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HARVEST OF HATE

By

H. M. APPEL

(Author of "Daughters of Pain," etc.)



*Through the heat-
blasted, tinder-dry
wheat a black-robed
horror prowled, swinging
his bloody scythe to slack
the thirst of the angered rain gods.*

THE hot sun rose like a ball of crimson fire in a brazen sky. Reid Carter, after a sweltering, sleepless night walked out to the dusty farmhouse porch and looked across undulating miles of wheat that spread to the far horizon. He was drenched in sweat and his aching head throbbed. Rubbing red, inflamed eyes he glanced at a thermometer tacked to a post and muttered impotently:

"Hundred and four at dawn. What

will it be by noon? No wonder men go mad."

He frowned at his disabled car parked beneath a tree from which seared leaves had fallen, winced at the recollection of yesterday's grueling miles hard-driven over burning roads that had taken their toll of machine and man. Toward evening, with a melted bearing clattering like a trip-hammer, he had inched his way along a dust-choked trail from the trans-continental route to this, the nearest dwelling visible in all that lonely prairie, seeking shelter from a bitter gale that scorched the rolling plains like a blast out of hell. Cole Yates had given him a bed, listlessly commenting:

"A body can't sleep—but you can rest your bones a bit. If this drouth don't break soon, reckon Sally and I'll go crazy. That hot wind does something to you. . . ."

Carter had agreed and for valid cause. Blessed with wealth and a curiosity concerning people and places, he had traveled widely in both hemispheres. Once in South Africa, with a vicious harmattan howling down the West Coast, again in Asia Minor, he had seen men run amuck when the relentless sirocco unseated reason and bred in fevered brains a flaming lust to kill. Nor were the unfortunates punished, in lands where the nerve-rending effect of heat is properly evaluated. There the weather—not the man—was blamed for murder.

Mopping his streaming brow, plucking the folds of a sodden silk shirt from his muscular torso, Carter rumped moist, black hair and squinted dust-burned eyes toward barns where domestic animals huddled round an empty watering trough. Horses, gaunt as scarecrows, stood with drooping heads. A few scrawny cows lowed mournfully. Faintly, from somewhere deep in the wheat, the yapping of

a dog was borne to his ears on the blistering wind.

He saw the squat, aged figure of Cole Yates clinging to the topmost rung of a spidery ladder bolted to the windmill frame. Evidently, the mechanism had broken or slipped out of gear and he was making repairs. Carter shuddered, thinking that without water, in this arid belt no life could long survive.

He looked more closely. Yates was shading his eyes, rigidly staring across the acres of wheat at something which held him spellbound. The barking of the dog echoed more keenly now. Carter, peering through narrowed lashes, discerned the sprawling buildings of a neighboring farm which he had not noticed the evening before. A scant half-mile away it lay, across a dip in the land between.

Yates, shifting his gaze toward the house, saw him standing there and beckoned. When Carter approached, the old man called softly:

"Quick! Climb up here. I want to show you something."

MOUNTING the narrow ladder, Carter felt the metal hot beneath his hands. Smothering gusts, laden with powdery dust, swirled past and left him gasping. When his head was level with the farmer's boot, he inquired: "What's wrong? What do you see?"

"Look." Yates pointed, eyes somber beneath white, knotted brows. "I tell you, the heat's brewing dangerous notions in men's heads. No telling what will come of that."

Carter's glance followed the jerky gesture, scanned broad yellow acres nearly ready for harvest, where tall stalks writhed and twisted before the invisible force of the stinging gale. Blinking, as though to banish an illusion, he stared. Midway of the restless expanse a thin, grey line of fence was visible. Beyond,

in the neighbor's field, someone had mowed wide swaths in the standing grain, and these swaths—looming darkly grey against the golden wheat—formed gigantic letters which spelled the grim word:

H A T E

For a space Carter studied that ugly thing, wondered what festering feud had boiled to the surface here, perhaps stewed out of the forgotten past by unbearable temperatures that have the power to madden melancholy minds. He looked up at the troubled face above.

"Who lives there?" he asked. "Is it you that he hates?"

