

May

W

Weird

Tales



ANC

35¢

**SONG
IN THE
THICKET**

**Manly
Banister**



Weird Tales

May
1954

-
- THE EYRIE Inside front cover
- SONG IN THE THICKET (A novelette) Manly Banister 2
*Neither closer nor farther, the voices urged him onward—
calling, luring, promising, lulling.*
- THE PREDESTINED Q. Patrick 38
*It seemed as if the horror of his predestination had
dogged him all his life.*
- LORD OF THE TALKING HANDS Arthur Woodward 49
*An unusual man, indeed, and his statements were as unusual
as his looks and manners.*
- PREDICTION Curtis W. Casewit 60
*. . . not a story of murder, though there's a corpse in it; nor a
love story, though a blond actress plays a role in it.*
- THE PLACE IN THE WOODS August Derleth 84
*In isolated country places, one is alone with sky, earth and water—
and any invisible dwellers there may be in the trees.*
- THE RETURN OF SIMON CARIB Frederick Sanders 94
*The hospitable lights of an old inn shone over the snowy street.
How long had they thus shone?*
- WITCH WOMAN (Verse) Dorothy Quick 102
- THE BANSHEE AND PATRICK O'BANNON Joe Bishop 104
*Though usually silent, the Banshee's wail could not be stopped;
it meant death—maybe that of the man who tried it.*
- BEYOND THE DOOR Paul Suter 114
*The whole affair had been a mystery of lips which closed and
faces which were averted at my approach.*

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.

D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Copyright 1954 by WEIRD TALES. Copyright in Great Britain.



Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

Printed in U. S. A.

VOL. 46, No. 2



Heading by W. H. Silvey

SONG IN THE THICKET

By Manly Banister



JOHN DRAKE drove off the highway upon the dusty approach of Beauregard Avenue. All the streets are avenues in Burton County; although, new development style, they deserved rather to be called ruts. Beauregard Ruts, Drake thought with a high degree of dissatisfaction. Whyever he and Bev had chosen to settle in Burton County was something that presently evaded his more cognizant faculties.

Twelve thousand bucks . . . twenty years to pay it in . . . be dead by then. Drake tooled the sedan through a choking cloud of dust. Twelve thousand bucks down the drain—if you could call a cesspool a proper drain. There were no sewers in Burton County yet . . . they'd come later. Sewers would bite an extra

Is it true that an Undine can obtain a soul
by marrying a human being?

twenty-five dollars a month out of his already inadequate income. He kicked himself for not having foreseen the sewer problem. Add that expense to house payments, car payments, insurance, lights, water, gas, food, clothing, and the sizable sum he had invested in a perverted lawn that refused to become grass. .

He braked to a crawl and steered carefully around a big mud puddle in the middle of the road. A dollar and a quarter he'd spent this very day for a wash job, and damned if he was going to throw *that* away with a wild dive through that obscene patch of liquidity.

No wonder there was a puddle in the road, Drake mused viciously. The whole benighted country was clay from the surface to the center of the earth . . . and probably a few thousand miles beyond. No drainage through clay . . . clay! No wonder his lawn wouldn't grow! Gezwich told him that yesterday . . . no, it was this morning. You got to haul in topsoil, Gezwich had said, or put in sod. Need topsoil in any case . . . the builders buried the original topsoil under the junk they dug out to make the basement.

Drake had always thought dirt was dirt, and dirt was what grass grew in. Thirty bucks worth of seed and fertilizer—hours of back-breaking effort—and the

yard was still a semi-sea of yellowish mud whenever it rained. When it didn't rain, the soil baked so hard you couldn't sink a pick in it. Oh, of course, he had a *few* sprigs of grass here and there . . . crabgrass grows anywhere.

Drake steered carefully around another puddle. There were not many finished houses on Beauregard Avenue. Drake had the last one, at the end of the street. There were several more about midway down, but all the other lots were still a-building. Lean skeleton houses lined the dusty road.

A **N**OTHER puddle. Drake peered at it with a frown of disfavor. Something about those puddles had set his subconscious mind to working. He could almost hear the whirring and clicking of mental cogs. The puddle was as ordinary as any, damp around the edges and wet in the middle. Otherwise, the roadway was covered with a thick, soft layer of dust. There wasn't much traffic on the back streets of Burton County, and Drake was sure those puddles had not been there when he left for work this morning. If it had rained in Burton County today, the roadway would at least be damp, wouldn't it . . . ?

Drake coped no further with the problem of the puddles. He

carefully negotiated the perimeters of several more and drove onto his own drive.

A flurry of pink and white in a yellow starched housedress of economical cotton fluttered at the kitchen door, hurtled out to the car. Drake opened the door.

"H'lo, hon. How's m'baby?"

Beverly Drake planted a luscious, soul-satisfying kiss on her homecoming husband's lean chops. They still had a couple of million kisses to go—and a couple of babies, too—before Bev would content herself with a mere look out the window as John came driving in. For the present, they were very much married, and very much in love.

"I'm *so* glad you're home, lover boy!"

Beverly was blonde, sparkling blue-eyed, warm and cuddlesome. Drake grabbed her to him and returned the luscious, soul-satisfying kiss she had so generously given him.

"'Smatter? Trouble?"

He knew there was no trouble. Bev said it every night. She was just glad he was home and wanted him to know it. He knew it and was glad of it, too. Bev was all he wanted out of life—the rest of it could go hang.

He expressed the depth of his feelings with, "What's for supper, baby?"

She ignored his outburst of connubial passion.

"John there's something I want you to do for me before it gets dark . . ."

"Eh? Sure . . . anything at all, baby!"

He kissed her again, even more satisfying than before.

"Well!" she balked, pulling free. "'Nothing like killing a dragon or anything! I just want you to drain a puddle out of the front yard."

He went up the kitchen steps into the house.

"Let it dry up, baby."

"But John . . .!"

He turned, chucked her under the chin, grinning.

"Anything for you, baby after supper!"

He progressed into the living room, dumped his hat on a chair. He sprawled on the davenport.

"Where's m'paper?"

"Pork chops for supper . . . to answer your questions in the order of their appearance," Beverly said, running one hand through his hair. She balanced herself delicately on the arm of the davenport.

"As for your paper—it's out in the middle of that nasty puddle I was telling you about!"

"The hell it is!" Drake swung himself to a sitting posture. "What kind of an idiot have we got for a paper boy? Get on the phone and have another sent over."

Beverly went dutifully to the

phone, called the local distributor.

"He'll be by with it in about a half hour," she said, hanging up. "John, I want to discuss that puddle with you."

Drake lay back on the davenport and reached for a magazine.

"Hmmm. Hope you told that guy what I think of his delivery."

"John, the puddle"

"Lots of puddles, John observed, whetting his glance on a four-color representation of pulchritude in the magazine ad. "There are puddles all over the road," he said. "What do you expect when it rains?"

"Did it rain downtown today?"

"Don't think it did just out here."

"Not out here, it didn't. I've been home all day, so I know."

"Maybe a street cleaning wagon went by."

"Be sensible!"

"Okay. Maybe there's a water main bust."

"John—this puddle in front of our door."

Drake's face went a trifle gray.

"Good God! Do you suppose *our* water main could be broken? And on *our* side of the meter?"

"Oy! At the rate we're paying for water!"

He got up quickly and opened the front door.

"It isn't a broken water main," Beverly said matter-of-factly, "because the water doesn't flow. It just puddles. There seems to be a sag in the walk there, right at the foot of the steps."

Indeed, it did appear that the water filled a sag in the concrete walkway. It lapped out several feet on either side into the gruesome mockery of a lawn. John knew there couldn't be a sag there. The grade sloped from the house to the street—the walk itself was slightly crowned.

The evening paper lay, as Beverly had said, in the middle of the puddle, just beyond reach of a questing broom handle.

"Could you drain it?" Beverly suggested, referring to the puddle. "Dig a little ditch or something?"

"It'll dry up by morning, Drake protested dubiously.

"Are we to ask the Harrians to wade through it tonight? Remember—we're having them over for canasta. Or do you?"

Drake hadn't remembered, but he did now.

"Get me a broom," he said tersely, "and go on with supper. I'll sweep it away."

"Huh-uh."

"Huh-uh what? Must I get my own broom?"

"Nuh. No sweep."

"Nonsense. Get me a broom."

"It won't work, I say."

"Why won't it work? Get me that broom!"

"Okay, Canute. Have it your way."

She flounced into the house and a moment later the broom came bouncing out. Drake caught it and began to sweep industriously, sending the offensive puddle in foaming waves down the walk. Observing the damp spot that remained, he shook the moisture from the broom with complete satisfaction and went into the house.

Drake was in process of mangling his third pork chop when Mr. Barnes, the neighborhood newspaper distributor, knocked on the door. He passed the paper and a mumbled apology through the door to John.

