it comes."

"Righto."

They came down into the valley without incident, passed old Cyrus' place and saw nothing there to warrant their interest. The shades were partly drawn in the little cottage and everything seemed slumbering and silent in the heat of late afternoon. Crickets hummed in the grass and the buzz of the locusts made a riotous chorus in the drowsy air.

Hal said nothing until after they had started up the hill toward the Mansion.

"Poor Old Citrus must be taking forty winks. Guess he must be all in after last night. Kind of tough the way he had to stay up all that time. He doesn't look as if he's used to it."

"Guess not," said Stuart musingly. Then: "You didn't seem to have the same interest in the cottage and the old mill as before. I noticed you hardly raised your eyes as we passed."

"Darn right, Cowboy. I've been thinking it over since noontime, specially since Mom told us about that stolen car business. I'm not terribly keen about getting mixed up in a mess like that. Mystery is one thing, Glen—stolen cars another. Let the troopers find them. And if Lem is mixed up with a gang like that (and it's apparent he is) then Cyrus Price will have to make the best of it. You can excuse a fellow for making one criminal mistake, but that's all. Anyway, we're not going to put our noses into that cottage again, unless we absolutely are forced to—what do you say?"

"That's a relief to hear you say that, Hal. It's a little bit too much for me. I'd rather devote all my time and attention to thinking how long it will take me to get this infernal property off my hands and how much I'll get for it when I do. Well, here we are almost *home!*"

"*Home!*" Hal echoed. He laughed. "Remember what I said about 'home is where the heart is' and all that business? Doggone, Glen, how could anyone feel their heart was in your Grandfather's gloomy house, huh? How could they even call it home?"

"Don't ask me, Hal. I never could, I know that, but I suppose Grandfather and Uncle Dorkas did. And I suppose if they had lived it would have been just as dear to them as your house is to you and the cottage is to old Cyrus."

"But those darn queer noises...." Hal began.

"Must have added an indefinable something to this place that they could call home," Stuart interposed thoughtfully. "After all the years they lived with the blooming noises they couldn't help but regard them as part of the household. They might not have ever developed a real affection for them, but I'd wager the house would never have seemed the same home to them if they had suddenly ceased."

"The noises, you mean?" Hal asked abstractedly.

“Of course. What did you think I meant? ... Say, Hal,” he said, noting the other’s sudden interest in the top of the hill, “what in heaven’s name are you looking at?”

Hal nodded toward the Sharpes’ high garden gate.

“Notice something moving at the gate, Glen?” he asked excitedly.

Before Stuart had a chance to answer, a man, bareheaded and coatless, ran out from behind the gate, shot across the road and disappeared among the trees opposite.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A HOUSE DISTURBED

Hal stepped on the gas and brought the roadster up to the spot in a flash. Both he and Stuart immediately left the car and instituted a thorough search of the district, but the bareheaded stranger had successfully eluded them. In point of fact, they were able to find his footsteps only for a few feet across the timber-clad hill.

Fifteen minutes later, the young men found their way out to the roadway, wearied and perspiring. They passed the parked roadster, went through the opened garden gate and up the flagstone walk, silent and thoughtful. Not until the narrow entrance hall was reached did Hal speak.

“*Look, Cowboy!*” he shouted. “Look, what’s come back!” He was pointing toward the old hatrack.

Stuart rushed into the hall, and looked up to see the old brown derby without its former coating of dust, hanging placidly up on a hook.

“The cap—that golf cap, Glen?” Hal asked excitedly. “Where did you put it—what did you do with it?”

“I got it in my pocket. I stuffed it there unthinkingly when we left here this morning. Why?”

“Nothing much,” Hal answered, and stalked on into the hall excitedly. “I was just thinking he wouldn’t have come back just to get his cap—no, *he wouldn’t!*” he added, as if to himself.

“Say what’s the idea, Hal? You’re talking to yourself like a nut.”

“Sure I am. I’m so full of contradictory ideas, I don’t know what I think.”

“Well, there’s nothing puzzling as to how our chum got in the house today—he could have stepped into either the sitting room or the library from the veranda.”

“Sure, I’m aware of that,” Hal shouted and hesitated at the library door. “The fact still remains that he didn’t get in last night through any windows. Also, he must have been somewhere in the neighborhood this morning and watched us drive off. Maybe he even heard us mention where we were going and took advantage of the occasion to spend the afternoon here undisturbed.”

“Say, Hal, that’s an idea. He must have or he wouldn’t have been so brazen to come here after he knew you woke up and saw him last night!”

Hal hardly heard this declaration from Stuart, for his attention was already given to the library door. It was standing open, wide open, and they had left it closed only that morning. Moreover, he could see from where he stood that the

room was in a state of chaos. He motioned Stuart to follow him in.

All the books occupying space along the walls had been tossed to the four corners of the room. Some had been thrown to the desk, their covers sprawling and bent as if they had been looked over hastily and shoved to one side. Chairs were overturned and their rotted, grimy covers hung all awry. Last but not least, part of the floor just under the desk had been ripped up and the splintered boards thrown into the fireplace.

Stuart put his hand on Hal's shoulder. "I imagine," he said whimsically, "that our friend has been looking for something."

"Hidden treasure," Hal laughed sardonically. "Did you ever hear that such an animal was buried in this house?"

"Never, never in my young life, Hal."

"Well, somebody's put the bug in that chap's ear, Cowboy, and I don't mean maybe! He wasn't hunting for a collar-button nor for last year's almanac when he made all this mess. Whew! It looks as if he had some pretty serious motive behind all this."

"Serious and urgent. I wonder if he meant to try and straighten this out before our return?"

"Who knows? Boy, it looks as if he meant to find what he was after or bust."

