

The Death Pit

A Novelette of Grim Tragedy

By OSCAR SCHISGALL

CHAPTER ONE

OUT OF THE STORM

A SPLOTCH of yellow light fell from the oil lamp to the flushed face of the boy. He writhed on the creaking bed and moaned, while his features were distorted by the agony of fever. His eyes were fiercely closed. One shivering hand grasped the edge of the covers. And from his blistered lips came the harsh query:

"Where's Pop? Where is he?"

The sallow woman, sitting at the bedside, glanced around nervously. She hesitated; then her bony hand reached toward the boy's forehead and touched it with a soothing caress. She bent forward until her haggard face hung under the sickly light, until her thin, straggling hair dully reflected the yellow glow. Anguish lurked in her weary eyes as she gazed upon the boy, and she shook her head pityingly.

"Where's Pop?" he repeated, raising his voice.

His eyes opened and he stared at her, as though he dared the woman to answer. Desperately she tried to smile, but

there was no mirth on the bony countenance.

"He'll be home soon, Gil. He'll come—soon."

"Where is he? I want him!"

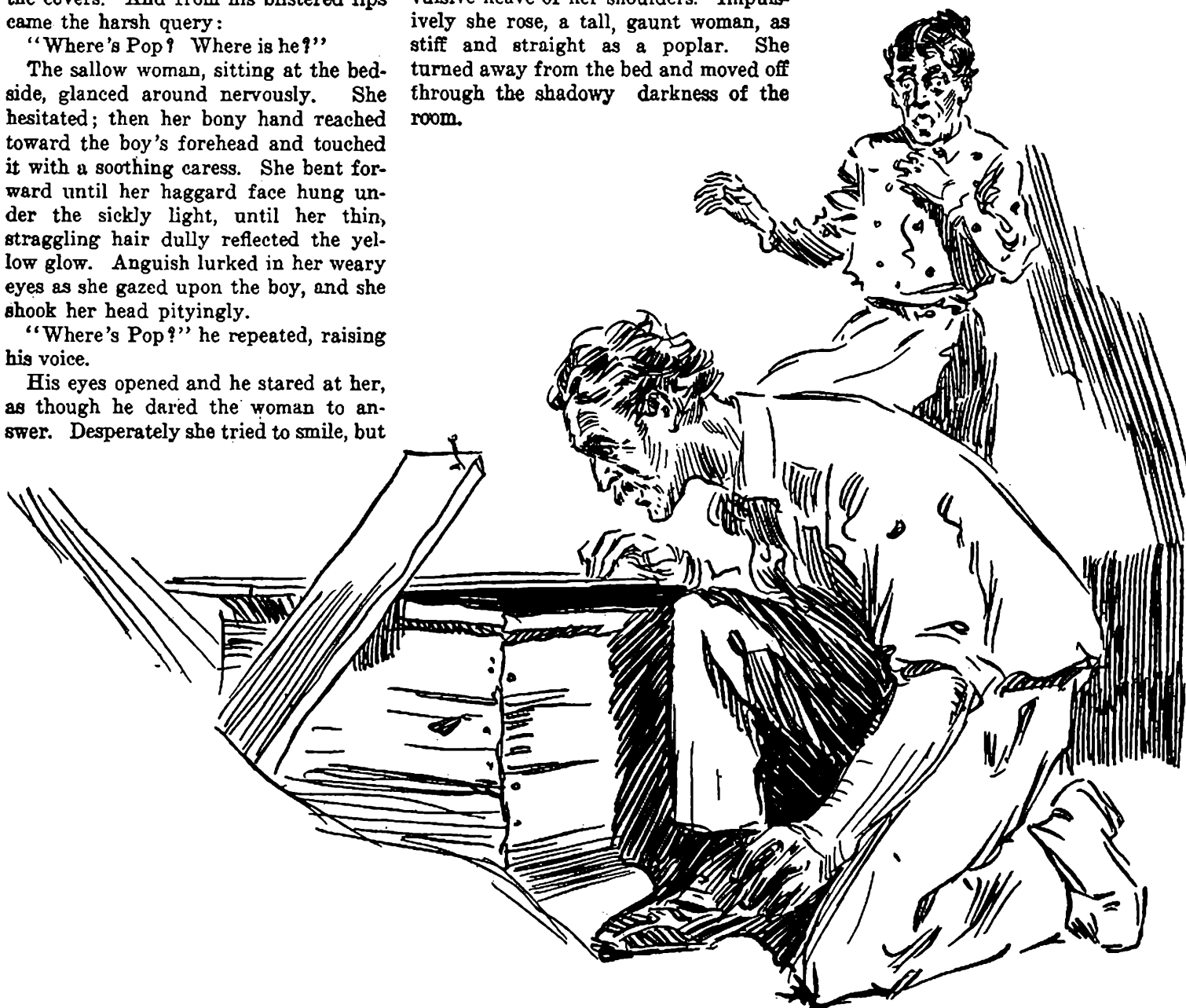
"In a few minutes—"

"I want him! Call him, Mom. Why don't you call him?"

Her tightly pressed lips forced back a sob, but she could not conceal the convulsive heave of her shoulders. Impulsively she rose, a tall, gaunt woman, as stiff and straight as a poplar. She turned away from the bed and moved off through the shadowy darkness of the room.

Her clothes, heavy and voluminous, hung about her with ungainly looseness; her hair was neglected, so that some of it strayed over her listless face. She brushed it away and went to the window.

Rain pattered against the pane. Through the blackness outside a steady wind sent its weird ululations.



The woman shuddered. Somewhere in that miserable night was her husband. She did not know where. Peering through the streaming window, she could discern a lonely light far down the road—but that was all; no sign of her husband.

It was almost midnight. He should have been home hours ago. But—well, it wouldn't help to worry about Timothy Cruze. Most probably he was in the village, as usual, wasting his time with the shiftless crowd at the store.

A sneer twisted the woman's mouth as she walked back to the bed. She looked about the room—a pauper's room furnished with a few broken chairs; a table which groaned with every weight placed upon it; an old-fashioned closet which might have retained a semblance of dignity, had it been standing on four legs instead of three. And now, to make the poverty of the home even more keenly felt, two beds had been brought into the chamber.

Those beds had been on the upper floor through the summer; but now, with cold weather imminent, they had been carried down. It was foolish, Timothy explained, to heat two floors when the family could sleep downstairs. He had said "foolish." What he actually meant was "impossible." The Cruzes could not afford enough fuel for a whole house.

A peculiar little laugh escaped the woman as she viewed the dismal chamber, large and square. The glow of the lamp near her son's bed served but to accentuate the bleakness of the other corners.

Again she sat by the boy and stroked his forehead. She watched him writhe for a few moments, then said:

"You ought to have a doctor, Gil. Soon as Pop comes home we'll send for—"

"Where's Pop?" The boy caught her hand in a frenzied, trembling grip. Deliriously he repeated, "Where's Pop? Where is he? I want him!"

"I don't know where he is, son. I never know—"

"Call him. Oh, Mom, please call him!"

The plaintive wail in his voice tortured her. She looked away—only to be mocked by the persistent splash of rain on the window. If only Timothy would come, it would be so much easier to sit with the fevered boy!

But another hour dragged by before Timothy Cruze came home. She did not hear him as he approached the house. The wind drowned the sound of his steps sloughing through the mud.

