

Weird Tales

January
1954

MOP-HEAD	Leah Bodine Drake	2
<i>Its mockery of speech it had made from fox's bark, owl's cry, rain's patter.</i>		
EFFIE'S PETS	Suzanne Pickett	17
<i>... eons and eons—a long time to be hemmed in by a strong, wholly invisible wall.</i>		
BLACK HEATH	Farfal Delano	26
<i>Since man can run, walk, jump, swim, and crawl—then why not fly?</i>		
A VERY SPECIAL QUALITY	David Eynon	39
<i>Caveat emptor—and most especially when bartering with the devil.</i>		
WALPURGIS NIGHT (Verse)	Dorothy Quick	43
TIGER DUST (A novelette)	Bassett Morgan	44
<i>... terrible magic in the hills.</i>		
YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL	Garnett Radcliffe	65
<i>How long does it take for a ghost to find itself?</i>		
ATLANTIC ISLE OF MYSTERY . . .	Cyrus Macmillan	70
<i>About the sea, and the mocking fugitive horizon, there is always mystery.</i>		
SHADOWS OF BLOOD	Eando Binder	79
<i>It was Caesar's own wish to speak with the barbarian.</i>		
THE CALAMANDER CHEST . . .	Joseph Payne Brennan	97
<i>... the finger kept beckoning, beckoning. . . .</i>		
REFLECTIONS OF AN EGYPTIAN PRINCESS (Verse)	Edith Ogutsch	105
THE STORMCLIFF PAPERS (A novelette)	W. J. Suprenant	106
<i>They ended with the ominous phrase, "the demon is impatient."</i>		

COVER BY W. H. SILVEY

Published bi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. W. J. Delaney, President & Treasurer. R. M. Cogan, Secretary. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions \$2.00; two years \$3.50. Canadian: one year \$2.25; two years, \$4.00. Foreign: one year \$2.30; two years, \$4.10. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Printed in U. S. A.

Vol. 45, No. 6

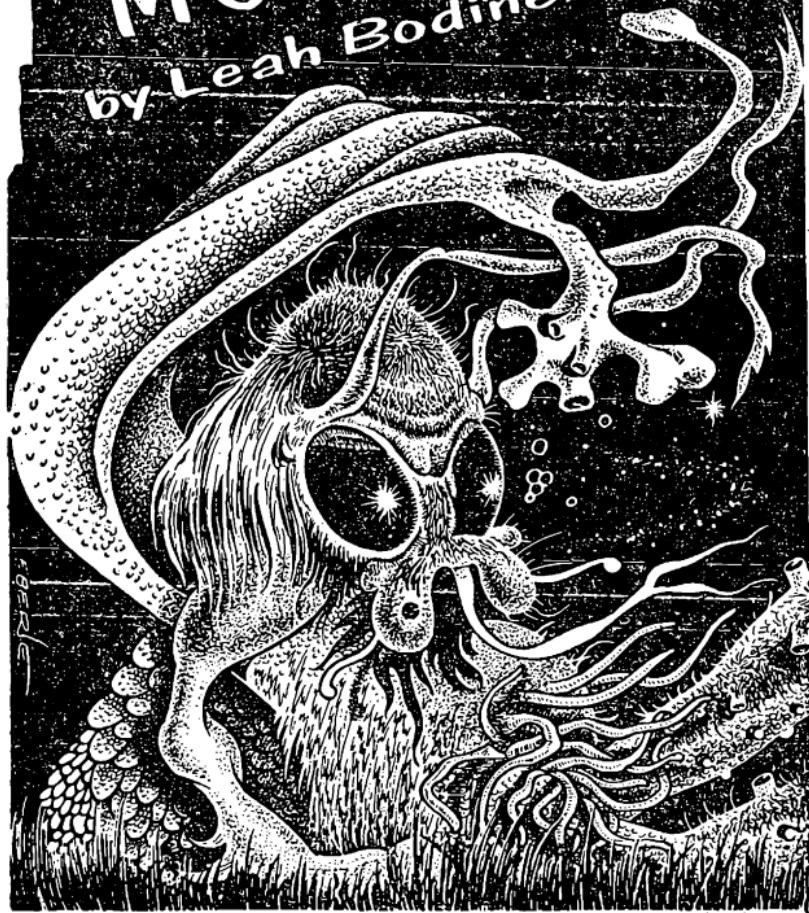
D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*



173

MOP-HEAD

by Leah Bodine Drake



Heading by Joseph Eberle

along the countryside, from yard to yard, from farm to farm dogs set up a barking.