"That's certainly a man-size puddle you've got there," he allowed. "You got a bad sag in your walk. What I always say about these houses they build nowadays, scamp the work, that's what they do! Never try to see a thing is done right. If you was me, I'd get hot after the contractor that left that sag in the walk. You get a puddle like that from watering your yard, you'll see it's a fright when it rains!"

With that, he politely touched the brim of his fedora, stepped off the porch and sloshed off through the puddle. Drake stared after him, nonplussed. It was almost dark, and the puddle

gleamed silvery with sky light.

Beverly said over his shoulder, "I see it's back."

There was a tone of smug satisfaction in her words that stung Drake.

"I suppose you knew it would be?" he hurled at her.

"Yup. I swept it away three times myself today!"

"Get me that broom again!" Drake snapped. "I'll do some more sweeping—see if it's a water line bust, or a spring in our front yard!"

"John, dear . . . your supper . . ."

"Hang supper! I've finished anyway."

He swept the water away again. During the last half of the operation, he had to have the porch light on to see by. Finally, there was only a damply gleaming streak reflecting the shine of the early evening stars.

Drake examined the ground on both sides of the walk and along the foundation, but there were no tell-tale streams of moisture bubbling from the earth or anywhere else. For the last time, Drake shook out the broom, stamped moisture from his soggy footgear, and went grumpily back into the house. He left the porch light on for the expected arrival of the Harrians.

Neither John nor Bev heard Ben and Zuelda Harrian drive

up. A bedroom intervened between the living room and the driveway, and the TV set was making an exorbitant amount of noise. A loud hallooing and banging at the back door announced the arrival of the expected couple.

"The front door's for coming in," Drake greeted them pleasantly, switching on the drive light.

Zuelda, tiny, buoyant, vivacious and brunette, assumed a mien of mock indignation.

"Wade through that puddle? Or do you furnish a boat?"

Tall, handsome Ben Harrian, as dark and sombre as his wife was dark and sparkling, nudged her through the door.

"Go in, Zuelda!"

The expression was just like him, Drake thought. So grammatically proper. He could not imagine Ben saying "go on in" like a native would have said it.

"Don't keep the man waiting with the door open," Ben concluded, and grinned at Drake as they passed through the kitchen. "That is a big sink you have in your front yard, Jack. Been watering the lawn?"

"That's the second time tonight somebody has blamed lawn watering for that puddle," Drake retorted. "I haven't got enough of a lawn to waste our high-priced water on. If there's a puddle there now, it's grown in

the last hour. I've swept it away twice this evening. I don't know where it comes from nor where it goes to!"

Ben lifted heavy, perfectly arched brows.

"Tut, tut not so touchy, Jack! Sorry to tramp on your feelings, but it is a big puddle . . ."

"All right," Drake said. "All right! Let's go into the living room."

The living room emitted a blast of variegated squeals and giggles as Bev and Zuelda came face to face. The Harrians were really Beverly's friends, Drake thought, as he put their things away in the bedroom while Bev and Zuelda hugged each other.

The Harrians had arrived in the city, friendless, a few months ago, and Ben had landed a job in the shipping department of Drake's company. A background of extensive Old World travel and an uncanny familiarity with every backwoods hamlet in America made Ben a natural for the shipping department post.

Drake, of course, had been responsible for Beverly's meeting Zuelda. He'd invited the couple the first time, out of a desire to be friendly to the new man. Ben had accepted the invitation with a surprising warmth, and from then on. well, it had been like a rolling stone picking up momentum.

Not that he disliked Ben Harrian. Drake just was not a gregarious type, and the thoughtless remarks of others frequently irritated him. Ben was quite good at being irritating, and apparently without meaning to be.

Zuelda, now . . . she was cute and convivial and . . . well, hell! . . . it's natural for a man to take less umbrage with a good-looking woman than with another fellow, isn't it? Zuelda had a mouth like a fresh, red rosebud, deep, dark eyes that swam in a sea of gaiety, and a figure . . . Drake's neighbors *never* irritated him with things like that!

The group settled down to a comfortable game of canasta. The conversation was bright and sparkling. Ben was witty, Drake had to say that for him. He was extremely cultured, betraying in speech and manners an unusual education coupled with a wide knowledge of little known subjects.

Ordinarily, Drake enjoyed the Harrian's company well enough, but tonight a worry oppressed him. He didn't like things that went unexplained. Finally, he put words to his aggravation.

"The thought of that puddle is getting me down!"

"Tell your contractor about it," Ben observed judiciously, quietly studying his cards and playing with great care.

"You mean I should make him

replace the walk. The walk doesn't need replacing. There's no sink in it. But where is that water coming from?"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Ben observed lazily.

"I *should* worry," Drake said stiffly. "It's *my* walk."

The game continued with something less of its former sparkle. Bev mixed and served cocktails, and spirits picked up again.

"It's either a busted water main or a spring in the front yard," Drake gloomed.

"How terrible!" Zuelda put in. "Your nice new house!"

Drake looked at her gratefully. Ben tapped his cards against a gleaming thumbnail.

"A spring? That's a possibility, Jack."

Drake tossed his hand on the table.

"Come on, Ben. Let's look it over. Maybe you can see something I couldn't the last time I looked."

ARMED with a flashlight, Drake flipped on the porch light and went out. The puddle was a black and shining smear at the foot of the steps, extending out a considerable distance along the walk and into the yard on either side. Drake flashed the torch over the far perimeter of the glistening slick.

"It's bigger than it was last time, and for the life of me, I

can't figure what keeps it from flowing down the walk. Might as well be tar." He dipped the toe of his shoe into the pool. "But it isn't. It's water, all right."

Ben made a humming noise in his throat but offered no other comment. Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

"Might be a spring at that, Jack! I know a fellow who might be able to tell you something. Old Tom Ellers . . . he lives over near us, on a back street. Sort of a neighborhood handyman. He . . ." Ben stopped, at a loss for words.

"Go on, Drake prompted. "He what?"

"He . . . he's what they call a water witch. . ."

"One of those guys who twiddles a stick and finds water?"

"You might put it that way

"Ha!" Drake glared gloomily at the puddle. "I can find water without a stick. Here it is see?"

"I mean, Ben put in, "that Tom could find out where it is coming from . . . if it is a spring."

Drake glanced sourly up at the taller man.

"You don't . . . *believe* that rot, do you?"

"Well . . . Ben temporized. "I can't do it myself, but Tom . . ."

"Let's go in the house, Drake

grumped. Ben's talk of the water witch irritated him more completely than anything else that had passed between them this night. "If I got a spring pouring up there, I can find it myself tomorrow!"

DRAKE could not find the spring the following morning, though he swept the puddle away once more before going to work. Far from being happy at not finding the evidence he sought, Drake was so put out he failed to notice that yesterday's puddles were gone from the road, though new pools of water gleamed among the row of houses under construction.

Having had the day in which to think over his predicament, he dropped into Ben's office shortly before quitting time.

"What'd you call that fellow, Ben?"

Ben looked up from a desk full of papers. "What fellow?"—

"You know . . . last night was it . . . water witch?"

"Oh . . . you mean Tom Ellers. Sure. Decided to have a try at it? Now, I don't guarantee Tom can actually tell you where that water is coming from, Jack . . ."

Drake waved a hand.

"I looked all over hell for a spring this morning. Didn't find any."

"Was the water still there?"

"I swept it away."

"It's gone now?"

"I . . . well . . . it's always come back before. Let me call Bev."

He scooped up Ben's phone, dialed outside, then rapidly dialed his home phone number. Beverly answered promptly.

"How's that puddle, hon? The one in front, I mean."

There was a brief pause. "It's back again, John."

Drake swore. "Sorry, honey," he apologized.

"That isn't all."

"Isn't all?"

"No. There's another one across the drive from the kitchen door, and a third one in the back yard!"

"Have you been Drake began suspiciously.

"Whatever it is you're thinking, I haven't. And it hasn't rained today, either."

"Uh thanks. See you." Drake hung up, looked gloomily at Ben.

"Bev says it's back . . . and there's another in the side yard and one in back."

Ben whistled softly.

"You just *could* have a spring breaking out in several places. You'd better let me bring Tom Ellers over this evening."

"Sure, but what could he do?"

Ben shrugged. "He might be able to give you a hint whether

it's permanent or not . . . or show you some way to divert it."

Drake shook his head. "I can't believe in that kind of stuff."

Ben hoisted his shoulders again.

"Nobody does, really . . . except the water witches. Nobody believes in their ability but they hire them every day to find water."

"Is that true? I thought water witching was some kind of fable . . ."

"Many water sources have been discovered by the so-called water witches. Fable or not, they frequently do locate water underground with nothing but a stick."