"He busted out of here and he busted up this room good and proper. I'd say he got his wish, Hal."

"What do you say we look over the rest of the castle?" Hal suggested. "There might be some more evidences of this hunt for hidden treasure."

"Righto, and we'll take a peek in the turret while we're about it."

They searched the lower floor and the cellar, but nothing had been disturbed. The kitchen, dining room, all of the rooms, smelled sweeter and fresher after the long hours of their exposure to the air and sunshine. Yet Hal was forced to agree with Stuart that none of the Mansion's gloom had been dispelled, despite all the sunlight. It had a doomed sort of atmosphere—assuredly, the hand of death seemed ever to threaten and must some day take its toll again.

The clanging lower hall, the invisible walker on the first stairway, all these Hal was becoming accustomed to. Certainly they seemed less eerie in the sunshine and mellow light of late afternoon. Not that much of this light or sun penetrated the high, narrow halls of Sharpe Mansion. Little of it did, yet Hal was impressionable enough to feel that no abode, no matter how dark or dreary, could escape entirely the essence of such a day.

They went the rounds of the second floor and, as on the lower floor, closed each window and locked it securely for the night. It was Hal's suggestion entirely.

“We’re going to find out how this chap gets in, if he has the nerve to come back,” he said. And at Stuart’s protesting glance, he added: “We’re not going to wait all night for him to do it either. We’ll have our supper, hang around till about eight or eight-thirty, then ride away from here as if we’re going back to Ramapo for the night. We’ll shout it out loud that we are! Then we’ll ride down to about where we parked the roadster last night, only we’ll hide it on the other side of the road under the trees.”

“And walk back, hey? That’s a swell idea, Hal.”

“We’ll sneak back, Cowboy. Then we’ll see what happens.”

They explored the third floor and found it as sad and tranquil in its dust as the rest of the house. Only the bedroom that they had slept in (Uncle Dorky’s room, Hal had nicknamed it) the night before, seemed not to have that aged and death-ridden look. They made up their bed for the coming night before they left it to inspect the turret.

“Has this got bats’ nests and mice’s nests and every other kind of nests known to mankind, I wonder?” Hal asked as they ascended the queer spiral stair to the turret.

“I don’t know about the nests,” Stuart answered, leading the way, “but I know it’s hot enough up here to make griddle cakes out of any nest that happens to be around.”

He pointed suddenly to some footprints in the dust—footprints that had preceded theirs.

Hal nodded and followed him up to the landing, a narrow affair which boasted a high, casement window choked with dust and cobwebs. The view from it, however, was panoramic and they stood in silence for a moment, staring through the dusty panes and out over the green beauty of the Ramapo hills. The sun, already far in the west, bathed the rolling slopes in a riot of color and cast some sparkling rays down upon the Mill Pond.

Hal could see the water dance under its warmth and caught its reflection against one of the dusty windows at the mill ruins. The cottage, white and shining, looked almost miniature from this height, and the road wound up hill and down valley like a ribbon of sullen brown. Stuart nodded toward the road.

“He’s been up here and saw us coming up from the valley. Can’t you just imagine how he tore down these stairs to get away before we arrived?”

“And how!” Hal agreed. He motioned toward a door just behind Stuart. “That the room?”

In answer, Stuart opened the door. Chaos reigned here too.

The floor, as downstairs, had been ripped up under each of the three casement windows. The mattress, moldy and lying half off the old iron bed, was all but ripped in half. Only the old walnut dresser and washstand had been left untouched.

“This was your Grandfather’s room, wasn’t it?” Hal asked.

Stuart nodded his dark head two or three times.

“It’s someone who’s known your Grandfather’s parsimonious habits in the dim, dark past, Glen. And whoever it is, they’ve been hunting for something they know he kept hidden or something they thought he kept hidden.”

“Grandfather kept everything he had in that strongbox, Hal. Where he kept it hidden, I don’t know. It was a small, steel chest, about half the size of a steamer trunk. I saw it in his library once or twice.”

“Then it was too large for the average person to carry it about, huh?”

“Good Lord, yes. Much too large and much too conspicuous. Grandfather had it made especially for himself. After the murder the theory was that Lem rifled it and tossed it into the Mill Pond.”

“That poor Mill Pond,” Hal sighed, stepping carefully across the ripped boards and looking out of one of the windows. He glanced down the road toward the cottage, musingly. “Do you know what I think, Glen? I think Lem Price never took that strongbox out of here.”

“You think he rifled it and hid it somewhere in the house?” Stuart asked eagerly. “Do you think perhaps he left something behind in it that he’d like to have now, and has come back to look for it?”

“Nope, I don’t think anything of the kind, Cowboy,” said Hal enigmatically. “For one thing, Lem Price never had the time to bury so much as a nickel when your Grandfather was killed. He was gone when the police came, wasn’t he? Besides, he wouldn’t be burying or hiding a steel chest the size of your grandfather’s, behind hooks or under a mattress, nor even under floorboards. Moreover, your Uncle Dorkas lived here for a full month after the murder and had all the chance in the world to discover anything like that.”

Stuart threw up his hands and turned to the door.

“I give it up, Hal. Absolutely! What do you think, hey?”

“I think I’ll be able to tell you even sooner than I expected, Glen,” Hal said complacently. “I’ve a feeling I’ll be able to tell you very soon. Now isn’t that nice?”

“Get out, you red-headed nut!” Stuart laughed and turned back for a moment. “First thing you’ll be telling me it’s old Cyrus or one of Lem’s buddies that’s coming in here.”

“I’m full of surprises, Cowboy. Don’t be impatient with me. You’ll learn it all in good time. How let’s get down and get that stove cleaned out and get a fire going so we can cook some supper, huh?”

