

# TERROR TALES

15¢



MISTRESS  
OF  
SATAN'S  
HOUNDS  
by  
FREDERICK  
C. DAVIS



FEATURE-LENGTH TERROR NOVEL  
OF MACABRE MYSTERY

QUEENS OF BEAUTY  
AND HORROR

by GEORGE EDSON

QUINLIVEN·ROGERS·CUMMINGS

# TERROR TALES



Volume Nine

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Number Two

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# MISTRESS OF SATAN'S HOUNDS

by  
Frederick C. Davis

*Was that monstrous little body which  
Jeff and Laura found the child of  
the lost serving girl—or was it  
some thing of the half-world brood,  
sired by the Hounds of Hell!*



*Unless You Are Prepared to Stay Awake All Night,  
Don't Read This Eerie Novelette!*

## CHAPTER ONE

Hear the Hounds of Hell!

**W**E WERE listening for the cry of the hounds. Though everyone living within earshot of the State Prison was busy in our usual quiet, routine way that evening, we were waiting to hear the voices of the bloodhounds come bay-



ing out of the distance—throaty, animal voices proclaiming that the escaped convict had been tracked down and captured.

It had been hours since the first shattering clangor of the great alarm bell had appraised the countryside of the escape of a prisoner from the great grey pile of the prison which sat like some squat misshaped guardian on the outskirts of the village. The searchlights on the granite

turrets had swung their beams into the surrounding woods; cars loaded with armed guards had rushed out to block the highways, and the warden had swiftly thrown a ring of men into the hills in an attempt to encircle the fugitive. But Ira Clegg, the keeper of the bloodhounds, had taken up his part in the chase unhurriedly. He had loosed his ugly band of dogs upon the scent of the fleeing man with ominous deliberation, grimly confident that the quarry could not escape them. He had good reason for his confidence. Never yet had the

great beasts failed him. Their unerring noses would follow a scent to the end of time—or until the poor haunted wretch gave himself up, driven mad by the ceaseless baying always at his back.

We had listened to the fierce voices of the hounds as they skirmished into the woods, farther and farther, relentlessly following the fugitive's trail; and now we were waiting for them to return, to hear them crying out the savage victory of the man-hunt.

I had gone to Laura Blayne's home soon after dinner. She was a girl of gay, heady spirit. With her slender figure, her light brown eyes and her sparkling, honey-colored hair, she was as delightful and as intoxicating as champagne; but this evening she seemed preoccupied. The merriment that usually bubbled within her was gone. Taking her hand, and finding that it seemed chilled, I asked anxiously:

"What's distracting you, darling? We've got to make the final arrangements for our wedding, you know—but you're scarcely listening."

Her smile was a bit forced, I thought. "It's really a silly thing to worry about, Jeff," she said, "but somehow I can't get it off my mind. Something that belongs to me is missing.

"Something valuable?" I asked quickly.

She shook her head. "No, but—you see, when we went to the dance last night, I wore that lovely pair of step-ins that Aunt Hetty gave me for my birthday. I was going to launder them this evening, before you came, but when I looked in the hamper I couldn't find them. I searched everywhere, but—they're gone."

"Don't let it concern you too much, honey," I said with a smile. "I promise to provide you with all the beautiful lingerie you deserve. Is anything else missing?"

"No—nothing else."

I couldn't help chuckling. "Do you think someone stole the step-ins?"

Laura looked at me strangely and said, in a quiet tone, "I *know* someone stole them."

"But who could have done it?" I protested, still amused. "There hasn't been a servant in this house since Nilla Lejune left yesterday. Surely you don't imagine that someone sneaked in from outside solely for the purpose—"

"That's exactly what happened, Jeff," Laura broke in. "I found one of my bedroom windows wide open. Someone had crawled in and—"

"Look here, darling," I said. "It's not worth getting worked up about. There are so many things about our wedding that must be decided tonight—"

"Jeff!" Laura's fingers closed tightly on mine. "It makes me afraid, somehow. It must mean something. It's so strange, there must be a reason—"

**I**T WAS then that we became conscious of the sharp, fierce barking of the hounds.

Looking out the window, Laura and I saw Ira Clegg passing on the road with his pack of dogs. They were huge beasts, with great, drooping jewels. Everybody in the village disliked them. Though we rarely saw them, we heard their barking day and night and had grown to heartily detest the brutes. Now their fangs gleamed as their piercing voices rang through the darkness.

Straining on their leather leashes, they were pulling Ira Clegg along behind them. They seemed to be savagely eager and there was a strange urgency in their voices, as if their sanguine hunting instincts had not been fully appeased. It was with a start that I realized they were heaving themselves toward the gate of Laura's home.

"They—they're trying to come in here!" Laura exclaimed breathlessly.

Ira Clegg dragged on the braided thongs that were hooked to the dogs' brass-studded collars.

"Satan!" he shouted at them in his rasping tone. "Moloch! Baal! Orion, Anubis! Stop it! Come back! Wait! Do you hear me, you devils? *Wait!*"

What did it mean, that last snarling word? Wondering, I stared at the gigantic bloodhounds as they thrust their black, wet noses at the gate. They complied with Ira Clegg's grating order—but reluctantly, I thought. They seemed to be obediently bridling a wild impulse to jump the fence and leap to the window from which Laura was gazing. Their great red-rimmed eyes, shining blackly and fiercely, were fixed on her.

"*Wait!*" Ira Clegg had snarled at them. But why? What did that ominous order imply?

The question shot a sudden, unaccountable fear through me; and there was no answer in Ira Clegg's inscrutable face. Lean, grotesquely tall, his long arms stretching with the effort to restrain the powerful dogs, he gazed into the window at Laura—gazed with eyes as black and evil as theirs—gazed with craven eyes that were set in a cruel heartless face.

Laura shrank from the window. I opened the door and stepped out to shout at Ira Clegg above the hungry barking of the dogs.

"Get along!" I said. "Get those damned brutes away from here!"

