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DEATH

on the LOOSE

We guarantee you'll break out in a cold, chilling sweat before you finish this amazing true story—which should be kept from the hands of women and children

By Jack Duncan

as told to Bob Bristow

We are editorially opposed to stories about deadly snakes, and we have turned down dozens of them in the past, even though they were well-written. This one, however, we literally had to buy; it was that good, that compelling, and with a climax that's a dilly. How do you readers feel about such yarns? Do you like them? Want more? Let's hear from you. But don't write till you've read this one through to the end.—Ed.

I STOOD, motionless, a cold fear inching from my shoulders along my spine as I looked at the empty cage. The night before, six western diamond-back rattlesnakes had been in the screened-box cage. But now there was a large rip in the fine screen. The snakes were gone. Across the street I heard the neighbors' children laughing and playing noisily in the yard. Was one of those deadly rattlers lying hidden from their eyes, poised, ready to strike?

Six. Six big ones I'd caught only three days before in the jagged rocks of Southwest Oklahoma. I had put them in the box and stretched it across two saw horses, out of reach of any curious child. Over the top I'd pulled a blanket, just in case someone happened to get too close. I had planned to deliver the snakes to a dealer for shipment to a carnival. The night before, tornado winds had struck, and as I huddled in a storm shelter, I did not give a thought to the snakes. Somehow I felt certain that they were safe. But the winds had tossed the blanket away like a scrap of paper. The box had been tumbled from the saw horses, bouncing and rolling, and striking a sharp stake.

The snakes had escaped.

Here in the middle of a small

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ILLUSTRATED BY IRVING ZUSMAN

Death on the Loose

Continued from page 23

city of 18,000 people! Here a few blocks from the city park where hundreds of children played every day. Somewhere, among the crowded houses, I knew that the six snakes prowled—angry, silent, deadly.

My first thought was to call the police. I walked, keeping my eyes to the ground, back to the house and went inside.

My daughter bumped into me, her jump-rope in her hands, hurrying toward the door.

"I'm going out to skip," she said.

My voice exploded suddenly. "No!" I shouted.

She looked at me curiously, her lip trembling at the severity of my tone.

I realized I was near panic. I lowered my voice, spoke softly. "Later . . . you can go later," I said.

My wife, Jan, had turned from the sink when she heard me shout. "What is it?" she asked evenly, knowing by my tone that something was very wrong.

"Keep her in," I said. "The snakes got out."

She covered her mouth with her hand, a sudden movement. Her eyes showed terror.

I reconsidered the call to the police. Wearing a badge, riding in a squad car, writing tickets was one thing. Hunting down six deadly rattlers was quite another. I did not doubt the willingness of the police to help, but I had seen dozens of men struck dumb by the sight of deadly snakes. Perhaps for good reason, most people have an almost unreasonable fear of reptiles, even harmless ones. I decided that the police or the fire department would not help. I visualized the radio broadcasts that would strike terror across the city and the reactions of the people who would panic. Hundreds of them, giving way to fear.

I went to the telephone and called Mike Dawson, a friend who accompanied me on my snake hunting trips. The phone rang four times and I was about to hang up when a deep baritone voice answered.

"Mike. . ." I asked.

"Yeah. . ." he said lazily.

"This is Jack. What are you doing right now?"

"Cleaning up. I was outside. That storm made a mess of the place.

"Come over here. . . now!" It was a command.

"I'll be through in a minute. I've just got to. . ."

"Now," I inserted.

"What's up?" he asked seriously.

"I'll tell you when you get here," I said, knowing that someone on the party line might be listening on the phone.

"Okay. . . I'll be over," he said, aware that I would not have called him this way had it not been important.

"Bring your tall boots," I said.

There was a pause. I could sense his thoughts as he breathed into the phone. "I'll be right over."

I hung up.

"What are you going to do?" my wife asked.

"Find them."

She waved her hand expansively. "Where?"

I started to lace my heavy hunting boots. "I don't know," I said.

If I had a chance to get two or three of them, which was still a long gamble, what about the others? Six. An impossible number. But I knew only two men in the city who had hunted snakes extensively. I was one and Mike was the other. Any other searchers would be a waste. For one thing most of them had never seen a rattlesnake up close. In the movies perhaps, but being face to face with a rattlesnake is an entirely different thing. The police or other volunteers would be shooting wildly at anything that moved in the grass. This would be a greater hazard perhaps than the snakes. When I had finished lacing my boots, I pulled my slacks down over them.