IN ABANDONED cisterns and old wells, in moldy heaps of straw forgotten in the corners of deserted barns, in reedy pools deep in the woods, in fungied hollows of dead trees, in all such secret places apart from man, strange life engenders, drifts in and takes root and form.

In a place called Yancey's Meadow such a thing grew and waxed and made itself a shape, listened and dozed and waited.

"Dorothy, where are you and Harry Todd going?"

"Just over the Yancey's Meadow to play, Mrs. Trevyllian."

"Not Mrs. Trevyllian, honey—mother."

"Yes . . . mother."

"Well, don't you all stay long.

Daddy'll be home from Court early today."

"Yes'm mother."

Oh, dear, thought Aline Loveless, will I ever make a dent in that child's affections? Won't she ever forget that I was Mrs. Trevyllian and not her natural-born mother? Little Harry Todd accepts me—at least, he tolerates me. But Dorothy, no.

The stout, pretty red-haired woman watched the two little figures, seven-year-old girl and five-year-old brother, as they moved off towards the fields that lay close by, for the home of Jeff Loveless stood on the edge of the small county seat of Elkford.

I declare, she thought bitterly, if I'd known what a chore it



would turn out to be, trying to mother a dead woman's children, I might have thought twice about leaving Bardstown to marry Jeff!

That's a fine way for a little girl to address her mother—"Mrs. Trevyllian"—all right, "step-mother"! But even Harry Todd says, "Aline." Why doesn't Dorothy go one step more and call me the Widow Trevyllian?

Six months ago Aline had married the lonely young lawyer with the two motherless children, and for six months she had tried, with all her store of natural warmth and kindness, to take the dead Reba's place. She knew she had succeeded with Jeff, and to a degree with his little son. But with the girl she had failed. The child seemed almost to hate her. Nobody had ever hated Aline in her life and the tears welled as she gave rein to her thoughts. The stitches in the apron she was hemming grew dim and she threw down her work with disgust.

"I'm such a softie!" she said aloud, and bent down to lift Mudge to her lap.

Mudge, a chunky Maltese, was the last living link with her former life, and the feel of the heavy little body gave her comfort. "Mudge loves me, at any rate—don't you, fellow?" she muttered to the purring cat as she rocked in the well-worn

chair in the dining-room's bay window. "I reckon I shouldn't even sit here, in Reba's chair, if Dorothy had her way."

THE noise of hoofs and a rattling wagon coming to a halt at the back gate made Aline wipe her eyes hastily, and by the time a discreet knock sounded on the boards of the kitchen steps, country fashion, she was once more to all appearances her happy, pleasant self. The knock was followed by a rich baritone calling softly, "Miz Loveless? Ah's heah with de fryahs."

"Oh, it's you, Ben! Come in," and Aline moved to open the kitchen door. Ben Pondy, the colored man who owned a small farm on the outskirts of town had brought in his weekly order of frying chickens.

"What nice, fat hens you raise, Ben," she said as she took the two limp bodies and rummaged in the broken teapot for change.

"Yes'm, thank you, ma'm." The old man took the money but lingered.

"What is it, Ben?"

"Well'm, Miz Loveless, Ah don't want you to figger Ah'm buttin' in wheah ain't got no call to—but them two li'l chilluns of Mistah Jeff's—they shouldn't be out yondah in that theah field so much. No'm."

"You mean somebody keeps a

bull over there? My goodness, Ben, I'm glad you told me!"

"Well, no'm . . . not 'xactly bull. But they's that ol' well in de field yondah. Ol' dried-up well wheah they ain't been no house for de Lawd know *how* long."