“Why not bring our steak and stuff right up here and fry it?” Stuart returned with a grin. “It’s hot enough.”

Hal put out his hand and touched a wasp’s nest that clung close to the window frame.

“We’ll use this for dessert,” he laughed mischievously, “and get stung in the end.”

CHAPTER XXIX

ELI SHARPE'S GRIM JOKE

They did not fare badly at supper. Stuart cleaned out the old coal stove, and Hal gathered wood, declaring that this pursuit was more in his line. He scrubbed the kitchen table, however, and made a good job of it, spreading his camp oil-cloth over it and setting out two places with the things from his indispensable kit.

Canned beans, some steak, buns, fruit and coffee completed the meal and they enjoyed it. The fire continued to crackle with each added piece of wood and though the draft seemed not to be so brisk, it gave out enough heat to cook their food sufficiently.

After the meal was over, Stuart heated water to wash the dishes in. Twilight was stealing over the hill and long shadows stole into the kitchen. Hal got up and lighted six of the lanterns carefully.

Stuart watched him questioningly. "What's the idea, Hal? I thought we were going to sneak out of here as if we were going to be gone all night?"

"Hope," said Hal, turning one wick down a little and putting another wick up, "I've changed my mind about that. Oh, don't get worried that we're not going—we are. If he's sticking around as I feel sure he is, he's going to hear me yell from the car for you to hurry, because we're going to be late for the movies if you don't. Your cue is to linger behind when I go out to the roadster and call and ask me what I'm leaving on the lights for. I'll say that I just thought it would be cozier to ride up the hill and see a little light in the house. Also, I'll add that if there's lights in the house it'll keep the confounded hobo out that was around today. It's just an experiment, Stuart, old Cowboy, but I've a hunch it'll work."

"You and your hunches," Stuart grinned good-naturedly. "Well, it's fun to see just how much will come of all this. By the way, where will these six lanterns be placed?"

"One on the hatrack in the hall, one in that wreck of a library, and one in each of the upper halls. Lastly, Cowboy, two in our own boudoir. We're not coming back into the same dark, dismal castle we did last night."

"No, I hope not. Once was plenty. We'll appreciate light, tonight particularly."

"Why *particularly*?"

"I don't know, Hal. I just feel sort of jumpy and I can't imagine why. Things are so much more cheerful looking around here tonight, too."

“Maybe you dread hearing those darn noises again, huh?” Hal asked sympathetically.

“Well, I don’t look forward to them with delight,” Stuart admitted a little abashed. “I can stand them in the daylight, but I do hate the thought of them with the darkness. They seem to be worse somehow.”

“Bosh, Glen. I’ve been listening since we came back this afternoon and it’s not one bit worse than it was last night. It’s your imagination. Do you know what? I’ve noticed that the sound doesn’t commence until someone starts walking through the halls or up and down stairs. It doesn’t sound in the bedrooms, nor in any of the rooms, in fact, neither does it sound up in the turret. Now that’s something to ponder. Besides, the noises die away after we’re in the rooms a little while.”

“Yes, I’ve always noticed that. How I used to rush up to my bedroom when I was a little fellow! I couldn’t get there quick enough so’s to put that awful creaking behind me.”

“What a solitary kid you must have been, Glen! Gosh, I don’t blame you for feeling that your grandfather’s murder was a blessing in disguise.” He took up two of the lanterns and started for the door. “You take two and we’ll begin to distribute them upstairs first. Then we’ll finish up down here. After that I’m going out and look in the tool chest in the roadster and get a chisel and a hammer.”

“What for?” Stuart asked, following obediently up the dim, pounding stairway.

“You’ll see if I see, Glen.”

And that had to suffice for an answer until the lights were all distributed and Hal came triumphantly back from the roadster, armed with chisel and hammer. Stuart sat down on the edge of the hatrack and watched wonderingly, while his friend walked mysteriously up and down the hall, stamping his feet in places and at intervals pounding on the floor with the hammer.

Suddenly, Hal bent down and for a few seconds kept up a steady pounding with the hammer until he came within a few feet of the kitchen door.

“Mind if I rip up this awful carpet and pull up the floor, too?”

“Rip up the whole house, Hal. It’s the only way I’ll ever get rid of it.”

“Go on. It’s not going to be as bad as that,” Hal said, and started to rip away the musty, dust-filled carpet.

He had little difficulty with that, and the floor was no great task for he soon discovered, as he reported to Stuart, that the boards yielded surprisingly. They seemed to have been laid purposely loose.

After fifteen minutes he had uncovered a good sized cavity in the floor. He sat and stared at it so that Stuart left his observer’s seat and came forward. Hal pointed down into the cavity.

“There’s your chain gang exposed to the light of a lantern, Glen. There’s your ghosts of the first floor hall.”

Stuart bent over, staring at the series of chains which were held in place by springs. A sheet of metal had been placed under these, holding the chains and springs intact between the double flooring. Hal touched the springs with his hands and immediately the chains rattled against their metal base.

Stuart laughed but it was not pleasant to hear.

“And that’s what held my poor grandmother and myself in a grip of terror for years? Great heaven!”

Hal got up, taking his hammer and chisel straight to the stairway. He pulled up the carpet from there quickly, sounded each step carefully and coming back to the first one, ripped at the boards. Stuart came over and looked on in a sort of daze.

The stairway was easier. Hal had exposed another spring hidden under the first step, a spring that unloosed two metal clamps which knocked against each other with the rhythmical sound of footsteps whenever the spring was touched.

