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The Deadly Amanita

by

Eli Colter

THIS is Henry Wytten's story. I do not know Henry Wytten. But, like the rest of the literature-reading world, I do know his works. His name is a household word. His photograph in some characteristic pose dominates every dilettante's art collection of the literati. But for the purpose of preserving an incognito one name is as good as another. Henry Wytten.

The pseudonym was created by Hugh Blondin. Last summer during his vacation, Blondin made a trip to Los Angeles and we happened to meet on the street. Delighted at the unexpected pleasure of seeing him again I insisted that he accompany me to the newly opened Biltmore to luncheon.

When we had ensconced ourselves by a window table I noticed among the entrées a favorite dish of his—kidney sauté. Remembering his fondness for mushrooms I suggested the dish, and he heartily commended the choice. Then he looked at me with the sudden gleam of inspiration in his eye.

"Didn't I hear you say you were out here looking for a story?"

"You did," I nodded. "But with restrictions and conditions. It must be a story with a lift—and with a kick. Also it must be the real life

story of a real man—I have a commission. And such stories aren't hanging around on the palm trees."

"I think not," he agreed. "But I can give you one. A rattling good story, too. Provided you promise not to reveal the identity of anyone concerned in it. Myself included."

"Done on the spot."

But what was Blondin doing with a rattling good story up his sleeve? I appreciated his generosity, but I was instantly alert for the nigger in the woodpile. Why didn't he write it up himself if it were of such excellence? There must be a catch somewhere. However, I refrained from voicing any such thought, drew an envelope from my pocket, slit it and lined off the back of it for shorthand notes.

"Lay on, McDuff, we're all set," I said.

And this is the story Blondin told.

WELL, fifteen years ago Madden wrote me for a story. It also had to be a story with such restrictions and conditions as you name—the real life story of a real man. Quite a coincidence, eh?

Madden was before your time, so I might mention that he was the editorial genius of that period, and a con-
 signment from him was considered a complimentary ticket to the hall of fame. Of course I was wildly excited over my long-awaited-for opportunity, and began casting about in my mind for a suitable man to approach. Several interested friends offered inadequate suggestions. I tried one or two, but either their lives were unthrillingly dull, or they objected to having their intimate histories made the basis of a story. I was beginning to despair when I recollected a chum of old acquaintance who had been condemned with T. B. Hoping to dodge the undertaker with the aid of fresh air and a tomato patch, he had gone off to rough it in the hills. I took the next train for his hill valley with high hopes.

Arriving there I told him immediately of the object of my trip. The poor chap raked his memory obligingly. But either he had nothing of value to give me, or I had grown unwontedly meticulous under the importance of the occasion. The morning after my arrival I was seated on an overturned tomato crate in his garden, watching him pick and sort the choice specimens of his small crop, when he suddenly paused in his work with the air of having hit upon the very thing I sought.

"I've got it, Hugh. Go up and see the hermit! I'll bet a house he's got a story—if you can make him talk. Nobody else has ever been able to pry a word out of him."

"The hermit? Sounds good," I answered politely, but morosely unimpressed. At the word "hermit" a picture had instantly presented itself to my mind. Some long, lean hill-billy. Lantern jaws covered with scraggly whiskers. Little, black, shifty, beady eyes. Endless chews of plug cut. An unwashed, odoriferous

person. I'd seen hermits before. But merely for the purpose of furthering conversation. I asked: "Why won't he talk?"

"How should I know?" My friend was both amused and surprised at my question. "I don't suppose hermits ever talk, do they?"

"On the contrary, the most loquacious man I ever knew was a so-called hermit," I assured him. "I had, you will see, become thoroughly pessimistic. Men give various reasons for avoiding contact with the world, but they are all actuated by the same fundamental impulse. They're failures. All they can do is ride their grouches interminably to whosoever will listen. I wouldn't walk across the street to interview a hermit! Where does this one keep himself?"

"Up yonder, at the edge of that bare patch on Old Baldy. You may be right about hermits in general. Hugh, but I tell you there is something unusual about this fellow." My friend laid a huge red tomato in the crate he was filling, and there was a slight puzzled frown on his forehead as he answered me.