At the sound of my voice, the hounds became ominously silent. Their canine gazes seemed to be a black threat. The intensity of the anger in their eyes sent another sharp chill through me . . . Ira Clegg said nothing, but stared at me fixedly, sullenly. Then, still silent, the hounds and their keeper turned from the gate.

I took Laura into my arms, and felt her trembling. As the hounds loped away in the darkness, she listened fearfully to their throaty baying—listened until their voices became faint in the distance. Ira Clegg and his dogs must have reached the isolated hollow in the hills, where he lived, before

she raised her frightened eyes to mine.

"What the devil's the matter with us?" I said quickly, then. "Why should we be upset by Ira Clegg and those damned hounds of his?"

Before Laura could speak, a car drew to a stop in front of the house. As two men alighted from it, an ambulance sped past, on its way to the State Prison. Sheriff Qualen and Randall Crain came in soberly.

"There's no need to ask if Ira Clegg's bloodhounds cornered the convict," I said. "They always do."

SHERIFF QUALEN was a big, tough, gruff man; but he seemed to shudder. "They got him, all right," Qualen said. "In my time, I've seen other bloodhounds, besides Ira Clegg's, follow a trail. I've seen 'em run their man into a corner, then frisk around him and lick his hand. But not those dogs of Ira Clegg's. Once they corner a man, they attack him like starving wolves. This poor devil—he's so badly bitten and clawed, I doubt if he'll live."

"I wonder why Ira Clegg's dogs are so damnably savage?" Randall Crain said. He was a handsome, dapper young man, who had come to the village only recently, seeking, he said, a quiet place to spend his vacation. "He trains them to be as fierce as wild jungle animals, of course—but I wonder how?"

We had all wondered about that, and none of us knew the answer.

"Was it Len Glander who broke out of the prison, sheriff?" I inquired.

Len Glander was the most notorious among the inmates of that great grey fort outside the village. A thoroughly conscienceless racketeer, he had been convicted as the overlord of a State-wide vice ring. Recently rumors had been whispered about that Glander might yet outwit the law, that the prison was not strong enough to hold him.

"No, it wasn't Glander," Sheriff Qualen answered. "Glander's too smart to've tried

it. He's learned that he wouldn't stand a chance of getting away from Ira Clegg's hounds—same as every other one of those convicts realizes. The poor devil who broke out today was a stir-bug who didn't know any better."

Randall Crain said suddenly, "Look here. Qualen and I had just started out, trying to find Nilla Lejune, when those sirens let go. Now that the convict has been caught, we've decided we'd better make a general search for her. She's still missing, and something may have happened to her. Will you join us, Jeff?"

"Certainly," I said.

Nilla Lejune was a buxom girl of eighteen, none too bright, who lived with her father in a little shack in the woods. They fed themselves on the few dollars she made by doing general housework for several families. She had been coming to Laura's home every day, and she had also been taking care of Crain's place. But yesterday she hadn't shown up. Crain had failed to locate her, then had asked Sheriff Qualen's help.

"Strange thing," Qualen said. "Nilla's father is half crazy with worry over her, but I think he knows where she's gone. He won't tell us much—seems to be afraid to. But there's one thing he keeps muttering about—he keeps saying that somebody stole a pair of Nilla's old shoes, just before she disappeared."

"Somebody stole—I"

I choked off my own words. Icy fear trickled again into my heart as I turned quickly to gaze at Laura. Suddenly she was deathly white. Her lips were trembling; and her eyes were full of dread.

"I—I knew that, Jeff," Laura said in a whisper. "Nilla told me about it, the last time she was here. It worried her terribly—she seemed to be listening and watching, as if she expected something to happen to her."

And Randall Crain went on. "That's not all," he said grimly. "Nilla was cleaning

up my place, when suddenly she became so terrified she ran out of the house. Later, when I searched, I didn't find a sign of her, but I did see Ira Clegg and his dogs."

A little cry came from Laura's lips. She seemed to realize some frightful significance in this. The dread in her eyes grew sharper as Crain went on.

"Ira Clegg's dogs were following a trail," he said. "They seemed to be half crazy—wild with the scent. They were barking in a horrible, savage way. They were so fierce—like starving, four-footed demons—"

AT THAT very moment we heard the urgent voices of the hounds. Their cries rose out of the quiet night, shrill, piercing, somehow triumphant. The barking brought with it an uncanny chill of revulsion. Laura shuddered, her eyes wide with fear, her fingers pressing her lips to stifle a cry of her own . . .

"Let's not waste any time about this, Jeff," Sheriff Qualen said with sudden determination. "Take your car and search along Aspen Road. Crain and I will cover the other side of the main highway. I—somehow, I'm afraid it may be too late already."

He strode from the house, strangely anxious for such a hard man, and Crain hurried after him. I was taking up my hat when Laura said, quickly. "Wait, Jeff!" She ran into her father's study; and she came back carrying her father's rifle, a fine .22 repeater. She pressed it into my hands.

"We may need this, Jeff," she said in a husky tone. "Please don't tell me I can't come with you, because I—I won't stay here alone. "I'll be much—much safer with you, Jeff."

She was so disturbed, I could neither protest nor question her. She hurried out to the car with me. Neither of us spoke—we were both silenced by that strange, unknown dread that was growing within

us. The wild clamor of Ira Clegg's hounds continued as we turned into Aspen Road, a narrow dirt lane that serpented through the hills and passed the kennels. Their savage voices grew sharper and louder while we went on; and abruptly Laura seized my hand.

"Jeff," she said, tensely quiet. "this isn't the first time that Nilla Lejune has been missing."

"I know," I said. "About a year ago—"

Nilla Lejune had disappeared in the same way. For several days we had searched, without finding her. Then she had come back, strangely changed, brooding, silent, fearful. She seemed unwilling to discuss what had happened to her—and she wouldn't tell where she had been.

"Then," Laura whispered, "only a few months ago—do you remember. Jeff?"

Nilla Lejune had quit working for a while. She had stayed at home, strictly secluded, for several weeks. We had thought she was ill, for Dr. Wentworth had been called by her father. But Dr. Wentworth would say nothing about his visit; he had simply stared at anyone making inquiry, and had turned away with a grave wag of his head. At last Nilla had resumed working, even more crushed and hopeless. Her eyes seemed to look out of a wretched mask. And her father had become a recluse, as if overwhelmed by the burden of an unspeakable shame.