"Of course they shouldn't play near a well!" cried Aline. "Why, they might fall in! I'll see that they stay away from there from now on."

"Yes'm 'Course, they *might* fall in, though it done got coupla planks laid 'cross it. But Miz Loveless ma'm, it's kind of a funny place, that Yancey's field. Ah come by theah once, right smack in de middle of de evening, sun shinin' with all his might, ever' thing nice and peaceful, and Ah heah a noise like somebody chucklin' and a-whistlin' to hisself over by that ol' well. Man, Ah never *did* stop to heah no more! An' Ah ain't never go through that field again—no *ma'm*!"

"How queer! Do you reckon there might be snakes there?" Aline was half alarmed, half amused at the old man's tale. "I'm grateful to you for telling me, Ben."

"Yes'm. Sho' wouldn't want nothin' to happen to Mistah Jeff's and Miss Reba's chillun. Sho' wouldn't go theah my own self."

AS SHE heard the clatter and cllop of Pondy's decrepit

outfit move away Aline took a yard-rake and went across the narrow lane into Yancey's Meadow. The sun was hot and the strong musty smell of drying grasses filled the August air. Funny, she thought, ever since I've lived in Elford I can't remember ever seeing any people in this field, not even any cows. Nobody ever seems to come here except Jeff's young ones.

She trudged across the meadow, her short sturdy young body plowing through the long johnson grass. Jimsonweeds caught at her skirt and stick-tights to her stockings. Grasshoppers leaped up in alarm as she brushed by their green hidey-holes. A faint breeze wandering aimlessly towards her brought the sound of children's voices talking excitedly and, she thought, a little stealthily. There seemed to be a third voice, with something thick and unnatural about it. It was vaguely unpleasant, she thought.

She could see no one. The insects whirred, joe pye-weed nodded its purpling plumes, the sun beat down. A quick little chill ran over Aline. "Dorothy! Harry Todd!" she called, her voice skittering away across the field like a scared rabbit.

Some way off, where there had been no one, the heads of the two children suddenly popped up from the grass. As they

got to their feet the little girl had a sullen look on her pretty face, and the boy looked frightened. They came slowly towards Aline, and she said sharply, "What were you two doing near that old well?" For now as she moved forward she could see the dark opening in the long weeds, the ancient gray boards that covered it haphazardly pushed aside.

THÉRE was a moment of silence, then Dorothy said, looking anywhere but at her stepmother, "We were just foolin' round. Just sorta walkin' by."

"Walking by? But I couldn't see you—you must have been leaning right over it! Don't you know that you might have fallen in? Dorothy, you ought to look after your little brother better than this!"

As neither answered her, Aline's impatience, always near the surface, got the best of her. "What on earth do you two find so fascinating, anyway, about this place? You and Harry Todd have been kitin' off here all summer! And Ben Pundy thinks there's snakes around."

"Ben Pundy!" Dorothy looked at her stepmother, suddenly scornful. "That ol' cowardly custard! That ol' scairdy-cat! Ain't any snakes in that well."

"Well, you might fall in. . . And who were you talking to? I'm sure I heard three voices."

Dorothy hesitated, then she replied, "Nobody. Nobody at all."

"Wasn't nobody, Aline," Harry Todd's treble piped up brightly. "Just ol' Mop-Head. He talks to us all the time and—ouch!"

"Why, Dorothy Loveless, you kicked your brother!" Aline, shocked, stooped to comfort the boy whose small shin had been given a surreptitious warning by his sister. "And you *were* talking to someone," she went on. "I heard you, and Harry Todd just said so. Who's Old Mop-Head, and why do you tell me stories?"

"He's just somebody we made up, Mrs. Trévylian. He's just a play somebody, honest—mother."

Her manner changed. She was all smiles and sweetness as she took her stepmother's hand.

"Harry Todd and I just stopped to peek down that ol' well for a teeny weeny little ol' second — didn't we, Harry Todd?"

