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THE BLUE LIZARD

BY FISWOODE TARLETON

"He seemed growing old like sculpture under a white moon."

MOUNTAIN thunder boomed like artillery, with the regularity of a triphammer, and caused Turtlelove, the zoologist, to rise from his kneeling posture and with a surprized look inspect the sky. Absently holding a captured lizard, he fixed his attention upon a green storm cloud that seraped the mountain in the west and sagged into the gap. Sinister, ragged streamers of gray-black vapor seemed to forge ahead of the wall of cloud, as if they, the feelers of the storm, were pointing out the targets for the thrusts, the blinding javelins of lightning.

Turtlelove, mechanically putting the lizard specimen into his coat pocket and buttoning the flap, turned sharply at right angles and hastily followed a fork in the trail that

dipped down to a cove. He hurried because he knew the attraction certain trees held for lightning. He kept on the lookout for a cabin as he ran, looked sharply to the right and left, but saw no signs of a habitation. Working his way through some tight, tough laurel, he stood at last on the bank of a branch whose waters crept lazily, sluggishly to unite with a creek three hundred yards below. He inspected both sides of the branch; then, as the first drops of rain struck his face, he crossed the branch by hopping from rock to rock. In half a minute he stood under the shelter of a ledge.

Breathless, yet congratulating himself upon his gaining protection from a good soaking, he sat down well back under the ledge, and rest-

ing his elbow on the ground and his head in his hand, contemplated that which threatened to be a storm of uncommon fury. It became actually that, a fury the like of which he had never before witnessed.

Soon he could see nothing across the branch, though he could dimly distinguish the boiling, roaring waters. During the lightning flashes the falling rain, whipped by the wind, became a raging waterfall.

Later, when the zoologist looked at his watch, he made a guess that he had been under the ledge about fifteen minutes and estimated that in that time the water had risen at least six feet. Then he found a new interest in watching what the racing waters brought down from the surrounding hillsides—fence pickets, whole fences, rails cut by some mountain woodsman, even outbuildings that bounced and crashed against submerged boulders. Life floated by—chickens, pigs that rode helplessly on their backs, and, lastly, a calf seemed to flash its white eyes at the zoologist. He felt afraid to look longer. There was no telling whose eyes might speak to him from the insatiable torrent.

He looked back of him. When a flash came he saw that he was really in a cave, a cavern. Rising, he took his flashlight and began to explore, examining the low walls and the roof. They were supported by rough-hewn timbers, and between the timbers he discovered a medium grade of bituminous coal. Before him, about ten feet away, his flashlight revealed a low pile of coal, and beyond the pile a turn in the cavern. Toward this turn he made his way through black dust that seemed unable to settle.

At the turn he paused to watch a lizard that stared at him for a few seconds through jeweled eyes, then suddenly disappeared. The lizard was of a common species not worth the capturing; yet, hopeful of find-

ing rarer specimens, he kept his light flashed on the ground until, sensing the end of the cavern, he stopped and threw his light directly ahead of him. What he saw held him transfixed. Not three feet away, seated or propped in the corner, in an attitude of sleep, was a man—a bearded man, his head well forward and resting on his breast.

"A mountaineer, about fifty, very poor," thought Turtlelove.

The zoologist found no marks of violence, no blood, no signs of a scuffle about the ground, or on the dead man's jean pants and calico shirt. He was about to retrace his steps, not caring to waste the battery cells of his flashlight, at the same time he concluded that the hillman, becoming ill while mining coal, must have died before he could summon aid or make his way home. Actual decomposition had not yet set in. To Turtlelove's mind the skin had the common, more or less serene cast of a victim of heart-failure.

As the zoologist swept his flashlight away his eyes caught a point of blue fire at the end of the dead man's beard. Throwing the light again full on the face of the victim he deliberately lifted the beard and revealed a bluetail lizard lying against the neck. Seemingly, the head of the lizard was caught in the roots of the hair.

