

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

LONG NOVELETTE

THE WHIPPOORWILLS IN THE HILLS August Derleth 4
*The ghastly sound swelled from the black hills into the valley,
surrounding the house with waves of cacophonous horror.*

NOVELETTE

THE FOLLOWER Allison V. Harding 34
A trail that begins in life and ends only with death.

SHORT STORIES

FEVER DREAM Ray Bradbury 23
We know the way germs multiply—suppose they go on and grow big and bigger!

THE CRACKS OF TIME Dorothy Quick 27
She was fascinated by the image of the tiles—heedless of the danger.

THE BEASTS THAT TREAD THE WORLD Harold Lawlor 48
*A woman pursued by monsters, but only in a nightmare, should
not have scars to show for it in the morning.*

THE DAUGHTER OF URZUN Stanton A. Coblenz 56
Decisions made on other days, in other lives can affect us now and today.

THE HIDDEN TALENT OF ARTIST BATES Snowden T. Herrick 64
The most unusual, unheard of and deadly kind of strange talent.

THE WATCHER OF THE AGES Edmond Hamilton 68
*Many had sought the dead metropolis but all had been defeated
by the dark jungle and darker forces within it.*

DISPLACED PERSON Eric Frank Russell 77
*Our troubled world is full of displaced persons but the man
in the black cloak was surely the strangest.*

DEATH'S BOUQUET Peter Phillips 80
*Lebrun's cider possessed a curious quality.
Delightful until you knew the ingredients.*

THE DEVIL'S LOTTERY Mary Elizabeth Counselman 87
*Everyone agreed that the strange man was there, but no
two people agreed on what he looked like.*

VERSE

THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB 3

WEIRDISMS 47

THE RIVER Dorothy Quick 67

TO THE CHIMERA Clark Ashton Smith 79

*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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178
Vol. 40, No. 6

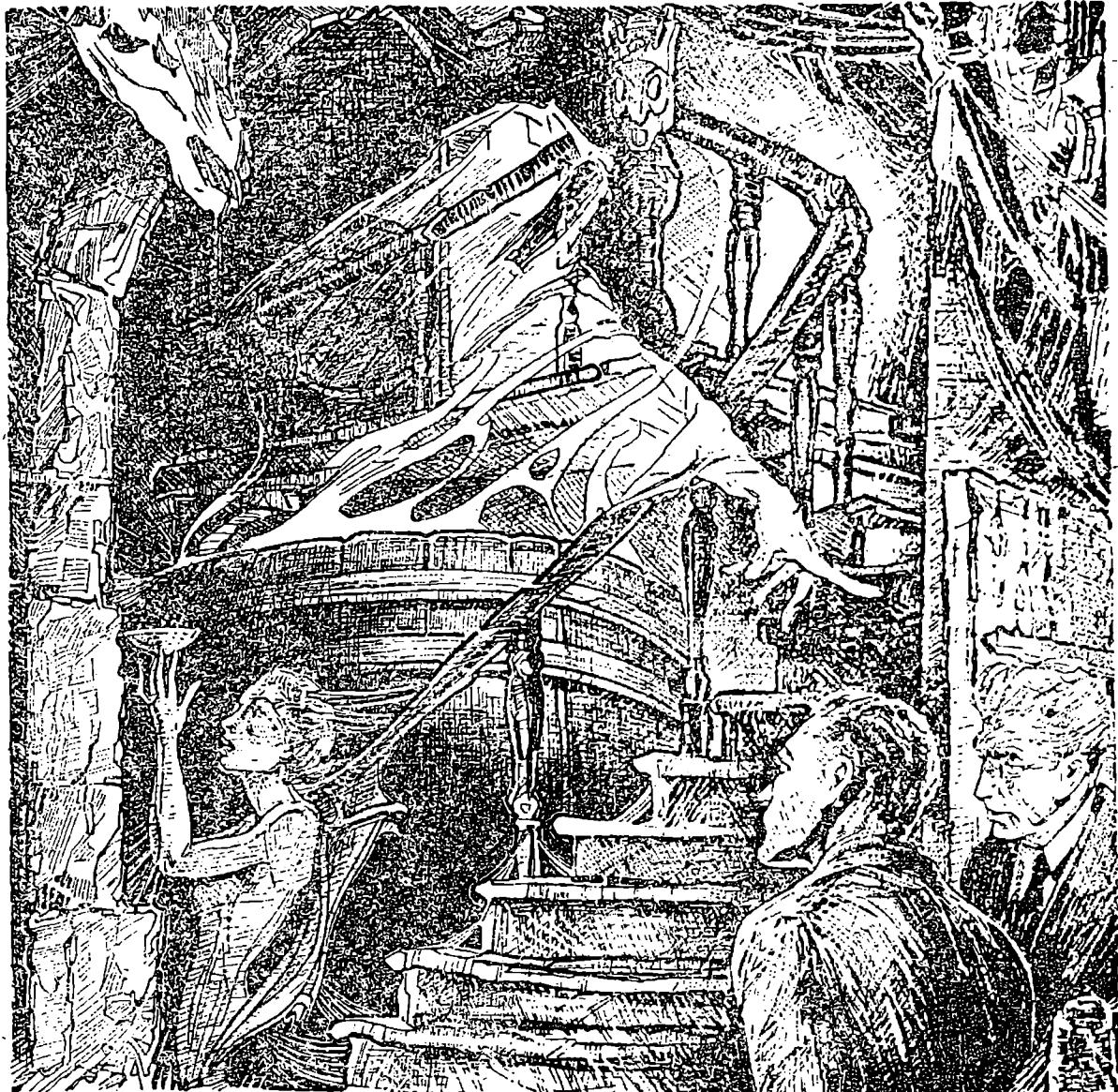
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Death's Bouquet

