



Little Death

by
Edison Marshall

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Little Death

by Edison Marshall

THERE is always a gentle wind that blows through the Divide just at the fall of darkness. It comes from the snowfields, but whither it goes and where it dies no government weathermen have ever taken the trouble to determine. It does various things as it goes along—pausing here and there to wag the tops of the pine trees, like great semaphore signals to one another, brings certain smells and other messages to the senses of the wild creatures, and plays a curious song in the reeds of the river's edge. On this particular evening, Amos Hardman felt that it would also bring in the cold.

But the man didn't particularly care. It was true that as yet he had built no cabin on his recently acquired farm on the Upper Umpqua. But he had a tent on the very shore of the river, and as all campers know, a tent can be made snug and warm in the worst of weather. There were plenty of warm blankets, and there was more firewood on the hills about than any man would care to attempt to measure in a lifetime. In fact there were hundreds of miles of nothing but firewood. For one of the greatest timber belts in the world sweeps on either side of the Umpqua River of Oregon.

He would have no cause to fear the chill night that was sure to follow. It would probably be the first frost of the fall. Leaves in a moment struck yellow and red, falling acorns and the first glint of the wings of the waterfowl—this was what frost meant to the high plateaus. It meant even more personal things to Amos Hardman. He wondered if his cattle would

suffer on the range, and if his growing things would be killed. He busied himself about the little farmyard.

The chickens were going to roost, and methodically, Amos Hardman counted them. There had been a full dozen when they had mounted to their perches the previous evening. Now there were just eleven. He called into the growing shadows.

Just a moment he stood in thought; then he turned one hundred yards up the river. On the green bank he found what he was looking for—a little telltale bunch of feathers and curious dark spots on the herbage. The angry furrows grew in the man's face as he bent to examine them.

With the care of a detective he looked at the tracks in the soft dirt. He was naturalist enough to identify them at once. "A mink," he said to himself. "The low-lived little critter!"

It was all very plain. A mink—one of those bloodthirsty little slayers that have hunting-grounds on the waterways—had made short work of one of his pullets. It was the loss of a few cents, and it was even a greater blow to his feelings. Amos shook his fist at the river.

"Hang you, I'll get you for that if it takes all winter," he cried. "You little bandit—you'll die for it yet. What a mink was ever created for is a mystery to me, anyway—the most worthless, useless, no-good thief in the world."

He turned swiftly back to his tent and obtained his shotgun; then looked up and down the shore. He thought he might catch sight of the robber. The shadows grew and deepened; and soon it became plain that even Hardman's keen eyes could no longer detect a mink's body in the reeds. He turned up the hill for a final effort, in a field that lay nearly a mile from his riverside tent.

"Most worthless critter in the world," he said to himself as he started off into the shadows. "No use to anything or anyone on earth."

BUT although Amos Hardman had eyes trained to the distances of the hills, there were many things indeed that he could not see. He had lived many years among the wild things of the forest. He was a kindly man, as mountaineers go, and not swift to condemn. Yet there were existences in the forest about him, the motives and missions of which he could not grasp. No man ever lived long enough to understand all the mysteries of the wilderness

and perhaps even Little Death, the Mink, had his place in the scheme of things.

For there is a curious balance in nature. It seems to be the plan of nature that no one species may be allowed to overrun the earth. The ideal seems to be a world literally teeming with all forms of life, and that means that a certain number of foes must be created for every living form to keep the numbers of each in check. The stately cougar and the larger beasts of prey are too proud to devote much of their time and energies to the rodents and fowl and such small people, and nature soon saw the need of a new breed of meat-eaters to take care of them. So she evolved a whole family of small-sized, wiry, courageous hunters and identified them with a little gland of astonishingly potent musk in the body of each.

The weasels, the ferrets, the otters, the martens—even the despised mink was a member of this family. If Amos Hardman had thought about this fact, perhaps he wouldn't have been so quick to condemn its existence as useless and purposeless. There were many things indeed he didn't know about Little Death; otherwise his tone might have been different. He didn't know of the hundreds of rodents, each destructive to his crops, that the mink took care of every year. And like all men, he couldn't see the unfolding of events.

