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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Hugh Rankin

"From among the tombstones he lifted in his arms a limp, lifeless thing which he threw in the boat before him."

Charon

By LAURENCE J. CAHILL

An unusual story, about a gray man who came back from the grave to comfort the dying and terrify the living

YOU still hear it said that there is something bloody and ghoulish about that newspaper *The Daily Express*. It likes news that is heart-

chilling. Nobody will deny that, surely. And there is the reason why my hair is supposed to be turning white when I'm not yet thirty-one years old. Does being

a reporter for *The Daily Express* shock the brown out of my scalp? Or are the roots of my hair doing something on their own account? I'd like to know as well as you. Meanwhile I keep well fed on this job, just as the peasants of Lower Austria eat arsenic to gain a healthy color. And no other job would suit me.

Reminds me a great deal of some of the things The Gray One himself said. One of them was, "If you don't get scared—it's as easy—as that." Such words you wouldn't be liable to forget in a hurry; for twenty people who saw The Gray One will swear on their coffins that he came from death, returned from the dead that sleep for ever, to fulfill five very strange errands before he died again.

That scoop made the greatest headlines in the history of the state. Newspaper stories that are red and sticky and coarse are made to order for *The Daily Express*. The ax-slayer two years ago who lopped off the left hands of his victims. *S. S. Mistral* floating into port with a question mark painted on its foredeck and no soul on board. A band of little children, all less than eight years old, teaching a Great Dane dog to attack a truant officer and jump for his throat. Escaped convicts trapped in an abandoned mine beyond Hill City, their voices wandering far underground and never heard again.

"Bring in the story that's queer and cold and spotted with goose-flesh, and we'll slam it on page one every time," declares McKenna.

He's the squarest-jawed and squarest-shooting editor in the game, and I'm right now thinking of that occasion when the telephone rang while he was beginning the six o'clock shift.

"What is it about, Chief?" I questioned.

The stillness of night, McKenna's mo-

tion to keep quiet, and that distant voice sizzling and frying in the receiver.

The message ended, and down on his desk McKenna set the telephone, and his hand was hard to see. Shaking. Into the pockets of his vest dived McKenna's ten fingers, and they routed out a monster cigar blacker than the shades around us. Trying to be cool and easy. Trying, and vainly this time, to show the whole round world that his nerves were in fine fettle.

"Bill." McKenna cleared his throat with a quick and raw sound. "Go out and grab this story. And so help you the God that made you, don't let anyone else get it."

There were three other reporters in the room dealing rummy next to the ice-water tank, but McKenna's order was for me. And there was something in his face that said to me I'd better not argue.

"Okay," I retorted.

"Do me right on this, Bill," he said, very unusually. He was pleading. "You're as smart a leg-man as there is in the trade. Get everything there is on this thing, and get it quick. Stay in the West End. Now listen. Today someone was dying out there on Larchmont Avenue where that epidemic has been cutting them off like flies, and somehow this stranger slipped into the house. He was dressed in gray, and he was tall. He went to the bedside and introduced himself as the advance agent of Death. Told the sick man that he came from the other world to help him die, and for him not to be frightened. Dying, he said, was easy if you knew how. The members of the family at the bedside were paralyzed and didn't know what to do. They didn't want to start a rough-house. The stranger talked like a man with brains. The sick man was glad the stranger came, and he passed away happy. The stranger took his leave by slipping out as he came in,

and nobody had strength to follow him."

In my opinion it was all a nut act, with extra frills. There was a tickling under my collar, however, proving that the hair on my neck was stiffening just a little.

"There's good evidence that once before this week that guy's gained his way to the side of the dying. At other places and addresses he's made an effort to get in—and doors were slammed in his face. Folks are afraid of him. He's at large." McKenna's oily cigar spluttered and showered sparks. "This is the first paper that's been notified. Police are on the job to catch him, but the other papers think they're heading off burglaries."

You'd get the idea McKenna wrote headlines with his jaw, to see it hunch while he talked.

"You can follow this guy into houses if you want to," said McKenna, "but don't let yourself get into trouble. Don't offend the people out that way. It's that guy we want to find out about. He says he was dead once, says he? Find out what that means."