BY PETER PHILLIPS



A lot goes into the making of good wine.

Heading by Fred Humiston

LEBRUN was not a big commercial wine-grower and his modest country house was not within a thousand miles of Bordeaux.

That's to forestall the experts. Given a hint, they would fret for further clues to the locale. Once I knew a man who at the first sip of a worthwhile wine might proceed to



determine the very half-acre of ground whence it originated.

The Lebrun family were once possessed of a less modest residence and a less common

patronymic; but at a certain period of the nineteenth century they found it expedient to relinquish both.

To the Lebrun of my acquaintance, that was a sad error. But since no attempt had been made up to the time of the Fourth Republic to rectify the matter and it then seemed beyond redress, he contented himself with impressing on his intimates that an aristocrat by any other name would still bleed a shade of blue when pricked.

He had little success in conveying the same impression to the half-score sturdy, spittle-handed workers who tended his shrunken acres; to his small household staff; or to the few cottagers who still reluctantly paid their rents to him.

If he had lived in the time of the Occupation, he would have been first on the list of district collaborateurs.

By killing him before the war, I probably saved the Resistance the trouble of shooting him.

He was a boor. A spindle-shanked, languid, gutless poseur. A thin, mincing, effeminate patronizing hypocrite. A veritable Gallic Pecksniff. But he had two assets in my opportunist eyes: his cellar and his daughter. He cherished and revered both.

I got to know father, daughter and cellar on one of my rare visits to the district as agent for a Paris-London bookseller. No doubt a bourgeois occupation in Lebrun's view; but I had mentioned certain great names. . . . So he dined me.

The first dinner was in the nature of a symposium of wines from the cellar, followed by a eulogy (in her absence) of motherless Héloïse Lebrun.

I'm not even an amateur of wine. It's one of the few subjects connected with art—in this case, the art of living—about which one may say "I know what I like" without being marked down as an ignoramus and a Philistine. I can tell a Burgundy from a Bordeaux, or a Graves red from a Claret; but neither my memory nor my interest permit me to go further.

But women Lebrun's eulogy, after his daughter had left us to our coffee and fine champagne, was unnecessary. I was sufficiently impressed I had covertly appraised her with an earnest attention to detail.

Her charms were characterized by a curious and intriguing dichotomy of form and feature. It was as if the beautiful, long-haired head of a young Greek boy had been set on the body of a mature woman—Apollo's head on Aphrodite's shoulders. Yet the effect was not of disparity, but harmony; not of masculinity, but ultra-femininity.

There was no trace of common "prettiness" about the severe, classical planes of her face; and her jet hair—so black as almost to deny reflection from its gloss—was taken straight back from her high, cool forehead and caught up in a tight roll in the nape of her swan-slender neck.

She was tall, and the severe but flowing cut of her white gown enhanced the pressing roundness of body that contrasted so delightfully with the piquant handsomeness of her face. . . .