I sat up on my perch with a glimmering of interest to survey the spot he indicated. A high mountain loomed over the nearer foothills, thickly wooded save for an oddly flat bald space on the summit. Old Baldy. Well, I was certain of one thing. A man who chose to live at the timber line on an obscure mountain top the year round was sincere in his desire to isolate himself! He must spend most of the summer storing up fuel and provisions against the winter when he would be snowed in.

"What's unusual about him?" I asked. My interest was increasing rapidly. As I said, I'd seen hermits before—a number of 'em. But none buried alive at the timber line! I couldn't afford to neglect a clue.

wild or otherwise, that might lead to a story.

"Oh, I hardly know." My friend glanced up at the mountain, his brows still wrinkled in perplexity. "A few adventurous fellows have run him down, and rumor has it that he always says 'Howdy' and invites them in to dinner. I fancy it's his way of getting rid of them. They always vamoose at that, their curiosity satisfied, having found nothing romantic or mysterious in just an ordinary man in an ordinary cabin living a step aside from the beaten track. But I have an idea he's a strange old cuss."

Just an ordinary man in an ordinary cabin living—at the timber line. Imagine! I rose to go into the house for my mackinaw and hiking boots, asking: "How do you get there?"

My friend grinned. "Oh, you've decided to go, have you? Well, it's a bit farther than across the street—about four or five miles farther," he answered dryly. Then his face sobered and he went on with enthusiasm. "I believe it's worth looking into, anyhow. You go up over Larch Trail. It's not traveled very much and you'll find it heavy going. Better not tackle it today. Wait till tomorrow and get an early start."

"That's hardly necessary," I told him, taking a quick glance at the sun. It wasn't more than 10 o'clock, and at that time of year it doesn't get dark till 8 or 9 in the evening. My muscles were rather well trail-seasoned then, and I knew I could make four or five miles easily, and have an hour or so with the hermit, and get back before night. I explained my thoughts on the subject and he answered: "Well, go to it, old son. I hope your trip isn't for nothing."

I told him if it was I'd have him drawn, quartered and boiled in oil: then I made for the house.

HALF an hour later I was well on my way to Larch Trail. I found it pleasant traveling until I reached the base of Old Baldy, and struck into the trail. There I came to the real labor of climbing, and it developed into mighty nasty going. The trail ran circuitously up the mountain through heavy forest and rank underbrush. There was a good deal of clay in the soil, and the path itself, though clearly enough defined to be followed easily, was mucky and slippery.

I traveled as swiftly as I could, but to my dismay my friend's four or five miles lengthened into seven or eight, and it was early evening before I reached the timber line, where at the edge of the bald space the trail turned sharply to the right. I stopped abruptly and stared at the scene before me. It stamped itself indelibly upon my mind. Now, after fifteen years, it's as clear as though it were something I had seen but yesterday.

Flanked on both sides by the stunted timber indigenous to that altitude, unpainted and weathered a deep gray, facing a small cleared space, stood a log cabin. Directly in front of it was a garden outlined with small whitewashed stones, a garden of flowers brilliant in color and profuse in bloom. I don't know exactly what I had expected, you understand: some sort of eccentric squalor, I think. But certainly I hadn't expected a flower garden! And the cabin itself—it had a queer dignity, a kind of architectural individuality that gave me the impression of having found a soul where I had thought to find a skeleton.

I walked up to the door and gave the old iron knocker a single sharp rap, keenly conscious, as I did so, of the atmosphere of the place. As though my knock were a signal which someone within had been expecting, the door swung instantly

open, a man appeared on the threshold, and a gentle courteous voice said, "Howdy."

I made a mental note that so far rumor was right, as I turned my eyes full on the hermit of Old Baldy. I realized instantly that there were potent possibilities in the man. He was of a most unusual type. You've seen his picture—but he's changed greatly. At that time he was thin, almost to emaciation. He combed his long white hair straight back as he does now. But it was from his face that I got my impression. I knew it for the face of a man with inhibitions and banked desires. A face that wore a mask of quiet dignity, challenging vandal eyes. And out of his own long, green-gray eyes the very spirit of the man seemed to look forth valiantly—almost defiantly.