Drake gave in with a sigh.

"Okay. How about bringing this Ellers around, hey? I don't know what good he can do, but maybe . . . just maybe he can tell me for sure if I've got a damned spring running loose or not!"

ELLERS turned out to be a wizened little man of about sixty, gaunt as a pitchfork, sparsely topped with gray. His cheeks like old bacon rind were covered with a gray stubble. He was dressed in sordid blue overalls, and his wretched once-white shirt bore witness to at least a score of bachelor meals. He grinned all over, shaking hands with Drake.

"Pleased t'meet yew, Mist' Drake!"

Drake smiled affably as the little dowser ambled out of Ben's coupe.

"Ben uh . . . tells me you're a water witch, Mr. Ellers."

Tom Ellers' blue eyes turned frosty. He frowned.

"They ain't no sech thing as a witch, Mist' Drake. I'm a plain, natural dowser, that's all. I dowses for water ain't no witchin' to it!"

Drake acknowledged his error with a look of pained embarrassment, hiding an inward smile.

"Do you think I've got a spring on the property, Mr. Ellers?"

The oldster stamped on the concrete drive, surveyed the lay of the land with a critical eye.

"T'tell 'e truth, Mist' Drake, if I was one of these geology fellers, I'd say there wasn't a chance in the world. This county is solid clay more than two hundred foot down, to bedrock. But that ain't the case." He fell musingly silent, scanning the slope behind the house and its thickets of scrub elm and willow. "No, sir, it ain't the case. There's lots of water here—I can feel it. I am one of them as can," he observed with a proud grin, "though I like the feel o' the stick for pinning it down. Let me cut a stick, now, and I'll be right with you."

Ellers stamped off briskly in the direction of the thicket be-

hind the garage. Drake glanced inquiringly at Ben. The tall, dark man smiled easily.

"He's gone to cut a divining rod—the forked stick he uses."

Ellers returned in an instant, paring leaves and stems from a forked branch of elm.

"We c'n start aroun' in front," he hailed cheerfully, "by that big puddle, and come on aroun' this-away . . ."

He led off quickly, with a spryness that belied his years, shucking the last of the leaves in the drive. He skirted the edge of the puddle on the sad description of lawn, raising the "rod" until it pointed upward like a V, in a peculiar, back-handed kind of grip.

Drake was not prepared for what happened next. He jumped as the rod whipped violently downward, swung back up another half arc between Ellers' arms and beat the air in front of his chin. The dowser's brown face mirrored his physical strain. His arms twisted, seeming to fight the vicious pull of the rod, and he found it difficult to keep his footing. Suddenly the old man stumbled and fell, losing his grip on the writhing rod.

Ellers got up with a shamefaced grin.

"You've sure got a lot of water under there, Mist' Drake. See how that blamed rod th'owed me? One nev' th'ow me befo',

though I did hear tell of it happenin'."

He grinned, braced himself, and swung the rod upward. It flapped violently again, seeming to twist itself from the old man's grip.

"Plenty there, all right," Ellers grunted. "Naow, le's aroun' to side."

He led off again, and Drake hurled an accusing glance at Ben.

"Is that guy nuts or something?"

The half-grin of understanding he had expected from Ben did not materialize. The tall man's lean face suffused with a saturnine frown.

"You modern Americans don't believe in anything; that's your trouble!" he spoke harshly.

Drake shrugged, privately thinking that Ben Harrian must be nuts, too, if he took any stock in this sort of thing.

Ellers was in the side yard, his rod doing a witch's dance over the second puddle. "I'd say, Mist' Drake, they's a great big spring feedin' that pool, but you doan' see it runnin' out anywher!"

Drake regarded the pool. The sun was below the horizon by now. It had been sunset when Ben drove in with the old fellow. Lingering twilight reflected from the surface of the pool, which seemed to ruffle, swirling, as if caressed by a brisk wind.

But there was no wind . . . not

a breath. Drake peered more closely at the puddle. The surface was definitely agitated in brisk motion.

Ellers cupped the rod in his armpit and moved into the back yard where the performance was repeated. He held his rod up again, turning this way and that, seeming to read significance into the waving and waggling of the forked stick.

"I think, Mist' Drake, I can find fo' you where that stream is comin' from . . ."

The oldster took off at a high lope toward the thicketed slope. Drake took a step to follow, heard Ben call out to Ellers, then Ben's hand on his arm arrested him.

"He'll be back in a minute. The big spring, or source, is probably up there on the slope some place. No use our crashing around the brush after him he'll go in a straight line through anything in the way!"

It was, Drake saw, almost dark. The sky still glared against the horizon, silhouetting the thickety ridge, which was now like a pool of ink.

DRAKE didn't know how long they waited. Ben passed the time with a few comments on dowsing which he seemed to have gleaned from some place. It may have been ten minutes, or fifteen. Shadows gathered thickly on the

drive until Drake could scarcely see the tall man's face. Before they knew it, darkness closed in. Stars sprang into being in the velvety overhead. Drake fumbled his way to the kitchen door, found the light switch just inside, and turned on the drive light.

"Your friend ought to be coming back pretty soon, hadn't he, Ben?"

Ben shrugged. "He may have gone farther than we think. No use shouting. If he's still dowsing, he wouldn't hear us."

"Drake peered across the drive toward the puddle that had puzzled him with its seeming agitation. He clutched Ben's arm.

"Ben! The puddle . . . !"

The tall man swung around.

"What . . . ?"

"It isn't there!"

"Sure enough!" Ben bit his lip. He looked sidelong at Drake.

"How about . . . ?"

Drake bounded through the house, nearly scaring Beverly out of her wits. A long minute later, he returned slowly.

"It's gone."

"I checked the one in the back yard," Ben said.

Drake looked at him. Ben nodded.

"What the hell . . . !" Drake exploded.

"What can it be?" murmured Ben Harrian. "Jack, you don't believe in superstition, of course, but I've made a study of such

things. Frankly, this business worries me."

"Your friend Ellers is what's worrying me!" Drake barked at him. "We'd better look for him."

Drake went inside for a flashlight. It took an hour, casting about in widening circles, to find the little dowsler on the thickety slope. A three-quarter moon rising in the east cast oblique light into a small clearing about two hundred yards from the house. They found Tom Ellers there . . . quite dead.

"Poor little devil!" Drake mourned as they picked their way back to the house. "I feel guilty as hell, having you bring him over here . . ."

Ben's voice was a mumble in the darkness. "Forget it, Jack."

"We couldn't know he had a bad heart, could we, Ben?"

"Forget it, Jack!"

Drake nearly wept with remorse. "Ben, I . . ."

Ben's firm, slim hand came out of the darkness, shook Drake forcibly.

"Forget it!"

Drake's teeth rattled. Momentary rage swarmed through him. But the shaking cleared his head. He felt his guts settle slowly back into place.

"Sorry, Ben . . . here, take it easy . . . here's the yard . . ."

They rounded the garage and went into the house. Drake did not see the shadow lurking there,

out of the moonglow. As the kitchen door closed, the shadow detached itself from the garage, drifted down the drive and into the night.

"Guess we better call the sheriff, Ben?"

"That is the usual procedure," Ben said gruffly.

Drake moved toward the phone. Ben put a hand on his arm. He made a motion signifying a drink in Beverly's direction. Beverly understood, sped worriedly into the kitchen where they kept a fifth under the sink.

"Better let me phone," Ben said.

He made the call quickly, curtly, and turned to Drake.

"Bev is bringing you a drink, Jack. Pull yourself together. The sheriff and his men will be here in a few minutes. Don't mention the puddles to them."

"The puddles?" Drake had forgotten the puddles. "Why?"

Ben grinned tightly. He tapped his forehead with a stiffened finger.

"*That's* why. They'll think you're crazy enough, having a dowsing over. Let me do the talking. You just answer what questions are asked of you."

"But, Ben, how about those puddles?"

"Forget the puddles, Jack!"

Drake felt anger flare in him again. Ben Harrian was master of this situation. He, Drake, in his

own house, was a nincompoop. He blamed Ben for accentuating his distress. Beverly appeared suddenly and jammed something cold and firm into his grasp. He tilted the glass, drank. His feelings subsided.

It was a long night. They had to go back to the body, of course, with the sheriff and two of his deputies. Flashlights bobbed in the thicket, pale swords of luminance in the stark glare of the moon. When they came upon the body, Sheriff Hamilton sent a deputy back to the house to await the county coroner, who was an unnecessarily long time in coming.

The remaining deputy occupied the interval taking several flash photographs with an enormous camera.

The sheriff questioned both Ben and Drake, listened to the story Ben told of the water hunt, the graphic description of the speed with which the old man had darted into the brush in search of the "big spring."