My visits to the district became less rare. . . .

However, inclination could find no opportunity for closer acquaintance with Héloïse Lebrun.

Said one innkeeper in the district: "He guards her like a prize cow."

An unfortunate metaphor. But I forgave him.

Cows are dumb. So was the delectable Héloïse, so far as I could ascertain. Her conversation, in a honey-sweet voice, was strictly confined to the most mundane of small-talk.

Disappointing. Lebrun was to blame, apparently. On the death of her mother, he had cherished her to the point of stultification, warding off all outside influences—even to the point of bodily assaulting a young farmer-neighbor who had the temerity to exchange a few words with her without the formality of an introduction.

MY INFORMATIVE innkeeper also spoke of another young man, Théophile Morin, who, three years previously, had aroused Lebrun's paternal wrath to such a pitch that fearing the self-thought "lord of the manor" would hire an apache type to wreak displeasure, he had disappeared overnight from the district.

I couldn't reconcile this information with the impression I'd gained of Lebrun's character—an ineffectual old hedonist who'd

hesitate to harm a mouse in case it should bite him.

Anyway, to me he showed only his best side—and his best wines, some from his own acre of well-tended vines. He sold some casks of *vin ordinaire* and some bottles of a passable white table-wine in the district; but his main source of income was not from wine at all but from a special quality cider-perry, fermented in a huge vat from the crushed apples and pears of a large orchard—a technique he had studied in Devonshire, England.

The approach to the Lebtun mansion—several miles from the huge dilapidated chateau which he privately claimed as his true family seat—was through an unhedged avenue of young cypresses, with flat fallow fields on either side.

The house itself lay within a large enclosed garden. Vines—for decoration or dessert grapes I assumed, since the location was hardly suitable for wine grapes—were trained along the high gray southwestern wall.

The drive to the house was pleasant, and my thoughts were pleasant as I undertook it for what proved to be the last time. I'd done good business in the provincial town ten miles away; and Lebrun had invited me to stay the night after dinner. I hoped that this would give me an opportunity to try to elicit something more than the usual platitudes from the beautiful but subdued Heloise. I wanted to know whether she was dumb from weakness of intellect; or from disposition, inherent or imposed.

Lebrun usually had a few of his sycophantic cronies at the table when we dined; but on this early winter night—the dusk was deepening as I arrived—there were only the three of us, Lebrun, Heloise and myself, in the high-ceilinged over-furnished dining room, lit by a grotesquely out-of-place crystal chandelier. The table had begun its life in a rich monastery, and the chairs were fussy imitation Louis XVI.

Part from wine and food, Lebrun's ideas of taste, particularly in the matter of interior decoration, were pretentious.

YEET the whole house, with its mixture of styles and periods, gave the impression of being merely *demodé* and commonplace

—like its owner. No setting for mystery. No hint of horror to come in this character, or his surroundings.

So when horror came, its forces were trebled.

It came after dinner. There was nothing memorable about the dinner itself, save for an incomparable *Chateau Latour*, which I drank with reverence; and the continued silence of Heloise Lebrun.

In retrospect, however, I realize that I was vaguely aware of a curious tenseness about Lebrun's movements and speech throughout the meal. He was drinking more than usual, and when Heloise left us, he insulted a fine brandy by gulping a liberal measure as though it were a cheap cognac.

Then he stared at me across the table, and said: "She is a silent one, my Heloise. She broods. I believe she hates me."

This confidence, in a calm, conversational tone, embarrassed me. I muttered some deprecating inanity.

"You cannot conceive, my young friend," he said, "of the hatred that an only daughter may bear for an old father who loves her too well." He stood up, a thin figure in black. "You say nothing. . . . I surprise you? . . . Let us change the subject. I would value your opinion on a wine. Come with me."

He swayed a little as he went to the door. He was certainly drunk. I had seen his main cellar before, but he led me now to an alcove I had not previously noticed. There were about a dozen bottles in the bin. He withdrew one and cradled it gently in the crook of his arm. I wondered why he hadn't sent his old manservant for it.

His wrinkle-seamed face was white in the stark glare of unshaded light-bulbs. He might have been a grandfather caressing his tiny grandson. He touched the neck of the bottle. "An experiment," he said softly. "It was laid down two years ago today. It is very young, but I believe it will have great qualities when it matures. The potentialities of age are to be discovered in the youth of a wine. Tonight, we shall divine its future."

