

Weird Tales



March, 1953

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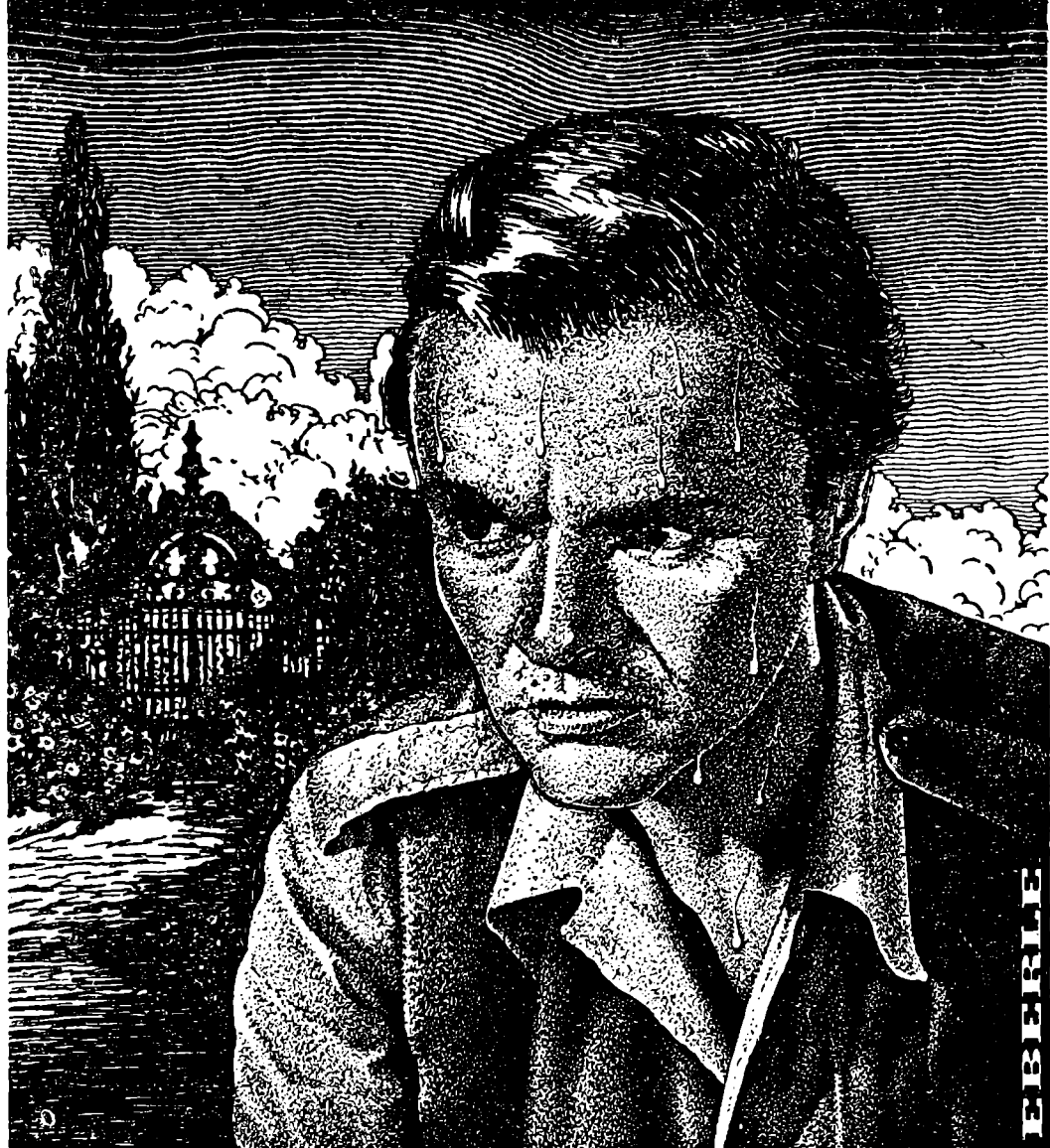
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NIGHT COURT



by Mary Elizabeth Counselman

BOB waited, humming to himself in the stifling telephone booth, his collar and tie loosened for comfort in the late August heat, his Panama tilted rakishly over one ear to make room for the instrument. Through it he could hear a succession of female voices: "Garyville calling Oak Grove tuh-ree, tew, niyun, six . . . collect . . ." "Oak Grove. What was that number . . . ?" "Tuh-ree, tew . . ."

He stiffened as a low, sweetly familiar voice joined the chorus: "Yes, yes! I . . . I accept the charges . . . Hello? Hello? Bob . . . ?"

Instinctively he pressed the phone closer to his mouth, the touch of it conjuring up the feel of cool lips, soft blond hair, and eyes that could melt a steel girder.