"Adolph Blount." Yates nodded. "And the hatred has lasted forty years. In all that time no word has passed between us. But—" his eyes narrowed knowingly—"it's Irvin, the son, who'll be hunting trouble. I drove him away last night, while you were trying to sleep, when he came to pester Sally."

A vision of the girl's appealing face rose in Carter's mind. Wistful, lovely, pathos darkening the eyes of cornflower blue, her hair a golden glory that matched the fields mid which she lived, Sally Yates had stirred something in his breast that he had never felt before.

"To pester her?"

Yates saw the tightening of his lips, the spark of anger in Carter's eyes, and nodded.

"You know what I mean. Irvin Blount has a cruel reputation with girls. I told him to go—not to come again—so that I'd never have to kill him."

"I see. . . ."

They began climbing down. Yates said: "Don't mention it to Sally. She doesn't realize. It's the Blount blood, I guess. Old Adolph lusting after women all his life. His girl, Alice, a wild one. . . ."

REID CARTER paused, pointing toward the field below. "Is that your dog? What excites it so?" The animal could be seen leaping and barking about the bare space formed by the top of the letter "H" in the ominous word. A darker blotch on the ground seemed the center of the creature's circling maneuvers.

"Maybe we'd better go and see," Carter said.

Then the old man looked toward his barns. "I wonder . . . Calf might have got out and foundered itself on grain."

Passing through the gate in a fence that ringed the farmyard, Yates paused, peering up and down.

"Funny. I left my scythe sticking here yesterday, after mowing some weeds. Now it's gone. Irvin went home this way last night, cussing like a crazy man. . . ."

At the boundary fence, Yates halted.

"In forty years," he muttered, "I haven't set foot beyond it."

Carter's eyes were glued to an object now partly visible ahead. He was over the barrier in a bound, ran forward. Then he slid to an abrupt stop, crying aloud at what he saw.

Yates followed more slowly. When he came abreast Carter, he stood transfixed. In the mown space two bodies lay tumbled awry. One was the body of a man, the other of a buxom girl. Their severed heads had rolled away when the terrific death blow struck, and come to rest nearly lip to lip, with the hair scarcely disarranged. Blood gushing from the gruesome stumps had drenched the earth and splattered the yellow straw.

"Alice Blount!" Yates blurted the name hoarsely. "And Harry Clark—who ought to have married her long ago. . . ." His gesture toward the girl's distended waistline was sufficiently explanatory. "See how their life-blood sprinkled like

rain upon the wheat." He stared like one hypnotized.

Carter looked away, sick at his stomach. "But who? Surely not her own brother."

Yates spoke to the dog roughly, waving it toward the house. Glancing obliquely at Carter, he said: "Who knows how it was when he came upon them?"

Of one accord they moved toward the fence. Carter asked, "What do we do? Notify the sheriff, of course. There'll be a world of trouble."

"No phone out this way." Yates paused, considering. "You being a stranger, maybe it would be better if you'd go tell the Blounts, while I walk down to the highway and flag a passing car." He added querulously, as Carter turned back upon the unwelcome errand: "No time to lose—for the undertaker. With them lying in this awful heat. . . ."

THE two were alone on the Yates porch. Carter looked long at the silent girl who sat with hands clasped round her knees, leaning against a post, gazing at the incandescent orb of the setting sun. Its red light pinked the cheeks which tragedy had paled, and accentuated dark shadows beneath her troubled eyes. He felt the wish to take her in his arms, to carry her away from this stricken land which lay prostrate before the blighting breath of the gale. But he said only:

"This scorcher—how long have you endured it?"

"Twenty days." Her voice was edged with hysteria. "It's driving men to murder! Oh, if it doesn't stop soon—"

They were silent again.

The sheriff had come and gone. His monotonous questioning had brought few facts to light. Carter, listening at the Blount farm, had heard Irvin declare that he walked straight home through the wheat and saw nothing amiss. Adolph

Blount, he said, had gone early to bed before he left the premises. An elderly female cook was sure that she had heard Alice and her lover talking in the dark, seated upon a bench beside the well, after Irvin had returned. Upon further questioning as to the hour, she became not so sure, finally lapsing into a sullen silence. The sheriff, ordering all—including Carter—to remain upon the respective farms, had departed after the bodies were removed. On the morrow, he said, he would return following a discussion of the case with the District Attorney.

