

*An eerie story by the masterful author of Re-birth, Day of the Triffids, and "The Eternal Eve" (in the October Amazing). A disturbing tale about hideous blood-red footprints that shouldn't have been there—because the only one—or thing—that could have made them lay dead, his head bashed in, on the dark floor of a strange old house that two horrified second-story men wished they had never tried to burglarize.*

Illustrator: LUNDY

YOU didn't ought to of croaked him," Smudger said resentfully. "What in hell did you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

Spotty turned to look at the house, a black spectre against the night sky. He shuddered.

"It was him or me," he muttered. "I wouldn't of done it if he didn't come for me—and I wouldn't even then, not if he'd come ordinary. . . ."

"What do you mean ordinary?"

"Like anybody else. But he was queer. . . . He wasn't—well, I guess he was crazy—dangerous crazy. . . ."

"All he needed was a tap to keep him quiet," Smudger persisted. "There wasn't no call to bash his loaf in."

"You didn't see him. I tell you, he didn't act human." Spotty shuddered again at the recollec-

# CLOSE BEHIND HIM

tion, and bent down to rub the calf of his right leg tenderly.

The man had come into the room while Spotty was sifting rapidly through the contents of a desk. He'd made no sound. It had been just a feeling, a natural alertness, that had brought Spotty round to see him standing there. In that very first glimpse Spotty had felt there was something queer about him. The expression on his face—his attitude—they were wrong. In his biscuit-colored pajamas, he should have looked just an ordinary citizen awakened from sleep, too anxious to have delayed with dressing-gown and slippers. But some way he didn't. An ordinary citizen would have shown nervousness, at least wariness; he would most likely have picked up something to use as a weapon. This man stood crouching, arms a little raised, as though he were about to spring.

Moreover, any citizen whose lips curled back as this man's did to show his tongue licking hungrily between his teeth, should have been considered sufficiently unordinary to be locked away safely. In the course of his profession Spotty had developed reliable nerves, but the look of this man rocked them. Nobody should be pleased by the discovery of a burglar at large in his house. Yet, there could be no doubt that this victim was looking at Spotty

with satisfaction. An unpleasant gloating kind of satisfaction, like that which might appear on a fox's face at the sight of a plump chicken. Spotty hadn't liked the look of him at all, so he had pulled out the convenient piece of pipe that he carried for emergencies.

Far from showing alarm, the man took a step closer. He poised, sprung on his toes like a wrestler.

"You keep off me, mate," said Spotty, holding up his nine inches of lead pipe as a warning.

Either the man did not hear—or the words held no interest for him. His long, bony face snarled. He shifted a little closer. Spotty backed against the edge of the desk. "I don't want no trouble. You just keep off me," he said again.

The man crouched a little lower. Spotty watched him through narrowed eyes. An extra tensing of the man's muscles gave him a fractional warning before the attack.

The man came without fainting or rushing: he simply sprang, like an animal.

In mid-leap he encountered Spotty's boot suddenly erected like a stanchion in his way. It took him in the middle and felled him. He sprawled on the floor doubled up, with one arm hugging his belly. The other hand



threatened, with fingers bent into hooks. His head turned in jerks, his jaws with their curiously sharp teeth were apart, like a dog's about to snap.

Spotty knew just as well as Smudger that what was required was a quietening tap. He had been about to deliver it with professional skill and quality when the man, by an extraordinary wriggle, succeeded in fastening his teeth into Spotty's leg. It was unexpected, excruciating enough to ruin Spotty's aim and make the blow ineffectual. So he had hit again; harder this time. Too hard. And even then he had more or less had to pry the man's teeth out of his leg. . . .

But it was not so much his aching leg—nor even the fact that he had killed the man—that was the chief cause of Spotty's concern. It was the kind of man he had killed.

"Like an animal he was," he said. The recollection made him sweat. "Like a bloody wild animal. The way he looked! His eyes! Christ, they wasn't human.

That aspect of the affair held little interest for Smudger. He'd not seen the man until he was already dead and looking like any other corpse. His present concern was that a mere matter of burglary had been abruptly transferred to the murder category—a class of work he had always kept clear of until now.

The job had looked easy enough. There shouldn't have been any trouble. A man living alone in a large house—a pretty queer customer with a pretty queer temper. On Fridays, Sundays, and sometimes on Wednesdays, there were meetings at which about twenty people came to the house and did not leave until the small hours of the following morning. All this information was according to Smudger's sister, who learned it third hand from the woman who cleaned the house. The woman was darkly speculative, but unspecific, about what went on at these gatherings. But from Smudger's point of view the important thing was that on other nights the man was alone in the house.