At first Turtlelove was not excited to any great degree of interest. He thought that the lizard, as a lizard will, had discovered a new cranny in which to hide, and had in its dumb way found a new resting-place. Not until the thought struck the zoologist that, to be in character, the lizard should have raced from its hiding-place at the first flash of light did the proceeding grip him with interest. He clutched the lizard with his thumb and forefinger, found that it, too, was dead. Dead, yet it seemed to resist a sudden jerk to free it. Upon closer examination Turtlelove

found that the jaws of the lizard had a grip on the dead man's throat.

Resentment and anger suddenly stirred Turtlelove. With a hand on his hip and his face flushing he glared at the dead man. "Hell!" he exclaimed; "nobody can make me believe it! Absolutely impossible! Who ever heard of a lizard killing a man? No more venom than a frog!"

With a jerk he freed the lizard and gave it a toss back of him. Then, as if taking the incident as a personal joke played on him, he threw his light down the narrow passageway, half expecting to see the joker. "Somebody must consider science a fool," he thought, and picking up a small lump of coal he threw it with bad aim at a lizard that stuck its head out from a crevice in the timbered wall.

The personal way with which he viewed the contradiction of life finally gave way to reasoning. He was a stranger in the Cumberland; so how could a hoax be arranged for him? And, granting the cheapness with which a hillman holds life, even he would consider the cost of such a joke. The storm had turned Turtlelove quite unexpectedly into the cave. Man had had nothing to do with it; had had no knowledge of it.

AGAIN the zoologist's attention centered upon the storm, and he returned slowly to the mouth of the cave, where he stood silently, unmoving for a minute, peering out. The rain had lessened. The thunder sounded removed, weaker. Overhead the clouds were breaking into ragged-edged fragments. He stepped out of the cave mouth, and, unmindful of the drizzle, methodically inspected both sides of the swollen, roaring creek-branch. He hoped to find a habitation, find somebody who could direct him to the county seat, somebody he could question about the coal mine. Besides, he began to feel gnawing hunger.

At first Turtlelove could see nothing but the typical wooded slopes, the foaming branch as it rushed down the narrow ravine, the dripping laurel and rhododendron. The dimming effect of the misty rain, the puffs of vapor, made him uncertain as to whether a narrow bluish feather that rose above the tops of second-growth timber across the branch was smoke or merely a lifting of vapor caused by a peculiar and local effect of temperature. For several minutes he pondered over this. Then a gust of wind whipped the feather above the tree tops, made it whirl. Vapor, he knew perfectly well, would not do this, would not change its shape so suddenly. What his attention was fixed on was surely smoke, and smoke meant a habitation.

Fed no more by the water washing down the slopes, the branch was beginning to recede. Yet he knew it would be some time before there would be an appreciable fall in the water. Now and then he heard back of him in the cave the faint tappings of loosened coal fragments as they dropped to the ground. They sounded like light footfalls. Once he turned quickly. After what he saw at the end of the cavern, he wouldn't have been surprized at anything. Inaction lay heavy upon him.

Suddenly he removed his coat and shoes and stepped to the edge of the water. He made another quick inspection up and down the bank, and waded in. When the water reached his waist he could feel its power, its pull. Once he was in the middle of the stream and in the clutch of the current, he had the sensation that he was racing at railroad speed under the tips of laurel and rhododendron. Fragments of cloud keeping pace with him told him more than any physical sense of his that he was on his back, floating, or rather borne on helplessly. He expected destruction after his first futile effort to right his body.