I found my long-barreled .22-caliber pistol and loaded it with bird shot. This is an ordinary .22 shell filled with about a hundred tiny shot. The shot expands, making a pattern exactly like a shotgun. At close range you couldn't miss a small target. Like a rattlesnake. Like six of them, if I could only find them.

I heard Mike's tires slide on the gravel outside. In a moment he was at the door, tall, his face flushed slightly red with excitement, his lips tense.

"They got out?" he asked.

I nodded. He followed me into the house.

"What are you going to do?"

"Find them. Will you help?"

"Sure. But six. . . can we find six?"

My nerves were wearing thin.

"Dammit we've got to find them. Every last one. Did you bring your pistol?"

He nodded. I gave him several cartridges and he slipped them into the revolver chamber.

He smiled faintly. "I'm ready," he said.

Outside I checked the thermometer, because I knew that when the temperature was below 60 degrees, the snakes looked for cover, because slow, almost lifeless.

In Southwest Oklahoma the rattlers hibernate in caves and cracks in the earth for nearly six months to escape this cold. When they emerge in the early spring, they are half blind and in an angry mood. They lie on the warm rocks and sun themselves until the temperature, which dominates their lives, rises to a comfortable degree. Then they leave the caves and dens for the season.

The thermometer read 52-degrees. They might be huddled around a trash barrel next door, or in a garage, or in the deep grass. I looked at the broken cage.

"If you were a snake, Mike," I asked, "where would you go?"

"In that storm. . . I'd try to get under a rock."

"Sorry," I said. "No rocks. Then where would you go?"

"I don't know."

"Stick your gun in your shirt. We'll start at the box and work a widening circle. We've got to look everywhere. If you see one, shoot it."

"Suppose somebody asks what the hell I'm doing hunting in town?"

"Tell 'em you're killing rats. Every-time you shoot means one less snake."

"Don't you think we need help?"

"Sure," I said. "Go in and call all the people you know who've hunted diamond-back rattlesnakes. How many do you know?"

His face was blank. "I see what you mean. Should we warn people?"

"And start a riot? Right now the snakes don't feel like moving. They're hiding from the chill. But if it starts to warm up, we'll have to send out an alarm. Right now let's see what we can do."

We started moving around the yard cautiously. Like looking for needles in the trite haystack. Except these needles had holes in them filled with deadly poison. You hear the nonsense about the rattlesnake always warning with a tail shake when somebody comes near. That's a bunch of hogwash. I've hunted snakes for years, and, more often than not, the western diamond-back just looks at you until you get close enough, and then he drives his body toward you silently, knifing the fangs into your flesh, oozing the milky poison into your body. They can coil, strike, inject the poison, recoil and be ready to strike again in the time it takes a half-dollar dropped from your waist to hit the floor. Try that sometime. It's pretty fast!

We hunted for thirty minutes, checking every crack and corner. Nothing.

We had finally worked out to a vacant lot two houses away. Here the grass was nearly a foot high. We were walking through the grass when a sudden movement caught my eye. I wheeled just as the snake's fangs bounced against my boot top. I jabbed my foot down on the snake before he could slither away in the grass, and fired. I watched the body writhing in the grass, turning crazily over and over, until it lay still. Mike came toward me.

"If there are others, they won't like the shot," I said. "You run tell my wife to call the fire department and tell them I'm burning this vacant lot to get rid of mice and rats. Then tell the neighbors what we're doing, so they won't come out here. We'll set fire to this lot and burn them out, if there are any more. We can kill them as they come out."

As Mike ran to the house, I took my cigarette lighter and started fires along the edge of the grass. Fanned by the wind, the flames moved quickly. Mike and I took positions on the

windward side of the lot. We waited. My hands were close to my revolver, because when the snakes came out of that smoke, they would not be slowing down for anything.

The flames inched closed and closer, until I felt certain there were no other snakes in the grass.

"Freeze," Mike said.