"Marian? Sure it's me! . . . Jail? No! No, honey, that's all over. I'm free! Free as a bird, yeah! The judge said it was unavoidable. Told you, didn't I?" He mugged into the phone as though somehow, in this age of speed, she could see as well as hear him across the twenty-odd miles that separated them. "It was the postponement that did it. Then they got this new judge—and guess what? He used to go to school with Dad and Uncle Harry! It was a cinch after that . . . Huh?"

He frowned slightly, listening to the soft voice coming over the wire; the voice he could not wait to hear congratulating him. Only, she wasn't. She was talking to him—he grinned sheepishly—the way Mom talked to Dad sometimes, when he came swooping into the driveway. One drink too many at the country club after his Saturday golf . . .

"Say!" he snorted. "Aren't you *glad* I don't have to serve ten to twenty years for manslaughter . . . ?"

"Oh, Bob." There was a sadness in his fiancée's voice, a troubled note. "I . . . I'm glad. Of course I'm glad about it. But . . . it's just that you sound so smug, so . . . That poor old Negro . . ."

"Smug!" He stiffened, holding the phone away slightly as if it had stung him. "Honey . . . how can you say a thing like that! Why, I've done everything I could for his

family. Paid—his mortgage on that little farm! Carted one of his kids to the hospital every week for two months, like . . ." His voice wavered, laden with a genuine regret. "Like the old guy would do himself, I guess, if he was still . . . *Marian!* You think I'm not *sorry* enough; is that it?" he demanded.

THERE was a little silence over the wire. He could picture her, sitting there quietly in the Marshall's cheery-chintz living room. Maybe she had her hair pinned back in one of those ridiculous, but oddly attractive, "horse-tails" the teen-agers were wearing this year. Her little cat-face would be tilted up to the lamp, eyes closed, the long fringe of lashes curling up over shadowy lids. Bob fidgetted, wanting miserably to see her expression at that moment.

"Well? Say something!"

The silence was broken by a faint sigh.

"Darling . . . What is there to say? You're so thoughtless! Not callous; I don't mean that. Just . . . *careless!* Bob, you've got to unlearn what they taught you in Korea. You're . . . you're home again, and this is what you've been fighting for, isn't it? For . . . for the people around us to be safe? For life not to be cheap, something to be thrown away just to save a little *time* . . ."

"Say, listen!" He was scowling now, anger hardening his mouth into ugly lines. "I've had enough lectures these past two months—from Dad, from the sheriff, from Uncle Harry. You'd think a guy twenty-two years old, in combat three years and got his feet almost frozen off, didn't know the score! What's the matter with everybody?" Bob's anger was mounting. "Listen! I got a medal last year for killing fourteen North Koreans. For gunning 'em down! Deliberately! But now, just because I'm driving a little too fast and some old creep can't get his wagon across the highway . . ."

"Bob!"

". . . now, all at once, I'm not a hero, I'm a murderer! I don't know the value of human life! I don't give a hoot how many people I . . ."

"*Darling!*"

A strangled sob came over the long miles. That stopped him. He gripped the phone, uncertainty in his oddly tip-tilted eyes that had earned him, in service, the nickname of "Gook."

"Darling, you're all mixed up. Bob . . . ? Bob dear, are you listening? If I could just *talk* to you tonight . . . ! What time is it? Oh, it's after *six*! I . . . I don't suppose you could drive over here tonight . . ."

The hard line of his mouth wavered, broke. He grinned.

"No? Who says I can't?" His laughter, young, winged and exultant, floated up. "By, I'll burn the road . . . Oops! I mean . . ." He broke off, sheepishly. "No, no; I'll keep 'er under fifty. Honest!" Laughing, he crossed his heart—knowing Marian so well that he knew she would sense the gesture left over from their school days. "There's so much to talk over now," he added eagerly. "Uncle Harry's taking me into the firm. I start peddling real estate for him next week. No kiddin'! And . . . and that little house we looked at . . . It's for sale, all right! Nine hundred down, and . . ."

"Bob . . . Hurry! Please!" The voice over the wire held, again, the tone he loved, laughing and tender. "But drive carefully. Promise!"

"Sure, sure! Twenty miles, twenty minutes!"

He hung up, chuckling, and strode out into the street. Dusk was falling, the slow Southern dusk that takes its time about folding its dark quilt over the Blue Ridge foothills. With a light, springy step Bob walked to where his blue convertible was parked outside the drugstore, sandwiched between a pickup truck and a sedan full of people. As he climbed under the steering wheel, he heard a boy's piping voice, followed by the shushing monotone of an elder:

"Look! That's Bob Trask! He killed that old Negro last Fourth-o-July . . ."

"Danny, hush! Don't talk so loud! He can hear . . ."

"Benny Olsen told me it's his second bad wrack . . ."

"Danny!"

". . . and that's the third car he's tore up in two years. Boy, you oughta seen that

roadster he had! Sideswiped a truck and tore off the whole . . ."

"Hmph! License was never revoked, either! Politics! If his uncle wasn't city commissioner . . ."