Morbidly, depressed by the breathless heat, Carter asked Sally Yates: "What do you think? Did Irvin Blount do it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Fear twanged in her cry. He looked at her curiously. "How could any man do such a horrible thing?" When she turned toward him, his throat tightened with remorse over the terror his question had brought into her eyes. Brokenly, she murmured: "I'm not sure it was a man. Three nights I've watched—it—at my bedroom window, and thought I was slowly going mad."

"Watched what?" Carter stood up abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"I saw—something. A spectral shape, tall and black. It made no sound—it only stood and stared, as though it could see me in the dark. . . ."

He thought the girl about to faint and quickly moved to aid her, shocked by the vision of a lust-crazed maniac which her words had conjured.

From the house corner, out of the deepening gloom, Cole Yates spoke sharply. "You never told me that!" He strode into view, mopping his moist, frowning face with a blue bandanna. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you mention it to the sheriff? It was that cursed Irvin sneaking around at night, spying on you, wanting you—"

"No, no!" she cried nervously. "It

must have been a dream-shape. Perhaps I was seeing things unreal. But it frightened me so. . . ."

Cole Yates grated: "If he comes again. . . ." Swinging toward Carter, he asked: "Got a gun?" And when Carter shook his head—"Neither have I, but a club will do." He hurried around the house corner, soon returned with an axe upon his shoulder. He dropped a billet of wood upon the porch.

"Too hot to sleep," he said. "Suppose you sit there in the easy chair till day-break. And if that—that *beast*—shows up again, do what any man should do."

"Gladly."

For a moment, Yates stood in silence.

"I keep worrying about my stock—the barns," he said finally. "In this wind, one match tossed into the tinder-dry fodder. . . ." He started away, paused. "If anything happens, sing out. I'll hear you. Sally'd best go to bed."

A clump of footsteps in the dark drew their eyes toward the lane. Yates muttered: "What now?"

A tall, lean figure appeared in the gloom, said hoarsely: "It's me—Irvin Blount. I'm just warning you. Don't cross the boundary fence—again! We'll be on watch tonight."

"Again?" Yates swung the axe restlessly in one powerful hand. "What do you mean by that? I'll warn *you*. Let me catch you sneaking around here again, peeping in Sally's window, and I'll. . . ." He did not finish the threat.

"Me—peeping?" Unexpectedly, the tall visitor laughed—a jangling, raucous sound. As Reid Carter started angrily to his feet, the fellow turned away. "If you saw anything like that—" Blount's tone was venomous—"it's someone who wants her as much as I do, but is welcomed better." Then he was gone.

Yates held back the furious Carter,

muttering: "Let him go. There'll be a reckoning, later. . . ."

CARTER sat alone, in the obscurity of the gloomy porch, cursing the deadly temperature in which his flesh seemed to melt through every streaming pore. Sweat dripped off his nose, his ears, and ran in tiny rivulets down his back. The malignant wind seemed bent upon destruction of all life left on the desolate plain. If only that occasional flicker of lightning portended rain! How men would revel in a downpour, and the thirsty earth suck up each blessed drop. Perhaps, then, people would grow sane.

Irvin Blount's sneering remark had lodged like a canker in his brain. How many men "wanted Sally?" It occurred to Carter that he wanted her, too—that he loved this wistful girl of the wheatlands. Or was that, also, a distorted fancy born of the maddening heat? Did love come to utter strangers all unreasoning?

Impulsively, an hour before when she started indoors, he had caught her in his arms, pressed a kiss upon the quivering lips. So tightly she had clung to him, like a frightened child, returning his caress, then breaking free with a murmur of confusion.

The dog began to howl mournfully, down near the barn. Carter raised his head, listening; decided to investigate. What if a lurking killer had sprung upon Yates unawares? Suppose the man were dead? He stepped off the porch, gripping his club, and stole along a hard-trodden path, feeling his way in the dark.