I followed him up the cellar steps. I wondered whether his hospitality was sufficient recompense for humoring a man I disliked; and I was beginning to feel that even access to the startling beauty of Heloise might not repay the efforts necessary to beguile her

from her moodiness. . . . This place was out of my way. I might make it my last visit. . . . I make no secret of my own self-seeking hypocrisy. . . .

We did not join Heloise, but returned to the dining chamber, where Lebrun made a fumbling and rather ridiculous ceremony of opening the bottle and pouring out two glasses of what I fully expected to be a raw and virtueless wine.

It was a pale straw color, with the slightest tinge of green, although this may have been imparted by the glass.

We sat opposite each other at one end of the table. From the way he raised his glass, we might have been about to sample a rare and precious vintage.

As I've said, I'm not even an amateur of wine; but I know that there is some delicacy of approach in the matter of tasting, and I was surprised when, after the most cursory attention to aroma, Lebrun suddenly tilted his glass and drained the wine as though it were a medicine.

Stranger still, by a compulsion I cannot explain, I felt obliged to follow his example, and swallowed mine without a preliminary sip.

My first very brief impression was of its sweetness. My second—as it constricted my throat and hit my stomach lining—was that it was one hundred per cent ethyl alcohol.

"Good God!" I choked, my eyes filling with tears. "It's a raw hooch. What a damn-fool trick—"

Lebrun's eyes were wide, unfocused. He shuddered. Then like a dead man released from stiffening bonds, his head lolled forwards and he slumped to the table. I heard the bump as his forehead hit the wood, and I stared rather stupidly at a bald patch in the center of his short, gray hair.

Even wood alcohol doesn't kill as quickly as that. Poison. . . ? Was he dead, anyway? My throat cleared. The warm glow in my stomach spread with incredible rapidity throughout my body. My hands and feet tingled. I could feel a flush riding up over my face. . . . If he was dead, did it matter? Was I dying? I tried to rise, but my legs were stricken with an insidious weakness. But, of course, I wasn't dying. . . . Dying men don't want to laugh. The old fool had grabbed a bottle of newly distilled brandy

by mistake and on top of what he had already taken, it had knocked him out.

But it shouldn't take me like that. I'd drunk hooch before. And no brandy could be as strong. Then why couldn't I get up . . . what an absurd weakness . . . especially since I felt as light as a bubble . . . a big bubble, drifting back through a tunnel of warm redness away from a bald patch on a man's head.

Those were my hands, clenched on the table, and my arms, attenuated, lengthening as I was drawn away. . . . If I grasped the table I could pull myself back to my hands, back to reality. Yet there was no reason why I should.

For there was nothing to fear.

There was a gentle purposiveness in this force that seemed to be withdrawing me from my corporeal self; a bidding that I had no desire to resist, as of a gentle far-away voice saying: "Come. You shall not be harmed."

My body was safe. It floated past me in the tunnel, back and head rejoining my hands, the arms foreshortening, until I saw myself at the table, slouched forward, head comfortably pillowed on arms. . . .

Then the warm red tunnel closed in, hiding the scene, and I became an awareness, a focus of consciousness without magnitude, a point of observation without senses, save those borrowed from the being I observed, whose thoughts I also shared—the being who had called me from my body to be a witness and a judge to some unnamed crime.

I knew this, as I knew his name was Theophile Morin. I recognized him as I would recognize myself in a vivid dream, and was as much a part of him; a young man tall and strong, the secret lover of Heloise Lebrun.

* * *

HE WAS climbing—we were climbing—the ivied wall to the balcony of her bedroom. A thin crescent moon soared high in a black sky, casting deep shadows in the walled garden.

The windows were open. He stepped within. She was waiting for him, in the soft, light of a shaded bedside lamp, arms outstretched.

His heart—my heart—leapt at the vision of unearthly beauty she presented. This was

not the beautiful but dull Heloise I had seen.

Her eyes glowed with love, desire, vivacious life; and her face, framed now by the loosened abundance of her black hair, was softened by the sweet hint of a blush. The slender but near-statuesque ripeness of her body in the sheerest of night attire was imbued with an ineffable grace as she came forward into his embrace.