Turtlelove began to condemn himself for not waiting until the waters subsided. Inwardly he cursed his zeal, his impatience. He fretted for short minutes under the seemingly inevitable and inglorious end of his career. His mind flew to the scene in the coal mine and the unsolved murder, and virtually rehearsed the whole adventure from the beginning of the storm. Then, quickly, as if the act were the end of the drama, as if his part in disengaging the false proof of the lizard's killing the hillman were the end of the whole thing so far as he was concerned, he found a growing consolation in it. He had been loyal to science. He had saved it from ridicule. But, *if he hadn't thought to remove the lizard from the dead hillman's throat!*

A sudden sense of floating on his belly made the zoologist hunt for an advantage over the boiling, whirling, pitiless creek-branch. Though he could not, because of the undertow, lower his legs to feel for the bed of the creek-branch, he threw out his arms, vainly trying to hold on to the thickets he passed. When finally he was borne on to a sharp turn, where the waters flushed the creek bank, he made a grab and found himself hanging to tough strong dripping laurel branches. For several minutes he could no more than keep his hold; he neither gained nor lost ground. Then slowly, so that the movement would not disengage his fingers from their feeble clutch, he drew in his legs, kicked backward, and got the branches firmly in his hand. Alternately grabbing other branches, he managed to pull his body to the bank and shallow water. He straightened up, breathed heavily, and shook his fist at the creek-branch.

At first it didn't seem difficult to work his way through the laurel, though his arms soon became tired of the eternal bending and pushing aside of the branches. He soon left the water, but the thicket became

tighter, and, more to his discomfort, it became laced with greenbrier. Yet, steeling himself to the tearing thorns and gritting his teeth, he continued on.

After a while the thicket thinned, and with a last maddening rush he stood in a clearing. Dressed in ribbons, scratched all over and dripping water stained by his own blood, he sat on a stump to regain his wind and to get his bearings. He saw the ledge up the creek-branch, and his coat lying under it. On his side of the branch he saw above him a small pawpaw grove, and a cabin, its chimney smoking.

Looking at himself he laughed lightly. "I wanted to get in the field. Wanted to leave the confining museum. Cloudbursts. Almost drowned. What next?"

What next? Food if possible, he told himself, and rose.

THOUGH weak on his legs, he tried to make his movements deliberate as he started for the cabin. He knew that suspicion in the hills is more surely aroused by an appearance of stealth than by an open and nothing-to-fear attitude. He knew also that it is imprudence of the worst kind to approach a mountain cabin without calling first. Twenty feet from the cabin he stopped, waited to see if his presence stirred anybody to come to the door, then called, in a moderate tone. Meeting with no response, he called again in a louder tone. He waited a minute, and when he was about to call for the third time it seemed to him that the door had been opened a crack. While he looked, a rifle muzzle was pushed through.

Several minutes of absolute inaction passed. Turtlelove sensed that he was being very closely examined, meticulously inspected, appraised by eyes behind the door. Not only was he sure he was being sized up, but looking at himself suddenly he sus-

pected that his grotesque appearance was creating more than ordinary wonder. He recalled that in the hills time is of no consequence and suspicion is slow to die. Finally, because of the stinging of his wounds and the hunger gnawing at his stomach, his patience flew. He yelled loudly and in a provoked tone.

The door opened wider and a man stared at him from under a wide-brimmed hat. A powerful, big-boned man, bearded, black-eyed and grim-looking.

Turtlelove particularly noticed the length of the man's arms and the size of his hands; was in fact almost overawed by them. "He's downright conscious of those hands," the zoologist told himself; then approached nearer, to within five feet of the doorway. "Howdy," he said, with an attempt at cordiality.

The hillman spat. His face remained a mask. For half a minute he looked away from the zoologist—looked across the creek, directly at the top of the ledge over the cave entrance across the branch. Then, as if he had considered the matter, his face swung slowly around. "Howdy," he said.

"The storm drove me here," explained Turtlelove. "Worst storm I ever saw. There were things floating by in the creek. Hogs—and a calf. The calf looked right at me. I couldn't give it any help."

"Whar yuh from?" asked the hillman.

"New York."

"What fatched yuh hyar?"

"Why, salamanders, snakes, lizards. I'm collecting 'em."

The expression in the hillman's face changed. His stolidness of countenance gave way to a look of mingled curiosity and purpose.

