

# *An Unusual Storiette* SNAKE

By GALEN C. COLIN

IT WAS Saturday afternoon, and the men of Mooreland County were gathered, as was their custom, on the porch of the postoffice at Clayton Springs. They were watching a man, who was a stranger to most of them, making his way toward them down the trail from the hills.

"It's Ben Tibbits," said Jem Bates. "He's the feller that came over the divide a month or two ago and built a cabin about ten miles up the trail. Don't know much about him, but what I do know is too much. He beats his wife." With that, he spat disgustedly on the porch floor.

As Ben Tibbits came nearer, a playful puppy, one of the pack that always followed Jean Parton, ran to meet him. With an oath, he gave the puppy a brutal kick that sent it sprawling ten feet away. In an instant Jean was on his feet and rushing at the stranger.

Instead of defending himself, Tibbits groveled at Jean's feet. He fairly writhed in fright; every movement, every expression, showed terror beyond control. With disgust Jean spurned him with his foot and walked back to the group of interested watchers.

"The cowardly Snake," was his only comment.

And "Snake" was his name from that time on to the men of these Western Mountains. Swart and low-browed he was, with long and gorilla-like arms. His eyes were small and beady, black and furtive. All the cunning and lack of conscience of a swamp moccasin were shown in his shifty glance. Trapping was ostensibly his occupation—rumor had it otherwise. Hundreds of Chinese were smuggled across the border. Much of this smuggling was attributed to Snake and the immigration officers were constantly watching him. He was never caught red-handed for he was too sly and patient; he made no move until he was absolutely safe.

A fiery temper had Snake. Physical cowardice—abject terror at thought of physical injury—made him hold his temper well in hand toward men. The incident at his first visit to Clayton Springs was his only display. Toward his wife he gave it full sway. Never was her face and body free from the marks of his beatings; and his blows and insults had left her spiritless.

Dorothy Tibbits was frail and flaxen

haired—always tired-looking. Still, after six years as the wife of Snake she showed more than a hint of her former beauty—loveliness that made her the belle of the home village in old York State, before she came West to be the wife of Snake. With the unaccountable heart of a woman, she loved Snake and endured his lashings of both tongue and fist.

Owning the idolatry of every man in Mooreland county, none dared say a word against Snake in her presence. They were not so reticent among themselves. Jem Bates voiced the opinion of all.

"That damned Snake!" he burst out one day. "If he ever accidentally nips his thumb when he takes a chaw of eatin' tobacco, all the booze in the state won't cure his pizen. He'll swell up and bust like a mosquito."

These neighbors, had they ever learned the details of Snake's demise, would have been the first to sense the poetic justice of it.

When building his trap-line cabin in a secluded ravine up the mountain-side, Snake built with true serpentine cunning. He labored alone. No one had seen him at work. No one knew that beneath the rough slab floor was a cellar some eight feet square and five feet deep. It was reached by a trap door, cleverly concealed beneath the bunk. The only light came through a narrow crack between the cabin wall and the ground.

"Some day," mused Snake as he dug, "I'll get sore and kill that whimperin' female. Then I'll need this hideout."

He glanced at a six-foot length of one-inch rope, coiled in a corner.

It was a drizzly, damp spring night when Snake realized that his foresight would prove of immediate worth. His wife had been more than usually docile. She endured his curses without remonstrance. This inflamed Snake's twisted brain. With maniacal fury he seized her about the throat and wrung her neck as the cook wrings the neck of a chicken. He carelessly flung her body into a corner.

Then, as realization of what he had done dawned, he made a pack of all the eatables in the house. Slinging it to his back, he started for his retreat. He did not know that the slamming door had overturned the lamp and fired the house.

The wind howled dismally through the trees. Wet branches, like dead hands, slapped Snake in the face. At

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times the scraping of boughs brought him up standing, so much like the groan of a stricken woman they sounded. It was with a somewhat shaky set of nerves that Snake pushed open the cabin door. Into the cellar Snake dragged a few blankets. His pack of provisions and two canteens of water followed. It was pitch dark. Not daring to strike a light, he spread the blankets and lay down to dream-troubled sleep.

His neighbors were on the trail sooner than he had expected. Attracted by the light from the burning cabin, Jean Parton was the first on the scene of the tragedy. He lived but half a mile down the valley and arrived in time to read the marks. Soon a dozen well-armed men were on the trail.

Knowing of Snake's mountain cabin, it was there that the hunt centered. A thorough search failed to reveal the well-concealed hiding place. On account of the intense darkness it was useless to search further that night. The man hunters bunked down in the cabin to snatch a few hours of sleep before dawn. It was their stirring that awakened Snake. Day was just breaking. For some moments he lay with his eyes closed, listening to the comments on the killing.

"Hangin' is too good for the dirty devil," growled Jem Bates. "Burnin' is better, but I

vote for *slow burnin'*, you bet."

"Bet he's lit out across the Divide," hazarded Jack Williams, veteran trailer. "We'll foller him clean to Californy. The Law will never git its hands on him."

Snake almost chuckled aloud as he slowly opened his eyes. Instantly he froze with horror. Not three feet in front of his face was a sinister and menacing coil. Quickly he closed his eyes for a few seconds. It was no dream—the coil was there.

He could almost see the quiver of a sinuous body about to strike. It seemed he could feel the pair of jet black, glistening eyes glaring into his own. He could imagine deadly fangs fastened into his cheek. If he only dared draw his gun and blow off the reptile's head. That would bring more enemies more deadly about him. If only the men above would leave before some inadvertent movement drew that attack.

Then stark terror took him. Now the reptile breathed twin jets of fire. Now it grinned at him in hideous fashion. Again it grew—and grew—until it almost crowded him from the cellar. It disappeared for a second. Then the blessed relief was broken by finding it more menacing than ever in another corner.

Through it all, Snake uttered no word. At

length, with hypnotic power, the eyes drew him. He gently rolled onto his stomach. He began to wriggle toward the thing. Could he grasp it by its slimy throat and choke it before it struck? That was his only chance. He would rather die from the poisonous fangs than lie there trembling and chilling with terror.

He moved cautiously, stealthily; his fear-filled eyes dimmed and glowed alternately. Was the reptile moving toward him, or merely lying in wait, biding its time before it struck?

He was close enough now to grasp it. Slowly he raised his hand—he slipped—his face fell

forward into the very center of the coil as his hand closed about the slimy throat.

Then it was over.

Many days were consumed in the search for the murderer. At length the disappointed men returned empty-handed. In time the story of the crime was almost forgotten.

But to this day, in a cellar beneath a rough slab floor, in a far-away mountain ravine, lies a moldering skeleton. Its long, bony fingers are clutched tightly around the end of a six-foot strand of slimy rope.