The vague shape of the stable loomed ahead. At a door the dog leaped and whined, confined behind slatted bars. "Yates?" Carter ventured a low call.

There was no answer. Perhaps the man had left the animal there to give an alarm while he kept watch elsewhere. Or,

perhaps. . . . Carter stared into the gloomy interior, debating whether or not he should enter.

A girl's sharp scream of terror sent him whirling toward the house, heart leaping! Again the unnerving cry rang out, vibrant with fright, quavering with dread. He lunged forward breathlessly.

Rounding a corner, he nearly collided with a running form. It was Cole Yates who exclaimed: "What's wrong? Did you let him get at her?"

"Inside! She went to bed—"

Halting their instinctive rush across the porch, Sally Yates appeared at the screen, whimpering in her fear.

"It came—I saw it again. So tall, silent, standing at my window. Ah, God—I don't believe it was human. . . ."

Cole Yates stormed: "Why didn't you stay where I put you, Carter? You'd have seen him—had a chance to brain him. The sneaking whelp!"

"Your dog was howling. I went to the barn, thinking something might have happened—"

"And passed me in the dark, I suppose, when I went to listen near the fence. Did you pass Sally's window?"

"No. I followed the path."

Yates blew out his breath wrathfully. "No use hunting for him in the dark. He's a killer, but no doubt he ran. Or if he can hear me now, much good may it do him when I swing this axe against his neck."

They stood silent for a little while. Finally, Yates said: "I'll go look around a bit. Sally, lock yourself in. Fasten the shutters in spite of the heat. This time, Carter, you stay put—unless I call for help. I'll be near the barn. Can't get rid of the notion there might be a fire."

SOME time later Sally Yates came out to the porch, a faintly luminous figure in her white nightdress.

"I'll die in there with the house shut up," she whispered. "It's like an oven."

Carter got out of the chair and sat beside her upon the steps, the club across his knees. "It seems so quiet now. The wind is falling."

"That—that thing." She caught her breath a little. "It never returned on the other nights." Words thickened in her throat as though the muscles still were tight with terror. "Perhaps it won't this time. . . ."

"I'm sure it won't." He held her close, could feel the staccato pounding of her heart against his fingers. At last, he urged that she go inside and rest, or try to sleep in his chair. But Sally pleaded:

"How can any one sleep? Let me stay with you."

Some faint, unidentified sound from beyond the fence roused Carter. He listened intently, wondered if Yates were patrolling the field, decided that since the dog was quiet the old man must still be at the barns.

"What was it?" Sally's lips were close to his ear.

"Don't know. I'll go down to the edge of the wheat and listen."

She got up. He whispered: "Not you! Stay here. Go in and lock the door."

"No! I'm afraid. I'm going. . . ."

They made their way to the gate which stood ajar. At each side withered bushes drooped. Beyond stretched the field of grain, evanescent flashes of heat lighting making it resemble an expanse of restless water, its slight movement sensed rather than seen. The wind ceased abruptly, and in the unearthly quiet that followed, no slightest sound evidenced the presence of any living thing.

"It's so peaceful," Sally murmured. "Not a place where horrible things should happen."

Carter said dubiously: "Just the same, —I don't like standing here where some-

thing could leap out from behind the fence or shrubs. Come. . . ." He took her hand, walked a few paces into the wheat. "We'll stop here a bit. Sit down, if you'd rather."

The standing grain was level with their chins as they sat looking across the surface toward Blount's farm, where a single light gleamed like a lonely beacon. Hand in hand, wordlessly, each thrilled with the other's nearness, they waited while the minutes sped by. Carter found himself half bewitched by the spell of darkness and the subtle perfume of Sally's hair.

Suddenly, the Blount light winked out. Then on again. He stared at it curiously. Off, then on—once more it happened. Then the lamp burned clear.

Almost imperceptibly registering upon his ears came a whisper of sound that, at first, he scarcely noticed.

S-s-z-z. S-s-z-z. A barely audible hissing. *S-s-z-z. S-s-z-z.* His muscles tensed. Someone walking between them and the light? That would account for its blinking.