McKenna reached into his desk and took out a gun, which he laid in my hand. "You won't need this. Maybe. But that stranger in gray has a brainy technique. If you have to use weapons of any kind, make it plain enough that it's self-defense. Collar and corner all the story you can."

He sat back with a sigh. "Wait a minute, Bill."

A minute or two went by while he pondered every curious feature of it.

"Two or three times," he admitted, "we've looked foolish running wild stories that were built on nothing but hot air. If this isn't the real goods, don't bother to bring it back."

That nearly bowled me over. McKenna so excited he was cautious!

"But you can tell if it's good," he ad-

vised me, and I knew I'd better find it was good. "If I can smell news myself," said McKenna, "this is the genuine McCoy. A valet on Larchmont Avenue called in the tip and sold it for five dollars."

Impatience now seethed between McKenna's tongue and his teeth as often as he breathed.

"Go and get it. And don't fail."

"I won't, Chief," I promised.

OUT on Larchmont Avenue, I made my telephone base the drug store on the corner of A Street. It was about six-thirty o'clock. I bought some razor blades and interviewed the clerk.

"Who's this death-watch that's annoying the neighborhood?" I asked.

He looked at me with a fishy, cold eye. "Oh, you heard, did you? Reporter?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

The drug clerk hesitated, peered at the door and shivered. The place apparently had been empty of customers for several minutes before I happened along. He must have been glad of a homely chance to talk to anyone, even me.

"How should I know? And I don't wanna."

"Why not?"

"Am I crazy?" He mixed himself a soda-and-lime and then absently threw it in the sink. "The cops are on the job. Thank Gawd."

"They'll handle it all right. I hear the neighborhood's nervous."

"All but the dead."

"What do you mean?"

He put down the empty soda-and-lime glass and licked his lips.

"Them that died weren't nervous."

The hair on my neck stirred again, but there was a draft pouring down my collar from the transom over the door.

"Can you say how you account for what you just told me?"

"I ain't tellin' you nothin'," he said with a dash of shrewdness. "I'm just sayin' what's been said by everybody in this block."

"That stranger must have a way with them," I suggested.

"With them about to depart this life, he does," admitted the clerk, soberly. "The Gray One has a way with 'em."

"*What?*" I questioned.

"He's known as 'The Gray One,'" repeated the man behind the counter, his smooth face a little red and foolish. "He's successful with 'em, because he *knows* something."

"Good enough. Where is he seen?"

"In the rooms of the dyin'."

"But—before and after, where is he seen?"

"Nowhere."

I started to reach for my pencil, but put it away again.

"This looks like something that's too elaborate for ordinary inspection. Come on, this stranger's human. He was turned away from different places."

"Yes," the clerk conceded, laughing cynically. "Ya know what? They wouldn't let 'im in up the street here last night. That was at old Baxter's. Baxter was sick for three days with this epidemic and suffered horrible stuff. And he died screaming for The Gray One and stretched out his arms and fell outa the bed."

I was waiting for a crumb of real information. "Where is Baxter's?"

The clerk gave me the address with reluctance.

"Thanks."

DARKNESS had come when I left the drug store, street lights were on and the West End was settled for the night. One block away a policeman was stationed, well out upon the crossing. Look-

ing along the street, I could see three more patrolmen, silently posted to catch him called The Gray One. Windows for the most part all along the way were brilliantly lit, although a few homes had no lights in their windows.

None of the bereaved families wanted their sick members comforted by The Gray One. I had never known anything like it in all my life.

I walked along the block, and tried to wonder what headlines McKenna could make out of this matter. I wondered again if it was true that I was the only reporter hunting "game".

Within a minute I came to the nearest cop and attempted to get a statement of what opinion the police had on the case.

"Seen him?" I hailed.

"Shut up."

Now, for all kinds of reasons the police are apt to be friendly with the newspaper craft. When they are not friendly, something is rotten—and it isn't necessary to go to Denmark to find what that is.

"What's the matter?" I parried.

He eyed me with Irish honesty. "No, I ain't seen him—that one—and I defy any man to know what to do if he did."

I grinned. "What's your orders?"