Bob's scowl returned, cloudy with anger. People! They made up their own version of how an accident happened. That business with the truck, for instance. Swinging out into the highway just as he had tried to pass! Who could blame him for *that*? Or the fact that, weeks later, the burly driver had happened to die? From a ruptured appendix! The damage suit had been thrown out of court, because nobody could prove the collision had been what caused it to burst.

Backing out of the parking space in a bitter rush, Bob drove the convertible south, out of Gareyville on 31, headed for Oak Grove. Accidents! Anybody could be involved in an accident! Was a guy supposed to be lucky all the time? Or a mind-reader, always clairvoyant about the other driver?

AS THE white ribbon of highway unreeled before him, Bob's anger cooled. He smiled a little, settling behind the steering wheel and switching on the radio. Music poured out softly. He leaned back, soothed by its sound and the rush of wind tousling his dark hair.

The law had cleared him of reckless driving; and that was all that counted. The landscape blurred as the sun sank. Bob switched on his headlights, dimmed. There was, at this hour, not much traffic on the Chattanooga Road.

Glancing at his watch, Bob pressed his foot more heavily on the accelerator. Six-fifteen already? Better get to Marian's before that parent of hers insisted on dragging her off to a movie. He chuckled. His only real problem now was to win over Marian's mother, who made no bones of her disapproval of him, ever since his second wreck. "*Show me the way a man drives a car, and I'll tell you what he's like inside . . .*" Bob had laughed when Marian had repeated those words. A man could drive, he had pointed out, like an old-maid school-teacher and still be involved in an accident that was not legally his fault. All right, *two* accidents! A guy could have lousy luck twice,

couldn't he? Look at the statistics! Fatal accidents happened every day . . .

Yawning, at peace with himself and the lazy countryside sliding past his car window, Bob let the speedometer climb another ten miles an hour. Sixty-five? He smiled, amused. Marian was such an old grandma about driving fast! After they were married, he would have to teach her, show her. Why, he had had this old boat-up to ninety on this same tree-shaded stretch of highway! A driver like himself, a good driver with a good car, had perfect control over his vehicle at any . . .

The child seemed to appear out of nowhere, standing in the center of the road. A little girl in a frilly pink dress, her white face turned up in sudden horror, picked out by the headlights' glare.

Bob's cry was instinctive as he stamped on the brakes, and wrenched at the steering wheel. The car careened wildly, skidding sidewise and striking the child broadside. Then, in a tangle of wheels and canvas top, it rolled into a shallow ditch, miraculously rightside up. Bob felt his head strike something hard—the windshield. It starred out with tiny shimmering cracks, but did not shatter. Darkness rushed over him; the sick black darkness of the unconscious; but through it, sharp as a knifethrust, bringing him back to hazy awareness, was the sound of a child screaming.

"*Oh, no obmygodohgod . . .*" Someone was sobbing, whimpering the words aloud. Himself.

Shaking his head blurrily, Bob stumbled from the tilted vehicle and looked about. Blood was running from a cut in his forehead, and his head throbbed with a surging nausea. But, ignoring the pain, he sank to his knee and peered under the car.

She was there. A little girl perhaps five years old. Ditch water matted the soft blond hair and trickled into the half-closed eyes, tiptilted at a pixie-like angle and fringed with long silky lashes. Bob groaned aloud, cramming his knuckles into his squared mouth to check the sob that burst out of him like a gust of desperate wind. She was pinned under a front wheel. Such a lovely little girl, appearing out here, miles from town, dressed as for a party. A sudden

thought struck him that he knew this child, that he had seen her somewhere, sometime. On a bus? In a movie lobby . . . ? Where?

He crawled under the car afraid to touch her, afraid not to. She did not stir. Was she dead? Weren't those frilly little organdy ruffles on her small chest moving, ever so faintly . . . ? If he could only get her out from under that wheel! Get the car moving, rush her to a hospital . . . ! Surely, surely there was some spark of life left in that small body . . . !

Bob stood up, reeling, rubbing his eyes furiously as unconsciousness threatened to engulf him again. It was at that moment that he heard the muffled roar of a motorcycle. He whirled. Half in eagerness, half in dread, he saw a shadowy figure approaching down the twilight-misted highway.

THE figure on the motorcycle, goggled and uniformed as a State Highway Patrolman, braked slowly a few feet away. With maddening deliberateness of movement, he dismounted, flipped out a small report-pad, and peered at the convertible, jotting down its license number. Bob beckoned frantically, pointing at the child pinned under the car. But the officer made no move to help him free her; took no notice of her beyond a cursory glance and a curt nod.

Instead, tipping back his cap from an oddly pale face, he rested one booted foot on the rear bumper and beckoned Bob to his side.

"All right, buddy . . ." His voice, Bob noted crazily, was so low that he could scarcely hear it; a whisper, a lip-movement pronouncing sounds that might have been part of the wind sighing in the roadside trees. "Name: Robert Trask? I had orders to be on the lookout for you . . ."