Sally sensed his uneasiness. Her ears discerned the cause, and she stiffened against his arm. Her words were so low they seemed the echo of a thought.

"It's like someone reaping—like Death swinging his awful scythe. . . ."

S-s-z-z. S-s-z-z.

Louder . . . nearer. . . .

A FLICKER of lightning momentarily illuminated the wheat. A scream was wrenched from the cringing girl's throat. And in that brief flash, with photographic clarity, Carter saw the gruesome thing that she had named.

Death—veritably—a tall and hooded figure, loose black robes flapping, hooked blade gleaming as it seethed through the toppling grain! Close! The great knife swinging, the greedy steel reaching out for their heads. . . .

Carter snatched up the girl in his arms and ran. Wildly, blunderingly, he stumbled toward the fence. He did not stop until he had placed Sally upon the porch. Then, loosing one loud call for Yates, he plunged back toward the field.

Over the dark expanse a silence hung. No visible motion betrayed the grim reaper's whereabouts. Carter cursed himself for having dropped his club in his haste. He stepped forward cautiously, eyes straining, muscles braced to meet a deadly onslaught.

He had gone but a few paces when he heard behind him an angry voice. It was Cole Yates.

"Come back here, you fool!" Yates cried. "Want to get yourself killed?"

The squat old man was waiting at the gate. "She says you saw it. That you took her down there with you! Fool—fool! Do you want her blood spilled over the thirsty wheat?"

They returned to the porch, found Sally huddled in the chair. Carter morosely speculated that perhaps all their minds were weakening under the strain. He wondered if, actually, they had seen that spectral figure.

Breaking an uncanny stillness, the torrid gale rose again to moan about the eaves and torture them with its enervating blast. Their jaded nerves leaped agonizingly, and Sally uttered a startled gasp. For on the wind was borne a distant cry, echoed down from the Blount place—a wild, weird call freighted with terror!

But neither Yates nor Carter made any move to investigate. Tight-lipped, silent, caught in the grip of sinister imaginings, they awaited the reluctant coming of the dawn. . . .

The east paled at last to opalescent grey, then flushed to rose. A blood-red sun dispersed thin wisps of cloud which fringed the low horizon. Sally had fallen

into a restless slumber, and Carter was saddened by the play of troubled dreams across her mobile face.

Cole Yates stirred, frowned, muttered cryptically: "It's light enough, now, to see."

Carter watched the old man's progress toward the windmill, saw him climb. When but halfway up, Yates waved his arm excitedly. Carter ran, made a hurried ascent.

Once on the mill he stared toward the waving plain of the nearest Yates field. There someone had mowed two sinister words which shocked him with their hideous portent:

M O R E B L O O D

A cloud of dust streaming in the vicious wind preceded the passage of a car along the lane.

"That'll be the sheriff," Yates said. "Wonder what he'll think of this?"

Descending, they went to meet the visitors, saw Irvin Blount get down and stand near the gate while the sheriff and a deputy came forward. Sally, awakened by their arrival, was waiting on the porch, her face pale and drawn.

"What happened last night?" the sheriff demanded gruffly. "Got anything to say, Yates?"

"Considerable," the old man answered quietly. "But maybe Sally'd better tell you. She saw it—"

"Oh, you've got to do something!" Tears welled in the girl's deep blue eyes. "It's driving me mad—peering through my window at night—prowling the fields, seeking someone to kill."

"You mean—" The officer scowled—"it came again? That thing you mentioned to Irvin Blount?"

SHE nodded. "First, at my window when I was trying to get some rest while the men were standing guard. Later, when I walked with Mr. Carter to

the edge of the field, we saw it in a lightning flash. Black, terrible, reaping the wheat as it came. Ready to butcher us—" Her voice shook miserably—"with that awful scythe."

The sheriff frowned at Carter. "You were with her? It wasn't a hallucination?"

"I wondered, last night," Carter said slowly, "but not any more. The fiend left a demand for all to see."

"Demand?"

"Letters cut in the grain again, crying its thirst. They read: 'More Blood.' It's the cursed heat. . . ."