"Don't take much stock in water witchin', myself," the sheriff grunted, "though I guess there's a lot of it bein' done. It's plain the old fellow had a bad heart. Too much exertion for a man his age."

The coroner finally came, fussed over the corpse. He wasn't a doctor—the coroner's post in Burton County was a political ap-

pointment—but even he could see that Ellers was dead, and he said so, with what seemed to Drake to be a great deal of unnecessary satisfaction.

“Think his heart gave out, Abe?” rumbled the sheriff.

“Ed, you know I’m not a doctor!” protested the coroner. “We’ll have to send the body to the city for a post mortem. All I can say for sure is that he’s dead.”

The group crashed back through the brush. The two deputies carried the body. At the edge of the thicket, a pair of ambulance men with a stretcher met them. The body was put on the stretcher, carried out to the ambulance in the street. Sheriff Hamilton offered a few last words, legged into his car with his deputies, and the cortège ground away.

Drake was surprised to find Zuelda in the house when they re-entered.

“Bev called me,” Zuelda explained. “I had neighbors bring me over.”

Ben frowned. “You should not have come, Zuelda . . .”

Zuelda sparkled dangerously. “Leave Bev all alone, with you men out there crashing around in the brush?” She softened suddenly. “Poor old Tom !”

Ben shrugged, turned to Drake.

“I guess we better be going,

Jack. It’s late.” A cloud settled on his thin, handsome face. “There’s something frightening going on around here, Jack.” He appealed to Beverly. “Aren’t you afraid to stay here?”

Beverly shook her head, wondering.

Drake said, “If you’re referring to those puddles, Ben, it’s your turn to forget it. There’s a natural explanation for everything, if you look far enough. As for being afraid of poor old Ellers’ ghost . . . I think not!”

Zuelda spoke slowly, looking doubtfully at her husband, as if seeking support from him.

“Ben is . . . is psychic . . . Jack. You can call it that. We wouldn’t blame you if you moved out right away after these things have happened.”

Drake laughed harshly.

“Too big an investment to leave,” he chuckled grimly. “It’s over with now, so what is there to worry about? Ben . . . you’re too sensitive. I’ve thought that about you all along. If I told you there were pixies in the thicket, I’m sure you would believe me!”

Ben stared at him oddly while Zuelda anxiously regarded her husband.

“Do you . . . do you know there is something in the thicket ?”

Drake exploded with strained mirth.

“There . . . what did I tell you?”

I didn't even say there were pixies, and you . . ." He exploded in another uproar.

"You listen to Ben, Jack!" Zuelda shrilled at him, shocking him out of his semi-hysteria. "Ben knows things you don't know he knows don't dream . . .!"

Ben Harrian's hand came down forcibly on her arm.

"Zuelda! My dear . . ." He turned to Drake, smiling. "Sorry, old man. I take it, then, that you plan to stay right here?"

NOW it was Drake's turn to stare. Could there really be any other thought in the tall man's mind? Move out? Why? Ben seemed satisfied with Drake's reaction. He took his wife solicitously by the shoulder.

"Come, dear. Jack's had a bad evening."

"Sorry I'm not scared out of seven years' growth," Drake put in with a sour grin. "Like some people . . ."

Ben turned, flashing white teeth in a friendly smile.

"Good night, Jack Beverly."

They heard the Harrian's car churning the furlongs to the highway.

Beverly said, "You've insulted them, John, our best friends!" She said it simply, without accusation, as if puzzled, and she awaited an explanation.

Drake passed a hand across his face. His fingers shook.

"I'm sorry, Bev. Shock, I guess. Mostly, I can't stand that guy, anyway. I'll look him up at the office tomorrow and apologize."

He wondered later about Ben's concern over their leaving this place, he and Bev. Drake laughed grimly at the thought. It wasn't in Drake's make-up to scare easily. He wasn't scared at all, he told himself. His reaction was shock . . . sympathy . . . pity for poor old Tom Ellers . . . tough way to end!

The apology he had contemplated making Ben for Beverly's benefit dried up like the puddles in the yard. Drake didn't apologize, and though he saw Ben frequently at the office, there was a strained atmosphere between them. And it didn't matter, Drake told himself, though Bev was worried about losing Zuelda's friendship.

FRIDAY evening, Sheriff Hamilton stopped by. Drake gave Bev that look which both of them tacitly understood to mean vanish. Bev vanished into the kitchen and rattled crockery.

Hamilton opened the skirmish with a few questions about Tom Ellers—pointless questions. Drake shrugged.

"You'd better ask Ben Harrian

about that, Sheriff. I'd never seen the man before in my life."

The sheriff grunted. "I'll get around to Harrian later. Now, about this dowsing. Tell me about that again."

Drake told him. He wanted to mention the puddles, just to spite Ben Harrian, but somehow he could make no mention of them pass his lips.

"Now, tell me again just how you found the body," the sheriff went on.

Drake said, "Aren't you making a lot of unnecessary trouble, Sheriff, over a man's dying of a heart attack?"

Sheriff Hamilton stared levelly into Drake's eyes.

"I didn't say Ellers died of a heart attack—leastwise, not tonight."

Drake felt a kind of sick alarm flood him.

"You mean an accident? He could have tripped and fallen

"He didn't trip.

Drake felt sicker. The thought of an attacker lurking in the thicket probably there while Bev was home alone

"I didn't see any marks to show he might have been clubbed or stabbed, Sheriff. And we didn't hear a shot."

"Ellers wasn't knifed, clubbed or shot."

Drake wondered why the sheriff deliberately prolonged the

agony of his disclosure. Did he think he and Ben Harrian had killed Ellers?

"How *did* he die—if it's any of my business?"

"It *might* be your business. It depends on whether Ellers went off into the brush under his own power, as you say, or whether he was carried in there and planted after he was drowned."

"Drowned?"

"The autopsy showed his lungs full of water. Ellers died by strangulation in an aqueous medium if you prefer the language of the autopsy report."

There was a moment of leaden, swimming silence, then the sheriff's rough voice resumed the interrogation. —

"Now, you're sure, are you, that Ellers went off alone into the brush . . ."

He does suspect us, Drake thought. A countering thought flashed through his mind. It was Hamilton's job to suspect everybody. He could have no evidence to point suspicion toward Ben or Drake.

Drake said, "I guess I've said enough, Sheriff. If I am under arrest, I'll go peacefully . . ."

The sheriff sighed and got to his feet.

"Sit down. You're not under arrest. I believe your story, and that's the tough part of it. It would be easier if I didn't. If you

find out how a man can drown himself in the middle of a thicket without getting his clothes wet, and without a drop of water anywhere around, let me know huh?"

JOHN DRAKE awoke in the middle of the night with a feeling of palpitant urgency. His ears strained against the unusual quiet of the night, as if seeking again the source of some sound that might have awakened him. Silver moonlight gushed through the bedroom windows from a nearly full moon riding high in the star-powdered sky.

The night was breathlessly still and hot. There was no murmur of insects, no raucous screams of the cicada, a blasting trumpet of sound synonymous with hot weather. He heard only the light breathing of Beverly as she slept quietly beside him, bathed in the light of the moon.

Then, faintly, he heard the sound again, the sound that had brought him awake—a low, throbbing ululation of musical quality that rose and fell on the moon-drenched night, crescendoed to a wail, and fell again to a haunting murmur that was like the whisper of dark waters caressing the smooth stones of an ancient stream bed. With the sound, there came an intensification of the urgent feeling that gripped him. He had to get up and go—

someplace, he knew not where. Drake sat up in bed, head cocked for better listening, restraining the mad impulse to jump and run.

It was the sound of a voice—or of many voices, so beautifully blended as to seem one. It was a voice such as Drake had never heard before, its unhuman quality poignant with desire and the promise of sweetness ineffable. As the voice crescendoed, his ear detected the separation of syllables, but the song remained lost to his understanding, the words blurred and indistinct, yet pregnant with a lure that was more than he could resist.

Suddenly the singing was quite loud, as if swelled by an unimaginable chorus, until the room throbbed with its rhythm. Surely, Drake thought, the swelling harmonies must awaken Beverly. But she slept gently on. Drake covered his ears with his hands, but the wild song diminished not a decible in volume.

It came to him then that the voices he heard lifted in song were not in the air at all, but in his own mind, ringing sweet and clear from some mystic, hidden well-spring of his own being. The pathos of it, the lure of it, the liquid, murmuring richness of its rhythmic fabric consumed him, dulled his senses, his power of thought, made of his mind a bright chamber where Nothing-

ness floated in Void and he was robbed of his will.

Like a man in a dream, Drake dressed, stole to the door and out. Moments later, he picked his way through the thicket world of scrubby elms and willows, blundering through an endless, chaotic world of molten-bright moon silver and ebon shadow.