I turned with my hips and saw him. He was a huge one, sixteen rattlers on his tail and as big around as the calf of Marilyn Monroe's leg. Mike took a quick aim and fired. The snake was moving so fast he only got the tail, blowing it off. Blood oozed from the end, leaving a faint trail of blood. He fired again. This time his aim was true. The snake was motionless.

I saw the next one as he came out of the grass, and my heart pounded fiercely as I took quick aim and squeezed my finger. I missed. I fired again and got him. Before I had finished, I heard Mike fire, turned to see him stomp his boot heel on the head of another. The fire burned down. The field was completely burned.

"That makes four," I said. I turned to see a police squad car stopping by the lot. The officer got out frowning.

"Let's go over there quick. I don't want him to see these snakes." As we walked over to the car, I noticed that half-a-dozen housewives were standing on their porches, not looking any too happy about our shooting. If they had known what we were hunting, they would not have been standing around watching.

"Get in the car," the officer said. "And I'll take those guns."

"What's wrong. . . we were just killing rats. They've been eating up the place."

I opened my gun and handed the officer one of the cartridges.

"I know it made noise," I said, "but these are no more dangerous than those damned BB guns the kids fire."

"There's a city ordinance against this. You guys know that."

"Okay. . . you're right. No sense arguing. We thought we were doing the neighborhood a favor. We just burned off the lot and shot them as they came out. We got permission to burn the lot. I didn't think to call you boys."

"How many did you get?" the cop asked.

"Got four," I lied. "Little ones. They've sure been bad around here. The city ought to do something with them."

"Yeah," he groaned. "We got 'em over at my place. Well . . . you through now?"

"Sure," I lied again.

"So go put the guns away. Since you weren't shooting slugs I don't think it makes much difference. A bunch of ladies got scared, that's all."

"Thanks," I said.

The squad car pulled away from the curb. I looked at Mike. Sweat was running along his cheek, partly from the heat of the fire, and I thought

partly because of the officer. It had been a close call.

"Jack," Mike said as we walked back toward the house, "what now?"

"Two to go," I answered. I was encouraged. Searching for two snakes now seemed a lot better than searching for six.

We sat down for a minute on the back porch steps. We wiped the smoke and dirt from our faces. Then I looked at the thermometer. It was getting warmer. Wherever they were, I knew that the remaining snakes would start moving around.

"If we don't find them soon," Mike said, "what are you going to do?"

"Report it. I'll have to."

He laughed softly. "You'll be cussed by everyone in town."

I shook my head. "I've been cussed before. I just don't want some kid to step on one of those babies."

I looked at my boot where the first snake had struck. The fang marks were plain against the leather, but the impact had not been strong enough to penetrate the leather. Two small stains of white fluid had dried on the boot. I swallowed hard.

"Mike," I said desperately, "we've got to find those snakes."

We started again. We looked everywhere. By this time the neighborhood was growing very curious about our activities. Go poke around your neighbor's trash barrel, looking in and under corners sometime, and see how much curiosity you can generate. We were on the spot.

The last time I checked the temperature it was nearly noon and the mercury had climbed to 66 degrees. We met again at the side of my house, and Mike's face was grave.

"I think we've lost them," he said.

"I know."

"I guess I'd better call the police," I said.

I started toward the door. A clod of mud had stuck to my boot, and as I kicked it free, it rolled toward the house foundation and bounced off the concrete. Then I saw that the entrance cover to the foundation had been blown away by the storm. The opening was 18 inches wide and about the same height. Mike was going in the house.

"Wait," I said, "get my flashlight. I'm going under there for a look." Mike looked at the hole, then back at me.

"That's not too smart. You can't stand up under there, you know. If a snake is in there, you'll have your face on the ground."

"If he's in there," I repeated, "I'll have to take the chance."

Mike returned in a moment with the flashlight.

"We've got to do something, Jack," he said. "Your wife is about to crack."

I didn't reply. I took the flashlight, switched it on and squeezed my way through the small hole. Inside it was pitch dark. And quiet. I could hear my breath coming in short gasps. My pistol in one hand, the flashlight in

the other, I inched forward. The ground was uneven, dips and small mounds scattered about. These threw fearful shadows.

I moved cautiously over the damp ground. I came to a small block of wood that had been left during construction. It gleamed muddy white in my light and I squeezed the trigger, catching myself just before the hammer slammed home. I tried to get my breath. I had to be alert, keyed up, but to lose my head would be suicide if I did find a snake.