"Uh-huh, I reckon so," mumbled the boy as he took Aline's other hand. As the trio moved off towards home the little girl looked up sideways at Aline in an appealing way she had, and said, "Now that Queen Esther's got the misery again and can't come around tonight, can I wipe the dishes for you, mother?"

To have you call me mother, Aline thought, I'd let you break every one of them, including my big Spode platter. Aloud she said, "Certainly, honey, that'll be a help."

AS THE little party entered the back yard Jeff's car turned into the drive. Not even the fact that the two children tore their hands from hers to fling themselves on their father, leaving her for a moment outside the family group, could spoil her happy mood that the feel of those small hands had induced. Even Ben Pondy's warnings dimmed in the sudden rush of well-being.

This pleasant state lasted through a hilarious if rather scrappy supper, result of the absence of the imperious Queen Esther whose reign in the Loveless kitchen was frequently interrupted by her "misery in the back." Not until brother and sister were in bed (after a washing-up marked by only one broken cup) and Aline was sitting with Jeff on the screened-in side porch, did she remember Ben's story about Yancey's Meadow.

"Jeff, do you know anything about an old well over there in that field—the one they call Yancey's Meadow?"

"What, honey?" He lifted his head from the radio's glowing dials. "Oh, that place. Yes,

there's a well there. Been there since the Year One. Why?"

"The children have taken to playing there all the time, and I'm afraid they may fall in, or get bitten by a snake, or something. Ben Pondy hinted they might, when he brought the fryers today. He said he wouldn't go through that field himself for love or money. What's wrong with it, Jeff? Outside of snakes, I mean?"

Jeff studied his pipe a moment. "I don't rightly know, Aline," he said slowly. "I never much liked to go through that field as a kid, but I couldn't have told you why. That well's been boarded over, though, as long as I remember."

He stopped to light up. "Tom Bell tried to pasture some horses there once, but they got skittish about something, and one jumped the fence and took off for the woods, and it was two days before they found her. Funny....

"Well, I want you to forbid them playing there, dear. And Jeff, do you know anybody named Mop-Head? The children seem to know somebody by that name. I never heard of 'em.

"Mop-Head?" laughed Jeff. "I should hope not! What a handle! There's some Moreheats, live up by Tyewhoppety, but that's a sight too far for their kids to

come down here visiting of an evening. But about that well—I'll tell the little huzzybugs to stay away from it."

THE radio crackled and sang, the smoke from the pipe mingled with the cloying scent of clematis in the warm Kentucky night. Where the street straggled off into the fields a lonely arc-light swung, its pale glow like a guardian posted against all things that crept or padded or cried in the rustling woods and ferny hollows, and were not of man. And off in its own place, amid the scummy water and crumbling stones, the dead leaves and moldering bones of field-mice, the thing called Mop-Head was awake, ears up in the quiet.

And the children, awake in their beds, watched a yellow half-moon sail up from the dark woods and send a long ray across the floor. The house was still. The big folks had gone to bed. A whispering began: "Harry Todd; you awake?" "Uh-huh." "Well, get up! We gotta go to the field. We promised ol' Mop-Head."

"I'm scared. He's ugly. He's uglier'n a scarecrow."

"I know—but he's our friend, and he'll do what we want about—you know—if we get him things. He promised us, that time we woke him up. He

can't do everything by himself—he *told* us that! Hurry up!"

Quietly, as if with much practice, the two children got out of bed and stole downstairs to the dark kitchen. The girl took a large covered plate from the refrigerator, and as carefully as two little animals on the prowl, brother and sister left the house and headed for Yancey's Meadow. Through the milky river-mist that lay in long veils over the grass, they went straight to the well in the far corner. Pulling and tugging, they removed the rotting planks to one side, and tipped over the plate's contents into the darkly gleaming depths.

A wind ruffled the fair hair of the two young heads. A hunting owl called from the hedge, and a fox, passing on some private business of his own, stopped and lifted a startled paw. And that which lived and had its curious being in the well chuckled with pleasure, and all its small mouths slobbered as it noisily feasted.