"Air yuh 'at scorpion-hunter I heerd on?"

"Huh, it's sinister the way these hillmen flash news of a stranger's coming," thought Turtlelove. He

had wondered much about the system by which a stranger's status is carried from settlement to settlement and from hill to hill. He was inclined to feel amused over the mysterious mountain telegraph, but as usual the "scorpion business" aroused his ire; more, it aroused his disgust. For the dozenth time he asked himself, "Who the devil in these hills ever started calling a lizard a 'scorpion'?" The very connotation of the name implied a venomous hate, and basely traduced the harmless little jewel-eyed lizard, which is as helpless as a rabbit.

"It's a wonder," the zoologist told himself, "that they don't call a horse a 'whale'." He had always been amazed over the almost universal credence given the belief in the death-dealing characteristic of the lizards by hill people. He had stood and listened with disgust to the tales of lizards killing folks in bed and of their scooting up the skirts of women. And now to have this silly superstition sprung again when he was scared all over with flesh wounds and as hungry as a beast was quite too much.

For the dozenth time, with his voice carrying disgust and anger, he corrected the error. "A lizard is a reptile. A scorpion is—well, call it an insect. There are no scorpions within five hundred miles of this place. When a scorpion stings you, you want to look out. As for your lizard, I'd sleep with a million. They're harmless. We *know* they are—know it as surely as we know that water runs down-hill."

Turtlelove reached in his pocket for a cigarette, but the package was dripping wet and he threw it away. "Yes," he continued, "I'm collecting lizards. I'm the man you heard about. Any grub? I'm starved."

With a pull at his chin and an accurately aimed squirt at a chip of wood that jumped from the impact, the hillman stepped back into the

cabin. "Air pizen," he muttered. "Scorpions air pizen. Allus a-killin' we-uns."

"Oh hell!" exclaimed Turtlelove, and moved to the door of the cabin to watch the dim figure of the hillman as he worked over the fire in the warped, antique stove. His attention was fastened particularly on the hands that broke thick lengths of wood with ease and almost filled the stove holes as they placed wood on the smoldering embers.

The zoologist, leaning against the door tired and sore, watched the hands over the stove cut off chunks of fat pork and let them fall into a pan. He heard the hillman muttering to himself again, "Scorpions air pizen. 'At's a God-truth."

Too hungry for thoughts or words, Turtlelove entered the cabin and took a seat on a stool before a pine table. Soon, when the hillman's big hands carried the food to the table, the zoologist turned to it. He cut the pork into small pieces and shook off the grease before he carried them to his mouth. And with every bite he mixed a piece of cold corn pone. He sipped the cheap chickory-coffee out of a tin cup between bites. Unsugared, it was bitter.

Turtlelove's eyes now and then looked out the cabin door. Not only had the storm worn itself completely out, but the slope of the hill across the creek-branch was touched with the light of a clearing sky. The branch waters no longer roared. There was only a subdued wash of waters about the boulders and a faint overtone which seemed to the zoologist more like the humming of countless bees than anything else. Because of the pawpaw bushes surrounding the cabin and unusually high rhododendron on the bank he could not see the ledge overhanging the cave-mouth on the other side, but knew approximately where it lay.

His attention returned to the hill-

man, who stepped out the door and returned soon with an armful of dripping wood, which he arranged in the doorless oven to dry. The zoologist wondered why the hillman didn't burn coal, since it was handy. Thinking of coal brought his mind quickly to the dead man in the cave and the lizard. The food gave him strength. The unsolved tragedy once more gripped him.

"You ought to burn coal," he said, watching for the slightest change of expression in the hillman's face.

The hillman scratched his head as if he had never thought of the idea before. He pulled at his chin as if giving consideration to the zoologist's suggestion.

"Lots of coal yonder, across the branch, isn't there?" Turtlelove asked, pointing with his wooden spoon.

"Haint we-un's coal," the hillman answered simply.

"Whose, then?"