If he had been able to, perhaps a moment's understanding of the mysteries of existence might have come to him. He would have known that every living creature has its mission and its place, from the buzzards that follow the dead, to old Woof the bear, grunting in the thickets. Some were created to keep the numbers of some other breed in check, some were to clear the ground of certain fast-spreading plants, but the missions of many of them are too obscure for the eyes of men to see.

Hardman didn't think about these things as he climbed the hill. He only thought about the growing chill in the air and because he was only human, he listened to the stir of the waking forest life about him.

LITTLE DEATH was clever at many things; but most of all he surpassed in keeping out of sight. It was the first lesson his mother taught him, long ago in the grass nest beside the river. "Never show yourself till just before the leap," the old she-mink had said. And perhaps, anticipating even then the rapture of ripping out a jugular vein with his ivory teeth, his wicked little eyes had glowed like two rubies in the velvet fur. For the leap of a mink is as swift, as savage a thing as is to be seen in all the savage wilderness, and

usually there is death at the end of it. Once to see it is to understand how the little slayer won his name.

The same rule held when Little Death was the hunted, rather than the hunter: to lie still like a little strip of brown mud between the reed-stalks, until it became perfectly certain that his enemy had seen him and flight was the only course. For Little Death had many enemies. Millions of women, all over the broad earth, offered much gold for his soft coat. There were traps in plenty, all along the Upper Umpqua, there were the greater beasts of prey, and the wide-winged marsh-owls had unpleasant habits of slipping up behind him when least expected. These great birds had wings that were silence itself, claws that were sharp and deadly, and many fledglings always hungry for the flesh of the little people of the river. Even before he had left the nest, Little Death had had nightmares of the two blue eyes in the twilight.

There were not many human wayfarers along the Upper Umpqua, but such as there were rarely caught sight of him. And this speaks well for the little bandit's ability to conceal himself. The few trappers and hunters that came along were men of rather exceptional powers of vision. Mostly they were lank, dark mountaineers who didn't miss much of what was going on about them. Though there is no more deceitful jade in the world than Mother Nature, always pretending that her living creatures are just patches of light and shadow, most of these mountaineers had long since learned her wiles. If a tenderfoot should pass within five paces of Little Death's body and fail to see him, it would be nothing at all to wonder at, but when Amos Hardman, he who had lived forty years on the Divide, did just this thing it was something for the forest people to talk about. One can even imagine a wise old Kingfisher, blue-coated policeman who had a beat on a certain ripple of the Umpqua, squawking out this bit of scandal to old Woof the bear, catching crawfish on the shore, and the furry old fellow sitting back on his tailless haunches and grunting with laughter.

BUT it was true that ordinarily, human beings completely failed to see the little people of the river. Of course, no one could fail to notice Woof, and dull are the eyes that are not filled with delight at the sight of the black-tail deer, drinking at the water's edge. When Whisperfoot, the cougar, cared to show himself at all, no man in his right senses cared to look the other way. And the glory of the elk is a name. The little people, however, went mostly unobserved. They were physically small, their coloration was highly protective, but most of all they were wary and elusive as so many little

shadows. Some of them were not mammals at all; the great trout, for instance, that waved lazy tails at the still bottoms of the deep pools. Farther down the river a pair of beavers made engineering plans through the long night, and the blue heron told a pair of little ruddy ducks, flirting their tails in a certain shallow, that the last of the otters had established himself at the neck of an old slough. But they all were crafty and furtive and shy beyond all telling, and most of them, like Little Death himself, did most of their hunting either in the eery hours of twilight or at night.

This particular twilight he came creeping forth from a little bunch of tall reeds on the river bank. No one could have guessed, one minute since, that the few yellow stalks would have made such a perfect hiding place. The hour was late, the light was dim, yet one little moment of close scrutiny would have sufficed to completely change one's opinion about Little Death. In a moment one would cease to think of him as an insignificant little rat of the river, and would know him for what he was—a hunter and a killer, more bloodthirsty than a tiger, more cunning than a fox, more savage than a wolf.