"Have you heard, Jeff—" Laura asked it in a whisper. "Have you heard that there is a small grave hidden in the woods behind Jules Lejune's shack?—a grave the size of a baby's. And that there's a headstone on it—but the stone is blank—with-out a name."

"Come, Laura!" I said. "You're too upset—"

"But I've got to tell you this. Jeff!" Laura insisted. "I've always thought, somehow, that—the first time Nilla Lejune disappeared—something *took* her—took her, body and soul. And that later,

she gave birth to some horribly unnatural child—some sort of monster, so terrible that its very existence has been kept secret from everyone. That would account for— for—"

"Please, Laura," I implored. These strange recollections were feeding fuel to my own burning fear. "We can't be sure—"

"Jeff, you *must* listen. Think of what has happened now. First, Nilla's shoes were stolen. Next Randall Crain saw Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds following a trail through these hills, at night. We haven't seen Nilla since. Jeff! I believe it was Ira Clegg who did that tragic thing to Nilla a year ago, whatever it was—and now he may have done something even worse. Jeff—it's such a ghastly, such an impossibly horrible thought, but—all of Ira Clegg's hounds are males."

"Good God!" I blurted.

"Then—tonight! That piece of underwear missing—a piece I'd worn! Those dogs at the gate—and the way Ira Clegg looked at me. Do you remember what he shouted at them. Jeff? 'Wait!' He told them *to wait!*'"

**E**VEN as Laura spoke so fearfully of those damnable brutes, their cries ceased. Suddenly they stopped their hoarse questing, and silence closed down—so suddenly, so completely that the hush seemed fraught with portents of an unknown terror.

Startled, I braked the car; for at the same time a light shone across the hills, from behind the high board fence that barricaded Ira Clegg's property against the world. The light was still; it gleamed close to the ground; and it cast moving shadows across the cracks between the boards, as if Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds were bent upon some secret, evil task. . . .

I took up the rifle and left the car *with* Laura at my side. Starting across the slope, we walked cautiously, hopeful that the



sharp ears of the dogs would not detect our presence. If the wind had not been blowing in our faces, those brutes—possessing the keenest sense of smell of all dogs—would have scented our approach at once. We crept closer and closer, until we could peer into the yard through a broken board, and we saw—

What we saw held us transfixed, shocked and chilled with horror.

The hounds of Ira Clegg were standing in the light, their huge heads lowered, their eyes gleaming evilly, their nostrils distended with hot, hungry breath. They stood in a circle, as if in the positions of a secret and obscene ritual; and in their midst Ira Clegg was kneeling. He was crouched and at work, scooping moist, black earth into a small shovel, piling it into a hollow in the ground. His canine face was a cruel mask and his doglike eyes gleamed evilly. And in that dank trench—

The dirt half-covered a white figure—the full-curved, nude body of a young woman! Her waxen face was turned to the dark sky, her staring eyes were glazed in death. One of her hands was lifted and clenched, as if locked with the spasm of her last unbearable agony. . . . It was— it *must* be the body of Nilla Lejune. And Ira Clegg was burying it—piling rich, black loam upon it—while his bloodhounds watched with their gloating canine eyes. . . .

Then, suddenly, a savage, hungry howl broke from the throat of one of the beasts. Neither Laura nor I had moved. We could not have made the slightest sound. The quivering, distended nostrils of the hound must have caught our scent. The great dog reared up from the secret grave, barking fiercely; and at once the hoarse voices of the others roared in a terrifying chorus. Before Laura and I could take a single step backward, the big beast bounded wildly toward us.

It hurled itself at the fence where we were standing. There was a sudden, crashing sound. The impact of the hound's body

jarred the whole fence; and one of the weather-rotted boards broke loose. It fell away, leaving an opening. And the savage hound leaped through! With fangs bared, it sprang—upon Laura!

She cried out in terror as the great brute struck her down. She fell to the black ground; she lay stunned as the hound crouched over her. Saliva dripped from its jaws as it nipped and pulled at her clothing. Its fangs tore the cloth, ripped it away! Laura lay helpless, pinioned by the animal fiend, as it growled above her.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Beasts Cry for Blood

IRA CLEGG had run to the break in the fence. His voice snarled through the ear-piercing barking of the dogs.

"Moloch! *Moloch!* Come back, you devil! Wait! *Wait!*"

The giant hound had leaped upon Laura so swiftly, so savagely, that I had been stricken with a paralysis of terror; but that one awful word grating from Ira Clegg's throat—"Wait!"—whipped me into a frantic defense of the girl I loved.

I swung the rifle to my shoulder. Aiming with desperate swiftness, I pulled the trigger once. Fire leaped from the muzzle of the weapon and the report echoed off into the night. For a moment, the barking of the hounds became more frenzied. They had crowded to the opening in the fence; and they were peering at the brute named Moloch. Blood was streaming from the bullet-hole in its massive head.

Suddenly the hound slumped down upon Laura; and another terrified cry broke from her lips.

Fearful that the other dogs would leap upon her, I swung around. I aimed my rifle at them. They were crouched at the fence, around Ira Clegg. Their dark ugly eyes were fixed upon Laura, and the scent of the dead dog's blood was pouring into their quivering nostrils, inflaming them

with a primitive thirst; but a command from Ira Clegg was holding them leashed—that same dread word, "Wait!"

"Keep those brutes back!" I shouted at him. "Keep those damned dogs away from her! By God, I'll kill any of them that comes near her!"

Ira Clegg stared at me, silent, his face hard with vindictiveness; and yet, there was a strange sadness in his evil eyes—for one of his hellish hounds was dead . . .

Laura was struggling to free herself from the crushing weight of the lifeless beast. She sprang up, her dress tattered, and stained by its blood. Frantic to escape an overwhelming terror, she whirled and ran down the black-shrouded hillside. Still holding Ira Clegg and his dogs in check with the leveled rifle, I retreated to the spot where we had left the car.