Turtlelove finished eating and moved his stool away from the table. When he looked up again he found the hillman's eyes boring him with a steady stare. Instinctively the zoologist knew that he had overstepped himself, and that further questioning would get him nothing. In the hills inquisitiveness is the inevitable plug to a native's mouth.

The darkness began to thicken in the cabin. There was a heaviness, a sinister, indescribable weight that seemed to attach itself to everything. When Turtlelove absently lifted a spoon, it seemed strangely heavy. He attributed this to his fatigue. He was tired, and the close, unventilated air of the cabin gave him a doped feeling. Everything seemed tied, bound to something else. The thought came to him that he was really fighting sleep, and the fear of losing consciousness somehow made him inwardly shiver.

He rose and took a bill from his pocket and placed it on the table. As he took a step toward the door a lizard raced across the floor directly toward the hillman, and touched the hillman's foot. The zoologist was sure the hillman saw the lizard, must have felt its touch; yet he seemed to show no fear. "There wasn't time for the hillman to assume fear," Turtlelove told himself, and went outdoors. When he reached the rhododendron-covered bank he turned to look back.

The hillman stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. His thumbs were hooked in his pockets and his eyes gazed upward, unconcernedly, at the sky. When in half a minute he proceeded to fill his pipe, his hands were sharply, grimly significant to the zoologist. As if the very sight of them motivated his next move, Turtlelove abruptly broke his way through the rhododendron and stood at the edge of the creek-branch.

Since the branch had reduced itself, Turtlelove without hesitation waded in. At the deepest spot it was scarcely up to his waist.

Once again he stood under the ledge at the mouth of the cave. He found his flashlight under his coat, snapped it on, and deliberately, as if he were going after something whose location was no mystery to him, he made his way rapidly to the turn in the cavern.

WHEN the zoologist stood before the corpse again and splashed it with the flashlight, he made a swift grab for the beard but allowed a short pause before he lifted it over the face. "These things must be done with some reverence," he thought. Then he got down on his knees and held the brilliant beam against the dead man's neck, under his beard. Inch by inch he examined the hair-covered skin. He found what he was dead-sure he'd find:

the somewhat faded finger-marks on the dead man's windpipe. Mentally he measured the width of the finger marks and the uncommonly deep indentures in the skin.

"If," thought Turtlelove, "the sheriff, whoever he is, has a grain of penetration, a grain of common sense, he will be able to see that the fingers of this hill-billy fit this throat. In a few days more decomposition will set in; then good-bye to the evidence."

Turtlelove rose, thinking that when morning came he would report the case to the authorities. It would have been folly to attempt to reach the county seat that night. He was unfamiliar with the trails. He could only with great difficulty have made his way back through the darkness to the point where he was turned by the storm.

Slowly he made his way back to the cave entrance, spread out his coat and lay down. With his head clasped in his locked hands, he watched the light dwindle, listened to the soft lapping of the waters on the boulders and rocks, the croaking of frogs, the thin notes of night insects. He would have preferred to surrender to the drowsiness that crept over him. The scratches on his body stung incessantly; his muscles were sore and his mind weary. But his mind could not detach itself from the thing at hand. The details of the crime assembled themselves with overpowering demands.

"If this big-handed hill-billy is guilty," thought the zoologist, "what motive drove him to commit the murder? An old feud? Was the dead man an informant? A traitor in the ranks of blockaders? Was he killed for money, for gain of any kind? Here is a coal mine——"

Turtlelove released his locked fingers behind his head, snapped them. "When I mentioned coal to this hill-billy he shut up like a clam. If he had coal himself he wouldn't

lug in wet wood, would he? It's coal. Motive's coal. And wouldn't the bogey at the cave's end forever scare away the neighbors? Sure as water runs down-hill."