He was Little Death, the mink, less in size than a rabbit, but as fierce and terrible a hunter as is known in the whole wilderness world. His little red eyes burned with a wicked light as he took the trail.

NATURE has been trying a long time to secure efficiency in her various creatures. She has always been improving her types and her methods have been sure but exceedingly deadly. It was just a simple proposition of killing off, by process of the survival of the fittest, all the less efficient and incapable creatures. She has made mistakes, but few of them remain to clutter up the earth. And once or twice she has achieved a positive masterpiece.

The little animal that, serpent-like, came slipping out upon the game-trail beside the river was really nothing less than a masterpiece of nature. No one could doubt it, to see him in action. It isn't known that nature had any efficiency expert to help her out, but naturalists do know that this little beast of prey, in his own sphere, is as capable, effective, and withal as deadly a hunter as ever followed a trail. He is just as effective in a tree as on the ground, though this fact isn't relished at all by the feathered people that make nests in the branches. He is agile, fleet beyond belief, and ferocious up to his last breath.

As he came out from his hiding-place, he didn't make a false motion. No hare could have moved through the reeds more swiftly than he. He really

didn't have any limits. He could dart up a tree as quickly as a squirrel. He could slip into a rabbit burrow or a hollow tree with the ease of a ferret. If he wished, he could range far from his native waters and keep equally well fed. And even the great lake trout in the pool were no more at home in the dim paths of the river bottoms than he.

Scientists can tell about his teeth—how perfectly they are arranged and sharpened for a life of rapine. There have been trappers, now and then, who have carelessly gotten their hands in range of these same teeth—and thereafter have ever spoken softly every time the name of Little Death has been mentioned. The jaws are manipulated with tremendous bunches of muscles, the eyes miss little of what is going on about him, the nose is keen, and a thrown blade could scarcely equal the speed of his leap. Many and strange are the stories of his ferocity, his deathless courage and, curiously, most of them are true.

A rabbit had bounded along the river bank earlier in the evening, and Little Death had found his trail. Just for an instant he stood up on his haunches, like a squirrel, and if the light had been better one could have seen a transformation in the fierce face and body. He seemed to grow more furtive. The lips drew back, revealing a gleam of polished ivory. But the most pronounced change of all was in his eyes.

They suddenly became little points of reddish flame. Little Death's blood was up. The rabbit was still far off, but the blood-madness had already come upon him. All flesh-eaters know this passion—a lust to heat the blood and ignite the brain—but in none of them is it more pronounced than in Little Death and his fellows. A tiger, for instance, will often linger over its wounded prey. For long hours it will administer terrible caresses with claws and fangs, but this cold cruelty is unknown in the mink. His passion is too great for that. All he knows is to slay, and slay quickly, with white teeth at the throat; then leap to another victim.

LITTLE DEATH stood shivering, with the fury and the madness upon him. Then he started stealing down the river. But all at once he halted, and whipped about on his hind legs. No human eyes could follow that motion. For an instant he crouched, utterly motionless, and his red, fiery eyes searched the deepening shadows. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that a deeper shadow had flitted across his trail. All his life, Little Death had known this same, curious darkening across his path. He had wakened from

his dreams in the reeds in horror of it. It was made by only one thing—the swift passage of wings.

Little Death's eyes were keen; yet he could see no longer. Perhaps, forty yards distant, a shadow swept across a single bright star that had pushed through the twilight sky. But it was too dark and far away for even a mink to see plainly. And so intent was he upon the trail that he was willing to disregard it.

And disregarding this particular shadow was one thing his mother had told him, every time the dark came down, that he must not do. It was the deadliest of all the many deadly mistakes a mink can make. For that shadow often means the presence of Velvet Wings, the great horned-owl, that is terror itself to all the Little People. Velvet Wings can come like a cloud, and his talons are death. His voice alone, in the silence, is enough to strike terror into all the little folk within hearing. But the silence grew and deepened about Little Death and he kept to the trail.

