

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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*When the menu is murder, some
eat crow—some eat buzzard*

TERROR *in the sun*

TALMAGE POWELL

If the mission of the story-teller is to evoke a mood, then here is fiction doubly fulfilled—awakening emotions both of horror and tenderness. A push from fate . . . an evil chance . . . a stumble among quicksands . . . these, we are reminded, can overwhelm a man; or they can bring out such steel as lived in Cobb and Lonnie.

The author, who in 1949 was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe award in mystery fiction, at the age of thirty-one has published nearly three hundred short stories and novelettes. And yet, speaking of moods, he finds the time daily to indulge his own. They call for (1) taking naps or (2) playing the clarinet.

Cobb and Lonnie found the body in a palmetto thicker. As they came upon it, an obscene vulture reared its head, its beak dripping.

"Buzzards!" Lon said. Cobb tried to keep the pale, thin boy back, but Lon darted forward and flailed a pine-knot as the awkward bird wheeled up, wings creaking and slapping in the muggy silence. With a guttural cry of rage, Lon flung up his arm. The pine-knot slapped the bird's head sharply and it toppled heavily almost at the feet of the panting boy.

Cobb had hardly been aware of Lon's killing the buzzard. He couldn't drag his eyes from the body the killers had left to the vultures on the bank of the sluggish Everglades creek. The killers had stripped the body of every means of identification, but the filthy birds had left enough on the fine young frame of bones to show Cobb it was his eldest son, Brad.

Cobb felt the sickness churning up from the crannies of his soul. He was numb with a feeling inside like his guts had been ripped open. Yet

this was what he had known he would find from the moment he and Lonnie had come upon Slavirey's big car, its front wheels mired in the bottomless sludge at the side of the deep-rutted sand road.

He forced himself to stand quietly in the sweltering heat, his twelve-gauge shotgun on the crook of his arm. Agony burned through him like fever. He had known something was wrong when Brad had come running home, not frightened, but tight-lipped and determined. He had pleaded with Brad, but Brad wouldn't talk much about it, even when the fat man, Ed Slavirey, and his wizened companion, Skins Regger, had showed up at the farm. Trouble, bad trouble, had followed Brad home, and now the boy lay dead—left like an animal carcass to the sun and the vultures.

Cobb brought his agonized eyes upward. The sky was metallic, cloudless. Out there across the muck flats the saw grass stretched interminably, broken by black mud creeks. Out there, somewhere, were the men who had done this to his son. The skin glazed across his cheeks.

Cobb felt Lon shivering and sobbing silently at his side. Lon knows too, Cobb told himself. He knows the full pain of sadness. But the poor dull child is lucky, he'll have forgotten before we're home, and smiling he'll hunt a butterfly to chase.

Cobb worked, sweating and silent, digging a grave as deeply as he could in the soggy muck. Once he looked up through blurred eyes and saw Lonnie dragging the dead vulture

toward the grave. Not a butterfly to chase this time. Something new for Lonnie. A wave of revulsion crept hot through Cobb. "Throw the thing away, Lon," he said.

Lon went on standing with the buzzard's scaly legs in his fist. "It's filthy, son," Cobb said. Lonnie frowned and dropping the bird, came away from it, although his eyes coveted it across his shoulder.

Cobb returned the earth over Brad's ravaged body. His stumbling prayer was for the vengeance of Heaven upon the men who had left his son to desecration. Lonnie stood with head bowed across the black mound from Cobb until the prayer ended. But when Cobb looked up, Lonnie had run back to the dead buzzard and was raptly poking at it.

Gathering up his things, Cobb ordered the boy away. But Lonnie held to the bird as though bewitched by it. He was on his knees beside it when Cobb called to him to start home across the swamp.

Lon looked up, his eyes bright. He motioned to Cobb. "Tracks!" Lon cried.

Cobb moved. He stared at the place where Lon pointed. If there were footprints they were too faint for Cobb's strained eyes. Cobb was a slow, thick-shouldered farmer, and this was his first encounter with violence. Yet, here could be the answer to the gall-bitter wish stirring inside him. He'd give his life to come on those two killers.

He looked at the sunbaked sand that told him nothing. But the excitement in Lon's pale eyes communi-

cated itself to him and he felt his blood running fast.

"Follow them, Lon!"

Lon ran about in the grass and palmettos as Cobb watched him. The boy moved off north along the creek and, the sense of urgency rising over the grief in him, Cobb followed.

He kept his eyes fixed on the unchanging land ahead. Heat waves swam up, cranes screamed in the shallows and Lon's boney shoulders kept bobbing up in the brown sawgrass.