"Just orders. You know the kind." He took a breath. "Bring him in alive."

I put one question to see what the effect would be. "Expect to get him—alive?"

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you?" He eyed me with an owlish glance.

I shook my head. "This isn't the place for a joke, officer."

Still more steadily, he eyed me. "Well, damn it, I agree with yuh. I didn't take my exams for nothin' like this."

"What's the latest about him tonight?"

"Nothin' yet, glory to the saints."

"Where would he show up next?"

"It'd be a bad guess. Where them are that's sickest."

"But how can he tell when these people are dying?"

The cop shrugged. "He knows what none of the rest know. This is a handy district for gossip. Everybody's checkin' up everybody else about the epidemic every five minutes. When the symptoms are fatal the whole town hears the verdict twelve hours in advance."

"What would you call him?"

"I'd say somethin' like a banshee."

"Who is pretty sick—you know—right now?"

"None near me," was the very grateful reply.

"I'll be moving along, officer. Good-night."

His dead-serious face was calm, but his mouth sagged. With all his stout heart he didn't like being left alone.

AWAY from the lighted crossing, the trees made a tunnel of the street and dense black shadows over-edged one another. The epidemic was all around me. The little red cards dotted houses by the clusterful, and I walked among them, hoping that I didn't walk too safely. For I wanted to meet that death-watch. With every instant I calculated how far I was from the telephone at the corner of A Street and Larchmont Avenue, the wire that would connect with McKenna at his desk, in case I ran into this one who paralyzed the living and soothed the dying.

I knew I would not lack a story if I saw even as much as the color of his coat.

The Gray One. What kind of insane genius was this extraordinary person who feasted ghoulish on the last moments of others and yet played on their thoughts so cleverly that they died grateful? From some casket or tomb he had risen, to

walk dead-alive among the living. What cemetery did he come from? Or was he a hoax? There was no knowing what such a freak was capable of. I was armed, but imagined I would never use that gun. Better it would be, I figured, to take my chances, for I had no desire—nor have I ever had—to shoot a man down. I turned into the boulevard called Riverbank Drive.

A shrill police whistle racketed and rebounded. I spun on one heel, and saw the door of an address—it must have been four blocks away—burst open, and people tumble from the house.

I got there with fast sprinting. But confusion made it hard to profit by that moment. Another death had occurred in the West End, and *he* had been there. He had come and gone.

Police arrived with great speed. A police lieutenant cursed violently, barked hasty orders, and led a posse half strengthened by frightened citizens into the lawns between the houses. It was no use. The Gray One had dissolved like fog.

The hair on the nape of my neck quieted again.

The Gray One had come and gone. His clammy hands—were they clammy, coming from the grave?—had touched the fingers of the dying once more, while those about him had gazed at him nearly mad with horror. Who was The Gray One?

I remembered the information concerning the Baxter house. A few minutes of walking took me to the other end of Larchmont Avenue, and I went to the number given me by the drug clerk. I rang the bell and saw lights flash on all over the front of the house. After an extremely long interval a man came to the door in his shirt-sleeves, gripping an iron poker in his hand.

"I am a representative of the press working with the police in capturing this man who is alarming the section," I said, turning out my press badge. "Can you help by——"

"I don't know who you are," he said harshly, balancing the poker.

"A reporter for the *Star*," I explained.

"Get away," he ordered. "You look like him."

That hit me right between the eyes. "The Gray One?" I asked, and my own surprize made me sound stupid.

The poker lifted in his hand.

"You're mistaken," I replied. "Here is my identification——"

The door shut heavily in the midst of my remark, in my face. The earnest voice of the one in shirt-sleeves continued. "I've got a revolver and I'm loading it."

I let it go at that.

TRAMPING these streets alone and beginning to question whether we were all sweating after some shape made out of fog or vapor, I stepped over a curb and stopped short. The rustling of shrubbery convinced me as the movement of someone skulking not far away.

I gathered myself together and stepped off the sidewalk onto the lawn. I could see nothing at all; ten feet back from the street all was black as the sky overhead, but I knew that in my position I myself couldn't be seen. In a few moments bushes parted and out into the blue-yellow light of the street lamps stepped a man in gray.