I guess I'm getting muddled, but I find it hard to describe my exact impression. Above everything else I felt certain he had weathered some fiery ordeal which had burned away grossness, leaving the inner light shining clear. But there was something beyond even that, which I can find no words for. Oh, hang it!—when you get home dig out his picture and look—you'll see what I mean. It declared him for the man he was, warned me of the utter futility of dissembling. He had my number instantly. I knew it, and he knew that I knew it. So, having sensed that frankness was the only policy which would get me anywhere, I adopted it off the bat.

"My friend," I said, taking off my hat and leaning one hand against the door casing, "I hiked all the way up Larch Trail just to see if I couldn't persuade you to tell me your story. My name's Blondin. I'm an author—up against it for a plot. Every man's got a story, and I figured yours might be worth while."

Gad! It ~~must~~ have sounded cocky! I'd just landed in some of the biggest magazines and I was feeling my oats. But he saw past the sheer presumption of youth, and smiled.

Yet, even as he smiled, there was a queer flash in his strange eyes. What was it? Disappointment?—Delight?—Eagerness? For the life of me, I couldn't tell. I concluded it was a blend of all three with eagerness predominating. But it died out so quickly that I couldn't be sure.

Then he spoke, casually, courteously: "Cards on the table, eh? That is probably the first entirely truthful statement any of my visitors has ever made to me. Most of them had stopped to rest—tired—lost their way—one even had the trite idiocy to sprain his ankle. Any old alibi. Perhaps that is why your candor appeals to me. Won't you come in, Mr. Blondin?"

"Thanks, I was hoping you'd ask me," I answered. Sticking to my policy, you see.

But I tell you, the moment my eyes took in the big cabin's interior, I momentarily forgot the hermit and my interest was transferred to his dwelling place. It was a living room we had entered, lighted by two big shaded lamps, one on each hand. Although he had drawn the shades to keep out the half light of evening, the soft glow of the lamps gave the impression of the setting sun shining through the windows. The entire room was ceiled with myrtle wood of exquisite grain. On the wall facing me was a great colored reproduction of Sir Alfred East's *Lonely Road*. To the right was a myrtle-wood bookcase filled with volumes of poetry. Every man who ever sat on Olympus and communed with Calliope was there; from Homer to Kipling—from Omar to Masefield.

Oddly enough, the only coherent thought that penetrated my dum-

founded senses was the remark made by my tomato fancier friend: "An ordinary man in an ordinary cabin"

"But," I said, feeling a kind of helplessness, "I don't see how those others who came up here curiosity-seeking ever went down again and remained silent about what they had seen!"

"Bless your heart, man!" The hermit ran a caressing hand over his books: "They didn't know what they had seen." There was irony in his voice, and a shade of contempt.

I was recovering from my first shock of surprize, and my attention veered to the hermit as I remembered what had brought me up Larch Trail. I asked him rather bluntly what manner of man he was, but he shook his head, smiling and saying: "That, Mr. Blondin, is a part of the story."

I took a step toward him, hot on the scent. "Well—do I get it?" I said.

At my question the queer flash again lit his eyes. And again it was hidden quickly, but this time I was certain that the predominant quality of it was eagerness. He motioned me to a seat and began to speak in a slow, careful manner; a manner which gave me the uncomfortable feeling that he was veiling some deep, important purpose, with a casual exterior through which I could see only too easily.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Blondin. You've been candid with me. Very well. I'll return the courtesy. I didn't isolate myself for the sole purpose of avoiding my fellow men. I get lonely. But that again is part of the story. Very well. I'll make you a proposition. If you will stay and have dinner with me, give me the pleasure of your company for the night and at breakfast, I will tell you all there is to tell before you go down the mountain."

There it was. I could take it or leave it. But I didn't like that look in his eye. I knew that for a reason known only to himself, my unexpected appearance was of some secret and prodigious import to him. I knew, as he stood there almost breathlessly waiting my answer, that my staying was of even greater import and that he desired it enormously. I sat there looking him in the eye, trying to come to a decision.

Why should he be so palpably anxious for a guest overnight? If he craved companionship, then why didn't he get off that mountain top and live like a civilized human being? And if it were merely a passing impulse engendered by chance contact with a man from his own obvious stratum, why mask it under a tone too casual, a manner too guarded?