Soon Cobb saw that Lon had forgotten. The boy was playing with a stick in the creek. Clutching his gun against his side, Cobb said gently, "The tracks, Lonnie."

Lonnie grinned and bobbed his head. Cobb had always been obliged to let the boy wander, days at a time, in the hot, silent stretches of the 'glades. Lonnie wandered despite all Cobb could do about it. Fishing, picking wild flowers, visiting the Seminoles. You might as well try to keep some young animal home without a cage, and Cobb was too kind to think of a cage for his son. Lonnie was happy, and that's what counted in Cobb's book. Neighbors and Indians knew the boy and watched out for him, and he always came home about the time Cobb was exhausted searching for him; for Lonnie always eventually remembered where he lived, what he was about.

Cobb figured it was about four o'clock in the afternoon when they came to Cal Drudger's muck

farm. This was higher ground. Gaunt slash pines reared scraggly tufts against the merciless sky. When they reached a mangrove thicket, Lon came running back to Cobb.

"They hid in the mangroves."

"Good boy, Lonnie." Cobb's eyes narrowed; he felt his throat constrict. They're up there, he told himself, they're in Drudger's farmhouse.

Slipping his arm about his son's shoulders, Cobb could feel the boniness under the sweaty shirt. "I'm right proud of you, boy. Will you go home now? Straight home?"

"Sure mike," Lonnie said, pleased at his father's approbation.

Cobb watched Lonnie hurry off across the flats. It was a long way, and there'd be no one to remind Lonnie. He might not be home for days, but at least out there in the land Lonnie knew so well, the boy was safer than he would be here.

In a crouch, Cobb moved out of the shielding mangroves. He pushed the safety off his heavy shotgun as he ran across the deep black furrows of plowed ground toward Drudger's shack.

Outside the window, Cobb held his breath and listened.

He heard Slavirey's thick, bloated voice from the dining table. "I told you to bring me more to eat."

Cobb remembered the way the man had impressed him. Slavirey's hunger was psychopathic, voracious, far beyond the needs even of his great hulk. He had to be eating, eating all the time.

Pulling himself up to window level, Cobb peered into the gray

room. Slavirey was like a mound of grease at the table, with Vera Drudger gaunt, defiant and frightened before him. Regger, thin and deadly, the fat man's sidekick, had a .38 laid on the table. He was watching Cal Drudger, who was like a compressed spring on a straight chair against the wall.

Cobb watched Slavirey lumber up from the table and slap Vera across the face, staggering her back. "Don't you crackers know how to be polite to guests?"

Cal Drudger moaned and leaped toward Slavirey. Regger shoved out a foot that caught Drudger in the belly.

Drudger doubled up and reeled back, hard. Cobb felt his heart hammering. He thrust the round mouths of the gun into the room ahead of him.

Big Ed Slavirey saw the gun first. Cobb watched the gluttonous man's greasy face twist. "Regger!" Slavirey said.

Regger snapped the .38 around as Cobb came through the window.

Without even aiming, Cobb pressed off the first trigger. The big double-barrel bloomed fire. Regger screamed. The .38 bumped on the floor, and everybody in the room stared at the ragged mess Regger now wore at the end of his right sleeve.

Thick-shouldered, his blue shirt sweated out, Cobb Mixon sat in the open window, with the twelve-gauge loose in his grasp.

He watched Slavirey's thick lips move, m u m b l i n g unintelligible words.

"Would you take the fat man's gun?" Cobb said evenly to Cal Drudger. But it was Drudger's wife who acted. She took the automatic from Slavirey's shoulder-holster, careful not to get between Slavirey and Cobb's waiting shotgun.

She scooped up Regger's .38 and brought both guns to Cobb.

"How could you know we needed you so, Mr. Mixon?" Vera Drudger breathed. "You've always been a good neighbor—but I reckon now you've saved our lives."

"Lon's been tracking them," Cobb replied, watching the killers.

Regger was moaning and sobbing as he tried to bind the shotgun wound that had left his hand a bloody, stringy mass.

"I reckon," Cobb said, "you'd better tell me about the killing of my boy Brad if you ever hope to save that hand."

Regger's eyes shot up to Cobb.

"I mean it," Cobb said, "I can pretty well guess what happened to Brad. He wasn't a talky boy, but there was a lot on his mind when he came home. He wasn't a bad 'un, either, not bad enough to warrant your killing him."