"Quick, Jeff!" Laura gasped. "Take me away—take me away!"

She was huddled in the seat, her hands pressed over her face, sobbing with revulsion and fear. Starting the motor, I sped her away from that spot. While I turned toward the main highway, seeking my way like a man trapped in an inescapable nightmare maze, she struggled to gain control of herself, and by the time we reached the cement road she had conquered her panic.

Behind us, as we rushed, we heard the barking of the hounds—sharp, piercing, vengeful.

"You killed one of Ira Clegg's dogs!" Laura said suddenly. "Oh, God, Jeff! He'll never forgive us for that. He'll—he'll—"

"Every damned one of those beasts should be wiped out!" I blurted.

And Ira Clegg with them, I thought. I was convinced now that those ugly bloodhounds and their keeper were an unspeakable menace to the peace and goodness of our homes. Whatever ghastly thing they had done to poor Nilla Lejune, I was grimly determined that they would suffer for

it. I was coldly glad, therefore, when I saw Sheriff Qualen's car swing alongside us.

"WHAT the devil's the matter with those hounds?" he asked, when we stopped. "Listen to them! They sound wilder than I've ever heard them before. What's happened?"

Gripping Qualen's arm, I said, "Now we know what's become of Nilla Lejune. Laura and I saw her—dead—being buried by Ira Clegg."

Randall Crain was at the sheriff's side. "Dead!" he exclaimed. "God! Listen to me, Sheriff. I haven't mentioned this before, but now I must. We've all wondered how Ira Clegg trains those hounds to be so savage, so sure on a man's trail. Well, isn't it possible that he whets their appetite for blood *with* blood—human blood?"

As Qualen stared at Crain, I rushed on: "You've got to come with me. What Crain just said is probably all too true, but this is even worse—far worse than murder. This is something hellish—something so vile, we can't allow it to exist."

Qualen said grimly. "I'll look into it right now."

Laura huddled beside me as I drove in the wake of the sheriff's car. She was still too numbed, too fearful to speak—but I knew that her conjectures concerning Nilla Lejune were now a stark, dreadful reality. Remembering the bit of silk that had been stolen from her—the garment scented with the perfume of her body—I was chilled.

*The hounds are hungering for her! ran through my revolted mind. The hounds—and their evil keeper want her—they mean to take her!*

When Qualen's car stopped at the gate of Ira Clegg's isolated property, I took Laura's hand reassuringly.

"Stay here, honey," I urged her. "With the doors closed and the windows up, you'll

be safe until we get back from the hunt."

She nodded uneasily. Leaving her in the closed car, I joined Sheriff Qualen and Randall Crain. This gate was the only entrance to Ira Clegg's remote property. The board fence formed a stern boundary around it. On it were scores of signs, forbidding trespassing and threatening prosecution. Ira Clegg, we knew, guarded this place with a crazy sort of jealousy; he rarely allowed anyone to enter. To attempt it, we realized, would bring the savage dogs leaping upon us, unless Ira Clegg commanded them to be quiet.

Sheriff Qualen knocked loudly on the gate. Long moments passed before the light of a lantern appeared behind it. A panel opened, and the hard, cruel face of Ira Clegg looked out.

"We want to come in, Clegg," the sheriff said grimly. "We want to search the place. You can refuse, because I haven't any warrant—I can get one, and I wouldn't advise you to make me do that. Are you going to open the gate?"

The panel closed. In another moment the latch clicked. Ira Clegg opened the way. Qualen, Crain and I stepped through. The instant we set foot on Ira Clegg's property, the hounds began a furious yelping. Clegg shouted up the hill at them; and their fierce voices subsided. Then he peered at me in that same inexorably vengeful way, as if he were grieving over the loss of Moloch and insanely determined to make me suffer for the beast's death.

Looking at his lean, gleaming face in the light of the lantern, I wondered: What do we know about this man? He had lived here, in this hollow among the hills, all his life—lived here with his hounds. His only means of livelihood was using the dogs to track down convicts who escaped from the prison. Each time he effected a capture, the warden paid him a small reward. But money wasn't the real reason he had become a man-hunter. We all knew

that he took ghoulish delight in allowing his dogs to track down a fugitive, as if it gratified some cruel, mad hunger in his warped soul.

**H**E SEEMED to live for the moment when the sirens would begin a shriek, when he could unleash his ugly hounds upon the trail of the quarry. Yes, the capture, the running down of the hunted, sated some thirst for blood that possessed him. This was all we knew about Ira Clegg—no more than if he had crawled up from Hell itself—yet I felt grimly certain, now, that he was consumed with even more terrible appetites. The poor, nude, lifeless body of Nilla Lejune, buried secretly in the dark hillside, was ghastly proof of that.

"I'll take you to the place, sheriff," I said, turning in the direction of the hidden grave.

I felt Ira Clegg's eyes still fixed upon me as we walked through the night. The ground within the fence was rank with weeds except where bare areas looked like diseased scars. Ira Clegg's miserable home sat in the center of the enclosure, next to the kennels. We could hear the dogs prowling and sniffing inside their house—a better dwelling than Ira Clegg's own. We crossed the wretched yard; and I paused, pointing to a soft spot on the slope.

"She's buried there," I said, as Sheriff Qualen turned his flashlight upon it.

Ira Clegg said nothing. Frowning, the sheriff dropped to his knees and began to dig with his hands. Randall Crain aided him. They scooped away the loose, dark earth quickly. In a moment their fingers touched the body. It became visible in the dirt.

But it was not the soft, white flesh of a young woman. It was covered with dark, matted fur! And as the sheriff's hands cleared the earth away, I saw that the body in the grave was not human at all. It was actually a huge dog—the remains of Moloch.

Qualen peered at me strangely, closely.

"It was there," I said in a husky tone. "Laura and I both saw it. I tell you, we saw the corpse of Nilla Lejune buried at this very spot."