At the sheriff's nod, his deputy went to see. The heavy-jowled, red-faced officer stroked his grey stubble of beard and frowned.

"Yates," he said, "Irvin Blount accuses you."

The old man seemed not surprised. He said quietly: "Irvin would, of course."

Sally cried: "Why—it was twice as big as dad! And besides, he was here. . . ."

Carter added, positively: "Impossible. It was a good six feet tall. More like—" He hesitated, glancing toward the lean, angular figure of Irvin Blount standing near the outer gate. "Well, it was much taller than Yates."

The sheriff's keen eye had not missed the look, nor did he misunderstand the unspoken thought. "It might be that way," he agreed. "And again it mightn't. You're a pretty tall fellow, yourself." He sighed. "Reckon we'll get to the bottom of it sooner or later. Killer'll overstep. . . ."

The deputy returned, confirmed the presence of the threatening words in the wheat, was instructed to walk with Blount to his home. "I'll drive in and gather a posse to make a search," his superior said. "You stay on the job until relieved—stay after they come for the corpse."

Carter stared. "Corpse?"

"Adolph Blount." The sheriff's face was expressionless. "Somebody slashed off his head last night, while he was standing watch down there in the dark." He glanced toward the lane, saw a small truck approaching. "There come the mechanics to fix your car, but—" His eyes grew flinty—"don't be leaving us, stranger."

Carter was looking at Sally Yates. Her cheeks had blanched. Unmoved by the officer's obvious suspicion, he said slowly: "I'll not be leaving."

THE three sat together on the porch, talking, after the sheriff had gone.

"Irvin Blount is crazy," Cole Yates observed. "Claims to be a genius. Worked for years on a rain-making machine. Some of the old-time Indians did better—" His lips curled cynically—"with their sacrifices."

Carter's eyes widened abruptly, as they sat in the gathering dusk. "*Sacrifices!* You don't suppose that Blount—"

Yates grumbled: "Funny, the sheriff not doing anything much about these murders. Just keeps saying that the killer'll give himself away. And now we face another night. . . ." He squinted up at the coppery sky.

Sally sat with chin cupped in her hand, brooding eyes turned to the west where the sun had drowned in turbid clouds.

"I wish night would never come," she said. "But perhaps it will bring a storm. If only this brutal wind would stop. . . ."

"Always it blows toward us from the Blounts." Yates began pacing up and down the porch. "You rightly name it brutal. The very heat of hate that it bears is enough, alone, to scorch the grain. Forty years it was abrewing in Adolph's heart. Now he's gone, but still there's Irvin. . . ." He snapped beads of perspiration from his brow with a hooked forefinger. "I keep thinking of fire, with

all that wheat ready to harvest. Yes, always the wind blows our way, not theirs. And a blaze would wipe us out."

"Better stick at the barns again," Carter suggested, comprehending the old man's fear. "That's where it would start, if someone—" He broke off, noting the girl's tense expression. "Sally and I will stay here."

Yates nodded briefly. "This time, see that you stay."

Darkness fell like a black pall over the wheatlands as storm clouds gathered, and distant mutterings of thunder promised the coveted rain. But still the hot wind blew, to sap men's strength with its scorching breath, to upset the delicate balance of their minds with its ceaseless torment. Reid Carter, circling his arm round Sally's waist, said softly:

"This is more than any girl should be asked to bear. I'm taking you away with me—if you'll go—when all this trouble is over. You know I love you, don't you?" "I'm glad." Her voice was very low. "I hoped it would be that way."

They talked for hours, of many things, forgetful of hovering tragedy. Yates came and went, prowling on silent feet, cursing the black clouds which yielded no single drop of moisture, the rumbling thunder which mocked their awful need.

"The very gods seem to hate us!" he raged hoarsely. "Is there no way in which they can be appeased?"

Carter's lips tightened. The old man was breaking, delirious with trouble and strain. Small wonder, though, he thought, when his own sound nerves twanged like overdrawn wires.

Sally said: "I've prayed and prayed. . . ."

"Try once again." Her father's voice was thick and husky. "Both of you—walk into the wheat and pray for the blessed rain. There's no one there. I've watched beside the gate since dusk. Go

kneel and pray—that the clouds may open before it is too late.”