"You got us wrong," Regger said, his face, his whole body, shaking:

"I got you dead to rights," Cobb corrected. "Brad left with you. You killed him because you're a pair of big city syndicate killers. I know he was mixed up with you and that he crossed you. That means a killing in your book, don't it?"

"You can't prove a thing," Slavirey whispered.

"I'll prove plenty," Cobb said. "When you gunned my boy, you figured a quick run back to your kind of civilization. But the marshland trapped you, wrecked your car, left you afoot. And Regger here is going to tell me about it, ain't you, Regger?"

Regger rolled his head back and forth on his shoulders. Slavirey made a motion toward him. "You keep your two-bits worth out of this," Cobb said, showing the fat man the bore of the shotgun.

Then Cobb waited, cold and implacable. The silence in the shack echoed the wheezing of Regger's breathing. "That's your life messing up Drudger's floor," Cobb reminded, almost gently. "You'd better admit I've guessed this whole thing right."

"It wasn't my idea." Regger's voice was a muffled scream. "Slavirey bossed it all."

"All right," Cobb said. "Miz Drudger, get some iodine and we'll see if we can keep him from dying of blood poisoning or bleeding to death."

Slavirey exuded his thick-lidded hate for Regger as Cal Drudger's wife fetched iodine. Regger screamed as the raw medicine hit the wound. The woman whitened but bandaged the wound stolidly.

"I'm beholden to you," Cobb told her. "Now I'll take these two along."

He prodded the pair ahead of him across Drudger's clearing. In twenty minutes Regger was staggering. The fat man mumbled a hope that Regger would die. Cobb's prodding gun kept Regger going.

Sweat poured out of the fat man like molten lard. He pulled off his felt hat and carried it in his hand for a while. Then he hurled it aside in the palmettos. He kept dragging his arm across his steaming face, his breathing loud and rasping.

Regger fell twice before they crossed the bare yard to Cobb's empty smokehouse. The second time, Cobb had to threaten to shoot off the little man's left hand to get him to his feet at all.

The corrugated tin roof of the smokehouse reflected the last rays of the afternoon sun. Cobb called for Lonnie, but there was no answer. The boy had forgotten. He was probably playing some game of his own in the marshes.

Cobb held open the rough, thick door of the smokehouse. He made them stand just outside it and empty their pockets. Knives, brass knuckles, wallets, even their sodden handkerchiefs were dropped to the sand.

"All right," Cobb told them. "Inside."

Slavirey waddled in and Cobb shoved Regger after him.

Regger stumbled on the floor, and lay panting against the greasy boards.

Cobb looked at the two men peering at him from the gloom of the breathless room, and the memory returned of how they'd stripped Brad's body and left him to the vultures.

Across the yard, he recognized Lonnie's ambling shuffle. Cobb smiled with relief, and then his face blanched.

Lon was dragging the vulture

he'd killed beside Brad's grave.

As he came near, the sandy-haired boy dropped his eyes, abashed at the condemnation in his father's face. Clearly, the boy wanted his father's approval above anything else in the world, but he couldn't resist the horrible fascination of this bird.

Cobb kept his voice gentle. "I want you to go for the sheriff, Lonnie. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure mike!" Eagerly, Lonnie bobbed his head. He dropped the buzzard at his father's feet and raced bent-shouldered across the yard. But Cobb saw the boy had already slowed before he reached the line of trees down by the road.

Slavirey wiped away the sweat and looked about the narrow, dark oven of a room. "How long will it take him?" he whined.

Cobb looked up at him. "Lon's memory ain't good," Cobb replied. "It might take a day if he don't forget. It might take a week—"

"A week!" Regger wailed from the floor.

"Lon's a good boy, and he'll get there," Cobb said. "Anyhow, I can't

go. He's all I got to send. You men might dig out, with me gone."

In his face was invitation for either of them to try to dig out while he sat there, waiting with his shotgun.

Regger slumped against the floor and wept. Finally, he lifted his head. His voice was a horrified whisper.

"Water?" he muttered. "Who'll give us water?"

"I'll get you water."

Slavirey's face was a melting moon of fat. His gluttonous mouth worked. He dragged a thick, wet tongue across his mouth.

"And food," he wheedled. "I take a lot of food."

Cobb's hand tightened on the door. "I dunno about food," he replied. His eyes moved to the tattered vulture in the sand. A sudden change worked across his face, turning it to ice. He picked up the vulture, and with revulsion strong in his features, he backhanded it into the smokehouse.

His gaze lifted, and his shoulders went back. "I'll see if I can fetch you a little salt," he said.

And Cobb slammed the solid smokehouse door.