The voices still rang in his mind, neither closer nor farther away, with quickened tempo, with breathless beat, urging him frantically onward, calling, luring, promising, lulling. Drake came out in a clearing in the heart of the thicket. He might have recognized it as the place where they had found Tom Ellers' body, but his external senses were dulled to his surroundings, only the inner ones were afire with the rhythm of that delectable melody.

In the clearing he saw them that angelic chorus that heavenly minstrelsy . . . and the moon bathed with its glare their glowing bodies, effulgent silver against the shadowed backdrop of the thicket. With intricate step and flowing motion they danced . . . naked in the moonlight they danced . . . the grassblades scarcely bending under the flitting lightness of their dainty feet. Scores of female figures dancing, each perfect as cast in the mold of perfection, and from the throat

of each seemed to pour that unearthly melody which held him spellbound.

The night became a blur in Drake's mind. By and by, he was vaguely aware that time had passed, that the moon had lowered itself and now poured a colder light athwart the thickety ridge. He stumbled, leaving the thicket behind him to re-cross his own back yard. He did not perceive the shape that huddled in the shadow of the garage and looked after him with complete satisfaction as he groped his way to the kitchen door and into the house. He was not truly conscious of anything until he suddenly awoke to full command of his own senses in his own bed.

Beverly slept quietly yet. She might not have stirred a muscle the whole night through. Drake's mind was a kaleidoscope of moonlight shards and shadows, and twisting, writhing, leaping shapes that glistened silver . . . of soft breasts and yielding torsos, clinging arms and flashing thighs. . . .

The whole vision seemed to contract in his mind, shriveling into a core of hard brilliance, an unremembered spectacle of grandeur and passion. Drake whimpered, his face in his hands, as the last shred of delightful memory drifted beyond his ken, became a throbbing ache that answered nothing of the ques-

tioning pain in his being . . . and demanded much. He slept.

DRAKE could not explain, even to himself, the feeling that gripped him next day. What mystified him was something beyond his unexplainable feeling of physical exhaustion. He spent the morning out of doors, hovering at the fringe of the thicketed slope. Once he cut a forked stick as he had seen Tom Ellers do. He held it in his hands in as nearly the same peculiar manner as he could remember. But it was only a stick—a scrawny, bifurcated wooden thing, dead as a stick of wood in his grasp . . . a stick of wood . . . it was nothing more.

He drove by the Harrian's, but the shades were drawn at all the windows, and nobody answered his knock on the door.

Drake drove into the city, parked by the public library and went in. It was late afternoon when he came out, and he was ravenously hungry. He found a small restaurant, ate, and drove home. It was after sunset when Beverly met him at the door. She looked worried, wifely intuition sensing the disquiet that gnawed at him.

She said, "Your supper is waiting, dear."

Drake roused from his abstraction sufficiently to kiss her lightly.

"Thanks. I ate downtown." At

her look of dissatisfaction, he added quickly, "I'll have a cup of coffee with you while you eat."

The table was set in the kitchen. While Drake gloomed over his coffee, Beverly pecked disinterestedly at her food.

"Have you seen the Harrians today?" he asked.

She raised her brows. "No. Should I have?"

"No. I just thought—" he paused. "I stopped by their place this morning. Nobody was home, and I thought maybe they might have come here. I didn't go directly there . . . I drove around a bit first."

"They weren't here. She paused, wanting to ask the question. She blurted, "Where did you go today, dear?"

"No place." At her continued questioning look, he amplified, "In town to the library."

Beverly seemed suddenly more cheerful. She relaxed, smiled.

"Get any good books?"

"Huh? Get any . . .? No . . . I didn't take any out. Just looked through a couple."

"What kind of books?"

He acted as if he didn't want to talk about it, but was impelled to speak.

"Skipped through some books on dowsing . . . you know . . ."

Beverly perked up with a look of interest.

"Are there books about it?"

He chuckled hollowly. "Plenty of books, but none of them say much. There's a history to dowsing, of course, and they all treat that. The authors are either totally for dowsing as a fact, or totally against it. None of the authors, it seems, are dowers. They're just investigators . . . and writers. It was a foolish notion I had, anyway."

She sensed that the subject oppressed him and wisely refrained from pursuing it further.

"Well, we don't seem to have any more springs in our yard, so I guess it doesn't matter. There's a good play on TV tonight, and I want you just to relax and forget all about . . ."

"Sure. I could stand some rest, hon. Feel beat up." He stood up, yawned, and went into the living room.

The television play was mediocre. Drake yawned all the way through it. At its close, he clumped off to bed and fell instantly into deep, dreamless sleep.

A GAIN the clarion call of the mystic saraband pulled him awake. Drake sat up in bed, panting, his brain astir with vague, delightful memories. Beverly slept peacefully, and the moon painted a broad band of silver across her face and night-clad upper body. The gold of her hair fought against the silver of the moonlight and lost. It looked like a

cloud of fine-spun platinum against her pillow.

There was something in the elfin light that flooded the bed which brought out a certain appealing quality no woman save Beverly had ever had for Drake. Briefly he yearned for her, then the throbbing ululation of devilish melody in his mind overcame the impulse and he found himself dressed, crashing through moon-drenched thicket.

The dance slowed its tempo as he approached, and as he stepped through a screen of young elms into the clearing, the swirling of naked figures became a close-knit weaving and swaying, their song a tremulous humming with vocal counterpoint. Suddenly there were words that had meaning for Drake, a contrapuntal repetition, now in low, murmuring melody, liquid as a clear, cold freshet springing down-a piney mountainside.

*"Hail the Bridegroom!
Hail!"*

The massed dancers converged upon him. Drake saw the gleam of moonglow on their eyeballs, the flashing refulgence of panting breasts, of sinuous torsos . . . He yielded to an intoxicating influx of passion, a living flame that ripped through his body, then flickered and failed, and nothing of it was left save a frigid ash. The hair prickled at the nape of his neck. The singers

were silent, poised, staring at him, sensing that their hold upon him had somehow snapped.

Drake fell back a step. He yearned to move forward, to be swept up again in a maddening chorus of voices and flowing bodies, in a welter of passion and delight . . . but something deep as the shadow of the elms, as hard and bright as the floating moon, shut like a door between his mind and his feelings . . . and he turned and fled, back to the house, to Beverly, to . . .

What it was that impelled him so to run, Drake did not know. It was a consuming urgency that brooked no delay, a greater urgency than that imposed upon him by the massed singers in the thicket, and diametrically opposed, accompanied by such a sense of prickling dread that it left him gasping.

He heard the sound of its going as he launched himself against the kitchen door, heard the frantic, watery splashing of it as the door burst open. He flipped the light switch on the floor was a sea of roiling water.

Poised on the threshold, Drake stared at it without comprehension, aware only that it seethed and boiled away from him, smote with a splash against the cellar door. The panel crashed open, and the water poured foaming into the basement.

Almost at once, the automatic sump pump woke to whirring life, began to pump the water into the French drain prepared for its outflow beside the house.

A step grated on the drive and Drake whirled. Ben Harrian stood limned in the light pouring out of the kitchen door. His face drawn and pallid. His mouth was half open, as if he had been about to speak.

"What do you want?" Drake snarled at him.

The sump pump still whirred softly in the basement. Drake knew that Ben heard it too, and he suspected that Ben knew why it was whirring. What was Ben Harrian doing here at this time of night, anyway? Drake got hold of himself.

"Sorry. I didn't see it was you, Ben. What's the trouble?"

Ben smiled slightly, his thin, handsome face passively calm.

"I . . . I just dropped by, Jack. I couldn't sleep for . . . for thinking. I was afraid you would be in bed. . . ."

"Beverly's asleep!" Drake announced crisply.

"Of course, Jack. I can speak to you out here. I've . . . I've been worrying. Sheriff Hamilton dropped by this morning yesterday morning now, I guess. We went with him, Zuelda and I, to his office . . ."

Drake grunted. "So that's

where you were. I stopped by to see you."

Ben's face lighted. He sat down on the kitchen step.

"He said he'd talked to you. I was wondering what you made of this drowning business."

Drake leaned in the doorway.

"Some fool of an intern got hold of the wrong corpse, naturally. Hamilton will probably get a corrected report next week. A man doesn't drown in thin air."

Ben got to his feet. He looked reassured.

"You don't think there was an assailant lurking in the thick-
et . . . ?"

"With a bucket of water?"
Drake snorted.

Ben grinned almost, it seemed to Drake, as if with relief.

"Okay, you win! I'd better be getting back. I left my car down at the end of the street . . . didn't want to wake you if you were sleeping."

He turned and walked off into the dark.

"Liar!" Drake thought. He stared into the dark, though Ben Harrian was no longer visible. "I'd give a nickel to know just why you *were* hanging around here!"

Drake locked the kitchen door and went into the living room. The mantel clock pointed to ten minutes past two.