Still Ira Clegg said nothing; but his eyes burned at me. Qualen and Crain resumed their investigation. They dragged the dead dog from the hole, then dug even deeper. But soon they struck harder, packed earth. It became evident that to open the hollow to any greater extent would be futile. As I rose, I stared stunned into the cavity.

*Where is the corpse of Nilla Lejune? I wondered numbly. What has this human dog-devil done with her lifeless body?*

"Clegg," I said, turning upon the keeper of the hounds, "you knew that Laura and I had seen it. You've had time to dig it up and hide it somewhere else. Where is it now? Answer me, damn you!"

Ira Clegg answered in his snarling tone: "I don't know what you're talking about."

I stepped closer to him. "How did Nilla Lejune die?" I demanded. "What brought her here, and what took her life? You know the answers to those questions, Clegg, because you're responsible—you and those damned beasts of yours. By God, if you don't tell us—"

Sheriff Qualen caught my wrist as I raised my fist. "Easy there, Jeff," he cautioned. "You'd better leave this to me. This has got to be handled in the regular way that the law prescribes. I'll come back here in the morning, with a warrant, and I'll keep on looking until I find her."

Still staring at the keeper of the hounds, I said hoarsely, "Listen to me, Clegg. This evening you sneaked into Laura's home and stole something belonging to her. I know why you want it. But damn you, you're never going to use it for that horrible purpose. You're going to give it back to me right now, do you understand? Give it back, Clegg!"

But again the master of the bloodhounds said in his grating voice: "I don't know

what you're talking about, and don't care."

"By God, Clegg," I said, "I'll tear this place apart until I find it. Give it back!"

Sheriff Qualen took a tighter hold on my arm. "Better leave this to me, Jeff," he said again. To Ira Clegg, he added, "You can expect me back the first thing in the morning."

THE sheriff forced me to walk along with him. I still felt Ira Clegg's gleaming eyes fixed upon me; but then, when I looked back, I saw him tenderly replacing the body of Moloch in the grave. Reaching the gate, Qualen and Crain and I went out. Laura was still in the closed car—safe, I saw with profound relief.

"Better watch yourself, Jeff," the sheriff said quietly. "It isn't wise to challenge Ira Clegg like that."

"I'm not worried about myself," I answered. "I'm anxious for Laura. The same ghastly thing that happened to Nilla Lejune might happen to her, whatever it was. I tell you—"

"Better stick close to her, then, Jeff," Qualen said soberly. "Take her home, and stay with her."

He turned to his car. Randall Crain also climbed into it, suggesting that the sheriff drop him off at his place. They started away. As I turned back toward Laura's home, I explained to her what had happened. She was less distraught now, and puzzled. When we reached the crossing at Aspen Road, she suddenly took my arm.

"Turn back, Jeff," she said urgently. "We know that Ira Clegg didn't have much time—not time enough to take her very far away. But he has another chance now, and by morning he may have hidden her so well, we'll never find her. We must look—try to find her before—"

"Yes," I agreed. "But you're not afraid to go back?"

"Not while I'm with you, Jeff," she said. "And we still have the rifle."

When we neared Ira Clegg's place, I

turned out the headlights. Then, switching off the motor, we rolled along soundlessly and stopped at almost the same spot. I took the rifle and a flashlight, and got out. Laura kept close to me as we worked our way silently toward the break in the fence.

Careful to conceal the glow of the torch as much as possible, I found the wet marks on the ground—the blood of Moloch. There were prints of dogs' feet in the loose earth. Laura's hand clung to my arm as I began to follow them. The tracks led down the slope; they were clearly visible in the dust of the road. The dogs had come down here and had gone into the woods. Our task was more difficult while we groped our way through the trees.

A strange and dreadful reversal, I thought—trailing the bloodhounds whose every instinct was attuned to the trailing of others.

At a damp, dark spot our search ended. We found many prints of dogs' feet there, in the soft, wet earth. It was a clearing, piled with rock that had been pulled out of an old excavation. I gave the light to Laura. Placing the rifle nearby, where I could snatch it up in an instant, I began moving the rocks. I tore away one after another. A little cry came from Laura's dry lips when we caught our first glimpse of the white body entombed under the stones.

Revulsion filled me as I uncovered the corpse of Nilla Lejune. Her dead flesh bore the marks of fangs and claws. Blood was caked on her breasts, her abdomen and her plump flanks.

All the fears that Laura had voiced struck back at us then—the tales concerning Nilla Lejune's previous disappearance and the little grave hidden in the woods behind her home. And we could hear the barking of the hounds as we stood there—a hungry, anxious, crying . . .

Hastily I covered the poor dead body with the stones. I drew Laura away. She

clung to me, as if fearful that the fiendish beasts might leap at her from the shadows. We paused at the car, and her dread-filled eyes looked deep into mine.

"Sheriff Qualen must know about this tonight," I said quietly. "But a few minutes won't make any difference. We've got to learn the rest of it. I want to find out before any action is taken against Ira Clegg, so that we can build up the strongest possible case against him. I'm going to Jules Lejune's shack right now."

"Yes," Laura said in a whisper. "We must know—we must know the truth . . ."

LAMPLIGHT was shining from the windows of Jules Lejune's shack. It was darkly isolated, the only dwelling within miles. As we went to the door, we could hear Jules Lejune moving about, muttering and moaning to himself. In answer to my knock, he hurried to the door and stared out at us.

His eyes were haggard, his face wretched. A small, thin man, he seemed overwhelmed with anguished worry. He said nothing, but stared at us, until I spoke.

"I'm sorry to bring you such sad news, Jules," I said, "but—I think you already know what it is."

"Nilla—" His voice was a miserable whisper. "Nilla is—dead?"

I took his thin shoulders in my hands. "Nilla is dead," I said. "Soon we will bring her back to you, but first you must tell us everything you know about what happened to her."

Suddenly he looked terrified. "No!" he blurted. "I cannot tell you that! I am—afraid—afraid!"

My grip on his shoulders tightened. "You can't keep it a secret any longer, Jules," I insisted. "Think, man! Do you want the same horrible thing to happen to another girl—to Miss Blayne?"