My first impelling inclination was to refuse his offer, though I didn't like the idea of going down that tricky trail in the dark. Yet I felt it useless to stay. I had a distinct sense of foreboding, a prescience, in spite of his promise, that I would never take his story down the mountain. Maybe the man was merely a clever maniac; how could I know? But the thought of crusty, courted Madden, and the chance of pleasing that difficultly-approached editor decided me. I said to myself: what the deuce—I came after a story!

"I'll just take you up on that," I said, rising to my feet and holding out a hand. "And thanks for your hospitality. Also, let's eat, pronto. What do you say? I brought nothing but a couple of sandwiches with me, which I ate half-way up the trail, and I find I've developed quite an appetite."

He took my hand in a firm grip, a grip with the right stuff behind it, but that infernal eagerness flashed for a moment beyond all control, and

he couldn't quite suppress a sigh of relief as he murmured a courteous pleasure at my decision and turned to lead the way into the kitchen.

LIGHTING a lamp in a brass bracket on the wall, he turned to the window, where there was a deep white-granite pan covered with a clean blue cloth. I'd noticed that the whole place was clean as a whistle.

Lifting the cloth, he asked me: "Do you like mushrooms?"

And I saw that the pan was filled to the brim with mushrooms of all colors, shapes and sizes. I was used only to the common white mushroom of the city markets at that time, and I felt an involuntary start of repulsion. Some of these were really beautiful. But most of them presented an ugly, slimy, even deadly appearance.

"Good Lord!" I said, bending over the dish for a closer inspection. "Are those things fit to eat?"

He nodded emphatically. "They certainly are. See this?"

He held up a mushroom perhaps three inches across the top, somewhat concave in the center, and the orange-yellow of a carrot. Pretty enough, oh, yes! But it had been bruised here and there, and the abrasions had turned a dull, dirty green. He turned it over in his fingers, explaining:

"This is the *Orange Milk Lactor*." Taking a sharp paring knife from the table he cut the top across. Instantly a milky red fluid oozed from the severed edges. He rubbed it with his finger and the stain lay across his flesh like blood. "This juice makes the *Lactor* very rich, probably the most delicious species that grows. And this *Boletus*. Isn't it a beauty?" He held up a large heavy-stemmed specimen with white base, yellow tubes and a round, brilliant crimson top.

"That's a matter of individual taste," I answered. "Frankly—it may be a beauty, as you say, but I shouldn't consider it an enticing edible. Where do you get those weird things?"

"Down below the timber line under the pines." The hermit smiled as he went on with his explanations. "This small slimy brown one is the *Bermuda Boletus*. Of course, there are many poisonous species, but if you know your fungi—you're safe. And I know them."

He lifted the pan to the table, and began to clean and slice the heterogeneous collection without regard to size, coloring or shape. And as he continued his voluble description of each one, his sudden garrulity seemed to me more deliberately significant than incidental. I realized that he was trying to impress me with his expert knowledge of mushrooms. And to what end? I've always been a touchy cuss, and I couldn't help a feeling of slight uneasiness.

HE WORKED swiftly, and in an incredibly short space of time had laid on the table a steaming and inviting dinner, of which the *pièce de resistance* was jerked venison and mushrooms.

As I seated myself to the excellent meal, resolving to enjoy it to the full, I saw once again that flash of eagerness in his eyes. And as I ate, with great appreciation of his culinary skill, I was analyzing the situation I had found in that cabin. It wasn't in the book that a hermit should prove to be a man of refinement and culture. It wasn't in the book that a log cabin on a mountain top should contain the East hung on polished myrtle walls and the poets of all time bound in limp leather. It wasn't in the book, either, that his cordial reception should be born of an ulterior motive—but I hadn't yet decided

whether or not the man were sane. Many a dangerous maniac's aberration shows only in his eyes.

Finishing my dinner, I drew out my cigar case and offered him a smoke, with the remark, "That's the best meal I have ever eaten, without any exaggeration." As he accepted the Havana I glanced casually into his face. You know how sensitive I am to atmosphere. Something chilling and arresting flashed over me. That confounded eagerness again! I said, rather bluntly, I fear: "You're a strange character, my friend. Don't fail to shoot square with me!"

