

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

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Birkett's Twelfth Corpse

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "The Slanting Shadow," "The Man from Dark Valley," etc.



*Darkly Swirling Waters
Covered All That Remained
of a Hideous Secret!*

THE wall of hate that stood between the two old rivermen, Fred Birkett and Hank Room, had grown from a strange and gruesome rivalry—finding bodies of persons drowned in the Wisconsin River at Badger Prairie.

At the time of the tragic drowning of Bud Enters, the rivermen were tied. Each had found eleven bodies in the past forty years. It was said by each of them, and repeated in Badger Prairie, that Bud Enters' body would decide the contest.

The sympathy of Badger Prairie was with Birkett, a kindly old man, as opposed to the sullen surliness of Room, who was somewhat younger. Birkett had always joked about his

Room swung the
oar savagely at
Birkett's head

odd luck at finding bodies in the river, and still looked upon his almost uncanny way of knowing where the bodies had been taken by the swift current as more amusing than not.

But Room had brooded upon his

rival's luck ever since Birkett had earned a five-hundred dollar reward for finding the corpse of a young student who had fallen into the Wisconsin while drunk—almost a decade before.

Room made no effort to conceal his violent hatred for Birkett, nor could Birkett keep down his dislike for his rival.

Bud Enters was drowned on a warm night in July, and twenty boats put out from Badger Prairie within an hour after he went down. Fred Birkett and Hank Room were among them. Both men headed downstream, knowing by long past experiences that the swift current in mid-channel, where the youth was drawn under, would quickly roll the body below Badger Prairie toward the long clay river bank southeast of the village, which was locally known as the Yellowbanks district.

TOWARD dawn, Fred Birkett found Bud Enters' body, rolling along in shallow, swift water crossing a sandbar just above the Yellowbanks. The moon was out, and he had no difficulty seeing the body, which he immediately caught with a boathook and secured to the boat without removing it from the water. Then he edged his boat out of the current and headed swiftly upstream.

Just where Hiney's Slough enters the Wisconsin, he met Room. He could not help boasting.

"Just made my dozen," he called to Hank in a gruff, yet faintly triumphant voice.

Room turned his boat and swung across current toward him.

Birkett rested on his oars. Unaware of the fury that consumed his rival, he went on.

"Well, we couldn't both find him," he said, agreeably. "Let the best man win, I always say." He smiled in the satisfaction of feeling himself the better of the two.

Room said nothing. He was looking cautiously upstream and down, his eyes scanning the surface of the water for sight of any boat, his ears waiting to catch any sound that might indicate the approach of other searchers. The

two boats lay in quiet water, away from the current.

Whether or not Birkett heard Room loosen and jerk out one oar is problematical. He turned toward Room just as the oar descended and dealt him a glancing blow on the side of the head.

He toppled from his boat, turning the vessel with him.

With a savage lunge, Room pushed Birkett's boat out of reach of the older man, just as he came coughing and gasping to the surface of the water. With another quick movement, Room detached Enters' body from the overturned boat. He made no attempt to catch the body, knowing that the current would not carry it from this quiet water, and he could always return and find it.

Then he shot away, unmindful of Birkett's despairing cries, secure in the knowledge that Birkett could not swim very well. A little way upstream he paused and listened. There was no sound from below. Birkett had gone down.

A cunning smile touched Room's lips. Edging the boat into shallow water, he left himself fall fully clothed into the river, wetting himself thoroughly, except for his torn hat. This he threw into the bottom of the boat to give it the appearance of having been hastily torn away from his head and thrown there. Then he got back into the boat and rowed furiously toward Badger Prairie.

The circle of boats was now further downstream, and he did not have to row up quite as far as he drifted down. He timed his entrance well, for Enters' cap had just been found along-shore, and the searchers were excited over their find. Quite suddenly he shot from under the bridge into the yellow glow of lanterns held high above the water.

"Birkett's gone under," he shouted frantically. "His boat tipped just above the Yellowbanks!"

ANYONE who might have doubted his cries was easily convinced by his bedraggled appearance. It did not require his explanation that he had gone into the water after Birkett to

explain the wetness of his clothes. He told hastily that the old man fought hard, that he had had to hit him, finally, and had reluctantly let him go in order to save himself.

He led the rowboats to a spot a hundred yards above the entrance to Hiney's Slough, where in the quiet water the two bodies still lay. Room was enjoying the irony of the knowledge that his twelfth body would be that of his old rival. He broke into speech again, excitedly telling about the accident, and explaining that the boat had long since gone downstream, swept away by the powerful current in which it had tipped. He pointed out approximately the place where the accident had occurred, and went glibly over his story a third time. Then he left the searchers, and pulled into the current toward the dark waters where Birkett had actually gone down.

That much Badger Prairie was later able to piece together. What happened after that is more obscure and fraught with horrific suggestions. It is certain that Room went downstream, and equally certain that he seemed to be heading for Hiney's Slough, though one or two disputed this point later. Despite the moon, it was difficult to observe Room's progress downstream, for he was soon lost in the dark, heavy shadow on the

quiet water surrounding the slough's junction with the river.

In the babble of sound made by the searchers above the slough, Room might have called for some time and not have been heard. At any rate, during a lull in the conversation, someone picked up the sound of frantic calling. Everyone stood and listened. Once again came a sharp call, in a voice which was immediately identified as Hank Room's. The call was heavy with horror and fear. Then another call began to sound, but was abruptly stopped, almost as if it had been rudely shut off by a hand clapped over the lips through which it came.

The boats immediately pulled away toward Hiney's Slough.

At first there was nothing to be seen except the bottoms of two overturned boats, one of which was Room's, the other Birkett's. Then someone saw the body of Enters against one bank, apparently just washing up from deep water. Quite near it, partly submerged, they found the bodies of Hank Room and Fred Birkett.

Room was dead, yet he had not drowned. He had been strangled. For when the horrified searchers pulled him out of the water, they found Fred Birkett's dead fingers sunk deep in the flesh of Room's neck.

Birkett had found his twelfth corpse.

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