By now, the darkness was growing over the lake region. The pines still stood in curious silhouette against the western sky, but the outline of even the close tree-trunks was blurred and indistinct. The river gleamed, ever so softly. The reeds began their night song, that curious rustle they make as the wind plays over them, a sound that lingers long in the memory. All the forest world was wakening.

It was the hunting hour, and Little Death's passion grew upon him. There seemed to be something in the air, a fever and excitement that the night wind had brought on. He didn't know it, but farther up the slope Whisperfoot, the cougar, was stalking his buck. There was no particular way in which Little Death could know it, because cat-tail feathers, falling on the reeds, make more sound than Whisperfoot at his hunting. Moreover, he is tawny and hard to see in the shadows. If he had known, the mink might have been more wary. The great cat does not ordinarily attack such small game as minks, but like most other forest creatures, his habits are not entirely known and never to be trusted.

AND there was one other stirring creature in the same little forest patch back of Hardman's tent. He was hunting too, but not for food. The lowering night had brought the cold, and the breed to which Cold Eye belonged was particularly susceptible to the lowering of the temperature. Cold Eye was looking for a warm place to lie through the night and must make haste.

He seemed to move with strange stealth, scarcely a leaf rustling under him. Not even his eyes were visible in the shadows. He crept lower, down toward Hardman's tent.

But the man was still on the hills, and didn't see Cold Eye come. For certain very good reasons, Hardman would have taken no joy in this visitation. For Cold Eye was known far through the forests, a creeper in the dust and a seeker of warm places in the cold nights. He was the great gray rattlesnake that had lain all day on the ledge. He was old, the poison glands in his head were full, and the forest creatures scampered off the trail to get out of his way.

He was angry because the deepening cold had driven him from his ledge, and his savagery had grown upon him as he progressed down the trail. He didn't understand the gray wall that now had reared in front of him. He slipped slowly under it.

Hardman was a mountaineer, brawn and bone, and his bed was a pallet of boughs, spread on the ground at the mouth of the tent. His blankets, two pairs of them, were spread on top. And at first Cold Eye did not understand them.

But slowly he slipped into them, into the warmth and the darkness. Slowly he coiled, till at last only a gray circle, deadly past all things, remained. He would sleep here through the night, he thought. He would strike with deadly fangs any one that came to disturb him. Only his head was exposed.

On the hill above, Amos Hardman had finished his work. It had been a hard day, and he was tired. He thought with pleasure how he would swiftly remove his boots and trousers, and leap between the blankets.

He would sleep well, he thought, at least if that worthless existence, the mink, did not revisit his hen-roost during the night. Yes, he would sleep well, for Cold Eye would be waiting with bared fangs for any one who would contest the bed with him. And all things slept well after Cold Eye had spoken to them.

THE darkness had fallen, by now, but the moon was up. Otherwise it would have been too dark for even Little Death to hunt. It made a curious patchwork of light and shadow on the trail; it worked strange miracles with the many ripples and waterfalls of the river, changing them seemingly to wondrous works in silver; it glinted on the tops of the pines. The rabbit trail

circled back, and Little Death had made the circuit when the shadow fell again. But it was behind him, and he didn't see it. Neither did he see the two circles of blue fire that for an instant burned at him out of the shadows. The trail was growing hot, and the only emotion he had left was anticipation of the killing that was to come. He had quite forgotten that Velvet Wings also kept watch over this same hunting-ground. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sped forward so gaily.

Once more he paused to listen to a long-drawn howl from the thickets at one side. It was a curious, angry, disappointed sound and if Little Death's intellect had been just a little greater, he might have understood. Whisperfoot had missed his stroke. His paw had whipped down a fraction of a second too late, and the buck was a streak in the darkness by now. This was never soothing to Whisperfoot's disposition. He was angry, and he didn't care who knew it. The sound chopped squarely off in the middle.