He answered evenly: "I always shoot square. Can you believe that? Very well."

The eagerness seemed to sink back into some hidden recess of his thought, and I, searching the green-gray eyes, found the pupils suddenly opaque, and felt queerly baffled.

He went on softly: "I never failed to shoot square but once in my life, and thereby hangs—this cabin on Old Baldy. But I'll tell you in the morning." Then he shut his lips tightly, as though he had said too much.

My uneasiness rose again. What was the man up to? What would I find in the morning? An empty cabin from which my bird had flown? Locked jaws which had never intended to speak? Would there be any morning for me? My nerves were knocked into a cocked hat and I was ready to imagine anything.

It was such an unprecedented experience, you understand. And I was young, and impressionable to a painful degree. Tired from the long hike up the mountain, too. Then the man's culture and exquisite tastes displayed in his house were so unlooked for. And his manner—and that infernal eagerness! My brain was in a mess—all I could do was stick it out and see what came of it. But that one thing in my mind kept

growing to an uncomfortable certainty: I'd never take his story to Madden. I mentally kicked myself for an ass, but I couldn't get away from that impression.

I got to my feet abruptly and said to him: "I'd like to turn in, if you don't mind. I'm tired." It was rude and boorish, but I couldn't help it. He said, "Certainly," rose quickly and pushed open the bedroom door.

"I suppose you are done up," he went on by way of leaving me to my sleep. "Larch Trail is a bad one. Will you have the lamp?" I told him no, there was a little light through the windows. He answered my shortness with his unflinching courtesy and stood aside as I passed into the room, where in the dim light I could see a magnificent walnut bed standing by the wall. As he closed the door he added almost heartily, "Good night, Mr. Blondin. I hope you sleep well."

I GOT into bed quickly, but with no intention of sleeping. I had fully decided to remain awake all night. I listened for some sound from the other rooms, but there was none. I could see the light shining through a crevice under the door, and finally I got out of the covers and looked through the keyhole. Much good it did me! He was not in my line of vision, I couldn't see a thing but the corner of the bookcase. I lay down again, listening and thinking. Presently I became aware of a light insistent noise to the left just beyond the door. The unmistakable rhythmic swing of a rocking chair, and the rustle of pages turned slowly. But I wasn't at all reassured, and I fought all tendency to drowse. However, my tired body and the mountain air were too much for me.

In spite of myself I lost consciousness, and awoke in what seemed the following instant with the sun shin-

ing full in my face. I heard the hermit in the other room whistling cheerily as he went about getting breakfast. I thought of my apprehensions of the night before and laughed aloud.

Dressing quickly, I opened the door and called out: "Good morning! How's everything?"

The hermit instantly appeared in the kitchen doorway with a pleasant greeting, adding that he was about to call me to breakfast. Yet, in spite of his attempt at cheerfulness his face was drawn and the eagerness had disappeared from his eyes. I knew instinctively he had not slept—that he had been sitting in that rocking chair all night. As he looked at me I sensed about him a sort of hunted air, and I felt a keen impulse of pity. I almost contemplated letting him off, then I decided he hadn't needed to make the bargain if he hadn't wanted to do so, and I went in to breakfast. Not a word was said during the meal. We ate in a strained silence, and after we had finished he abruptly rose and went into the living room, motioning me to follow. Still silent, he stood looking at me, in the center of the room. There was something so downright sad in his eyes that I involuntarily walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Well, what about that story?" I said, trying to speak gently, but wanting it over. He flinched, as if from some sudden pain, and I instantly removed my hand, nonplussed.

Without a word he turned to the bookcase and took from it a volume covered with heavy Manila paper. It had been lying on the bottom shelf, which I had not noticed before, upon a stack of loose-leaf files packed to overflowing with papers of some kind. Still silent, he removed the manila wrapper and handed the

volume to me. I've seen a like volume in your own library. An excellent example of the book-maker's art, deep gray, embossed in gold. Across the corner a full-rigged ship sailing with all canvas up, and under it the title:

PASSION AND AIR AND FIRE

By Henry Wytten.