"Orders?" Bob bristled abruptly, caught between anxiety for the child under his car and an instinct for self-preservation. "Now, wait! I've got no record of reckless driving. I . . . I was involved in a couple of accidents; but the charges were dropped . . . Look!" he burst out. "While you're standing here yapping, this child may be . . . Get on that scooter of yours and go phone an ambulance, you! I'll report you for dereliction of duty! . . . Say!" he yelled, as the officer did not

move, but went on scribbling in his book. "What kind of a man *are* you, anyway? Wasting time booking me, when there still may be time to save this . . . this poor little . . . !"

The white, goggle-obscured face lifted briefly, expressionless as a mask. Bob squirmed under the scrutiny of eyes hidden behind the green glass; saw the lips move . . . and noticed, for the first time, how queerly the traffic officer held his head. His pointed chin was twisted sidewise, meeting the left shoulder. When he looked up, his whole body turned, like a man with a crick in his neck . . .

"What kind of man *are you?*" said the whispering lips. "That's what we have to find out . . . And that's why I got orders to bring you in. *Now!*"

"Bring me in . . . ?" Bob nodded dully. "Oh, you mean I'm under arrest? Sure, sure . . . But the little girl!" He glared, suddenly enraged by the officer's stolid indifference to the crushed form under the car. "Listen, if you don't get on that motorbike and go for help, I . . . I'll knock you out and go myself! Resisting arrest; leaving the scene of an accident . . . Charge me with anything you like! But if there's still time to save her . . ."

The goggled eyes regarded him steadily for a moment. Then, nodding, the officer scribbled something else in his book.

"Time?" the windy whisper said, edged with irony. "Don't waste time, eh? . . . Why don't you speed-demons think about other people *before* you kill them off? Why? *Why?* That's what we want to find out, what we *have* to find out . . . *Come on!*" The whisper lashed out, sibilant as a striking snake. "Let's go, buddy! *Walk!*"

Bob blinked, swayed. The Highway Patrolman, completely ignoring the small body pinned under the convertible, had strode across the paved road with a peremptory beckoning gesture. He seemed headed for a little byroad that branched off the highway, losing itself among a thick grove of pine trees. It must, Bob decided eagerly, lead to some farmhouse where the officer meant to phone for an ambulance. Staggering, he followed, with a last anxious glance at the tiny form spread-eagled under his car wheel.

Where had he seen that little face? *Where* . . . ? Some neighbor's child, visiting out here in the country . . . ?

"You . . . you think she's . . . dead?" he blurted, stumbling after the shadowy figure ahead of him. "Is it too late . . . ?"

The officer with the twisted neck half-turned, swiveling his whole body to look back at him.

"That," the whispering voice said, "all depends. Come on, you—snap it up! We got all night, but there's no sense wastin' time! Eh, buddy?" The thin lips curled ironically. "Time! That's the most important thing in the world . . . to them as still have it!"

Swaying dizzily, Bob hurried after him up the winding little byroad. It led, he saw with a growing sense of unease, through a country cemetery . . . Abruptly, he brought up short, peering ahead at a gray gleam through the pines. Why, there was no farmhouse ahead! A fieldstone chapel with a high peaked roof loomed against the dusk, its arched windows gleaming redly in the last glow of the sunset.

"Hey!" he snapped. "What *is* this? Where the hell are you taking me?"

The highway patrolman turned again, swiveling his body instead of his stiff, twisted neck.

"Night court," his whisper trailed back on a thread of wind.

"*Night* court!" Bob halted completely, anger stiffening his resolve not to be railroaded into anything, no matter what he had done to that lovely little girl back there in the ditch. "Say! Is this some kind of a gag? A kangaroo court, is it? You figure on lynching me after you've . . . ?"

HE GLANCED about the lonely graveyard in swift panic, wondering if he could make a dash for it. This was no orderly minion of the law, this crazy, deformed figure stalking ahead of him! A crank, maybe? Some joker dressed up as a highway patrolman . . . ? Bob backed away a few steps, glancing left and right. A crazy man, a crackpot . . . ?

He froze. The officer held a gun leveled at his heart.

"Don't try it!" The whisper cracked like a

whiplash. "Come on, bud. You'll get a fair trial in this court—fairer than the likes of you deserve!"

Bob moved forward, helpless to resist. The officer turned his back, almost insolently, and stalked on up the narrow road. At the steps of the chapel he stood aside, however, waving his gun for Bob to open the heavy doors. Swallowing on a dry throat, he obeyed—and started violently as the rusty hinges made a sound like a hollow groan.

Then, hesitantly, his heart beginning to hammer with apprehension, Bob stepped inside. Groping his way into the darker interior of the chapel, he paused for a moment to let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Row on row of hardwood benches faced a raised dais, on which was a pulpit. Here, Bob realized with a chill coursing down his spine, local funeral services were held for those to be buried in the churchyard outside. As he moved forward, his footsteps echoed eerily among the beamed rafters overhead . . .