Keeping quiet, I went toward him, advancing on grass which acted like a cushion. His hearing was acute or he smelled danger. At first he was facing in the other direction. Then he turned and lunged straight at my head. I dodged and lost my footing, but in the slack of his collar I wound my fingers and pulled him down

also. For a moment we fought like savages. The swinging light of a street lamp almost blinded me. He backed off suddenly and spoke. "You damned fool!"

The voice gave it away. "Double or nothing," I answered. "And I suppose you're here because you can only sleep in the daytime."

"Same as you," grinned Ted Corbett, reporter for the *Herald-Telegram*. "What have you made out of it so far?"

"Just wasted time. And your score?"

"It's early yet. He's in the neighborhood, they tell me."

Corbett lit a cigarette.

"You'd better douse that light," I suggested. "He'll spot you. And you say you haven't seen him?"

A baffled, puzzled discontent was in Corbett's face. "One burglar busy at work, and a platoon of police moved out here to get him. Does McKenna think that's good for a spread-head?"

Headlines. Banners. Spread-heads. Streamers screaming across the width of the paper. Big news. Strange. Ugly. But *news*—for the breakfast-table stomach, the brain, the nerves. Jar 'em. Scare 'em.

I pictured McKenna waiting at his desk, grim as time itself and cold as ice now that the first excitement of the case was over. He and his voracious appetite for headlines. The thunder of Doomsday wouldn't tear him from that desk or mean any more to him than new headlines. Give him another smash story to build up the circulation. "And don't fail me, Bill."

Licking his fangs, and tasting his chops, McKenna. Scratching for news in different boneyards like a hound with a belly of cast-iron. An X-ray of his vital organs would probably show he had a heart the shape of a stick of type and just as thin.

But it was all right with me since Cor-

bett thought this night prowler called The Gray One was a burglar, for it bore out McKenna's claim that none of the other newspapers were on to The Gray One's real character.

Corbett and I parted with a wary exchange of glances.

WHILE convinced that Corbett had never heard of The Gray One, I intended to take no chances but to telephone McKenna what scraps of hearsay I could. It would be no story, but it would be a teaser worth headlines. I was walking rapidly to get to the drug store telephone, and was in the course of crossing a wide lawn that ran diagonally back of a corner house and came out on the next street. The corner house was a California-type bungalow. But for a false attic all the rooms were on the first floor, and brilliantly lighted. As I passed these lighted rooms I saw a sight that held me.

A bedroom window was flung open to the breeze, the curtains flopped idly, and I saw a sickroom scene—a death-bed scene. The unfortunate one I could not see but for his restless hand on the covers. Three people were in attitudes of expectancy and anguish about that room, three that I could count. A fourth person, male, rugged and fierce of appearance, stood almost wholly blocking a hall door and staring out into the darkness beyond. He waited. I figured he must be blocking the door against the coming of The Gray One, when I saw something that made my case-hardened reporter's heart leap in my throat.

The broad porch of this house circled half-way around one side, to where there was a front door. Even as I looked, a form in gray pressed closely against the door, tried it with his fingers and softly pushed it in.

The starch suddenly left me. With my

experience in the reporter's game telling me that there were few things worth being afraid of, I nevertheless paused. When one hesitates, there is a sickness that grips him. I was sick.

I saw that deathroom scene again with a glance at that open window, and I had the will to jump with decision toward the porch. The thing then heard me, turned and stopped as I pounded on, and silently leaping away over the front of the porch, after another second or two whisked shadow-like across the street in the tricky light. I ran headlong after it, as if my own life and my own escape from death depended on stamping out that form or fog or vapor when I caught it.

I chased its trail until I realized that I was only chasing the shadows of harmless things. Where did it go? Where did *what* go?

Confused and exhausted, I staggered out of a driveway into A Street. On the crossing a patrolman braced himself and tugged at his holster. But first his left hand raised and he swiftly crossed himself. The buttons and insignia on his uniform sparkled, for rain was beginning to fall.

The copper recognized me and I passed him, breath spent, without saying a word.

Reaching the drug store, I entered the phone booth without speaking to the clerk. He was startled when I came in, and he dropped a soda-shaker.