Her long, bony fingers were lengthening the flickering wick of the lamp

when she felt a gust of wind on her back. She looked around.

Leaning against the closed door, her husband stood panting. Water dripped from his uncouth clothes, from his face, from his hands. He drew the soaked cap from his head and tossed it to a chair.

And then she saw that he was smiling—a strange, malicious smile—a smile of triumph—almost a leer. His huge head was lowered as he began to pull off the baggy coat. In the dim luminosity of the oil lamp he appeared menacing; about him hovered an air that seemed unreal, fiendish.

"How's the kid?" he asked gruffly.

"Very bad, Tim—worse than he was this morning. Fever's awful. Where have you been?"

He ignored the question. Instead, he strode lumberingly across the room until he stood beside the bed. From his arms, powerful and dangling, water dripped to the covers. He studied his son's fiery face.

"Looks bad," he grunted.

"He was—delirious before."

"Delirious?" He squinted at his wife with suspicion, as if he doubted her report. "From what?"

"I don't know, Tim," she answered wearily. "He just sort of raved about—oh, about everything."

He emitted a short, guttural sound intended to express displeasure and concern.

"His face is all red," he mumbled. "Bad fever, I guess."

"Yes. Bad fever. I want you to call Dr. Philemon."

With a sudden start, Timothy Cruze turned savagely toward his wife. Even the shadows of the room could not hide the wild flames which had leapt to his narrow, swollen eyes. His chest heaved as he lowered his head close to her straggling hair.

"Forget Philemon!" he commanded, his voice strangely subdued.

In surprise she looked up. Crazy shadows played across her features as she demanded:

"What do you mean, 'forget' him? We need him. The boy needs him. I want you to go down to Drake's place where you can telephone."

"No! We ain't going to get the doctor."

"Ain't going to get him?" Exasperation sprang into her tones, and she scowled. "You're talking like a fool, Tim. We've got to get him. Just look at Gil. Who knows what's wrong with the boy?"

Tim raised his huge shoulders in a stubborn shrug.

"I ain't going to call Philemon tonight—nothing doing."

Indignant and angered, the woman jumped up, faced him. She shook a finger under his nose and declared:

"Look here, Tim Cruze, I stand for a lot from you. But I ain't going to let the boy suffer on account of your thick-headedness. If you don't go out and get the doctor, I'll do it myself!"

A queer smile appeared on his heavy lips—the same malicious smile he had displayed when he entered the house.

"None of us is going to call the doctor tonight. He's too excited to come out here in this weather."

"Why?" She shot the word at him as a challenge.

"'Cause—'cause I just came from the doctor's house!"

She frowned questioningly.

"You—just came from—the doctor's?"

"Yes."

"What for—what were you doing there?"

He laughed—harshly, curtly. His hand fell into his pocket, and from it he drew, with great deliberation, a glittering brooch and a studded wrist-watch. From another pocket he extracted a thin packet of bills—ten-dollar bills.

And as he held them under the radiance of the oil lamp, he continued to laugh softly.

"Look at 'em," he said, exulting, "look at 'em, Agatha! Worth a couple of hundred dollars, sure!"

The woman's eyes were round as she gaped upon the jewels. Her bony hand rose to suppress a gasp. Never before had she gazed upon such glistening, such alluring wealth. A brooch—a wrist-watch—and money. . . .

"Wh-where'd you get that, Tim?" she whispered in awe.

"I just told you, didn't I, that I came from the doctor's?"

"The doctor's!" She glanced up in terror to encounter his triumphant leer. For an instant they stared into each other's eyes; then she asked hushedly, "You mean you—stole 'em?"

"Just what I did. From that toy-safe in his office."

"Oh—Tim!"

Agatha Cruze shrank from her husband. Her ungainly form receded to a corner, and out of its darkness she directed a piercing, incredulous gaze at him. He stood, tall and swaggering, a brute of a man, self-satisfaction beaming on his puffed features.

"What's the matter?" he asked tauntingly.

"How could you do a thing like that, Tim? *Steal!*"

"How?" Contemptuously he flung the jewels and the money to the table. His brows sank so that he glowered at her. "I'll tell you how. You needn't stand there like an angel looking into hell. Use your head and you'll see. We need money, don't we? What with winter coming and you wanting clothes for yourself and the kid—we need money, don't we? Sure! Have we got any of our own? No, we ain't. Stands to reason we got to get it somewhere."

"But, Tim, *stealing*—"

"Stealing is one way to get it—and I used that way. The farm didn't give us a cent this year, did it? No. Nobody around here made any money this year—nobody except the doctor. 'Cause we had rotten weather, we had sickness instead of crops. And the doctor gets his money out of our misery. Look at his wife—buying wrist-watches and brooches and diamonds and fancy dresses out of the money her husband sucks from us poor sick farmers. Is it right? It ain't! I didn't take much from him. Maybe the whole business here, including the cash, ain't worth more than five hundred. It'll tide us over the winter. What'll it mean to him—the doctor? Nothing!"

He strode ponderously to the window and glared out into the night. Trickling rivulets of rain traced their crooked courses on the pane, but he did not see them. He saw nothing. In defiance he was awaiting his wife's answer.

Agatha Cruze was eying the fortune on the table. Queer thoughts raced through her brain—new thoughts—fearful thoughts. If those things could be sold for five hundred dollars, it would mean a comfortable winter, proper attention to Gilbert, her suffering son. She glanced at the boy; he was leaning on one elbow, his eyes feasting themselves upon the display of wealth on the table.

"Put your head down on the pillow, Gil!" she ordered; and he obeyed unexpectantly laughing with a wild joy.

"We're rich now, ain't we, Mom?" he cried deliriously.

She offered no reply. She considered rapidly. Then her low voice called:

"Tim!"

Slowly the man looked around.

"Were you—seen? Anybody know you did it?"

"No!" he snapped brusquely. "Think I'm a fool? Of course nobody knows—excepting you and the kid. And *you* ain't going to tell."

"Then—then as long as nobody knows, why don't you want to call the doctor?"

"Call him!" He appeared amazed. His feet astride, he remained silent for an instant. He had expected his wife to preach a sermon on the evils of theft. Instead, she was still thinking of summoning the physician for Gilbert.

"Yes," she said quietly. "The boy needs him. He—he'll get worse, maybe, if we don't call—"

"But, Agatha; do you want me to tempt the fates and everything by calling the doctor right after I—I've robbed him? He'll be so excited over finding his safe open that he won't want to come, anyway. Call him!"

"A doctor always comes, Tim."

"But—but—" An inexplicable cowardice was gripping him. He did not wish to face the man whose home he had robbed; he was afraid of something intangible. "Say, Agatha, use your head. It's after midnight and it's raining cats and dogs. Dr. Philemon lives four miles from here. Why make him come out on a night like this?"

"Gil needs him," she insisted, calmly obdurate.

"Gil can wait till tomorrow!"

"He can't—I won't let him. The boy's terribly sick. He gets a doctor tonight."

"But four miles!"

"You don't have to walk it. Go down the road to Drake's—that's only one mile. They'll let you telephone."

"Aw, look at that rain!" he objected.

"Tim, if you don't go, I will! You fool, don't you see the boy needs a doctor? He's as red as fire. Who knows what's wrong with him?"