Then he saw them. People in those long rows of benches! Why, there must be over a hundred of them, seated in silent bunches of twos and threes, facing the pulpit. In a little alcove, set aside for the choir, Bob saw another, smaller group—and found himself suddenly counting them with a surge of panic. There were twelve in the choir box. Twelve, the number of a jury! Dimly he could see their white faces, with dark hollows for eyes, turning to follow his halting progress down the aisle.

Then, like an echo of a voice, deep and reverberating, someone called his name.

"The defendant will please take the stand . . . !"

Bob stumbled forward, his scalp prickling at the ghostly resemblance of this mock-trial to the one in which he had been acquitted only that morning. As though propelled by unseen hands, he found himself hurrying to a seat beside the pulpit, obviously reserved for one of the elders, but now serving as a witness-stand. He sank into the big chair, peering through the half-darkness in an effort to make out some of the faces around him . . .

Then, abruptly, as the "bailiff" stepped

forward to "swear him in," he stifled a cry of horror.

The man had no face. Where his features had been there was a raw, reddish mass. From this horror, somehow, a nightmare slit of mouth formed the words: ". . . to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I . . . I do," Bob murmured; and compared to the whispered tones of the bailiff, his own voice shocked him with its loudness.

"State your name."

"R-robert Trask . . ."

"Your third offense, isn't it, Mr. Trask?" the judge whispered drily. "A habitual reckless-driver . . ."

Bob was shaking now, caught in the grip of a nameless terror. What was this? Who were all these people, and why had they had him brought here by a motorcycle cop with a twisted . . . ?

He caught his breath again sharply, stifling another cry as the figure of a dignified elderly man became visible behind the pulpit, where before he had been half-shrouded in shadow. Bob blinked at him, sure that his stern white face was familiar—very familiar, not in the haunting way in which that child had seemed known to him, lying there crushed under his car. This man . . .

His head reeled all at once. Of course! Judge Abernathy! Humorous, lenient old Judge Ab, his father's friend, who had served in the Gareyville circuit court . . . Bob gulped. In 1932! Why, he had been only a youngster then! Twenty years would make this man all of ninety-eight years old, if . . . And it was suddenly that "if" which made Bob's scalp prickle with uneasiness. *If he were alive.* Judge Ab was *dead!* Wasn't he? Hadn't he heard his mother and dad talking about the old man, years ago; talking in hushed, sorrowful tones about the way he had been killed by a hit-and-run driver who had never been caught?

Bob shook his head, fighting off the wave of dizziness and nausea that was creeping over him again. It was crazy, the way his imagination was running away with him! Either this was not Judge Ab, but some old fellow who vaguely resembled him in this half-light . . . Or it *was* Judge Ab, alive, looking no older than he had twenty-odd

years ago, at which time he was supposed to have been killed.

Squinting out across the rows of onlookers, Bob felt a growing sense of unreality. He could just make out, dimly, the features of the people seated in the first two rows of benches. Other faces, pale blurs against the blackness, moved restlessly as he peered at them . . . Bob gasped. His eyes made out things in the semi-gloom that he wished he had not seen. Faces mashed and cut beyond the semblance of a face! Bodies without arms! One girl . . . He swayed in his chair sickly; her shapely form was without a head!

He got a grip on his nerves with a tremendous effort. Of course! It wasn't real; it was all a horrible, perverted sort of practical joke! All these people were tricked up like corpses in a Chamber-of-Commerce "horror" parade. He tried to laugh, but his lips jerked with the effort . . . Then they quivered, sucking in breath.

The "prosecuting attorney" had stepped forward to question him—as, hours ago, he had been questioned by the attorney for Limestone County. Only . . . Bob shut his eyes quickly. It couldn't be! They wouldn't, whoever these people in this lonely chapel might be, they *wouldn't* make up some old Negro to look like the one whose wagon he had . . . had . . .

The figure moved forward, soundlessly. Only someone who had seen him on the morgue slab, where they had taken him after the accident, could have dreamed up that woolly white wig, that wrinkled old black face, and . . . And that gash at his temple, on which now the blood seemed to have dried forever . . .

"Hidy, Cap'm," the figure said in a confident whisper. "I got to ast you a few questions. Don't lie, now! Dat's de *wust* thing you could do—tell a lie in *dis-yeah* court! . . . "Bout how fast you figger you was goin' when you run over de girl-baby?"

Bob stared down at the kindly black face, smiling up at him, soothing him, telling him not to be afraid, but to tell the truth.

"I . . . Pretty fast," he blurted. "Sixty-five, maybe seventy an hour."

The man he had killed nodded, frowning. "Yassuh. Dat's about right, sixty-five accordin' to de officer here." He glanced at

the patrolman with the twisted neck, who gave a brief, grotesque nod of agreement.