The zoologist observed the new silvery light spread by the rising moon, and reflected briefly upon the quick transformations of nature. Once more he wished he could surrender to sleep, and once more, tantalizing him with its interesting aspects, another phase of the case opened his mind wide. The hill-billy wasn't afraid of lizards, yet he recognized the preponderance of belief in the silly and unwarranted superstition. In a country where an autopsy is never held, where external appearances guide all reasoning, all philosophy, the finding of the lizard locked to the dead man's throat would not only have been accepted as proof by the hill people, but likely also by the county officers themselves.

Turtlelove saw, as a scientist naturally would see, the far-reaching and uncontrollable impetus that would be given to the belief that the lizard was venomous and deadly. And he knew that from generation to generation the tale would be handed down with embellishments. This affair of the cave would become a folk-tale used by hill women to frighten their children. Songs would be composed and sung with the same literalness accorded every tragedy in the hills. The harmless lizard would be doomed. It would be kill, kill, kill wherever he was met. Salamanders as well as lizards.

Then he came abruptly to another consideration. "Suppose," he told himself, "suppose that this hill-billy has an inkling, a suspicion, that I'm on to his crime. It would be in character for him to get rid of me, or try to. He is not a fool. He showed a fine stroke of imagination in saddling the lizard with the crime. He could do it again. With me!"

Watching the water flow by, the moon climb the sky and the overhanging laurel etch itself in more pronounced lines against the heavens, the zoologist continued to fight sleep. It seemed to him that a long time ago he had become familiar with every contour, every shape in the existing scene, the laurel hanging over the ledge and etched against the sky, the willows by the bank that stood languid and drooped like seven old men afraid to cross the water. His ears, too, knew the peculiar harmonies of the night—the thin singing of insects, the contented faint hum, almost a crooning, of the creek-branch.

Then, toward midnight, he heard an overtone—the faintest sort of splash. He rose to his elbows. Pretty soon he saw an addition to the company of willow shadows—saw one shadow disintegrate and evolve in the full moonlight into the form of the hillman. The hillman was bare-foot. He approached the cave entrance deliberately though quietly, as if in a hurry to block the door of the trap.

TURTLELOVE thought to move back into the blackness of the cave, out of the strong moonlight, where he might defend himself by hurling lumps of coal. Yet at best it would have only been prolonging a most certain and unpleasant fate. The hillman could have afforded to wait, even until the lingering process of starvation ended the zoologist's existence. Hunger would leave even less of a mark than hands.

Strangely, what happened when the zoologist's enemy was ten paces from the cave entrance seemed inspired by neither terror nor desperation. A smile crossed Turtlelove's face as he made a quick search in his coat pocket and found the lizard he had captured just before the storm broke. With a flick of his right wrist he knocked the lizard's head

against the knuckles of his left hand, then clapped the reptile to his neck. It lay stunned, unmoving, its mouth tight against Turtlelove's throat.

Once more Turtlelove stretched out on his back. He closed his eyes to slits, held his breath, watched the hillman come to the cave entrance, pass through and stand within four feet of him. The hillman leaned over to see better. His hands were held out ahead of him. Then suddenly his mouth flew open, his eyes dilated. The shadows of his hands lay unmoving on the floor. In this pose he appeared to freeze.

Fighting the growing impulse to breathe, and by sheer will overcoming the tendency of his muscles to twitch, Turtlelove felt seconds grow into eternity. It seemed to him that he had been looking into horror-

struck eyes and a froth-flecked mouth for ages, that he and the hillman were growing old like sculpture under a hard, white moon.

Suddenly, as if to bring the agony of suspense to a close, the lizard stirred. Turtlelove could feel its flight across his body, see the flash of its leap to the hillman's foot and its race for a cranny in the wall. The hillman's body broke up. With a cry which seemed tuned to a vision of something worse than death the hillman threw out his arms as if for support, spun around and crashed to earth.

Rising to his elbows, breathing heavily, beads of sweat covering his forehead, Turtlelove shivered and stared at the hillman's face, horror-frozen by death, and the silent, open mouth flecked with froth.