"Still—"

"Still nothing!" she ejaculated, spitting the words at him. "You're afraid to meet the doctor, that's what. But I ain't! What's to prevent our hiding the things you took from him? What's to prevent our putting them where the doctor won't see 'em when he comes? They don't have to be on the table all night!"

The realization that his wife was not condemning his theft, that she was actually making of herself an accomplice, stirred a peculiar emotion in Timothy Cruze. It is soothing to have one's sins shared by others. He experienced a surge of courage. He moved forward hesitantly.

"You don't mean, Agatha—"

"I don't mean anything except that we need the doctor. And if you ain't going right now to 'phone him, I'll go myself!"

"And the brooch and the money and the watch—what—"

"Hide 'em in the closet. He'll never guess you got 'em here, will he? He ain't a mind reader. Besides—" she paused thoughtfully.

"What?" he urged.

"Oh, even if somebody saw you there—or *thought* they saw you—or somebody like you—I'm just supposing, Tim—then your calling the doctor here would sort of—sort of kill suspicion, see?"

Timothy Cruze did "see." A shrewd appreciation of his wife manifested itself in a comprehending smile as he nodded.

"You're right, Agatha."

"Are you going to call the doctor?" she demanded.

He lifted his drenched coat from a chair.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll walk down to Drake's. And you—you hide the things, Agatha."

And from the bed of Gilbert came a hysterical wail:

"Hide 'em in the closet, Mom, hide 'em in the closet! We're rich now, ain't we?"

The boy ended his question with a hysterical, shrill laugh. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

DR. PHILEMON CALLS

IT WAS after two o'clock in the morning when Dr. Philemon, huddled under the leaking top of his buggy, drove up to the rickety porch of the Cruze house.

He stepped awkwardly to the ground and muttered an oath as his feet sank into deep mud. Carefully he moved to the head of the horse; he tied the rein to one of the square beams which supported the roof of the porch.

The rain splashed upon him, upon the mud-spattered animal. He felt a stream of water run down his sleeve as he fastened the rein, and he grumbled audibly. But his protest ceased when he heard the moans of Gilbert Cruze, distinct above the noise of the wind.

Agatha opened the door for the doctor, and he eyed her angular being with mingled pity and contempt. These poverty-stricken farmers who lacked energy to earn a living from a source other than the soil disgusted him. They were worse, he firmly believed, than Russian peasants.

He unwound the muffler from his throat, threw off his great, dripping coat. No longer was he looking at Agatha or at Timothy, standing in a dark corner. Now his attention was fixed on the flushed young face under the light of the oil lamp.

Still writhing, Gilbert emitted an occasional moan. He tossed about incessantly, his small hands groping upward.

"How long's he been like that?" asked Dr. Philemon, rubbing his palms for warmth. He was a big man, almost as big as Timothy himself, and he cast a long, ungainly shadow on the wall.

"Since noon," replied Agatha, monotonously. "He's been—delirious. Talks about all sorts of things—just bables. His fever's awful."

Dr. Philemon shook his head.

"Trouble here, trouble at home, trouble everywhere!" he chanted as he went to the bedside.

"Trouble at home?" asked Agatha, casting a quick glance to the corner in which her husband stood in attentive silence.

"Yes. The whole town will hear about it in the morning!"

"About what?"

The doctor scowled into her face. His voice became hoarse. Pounding his fist on the back of a chair, he exclaimed:

"I've been robbed, that's what—robbed!"

Agatha stepped back in well-simulated amazement. Her mouth hung open, her eyes were circles. Before speaking, she turned toward her husband as if to inform him of the physician's astonishing declaration. Then she gasped:

"You've been robbed?"

"Yes. Over five hundred dollars worth of stuff! Right in my home!"

"Wh-when?"

"This very night! Before I came here. Lord knows it was no easy matter to hitch up and travel through this storm—four miles—while my own wife is home, half crazy after this night. All her valuables are gone—lost. The safe broken open—it wasn't a safe; just a rotten old box anybody could break through with a—good chisel or something. I wouldn't have come if your husband hadn't told me how sick the boy was. Let's look at him."

But Agatha was not satisfied. She wanted to hear the details of the doctor's story; she had committed herself to the task of aiding her husband in his struggle against the law—and it was well to know the enemy's information.

"When did you find out about this—this robbery, doctor?" she queried.

"When? When, your husband telephoned me, that's when. I went down to the office to answer the call, and there I saw the little safe—open. Everything—money and jewels—gone. Oh, I 'phoned everybody with authority in the village. Pulled 'em out of bed. In the morning there'll be an investigation."

From the dark corner issued Timothy's voice, resonant and deep and vibrant:

"Hope they find the thief, doctor. It'll be hard to lose that much money."

"Hard? I work for it hard enough—traveling four miles through a storm at two o'clock in the morning, and four miles home again—when my own wife is as nervous as—as—"

"Sorry," muttered Agatha, "but the boy was very sick."

And as if to vindicate her, Gilbert began to moan. His head tossed from side to side. He did not seem to notice the doctor's presence until his wrist was firmly gripped between searching fingers. Then he looked up, squinted inquiringly.

"Who are you?" he asked, almost threateningly.

"Quiet, my boy, quiet," murmured the physician, eying his watch as he felt the boy's pulse. He was forced to bend toward the lamp, and he did not see the wordless messages passing between Timothy and Agatha Cruze.

"Who are you?" repeated Gilbert.

"Sh! Quiet, boy. . . . Mrs. Cruze, can't I get better light? This flickering wick is bad for the eyes. Can't see—"

"I'm sorry," apologized Agatha. "We have no other lamp."

"Hum!"

Again Timothy's voice rumbled out of the darkness:

"Maybe I could hold a match over the watch, Dr. Philemon. The light might be better."

"Thanks, no."

The physician was frowning. So annoying a lack of household conveniences forced one to forget professional dignity. He was chilled, bad-humored; the prospect of the four-mile journey home, through the steady rain, deprived him of all cheer. He grumbled indistinctly—and suddenly stopped.

Astounded, he was gazing upon the sick Gilbert. The boy had raised himself on his elbow. He glared toward his father's corner, a wild, feverish light lending glittering brilliance to his small eyes. He coughed, gulped, then cried:

"Pop, is this the doctor? Is this Dr. Philemon?"

He did not wait for a reply; he fell back upon the pillow, laughing deliriously, and his little lips began to prattle hysterically:

"Dr. Philemon—Philemon—the doctor! We're rich now, ain't we, Pop? Ain't we, Mom? . . . Oh, we're rich! You got the doctor's money, didn't you, Pop? . . . Is it wrong to steal, Pop? It ain't wrong. . . . No crops, you said.

didn't you? . . . She bought diamonds and fancy dresses. . . . But you got the money, didn't you, Pop? . . . From the toy-safe . . . Does the doctor know you took it? . . . Tell him! Tell him! . . . Hide the things in the closet, Mom, before the doctor comes. That's right—in the closet—on the third shelf. . . . There they are, on the shelf in the closet—a watch and something else and money. . . . We're rich now, ain't we, Pop? Ain't we, Mom? . . ."

Gilbert subsided to an incoherent drool, chattering of money and jewels and the closet. He was squirming under the covers.

But no longer did Dr. Philemon listen to the boy. He had turned; he was staring queerly into the terrified eyes of Agatha Cruze. Behind the woman stood her husband, big and menacing and glowing furiously. They were speechless.