“Step on the stair and each time the spring is touched,” Hal explained. “See it, Glen? The vibration which any ordinary human being would make in walking along the hall or up and down the stairs would affect these delicate springs. See, one only needs to touch them with the finger to set them going. That’s why you got that sound immediately you stepped on the first step. And because the sound was directly beneath you, it echoed, making it seem as if it was someone walking down to meet you. There’s your invisible walker, Glen. I won’t bother tonight, but I bet old Harry, the upper halls have all been fixed the same way. The boards were purposely put down so’s to accommodate these eerie sounding devices.”

Stuart couldn’t seem to speak. He stared at the stair, then at the hall and finally at Hal. The whole thing had overwhelmed him, it seemed.

“Your grandfather built this house, didn’t he, Glen?” Hal queried.

Stuart nodded.

“He did everything in it,” he answered in an awed tone of voice. “Papering, plumbing, everything. He said he wanted to see that it was done right.” He laughed dismally. “He did things all right, there’s no doubt of it now! He was so rich and had nothing to do—he said he wanted to do it as a hobby. Uncle Dorkas said it took him no end of years.”

“Well, it must have taken him a nice time to contrive these devilish things.” Hal stood up at the newel post and rested his elbow upon it. “Think of it, Glen, he deliberately set out to make this house sound haunted—*deliberately!*”

“I know it, Hal. You’ve shown me all the proof in the world. Imagine a human being using his brain to contrive such a scheme!” Stuart looked at his

friend. "Why, I wonder?"

"A puzzle, I'll say. How did he act?"

"From what I can recall, he acted like no other human being acted. He rarely spoke. When he did, it was accompanied by a cackling sort of laugh that was not intended to be at all humorous. And he sneaked in and out and up and downstairs—he never walked. Uncle Dorkas and he kept house and did the cooking, of course. Those things are all rather vague, but I remember them about the house. Aunt said she had wanted to take me from here when my father died, but Grandfather wrote her a queer letter saying that he had a plot in Orangetown cemetery and that there was no use sending me out to Washington because if I died, which I seemed likely to, being in a delicate state of health, he would have the added expense of bringing me back here for burial."

"A nice, cheerful guy he must have been!" Hal exclaimed. "And you fooled him, you've fooled him by twenty years now. You'll fool him forty years more, huh, Glen?"

"Just for spite," Stuart said, regaining something of his former spirits. "But maybe he couldn't help it, hey? My Aunt said that Grandfather's father died with a queer brain affection. Maybe it was in him." He smiled ruefully. "Hope they haven't handed it down to me."

Hal looked at Stuart's smooth olive skin and clear, dark eyes. They met his own, steadily, unflinchingly, and the light of lasting reason glowed in them. No, Glen Stuart had not been tainted by the Sharpes.

"You're a new generation, fellow," Hal assured him gaily. "You've got enough to fight off anything like that. Be glad that there's no more Sharpes for you to contend with. A family like that is better extinct. No more builders of haunted houses, huh? No more misers who build a haunted house to keep their gold secure. Say, Glen, that's given me the idea! Do you suppose your grandfather built the house like this purposely, so's to drive his family away from him? He might have known it wouldn't be a pleasant house for his delicate second wife to live in? And she died so quickly. Well, I don't know—it's just an idea."

"And a darn clever one, Hal. There's logic in that. When I used to ask Uncle Dorkas what made the queer noises, he'd laugh and say that it was good to keep people away. Each person added to the house was that much less money in Grandfather's strongbox, that's what he used to say. He'd always laugh after he said it, as if it was a big joke."

"Maybe it was a joke to him, Glen."

"Maybe. But what makes me mad is that it took a stranger and twenty years of my life to find out what was the meaning of the joke."

"I haven't found the meaning of it exactly, Glen. Only your grandfather knew that. His own idea, and man alive, *what an idea!*"

CHAPTER XXX

LATER, THAT NIGHT

They carried out their plan of going out of the house separately and calling aloud to each other. Hal shouted from where the roadster was parked out in the road, making some mention of going to the movies and Stuart answered accordingly, as he came down from the veranda and hurried out through the garden.

Hal backed the car, turned it around and soon they were going down the hill. Dusk had settled over Lonesome Swamp and the road was full of shadows. A polecat ran out in front of the headlights, seemed dazed and hesitated, then ran back under cover.

“It’s not terribly dark yet,” said Hal. “Suppose we ride past Old Citrus’ and up the hill a little way. Then we can turn around and ride back without lights. It’ll be safe if I take it very easy. If our friend’s at all hesitant about entering the house too soon, it’ll give him a little more time.”

Stuart agreed to the plan. In fact, he seemed relieved to have the moment of their return to the house put off.

“The more I’m away from that place, Hal, the better I like it. We’ve found out why it’s haunted and we’ll find out who our caller is if we’re patient enough. And if we don’t find out ... well, in any case, I’d just as leave stay at your house after this. For one thing, your mother’d be much more pleased.”

“Sure, she would,” Hal laughed. “And so would I, Glen. We’ll do that, too, tomorrow night. I’ll give it up if nothing comes of this.”

The cottage looked almost gay with light. Lamplight shone from both the sitting room and the kitchen but from the road they could see no sign of the old man, nor of anyone else. After they had passed, Hal thought he saw a dark figure pass in front of the sitting room windows, but he couldn’t be sure. Moreover, he had determined not to let anything tempt him to meddle in Cyrus Price’s affairs and he was bravely trying to stick to that resolve.

After they had climbed the hill and were out of sight of the cottage, he turned the roadster around and switched off the lights. Very slowly they coasted back down the hill and entered the lower Swamp Road almost noiselessly. Neither one spoke, for the night was warm and silent, and just at that witching hour when the throbbing pulse of day has become a memory, and the murmuring voice of night is still anticipated.

They cruised along through a deep rut in the road. For some reason which he could not afterward explain, Hal was seized with a feeling that he must stop

the car immediately. They were about two hundred feet from the graveled cottage path and well in the shadow of a huge elm bordering the road.