But if Little Death had known the little drama that immediately followed, he would have been really vitally interested. Just in the last notes of his howl, a shadow had suddenly leaped across Whisperfoot's nose. It is an old saying in the forest that a cougar has always one jump left in him. Whisperfoot had just that one jump, and he gave it, fast as light. It wasn't very big game. It was just a rabbit speeding in stark terror up the slope. But it had come too suddenly and was gone too quick for even the cougar's lightning blow to overtake it. The long, meat-hook talons dug into the earth a half inch behind the little white tail.

Whisperfoot started to howl again, but abruptly bethought himself better of it. He had an idea. It seems to be true that no animal, excepting man, can really reason; thus Whisperfoot's curious behavior can hardly be ascribed to actual reasoning and foresight. Perhaps it was simply an inspiration—instinct developed, in that curious phrasing of which no one exactly knows the meaning, to the *nth* degree. Whisperfoot simply seemed to know that in just a moment some beast of prey would come darting along that way on the rabbit's trail.

He didn't know just what kind of beast it might be. He didn't care. He was sufficiently strong and large to master any other flesh-eater of the Oregon forest, unless, by a liberal interpretation, one would call Woof a flesh-eater. Were it a fisher or a wild-cat or even a wolf, Whisperfoot need not be afraid. And Woof, the bear, would no more attempt to catch a rabbit than he would try to bite off his own diminutive tail. He was quite a foolish old bear at times, especially when the love-sickness was on him in the fall, but he had never been *that* foolish.

The idea had no more than occurred to Whisperfoot, and his muscles had set (because in animals there is no time lost between an idea and its muscular response) than he knew he had guessed the truth. Little feet came scratching along in the dead leaves. They were coming swiftly and, indeed, they were very little. But Whisperfoot had missed his stroke and anything in the way of flesh was acceptable.

And if the bright eyes of Velvet Wings were watching from the sky, perhaps the great owl thought he was to be cheated after all. He came winging down the trail but a short distance ahead of Amos Hardman on the way to his tent and his bed.

LITTLE DEATH was running straight into the cougar's ambush. Whisperfoot would not miss this time. He would gauge his stroke correctly. And except for one little prank of the forest gods—those spirits whose sport it is to watch the everchanging drama of the wilderness—Little Death would have known no further adventures that night. Whisperfoot was crouched in the shadow but the moonlight probed through and reflected in his eyes.

Just for an instant they flashed like singular blue electric bulbs, two circles, close together, in the darkness. The eyes of the mink were red with passion and blood lust—for he was hot upon the rabbit's trail—but they were not so blinded that he did not discern the warning. Since his earliest kittenhood he had known about the two blue danger signals in the darkness.

It was not that he had ever encountered Whisperfoot before. Rather it was just a matter of instinct, an instinct all living creatures possess, that such twin moons mean danger. The eyes of Velvet Wings himself had these same surface lights; and that fact alone was enough to draw the mink up short in his tracks.

If he had raced on twelve more inches, he would have never got past the ambush alive. If he had stopped in his tracks for one half of a breath, Whisperfoot would have reached out a barbed paw and snatched away his life. But he did neither of these things. Whisperfoot struck, but before the paw landed Little Death had leaped aside. If he surpassed at nothing else, he knew how to dodge and his muscles were chain lightning itself. Whisperfoot struck with his other paw, and Little Death dodged again.

The rabbit was at once forgotten. Little Death was dodging for his life. Twice more the claws came down within an inch of his furry body, and by

now Whisperfoot was striking all about him and he would have suggested to Woof's grim sense of humor a human being vainly striking at a mosquito. Then Little Death gathered himself for a great spring and leaped full over Whisperfoot's low-hung head. Then he darted away through the tall grass.

Whisperfoot chased him, striking at him again and again, but always when the paw came down Little Death was elsewhere. The mink cut back, made a swift circle, and a moment more was at the river bank. The cougar understood these tactics. Once more he leaped at the brown serpent in the air, and except for the luckiest chance would have fallen into the river. And *that* would have given the forest people something to laugh about for a half-dozen moons.