Dr. Philemon drew in his lips, peered sidewise at the closet. Then, with unexpected vigor, he sprang across the somber room, pulled open the closet door, thrust his hand over the third shelf, and—

"So!" he cried softly. "So—you took it, Cruze!"

His fingers fondled the jewels. Over them his eyes gleamed in the fantastic glow of the lamp. He came very close to Timothy. His fat face was thrust forward so that his breath fell warmly upon the farmer's cheeks.

"So!" he whispered. "So! Well, I'm going to the village; and you'll be in jail before the night's over, Cruze! I'll have you in jail, or—"

Timothy's huge hands plunged forward and fastened themselves to Dr. Philemon's chest.

"You ain't going to do nothing of the kind!" tremulously declared the thief. "You ain't!"

"Oh, I ain't, ain't I?" jeered the physician. "We'll see about that. Let go of me!"

"You ain't!" insisted Timothy. His voice had sunk to a low, harsh rasp. He curtly told his wife, "Agatha, lock the door."

But Agatha did not move. She stood stupefied, unable to speak. The sudden flood of events against her, against her husband, had overwhelmed the woman. Tall, bony, erect, she gazed at the doctor. One thought charged repeatedly through her mind:

They were caught—they were caught—they were caught—

Though her eyes saw, she was not certain of what occurred during the following few minutes.

She had a vague vision of the doctor breaking from her husband's grasp; he lurched toward the door. But Timothy was behind him, pulling him back. The doctor's fist rose, thudded against a resounding chest—without effect. An answering blow—a scuffle—and the struggle began.

Two huge men they were. Timothy Cruze and Dr. Philemon, and they battled like giants. But the physician was soft of body, while the farmer was solid and muscular. Their fists flew; they collided with the table, threw it over upset chairs. They crashed against the walls, fell, rose again, pounded each other.

And on the bed the fiery-eyed boy sat up and cheered frantically:

"Hit him, Pop! Hit him! . . . Oh, that was a good one! Give him another—in the face—break his face! Another one, Pop! . . . Kill him! . . . That's the way—oh, that was fine! Right on the mouth! Oh!"

Agatha watched. There was nothing she could do—she, a woman. Nothing? Yes, there *was* something. On the floor she saw the brooch and the wrist-watch and the money. She picked them up and dropped them into the pocket of her skirt.

She had no doubt about the outcome of the fight. Her Tim would win. He always won in physical contests.

The doctor was gasping, staggering unsteadily; and still his fists answered the blows of Timothy. From his mouth a stream of blood, hideous in the yellow light, trickled over his chin. And Tim Cruze hissed between breaths:

"You ain't going to tell! I ain't going to jail! I ain't!"

And then he did a brutal thing: he poised his fist, waited, and sent it snashing with all his strength against the jaw of the doctor. That was the final blow.

Dr. Philemon uttered a choked cry. He toppled back, fell, and his head was battered against the corner of the fallen table. . . .

Very quietly he lay on the floor, while Timothy panted over him like a victorious dog, his mouth open, his chest heaving.

He waited for the doctor to stir; but the doctor did not stir. Around the head on the floor a small pool of crimson was forming, little streams groping out like the tentacles of a tiny octopus. And into the red smudge dripped the physician's hair.

Agatha stared at the appalling sight. Her eyes were dilated. The breath was imprisoned in her throat. For as she looked, a terrible dread swept over her. She wanted to scream, but could not.

Impulsively she darted forward, fell to the floor at the doctor's side. Her hands groped over his chest; they tried to find his heart, to feel its beating. She gazed at the ugly gash at the back of the head. She gazed—and suddenly started back with a little cry.

"Tim!" she gasped. "Tim—he—he's dead! You've killed him—murdered him!"

And like a fiendish echo came the voice of the sick, delirious boy:

"You killed him, Pop! You murdered the doctor! You killed him!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE WELL

THE knowledge of the horrible thing he had done left Timothy Cruze dumbstruck. Stupidly he stared from the motionless body to his wife. His mouth, smarting and swollen from the blows which had been stormed upon it, formed the word:

"Dead!"

She nodded, her expression of terror as fixed as the leer of a gargoyle. She was still kneeling beside the inanimate form, but her hand had sprung away from the silent head.

Timothy glanced around uncertainly. His fists opened and closed. He was conscious of the bleakness of the chamber, of the incessant rain pattering on the window, of the weird light on his son's face. He shuddered, and his hands smoothed his ruffled hair.

"Dead," he repeated, as though he were endeavoring to convince himself that such a thing was possible. "He's dead—"

Slowly he moved away. He found himself beside Gilbert's bed, and he sat limply upon the chair.

The boy was watching him with curious intensity; something akin to pride covered Gilbert's countenance. Very softly he said again:

"You killed him, Pop. You did it."

Timothy's two huge hands were clasped in his lap. He murmured:

"If only you hadn't babbled, son; if only you hadn't babbled—"

"He ain't responsible, Tim," stammered Agatha, rising to her gaunt height. She stepped away from the body, meanwhile speaking. "He ain't meaning to do anything wrong. The boy's delirious—out of his head."

"I—know—" whispered Timothy Cruze. And a strange tenderness stole into his tones. "It ain't your fault, son. It's—the fever—" He did an unusual thing; he leaned forward awkwardly and kissed the burning cheeks of his son.

There were times, rare, perhaps, when Cruze forgot his swaggering bravado; then sentiment mastered him for an instant, as it was doing now. But the spell always disappeared at once. After it his love for Gilbert or for Agatha was displayed by gruffness.

Impetuously he rose, glaring at the body of Dr. Philemon.

"What are we going to do with that?" he rasped.

Agatha stood beside him; and strangely it was she who assumed control of the situation; she who had become calm and who was scheming; she who gave orders. Her tone admirably steady, she said:

"I've just been thinking of it, Tim. They'll be around in the morning—everybody—to look for him. I suppose his wife knows he came here."

"Yes, yes! What are we going to do?" A spasm of fear gripped him. His great figure shook visibly as he chattered: "They'll take me and—and then I'm done for. Murder! D'you realize what I've done, Agatha? Murder! If they get me—"

"They ain't going to get you," said his wife, with imperturbable assurance.

"They ain't?" The words quivered. "Wh-what can I do?"

"You'll do what I say, and we'll be safe."

His features shone with the inspiration of new hope. He caught her arms and whispered with terrible tenseness:

"I'll get out—away from here! It's only a little after two. Before they come in the morning I can be pretty far away—a long start. Then—"

"Tim!" She interrupted his suggestion with a sharpness that cut into him. Her lips curled back in an ugly sneer, and she pulled her arms from his grasp. "What are you saying?" she hissed. "Run away? Leave me here alone with Gil—and Gil sick? Alone with—with that thing on the floor? What are you saying, Tim?"

He gulped helplessly, understanding the cowardice of the suggestion. Avoiding her accusing gaze, he muttered:

"What else can I do? You don't want 'em to get me, do you?"

"No. I told you they ain't going to get you—if you listen to me. Are you quiet enough to listen now?"

He nodded, like a schoolboy being chided.

"Nobody," she said decisively, "is going to hear about this!"

"But how—"

"Listen to me, you fool! When I say nobody will know what you did, I mean it!"