Bob waited sickly. The old Negro—or whoever was dressed up as a dead man—moved toward him, resting his hand on the ornate rail of the chapel pulpit.

"Cap'm . . ." His soft whisper seemed to come from everywhere, rather than from the moving lips in that black face. "Cap'm . . . *why?* How come you was drivin' fifteen miles over the speed-limit on this-yeah road? Same road where you run into my wagon . . ."

The listeners in the tiers of pews began to sway all at once, like reeds in the wind. "*Why?*" someone in the rear took up the word, and then another echoed it, until a faint, rhythmic chant rose and fell all over the crowded chapel:

"*Why? Why? Why? . . . Why? Why? Why?*"

"*Order!*" The "judge," the man who looked like a judge long dead, banged softly with his gavel; or it could have been a shutter banging at one of those arched chapel windows, Bob thought strangely.

THE chanting died away. Bob swallowed nervously. For, the old Negro was looking up at him expectantly, waiting for an answer to his simple question—the question echoed by those looking and listening from that eery "courtroom." *Why?* Why was he driving so fast? If he could only make up something, some good reason . . .

"I . . . I had a date with my girl," Bob heard his own voice, startling in its volume compared to the whispers around him.

"Yassuh?" The black prosecutor nodded gently. "She was gwine off someplace, so's you had to hurry to catch up wid her? Or else, was she bad-off sick and callin' for you . . .?"

"I . . . No," Bob said, miserably honest. "No. There wasn't any hurry. I just . . . didn't want to . . ." He gestured futilely. "I wanted to be with her as quick as I could! Be-because I love her . . ." He paused, waiting to hear a titter of mirth ripple over the listeners.

There was no laughter. Only silence, sombre and accusing.

"Yassuh." Again the old Negro nodded

his graying head, the head with the gashed temple. "All of us wants to be wid the ones we love. We don't want to waste no time doin' it . . . Only, you got to remember: de Lawd give each of us a certain po'tion of time to use. And He don't aim for us to cut off de supply dat belong to somebody else. They got a right to live and love and be happy, too!"

The grave words hit Bob like a hammer blow—or like, he thought oddly, words he had been forming in his own mind, but holding off, not letting himself think because they might hurt. He fidgetted in the massive chair, twisting his hands together in sudden grim realization. Remorse had not, up to this moment, touched him deeply. But now it brought tears welling up, acid-like, to burn his eyes.

"Oh . . . please!" he burst out. "Can't we get this over with, this . . . this crazy mock-trial? I don't know who you are, all you people here. But I know you've . . . you've been incensed because my . . . my folks pulled some wires and got me out of two traffic-accidents that I . . . I should have been punished for! Now I've . . . I've run over a little girl, and you're afraid if I go to regular court-trial, my uncle will get me free again; is that it? That's it, isn't it . . . ?" he lashed out, half-rising. "All this . . . this masquerade! Getting yourselves up like . . . like people who are dead . . . ! You're doing

it to scare me!" He laughed harshly. "But it doesn't scare me, kid tricks like . . . like . . ."

He broke off, aware of another figure that had moved forward, rising from one of the forward benches. A burly man in overalls, wearing a trucker's cap . . . One big square hand was pressed to his side, and he walked as though in pain. Bob recognized those rugged features with a new shock.

"Kid . . . listen!" His rasping whisper sounded patient, tired. "We ain't here to scare nobody . . . Hell, that's for Hallowe'en parties! The reason we hold court here, night after night, tryin' some thick-skinned jerk who thinks he owns the road . . . Look, we just want t' know *why*; see? Why we had to be killed. Why some nice joe like you, with a girl and a happy future ahead of 'im, can't understand that . . . that *we* had a right to live, too! Me! Just a dumb-lug of a truck jockey, maybe . . . But I was doin' all right. I was gettin' by, raisin' my kids right . . ." The square hand moved from the man's side, gestured briefly and pressed back again.

"I figured to have my fool appendix out, soon as I made my run and got back home that Sunday. Only, you . . . Well, gee! Couldn't you have spared me ten seconds, mac?" the hoarse whisper accused. "Wouldn't you loan me that much of your . . . your precious time, instead of takin'

away all of mine? Mine, and this ole darkey's? And tonight . . ."

An angry murmur swept over the on-lookers, like a rising wind.

"Order!" The gavel banged again, like a muffled heartbeat. "The accused is not on trial for previous offenses. Remarks of the defense attorney—who is distinctly out of order!—will be stricken from the record. Does the prosecution wish to ask the defendant any more questions to determine the *reason* for the accident?"

The old Negro shook his head, shrugging. "Nawsuh, Jedge. Reckon not."