Jules Lejune's eyes turned widened upon Laura. "No, no!" he wailed. "Miss

Blayne is so beautiful. It would be so awful, so awful. But I cannot tell you! I am afraid—afraid of *him*—and the dogs!"

Jules Lejune winced under the pressure of my clenching hands. "You're going to tell me the truth!" I demanded. "I'm going to hear it, if I have to beat it out of you. Don't you realize this ghastly thing will go on and on, unless we take some desperate means of stopping it now—unless you help us to stop it? God, you wouldn't want that on your soul. Speak up!"

Jules Lejune wrung his hands, and tears welled into his eyes. He rocked from side to side with unbearable anguish. "The poor little girl," he muttered. "The poor, foolish little child. She was so trusting, so warm, so young. My poor little Nilla." Then a desperate tightness settled upon his mouth. "Even I do not know of all that happened—but I know that she went to him."

As if eager to rid his weary soul of a shameful burden, he hurried on.

"Perhaps because he brought her a few little gifts—I do not know. But a year ago, when she went away, she was—there. With him! In that place with the hounds! When she came back, all the sweetness was wrung out of her. It was like she had come back from the pit of Purgatory. But even then, she told me so little. And then, in nine months' time . . ." he paused and a shudder shook his spare frame.

"Come," he said sadly and took my arm.

Laura and I, filled with wonder and anxiety, followed the wretched little man from the shack. He led us along a mossy trail. In a remote clearing, difficult to reach, he came to a pause. I turned the beam of my flashlight across it. Laura made a frightened sound—for then we knew that the strange rumors we had heard were true.

In the clearing there was a grave—the tiny grave of a child. It was marked with a headstone—a headstone that was blank

and white in the surrounding darkness.

"Little Nilla wanted no one to know," Jules Lejune said in a quavering whisper. "She was so ashamed. When this—this child was born, I alone was with her. Thank the merciful God that it lived only a few hours! A blessing that it died! At night, when no one else could know, I buried it here—this horrible little thing that brought shame upon us. This—horrible little monster that was covered with fur and—and looked like a deformed little dog!"

**S**HOCKED, Laura and I watched the stricken man turn from the unmarked grave. Sobbing, he stumbled along the trail and we followed him back to the house. He shut the door tightly, once we were inside, and glanced around fearfully.

"I am afraid!" he gasped. "Afraid of *him*. Listen! Do you hear them? Do you hear the beasts?"

The barking of the hounds was carrying out of the dark distance, startlingly sharp and clear. We listened fearfully; and Jules Lejune shrank away.

"They are close—coming closer!" he blurted.

Again I gripped his arms. "Nonsense!" I said, desperate to hear the rest of his **frightful** story. "The wind is blowing this way, carrying the sound, that's all. Go on, Jules. You've got to go on!"

He tried to steady himself, though the shine of abysmal dread remained in his eyes.

"Poor little Nilla, poor little child! Her soul was so sick, I was afraid she would die. But the doctor came, and said she would be well. When she got up, strong again, she was not the same. She was afraid, as I am afraid now—full of fear, day and night. It seemed like Ira Gregg had some evil power over her, a power that was trying to draw her back, and she was fighting it. She listened and watched, every minute, because she thought he

would come for her. Then, the other night, when we found that her shoes were missing, she knew—knew he could take her again!"

Laura scarcely heard Jules Lejune's husky words. She was listening, instead, to the barking of the hounds. I tried to tell myself that it *was* the drift of the wind that was making their hungry cries seem to come closer and closer. The pack seemed to be prowling nearer through the woods—in search of the scent that they knew was Laura's . . .

"When she went away," Jules Lejune was muttering, "I didn't dare go after her—didn't dare. Because she was with that devil—that devil and his beasts—"

"Jeff!" Laura cried suddenly. She clutched at me, staring across the room; and again, she cried out in abject terror, "Jeff—Jeff, look!"

His face was at the window! The face of Ira Clegg, its features dark and hard, its doglike eyes gleaming. His rabid gaze was fixed upon Laura—and in his one hand he was holding the bunched silken undergarment that bore the scent of her body! . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Bride's Blood for the Hounds*

I SPRANG to the door, jerked it open and ran out. Snatching the rifle from the car, I bounded to the window at which we had seen Ira Clegg. But he wasn't there. There was no hint now of his presence.

The night was hushed, except for the sharp baying of the hounds—the hoarse voices that sounded ominously close.

I stepped back into the shack.

"Lock yourself in, Jules," I ordered the terrified little man. "If you have any weapon to protect yourself with, get it into your hands. I'm going to Sheriff Qualen right now. I hope to God it won't

be long before Ira Clegg is locked up in that prison and all those ugly beasts of his are dead."

I hurried out again, with Laura. She clung to me fearfully as we climbed into the car. I heard Jules Lejune bolt his door, and saw him make sure the windows were latched before he pulled down the blinds. Holding the rifle, I peered around, searching for Ira Clegg. And, unmistakably, the savage barking of the hounds was drawing closer.

"We're safe—we can get away from them easily in this car, Laura," I said, gripping her cold hand. "God! Now we're sure. Only one of two things can lie behind all this ghastly business. It's possible that Ira Clegg seized upon poor Nilla to throw to his dogs. He used her in some way to gratify their beastly appetites. Either that, or Ira Clegg has used his bloodhounds to track down women he craved for himself. He devoured the very soul of little Nilla and then—God!—he must have given her ravished body to the hounds. Her blood for the dogs! Blood that would craze them with a craving for more—to sharpen their senses as man-trailers."

I stepped on the starter, still gripping the rifle and listening to the cries of the pack.

"This is the finish of that damned fiend we know as Ira Clegg," I promised grimly. "If the law can't punish him properly, then, by God, the rest of us will. We'll drive him out of that miserable hutch of his. We'll butcher every one of those devilish hounds—be glad to see them dead. The sooner we get rid of them—What's the matter with this car?"

The starter was grinding laboriously, but the motor had not caught. I tried again, then again—but the engine remained dead. Quickly, I gave Laura the rifle and got out, carrying the flashlight. "Watch!" I warned her, as I opened the hood. I probed into the wiring with the beam, but

I found nothing wrong until I removed the cap of the distributor. Then I saw that the arm was gone. That one small part, absolutely essential to the operation of the motor, had been stolen.