WHEN Aline discovered her loss next morning she was only annoyed and puzzled at first.

"Who took those chickens out of the ice-box?" she asked at breakfast.

"Not guilty. Don't look at me!" said Jeff, busy with ham and eggs.

"Well, somebody did. Those

hens couldn't walk off by themselves. And Queen Esther hasn't been here for almost a week—and I doubt if even she would make off with two whole dressed chickens, although I'm well aware of her, small-scale pilfering from the larder." Aline turned to the children. "Do you youngsters know anything about it?"

Downcast eyes and absorption in their breakfast of brother and sister told the young woman that she was getting warm. "Come to think of it," she went on, "seems like a lot of food has been disappearing around here lately. Half a coconut cake that vanished over night—just like those fryers—and other things. Come on, kids, 'fess up. Which one did it, and what for?"

"Didn't take 'em," muttered the girl, while the little boy buried his nose still deeper in his milk mug.

"I'm sorry to say this—but, Dorothy, I don't believe you," said Aline, hoping desperately that she didn't sound like the mean stepmother of fiction. Her fear was realized as her husband said quickly, "Oh, come now, Aline! If Dolly says she didn't take them, I'm sure she didn't. Dolly, baby, speak up and tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you Moses."

Harry Todd laughed, but his

sister burst into tears. Jumping from the chair she ran to her father and clung to him, sobbing, "I didn't, I didn't, I didn't! Oh, Daddy, I want Mommy! I want my *real* Mommy!"

Jeff Loveless turned worried eyes to his wife. "Don't you reckon some tramp may have stolen those hens? What would Doll here want with them, anyway? Tell you what," he added, "I'll go by Pondy's and have him bring you two more. O.K.?"

"Oh, all right," Aline agreed weakly, angry at herself for letting the matter drop so casually. Her thoughts were far from happy as she saw Jeff off to his law-office and heard his last orders to the children to "stay out of Yancey's Meadow." Dispiritedly she turned to the usual chores of the day.

OUTSIDE, under the big sycamore Dorothy pushed her brother back and forth in the swing and whispered fiercely, "Old Mop-Head doesn't want any more dead stuff. He wants somethin' alive next time, he said. Then pretty soon he'll get strong and powerful and can give us our wish . . . *you* know what."

"Ain't got any live stuff," said the boy.

"Well, then we'll have to find some. That's what *he* wants . . . and you want Mommy back, don't you?"

"Mommy's dead. They put her in a box," he answered, swinging himself vigorously.

"Silly! I know *that*, Harry Todd Loveless! But Mop-Head can get her back, like we asked him, and then that Mrs. Trevylilian, that ol' red-headed woman, will have to go home."

Her young mind scurried about the house and yard like an invisible mouse, considering all the prospects of living food for their peculiar friend. He had said if he had live food he could bring Mommy back. She tiptoed to the side porch. Mudge was busily washing himself on the step.

When the potato sack swooped down over him the big Maltese was so taken by surprise that neither clawing nor writhing helped him. With the spitting, moving sack bumping along between them, his captors hurried over to the forbidden field. They pulled aside the boards and looked down. Something glistened a little far below. Dorothy set the sack on the well's lip and pushed it over.

"Yoo-hoo!" she called softly. Mudge made a fine splash.

THE sun shone and westerned. Insects hummed and chirred in the warm grass. The shadows lengthened and dusk fell on trees and vines and hedges. Bats stole out of their secret places and

field-mice ran through their tiny alleys in the weeds. And that which was at the bottom of the well in the meadow felt strong currents pass through its crazy veins, felt the living blood it had tasted nourish the ricketty body.

The thing called Mop-Head was not animal or plant or rock, although, by now, it was a little of each. It had no definite body, and it longed for one. A scrap of elemental force that had drifted down over the field from far-off places, and settled long ago in the forgotten well, it had gradually built itself a body and a consciousness over the years. From darkness and silence and damp, out of earth-mold and wet leaves and blown dandelions, of scum and spiders' legs and ants' mandibles and the brittle bones of moles it formed a shape and a sentience. From the thin laughter of children and the far calls of men, from the haunting songs that the winds blew towards it from the Negro church in the woods, from fox's bark and owl's cry and rain's patter, the creature had made itself a clumsy mockery of speech.