For a moment I was puzzled, couldn't see what he was getting at. Ten years before, that work had flashed across the literary sky like a blazing comet. The critics had hailed Henry Wytten as the genius of the age. Then, like a comet he had disappeared, never to be heard from again, leaving behind that one little book as his sole contribution to immortal literature.

Suddenly I understood, and turned to the hermit in a daze, stammering: "You aren't trying to tell me—you don't mean—you're not—"

"Exactly." He interrupted. "I am the man who was once known as Henry Wytten. Won't you be seated?"

Be seated! And I had found Henry Wytten. *Henry Wytten—Old Baldy—ten years!* Be seated! Good God! I told him no—I must have air. He followed me outside and we came to a halt at last under the pines quite a way down the trail. I turned and faced him then, trembling with the import of my discovery.

"For God's sake, Wytten," I said, "talk!"

He smiled sadly, regretfully. "I'll talk, Mr. Blondin. It can be told in a few words." His voice was tired, let down. "From the days of my earliest memory I have written poetry. It has been my life, my thoughts, my hopes, my dreams. My very soul. But they wanted to kill my soul. Who? My wife—my people.

"My people were hardworking men and women of the lower class. They may have wanted me to grow husky and blossom into a boiler maker; I can't say. Certainly they didn't want me to be a poet. To them that was little above disgrace. When I was a puny child they used to take my beloved poems and burn them. I'd rather they'd beaten me with a knotted rope!

"There's something in the beautiful sound of singing words that meter and rime that fairly intoxicates me. I can't read poetry and stay on earth. It rouses me to ecstasies in which I'm hardly conscious of what I'm doing for hours after. You can see what my own poetry would mean to me? Very well.

"But my people couldn't understand. I realized that, but it didn't deter me. I was too frail for manual labor, unskilled in any trade, uneducated for any profession, and they hadn't the wherewithal to educate me. I got that education myself. My verses didn't sell, however. My father never allowed me to forget that I had never aided in the family expenses; and that was rank hersy to them, something intolerable.

"Life was coming to an unbearable pass for me when a friend of my mother's sent her daughter to visit us. The girl had an unusual amount of beauty. Her people were wealthy, the mother had married a swine of a man who had nothing but money. He had promptly died and left the fortune to her and the girl. The obvious thing happened. My people wanted me to marry the girl. She had romantic ideas, and my poetic ambitions fascinated her even as her physical beauty fascinated me.

"The marriage appeared to me a welcome relief from my stultifying environment. I had a delusion that through love I might find leisure and opportunity to indulge in poetry to

my heart's content. So—we were married. But love? I came out of my dreams, post haste! Early after our wedding, Minna—her name was Minna Flett—found that my poems had no market. Love had been the merest pretense with her—she had wanted to display a genius husband. She had counted on my frail health making me submissive to her ter-magant will. And when she found the world refusing to acclaim me, she let loose all the devils that had been born in her.

"Night and day she lashed me with her tongue. The things some women can think of to say to a man! God forgive her for having married a weakling—I was only a failure living on her money—and many other things beside which such as this pale into insignificance. You—understand? Very well.

"**WE** HAD been married more than a year when the inharmonious existence we led came to a crisis. I had compiled a volume which had just been rejected for the seventeenth time. With every rejection Minna became more vituperative. This day I mailed the manuscript for the eighteenth time, and had just returned from the errand. I had gotten out all my carbon copies from my files, and all my originals. I was sitting in the library reading them over, polishing, revising; as a jeweler polishes his precious stones, letting them lie in the sun, watching the light scintillate through them, fondling them for very love of them.

"Minna came in the door, watching me for a moment, then began raging at me because she was certain the volume would only be rejected once more. My nerves were on a raw edge. The best of me was in that book. You're an author. You know with what hopes I refined it again and again, and sent it on its way. With what hopes, and dreams, and

sick fears. I couldn't stand her raging. I'd simply reached the end of my endurance. I told her to hush or I'd find some means of compelling her to, and went on with my work, ignoring her outburst. Maddened by my stubbornly maintained silence, she began to taunt me with my inability to attract the attention of a publisher. I set my teeth and refused to answer. She came to the table and rested her hands on the edge of it, leaning down and sneering into my face.