Drake continued to muse about

Ben Harrian as he undressed for bed. There was that dark, sombre air about him that he didn't understand, for one thing. Take Zuelda; now . . . her face was like an open book. She was everything her husband was not . . . so full of life and the love of living . . . but what was the almost passionate affection she expressed for Bevely, a faint glow of which he seemed to feel washed over upon himself? Both the Harrians seemed unusually devoted to the Drakes, though their acquaintanceship was short indeed.

A PROFOUND weariness assailed Drake's frame. He started as he suddenly recalled the gushing flood in the kitchen. He had been so intent on concealing its presence from Ben that it had slipped his own mind until just now.

What manner of horror was it he had witnessed . . . what dark rite had he interrupted by his untimely return? Could that rush of . . . of water, wasn't it? . . . have any relationship to *them* . . . be one of them?

How could he ever sleep again with so frightful a question unanswered? He looked at Bevely, the sweet outline of her cheek cuddled against the pillow . . . then the segmented parts of his night's experience clashed in his brain, burst into jumbled frag-

ments that whirled madly and exploded in ribbons of incandescence upon the darkness of his mind. Drake toppled over in inert slumber.

There were thundershowers the next day, and Drake mooned around the house, hating the inclement weather. He blamed his feelings on a night of poor sleep, not realizing he had scarcely slept at all. His mind was confused with a chaotic non-remembrance of racing dreams from which he could isolate no single bizarre scene. He looked out the window at the rain puddles in the yard and street, remembering those other puddles with a vicious kind of wonder.

Drake had little enough to say to Beverly, and she seemed to respect his reticence, though with a puzzled crease between her eyes.

"You've not been feeling well lately, John. I think you ought to stay home from the office tomorrow take another day of rest :

He shrugged, switched on the TV and settled himself for a dull afternoon. By and by, the sun came out, the landscape steamed itself dry, and Drake went out for a walk.

He felt impelled, somehow, to stroll up toward the thickety ridge, in the direction Tom Ellers had taken. There was nothing in the wood but damp humus and

puddles that glistened among the scrub. The earth was unaccountably dry in a clearing among the brush. It looked somehow familiar; then Drake remembered that here was where they had found Ellers' body.

He threw himself on the ground to rest, turned his eyes up to the sky and balefully studied the few woolly clouds that still lingered after the rain. He was troubled in mind and spirit, possessed of a wonder that went deeply and acutely into his perceptions. He wondered what this impelling wonder was . . . nothing had been the same since Tom Ellers had come up here on the hill and died . . . had drowned in a sea of dry grass, brush and trees.

Somehow, Drake felt no sense of personal danger from his surroundings. He was completely detached from the physical world as he wrestled with a thing that was in his mind alone. He let his thoughts drift over the events of the night of Ellers' death, tried to correlate them into something that resembled coherence.

The clouds drifted by as the sun declined. Slowly, Drake drifted away and away, until finally he slept in complete exhaustion of brain and body.

DRAKE felt as if he were floating. A strange, bluish luminescence engulfed him, a

sparkling blueness, alive with a strange, vital sort of sentience. The sparkles waxed and waned in the blueness, and he was conscious of dim, blue shapes that swam around him. He saw their glistening eyes as they peered at him, felt the presence of naked bodies close to his own, stirring the sluggish medium in which he seemed to float.

Somehow, Drake did not care. He contemplated his surroundings with a mindless apathy. "I'm dreaming, of course," he thought, as one thinks in dreams. "I should wake up and get back to the house. Beverly will be wondering where I am."

But he made no effort to extricate himself from the dream. He allowed himself to drift, blissfully at peace, fully relaxed, a floating mote, an atom, a wretched shell of nothing among the glimmering shapes of the blue void.

Drake's perceptions seemed to sharpen after a time. The limits of the void extended themselves to floor, walls, ceiling. He was in an eerie, blue-lit cavern the light which lit it he knew had no physical existence, but was merely an impression of his mind, reaching out with some other-sense to palp the eternal gloom of this rift in the limestone womb of the earth. He smiled to himself for dreaming such a bizarre thing as this, knowing that he

dreamed, but accepting the dream for fact, nonetheless.

He seemed to float midway between the floor of the cavern and its stalactite encrusted ceiling. The female shapes, with here and there among them the arrowing form of a male figure, swarmed around him, above, below and on both sides. He became aware then of a thrumming and humming that existed in his mind alone, as the images of the cavern-creatures existed, a wavering chorus of melody which he identified as coming from the throng about him.

The dream-people were singing to him—a song that welcomed him to the blue-lit cavern under the earth. There was a pathos in their welcome, and a sweetness, and a lulling lure that made his presence there a thing of desire to him.

All at once, a single figure swam out of the crowding myriad, a dainty figure, her hair a cloud of shadow that caressed her shoulders, floated on the too-heavy medium of the cavern atmosphere. Her arms moved slowly, with sinuous grace, as if she actually swam in something that was as if it were water . . . though even Drake's sleeping mind rejected the thought, for he breathed, and the air of Earth was his medium.

There was something vaguely familiar about the elfin features

that closely and more closely approached his own, but his mind was dulled, and he could not place the familiarity of her. She hovered above him—he could have touched her simply by lifting his hand, but he lacked the will to do so. Her hair floated around small, piquant features, blue-gleaming, shapely shoulders. The points of her tiny breasts pressed almost against him.

Her lips smiled, and her eyes caressed him voluptuously. He heard the murmur of her voice deep in his mind, and his perceptions fled before the ecstasy of promise in her words.

"Tonight, while the undines dance, my love I'll wed you and you'll wed me, as it was done when the world was young . . ."

Drake threshed, aflame with desire, as her lips met his and clung. He flung his arms up to embrace her, but he embraced nothing, and awoke in the still darkness of the thicket.

He rolled over and sat up, head swimming, eyes still blinded by the blue glare of the dream-cavern. The world was a silent, breathless place, peopled with moveless shadows among the scrub, gashed by the glare of the rising moon—a full moon tonight—a glowing orb that spectacularly lightened the sky to dusty blue and paled the stars.

Drake made to stand, but for some odd reason, his legs refused to support him. He sat panting, his mind's eye still aglow with that world of dream, his inner ear vibrating yet to the luring promise of the witch with the floating hair—the strangely familiar witch who promised herself to him body and .

The moon rose higher and higher on his dazed musing and the dance of the undines began.

He noticed suddenly how the moonlight sparkled on pools of water that nestled among the scrub. All at once, ripples beset the surfaces of them, though there was no breeze, so that they shimmered and winked like glowing eyes in the darkness—like giant jewels flung strewn by some sublime hand.

The pools stirred—and moved. They shifted position with wills of their own, rose in mounds, then in dripping columns and bulging shapes that spun and glistened in the moonlight. Then began a slow, erratic motion, from moon-bright night to densest shadow, back and forth, gliding, slithering, bending, twisting—and slowly the undine shapes took form, became as lovely women, bending and swaying in rhythmic dance. He was swept away by the sight of them in their nakedness, by the song to which they danced, and

he became as elemental as these creatures from the bluelit limestone cavern under the earth which he knew now had been no dream.

The woman-shapes tramped around him, unearthly in their beauty, breathing the breath of ecstasy into their song. They bent above him, caressing.

A SINGLE light glowed in the living-room window of the Drake house, where Beverly, worried and alone, tried to read a magazine. John had been gone all afternoon and evening it was nearly midnight.

She fought against the clammy fingers of cold fear that persisted in gripping her. John had gone off today into the thicket . . . as Tom Ellers had gone . . . she cast the thought out of her mind. John would have had no reason to stay this long in such a wild place, she told herself. He could have come out of the thicket at any one of a hundred different places. Perhaps he had taken a notion to stroll over to the Harrian's . . . the silent telephone mocked her. She could comfort herself, at least, with the thought that perhaps he had. If she called and found that he had not . . . her heart stilled . . . then raced at sound of a step on the porch.

The door rattled in its frame, and a feeling of glad relief thrust through her. Then a natural cau-

tion asserted itself. John would be proud of her for her discretion if she called out first

"Who's there?"

Totally unexpected, Zuelda's voice answered her, muffled by the heavy panel of the door.

"It's Ben and Zuelda, Bev. Let us in, please . . . quickly!"

Zuelda's voice was not loud, but distraught. Beverly opened up. Zuelda hurled herself into the room, followed closely by her tall, handsome husband.

"When I first heard your knock, I thought . . ." Beverly began.

"You thought it was Jack!" Zuelda cried. "We know he's gone. Bev . . . something terrible is happening . . ."

Beverly felt her throat contract.

"Has something . . . happened to John . . .?"

She felt faint. She groped behind her for the davenport and collapsed, stricken, horror staring out of her eyes.

Ben was briskly reassuring.