He seemed to be a dealer of some kind. People brought odd curios to the house to sell to him. Smudger had been greatly interested to hear that they were paid for—and paid for well—in cash. That was a solid, practical consideration. Beside it, the vaguely ill reputation of the place, the queerness of its furnishings, and the rumors of strange goings-on at the gatherings, were unimportant. The only thing worthy of attention were the facts that the man lived alone and had items of value in his possession.

Smudger had thought of it as a one-man job at first, and with

a little more information he might have tackled it on his own. He had discovered that there was a telephone, but no dog. He was fairly sure of the room in which the money must be kept, but unfortunately his sister's source of information had its limitations. He did not know whether there were burglar alarms or similar precautions, and he was too uncertain of the cleaning woman to attempt to get into the house by a subterfuge for a preliminary investigation. So he had taken Spotty in with him on a fifty-fifty basis.

The reluctance with which he had taken that step had now become an active regret—not only because Spotty had been foolish enough to kill the man, but because the way things had been he could easily have made a hundred per cent haul on his own—and not be fool enough to kill the man had he been detected.

The attaché case which he carried was now well-filled with bundles of notes, along with an assortment of precious-looking objects in gold and silver, probably eminently traceable, but useful if melted down. It was irritating to think that the whole load, instead of merely half of it, might have been his.

The two men stood quietly in the bushes for some minutes and listened. Satisfied, they pushed

through a hole in the hedge, then moved cautiously in its shadow down the length of the neighboring field.

Spotty's chief sensation was relief at being out of the house. He hadn't liked the place from the moment they had entered. For one thing, the furnishings weren't like those he was used to. Unpleasant idols or carved figures of some kind stood about in unexpected places, looming suddenly out of the darkness into his flashlight's beam with hideous expressions on their faces. There were pictures and pieces of tapestry that were macabre and shocking to a simple burglar. Spotty was not particularly sensitive, but these seemed to him highly unsuitable to have about the home.

The same quality extended to more practical objects. The legs of a large oak table had been carved into mythical miscreants of repulsive appearance. The two bowls which stood upon the table were either genuine or extremely good representations of polished human skulls. Spotty could not imagine why, in one room, anybody should want to mount a crucifix on the wall upside down and place on a shelf beneath it a row of sconces holding nine black candles—then flank the whole with two pictures of an indecency so revolting it almost took his breath away. All

these things had somehow combined to rattle his usual hard-headedness.

But even though he was out of the place now, he didn't feel quite free of its influence. He decided he wouldn't feel properly himself again until they were in the car and several miles away.

After working around two fields they came to the dusty white lane off which they had parked the car. They prospected carefully. By now the sky had cleared of clouds, and the moonlight showed the road empty in both directions. Spotty scrambled through the hedge, across the ditch, and stood on the road in a quietness broken only by Smudger's progress through the hedge. Then he started to walk towards the ear.

He had gone about a dozen paces when Smudger's voice stopped him: "Hey, Spotty. What've you got on your feet?"

Spotty stopped and looked down. There was nothing remarkable about his feet; his boots looked just as they had always looked.

"What—?" he began.

"No! Behind you!"

Spotty looked back. From the point where he had stepped on to the road to another some five feet behind where he now stood was a series of footprints, dark in the white dust. He lifted his foot and

examined the sole of his boot; the dust was clinging to it. He turned his eyes back to the footmarks once more. They looked black, and seemed to glisten.

Smudger bent down to peer more closely. When he looked up again there was a bewildered expression on his face. He gazed at Spotty's boots, and then back to the glistening marks. The prints of bare feet. . . .

"There's something funny going on here," he said inadequately.

Looking back over his shoulder, Spotty took another step forward. Five feet behind him a new mark of a bare foot appeared from nowhere. A watery feeling swept over Spotty. He took another experimental step. As mysteriously as before, another footmark appeared. He turned widened eyes on Smudger.

Smudger looked back at him. Neither said anything for a moment. Then Smudger bent down, touched one of the marks with his finger, shone his flashlight on the finger. "Red," he said. "Like blood. . . ."

The words broke the trance that had settled on Spotty. Panic seized him. He stared around wildly, then began to run. After him followed the footprints. Smudger ran too. He noticed that the marks were no longer the prints of a full foot but only its

forepart, as if whatever made them were also running.