"How you going to stop them from knowing? They'll see—that—" His shaking finger pointed at the corpse; now the little pool of blood had grown to an appallingly large smudge—and was still growing. Timothy looked away, a dreadful revulsion sickening him. But his wife was becoming steadily calmer. She went on:

"Nobody is going to see that thing. We're going to hide it."

"Hide it?"

From the bed came Gilbert's shrill repetition:

"You're going to hide the doctor, Mom!"

"Yes, hide him—hide him where no one will ever find his body!"

In his anxiety, Timothy was actually cringing before her.

"Where?" he asked tremulously.

Agatha's deep voice was lowered. Her eyes narrowed.

"In the well!" she said.

"The—well?"

"Yes, the dry well! You're going to fill the thing up with dirt, aren't you? It's no good any more."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing, Tim! That's going to be the doctor's grave, that well! We'll throw him into it tonight—now. You'll carry him out. And then we'll put the boards over it. No one will find him. After they go away—or, better, after a couple of days, we'll fill it as we were going to do. No one will be the wiser."

Had he found the courage to do such a thing, Timothy would have hugged his wife. Her plan was beyond reproach. The old well in the yard, long since dry, offered an ideal tomb, an ideal place of concealment. No one would search for the doctor's body there—especially after it would be filled. The well. . . .

"You're a good girl, Agatha," he murmured.

She did not answer. But from Gilbert came a gleeful exclamation:

"The well! Hide the doctor in the well, Mom! That'll be fine!"

Uneasily, Timothy glanced down at the body.

"The blood, Agatha," he stammered. "They'll see it—"

She looked at the fearful stain. Its dark crimson was joined by the yellow of the oil lamp, forming a queer, indescribable blot of color.

"Don't you worry about the blood, Tim. You take the body out to the well. I'll wash the signs away. I'll fix up the room so no one will guess. Don't worry about the stains."

She wondered, of a sudden, why she was taking all these precautions on be-

half of the man who had neglected her so cruelly during the entire nine years of their married life. But she brushed aside the hesitancy. He was her husband! Gilbert was her son! For their sakes she must fight the law. She could not afford to lose Timothy; and she could not bring disgrace upon the boy. She must fight. .

Peculiar, she told herself, was the fact that she could speak so boldly of blood and a corpse and burial; she no longer suffered from the horror of the situation. Instead, her mind was coolly planning a means of escape. Funny how the mind works under a strain. . . .

Timothy interrupted her musings. Again his voice trembled with misgivings; and again he stammered weakly:

"But his wife, Agatha—she knows he came here! They're bound to suspect us!"

A contemptuous smirk twisted her full lips.

"You fool, can they prove he came here—arrived here, I mean? Suppose we insisted he didn't arrive."

"We can't! His—his horse and buggy are outside!"

Energetically Timothy sprang to the window. He stared through the streaming pane into the blackness, his nose pressed against the glass.

"Sure," he hissed. "There it is—tied to the porch!"

Agatha considered. She bent her head and frowned. That horse could not remain outside. That evidence, too, must be destroyed—all evidence must be destroyed. They must find a perfect alibi, a story that would convince the villagers.

For a long time she remained motionless, gazing with listless eyes at the floor—but not at that part of the floor on which the dreadful thing lay. Timothy, quaking and baffled, stood by the window. He watched her anxiously, watched her because he knew his life depended on her decision, watched her as a criminal watches the foreman of a jury.

And after many minutes she spoke—quietly, decisively.

"Very well," she said, "we'll change our story. Tim, after you get that—that thing into the well, you're going to get into that buggy and drive about half way to the doctor's house. There you can tie the horse to a tree, and walk home."

"Drive half way—say, what's the idea?"

"Just do as I say, and we'll be all right. You leave the horse half way to the doctor's house, see? Then we'll admit that he was here, that he left about half past two. They'll find the empty buggy and—well, let them wonder about

the mystery of what happened to the man. He'll just sort of—disappear, see? We won't know anything about what happened to him after he left. His buggy half way home will show that he started away from us."

Again Timothy Cruze experienced a surge of admiration for his wife. He had never suspected that she could behave so sensibly, so tranquilly, under trying circumstances. But an inherent sulkiness and shyness stilled him; he did not express his thoughts.

"It's a good thing," Agatha continued, "that it's raining. Your tracks around the buggy, and from the buggy home, and around the well—they'll all be washed away."

"That's right! Never thought of that."

"You haven't thought of anything—yet," she answered, somewhat bitterly. "There's something else, too. Look in the buggy. If you can find some sort of doctor's kit—I guess it ought to be there—take out a bottle of some medicine. Proof that he visited us, just to make our story true."

At this evidence of keen scheming, Timothy could no longer suppress a word of praise. He rubbed his hands, shifted his weight from one foot to another, and declared:

"Agatha, you're all right!"

"Thanks," she replied dryly. "Now, let's get busy. Take—him—out."

It was a gruesome duty, one which was repellent even to Timothy. But he stiffened himself in grim determination, and bent to the corpse. And as his hands touched the still warm body, he abruptly paused—for Gilbert, almost forgotten in the excitement of planning safety, called:

"Throw him in the well, Pop! Throw him in the well!"

Sudden frenzy in his eyes, Timothy glanced up at his wife—rigid and ominous. Her hands were clasped, her face was hard; she stood as stolid as a sphinx, watching him.

"Say," he whispered, "we can't tell when the kid is in—in delirium or when he's all right. Suppose—suppose he blabbers to the people about this—same as he blabbered to the doctor? Suppose—"

Agatha scowled in concern; the weird illumination cast black shadows under her drawn brows.

"First good thing you thought of," she muttered. "We've got to be careful—can't give the boy a chance to blabber. We—we—"

She stopped, pondering. But she had trained her mind to overcome obstacles

in the path of their safety, and it was not long before she decided on a means of guarding themselves from Gilbert's delirium.

"We'll put the boy upstairs," she said curtly. "It'll be harder to hear him there. And—and we'll say he's got something contagious—scarlet fever. We can even put a sign on the door—you'll make a sign, Tim. Scarlet fever. We'll tell 'em the doctor said no one was to go into the house. That'll keep 'em away from Gil. We'll answer all questions outside. Understand?"

Cruze actually smiled in glee.

"Where do you get all the ideas?" he asked fervently.

"Not from you! Now get busy with that. I want to wash the stains."

With savage control of his emotions, Timothy applied himself to the task. Into the well in the yard he dropped the huge body of Dr. Philemon—and when he heard it thud against the rocks fifty feet underground, he felt faint and dizzy. He dropped the doctor's hat and coat and muffler into the pit, kicked its covering of boards into place, and rushed back through the rain to the house.

He fell upon a chair, buried his head in his hands, and sat moaning and swaying.

"It—was—terrible!" he told Agatha.

"That sound when he hit the bottom—"

"Forget it! Drive that buggy away!"

She was scrubbing the floor as easily as though she were merely erasing blots of mud. Her angular figure bent to the work, moving back and forth rhythmically with each scratch of the brush.

And presently Timothy regained sufficient strength to begin his journey through the storm. It was miserably chilly as he drove down the road, and he hunched his shoulders while the rain splashed against this face. He passed the dark house of the Drakes, a few other homes—and finally he reached a desolate spot where he tied the horse to a tree.