"Not at all! Beverly! Jack's all right, do you hear me?"

The meaning of his words slowly sank in and color returned to Beverly's cheeks. She gulped. Ben's voice was soothing, gentle, curiously lulling.

Ben turned to Zuelda. "Don't excite her, dear. Would you like a drink?" he asked Bev.

Beverly shook her head word-

lessly, wide-eyed. She sat up straight.

"What about John? Tell me!"

Ben looked at slim, well-kept hands. Zuelda fluttered like a small, frightened bird. She flew to Beverly's side, twittering almost, comforting with her arms.

"What I have to say is going to be difficult for you to understand. Bev. You must forget everything you have been taught as truth and fact . . . and remember that the scientists do not yet have the universe trapped in a test tube and wrapped up in a coil of wire.

"A long, long time ago, Bev, the world was much different from the world you know. I don't mean it was less civilized, or anything like that, which you know well enough. Perhaps I can make it plain this way—from childhood, you have been familiar with so-called fables and myths of the ancient world . . . of gods and goddesses, pixies, fairies, fauns, and so on. You must believe me when I say that the fables are founded on solid fact."

Beverly looked puzzled. "What has this to do with John?"

"I am getting to that. You must understand this part first. In the very long ago of which I was speaking, men knew the truth of these things I am telling you, be-

cause they actually associated with the beings who later became known as gods, goddesses, and so on.

"In those years, the streams, ponds, rivers and underground watercourses of the Earth were populated by a race of elemental beings called undines . . . popularly represented as being entirely female, but there were males among them too, naturally."

"You say these things are fact," Beverly put in. "How do you know?"

Ben smiled slightly. "My dear, I am a student of the . . . occult . . . a vastly misunderstood word, by the way. It simply means hidden. All my life, I have studied the hidden things . . . the things that are true but not evident, simply because people refuse to believe in them. The undines may be included in this classification, and they still exist in spite of man's stupid ignorance of them."

His mouth set in a thin, hard line. He mused on his next words.

"We have been watching your house every night, Zuelda and I, since the night Tom Ellers was drowned by the undines."

Beverly straightened with a gasp.

"It wasn't . . . his heart?"

"I assume John did not tell you. But you must know now. It is important. The undines drown-

ed Ellers because it is their simplest and most effective means of attack against human beings. The fact that Ellers was drowned in a perfectly dry area gave me my first clue that it was the work of undines.

"You see," Ben went on, "the undines have for many centuries been forced to live away from the habitat of man. Man's attitude toward them his vain pretense of enlightenment made further contact between the two races impossible. In places far from men, some undines still people the surface waters of Earth, but there are many of them, and not enough isolated waters. So many, indeed, have taken to the streams and pockets of water under the earth. Occasionally, some of them come to the surface, take on human form and mingle a while with men, but they cannot stay too long away from their natural medium a few months at most. In order to stay longer requires the peculiar spiritual nature possessed by man alone."

"I don't understand," Beverly interrupted quietly.

"You have heard a great deal of talk," Ben shrugged, "about something called the human soul. It is not exactly what you and the greater part of mankind think it is there are not even words in the language to describe its exact nature. Anyway, no undine

possesses this something called a soul."

A light of dawning comprehension gleamed in Beverly's blue eyes.

"I know! They can get a soul by marrying a human being!"

BEN smiled again, slowly. "That is how the fables phrase it. It is true in a sense, but only in the manner of speaking. We are speaking of perfectly natural powers now, and not of mythical beings and mythical souls. The human soul, as we must call it, is as real as the electricity that lights that lamp. It is a force or power that can be used, transferred, and otherwise treated like any other source of energy.

"The undines have a ritual of marriage with human beings, by which the mind-force of the group acts upon the individual human being to absorb him or her into the race of undines. In doing so, the human being is forced to give up that focus of living energy he calls his soul, which may then be trapped into the service of a waiting undine. Have I made myself clear?"

Beverly stared. Her mouth worked. "This . . . this marriage ceremony is some kind of witchcraft that will change a man into an undine . . . and the undine he 'marries' into a human being with a soul?"

"Precisely! Tonight, the undines celebrate the marriage of their queen with your husband."

Beverly's eyes blazed. Her lips tightened, white-edged.

"She can't do that! John is married to *me!*"

"The marriage of the undines is only a travesty on human marriage. The two have nothing in common. Unless we act to prevent it, the queen of the undines tonight will gain a soul and Jack will become an immortal, soulless undine."

He held up a warning hand as Beverly attempted to speak.

"We've been watching, as I said before, and twice already—last night and the night before—Jack has kept a secret rendezvous with the undines in the thicket, where they have made an entrance to their watery world under the surface. Tonight is the last night your husband is with them now... We need your help, Zuelda and I—we need your human soul as a catalyst in what we have to do. Will you come with us into the thicket now?"

There was a long silence. Beverly said, hollowly, "I—I can't believe a word you've said! I—"

"Don't try. Just come with us and do as I tell you."

"Now?"

"Now! You want to save Jack's life, don't you?"

The bluntness of his statement

shattered her reserve, penetrated where his other arguments had not. She acquiesced with vehemence. A minute later, the three picked their way cautiously through the moonlight and shadow of the dreaming thicket.

At first, Beverly could see nothing but a moonlit glade among the scrub, grass blades turned to the moon, glowing as if powdered with diamond dust. Beyond the glade, the shadows were deep and dark, and there was an uncanny stillness on the warm night air.

Ben halted her with a light touch, whispered to her to sit. Beverly obeyed, puzzled, frightened, as she peered out on the empty glade. Then Ben Harrian leaned over her and murmured something softly, a few syllables she did not quite catch. Before Beverly could ask him to repeat, she drew her breath in sharply at sight of the dancing figures, afire with moonglow, with which the glade seemed to be filled.

"These are the undines," Ben hissed. "Watch them well! Remain here—don't move or make a sound; no matter what you may see or hear. Remember your husband's life is at stake out there."

Then she heard the brush rustle softly as Ben departed in one direction and Zuelda in another, circling the glade as if to surround it with the three of them.

Moment by moment her eyes accustomed themselves to the treacherous light. Now she made out more plainly the dancing troupe, saw their nakedness, the lasciviousness of their gestures and dance. She could not guess how many there were.. perhaps a couple of dozen . . . perhaps as many as fifty or more. That they were lovely she could see at a glance . . . lovely, graceful, and possessed of an appeal that made even her pulses quicken.

WITH joyous abandon, the undines danced in the moonlight, and, as if from far away, the sound of their singing penetrated to the ear of her mind, wailing and wonderful, utterly sweet beyond measure, throbbing with undertones of passion and grief.

It seemed to Beverly that the words of the song were half understood by her, and the undines were wailing their farewell to the queen they loved, promising a welcome to the one who was to take her place among them.

The dancing group swirled apart for a moment, and Beverly saw her husband, seated on the floor of the glade. His face was toward her, but lifted, so that the moon caught his expression in full brilliance; and she saw his lips parted in a grimace of ec-

stasy, his hands clutching the turf with agonized fervor.

Beverly's breath came in short gasps. She felt sticky and wet with a perspiration of anxiety. She leaned forward, peering through the shadows of the scrub, into that moonlit glade in the heart of the thicket.

Around and around the undines danced, their song growing louder, trilling more sweetly as it filled with the ecstasy of the marriage bed. The bride was coming, the song related, to meet her groom.

The bride—it must be she, Beverly thought with a jealous pang—drifted from the press of dancers, alone into the center of the circle they made. Which it was, Beverly could not tell, for the creature had her back turned, her dark hair a floating cloud about her naked shoulders. Her body swayed voluptuously to the tempo of the dance; her arms and legs writhed to the pulse of melody. The queen of the undines approached Drake, who awaited her in eager expectation.

Beverly's breath caught in her throat. It was all she could do to keep from crying out and rushing into the glade. She restrained herself with an effort, trembling, panting, her eyes straining to realize the tableau.

Any woman would know what the dancer's gestures meant . . . and Beverly shuddered with re-

vulsion as she saw her husband responding. Slowly the undine bride with averted face circled her waiting groom; then she seemed to melt downward as she flung herself writhing at Drake's feet. Her body twisted—white arms reached out to embrace him as he hurled himself upon her.

Harsh upon the sudden stillness that followed cessation of the undine song; a man's voice boomed across the clearing. Beverly started with wonder and relief. It was Ben's voice, and he was chanting something not understandable, a semi-song of rolling syllables that had the sound of some ancient tongue long dead upon the face of the Earth.

What she expected, Beverly did not know, but she was not prepared for the sudden vanishment that occurred. One moment, the undines circled in a refulgent splendor of silvery flesh, in their midst an obscene spectacle of lewdness against which Beverly shut her eyes in horror and disgust. When she looked again, impelled by the silence, the glade was empty, a slice of moonlight carved out of the shadow.