It was not good, not evil, and it had one desire: to acquire a solid body. Being an elemental, it had vigor far beyond its size. Now that it had eaten, it felt strong, capable of anything. It clambered up the sides of the well and slipped over. The rising

moon glistened on its fuzzy grayness, glittered in its many eyes. Its antenna waved in the warm air and the thing whimpered a little. And in Ben Pondy's henhouse the hens awoke and protested against the strangeness in the air, and along the countryside, from yard to yard and from farm to farm, the dogs set up a barking.

The thing gathered its gim-crack body together and its feelers tested the wind. Finding the direction it wanted, it stood rigid a moment. Then it wobbled off toward the town. And the dogs barked at its passing, telling their masters of what was abroad in the night, and their masters slept.

AS THE Loveless family sat at lunch the next day Jeff talking gaily of a case he had handled that morning, Ben Pondy's old horse came down the alley at a clattering pace and stopped at the gate.

"Mistah Jeff! Mistah Jeff!" The colored man came in the yard at a run. "Come heah quick!"

When the young lawyer let him in the old man grabbed his arm and clung to it, moaning, "Oh, Mistah Jeff, suh! Somebody been at Mizz Reba's grave and mess it all up!"

"In Heaven's name, Ben, what are you talking about? Talk sense!"

"Yessuh, am talkin' sense. Somebody got into you all's lot in the grave yard and dig up Miss Reba. I come by theah jest now, and de grave all open, an' —" He groaned again and clung tighter to the other's arm. "Oh, Mistah Jeff, somebody break open that theah coffin and done stole Miss Reba!"

Drawn by the uproar, Aline and the children stood in an amazed group on the steps. Harry Todd started to cry, but Dorothy, her hands pressed tightly together, grew stiff with some inward emotion. Jeff, without a word and not even stopping to get his car, ran to Ben's wagon. With its owner scrambling up beside him, he sent the ancient horse to a feeble gallop in the direction of the cemetery.

Left alone, Aline felt she couldn't sit home and puzzle herself over the outrageous news. A heavy feeling of unease invaded her. Old Miss Crittenden was a near neighbor, and the young woman decided she wanted the companionship of someone besides the strangely excited children.

"Wash your hands, babies, we'll go over to Miss Sarah's a while."

"Isn't Mommy in that ol' box any more?" asked Harry Todd brightly.

"Hush, sugar—don't talk about it. Your Mommy's in

Heaven," said Aline. But she thought she heard Dorothy say to her brother in a low tone, "Mommy'll be back," although such a remark certainly made no sense!

As they passed the side steps she wondered where Mudge was. Her pet hadn't shown up for his usual breakfast of fish-heads. Probably out on the tiles last night and hasn't gotten home yet, she decided with a slight smile.

IT WAS a far from smiling group of men who assembled later at the Loveless family plot in the cemetery. Before the incredulous eyes of Jeff, Sheriff Helm and the posse which the latter had hastily gotten together, the grave of the first Mrs. Loveless lay open. The earth was thrown up as if a huge mole had burrowed under it, and the wooden casket, its lid ripped open, and with long scratches on its polished surface, was exposed. Except for the stained silk of the lining, still pitifully impressed with the dead woman's shape, the casket was empty.

Who had taken Reba Loveless from her grave, and why? As the news went around, and the baffled posse explored cellars and alleys and the nearby woods, the question was on every tongue in Elkford. Nobody reported having seen any strangers in town,

and there hadn't been a tramp lying-up in a culvert for weeks. And nobody in these parts had any rhyme or reason to do such a thing! By twilight, Sheriff Helm owned himself stumped, and declared it a day until other plans could be made.

"I'll run you home, Jeff," said Deputy Joe Barndollar as the weary men straggled back, in threes and fours, to the courthouse. "We'll start out again to-night, if you say so, but you ought to get something to eat first."