Little Death struck the water with a splash, and was immediately out of his sight. It was his own element. His claws were semi-webbed, and he took the ripples like a salmon. The chase had lost its terror for him. One hundred feet down the river he pulled up on the bank, his fur sleek and close-lying from the water.

He drew himself up, perhaps intending to utter his chattering laugh of scorn at the cougar on the opposite shore. Perhaps he was listening to the nearing footsteps of Hardman, on the way to his tent. In fact, Whisperfoot, angry and disappointed, was already slinking back into the shadows as inconspicuously as possible. But Little Death's laugh was never uttered.

He crawled up the bank into the very mouth of Hardman's tent and his little red eyes saw what Hardman never could have hoped to see—the head of Cold Eye, the serpent, stretching from the blankets. Cold Eye also had heard the man's step, and was waiting with lifted head for any one that came.

IF any one of a number of things had been different from what they were, a certain fight to the death on the shores of the Umpqua would have never come to pass. For it is true that few mink in their right senses would care to attack a full-grown rattlesnake. In the first place, old Cold Eye was a wonderfully efficient hunter on his own account. His bulk was many times that of Little Death. And even the lower intellect of a mink knew that one little scratch of the loose-hung fangs was simply death with just a few moments of quivering in between.

But in the first place, Little Death was feeling unusually sure of himself. He had just extricated himself from the claws of a cougar, and this was a

legend to pass down to his children. In the second place, his blood was up from the excitement of the chase. And lastly, he was angry all over at the rabbit's escape. It would be hard to imagine so many emotions flooding him at once, but their combined effect was to put him on fighting edge. The sight of the rattler, suddenly looming just in front of him, the blood-smell and the realization that here was the noblest game he had ever faced was like a spark to powder.

He seemed to puff out. The wet hair erected all at once, and in one second seemed to be dry. The light danced in his eyes. The muscles set and contracted seemingly without conscious effort, and he sprang fast as a light shaft toward the serpent's throat.

Then there began the grim and terrible battle that the little people of the river came out to see. Cold Eye was not to be felled by that first attack. The head swayed aside, then the long body lunged out. It came like a spear comes, almost straight in the air and faster than the eye could follow. Little Death rolled back and over, and both contestants found themselves in the moonlight, clear outside the mouth of the tent.

Little Death got in his bite as the snake came down, but he almost died to pay for it. Cold Eye's head whipped back, and the mink's leap to safety was none too soon. The flat head seemed to graze his shoulder.

TWO of the most agile, the most indomitable slayers in the whole wilderness world were matched on the river bank that night—cold fury on the part of Cold Eye and savage ferocity on that of Little Death. The moon showed the whole thing. The entire wilderness world seemed to stop in its business and look. The two fought almost in silence, so little sound that even the song that the wind played in the marsh reeds was not obscured.

It is true that Cold Eye hissed as he turned to parry Little Death's lunges. But it was only a faint sound, dying quickly in the silence of the night and charged full of the icy hatred of which the snake is the embodiment. And perhaps the mink's light feet rustled and crinkled in the leaves. It was almost as if he were dancing—some savage dance of death about a victim—so lightly did he spring back and forth. The whole fight was misty and unreal in the moonlight: two strange figures in a dance of death. Only once did the rattles sound: that far-carrying warning, sharp and high, that is as menacing an articulation as is ever heard in the wilderness. It was more than that. All that is deadly, all the lightning perils that can fall so swiftly on the dwellers of the Wild were symbolized in that piercing note.

Little Death danced about him, lunging in again and again: stroke and parry, gleaming teeth and darting head, bunching muscles and lightning lunge, bite and scratch and little wicked eyes burning out of the savage face. The serpent was more stately, bowing almost like a dancer in a minuet. He swayed gently, until he thought he saw his opening. Then the long head would lunge out and thwack down, and not even the eyes of the wild creatures were trained enough to follow that motion.