After that he trudged home, feeling as if he had removed an unbearable weight from his soul. The dim light in his window promised no cheer; rather, it gleamed with malicious foreboding. It lured—as the eyes of a snake lure. He moved toward it through the penetrating rain, and his heart beat furiously.

When he entered the door, he saw Agatha sitting by the bedside, her bony hand on Gilbert's forehead. She turned to Timothy in tremulous concern.

"We'd better put him upstairs," she said softly. "Soon's I got through cleaning the room, he started saying something like a song he learned in school. A crazy thing. He was delirious again. We'd better put him upstairs."

"What was he saying?" demanded Tim, throwing his wet coat on the once more upright table.

In answer to his query, Gilbert stirred. He squirmed, his mouth opened, and hysterically he began chanting a horrible parody of a song he had been taught. His eyes glared at the yellow lamp and he sang:

*"The doctor's in the well,
The doctor's in the well,
I own the cherry-o,
The doctor's in the well!"*

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INQUIRY

THOUGH they carried the boy to the upper floor where they tucked him comfortably on a cot, there was no sleep for Agatha and Timothy Cruze that night. Sleep after the terrors of the past few hours was impossible; everything was impossible—save their sitting in the dark room, silent and morbid.

Agatha sat near the window, her stolid face bent, her hands clasped in her lap. Opposite her Timothy glared at the lamp. His huge countenance deeply lined. Nervously his hands rubbed over his knees. He was not conscious of his wet clothes; he was conscious of only one thing: he had murdered a man. . . . And in the morning he would be compelled to meet inquiring villagers.

Well, his story was ready.

Their unspoken meditations were interrupted a dozen times by the chattering of Gilbert. From the upper floor floated the weird chant of "*The doctor's in the well—*"

It fell upon Timothy Cruze with the weight of a blow—and shattered his courage. Each wildly uttered word pounded upon his conscience—pounded steadily, gloomily, unavoidably. He writhed under the weight of the song. Once he sprang to his feet, stamped across the room, and rasped madly:

"Can't you make him stop? Can't you make him stop that damn thing? He's driving me crazy!"

Moodily the gaunt Agatha answered, without glancing up:

"Sit down, Tim. It's the boy's fever. Don't let it bother you."

He tried bravely to follow her instructions. When he sat again, his hands gripped the edge of the chair in an effort to find strength. But he could not escape the fantastic, repeated, "*The doctor's in the well—*"

At dawn, when Agatha blew the flame from the wick of the oil lamp, he was limp and haggard. With bent shoulders he sagged in his chair, and his lips quiv-

ered. Soon the villagers would come. And upstairs Gilbert was still muttering, occasionally, "*The doctor's in the well—*"

A bright sun vanquished the rain clouds. Fresh from its shower, the countryside sparkled in the golden light of morning. Vapory masses of billowing white rose lazily from the mountain forests, and were wafted away in ephemeral cloudlets. The vague odor of pine drifted down upon the rickety home of the Cruzes.

Timothy stepped out of the house, filled his lungs with the invigorating air. He looked for an instant at the brilliance of the rising sun, blazing above a distant ridge; he stared about, as he did every morning, at the maze of fiery colors in the dying leaves of autumn; and then—he glanced at the boards which covered the well. He shuddered. Fifty feet under those boards lay the lifeless thing he had thrown there. . . .

With gratification he noticed that no marks of his steps remained in the mud; the rain had effectively washed them into oblivion. Queer, he thought, how daylight brought reassurance and courage. He could breathe easily now, though his head throbbed with lack of sleep, and his eyes were black and cadaverous.

He turned to find Agatha, angular and forbidding and ungainly, beside him. She thrust a slip of paper into his hand.

"Nail it up on the door," she said sullenly. "Don't stand around dreaming. When the folks come, tell 'em you put this up until the doctor sent you one of those regular signs. Get busy, Tim."

He fixed the paper to the door. It bore the alarming words:

"SCARLET FEVER."

"That'll keep 'em out," mumbled Agatha.

She was right. It was almost noon—after an interminably long morning—when four men from the village walked up the road to their home. When the delegation, rather breathless from the rapid search for the doctor, came into the yard, they paused. The glaring sign stopped them as abruptly as the muzzle of a gun might have done. They eyed each other hesitantly.

But Agatha and Timothy stepped out of the door—a tall, menacing couple, uncouth and lumbering. It was the woman who called:

"Good morning!"

A short, bald man, twisting his hat in his hands, moved forward to act as spokesman. Before venturing a word, he tugged at both ends of a shaggy moustache.

"Morning, Mrs. Cruze. Is it your Gilbert who's down with the fever?"

"Yes. The boy—"

"The boy is in a terrible condition," interposed Timothy. That, he recalled, was the proper phrase for such an occasion.

Somewhat abashed, the spokesman stammered:

"I—I'm sorry we got to bother you, then, but—well, something mighty peculiar has happened. Something very strange."

"What's that?" demanded Timothy. He frowned questioningly.

"Dr. Philemon—he's disappeared."

"Dr.—Philemon?" Even Agatha admired the surprise in her husband's tone. She raised her brows to indicate her own amazement.

"Yeh," grumbled the spokesman. "Just—disappeared."

Timothy eyed his wife, then turned back to the villagers.

"What do you mean, he's disappeared? When? How?"

"Dunno, Cruze. Dunno anything about it—except what we found this morning."

"What?"

"His wife—she sent out a sort of general alarm. Said her husband hadn't come home after—after going to your house."

"He did come to our house," said Agatha.

"I know. So we started up here to ask if he'd left—and—and we found his buggy down the road."

"His buggy!" exclaimed Timothy, moving forward out of the door. "You found his buggy?"

"Yeh. Empty."

"Well!" Timothy addressed the exclamation to his wife. And Agatha succeeded in looking mystified, though she was wracked by turbulent nervousness. From her position she could see the boards which covered the well; the sight nauseated the woman—but she was too hardened a Stoic to surrender to her emotions.

"What do you mean—you found his buggy empty?" she demanded.

The bald spokesman shrugged.

"Just that, Mrs. Cruze. We came upon it about a mile or so down past Drakes'. The horse tied to a tree—and no sign of the doctor."

Agatha expressed fright in her widened eyes.

"Do—do you think he could have been—held up?"

"Held up? On a night like that—in that storm and everything? Dunno, ma'am, but it don't seem likely. Be-

sides—well, lots of queer things happened last night. The doctor's house was robbed."

"What!" It was Timothy who again vented feigned surprise.

"Yeh. His wife's jewels taken, money taken, safe busted. Then the doctor comes up here—and disappears. Funny."

"Mighty funny!" agreed Cruze. He scowled and scratched his head. "Let's see," he mused, "he left here about—about—what time would you say, Agatha?"

"About half past two, I guess."

"Yes, about then. Got into the buggy and drove off."

The bald man pulled at his moustache, perplexed.

"Didn't he act sort of—strange?"

"Not as I noticed," decided Timothy.

"He didn't say a word about the robbery? You know, he discovered it before he left home to come here."

Cruze felt an impulse to utter an oath. He cast an uneasy glance at his motionless wife, for he realized they had erred. Surely, Dr. Philemon would have mentioned the robbery. It must have been paramount in the physician's mind. To suppose that he would have called without speaking of it was ridiculous. And yet the Cruzes had simulated amazement at the announcement of the theft. Their caution had been too great—too great to be convincing. He could detect a hint of suspicion in the villager's query. The man had turned to look at his three associates—a meaning look, it seemed.