"It's Bill," I called McKenna, "and I can't tell you much except that I saw that freak for one second and then he disappeared. I guess if I hang around out here he might show——"

"Get it, Bill," cut in McKenna with the voice of command. "Don't come back empty-handed and don't fail."

I said yessir and hung up.

Out into the rain I stepped again—it

was pouring briskly by this time—and I remember I felt more stubborn than discouraged. The riddle of The Gray One had twisted its fog tightly around my heart and I swore with myself to solve it.

The short collar of my suit didn't keep the rain out of my neck. I looked left and right and stood on the curb a moment.

A police squad car came out of Larchmont Avenue and headed due north, away from the West End, with its radio crackling as I could tell by the attitude of its two-man crew. I hailed it.

"What's up? Leaving this beat?" I hollered.

The driver slowed down at the rain-slippery corner. "Goin' across town," he answered. "Boss Dolan's sick."

I knew immediately whom he meant. One of those exceedingly thin hunches came to me, coupled with an unpraiseworthy wish to get out of the rain. Thunder was beginning to rattle.

"Give me a lift," I appealed.

"Jump in, reporter."

Pretty soft for Boss Dolan, I reflected, having such strong political ties that he could have an owl-car at his service to run errands whether he was well or ill. And Dolan had already been an invalid for several months.

ON HUMBOLDT STREET was Dolan's modest home, his front door was open, and a number of ward workers were gathered there as we came up the street.

"What's the word about the Boss?" I asked those I knew personally.

A wreath of pale, set faces seemed to arise around me.

"He's dyin'."

A young district doctor ran out of the house and clattered down to the ambulance that rested at the curb.

Was this too far away for The Gray One to operate? Would he dare to visit Boss Dolan?

"I'd like to go in, for a minute, sort of," I said.

A few shrugged their shoulders. "Why not wait?" said one with the ghastliest candor I can remember.

"That's foolish," another said. "Even a smile now might help. I think I'll go in. If you will," he inquired of me.

"Sure," I replied.

"With all his faults he was generally good to the rank and file of his ward," my companion whispered.

"He was," I subscribed truthfully.

I saw Boss Dolan, and saw something of sad interest to his admirers. That meant something that held delight for his enemies. He was slipping away and he was afraid. A reporter of an opposition paper could make much of this; but not I.

A cluck of sympathy sounded from the tongue of the man I had accompanied in.

"Tough," I murmured.

Boss Dolan was afraid.

The doctor toyed glumly with his watch fob as he stared at an assortment of utensils on a small table. Seizing a powder box, a vial and a small pestle and mortar that were on the table, he left the room for some final experiment. Some instants later I heard a clinking and tapping in the kitchen sink. It was mixed with the cadence of thunder somewhere over the house.

"Poor devil," whispered the one at my side, and he went forward to the place vacated by the doctor.

"Dolan," he uttered smoothly, and touched the sick man's hands.

A strange feeling dragged within me, and I breathed heavily.

"Don't let it get your goat, Dolan," spoke this ready sympathizer. "You can

take it easy—if you want. You're all slated, but you're not in any pain, and you're only a little nervous. It's the softest thing you ever saw. I know, and I'm here to tell you. See? If you don't get scared—it's as easy—as that. It's in my eye, Dolan. Y'know I'm not lyin'. Anybody who has been in the last hour knows that I know—look at my eyes, if you don't believe it. Ah! Well enough y'know I'm right, Dolan. It's the same for you as for all the rest. It was the same for me when I died. That was six months ago. For the first time I think they let somebody come back. Anyway, I did. To help you. It's a certain cinch. Lean on me, Dolan—it's a short road——"

I'm not going to describe the shock and the stupor this caused.

That's the effect this one had when he worked. That's why people were paralyzed by confusion and later harried out of their wits. The way of it all was a certain thing, and the thing crept in so slowly and softly that it was there and established before one could hark to it. As much as I was fully forewarned, I was caught in the spell of amazement all too soon before I was ready.