The difference between peak alertness and panic was a thin, indistinguishable line. Once a man crossed that line, his reaction invariably was one of panic, and in this case, perhaps quick death. The bite of a snake on the hands or legs can be treated without too much difficulty. But a bite on the neck or face is usually fatal. The poison is too close to the heart, and once it reaches the heart the end comes quickly. You can't wrap a tourniquet around your neck!

Ten minutes, fifteen. I might not even get out from under the house. And once the snake bit me it would probably bite me again. Perhaps a half-dozen times before I killed it. I stopped to rest. I couldn't think these thoughts. I *had* to be calm. When I felt my shoulders relax, I moved forward again. I had worked one entire side of the house carefully and had not seen anything except a black widow spider which I killed. I wasn't worried about a lousy spider.

Then I worked over toward the side of the house where the floor furnace was installed. I got so close I could feel the slight warmth from the metal. Just as I twisted to move away, the angular, hideous head shot up in front of me, perhaps two feet away. I rolled and fired at the same time. The snake was directly in my light and I saw the entire top of the head disappear. The pellets clattered noisily against the metal of the floor furnace.

I completed my roll, started to take a breath, when I felt the movement beneath my body. My heart gave a single great beat, and I felt the pulsation in my ears.

I had rolled on top of the sixth snake!

Instinctively I started to roll off the struggling snake, but in the split instant before I moved, I knew that my recovery time would be shorter than that of the snake. I was not his match for speed.

I pressed the weight of my body down, trying to sense by the movement where the snake's head was. The thin jacket I wore would be enough protection from the fangs as long as I kept my body squarely over the head. But if I raised up even the slightest, I had to be prepared to take a pair of fangs. If the poison hit me in the chest, I was a dead man.

The snake was struggling wildly. The tail spanked about freely, hitting my buttocks. It occurred to me that

I could not wrestle him indefinitely I had to do something.

Finally as the snake squirmed, I could feel his head moving slightly just below my heart. The gun was useless now. I dropped it in the dirt. The flashlight was in the way also. I let it go. Then when the snake paused, I began to slide my hand beneath my body. I closed my eyes tightly, visualizing the exact position of the head. My fingers were only inches away. I held my breath then.

I waited while the snake squirmed beneath me. When it stopped for an instant, still holding my breath, I plunged my hand below my heart and grabbed for the head. This gave him room to move. But not enough. I held the snake's head in a death grip. I tightened my hand around him, pressed down with the side of my body to pin him beneath me, and began to pull. He thrashed fiercely as the pressure grew. In a sudden jerk, my hand pulled free. I dropped the severed head in the dirt and rolled away, crawling toward the light of the entrance, leaving the gun and the flashlight.

I reached the entrance, and Mike helped me pull through.

"I heard a shot. Did you get one?"

I didn't try to stand when I was free of the entrance. I lay on the grass breathing deeply.

"You got a cigarette?" I asked.

Mike lighted one and handed it to me. I breathed the smoke.

"Did you get one?" he repeated.

"Two," I said.

"With one shot?"

I smiled wearily and opened my hand. He saw the blood stains, and the ones on the front of my jacket. His face contorted in a grimace. I lay quietly, knowing he was recreating the scene in his head.

"Did he get you?" he asked.

I shook my head in the negative.

"You want a drink?" he said nervously.

I nodded.

"I'll tell your wife you got 'em all."

He went inside.

I heard him close the door. I lay quietly smoking, looking into the sky. The sun was warm on my face. It was, I decided at last, going to be a pretty nice day. ●

Blue Notes

*Some assorted background facts
on who wrote what, and why, in
this issue of Bluebook*

Like William Chamberlain, Bob Bristow (writer of "Death On The Loose", pages 22-23) is appearing in *Bluebook*, modern version, for the second time. You'll recall he penned



"Patsy" in our second issue, and, good as that one was, it's the Child's Garden of Verses compared to this dandy little thriller, which makes us wake up screaming even now—and we've read it twice.

Bob is an Oklahoman, which probably explains why he looks like another gent from that state, name of Mickey Mantle. A full-time writer, Bob's hobby is rattlesnake-hunting, which may be better than staring at pretty girls and then again it may not, depending on your point of view.