But Agatha Cruze assumed control of the situation, as she did in all crises. She was cool. Her gaze had roved over the distant hills to the blue skies, to the drifting clouds skimming lightly before a flippant breeze. As she watched them, a pained expression crossed her features. She said, quite pathetically:

"Maybe the doctor did act sort of funny. Maybe he did, Tim. We didn't notice. Our Gil was so sick—so sick! Even the doctor must have forgotten that robbery when he saw the boy. He didn't mention it, anyway. He was too busy with—Gil. Poor boy!"

The spokesman coughed sympathetically.

"Of course," he said. "Of course, Dr. Philemon wouldn't have bothered you with his own troubles at a time like that. He was too much of a gentleman, was the doctor—I mean, *is* the doctor!" He hastily corrected himself, as if regretting the implication in his use of tenses. "Er—what seems to be the matter with your boy, Mrs. Cruze?"

She choked a sob—a sincere sob, this time; the sob of a mother.

"Fever. He's got the fever."

Pityingly the spokesman shook his head.

"That's awful," he muttered. And one of his associates mumbled:

"Come on—guess we'd better be getting back, men. We ought to tell Mrs. Philemon about the buggy—and get some police on the job. Come on. Let's go. Mrs. Cruze has the boy inside—"

Readily the spokesman acquiesced. He rubbed a hand over his great moustache and said:

"Well, guess we ought to, at that. So you ain't got any information to give us, Cruze?"

"None except what I told you. The doctor left here about half past two, after seeing our Gil. Said he'd send a Board of Health sign up to put on our door. We put this one up meanwhile—to keep folks out. No use—no use letting the thing spread."

"No. No-o. Of course not. . . . We-ell, thanks, Cruze. Don't know what we're going to do about all this. We'll have to leave it to the police, I suppose. . . . Well, good-by. Hope your boy gets better real soon."

"Thanks," replied Timothy, watching the villagers turn away. Great elation was bubbling within him. He had evaded suspicion! He had fooled them—with his wife's brains.

Wishes for Gilbert's recovery were voiced by the other men as they walked off, and Timothy expressed his gratitude solemnly.

And when the visitors had vanished down the road, he turned to Agatha. His eyes shone; he gripped her arms.

"We did it!" he whispered gleefully. "We sent them off!"

"Yes." Moolily she nodded, as impassionate as ever. "Come in. We left Gil alone."

They entered. And the boy's voice came to them in its monotonous chant, thudding upon their nerves with its pitiless persistence:

*"The doctor's in the well,
The doctor's in the well. . ."*

Timothy suddenly shuddered. He eyed his wife uneasily.

"Can't we make him stop that noise?" he exclaimed harshly.

His answer came from the upper floor. Gilbert cried:

"I want to see the well! Take me to the well! Lemme see the well! The doctor's in the well! . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PIPER IS PAID

GILBERT'S illness became worse during the day—so alarmingly worse that Agatha did not leave his bedside. Though her eyes were heavy with lack of sleep, though she could have slumped down to the floor in sheer weariness, the gaunt woman maintained her vigil. Every few moments her bony hand caressed the boy's fevered forehead, and at such times his ravings abated.

Timothy's endurance was not so great. In the afternoon he threw himself upon a bed on the lower floor, and fell into a deep sleep. He dozed off during one of the intervals in which Gilbert was quiet. And there, on the bed, he sprawled and emitted loud, rhythmic snores. Agatha listened—and somehow she sensed an intangible injustice in the situation. Why was she, who had extricated her husband from a dreadful danger, sitting awake, suffering at the bedside of her son, while Timothy slept?

That had ever been her husband's way. During moments of danger he was nervous, almost cowardly, relying entirely on his wife's ingenuity. When the danger had passed, he forgot it—left her with the after-effects while he slept. . . . Yes, there was injustice in his attitude!

She grumbled; her mouth hardened grimly. If it weren't for Gilbert she would not have tolerated Timothy's ways. For Agatha Cruze, though somber and unattractive and unsentimental, still retained one feminine virtue; she loved her son with all the passionate ardor a woman can bestow upon an only child. If ever she possessed a tender instinct, it was vented in motherly affection. She would have sacrificed everything for Gilbert; he was the one thing which made her colorless life worth living. For him she did everything, gave everything.

And, even if she did not realize it, her husband shared those emotions. He felt no particular love for his wife; but for his son—the only offering he had ever made to the world—he nursed a strange, unexpressed masculine adoration. It was seldom shown, seldom permitted to evince itself in actions—but under his brusqueness the love for his child slumbered ever. It was deep, passionate. Were anything to happen to Gilbert; were the boy to die of his fever—life would have become worthless, empty.

And so these parents, merely tolerating each other, were held in family ties by their son. They were wondering what his fever would do to him—wondering in unexpressed fear. And yet Timothy

could sleep. . . . A strange, unfathomable man.

He was roused when darkness had once more fallen over the countryside. He blinked up into the sallow, bony face of Agatha. She had lighted the oil lamp, and its sickly yellow light played upon her features. She shook his shoulder.

"Wake up, Tim, and get something to eat. Gil's fallen asleep."

With much grumbling, Timothy rose. They ate meagerly at the rickety table, the flickering lamp between them. As he peered at her weirdly illumined countenance, at the black shadows under the cheek-bones and under the eyes, he said: "You look tired, Agatha."

It was an unusual attention on his part, even to notice her weariness. Quickly she glanced down at her plate.

"Been sitting with Gil," she explained.

"How is he? Seems quiet now."

"Yes. Just fell into a doze. But—but he's worse than yesterday—much worse."

"I wonder—"

His words were interrupted with stunning suddenness. Agatha jumped from her chair; he, too, rose, gaped at the wall.

From the upper floor had come the piercing scream; and Gilbert's voice shrieked wildly:

"The doctor's in the well! I see him, Pop, I see him! He's in the bottom of the well! I can see him, Pop; I can see him again!"

"Delirious again!" whispered Agatha.

Timothy rushed up the stairs, his wife behind him. They found the boy writhing in agony on his cot; his face was crimson, blistered. The lips, parched and sore, squirmed as he prattled insanely of the doctor in the well. Timothy caught his son's hands, gripped them tightly as if the pressure would ease the suffering of the child. Beside him Agatha looked on, stern and worried, breathing hard.

"He's worse than ever," she murmured. "Worse than ever. I'm afraid, Tim!"

"He'll be all right after a while," he assured her, though he felt no confidence in his assertion.

"All day he's been saying he wants to see the well—"

Timothy shuddered perceptibly; but he answered:

"He'll be all right; he'll be all right!"

"But I'm afraid, Tim—"

They remained at the bedside while Gilbert's delirium became steadily more turbulent. Gazing anxiously upon the stricken boy, Agatha forgot her fatigue,

forgot that she had not slept in two days, that she had not eaten—even that murder had been committed in the lurking shadows of her home. She thought of Gilbert only, of the danger in which her son was.

And after an hour she seized her husband's arm and declared:

"Tim, we've got to get another doctor! Get Dr. Loop from Hurleyville. That's nearest. We've got to!"

At the suggestion Timothy changed. His features had been lined with commiseration for the sick child. Now, as he turned in amazement to his wife, pity gave way to terror. His mouth opened wide.