I SLOWLY gathered myself out of that daze. Yet before I stirred a foot, there was the slightest and the most harmless sound from some distance as far as the front door of the house. But at that disturbance The Gray One whipped about away from the bed, and poised on his toes. I then saw that his face was white, sickly, and unchangeable of expression. There was another sound beyond the room, perhaps a scraping in the hall. The Gray One leaped with a great spring away from the bed and was through the door. I gazed numbly where he had been and saw that Dolan had peacefully died.

W. T.—3

"Got him. At last!"

A captain of police and two regulars surrounded The Gray One neatly, catching him as he began his last escape. As he wrenched and twisted in their grasp he hissed in that indescribable voice of his: "Let me alone, damn you! I'm here on my business—the special agent of Death. You can't hold *me*, that was at one time Kaye Ronn——"

Flash! as Walter Winchell says. I had the whole astounding story in the twinkling of an eye. But in the next breath The Gray One summoned all his strength.

Ten men couldn't have held him, and I was out there in the hall by then trying to help the cops. All I got for my trouble was a beautiful black eye. I wanted to save our mysterious prisoner for *The Daily Express* and nothing else, for an exclusive interview and photographs and quotations and signed statements.

That was a hope entirely in vain because The Gray One had other ideas. He fought like a beast, his mouth champing froth and his teeth making ribbons of his own lips.

"The telephone! Where's the telephone?" I yelled, thinking only of Editor McKenna.

It was natural that no one paid any attention to me. For at that point The Gray One broke loose and flew from the house. He *flew*, or so you would have said if you'd seen him. Landed on the sidewalk, anyway, without touching the steps, and away across the street and through an empty field.

The rain was coming down in vats, kicking up mud that splashed the tops of fence palings and even automobile hoods. You couldn't see very well, but the police were after The Gray One in three jumps.

When I had crossed the street and gone five yards farther, joining in the chase, I was plastered with mud. Accord-

ing to the weather records that was a cloudburst, and I could have told you as much while it fell. Did you ever choke in rain until you could hardly breathe?

Beyond the field was a graveyard and on the far border of it was a hopping, traveling shape that might have been The Gray One or gray streaks of rain.

Kaye Ronn!

The police started firing at that very uncertain target.

"Don't hit him," I shouted. "He hasn't done any harm. He's committed no crime."

It was unthinkable that *The Daily Express* should miss the chance to interview that strange figure while I was still so near him.

The name had been spoken only once, but once was enough. *Kaye Ronn.*

"There's no need to kill him," I protested to the police captain plunging through the field beside me. "You know how he got into the news six months ago. He was that fellow named Ronn who made a living taking supplies up the river, in a boat of his, to that lumber camp beyond Hill City. He took passengers across the river too, and he used to preach to them about death and damnation. But the way he got into the news six months ago was by belonging to one of those queer cult burial societies. They didn't believe in embalming. And when Ronn 'died' they just clapped him in a box and drove him to this graveyard here. But he wasn't dead. He'd just had a fit or something. And he wakes up and raps on the box and howls until they let him out."

The captain of police lowered his gun at that moment and I shouted in his ear.

"You see now why this Kaye Ronn was acting like he was in the West End, and at Dolan's. When he got out of that casket he was practically cuckoo. You

know a thing like that would drive anybody crazy. And Ronn had a head start. He seems to figure he was dead as a door-nail before he woke up in that casket. He thinks he's returned to life. So you see why he's tipping off other people who are dying—he figures it's his business to guide them along, and lend 'em a hand. You get it all now? He's elected himself as assistant to the Angel of Death, with errands to do at as many death-beds as he can get to. He's got away with five of those errands, anyway."

This case was so colossal that it was a weight upon the imagination, and I knew it would be well to unload the whole affair on McKenna as soon as possible. Was there a telephone in this no-man's-land away from Humboldt Street?

Continued gun-fire. The captain of police, who I thought had lowered his revolver after my explanation, had instead dropped the muzzle so he could the better feed more bullets into the chambers. He hadn't heard a word I had said, or anything else but the lashing of the rain. To him Ronn was a dangerous maniac.

WHERE the field ended and the graveyard began I don't know, and I learned the difference chiefly by barking my shins on tombstones. In those few minutes of the cloudburst, wind and rain had washed most of the grave hummocks flat, so that where tombstones were blown down there was no longer anything to identify one grave from another.