Little Death seemed so lithe, so slender, so unbelievably agile that he gave almost a reptile appearance himself. The flat, savage head helped out the delusion; only the wicked teeth revealed his true raptorial character. Cold Eye had felt their sting a half-dozen times, but they had never reached a vital place and the mink had been afraid to bite too long and deep. The whipping head of the snake was looking for just that chance.

Little Death's rage grew upon him with every passing second. The hair stood straight until he looked three times his natural size. Ever he leaped faster, ever his wicked little eyes had a more lurid flame. Cold Eye, however, still lived up to his name. Something glittered on either side of the flat head like bits of broken glass, strangely bright but cold enough to freeze the blood in the veins and paralyze the muscles. Little Death knew enough not to meet *those* eyes. In a fight where it was leap against leap, fang against fang, he had a fair chance of living to tell of it, but a battle of eyes with a reptile was a different matter. Little Death was a bloodspiller, but he didn't know black magic. For though naturalists deny it to the chapter's end, there *is* a power in the cold, glittering eye of a serpent, and for the little people to meet it is to be frozen in their tracks. A cold priestess to all that is deadly and merciless—*that* was the serpent, fighting in the moonlight.

IT was an incredibly graceful thing, this battle on the river's bank. Sometimes their shadows, as they hung on the water's edge, danced off across the ripples. Little Death hopped back and forth, now darting almost as Cold Eye darted, now swaying on his haunches, now leaping, now recoiling, but always staying just out of the reach of Cold Eye's lashing head. Mostly they fought in eery silence.

If the serpent had been fighting any other creature than a mink and had been in the least afraid of being conquered, he would have sprung immediately into the water. It is one of the ways of serpents to make a swift path across a river. But he knew enough not to try these tactics here. If the

serpent was a water dog, Little Death was a fish. The wild waters were the smaller creature's own element, and he would have had every advantage.

Again and again Cold Eye got in savage blows, strokes that didn't go quite true yet in which the flat head had pummeled the mink's sides; and Little Death was frightfully shaken and bruised by the furious jerk and recoil of the long body every time he himself had been able to get in a bite. But it is a trait in the nature of a mink never to give up, once embroiled in a fight. The tradition of their courage has carried far through the wilderness, not without cause. His fury increased and with it his effectiveness. Ever he seemed quicker of recoil. So absorbed was he that he could give no heed to any other danger: a dozen shadows could have flitted across the glinting river and he would have never seen them. Nor did he hear the descending feet of Amos Hardman, on the way to his tent. Perhaps, with one little successful lunge, Cold Eye could yet win the battle in time to go back to the blankets to keep company with the warm human figure. Not that it would be warm all night. Warmth dies from the veins after the rattler's bite.

ONCE more the snake lunged out. It was almost fatal to Little Death. The fangs combed the fur on his shoulder. The weight and velocity of the head knocked him aside, and the snake darted forward to strike again. And this was a mistake.

The snake was not quite in the best position for a blow. Too much of his length was already stretched out. But the truth was, he had seen Little Death rolled head over heels, and he didn't have quite the proper respect for the mink's ability to recoil. "There are none so swift, so agile as I," he tells the wicked-eyed little sons of him in the serpent nest, and Cold Eye thought that he himself wouldn't have been able to snap back to a position of battle before the poisoned fangs could sink home. But he hadn't quite counted on the fact that a mink is almost, if not quite, a masterpiece of nature.

It all transpired so quickly that even the little people that watched the fight didn't quite discern the details. For the smallest, littlest fraction of a second, less than stop-watch could measure, Little Death seemed to lie still from the force of the blow. The snake's glittering eyes saw the posture, and he lunged down far-out, with the full force and length of his body. But when he was in the air, a wonderful transformation occurred in the little, still handful of brown fur.

All at once, Little Death uncoiled like a spring. He leaped to one side, at the very fraction of a second that the head darted past. Cold Eye had sprung

too far to recoil. The white teeth flashed, cut, buried deep, and closed—fairly on the serpent’s spine. Cold Eye would paralyze no more fledglings in their tracks. Although his clammy tail would have certain motion for some hours, he was simply and assuredly dead. The battle had waged out from Amos’ tent and the long body lay fifteen feet in the shadows from the door. Little Death had lived up to his name.