"Eat! . . . Hell, Joe, I can't eat anything! But thanks for the lift—guess I *will* go home for a while," Jeff said in a tight voice, groaning inwardly. My God, who can have done this to poor Reba? He longed suddenly for Aline's calm good sense and practical, affectionate concern.

Aline herself was feeling anything but calm or sensible. Miss Sarah had a taste in conversation for rather grisly gossip and speculations. Then, as the word spread from the old lady to her many acquaintances via the phone, with the circle widening as they passed the news along, the jangling of that instrument got to be more than Aline could bear. Several calls to the Sheriff's office had brought no fresh word, and as the afternoon wore on she felt that she'd be better off

at home. If Jeff came back he'd be tired and unhappy. Yes, she'd much better go home.

"But I'll leave the children here, if you don't mind," she told Miss Sarah as she prepared to leave. "I don't want them to hear about that grave and Jeff's bound to talk about it."

Old Miss Crittenden was delighted to have company for supper and pressed Aline to stay, too. "You don't want to be in that house alone with Jeff gone, and all the menfolks off in the woods and all," protested the old lady. "Anybody who'd make off with a dead woman must be a nasty kind of crook, and there's no telling what he'd do to a live one."

BUT Aline had made up her mind to be home when Jeff returned. As she went into the empty street she was surprised to see how far the sun had westered. It's later than I knew, she mused, glancing towards Yancey's Meadow, which was a glory of golden light. For a minute she thought she saw a figure coming across the field towards her, dark against the sunset. It moved quickly, and there was something odd about it. But the light was in her eyes and she could not see it distinctly. By the time she had walked the short way up the street to her house and turned

into the driveway she'd forgotten it.

The clematis vines made an early dusk on the screened-in



porch and the air was growing cool. She shivered a little, and as she entered the house she heard the back gate click. She thought the children must have come home after all. Then a foul smell, unbearably rank and

loathsome, assailed her. Rapid, shuffling footsteps sounded on the kitchen floor and a shadow darkened the doorway. Aline looked up and screamed, and screamed again at what she saw before her.

In its most recent dress, Mop-Head was there.

It leaped towards her, thin arms wound themselves around her neck and pressed. Her senses reeled as she fought the thing with every ounce of strength in her short, solid young body, while the filthy, odor sickened her and the wild horror of it dazed her mind. The pressure on her throat grew harder, waves of pain rolled over her, until one wave, more powerful than the rest, swallowed her up in merciful unconsciousness, and she fell heavily to the floor.

Through the still evening air, down the shady street went a peculiar whistling call. The horses in Tom Bell's stable heard it and whinnied. The town dogs heard it and challenged it fiercely. The Loveless children, playing on the Crittenden veranda, heard it and knew what it was. They looked at each other, and Dorothy said excitedly, "Mop-Head's awake! Come on, Harry Todd, let's go find Mommy!"

The sun was sinking behind the sycamores as the boy and girl ran down the street towards

home. A car passed them, and the little boy cried, "There's Daddy!"

Joe Barndollar slowed down and the children piled in, Dorothy crying happily, "Daddy, we're going to see Mommy pretty soon! Our real Mommy, I mean!"

"What? Good Lord, no, baby!" said her father, horrified.

"Yes, we will—somebody we know is going to bring her back to us—from Heaven, I reckon. He promised us!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Doll," said poor Jeff wearily. "Come in, Joe, I'll ask Aline to fix you a bite to eat. I just want some coffee, my own self."

AS THE car slowed down in the driveway a repulsive odor met them. Could Aline have left a gas-jet on? Jeff wondered, although it smelled a lot worse than gas. There was no light in the house, but they could see somebody sitting in the rocking-chair by the bay window.

"Look! Look! There's Mommy!" cried Harry Todd, pointing.

Dorothy leaped from the car and tore into the house. The men heard her give a curious gasp and then a strangled cry. They raced in after her, to stumble over the unconscious body of Jeff's wife on the floor.

But it wasn't this that made them fall back, holding their arms over their eyes to shut out the horror that met them.