Spotty was frightened, but not badly enough to forget the turn where they had parked the car beneath some trees. He made for it, and clambered in. Smudger, breathing heavily, got in on the other side and dropped the attaché case in the back.

"Going to get out of this lot quick," Spotty said, pressing the starter.

"Take it easy," advised Smudger. "We got to think."

But Spotty was in no thinking mood. He got into gear, jolted out of hiding, and turned down the lane.

A mile or so farther on Smudger turned back from craning out of the window.

"Not a sign," he said, relieved. "Reckon we've ditched it—whatever it was." He thought for some moments, then he said: "Look here, if those marks were behind us all the way from the house, they'll be able to follow them by daylight to where we parked the car."

"They'd've found the car marks anyway," Spotty replied.

"But what if they're still following?" Smudger suggested.

"You just said they weren't."

"Maybe they couldn't keep up with us. But suppose they're coming along somewhere behind us, leaving a trail?"

Spotty had greatly recovered; he was almost his old practical self again. He stopped the car. "All right. We'll see," he said grimly. "And if they are—what then?"

He lit a cigarette with a hand that was almost steady. Then he leaned out of the car, studying the road behind them. The moonlight was strong enough to show up any dark marks.

"What do you reckon it was?" he said, over his shoulder. "We can't both've been seeing things."

"They were real enough." Smudger looked at the stain still on his finger.

On a sudden idea, Spotty pulled up his right trouser leg. The marks of the teeth were there, and there was a little blood, too, soaked into his sock, but he couldn't make that account for anything.

The minutes passed. Still there was no manifestation of footprints. Smudger got out and walked a few yards back along the road to make sure. After a moment's hesitation Spotty followed him.

"Not a sign," Smudger said. "I reckon—hey!" He broke off, looking beyond Spotty.

Spotty turned around.

Behind him was a trail of dark, naked footprints leading *from* the car.

Spotty stared. He walked back to the car; the footmarks fol-

lowed. It was a chastened Spotty who sat down in the car.

“Well?”

Smudger had nothing to offer. Smudger, in fact, was considerably confused. Several aspects of the situation were competing for his attention. The footsteps were not following *him*, so he found himself less afraid of them than of their possible consequences. They were laying a noticeable trail for anyone to follow to Spotty, and the trouble was that the trail would lead to him, too, if he and Spotty kept together.

The immediate solution that occurred to him was that they split up, and Spotty take care of his own troubles. The best way would be to divide the haul right here and now. If Spotty could succeed in shaking off the footprints, good for him. After all, the killing was none of Smudger's affair.

He was about to make the suggestion when another aspect occurred to him. If Spotty were picked up with part of the stuff on him, the case would be clinched. It was also possible that Spotty, in a bad jam with nothing to lose, might spill. A far safer way would be for him to hold the stuff. Then Spotty could come for his share when, and if, he succeeded in losing the tell-tale prints. It was obviously the only safe and reasonable course.

The trouble was that Spotty, when it was suggested to him, did not see it that way.

They drove a few more miles, each occupied with his own thoughts. In a quiet lane they stopped once more. Again Spotty got out of the car and walked a few yards away from it. The moon was lower, but it still gave enough light to show the footprints following him. He came back looking more worried than frightened. Smudger decided to cut a possible loss and go back to his former plan.

“Look here,” he suggested, “what say we share out the takings now, and you drop me off a bit up the road?”

Spotty looked doubtful, but Smudger pressed: “If you can shake that trail off, well and good. If you can't—well, there's no sense in us both getting pinched, is there? Anyway, it was you as croaked him. And one has a better chance of getting away than two.”

Spotty was still not keen, but he had no alternative to offer.

Smudger pulled the attaché case out of the back and opened it between them. Spotty began to separate the bundles of notes into two piles. It had been a good haul. As Smudger watched, he felt a great sadness that half of it was going to benefit nobody when Spotty was picked up. Sheer waste, it seemed to him.

Spotty, with his head bent over his work, did not notice Smudger draw the piece of lead pipe out of his pocket. Smudger brought it down on the back of his head with such force and neatness that it is doubtful whether Spotty ever knew anything about it.

Smudger stopped the car at the next bridge and pushed Spotty's body over the low wall. He watched as the ripples widened out across the canal below. Then he drove on.

It was three days later that Smudger got home. He arrived in the kitchen soaked to the skin, and clutching his attaché case. He was looking worn, white, and ready to drop. He dragged a chair away from the table and slumped into it.