"Determined to steer clear of any violent outburst on my own part, I still ignored her, rose from the table and stepped over to the wall to get my Keats from my own personal shelf. That shelf was the topmost one, and the ladder I used for reaching it none too sturdy. I had climbed the ladder and was standing on the top rung reaching for the book when I heard the rustle of hastily gathered papers and the sound of Minna's voice in a chuckle of malice. I turned quickly.

"The devil in her had seen its chance. She knew I was helpless. *She had seized that entire heap of manuscript and thrown it into the blazing grate!* I almost fell in my haste to get down the ladder and rush toward her. But even before I reached her side I knew it was too late. There she stood punching the papers madly with the heavy poker, screaming insanely at me, and I stopped dead. Every word I had ever written had been licked up by the roaring flames.

"Perhaps you can't see why that was such a cataclysmic thing to me. But you must understand that my poems come to me out of the air, so to speak. After I've once set them down I can't rewrite them. They're like birds of passage, beautiful Birds of Paradise that light on me for a moment, and if I don't capture them immediately they vanish forever.

Ten minutes after I've written one. I couldn't rewrite it to save my life. And she had destroyed the long labor, the delight and treasure of all my years. I had forgotten that one publisher had my poems—had held them for six months.

"As I said, I stopped dead. I went cold. Cold as a Cape Horn fog. The unearthly chill crept down slowly from my forehead till it reached my feet. I was a numb statue, incapable of moving, thinking or feeling. I only knew that all the love and beauty of my life and skittered up the flue of that fireplace.

"She wheeled on me, demoniacal satisfaction in her face. 'Now, Mr. Poet,' she shrieked crazily, 'maybe you can get your head out of the clouds! Maybe you can spend a little time on something besides those worthless jingles! Go out into the grove and get some mushrooms for dinner.' She flounced angrily from the room, but for a long time I did not move. I—I—what would you have done, Mr. Blondin?"

He put it to me, just like that. I told him flatly—I'd have killed her.

He caught his breath, then went on softly: "Well—do you know what I did? I went out into the grove and got some mushrooms for dinner.

The grove was a full five acres of first-stand pine and fir. In spring and fall the moss was lavishly sprinkled with all kinds of mushrooms. I returned from that grove with a pail full of beautiful fungi, which she cleaned, cooked and placed on the table for dinner.

"She knew mushrooms were my hobby, that my scientific knowledge of them precluded any danger. That I never made a mistake. I myself didn't eat any. I couldn't have choked down a mouthful—my throat was tight. I sat watching her in bitter silence as she hungrily devoured the mushroom-smothered steak. She ate her meal with a fiendish relish.

seeming to take delight in showing me how little she cared for what she had done to me.

"That night just before 12 o'clock she called to me. I was sitting in the library in a state of mental lethargy, but I realized that her voice was sharp with some unusual emotion. I went to her quickly. She said she had a horrible pain at the pit of her stomach. Her face was drawn, and little beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. I carried water to her by the glassful—but she couldn't seem to get enough. I suggested going for a doctor, but she wouldn't let me leave her. She grew weaker, but the pain abated and she said she was getting better. In a few hours she went into a state of coma in which she died without regaining consciousness.

"I DIDN'T seem to realize what had happened. I didn't even know when or where she was buried. There was a spell laid over me that I couldn't break. I forgot the book entirely. I think I forgot life itself. All the impulse I had was to get away, to isolate myself beyond the sight and sound of my kind. To wear out my suffering alone.

"I took what money I needed for the purpose, came up here and built this cabin. I have been here ever since. The first year I was simply an automaton, going about over the hills, not seeing, hearing, tasting or feeling.

"Then one day I went to town for provisions. I saw a windowful of books—gray books lettered in gold. I dropped my bundles in the street, rushed into the store and bought a copy, the very copy you have there in your hand. I ran all the way out of town with that book gripped tight to my heart. I slept out under the pines with it that night—the house couldn't hold me. And there under the pines the ice melted away. I

knew them once more, my passion and air and fire. The next morning I wrote the first poem that had come to me in fourteen months!