Stuart glanced at him questioningly, but was presently diverted, for the cottage door suddenly swung open. A man, bareheaded and coatless, ran with surprising agility across old Cyrus' well kept lawn, and without stopping to look to the right or left, headed straight up toward the hill. In a moment almost the night had obscured him from view.

"Well, what do you call that?" Stuart asked in a breathless whisper.

Hal was out of the roadster as he spoke.

"I may be wrong, but it looks like our old unknown chum. Darned if it didn't! I don't like the way he ran out, leaving the door open. Come on, we're going in and see what's up whether we're invited to or not!"

He ran half up the pathway and half on the lawn. Suddenly he kicked something and without attempting to stop picked it up. But the feel of it in his hand made him hesitate.

It was a wallet.

He examined it in the light of the doorway just as Stuart came up. It was packed with bills of all denominations. He picked one out by chance, glancing at it hurriedly. It was a twenty dollar note and crisply new. He shoved it in front of his companion.

"The first time in my life I've ever thought to look at the serial number of a bill, Glen," he whispered. "And look what I find it is!"

Glen looked, but turned up a blank face. "What about it? You've found a wallet full of money and all nice crispy twenty dollar bills—what's the matter with it?"

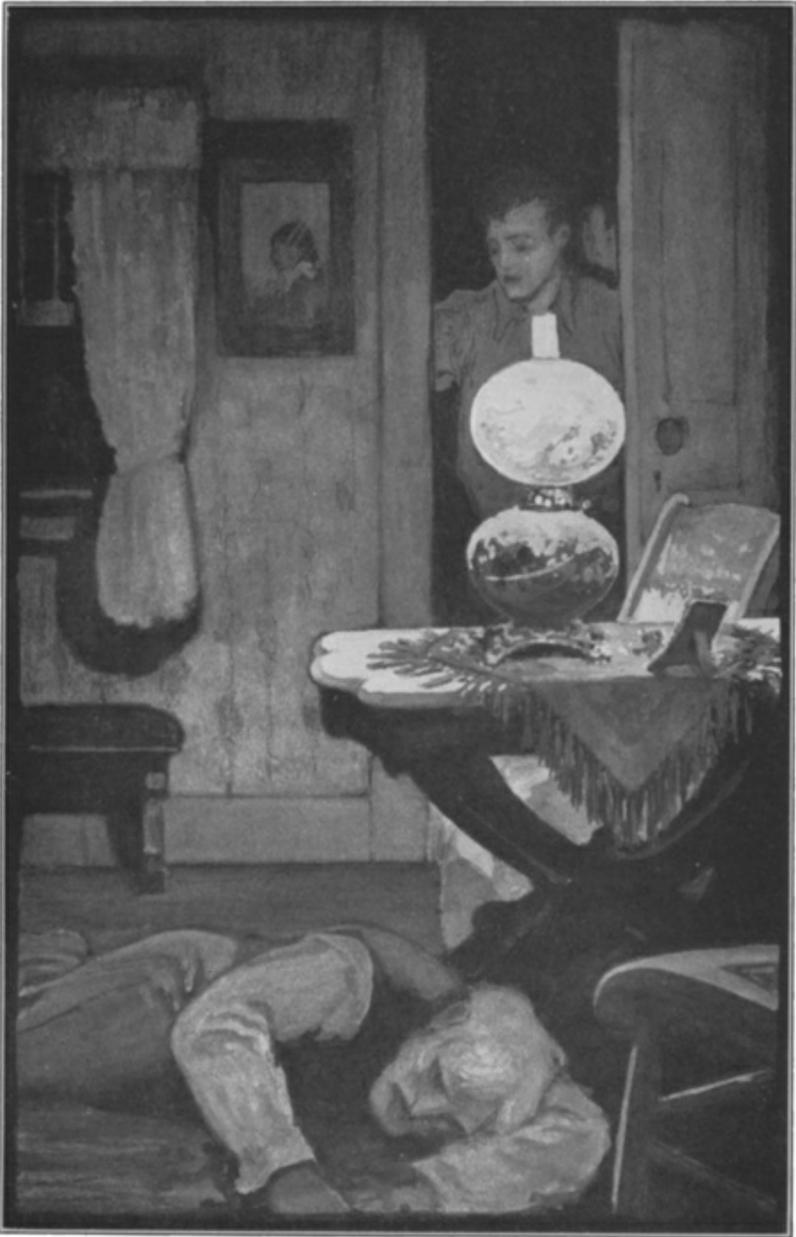
"Matter enough," Hal whispered hoarsely. "Don't you remember what Unk told us yesterday? Bick Yates and his pal were passing counterfeit twenty dollar bills, series of '27 and '28, Serial Number Z9874621K and...."

"Bick Yates?" Stuart was pointing toward the cottage. "Is he ... do you think?"

"Something's wrong in there, Stuart," Hal answered and started toward the door. "Something...."

He was in the hall and at the sitting room door with one bound. Stuart came right behind him and stood looking over his shoulder. Somehow neither one of them could utter a sound so shocked were they to see poor old Cyrus Price.

He was on the floor, his head in a little pool of blood, just under the marble-topped table.



HE WAS ON THE FLOOR. HIS HEAD IN A LITTLE POOL OF BLOOD.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

He lay quite still and his poor withered old face was ghastly. Hal picked him up and with Stuart's aid laid him gently down on the old mohair settee.

"Dead?" Stuart's lips framed the word, rather than spoke it.

Hal shook his head, for he had the old man's hand in his. It was still quite warm and the pulse was going feebly. Stuart put a handkerchief under Cyrus' bleeding head and then glanced at the table. There was a bright red smear at the marble edge.