"Jeff!" Laura exclaimed, seeing the sudden whiteness of my face. "We'll have to go afoot—and the dogs—the dogs—!"

The harsh, hungry voices of the hounds were louder now. We could hear bushes being trampled in the woods. The beasts were coming—led by their demonical keeper, they were closing in on us!

I TOOK the rifle from Laura quickly. "Don't be afraid of them, darling," I said, trying to seem confident, though my heart was chilled with dread. "As long as we have this rifle, I can keep them away from us. The instant any one of them comes near you, I'll kill him, as I killed Moloch."

"Ira Clegg knows that we've learned the whole horrible story now!" Laura gasped. "He's trying to keep us from reaching the sheriff with it. Jeff! What can we do?"

"We're going to get to Qualen's office as fast as we can," I declared. "I know a short-cut through the woods. It'll take us to town the quickest way. Stick close to me, darling. I don't know how far away those damned beasts are now, but it's our best chance. Hurry!"

Laura sprang from the car. With her hand closed hard on my arm, she started off at my side. We cut across the road, then began following a trail that wound through the hills. Groping our way, stumbling over roots, struck by low branches, we ran until our breath was gone—then, though at a slower rate, we hurried on.

"Listen!" Laura gasped. "How close they are!"

The damned four-footed devils yelped in the darkness appallingly near us. Their sharp voices lashed us into another spurt. We kept running until we reached a clear-

ing, where it was lighter. I started across, but suddenly Laura gave my arm a pull that stopped me short.

"Look!"

Shadows were moving on the crest of a hill directly in front of us. The dark figures were moving on the bend in the trail that we were approaching. A tall silhouette, surrounded by low, dark shapes. Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds! He had guessed our strategy; he had cut us off, with ruthless cunning. We stood stock still, watching him as he bent over the foremost of the wild hounds.

He was holding in his hand the bit of silk that carried the sweet scent of Laura's body—holding it to the nostrils of the gigantic hound that was leading the pack.

His snarling voice came to us. "There she is, Satan. Drink in the scent of her! Go to her! Now, you devil! Now!"

The huge beast stood quivering, its powerful muscles taut, tensed to spring forward.

"Clegg!" I shouted in a sudden frenzy. "Look at me, Clegg! I have the rifle! I'll kill every one of your damned dogs with it. Send them on, and I'll shoot them down!"

Ira Clegg's grating tone carried to us again—a single word fraught with unspeakable horror.

"Now! Now!"

Suddenly the great brute bounded. It sprang down the trail toward us, its blood-shot eyes fixed upon Laura. At the same instant I swung the gun to my shoulder. Aiming with desperate swiftness, I aligned the sights squarely upon the huge, ugly head of the beast that was flying toward the girl I loved. I pulled the trigger—

And only a small click resulted! There was no flash of fire this time, no cracking report, no swift bullet to drop the bloodhound in its tracks. In a frenzy, I worked the action, and pulled the trigger again—then a third time. The weapon would not fire.



Then I knew that the bullets had been removed from it. While we had been in Jules Lejune's shack, someone had stolen the cartridges from it—the cartridges that I had counted on to save Laura from the savage lust of the hounds and their bestial keeper!

**L**AURA screamed with overwhelming terror. The black shadow that was Satan was springing upon us! The vicious beast leaped with its fangs gleaming, its open jaws dripping. It was in midair when, with frantic swiftness, I swung the gun and whipped the barrel down across the great dog's back.

The force of the blow struck it to the earth. Gripping the barrel, I beat it with the stock while it rolled, growling with savage anger. At the same time, Laura ran back along the trail. Through the deafening barking of the pack, I heard her terrified cry.

"The others!"

The trail was black with the leaping beasts! The other brutes were springing after Satan.

Beating at them with the rifle, I retreated toward Laura. Thanking God that the trail passed between two steep banks, which enabled me to hold the beasts back a few seconds, I glanced back to see that Laura was climbing with frantic haste up to a narrow ledge. After a breathless struggle, she managed to throw herself upon this shelf that seemed to offer refuge from the gleaming fangs of the pack.

I whirled and leaped to the spot where Laura had climbed up, and pulled myself off the ground in desperate haste. Sharp fangs ripped me as I heaved myself onto the ledge. I struck out with the rifle to keep the four-footed demons from following.

"Jeff—watch Satan!" Laura screamed at me, over the fierce barking. "Watch Satan!"

The biggest and most savage of the pack

had sprung up from the spot where I had beaten him down. The painful blows had driven him into a state of ferocious frenzy. He sprang up at me, his fangs snapping at my throat. His front paws reached the ledge, and he clawed the stone in an effort to throw himself upon it. But I struck him with terrific force, and he dropped back—only to leap again, with an even greater fury than before!

*God!* I thought. I've got to keep them down. I've got to keep them away from Laura. If I don't, these obscene beasts and their master will seize her—they'll suck out her blood—and then they'll cast her lifeless flesh aside!

Satan leaped again—and this time, in his crazed savagery, he reached the level of the ledge! His teeth snapped at my throat as his heavy body jarred me back. I staggered; and before I could balance myself, Satan's jaws clamped crushingly upon my arm! He shook me with a fury that wrenched the rifle from my hands. It clattered off the shelf—fell down to the trail—and at the same time, the rest of the pack came rushing up—toward Laura!

She screamed with the terror of the doomed. Snarling at my throat, Satan forced me back. Striking with my one free fist, while the beast's teeth ground on the bone of my other arm, I attempted to fight him off. Wrenching to the edge of the ledge, I scrambled in a desperate attempt to save myself from spilling off. But at that instant, Satan released my arm—with savage cunning he rushed at me—and I dropped.

I fell to the rocks and lay stunned. Hot reeking breath was beating into my face. I saw the fierce eyes of Satan above mine, his open jaws poised at my throat. He was standing over me, pinioning me to the ground. At my first move, a snarl broke from his throat and his teeth began to close upon my neck.