Bob glanced sidewise at the old man who looked so like Judge Ab. He sucked in a quick breath as the white head turned, revealing a hideously crushed skull matted with some dark brown substance. Hadn't his father said something, years ago, about that hit-and-run driver running a wheel over his old friend's head? Were those . . . were those tire-tread marks on this man's white collar . . . ? Bob ground his teeth. How far would these Hallowe'en mummers go to make their macabre little show realistic . . . ?

But now, to his amazement, the burly man in trucker's garb moved forward, shrugging.

"Okay, Your Honor," his hoarse whisper apologized. "I . . . I know it's too late for justice, not for us here. And if the court appoints me to defend this guy, I'll try . . . Look, buddy," his whisper softened. "You have reason to believe your girl was steppin' out on you? That why you was hurryin', jumpin' the speed-limit, to get there before she . . . ? You were out of your head, crazy-jealous?"

Bob glared. "Say!" he snapped. "This is going too far, dragging my fiancee's name into this . . . this fake-trial . . . Go ahead! I'm guilty of reckless driving—three times! I admit it! There was no reason on this earth for me to be speeding, no excuse for running over that . . . that poor little kid! It's . . . it's just that I . . ." His voice broke, and suddenly he was sobbing uncontrollably. "I didn't *see* her! Out here in the middle of nowhere—a child! How was I to know? The highway was clear, and then all at once, there she was right in front of my car . . . But . . . but I *was* going too fast. I deserve

to be lynched! Nothing you do to me would be enough . . ."

He crumpled in the chair, shaken with dry sobs of remorse. But fear, terror of this weirdly-made-up congregation, left him slowly, as, looking from the Judge to the highway patrolman, from the old Negro to the trucker, he saw only pity in their faces, and a kind of sad bewilderment.

"But—why? Why need it happen?" the elderly Judge asked softly, in a stern voice Bob thought he could remember from childhood. "Why does it go on and on? This senseless slaughter! If we could only *understand* . . . ! If we could make the living understand, and stop and think, before it's too late for . . . another such as we. There is no such thing as an accidental death! Accidents are murders—because someone could have prevented them!"

THE white-haired man sighed, like a soft wind blowing through the chapel. The sigh was caught up by others, until it rose and fell like a wailing gust echoing among the rafters.

Bob shivered, hunched in his chair. The hollow eyes of the judge fixed themselves on him, stern but pitying. He hung his head, and buried his face in his hands, smearing blood from the cut on his forehead.

"I . . . I . . . Please! Please don't say any more!" he sobbed. "I guess I just didn't realize, I was too wrapped up in my own selfish . . ." His voice broke. "And now it's too late . . ."

As one, the shadowy figures of the old Negro and the burly truck driver moved together in a kind of grim comradeship. They looked at the judge mutely as though awaiting his decision. The gaunt figure with the crushed skull cleared his throat in a way Bob thought he remembered . . .

"Too late? Yes . . . for these two standing before you. But the dead," his sombre whisper rose like a gust of wind in the dark chapel, "the dead can not punish the living. They are part of the past, and have no control over the present . . . or the future."

"Yet, sometimes," the dark holes of eyes bored into Bob's head sternly, "the dead can guide the living, by giving them a glimpse into the future. The future as it will be . . ."

unless the living use their power to change it! Do you understand, Robert Trask? Do you understand that you are on trial in this night court, not for the past but for the future . . . ?"

Bob shook his head, bewildered. "The . . . the future? I don't understand. I . . ." He glanced up eagerly. "The little girl! You . . . you mean, she's all right? She isn't dead . . . ?" he pressed, hardly daring to hope.

"She is not yet born," the old man whispered quietly. "But one day you will see her, just as you saw her tonight, lying crushed under your careless wheels . . . unless . . ." The whisper changed abruptly; became the dry official voice of a magistrate addressing his prisoner. "It is therefore the judgment of this court that, in view of the defendant's plea of guilty and in view of his extreme youth and of his war-record, sentence shall be suspended pending new evidence of criminal behavior in the driver's seat of a motor vehicle. If such new evidence should be brought to the attention of this court, sentence shall be pronounced and the extreme penalty carried out . . . Do you understand, Mr. Trask?" the grave voice repeated. "*The extreme penalty!* . . . Case dismissed."

The gavel banged. Bob nodded dazedly, again burying his face in his hands and shaking with dry sobs. A wave of dizziness swept over him. He felt the big chair tilt, it seemed, and suddenly he was falling, falling forward into a great black vortex that swirled and eddied . . .

LIGHT snatched him back to consciousness, a bright dazzling light that pierced his eyeballs and made him gag with nausea. Hands were pulling at him, lifting him. Then, slowly, he became aware of two figures bending over him: a gnome-like little man with a lantern, and a tall, sunburned young man in the uniform of a Highway Patrolman. It was not, Bob noted blurrily, the same one, the one with the twisted neck . . . He sat up, blinking.