"Looks as if he slipped and hit his head on that, Hal," he whispered fearfully. "Maybe a fracture, hey?"

"The fracture part is plausible, Glen. But he didn't slip like that himself. Looks as if someone deliberately knocked his poor old head against it."

Cyrus' eyes opened slowly, surveying the two young men in a bewildered manner. It occurred to Hal that the dull, glazed look bespoke danger and he bent over the old man solicitously.

"It's us, Mr. Price," he said gently, "Glennie Stuart and me. We're here to help you ... we saw that man run out ... we came in and found you on the floor. You're hurt..."

"He pounded my head on the table, he was so mad!" Cyrus murmured, his falsetto voice sounding weak and spent. "He liked ter choke me, he wuz that anxious ter find out where them bonds an' papers wuz! But I didn' tell him—I told him a lie an' fooled him. I says ter him they're up in the cellar of Old Eli's where I hid 'em in a block o' cement. He'll be most o' the night huntin' fer 'em, so yer kin catch him. There's a rifle in the kitchen—I'd o' killed him with it, if I could of laid my hands on it. He had it in fer me 'cause he knew I caught him a-throwin' the strongbox in the Mill Pond that midnight."

For a moment he seemed exhausted, but soon continued.

"He dropped the bonds an' papers, he wuz so excited ter git all the money 'fore he went away. So I faced him an' he says he wouldn' tell if I didn'. That was account o' the murder. Anyway, he went away, but I didn' tell him he dropped them bonds. But now he comes back after all this time an' says how he remembers he did drop the bonds an' things, but he forgot ter pick 'em up till he was too far away. An' he suspicions I had 'em. I have. I've kep' 'em in a oil-skin wallet roun' my neck fer mos' twenty years. That's why he's tried ter kill me jest now—he knows I'd hold out them bonds as evidence 'gainst him in case the murder was cleared."

“Old Eli?” Hal asked gently.

“Him what started all my misery,” said the old man. Suddenly he started to talk as if the tragedy had just taken place. His eyes glittered for a moment. “Lem and me are in there tellin’ Old Eli how he’s a cheat. I tell him he’s my murderer an’ he comes fer me with the andiron. Lem tackles him an’ takes it frum him an’ in the tussle they both slip an’ fall. Lem gets up but we see Old Eli’s hurt his head bad ’cause he slipped an’ hit it agin’ the andiron what was on the floor. But he’s breathin’ an’ I turn him over. We hear Dorkas comin’ down the stairs along with them other ghost noises. I says ter Lem ter beat it as far as he kin ’cause he’s likely killed Old Eli. So he does an’ that’s the last I see him till.... Anyways, after Lem’s gone I see Old Eli ain’t hurt so bad cuz he moves a little. So while I’m a-lookin’ at him, Dorkas opens the door an’ says I killed his father. That’s all I knowed till I woke up in the hospital that time.”

A gray pallor stole over the old man’s face and he lapsed into a sort of apathy. Hal glanced at Stuart significantly.

“Think you can take care of him till I go for the police and an ambulance?” he whispered.

“Police, Hal?”

“I hate to say it, Glen, but it’ll have to be done. Your Uncle Dorkas will still be up in the cellar when they come.”

“*Uncle Dorkas?*” Stuart was horrified. “What are you saying, Hal?”

“That your Uncle Dorkas will be arrested for the murder and robbery of his father twenty years ago, also the attempted murder of this poor old man. Don’t look at me that way, Glen—I’ve suspected your uncle right from the start! He’s the only other person who had the key ... he’s been searching the house for those bonds and now he’s in the cellar! Who’ll be the one to go and tell the police that they’ll find him there—you or I?”

Stuart rose and put his hand on Hal’s shoulder.

“I’ll go. Believe me, I’ll go! After all these years of injustice to the innocent Prices, there ought to be someone with Sharpe blood in him who’s willing to make amends.”

“And that’s Glennie himself,” Hal said with an encouraging smile.

“Darn right it’s Glennie!”

CHAPTER XXXII AFTER TWENTY YEARS

Cyrus Price lay long in that stupor, but when he opened his eyes Hal noticed that the haunting look of misery which he had had was gone. A tranquil expression had stolen over his withered features and despite the profuse bleeding of his head, he seemed at ease.

"I know now Lem or me didn' have nothin' ter do with Old Eli's murder," he said in a whisper. "It takes the misery from me ter say that. Funny I couldn' be sure Lem didn't do it afore. My poor Lem! He went around in misery too. Then them scoundrels meet him an' recognize he's Lem Price 'n' wanted fer robbery and murder. They tell him he's got ter be lookout fer their gang or they'll tip off the police. So what's he ter do? He goes with 'em, but he says ter me be ain't never done nothin' agin' the law 'cept ter drive that stolen car frum Illinois where they wuz. An' that scoundrel Yates (him that shot at Glennie the other night), he makes Lem drive it so's he wouldn' be caught if the cops stopped an' ask questions."

"They were almost caught anyway," Hal said quietly.

"I know, I know," muttered the old man. "Yates he finds out Lem's father lives quiet like so he makes my poor boy come so they kin all hide. So I git scared that mebbe the police or somebody would find out an' I dig a tunnel frum the fruit closet clear out ter the mill where Lem an' them two fellers kin hide if somebuddy should search the house an' the mill. They could stay in the tunnel, I figgered, till police searched the house an' the mill rooms. The tunnel comes out in a closet there too—I hit it good but I did it fer Lem. So yer see Lem's jest been unlucky ter have them scoundrels find out who he was, eh? They jest used him so's they cud come here an' hide in the mill. Yer believe my Lem's a good boy?"