Sally touched Carter's arm, whispering: “Will you? It might help. . . .”

Carter growled: “Give me the axe before we go. Just in case. . . .”

FEELING his way along the path, the girl's fingers warm on his bare arm, a single bitter word rose in Carter's throat unspoken.

“Madness!”

Their folly could be nothing less—venturing into the gloom where a fiend might lurk—yet his raw nerves screamed for action. Fingers clamped upon the axe-handle, he paused at the edge of the grain. Straining his ears he could hear no sound save the rustling of the stalks.

Sally pressed forward like one hypnotically guided. “Surely,” she whispered, “nothing will harm us when we come to pray.”

She knelt mid the billowing beards of wheat, pulling Carter down by her side. Every muscle tense with an awareness of danger, he listened to her sweet voice raised in supplication. As though in answer to her plea, lightning flickered across the sky, closely followed by a clap of thunder. In the brief flash his darting glance discerned no sign of menace.

Then thunder rolled again—all but drowning another sliding, stealthy sound that brought Carter leaping to his feet, glaring into the obscurity.

“What was it?” Sally sprang up.

The heavens flamed with flashes forking from zenith to flat horizon, throwing gaunt leafless trees into stark relief—silhouetting a tall, black-cowled figure that swung a gleaming scythe!

So close it stood that Carter heard the hiss of steel as the great blade missed his throat. Thrusting Sally behind him, he struck with the axe. In the dark he erred, was jerked off balance by the very

force of his blow. He stumbled into the path of the frightful weapon and felt his left arm slashed to the bone.

“Run, Sally!” he gasped. “Call your father—”

Her terrified, pitiful quavering evidenced the complete paralysis of fear. Bleeding, half-blinded by pain, he lunged toward the unseen, panting monster.

Colliding with the spectral shape, he leaped backward, spun the axe in a singing arc. Steel clanged on steel. Sparks streamed from the rasping parry, and as if directed by devilish intent, lodged on tinder-dry beards of wheat. The gigantic bellows of the wind blew them into flame, whipped the small blaze into a flaring conflagration!

In the hell-hued light, Carter saw the hooked blade swing again. Too late to meet it with the axe, he sprang forward, caught a blow of the handle upon his temple and dropped with senses reeling.

Then Sally's shriek seemed to shred the muscles of her throat. The ghoulish thing bounded toward her, gibbering: “Blood! Young blood to bring the rain! Hot blood for the sacrifice. . . .”

CARTER had struggled to hands and knees. Too late! The scythe was lifted for the kill. In utter desperation he hurled the axe, saw it deflect the descending blade.

A shot crashed, somewhere beyond the wall of leaping flames! The tall, black Thing tottered and fell. Men in uniform came leaping through the fire.

“Get him!” the leader exclaimed. “Just in time. . . .” He shook Carter's arm excitedly. “Which was it? How'd he get you down here?”

“Irvin Blount, of course,” said Carter wearily. “Trying to please the gods and make it rain.” He stumbled to Sally's side. She had fallen in a faint.

A deputy, bending over the black-

cowled form, exclaimed: "No wonder he fooled us with this crazy contraption!"

He held up a queer, shapeless headpiece designed to make a man look tall. Carter's face whitened. He whispered:

"Cole Yates."

"Sheriff had it figured right," the deputy explained, "when he posted us at both sides of the field. Said it was sure to be one or other of them, but the boys sort of bet on Blount when they let him loose to see what he would do."

Jagged lightning seemed to split the sky asunder. Seething across the field

came a slanting wall of rain. It swept down upon the tragic group, quenched the red blaze that raced through the wheat, blotted out the lurid scene.

Sally Yates revived, stood trembling in Carter's embrace while a tourniquet was fastened upon his bleeding arm. He snapped a warning when the deputy began to talk, dreading the awful truth which soon must be told to this girl whom he loved. Turning up his face to the deluge, he cursed the Fate that did not send relief in time to halt this bloody harvest of hate. . . .

He pressed Sally more closely to him.