Snatches of voices. The storm drove words and parts of words against my ear. "River . . . sticks . . . sticks."

Lightning as tangled as a spider's web flashed down and showed the fugitive Kaye Ronn in a scene that could be compared to a nightmare. He was on the farther edge of the graveyard and had gained several yards on us. The "river"

ran by, known simply as the Creek, but in that locality more often called "Sticks River" from the fact that waste wood from the lumber mill frequently drifted on its current. That was what I had got in those storm-driven voices, the police directing one another by hollering "Sticks River."

And on the swollen brim of the river was Kaye Ronn drenched from head to feet like a symbolic figure in weedy garments. Upon the brink he could be seen, and not even the lightning could kill his grayness. He stooped over a boat, his own boat, tethered to the earth. And from among the grisly monuments and tombstones he lifted in his arms a limp, lifeless thing which he threw in the boat before him.

Then I knew that to know too much is sometimes perilous! For I shivered and my stomach revolted. I remembered ancient legends that fitted Kaye Ronn perfectly, everlasting tales brewed five thousand years ago, and I was scared stiff.

The police with bulldog efficiency had their minds on practical matters. By the same stake where Ronn had tethered his boat they found other craft, rowboats and sculls, riding on the flooded surface. This must have been a favored landing for boatmen who kept up a traffic between the Humboldt Street end of town and Hill City on the other bank.

"Sticks" River!

A disagreeable mixture of those ancient tales ran through my head, but I was in the first boat the police shoved off to overtake The Gray One.

And one more—only one more—sight of that peculiar character was given us when lightning slanted again. Crooked into a design like fiery fingers, the lightning leaped and showed Ronn standing tall and arrogant at the wheel of his vessel—at his knees that huddled thing he

had raised on the edge of the graveyard.

Was The Gray One abandoning the dying to clutch at the dead themselves and take them with him?

To telephone McKenna at the first chance was a determination of mine nearly buried under by a horror never felt by any man but myself.

I was afraid of Kaye Ronn, and not because he had waked up in a casket before he died. I was afraid of the "river" we were crossing, and not because it was a deep creek in a canyon of clay. Afraid, and I say it today and I am not ashamed.

Of course, the soaked and bedraggled thing in the waste of The Gray One's boat may have been only a strip of tarpaulin pelted away by the wind and recovered again on the graveyard's edge.

This was the Twentieth Century, after all. Kaye Ronn was probably only Kaye Ronn, an eccentric riverman. And that night of fury and supernatural storm might not have changed the river a bit from the common stream it had always been.

Wonder always runs, like a river, deeper than common sense. For in my dismayed brain I was thinking how, when the world was young and Creation was just finished, and a lot of things were known that have been forgotten since, wise men said that everybody who died was carried away to Hell by Charon.

Charon was the immortal boatman who crossed the waters between Earth and Hell, constantly, taking away the dying with their last breath and removing them to the hereafter. And the term for the hereafter in those times, whether a pleasant hereafter or an evil hereafter, was Hell.

Oh, McKenna—waiting at the end of a busy line for news!

And the ancient boatman's name was Charon—which name happened to be said the same as if it had been Kaye Ronn. And the waters between Earth and Hell, over which Charon ferried the dead, were the waters of a river called the "Styx." Styx, the river. "Sticks" River. Kaye Ronn.

The burst of thunder that tailed the storm didn't originate in my mind, but there seemed to be a closely related connection.

The rain stopped. Lightning rippled almost playfully across the earth.

We had grounded on the farther bank. The fugitive was not to be seen and yet it was plain that he had foundered, cap-

sized, or disappeared with all his possessions. In the expanded river stood a sign-post on which had once been printed "HILL CITY". The word "CITY" was split off and gone. The other half of the sign bearing the capitals "HILL", ending in a splintered arm, pointing down into the water. White splashes of clay dribbled from the letter I, making it an E. One word pointing toward the bottom of the river.

My chin came up as I shuddered, and I gazed overhead.

"What are you looking for," yelled a cop, "the soul of The Gray One?"

"No," I lied. "I'm wondering where those telephone wires go."