"I surely do, Mr. Price. Do you want me to go and get him?" Hal was worried about the old man's sinking pulse.

"Eh? No, no. Lem's too mis'able after not seein' me so many years an' he says I got so old frum my misery. I don't want he should see me yet. After yer kin go an' let him out when the police come, eh? Tell 'em first how he's a good boy, but that the other two ain't an' they jest made him go 'long with 'em cuz he wuz supposed ter be a murderer! They won't do nothin' ter him, eh?"

"I'll see to it myself, Mr. Price," Hal promised. "Lem has just been a victim of circumstances. Now set your mind at rest."

"The key ter the fruit closet is in my pocket. I wuz down in the cellar that

night you an' your uncle wuz here—I hid in the tunnel 'cause I wuz afraid yuh'd ask me questions 'bout Lem.” Then as if the thought suddenly came to him, he added: “The deed ter my cottage I got in the wallet round my neck. I found it in Eli’s papers what Dorkas dropped that night in the grass. I found a paper too what Old Eli had writ sayin’ he built the house haunted 'cause he wanted ter drive his wife an' everybody but Dorkas crazy so’s they couldn’t live an’ spend the money he saved so hard. Old Eli was outer his mind—I alius said so. Anyway, I never told how I saw the paper he writ about buildin’ his house haunted—folks would wonder where I got it, eh?”

It was ten minutes later when old Cyrus opened his eyes and spoke for the last time. Hal barely heard the whispered plea.

“Lem needs ter have somethin’ after his misery! Fer twenty years he’s been wanderin’....”

Hal squeezed the old man’s gnarled hand with assurance.

“There’s my word on it, Mr. Price. I’ll have my uncle do all he can!”

Cyrus Price smiled faintly. Fifteen minutes later he was dead.

Stuart came back with a cordon of troopers and a doctor. The ambulance, he told Hal as he entered the sitting room, was to follow and he was shocked when he saw that Cyrus Price was beyond all medical aid.

The doctor announced that the old man had died as a direct result of his head wound and shock.

“Then it’s two murders Uncle Dorkas must account for,” Stuart said grimly. “Come on, Hal, I’ve promised the troopers that I’ll take them up and let them in with my key. I’d like you to go back with me just for ... well, just because!”

“Sure, I understand, Glen. Sure, I’ll go. Glad to be along and buck you up. But wait half a sec, huh? I’ve got to show these other troopers the way to the fruit closet.”

“What for, Hal?”

“For an exhibit that will knock Unk flat off his feet—Bick Yates and Coly Murford. They’re at the other end of the tunnel which begins at the fruit closet and ends in another closet in the storeroom at the mill ruins. Lem Price is there too, but I’ve got to see that he’s taken good care of.” Hal turned to the trooper nearest him. “Will you promise me that this Lem Price gets the best treatment possible? I know you’ll have to take him along and he’ll have to stay until he can be cleared of Yates’ gang. Anyway, that murder and robbery charge isn’t held over him, is it?”

“No,” said the trooper pleasantly. “And we’ll put the good word forward that Yates has been using him as a sort of handy man because he knew his past, eh?”

“That’s it,” said Hal confidently.

“You think this Lem Price is on the level about Yates using him?”

“Absolutely!” Hal said vehemently. “So treat him kind of nice, huh? He needs it after twenty years of misery....”

CHAPTER XXXIII

HOME AT LAST

As they rode up the hill, Hal saw the queer light reflected on the windows. It was too mellow a glow to be illumination merely. Besides he remembered that they had not put any lanterns in the rooms on that side of the house. Suddenly a shaft of flame shot out from the turret into the night and a trooper shouted:

“The place is afire!”

Stuart grasped Hal’s arm as if to steady himself. They had reached the garden gate, left the car and followed the troopers in through the garden. At that instant, the whole north section of the Mansion burst into flames.

Without warning a shutter was thrust open from the bedroom on the third floor and a bareheaded man looked wildly down on the garden.

“*Uncle Dorkas!*” Glen gasped. He looked up and shouted: “*Dorkas—Uncle Dorkas!* It’s I—*Glennie!* Quick, come down or you’ll be trapped!”

The man put his head to one side for a moment and Hal could almost see his burning dark eyes as he surveyed the police waiting for him below.

“Eh, *Glennie?*” he shouted. “You say I’ll be trapped if I don’t come down? I’ll be trapped if I *do* come down, so I won’t! It’s better—yes, it’s better! I got crazy ’cause Cyrus wouldn’t tell me where those bonds were. So I came up here an’ looked for ’em, but they weren’t in the cellar. He knows where they are! There’s twenty thousand dollars in ’em, so you can have ’em. I thought I’d come home an’ get ’em so’s I could go away again, but now I don’t care. I spent the rest—yes, I did it because my father had it comin’ to him. I killed him because he spoiled my life with his crazy ways an’ wouldn’t let me have the money when I needed it most.”

A roar of flame shut off all sound of the man’s voice for a moment. The troopers made not a move, but stood watching and listening. Hal and Stuart kept close together, arm in arm. Suddenly *Dorkas Sharpe’s* voice sounded high above the growing flames.

“I knocked Cyrus down and gave my father ... no, Lem didn’t do it, but I wasn’t going to let people think I was alive.”

Once more the sound of his voice was shut off by the roaring flames. The two floors were now a seething furnace. Hal implored the troopers to devise some means of getting the man to jump from the window.

“He’d be killed probably,” said one of the men grimly.

Glen looked up at his uncle, his jaw set and his eyes full of pain. *Dorkas*

was shouting again.

“You came back to the place, eh, Glennie? They give it to you? I thought ’twas you here.”

“There’s something grotesque about him standing there talking these things when ... when the fire’s creeping up all the time. He can’t be right ... like Grandfather, he’s not right either!” Stuart gripped Hal’s arm tighter than ever.