"Bill!" his wife whispered. "What is it? Are they after you?"

"No, Liz—at least, it ain't the cops. But something is."

He pointed to a mark close inside the door. At first she thought it was his own wet footprint.

"Get a wet cloth, Liz, and clean up the front step and the passage before anyone sees it," he said.

She hesitated, puzzled.

"For God's sake, do it quick, Liz," he urged her.

Still half bewildered, she went through the dark passage and opened the door. The rain was pelting down, seeming to bounce

up from the road as it hit. The gutters were running like torrents. Everything streamed with wetness save the doorstep protected by the small jutting porch. And on the step was the blood-red print of a naked foot. . . .

In a kind of trance she went down on her knees and swabbed it clean with the wet cloth. Closing the door, she switched on the lights and saw the prints leading towards the kitchen. When she had cleaned them up, she went back to her husband.

"You been hit, Bill?"

He looked at her, elbows on the table, his head supported between his hands.

"No," he said. "It ain't me what's making them marks, Liz—it's what's followin' me."

"Following you? You mean they been following you all the way from the job?" she said incredulously. "How did you get back?"

Smudger explained. His immediate anxiety, after pitching Spotty into the canal, had been to rid himself of the car. It had been a pinch for the job, and the number and description would have been circulated. He had parked it in a quiet spot and gotten out to walk, maybe pick up a lift. When he had gone a few yards he had looked back and seen the line of prints behind him. They had frightened him a good deal more than he now ad-

mitted. Until that moment he had assumed that since they had been following Spotty, they would have followed him into the canal. Now, it seemed, they had transferred their attentions to himself. He tried a few more steps: they followed. With a great effort he got a grip on himself, and refrained from running. He perceived that unless he wanted to leave a clear trail he must go back to the car. He did.

Farther on he tried again, and with a sinking, hopeless feeling observed the same result. Back in the car, he lit a cigarette and considered plans with as much calmness as he could collect.

The thing to do was to find something that would not show tracks—or would not hold them. A flash of inspiration came to him, and he headed the car towards the river.

The sky was barely gray yet. He fancied that he managed to get the car down to the towpath without being seen. At any rate, no one had hailed him as he cut through the long grass to the water's edge. From there he had made his way downstream, plodding along through a few inches of water until he found a rowboat. It was a venerable and decrepit affair, but it served his purpose.

From then on his journey had been unexciting, but also uncomfortable. During the day he

had become extremely hungry, but he did not dare to leave the boat until after dark, and then he moved only in the darkest streets where the marks might not be seen. Both that day and the next two he had spent hoping for rain. This morning, in a drenching downpour that looked as if it might continue for hours, he had sunk the boat and made his way home, trusting that the trail would be washed away. As far as he knew, it had been.

Liz was less impressed than she ought to have been.

"I reckon it must be something on your boots," she said practically. "Why didn't you buy some new ones?"

He looked at her with a dull resentment. "It ain't nothing on my boots," he said. "Didn't I tell you it was following me? You seen the marks. How could they come off my boots? Use your head."

"But it don't make sense. Not the way you say it. *What's following you?*"

"How do I know?" he said bitterly. "All I know is that it makes them marks—and they're getting closer, too."

"How do you mean closer?"

"Just what I say. The first day they were about five feet behind me. Now they're between three and four."

It was not the kind of thing

that Liz could take in too easily.

"It don't make sense," she repeated.

It made no more sense during the days that followed, but she ceased to doubt. Smudger stayed in the house; whatever was following stayed with him. The marks of it were everywhere: on the stairs, upstairs, downstairs. Half Liz's time was spent in cleaning them up lest someone should come in and see them. They got on her nerves. But not as badly as they got on Smudger's. . . .

Even Liz could not deny that the feet were stepping a little more closely behind him—a little more closely each day.

"And what happens when they catch up?" Smudger demanded fearfully. "Tell me that. What can I do? What the hell can I do?"

But Liz had no suggestions. Nor was there anyone else they dared ask about it.

Smudger began to dream nights. He'd whimper and she'd wake him up asking what was the matter. The first time he could not remember, but the dream was repeated, growing a little clearer with each recurrence. A black shape appeared to hang over him as he lay. It was vaguely manlike in form, but it hovered in the air as if suspended. Gradually it sank lower and

lower until it rested upon him—but weightlessly, like a pattern of fog. It seemed to flow up towards his head, and he was in panic lest it should cover his face and smother him, but at his throat it stopped. There was a prickling at the side of his neck. He felt strangely weak, as though tiredness suddenly invaded him. At the same time the shadow appeared to grow denser. He could feel, too, that there began to be some weight in it as it lay upon him. Then, mercifully, Liz would wake him.