"After that the years flew. I have written, read, dreamed and created. There's enough manuscript in there to make six volumes of poems. And through it all—I have paid.

"I made a solemn compact with God. I should stay here on this mountain top shut off from the world till someone from the world of affairs should seek me out. Someone of my own clan. Someone who would stay with me as a kindly guest for the night, eating dinner with me upon my place of immolation. Someone who would eat mushrooms I had gathered and cooked. And that was to be a sign from God that my penance was done. Perhaps you will call it the distorted fancy of a twisted brain, but I believe God took me at my word. He has kept me here for ten years.

"And though I had planned mightily what I would do when I was released from my self-imposed penance, I did *not* plan that the man who came to release me would be an author hunting a story! You have your story, Mr. Blondin. Very well. Good-bye—and good luck." And he turned to go back to the cabin.

I caught him by the arm. "Not so fast, Wyten, please," I said. "You see I *hadn't* quite got it. "What do you mean—penance?"

He paused for a moment and stood searching the moss with brooding eyes. Then his gaze fell on the thing he sought. He stepped to the base of a huge pine and pulled from the needle-covered moss a great mushroom. Stalk, gills and top of it were a spotless white. Crumbling from the flange, fragile as gossamer, was a flocculent web and a deep snowy cap curled gracefully about the base of the stem. It was exquisitely beautiful. He held it toward me, and as he

spoke there was sinister significance in his tone.

"This, Mr. Blondin, is the worst mankiller that grows in the forest: the *Destroying Angel*, the *Deadly Amanita*. Scientifically and technically, the *Amanita Verna*. There are others of the same family, the *Muscaria* and the *Phalloides*, and so on. But the *Deadly Amanita* is the worst of them all. It is absolutely fatal. There is no antidote known. The poisons in this mushroom are so deadly that they can be neutralized only by hours of boiling in powerful acids.

"Within a short time after eating it—the time varies according to the amount taken into the system—one is attacked with a horrible pain at the pit of the stomach . . . the face becomes drawn . . . there is a severe retching and a continuous craving for large quantities of water . . . the victim becomes weaker as the pain abates . . . at last he enters a state of coma in which he dies without regaining consciousness."

He looked at me steadily, and I hope I shall never again see on any man's face the look I saw on his as he realized that I had begun to comprehend the full significance of what he said.

"You see? Very well." His voice was strained and jerky. "You're too much the author to go back down the mountain with such a story in your possession and not make use of it. And I'm too much the sensitive-souled poet to face the world after it knows. Perhaps, after all, God's answer to me was a thing of Godlike subtlety. I must stay here. And some day—who knows? I nearly live on mushrooms" . . . He held up the lovely lethal thing in his hand.

It will always be a source of inner thanksgiving to me that I wasn't even tempted. Not for an instant.

On the contrary I was swept by a wave of nausea. God! We don't climb to heights over the grave of another man's hopes! I snatched the thing from his hand, flinging it to the earth and grinding it savagely under my heel, obliterating it in a panic of haste, as if the very touch of it might make away with him then and there.

"You're wrong!" I cried, gripping his arm in a frenzy. "Wyppen, old chap—you're wrong! I've known ever since I came up that I'd never take your story down the mountain. Now I know why. You may be right in your estimate of the author's attitude toward a great story. But there's a point beyond. I'm too much a disciple of the larger good to quarrel with any man's conception of a self-imposed penance for—for an error in scientific judgment of fungi. My lips are sealed, Wyppen. Get that manuscript!"

So there you are. I did not go down Old Baldy alone. And the story I dared not write dominated my thoughts for nearly a year. During that time I helped Wyppen to readjust himself and get a new start in life. I lost out with Madden and it was a couple of years before I caught up again. But I had the greatest reward that ever comes to any of us. I saw the maturing and flowering of another man's hopes.

BLONDIN ceased speaking and his eyes were fixed upon the California sunshine pouring through the window.

Ah—the nigger in the woodpile! Another man's hopes! My thoughts tied my tongue. And it had cost him Madden. Two years of work to get back what he'd lost. Another man's hopes! I looked at Blondin with new eyes. As long as I'd known him I'd never really seen the man before . . .

But this is Henry Wyppen's story.