From the rocking-chair in the bay window a figure rose to confront them in the twilight. With rotten silk crumbling away from the yellow flesh, with soil and twigs fouling the long, fair hair, with dead eyes upon them in an unseeing stare and dead lips smiling in terrible mockery of life, the body of Reba Loveless tottered towards them. The shredding arms stretched towards Dorothy and the gray mouth opened.

"Here I am!" said Reba.

With a sob of terror Jeff sprang forward to sweep the little girl out of the creature's reach. As he caught her to him, Joe Barndollar took one look at that shape, drew his gun and emptied its barrel in its chest.

A tremor passed over Reba's body. For one moment longer it stood erect. Then the parody of what had been Reba Loveless collapsed in a heap of decaying flesh and bones. As it fell, Barndollar thought he saw something run out of the dead mouth—"like a big curly-haired mole, or a kind of shaggy spider," as he described it later. It was making a chuckling noise as it scuttled across the floor and out the door into the warm darkness. Joe hurled his empty

gun after it, but missed. He dashed out after it, only to see it disappear in the grass. Although there was a rustling in the mock-orange hedge that bordered Yancey's Meadow, he could see nothing.

The body of Jeff's first wife lay where it had fallen, in a gruesome little pile. The imitation life that had supported it briefly, that had raised it from the grave and had kept it hidden in the abandoned well until its moment had come to present itself to Dorothy—that life had gone with its alien guest.

BUT Aline's still-living body moved feebly, and Jeff was down on his knees, his brain whirling while his hands helped her to sit up. Her hands moved feebly at her mauled throat. As remembrance of the horror flooded back she began to cry silently, with long shuddering sobs. Then she saw Dorothy.

Her step-daughter stood like a small statue, her eyes round with fright, but no sound, other than that first faint gasp, had come from her.

"Dorothy Harry Todd?" Aline managed to say.

"They're all right, Darling—don't try to talk," Jeff cried, while the boy threw himself upon her, sobbing, "Don't die, Aline! Don't die!"

Aline still looked at the little

girl. She had such a queer, frozen appearance. . . .

"Dorothy?" she said again.

Dorothy wanted to answer, wanted to cry out as her brother had, "Don't die, Aline — Mother!" She wanted to say many things to the woman she had resented for so long—like, "I know I was bad . . . I wanted you to go away and for Mommy to come back . . . but I didn't want all *this!* I didn't want Mommy like *that* . . . and I'm sorry for what I did to Mudge . . . and oh, Mother, I'm scared! I'm scared!"

But nothing of this would come out. Her throat felt funny and she couldn't make the words sound like they ought to—only a kind of choked gurgle.

Jeff's jaw dropped. "My God, she can't talk! Aline! Dolly—she can't *talk!* Oh, my poor baby!" And Jeff suddenly knew that the horror had been too much for one small girl to face, as she had, alone, in a dark room, and that it had struck her dumb.

Yet, as the deputy dialed Doctor Oldham with a shaking hand, a faint, half-bitter hope crept into Aline's mind. She'll need me now, she thought. Until the fountains of her speech can be unlocked again, Dolly will need me now.

FARTHER and farther away, over the darkling fields in and out among the misty trees, along the reedy banks of creeks and down into damp hollows, the thing which the children had called Old Mop-Head hurried and danced and tumbled.

It felt light and gay, but its strength was fading. The fierce but transient power which had filled its makeshift body, which had spurred it to burrow and rip and choke and reanimate was leaving it. Its essential being had not been harmed by the bullets, but its ramshackle body was coming apart. Here fell away a giant mandible, there a long shred of borrowed possum-fur, there again a beetle's wing and a spider's leg. It was getting sleepy, too. It wanted to find a place that was deep and dark and hidden, and wet with an ancient wetness, where it could rest until it had assembled a new shape. This world it had stumbled into had all sorts of exciting possibilities, all kinds of shapes, and materials for shapes, and other beings to talk to and do things for and make friends of!

But right now all it wanted was to sleep and sleep. . . .

It began to look about for a forgotten cistern or an old well.