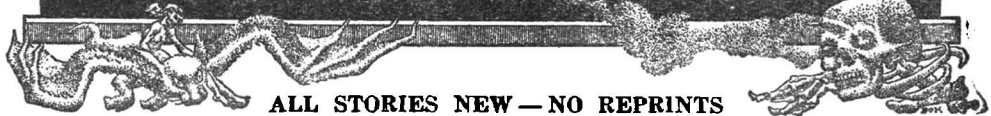


Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1945

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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
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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Murderous Steam Shovel

By ALLISON V. HARDING

YOU know those stories—you've read them—where people set things down for the record in notebooks. I don't do that. This story is in my mind. I go over it detail by detail and I can remember the whole business. And the remembering assures me that I am not crazy, that all this did happen. People who have seen things and had things happen that other folks don't experience are called crazy. It's the easiest way—and the most reassuring!

So I go over and over the story in my mind, and I say, Vilma—that's my name—here's just what has happened to you from the beginning, and because it's all so clear and distinct—you're not crazy!

It all started with that construction job just above the Northville Valley country, or maybe it all started when I married Ed Meglund.

Ed had always been in construction. He had the build for it, big hands, big frame, two hundred pounds of muscle and sinew on it, not so much between the ears. But you know the song, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"! Even I, Vilma, and his wife, wouldn't exactly have ever called Ed good. The outfit he'd worked for was Greene Construction and as Ed had never had much education, they gave him the jobs you could tell he could do just by looking at him, driving a ballast truck or digging or shoveling or using his strength and weight somehow.

He made a fair salary and we lived in Northville pretty comfortably. But I remember the night he came home and said they had a shovel on the job now, a big new tractor steam shovel, he told me. Ed's hard blue eyes lit up and I could tell the way a wife can without any speaking that what Ed Meglund wanted to do more than anything in the world was to run that shovel. That's a better job, of course, with more money and getting looked up to.

I never asked very many questions of Ed because he doesn't answer unless it pleases him, but I could tell from his face at home nights that he wasn't getting any closer to that old steam shovel. One Sunday when we were driving around up in the Northville Valley country, he toured me past the construction site and pointed.

"There he is, Vilma."

Well, one steam shovel looks about the same to me as another with those caterpillar feet and the operator's house and then the scoop that comes out so, you know. A woman never sees the same in them as a man does. Ed was just bubbling over.

"Isn't he a beaut!"

I read the letters that ran across the coping near the roof. Greene Construction Company, I made out.

"We call him Big Mike."

"That's a name for a derrick," I sniffed. "Howdya get that?"

"Oh, I dunno," replied Ed. "But isn't that a beaut!" he sighed.

"If you like 'em," I murmured.

It wasn't very many weeks after that that Ed came into our little place in Northville and announced suddenly we were going to move up toward the valley.

"Huh?" was all I got out.

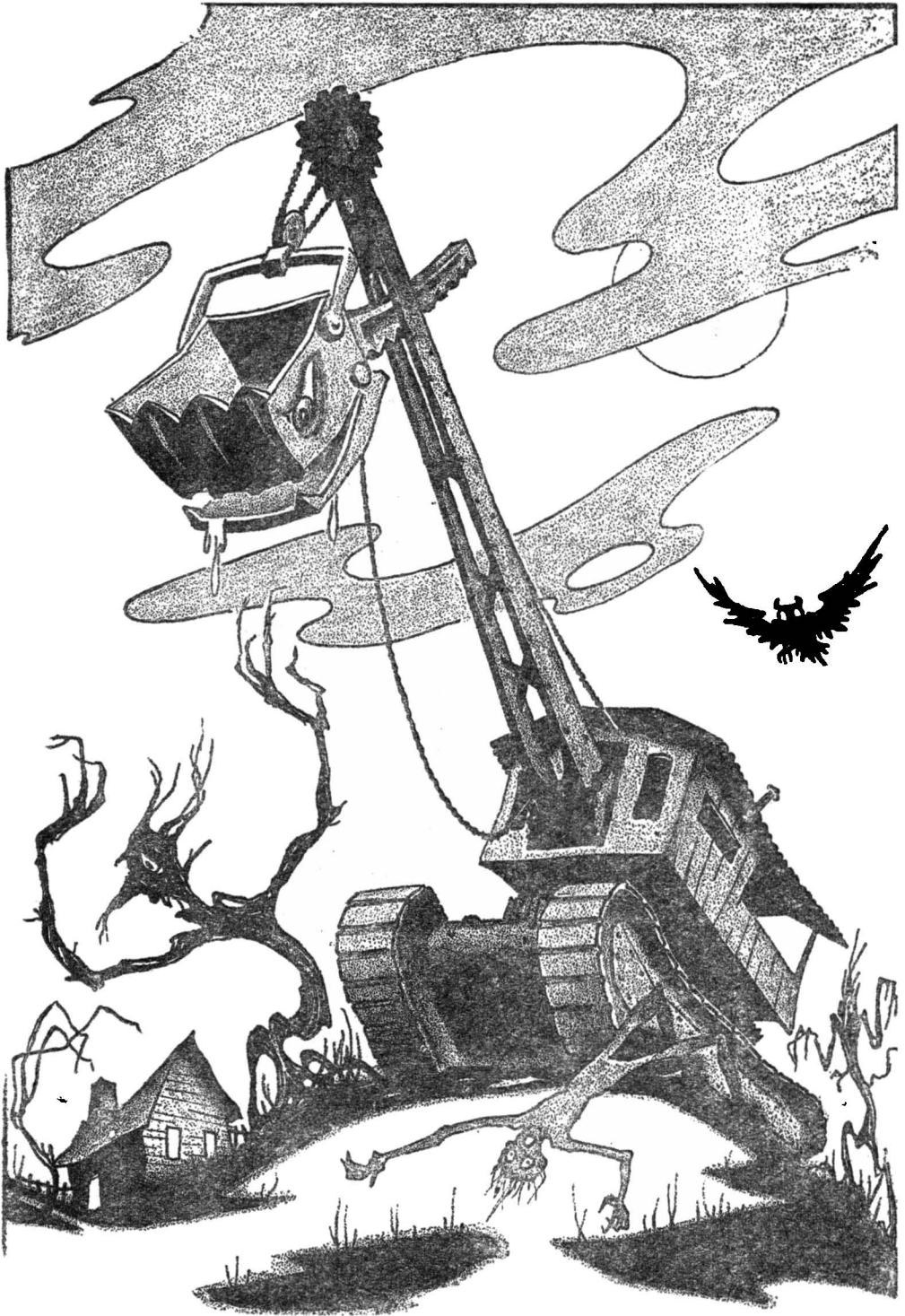
He told me he had a cottage that he'd found for rent not far from the construction site.