“I gave up huntin’ down cellar!” Dorkas shouted. “I come up to look at my bedroom for the last ’cause I couldn’t go ’way from home. *Home!*”

“Come on, Hal!” Stuart whispered hoarsely. “I can’t stand it one minute longer!”

As they got in the roadster and turned it about, Hal noticed that the flames were even then licking about the third floor bedroom. Dorkas Sharpe had disappeared from the window—a roaring flame had leaped in.

He looked back only once after that. It was when they had climbed the far hill, just before the bend in the road would obscure Lonesome Swamp from his sight. And he was sorry for having turned—he saw something he couldn’t put out of his mind for many a day.

The turret of Sharpe’s Mansion had burst into flames, the turret that had so reminded him of a gaunt witch’s cap. It jiggled crazily now atop the burning house and for a flashing second he could have sworn he saw a man’s dark figure outlined up there in bold relief, then melting into one shaftlike flame. The next moment there was a shower of sparks against the dark background of the night sky.

Dorkas Sharpe, he thought with a shudder, had gone home at last.

CHAPTER XXXIV

NOTHING EVER HAPPENS

A week later there were gathered around the Keens' luncheon table, Denis, Mrs. Keen, Hal and Stuart. The meal had been delicious and the talk pleasant. It was the first meal that had brought them all together since the night of the double tragedy.

Denis had been delayed in Washington and had just come home that morning. He had lots of questions to ask and still more to answer.

"For instance," said Hal briskly, "there's this business of Lem Price. Bick Yates has cleared him, Unk—said that Lem was nothing more or less than a watch-dog and a handy man. He helped them escape in Illinois because his own head depended on it. The stolen car charge against him has been cleared too, so all that remains is a lot of red tape. You could help unravel that darn fast if you got down and talked to Judge...."

"All right, Hal," said Denis indulgently. "And what's the rush about getting the red tape from Lem Price's shoulders, eh? Where does he have to go?"

"To Washington with Stuart," Hal answered promptly, "Glen's going to take him out to his aunt's ranch and give him a good steady job."

"They haven't been home one day for luncheon, they've been so busy talking this over with Mr. Lem Price," said Mrs. Keen mildly. "Now I'm glad to hear it's settled."

"Glen says he'll need a fellow like Lem to help. He'll have to do the work of a couple of men—both of them will. Things aren't so good at the ranch, Glen's aunt wrote. It seems there's a troublesome mortgage and the crops haven't been so extra and...."

"And what do you suppose I stayed over in Washington for, eh, Glen?" Denis Keen said with a chuckle. "I think I promised I'd see what could be done about Lonesome Swamp...."

"With all the publicity this trouble gave me, it's given Lonesome Swamp little prestige," Stuart said disheartened. "The place had had enough repute before, but now ... I'm going back to Aunt with little heart, sir. My one aim in taking Lem Price is to do what I can to atone for the Sharpes' treatment of him. Also he's a nice chap. He says he hasn't any heart for Lonesome Swamp now that his father is dead, so he doesn't care where he goes."

Denis Keen smiled and nodded understandingly.

"And so you'd both have been willing to let that property slide and go

back, eh? You have in mind that Lem Price owns the Mill Pond property, eh?”

“We both had it in mind, sir,” Stuart answered. “I had even some high hope that I could sell Lem’s property at a large figure and that we could go partners then, providing of course that I sold the Swamp too.”

“Well, go right ahead with your high hopes then, Glen,” said Denis enigmatically. “Your property and Lem’s property are as good as sold right now. A big realty concern came down and looked it over the other day. They’re going to make a beautiful artificial lake out of the mill pond. And on the hill they’ll erect a number of summer bungalows.”

“Doggone, why haven’t I got some property to sell, Unk!” Hal exclaimed. “I’d like to go in partnership with Glennie out there in Washington myself.”

“You can come out any time you like, Hal,” Stuart said with a low chuckle. “You don’t have to start any partnership, either. We’ve been partners since the night I met you at the station. Always ready to chuck your lot in with me, hey? Well, you had such a head on your shoulders about guessing Uncle Dorkas was still alive, I’ll have to let you try your hand at guessing a ranch’s greatest riddle.”

“What’s that?” Hal was immediately curious.

“It’s up to you to come out and find out,” Stuart answered with a sly wink at Denis. “And another thing, Hal, when you come to Washington you won’t want to come back to these lowly hills. We have snow-tipped mountains stretching away mile upon....”

But Hal had not heard. His alert mind had already leaped out to Washington on a visit to Stuart and he was at that moment visualizing himself back after the trip to those snow-clad mountains, back at home as he was now. He would drink his coffee just as he was doing, and he would probably gaze out through the casement windows which looked out over the Ramapo Hills and the three sides of the valley clothed in the deepest of green. And he would be glad he was home. But then nothing ever happened at home, he thought, with a bored shudder. He expressed this thought immediately.

“I was going to argue with Glen about these lowly hills,” he said seriously. “Only I happened to think that outside of beauty and all that, nothing ever happens around here. Why, there hasn’t been anything thrilling to happen within thirty miles of this burg in the last....”

But he never finished the remark, for he happened to notice that his mother, his uncle, and Stuart were all smiling, almost condescendingly, but there was a thoughtful expression in every eye that was turned toward the windows facing the west. Lonesome Swamp was over there—he caught himself up as he guessed their intention. They meant to make him retract and admit that there had been something very thrilling to happen within thirty miles of the quiet Ramapo village.

But just to keep himself free from future boredom, he didn't admit anything of the kind.

THE END

[The end of *The Lonesome Swamp Mystery* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh (as Hugh Lloyd)]