So real was the sensation that he inspected his neck carefully in the mirror when he shaved. But there was no mark there.

Gradually the glistening red prints closed in behind him. A foot behind his heels, six inches, three inches. . . .

Then came a morning when he woke tired and listless. He had to force himself to get up, and when he looked in the mirror, there *was* a mark on his throat. He called Liz, in a panic. But it was only a very small mark, and she made nothing of it.

But the next morning his lassitude was greater. It needed all his will-power to drag himself up. The pallor of his face shocked Liz—and himself, too, when he saw it in the shaving mirror. The red mark on his neck stood out more vividly. . . .

The next day he did not get up.

Two days later Liz became frightened enough to call in the doctor. It was a confession of desperation. Neither of them cared for the doctor, who knew or guessed uncomfortably much about the occupations of his patients. One called a doctor for remedies, not for homilies on one's way of life.

He came, he hummed, he ha'ed. He prescribed a tonic, and had a talk with Liz.

"He's seriously anaemic," he said. "But there's more to it than that. Something on his mind." He looked at her. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Liz's denial was unconvincing. He did not even pretend to believe it.

"I'm no magician," he said. "If you don't help me, I can't help him. Some kinds of worry can go on pressing and nagging like an abscess."

Liz continued to deny. For a moment she had been tempted to tell about the footmarks, but caution warned her that once she began, she would likely be trapped into saying more than was healthy.

"Think it over," the doctor advised. "And let me know tomorrow how he is."

The next morning there was no doubt that Smudger was doing very badly. The tonic had done him no good at all. He lay in bed with his eyes, when they were

open, looking unnaturally large in a drawn white face. He was so weak that she had to feed him with a spoon. He was frightened, too, that he was going to die. So was Liz. The alarm in her voice when she telephoned the doctor was unmistakably genuine.

"All right, I'll be round within an hour," he told her. "Have you found out what's on his mind yet?" he added.

"N-no," Liz told him.

When he came, he told her to stay downstairs while he went up to see the patient.

It seemed to her that an intolerably long time passed before she heard his feet on the stairs, and she went out to meet him in the hall. She looked up into his face with mute anxiety. His expression was serious, and puzzled, so that she was afraid to hear him speak.

But at last she asked: "Is—is he going to die, Doctor?"

"He's very weak—very weak indeed," the doctor said. After a pause, he added: "Why didn't you tell me about those footprints he thought were following him?"

She looked up at him in alarm.

"It's all right. He's told me all about it now. I knew there was something on his mind. It's not very surprising, either."

Liz stared at him. "Not—?"

"In the circumstances, no," the doctor said. "A mind op-

pressed by a sense of sin can play a lot of nasty tricks. Nowadays they talk of guilt complexes and inhibitions. Names change. When I was a boy, the same sort of thing was known as a bad conscience.

"When one has the main facts, these things become obvious to anyone of experience. Your husband was engaged in—well, to put it bluntly, burgling the house of a man whose interests were mystic and occult. Something that happened there gave him a shock and unbalanced his judgment.

"As a result, he has difficulty in distinguishing between the real things he sees and the imaginary ones his uneasy conscience shows him. It isn't very complicated. He feels he is being dogged. Somewhere in his subconscious lie the lines from *The Ancient Mariner*:

*Because he knows, a frightful fiend*

*Doth close behind him tread*

and the two come together. And, in addition to that, he appears to

have developed a primitive, vampiric type of phobia.

"Now, once we are able to help him dispel this obsession, he—" He broke off, suddenly aware of the look on his listener's face. "What is it?" he asked.

"But, Doctor," Liz said. "Those footmarks. I—" She was cut short abruptly by a sound from above that was half groan and half scream.

The doctor was up the stairs before she could move. When she followed him, it was with a heavy certainty in her heart.

She stood in the doorway watching as he bent over the bed. In a moment he turned, grave-eyed, and gave a slight shake of his head. He put his hand on her shoulder, then went quietly past her out of the room.

For some seconds Liz stood without moving. Then her eyes dropped from the bed to the floor. She trembled. Laughter, a high-pitcher, frightening laughter shook her as she looked at the red naked footprints which led away from the bedside, across the floor and down the stairs, after the doctor. . . .