I sensed, as in my own forgotten body, the surge and expectancy of his love as his arms enfolded her. They kissed, then she breathlessly spoke a passionate welcome. And I had thought her dumb. . . .

The scene changed with cinematic suddenness. I was aware of the door of the bedroom, a-trembling; I sensed fear and anger intermingling.

The door burst inwards and Lebrun stood there, his long white face contorted with fury. To me in my state of supra-being, with a duality of consciousness, his emotion was a palpable and a wicked thing: it was a wave of insensate jealousy—not the pride of a father, the possessive love of a parent—but the wild, carnal jealousy of a cuckolded husband or a thwarted lover.

There was a black stick in his hand. He raised it, gestured. . . . The scene was changed again; and Theophile Morin was walking down the hallway of the big house to the door. I knew Heloise had been locked in her room. I knew that Morin was about to turn on Lebrun, stalking behind him, and demanded that she should not be punished. . . .

Then Morin was descending the stone steps into the walled garden, a tall, proud figure in the light from the doorway.

I knew what was to happen . . . what little control Lebrun still retained over his actions disappeared in a rush of wild and evil thoughts through his inflamed brain. . . . He stood three steps above Morin. . . . From the black stick he drew a slender blade.

Morin turned and saw—I saw—the blade plunging down toward him. He felt—I felt—the steel point thrusting deep into his body, the ingush of air through the wound that shocked the living tissue into a blaze of pain extinguished by death.

The incorporeal point of observation was not extinguished, however. I saw through

the eyes of Morin's spirit, still bound to the crumpled hulk that was his body. . . . Saw Lebrun hasten for a spade, drag the body to a high wall and dig; his thin form jerking with a fierce energy.

And he dug a shallow grave near the roots of a vine, and scattered the rich displaced earth elsewhere; and the body lay quiescent, damp soil against the still-warm flesh.

A vigil began.

In time—time was all, and yet nothing—the flesh cooled, and the microbes of the soil



began their scavenging; saphrophytic bacteria that took the decaying flesh and in their blind, busy millions made carbon dioxide, nitrogen and thus, with moisture from the heavens, liquid foods. And the cut roots of *vitis vinifera*, the hungry vine, grew and stretched and sucked at the foods and made sap.

Through the winter months the vine fed and grew rich with sap from the body of Morin. Time was nothing, and dead flesh was manure to the soil from which all life springs.

And in the springtime sun, the sap was drawn up through the body and leaves of the living vine and into the green grapes, which grew fat and ripe in the warm sunshine. And I knew my vigil of a year—an hour—a second—was ending; and the tempo of my awareness quickened still more.

Lebrun came again to the vine and pointed to the grapes, which were taken and pressed; and their rich juice was fermented, fortified, aged, bottled and laid away in his cellar to mature.

What primeval vainglory was this . . . a civilized man, self-proclaimed aristocrat, following in warped fashion the instinct that told savage peoples to eat of the flesh of their enemies that they might acquire their strength ? No. It was pure bravado, a sadistic exulting—a declaration to himself that he need not fear any penalty for his evil.

But the grapes had absorbed a strange virtue from the rotting flesh of Theophile Morin whose restless and unfulfilled spirit accompanied my consciousness.

For two years, the wine lay. . . . Time was nothing. . . . And I was aware of the past—the immediate past—of myself accompanying Lebrun to the cellar, following him back to the dining room, accepting the glass from his hand, seeing his head fall so heavily forward; the bald patch. . . . *

AND I raised my own head from cushioning arms. Time is nothing, and a long dream—a dream of three years—may take but seconds.

I looked at the clock. A minute had passed perhaps. I went round the table, shook Lebrun's shoulder. His head lolled limply. But his heart was still beating. Alcoholic coma, I assumed.

I knew what I had to do. Although it may only have been a desire to reassure myself that I had merely suffered a drunken dream with no foundation in truth, I was affected by a sense of urgency.

The house was quiet. There was no sign of Heloise or the servants.

A full moon was rising in the cold November sky, giving sufficient light for my quest. There was a snow-spa^de in the tonneau of my car which stood in the driveway near the door. I took it out and without hesitation went to one of the vines at the southwestern wall and began to dig, carefully removing a layer of earth at a time.

A bare six inches was sufficient. . . . In the flicker of my lighter, I saw that scraps of clothing and some fragments of dark flesh yet unconsumed by the teeming soil still adhered to the bones I had uncovered.