He seemed very small but wholly deadly as he investigated the wound. The blood-madness, of which the weasel tribe are particularly susceptible, was on him even from this cold blood. He chattered in his rapture and ferocity. Once more he danced about the body, as if in triumph.

But the curtain had not yet fallen on the little drama of the river.

In the middle of his triumphal dance, a shadow swooped to the earth. So fast it came that there seemed to be no break in the flood of moonlight. It sped out of the dark sky, and it swept, faster than a man may sweep his arm, along the moonlit river margin. And before the river people could blink their eyes, the dead rattlesnake was left lying still and alone in the reeds.

Velvet Wing, the great owl, had seen his chance at last. He had dipped out of the air, swooped on his silent wings over the battle scene, and even now was darting away with Little Death held fast in his talons.

“THE end of Little Death,” the little people said, as the shadow passed.

But it’s a strange thing about the world that there is always one more card in the sleeve of Fate. It was played then.

There was an astounding explosion out of the darkness. It wasn’t just a small-sized sound, or even a fairly large sound. It was an incredible bellow and roar that seemed to make the air crack and rock about them. In the silence, it was a sound to strike deaf all who heard it. The little people simply tumbled over backward with astonishment and terror.

The shadow that was over the river abruptly dipped in its flight. It wavered strangely, and something fell out of its talons. Little Death’s luck was with him after all. He struck, not the rocky shore, but the glinting water of the river, and Little Death was known out and far as a high-diver. He was bleeding from the battle with Cold Eye and from the claws of Velvet Wings, but neither of these things had made him forget how to swim. He struck off boldly, among the dim passages of the sunken logs, and sped to safety.

And it was all because Amos Hardman had returned with his shotgun. He hadn't come in time to get in bed with Cold Eye. In fact, he didn't even know that the reptile had called on him, for the serpent's body was obscured in the shadows, fifteen feet distant. He came just in time to see the shadow of the owl in the moonlight and, likely enough, Amos Hardman was still thinking of his chickens. In fact, it was one of the few subjects Amos Hardman—and a good many other farmers as well—ever did think about. Likely enough this owl was flying away with one of them.

He had thrown his shotgun to his shoulder and fired. He hadn't stopped to take aim. He was too angry at the threatened loss of his fowl. The report was the sound the little people had heard, by which they were still almost petrified from terror. The truth was that Amos had shot very badly; otherwise he could have hardly missed the great form of the owl. All he succeeded in doing was to sink a few shots into the feathers and along the skin and the only result, beside terror, was a sudden relaxation of the bird's muscles that caused him to dip in his flight and open his claws. Of course the rascally mink had fallen out—safely into the river.

Amos Hardman heard the splash, and at first he didn't understand why he couldn't see the clump of feathers that would mean one of his fowl, floating down the moon-illuminated river. But he did see a black head that for an instant came up right in the middle of a glinting patch of water. And he was smitten with horror at a sudden suspicion that came into his mind.

“May I be strung up!” he suddenly exploded. “That owl was carryin' off the mink—and I made her drop him!”

He turned into his tent, almost speechless with self-wrath. “The ornery little thief,” he roared. “The most worthless, useless, plague-take-it varmint on the earth! What was he made for anyway—blast his thievin', bloodthirsty ways. I'll get traps and get him yet!”

If the mink, one hundred yards down the river, had heard, he might have leaned back upon his haunches and laughed his scorn. Why should he fear the traps of men? They could only continue to give him a life of zestful adventure. The years would pass, still to find him fishing and hunting and thieving and fighting his deadly fights in the twilight—the very rogue and rascal that Nature ordained him to be. His useless existence would continue for some time yet, while out in the shadows the last muscular quiver of Cold Eye's tail had begun to die.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this project modifying the picture from the original magazine. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Little Death* by Edison Marshall]