"My, my, young feller!" The gnome with the lantern was trying to help him up from where he lay on the chapel floor in front of the pulpit. "Nasty lump on your head there! I'm the sexton: live up the road a piece. I

heard your car hit the ditch a while ago, and called the Highway Patrol. Figgered you was drunk . . ." He sniffed suspiciously, then shrugged. "Don't smell drunk. What happened? You fall asleep at the wheel?"

Bob shut his eyes, groaning. He let himself be helped to one of the front pews and leaned back against it heavily before answering. Better tell the truth now. Get it over with . . .

"The . . . little girl. Pinned under my car—you found her?" He forced out the words sickly. "I . . . didn't see her, but . . . It was my fault. I was . . . driving too fast. Too fast to stop when she stepped out right in front on my . . ."

He broke off, aware that the tall tanned officer was regarding him with marked suspicion.

"What little girl?" he snapped. "There's nobody pinned under your car, buddy! I looked. Your footprints were the only ones leading away from the accident . . . and I traced them here! Besides, you were dripping blood from that cut on your . . . Say! You trying to kid somebody?"

"No, no!" Bob gestured wildly. "Who'd kid about a thing like . . . ? Maybe the other Highway Patrolman took her away on his motorcycle! He . . . All of them . . . There didn't seem any doubt that she'd been killed instantly. But then, the judge said she . . . she wasn't even born yet! They made me come here, to . . . to try me! In . . . night court, they called it! All of them pretending to be . . . dead people, accident victims. Blood all over them! Mangled . . ." He checked himself, realizing how irrational he sounded. "I fainted," his voice trailed uncertainly. "I guess when they . . . they heard you coming, they all ran away . . ."

"Night court?" The officer arched one eyebrow, tipped back his cap, and eyed Bob dubiously. "Say, you *sure* you're sober, buddy? Or maybe you got a concussion . . . There's been nobody here. Not a soul; has there, Pop?"

"Nope." The sexton lifted his lamp positively, causing shadows to dance weirdly over the otherwise empty chapel. A film of dust covered the pews, undisturbed save where Bob himself now sat. "Ain't been nary a soul here since the Wilkins funeral;

that was Monday three weeks ago. My, you never saw the like o' flowers . . ."

The Highway Patrolman gestured him to silence, peering at Bob once more. "What was that you said about another speed cop? There was no report tonight. What was his badge number? You happen to notice?"

Bob shook his head vaguely; then dimly recalled numbers he had seen on a tarnished shield pinned to that shadowy uniform.

"Eight something . . . 84! That was it! And . . . and he had a kind of twisted set to his head . . ."

The officer scowled suddenly, hands on hips. "Sa-ay!" he said in a cold voice. "What're you tryin' to pull? Nobody's worn Badge No. 84 since Sam Lacy got killed two years ago. Chasin' 'a speed-crazy high school kid, who swerved and made him fall off his motor. Broke his neck!" He compressed his lips grimly. "You tryin' to pull some kind of gag about *that*?"

"No! N-no . . . !" Bob rose shakily to his feet. "I . . . I . . . Maybe I just dreamed it all! That clonk on the head . . ." He laughed all at once, a wild sound, full of hysterical relief. "You're positive there was no little girl pinned under my wheel? No . . . no signs of . . . ?"

He started toward the wide-flung doors of the chapel, reeling with laughter. But it had all seemed so real! Those nightmare faces, the whispering voices: that macabre trial for a traffic fatality that had never happened anywhere but in his own overwrought imagination . . . !

STILL laughing, he climbed into his convertible; found it undamaged by its dive into the ditch, and backed out onto the road again. He waved. Shrugging, grinning, the

Highway officer and the old sexton waved back, visible in a yellow circle of lantern-light.

Bob gunned his motor and roared away. A lone tourist, rounding a curve, swung sharply off the pavement to give him room as he swooped over on the wrong side of the yellow line. Bob blew his horn mockingly, and trod impatiently on the accelerator. Marian must be tired of waiting! And the thought of holding her in his arms, laughing with her, telling her about that crazy dream-trial . . . Dead men! Trying him, the living, for the traffic-death of a child yet to be born! "The extreme penalty!" If not lynching, what would that be? He smiled, amused. Was anything that could happen to a man really "a fate worse than death . . . ?"

Bob's smile froze.

Quite suddenly his foot eased up on the accelerator. His eyes widened, staring ahead at the dark highway illuminated by the twin glare of his headlights. Sweat popped out on his cool forehead all at once. Jerkily his hands yanked at the smooth plastic of the steering-wheel, pulling the convertible well over to the right side of the highway . . .

In that instant, Bob thought he knew where he had seen the hauntingly familiar features of that lovely little girl lying dead, crushed, under the wheel of his car. "The extreme penalty?" He shuddered, and slowed down, driving more carefully into the darkness ahead. The darkness of the future . . .

For, the child's blond hair and long lashes, he knew with a swift chill of dread, had been a tiny replica of Marian's . . . and the tip-tilted pixy eyes, closed in violent death, had borne a startling resemblance to his own.