The cold dampness of the earth seeped through to my knees as I knelt.

"Praying for his soul, my friend?"

In all reason I should have been startled. Yet somehow I was not even surprised. I rose and turned to face Lebrun. The blade from his sword-stick was leveled at me.

"It is time," he added, "to pray for your own."

In the deceptive moonlight, he looked even taller and thinner.

I said: "It was excellent wine. You took care to give your vine a well-nourished soil."

"I shall be pleased to introduce you to another product of mine. This way, please. My three servants are visiting the town this evening; they left immediately after dinner. So if you thought of attracting attention—"

He was walking behind and a little to one side of me. I glanced back, smiling. "It's you who need help, Lebrun—not I. You may be mad, but I presume you value your neck. My company know my whereabouts."

"That may be so. But I shall abandon your car some distance from here. You will have left the house—and disappeared. An insoluble mystery. Your body will not be found."

"Heloise ?"

"My silent one is uncaring, apathetic . . ."

I'm sure I could have side-stepped Lebrun's blade at any time and disarmed him. Curiosity, not fear, kept me at its point. We

passed through a low, open archway on the further side of the walled garden and emerged in the shadow of a long, barn-like wooden building.

And he talked. Of his surpassing, but unreciprocated love for his daughter; of her particular beauties and the agonies he suffered when she deigned to notice young men; of the loving punishments he had inflicted on her body. . . . I won't recall details. It was infinitely pathetic, but infinitely disgusting.

Inside the wooden building, he switched on a lone, bare light. I saw great bins of apples and pears, crushing machines, and, centrally, an enormous vat.

BROAD wooden steps led to a narrow platform around its rim, which towered up near the roof-joists. The acid-swept vapors of crushed, fermenting fruit tightened my throat for a moment.

He urged me politely up the steps. An uncomfortable parallel occurred to me; this was not unlike the approach to a gallows or guillotine. But curiosity still restrained action.

We stood on the narrow platform. With his left hand, Lebrun released a counter-weight that slowly raised a huge lid covering the vat.

I saw, two feet from the top, the turgid surface of the liquor, flecked at intervals by the sluggish bursting of bubbles like marsh-gas from a disturbed pond.

"Lebrun's cider is scarcely inviting at this stage," said Lebrun conversationally. "But it possesses a curious quality." He nodded toward a joist over the vat. Several tiny, white skeletons of animals were arranged in a neat row.

"Rats, mice—picked clean by the corrosive action of the fermenting juices. Slower than inorganic acids in their action, perhaps, but just as certain. The quality of the product is not affected. If anything, it is improved. They were found when the vat was last drained, some years ago, for repairs.

"It is never completely emptied normally," he said. "Enough is retained to

assist in fermentation of fresh liquor. Enough to cover your body."

I had learned the savate under the most eminent practitioner in Paris. . . . My toe caught Lebrun's wrist as he lunged. The blade slid past my left shoulder.

Off-balance, Lebrun fell with an echoing splash into the great vat. He slowly disappeared.

Then his gray head, with its absurd bald patch, bobbed ridiculously to the surface.

Choking, spitting, whimpering. . . . A little gasping scream: "Help me. . . . Help me! I can't reach . . ." He scrabbled madly at the wooden sides with his long, thin fingers.

I have said that I am a hypocrite. Indeed, in many ways, I am not at all a pleasant person: I enjoyed every moment of Lebrun's drowning struggles.

He finally slid beneath the surface with exquisite slowness, his white, vainly clutching hands submerging last of all.

The turbulence in the vat died away. The liquor became still, a dark mirror, disturbed only by sluggish bubbles of gas. Among them appeared a few brighter, quicker-bursting bubbles. I watched until they, too, ceased.

I went back to the house for my hat and coat. When I came out again, I saw a slender white figure standing at the side of my car.

Heloise. Her eyes were less dull.

She said, "I shall tell everyone that he was called away suddenly on a long journey."

"You know. . . . ?"

She smiled.

I decided that I liked the daughter no better than the father. . . . But I said, "Get some things together and come away from this place . . . now."

She shook her head and looked toward the southwestern wall of the garden.

"I have a grave to tend."

I was next in the district with the 7th Battalion, the Homeshire Regiment shortly after D-Day.

I refrained from drinking any of the famous Lebrun cider-perry.