*Good God! This beast will not allow me to stir! If I attempt to get up, he'll sink*

*his fangs into my windpipe!* But Laura—on the ledge, where the rest of the pack were crowding upon her—*Laura—*

Then a mad nightmare of impressions swarmed through my spinning brain. While Satan's stinking, fetid breath souged into my face, I heard Laura's cries, and the howling of the dogs, and Ira Clegg's snarling voice—and two sharp reports. Were they shots? I did not know. These footfalls rushing around me—what did they mean? As from an immeasurable distance, I heard Ira Clegg screeching, "Satan, Satan!" And then, suddenly, I was aware that the hound was no longer pinioning me down—that a hand was helping me up.

Scarcely able to see, my first act was to clamber back to the ledge. Only vaguely aware that the dogs were no longer there, I saw Laura lying there, sobbing. Her clothing was ripped from her. Her lovely nude body was quaking with terrified sobs. I lifted her; and she clung to me, as if to the last vestige of life itself.

Then, recovering, I glanced around. I saw Sheriff Qualen standing on the trail below. He was looking down at a figure which lay at his feet. It was a man whose coat was thrown open, whose shirt was wet with blood. This man was writhing with the agony of the fangs that had torn his flesh. It was not Ira Clegg. Not the keeper of the hounds! It was Randall Crain.

Sheriff Qualen looked up. With a grim, yet sad, light in his eyes, he said, "Ira Clegg is dead."

Then I saw the master of the dogs. A short distance away, at the base of the cliff, Ira Clegg was lying. Blood had streamed from him into a dusty pool. His hard face looked strangely peaceful. And around him, in a circle, the pack was standing. As if according him the last rite of an unearthly service, they were standing in a ring around their dead

master and baying out their sorrow. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Murder Will Out

SHERIFF QUALEN soberly wagged his head. "If only I'd received that information several days sooner!" he said to Laura and me while we sat in his office in the village. "Then we would have known what was up, before all this ghastly business happened. I'll tell you what I mean.

"We'd all heard the rumors that Len Glander, the big shot racketeer, might make an attempt to break out of the prison. Well, in the city, the police had heard that rumor too. They knew that Glander couldn't possibly escape without the help of someone on the outside. They began looking for Glander's lieutenants, who had disappeared, and they soon unearthed evidence that preparations were being made.

"His lieutenants had gone to work cleverly. But they faced a big obstacle—Ira Clegg's dogs. They knew that they would never succeed in getting Glander out of these woods, with those bloodhounds ready to track him down at any hour of the day or night. So their first step was to get rid of the dogs somehow.

"They couldn't approach those brutes directly. It would have been too risky to attempt to shoot the dogs from a distance. They had to have some sure way of getting rid of all the hounds at the same time. They couldn't reach the dogs with poison, either, especially because Ira Clegg was so careful of their food. There was only one way—the way they took—pinning a crime on Ira Clegg. Such a horrible crime, that if the law couldn't punish him for it, then the people of the village would be so aroused that they would drive him and his dogs away."

I asked, "Have you all this in the form of a confession?"

Sheriff Qualen nodded grimly. "I've got it down in black and white. It was the work of Randall Crain—whose real name is Kohler. He was the chief of Len Glander's lieutenants.

"Then he took advantage of the rumors circulating about poor Nilla Lejune?" I asked.

Again Qualen nodded. "Nilla had given herself to Ira Clegg. After her deformed child was born, she tried to keep herself from yielding to him again. But it wasn't Clegg who stole her shoes—it was Crain, or Kohler. It was his first step in his plan to incriminate Clegg. He committed every atrocity that we blamed on Clegg. He hid her body on Clegg's place. The dogs scented it out and Clegg tried to hide it, because he was afraid the crime might get pinned on him. Poor chap—he suspected that someone was trying to get him and his dogs out of the way, and he was only trying to save himself.

"When Clegg learned, from Jeff, that your bit of underwear had been stolen, Miss Laura, he realized that you were marked to be the second victim, and he went about trying to protect you, in order to protect himself. He must have been afraid that the undergarment was planted on his place somewhere, and he must have looked for it. Finding it, he followed you to the Lejune place, and discovered that someone else was also watching you—Crain, or Kohler. He tried to use his dogs to keep Kohler away from you. They obeyed all his commands, and would have done it, except that no one else knew his purpose.

"You see, you didn't know, because Clegg was so close-mouthed, that his command, 'Wait!' was to order the dogs simply to stand. When he commanded 'Now!' he was telling them to obey orders he had already given them to understand. After giving them your scent from

the bit of underwear, Miss Laura, he ordered them to surround you. But of course, the advance of those dogs was a terrifying thing to Jeff, and naturally he attempted to fight them off. And because he did fight them, the dogs believed he was your enemy, and attacked him. Kohler, taking advantage of this deadly confusion, was going to kill you right then and there, in the woods, Miss Laura.

"Well, I'd gone back to my office, and I'd found a telegram describing Crain as Kohler, Glander's right-hand man. I started out after him, then heard the hounds barking. I can't take credit for saving you, Miss Laura. Jeff and Ira Clegg did that. The dogs had disabled Kohler before I arrived, because he had shot their master. A queer sort, that Ira Clegg. I'm almost sorry he's gone."

Laura and I often think of Ira Clegg now, in a queer, warm way. We were married as we had planned, and we have our home not far from the prison. We no longer hear the barking of the hounds in that miserable hollow where Ira Clegg lived. Instead, their voices come from the prison yard.

They're four-footed guards now, those hounds—guards that no convict would dare attempt to escape. Their barking is a continual reminder of that to the two men who are serving their sentences within earshot of the kennels. We feel secure and happy in the thought that neither Len Glander nor "Randall Crain" will ever try to break out and tempt the fury of the hounds of Ira Clegg. . . .

My wife sits now by the open fire. She is knitting on a tiny garment, and her face is happy. Yet, I can't help thinking of that other poor girl, Nilla Lejune, and what she must have thought when she saw her first born—a child of the hounds of hell. . . .