"Get another doctor!" he gasped. "We can't!"

"And why can't we?"

"Because—because—don't you see, Agatha? The other doctor will hear Gil blabber about the well—and—and—"

"Blabber about the well—" she murmured, dazed.

And then she understood. For Timothy's safety no one must enter their home before Gilbert recovered from his delirium. . . . And for Gilbert's safety, a doctor must be called. . . . A predicament which brought into conflict her maternal instincts and her desire to shield her husband.

She paled as she stared at the boy. If she didn't summon a physician, who could say what might happen? If she did—a slight shudder coursed through her gaunt body. Appealingly she looked at Timothy.

This was a time when Agatha Cruze needed sympathy, needed a strong arm and a strong mind to guide her—needed them desperately. She was tired and shaken by the events which had fallen upon her; within her something was drooping hopelessly; the burdens she bore were fast becoming too heavy. She needed support.

Instead, she received from her husband a look of misery, of cowardice, of fear. She found herself forced to decide without help. And she did.

"Tim," she said softly as she rose, "I'm going to 'phone Dr. Loop."

Without another word, she descended the stairs creaking under her weight. In the dark chamber on the lower floor, she threw a shawl about her shoulders in preparation for the walk to Drakes'. It was an old shawl, gray and lifeless, conforming with her personality.

Though she eyed the food on the table rather wistfully, she determined to telephone for the physician of the neighboring town before she did anything else. The fantastic glow from the oil lamp fell

upon her worn features; she blinked at the light, for her eyes smarted. But she had reached a decision, and she moved to carry it out; Timothy must be sacrificed for Gilbert! . . . Mother-love was the more powerful.

But even as she strode forward grimly, Timothy clattered down the steps. He rushed to the door, placed his broad back against it. As he faced her, he appeared gigantic, towering, even menacing. The sickly light poured upon his distorted, puffed face.

"You ain't going!" he snarled.

Pausing, she eyed him coolly.

"I am."

"I say you ain't—and you ain't!"

Her lips parted in an ugly sneer, hideous on her sallow features.

"You're a coward, Tim! You ain't a man—you're a dog!"

"Don't care what you say," he rasped back. "I ain't going to hang 'cause you think the kid needs a doctor. He don't!"

"He—he'll die if I don't get one."

Timothy gulped, glanced away in fear. But immediately his bravado reasserted itself.

"He won't die—that's just your talk. You're going to stay right here. No doctor—*nobody* comes into this house till the kid stops blabbering about the well."

Agatha's lean arms were crooked, as she placed her hands on her hips in a challenging gesture.

"Suppose I do go?" she said.

"I ain't going to let you."

"What'll you do?"

"Keep you here, that's what!"

"By force? With your hands?"

"Yes, with my hands!"

She smiled bitterly.

"It won't be the first time you beat me," she said.

But slowly she turned and went back to the bed. Upon it she sank thoughtfully. There was no sense in opposing Timothy when so violent a mood was upon him. She knew her husband. He would beat her, throw her upon the floor, compel her with brutal force to remain at home, if she attempted to call a doctor.

She did not mind the pain his fists inflicted. What troubled her was the knowledge that a beating from her husband would incapacitate her for days—it had always had that effect. And there would be no one to care for Gilbert. . . .

No, she could not throw her strength against the power of Timothy. She would wait at least until he slept.

The fact that in a short time Gilbert subsided into deep slumber lent Timothy cause for malicious gloating.

"See!" he told her as she gazed wanly upon the boy. "He's better now, ain't he? Sound asleep. Quiet. Suppose you'd called the doctor, it would have been a useless risk. Who was wiser—you or me?"

"You, of course," she replied sardonically.

"Sure I was right. And now that the kid's asleep, suppose we take the opportunity to rest? Come on, Agatha. Let's go down. You need sleep, if you're half as tired as I am."

"Half as tired as you—" she repeated weakly, and smiled. Oh, how unutterably stupid and cowardly and vile she was discovering her husband to be!

Without undressing, they threw themselves on the bed. The lower floor, with the light blown out, was impenetrably black. It took Timothy but a moment to fall into sonorous sleep.

But Agatha lingered on the border of wakefulness. She would wait a while, she promised herself, until Timothy would no longer notice her movements. Then she would steal off to telephone Dr. Loop. Gilbert needed him—needed him—

She dozed off, slept for a long, long time. Unconsciously she snuggled against the warmth of her husband's huge body, and her arm crept about him. Two lumbering farm toilers, suited to each other, yet unhappy. . . .

It must have been near dawn when she awoke with a start. She was trembling as she sat up in bed, and her hand rose to her lips. She looked about the blackness—saw nothing. Yet, strangely, she sensed a premonition that something was wrong. . . .

Beside her Timothy still slept. She thought of the doctor; and she cursed herself. Why had she permitted weariness to conquer her? She must go now—*now*—

Quietly she pushed herself off the bed, groped for the shawl, threw it around her ungainly back. She started for the door—and saw with a gasp that it was open.

A breeze, blowing in upon her, scattered her straggling hair and brought a queer dread. Without a sound, she turned, hurried up the steps to Gilbert's room.

A moment later she flew down, flung herself desperately upon her husband, shook him to wakefulness. She was screaming.

"Tim! Tim! Gil is gone—he's gone!"

He blinked up through the darkness.

"Hey? What?"

"Get up! Gil is gone, I tell you—he's gone! He's not in his bed! And—and the door's open!"

She was quivering as if the fever had caught her. She actually dragged Timothy out of the bed by sheer force. And as the meaning of his wife's words sank into his consciousness, he suddenly displayed an access of energy.

He hissed a fearful oath, dashed up the stairs. Instantly he returned, dazed, staggering.

"You're right," he said. "He's—gone!"

"And the door's open!"

"God!" he whispered.

Then he sprang to the door and with all the power of his lungs shouted:

"Gil! Gil! Son, where are you?"

There was no answer. As he called again, his voice throbbled with the anguish of his soul. Anguish which Agatha shared, felt even more keenly.

They tore out into the night, rushing about desperately in a wild search. And as she ran blindly, Agatha Cruze yelled hysterically:

"It's your fault, Tim! Your fault! You wouldn't let me go for the doctor! That might have saved the boy! You wouldn't let me go! I tell you, I swear—do you hear?—I swear if anything happens to him, I'll tell everybody everything—about the murder—everything!"

Timothy was suffering in torture too great to permit his saying anything but:

"If anything happens to him, I don't care what you tell everybody!"

And then suddenly he came to an abrupt stop, while all the strength oozed from his quaking body. His legs sagged; his eyes were dilated; he crumpled to his knees, gaping before him at the ground.

Agatha came to his side; with a moan of horrible comprehension she fell beside him, and gazed in terror-stricken fascination at the ground. A finger, trembling, moved forward to point at the dreadful thing.

Before them yawned the open hole of the well. The boards had been pushed back. . . .

"He—he wanted to—see—see the well!" whispered Agatha, each word forced out of a choking throat.

Without a sound, the quivering Timothy bent forward. He lit a match, cupped it in his hands, and held it over the pit. Mother and father peered down—peered in fearful awe.

And then Agatha Cruze collapsed against her husband's shoulder.

Far, far down in the well, scarcely visible in the dim light of the match flame, lay the still body of little Gilbert—sprawling across the form of Dr. Philmon. . . .

THE END

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