Beverly fainted then, and was only dimly conscious of Ben's arms supporting her as he carried her back through the thicket to the house. She was also vaguely aware of softly thudding footsteps that followed, Zuelda's

footsteps, light and indistinct on the deadening humus.

"Put her in the bedroom," Zuelda directed crisply, turning on the lights as they went through the house.

Ben deposited his burden on the bed and turned to leave the room.

"Undress her. She will be all right. She is sleeping naturally."

He went out and waited in the living room, turning off the overhead light, leaving the room dimly lit by a small television lamp on the console. Zuelda joined him softly.

He whirled, seized her arms in a fierce paroxysm of passion. His eyes gleamed fervidly in the half-light. Zuelda did not draw away. She collapsed against him, turned her face up to his with a smile of luxurious triumph. Her eyes were half-veiled, somnolent, flickering with nameless fires.

"How does it feel?" he cried hoarsely, devouring her with his eyes. "*How does it feel?*"

She laughed throatily, did a dancing pirouette out of his grasp, and threw herself breathless on the davenport.

"Not like going through the sump pump last night. That tickled!"

"You tried to rush things last night," he accused her. "You put us off a whole day."

"What is a day in eternity?"

He regarded her somberly, half across the space of the living room.

"You *can* feel it?"

"Of course I can! You will know what it feels like. . . by and by . . ."

He lunged at her, seized her shoulders, shook her.

"Tell me!"

She arched her back, like a cat stretching. Her mouth was red and wide with soundless laughter, eyes closed to gleaming slits.

"Wonderful, darling! Oh wonderful . . . to have a soul!"



He retreated, an enigmatic smile twisting his handsome, un-human face. He cocked his head listening.

"It is worth the trouble then . . . and now, 'the undines sing . . ."

The undines were outside the house and in it, below it and on all sides, dancing their endless dance, trilling the bridal song of the blue-lit caverns of limestone far down in the earth.

Ben squared his shoulders, murmured to his wife.

"Now that *you* have a soul, you will be the catalyst for me . . ."

His eyes held hers and she laughed without sound again, red lips parted, pointed white teeth gleaming in the lamplight.

"Hurry . . ." she whispered, ". . . and come back to me!"

The somberly handsome undine turned, stepped toward the bedroom.

JOHN DRAKE opened his eyes in the cavern of blue spangles and encrusted limestone walls. Full memory was his now. The charm that had held him powerless had acted upon that other side of him . . . that part of him which was his no longer. He was an undine . . . as soulless as these others who swam around him, peering curiously, pathetically, half-afraid, wishing to make him welcome, yet not daring the possibility of his wrath.

It was peculiar, Drake thought, that he did not feel angry. He fully understood how he had been duped, and by whom, but his mind viewed the situation with a logical philosophy. He

was without emotion . . . and it occurred to him that perhaps that had been taken from him, along with that other . . . his soul. The word echoed flatly in the corridors of his thinking.

The tragic enormity of his transgression in the ethereal glade he reviewed with a calm deliberation. He remembered well the dancing undines, the poignant sweetness of their song, remembered again the ecstasy of that joyous embrace of the queen of the water-world . . . then he felt again in memory the sharp pangs of dissolution, felt himself flowing away into the dark earth, a watery substance that fled through minute interstices of the clay, into the phosphorescent blue sanctuary of the limestone underworld.

Remorse and disgust bit him, these being not emotions but states of mind. He knew that the life force . . . the soul . . . erst-while his, now caressed the body and spirit of Zuelda Harrian, while her husband . . . he knew that, too.

The undines flashed away from him as he moved suddenly . . . and then he heard them singing again, their unheard voices lifted in the pagan lilt of their betrothal song.

He knew he must go . . . or spend eternity in this blue-lit water-world with Beverly . . . and the undines.

The throng was streaming away from him now, arrowing upward in full song, and Drake hurtled in the midst of them, came out with them in the moonlit glade, and flowed down the thicketed slope toward the lighted house.

Drake cast his other-sense ahead of him, palpating the night for the last act of this unhuman drama.

While the undines danced, he glided and ran. He was half a man-shape when he reached the house, a water blob of a man that shone in the unwavering moonlight. He found the door and hurled it open, flung himself into the living room.

Zuelda sat with eyes closed upon the davenport, attuned to the rapture of the undine song. Drake's uncouth entry startled her into outcry. She flung herself erect.

"Jack!"

Drake halted. "So you were my bride tonight." He chuckled obscenely. "I rather think you left me at the altar, my dear!"

"No!" she gasped. "No!"

She voiced not a denial of his statement, but a frantic rejection of the intent she read in his mind.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"But I would dare," Drake mimicked her tone softly. "You forgot a few things, my pretty

bride. You forgot that when you took the vital essence of my life, you took also the means by which you could control me!"

Her eyes were big and dark, pits of smouldering despair. She backed in a half-circle around him. The blood had drained from her face; taking with it her sparkling vivacity, the color of her beauty, leaving her cheeks sallow, sagging, quivering with alarm.

"I'm going to do to you, he said deliberately; "what you did to Tom Ellers out there in the thicket. Because he had a soul . . . and was human . . . he could die. You killed him then, because he came upon you taking form in the glade, and he knew you for what you are . . ." He chuckled with a tinge of bitterness. "Poor old devil . . . you were using him just for show to work me into the proper psychological mood, but you forgot to control him. Maybe if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have had enough on my mind to come back here from your blue cavern . . ." He paused.

"Jack!" Zuelda whispered desperately. "Ben is in the bedroom with . . ."

He laughed savagely.

"Another thing you forget, Zuelda . . . that I am an undine now. I can see where poor humans can not. He is standing on the other side of the door, in

quite as much of a funk as you are. But *you* have the soul, see? My soul . . . and I want it back. You can die now, remember, like Tom Ellers died . . ."

"If you kill me," she whispered in ghastly panic, "you will lose your soul forever!"

"You won't die, my dear. I won't let you . . . not for a long time. Drowning is not a pleasant death . . . but you wouldn't know anything about dying. You will learn, though . . . or go back to your hole in the ground!"

She moved swiftly to dart past him, into the kitchen. Drake elongated his body into a shining ribbon of water. A watery pseudopod burst from his side and plunged against her face, choking the scream that welled into her throat. His other hand, semi-solid, held her fast.

"I wish the sheriff could see this," he murmured into her threshing hair. "He'd see how a man can drown without getting his clothes wet!"

Zuelda struggled piteously, floundering in his aqueous grip.

The bedroom door burst open. Ben Harrian was wild-eyed, ferocious of countenance.

"Will she let me kill her, Ben?" Drake taunted.

Alarm flooded Ben's unhumanly handsome features.

"Don't do it, Jack!"

"She can give it up . . . if she

wants to. She is drowning now, Ben."

Ben didn't move. He called out, "Zuelda!"

The sound of water gargling in Zuelda's lungs was horrid answer to his call.

"Zuelda! Don't let him do it, darling! Give it up . . . hear? Let him have the damned thing back . . . it's probably bound for Hell, anyway!" He glared fiercely at Drake's shining form. "Give it back to him, and we'll go back to our world and our people together . . ."

Zuelda relaxed in Drake's grip. Her body began to lose form and substance. He knew that she had assented to her husband's plea with the last gasp of life in her tissues. Drake held his grip. He must not let go too soon.

The undine was a column of madly churning water between his hands. The base of it spread; the water-column collapsed . . . and *something* came out of it, like the song comes out of a bird, boisterous, vital, filled with a splendor of being.

Drake caught it, enfolded it with himself, made himself whole once more.

He stood erect, his hands empty. He was solid flesh and blood, sturdy boned . . . and only now did he know in full how

much he had lost . . . and how much regained . . .

He swayed, naked in his own living room. There were no dancing undines anywhere. Zuelda was gone. Ben was gone. There was only a liltng splash of water flowing down the kitchen steps, and then that was gone.

Drake found that he was shaking. He went into the bedroom, looked down at Beverly sleeping, touched the soft, pale curve of her cheek. The westerling moon shone full upon her. Her lips tilted in a tender smile, as if in her dreams she responded to a suggestive, unheard song.

"She knows," Drake thought, "but she won't remember . . . I can thank them for that, at least. I won't have to tell her, either . . . and I won't . . ."

He half-turned, cocked an ear toward the thickety ridge, seeing again the passionate surge of the undines' dance, hearing the elfin lure of their song. But it was only in fancy that he saw and heard. All was silent . . . no, not silent . . . there was sound that came to his earthly ears . . . the shrill music of tree frogs, the trilling of crickets, and booming above them all, the rasping scream of a cicada as it yielded its life to the predacious assault of some horny-limbed horror in the moonlight.