"But most of the rest of the crowd lives around here," I protested, thinking that my afternoons of gossip with the construction wives would be hard to come by if I was set down up in some shack in the woods.

But there's Ed for you. He had an idea in that thick skull and he was off after it. I said, "Why?" He said nothing. I said, "Why?" After twice that was enough. Ed had his reasons.

The cottage was all one floor, a big living-dining room, bedroom, porch, and a

That there steam shovel's built to dig, Brother—dig graves!



Heading by **BORIS DOLGOV.**

little garage sticking out like something they'd pasted on as an afterthought. It was lonely and the nearest neighbors' house was God knows how far away and I wasn't so keen about *that*. The ground was low here making the atmosphere dampish and the earth rich and soft. We were only a mile or so from the construction site and the convenience of its nearness was, I thought, the main reason for our moving.

But instead of being pleased by the change, Ed seemed to grow more uncommunicative and moody. His dissatisfaction centered around someone who'd come in to run the steam shovel.

"Guy named Ronsford. Got some high and mighty college education so they put him operating Big Mike instead of giving me the job."

I could see the current state of affairs and this man Ronsford were eating away at my husband.

Time passed and the path of construction widened and headed toward us so that during the day when I sat on the porch reading or listening to the radio, I could hear the sounds from the crew and I came to know the noise Big Mike made. There was nothing else up there, tractors or trucks, that had the heavy, deep-throated rumbling and vibrating of the huge steam shovel. On Sundays we often drove past the excavations.

"He keeps Big Mike all polished up," Ed growled, and even I could notice how shiny the steam shovel was, its cab where the operator sat on the left side resplendent under a new coat of red paint.

Ed mumbled a lot under his breath those days and what I could mainly make out was the word "Ronsford." He hated the shovel's operator, swore there was an unholy allegiance between the man and machine.

It was along about the first week in June that Ronsford disappeared. There was a lot of noise and investigation but no clues. Nobody'd known too much about him beforehand except that he had a mechanical engineering degree and some good references. The construction boss just figured he'd skipped out all of a sudden. There was no evidence of foul play, and it wasn't too much later that Ed came home and

told me of a conversation he had with the boss.

His big, broad face lit up, "So he says to me, Vilma, he says, 'Meglund, you been watchin' that steam shovel and fussin' around with it for quite a while now. Think you can take on the job?'"

Ed clapped his hands together almost like a kid. "Waddy think of that, Vilma?"

Yeah, what I thought! I can also remember that almost directly Ed began to run Big Mike there were funny things went on over at the construction site, and I don't mean humorous! Ed would come home and tell me, "That shovel's a devil, Vilma. A big tough baby, and he's got a mind of his own. I was standing under him this morning and that shovel started to come down right on top. If the boss hadn't looked up, we would've both been smashed like that," and he plunked the flat of his hand down on the table hard.

"Course the motor was idling but the cables were locked. I dunno how it happened."

This and other things. Big Mike stuttered and stalled when they were trying to push ahead the fastest. Once it used its teeth on one of the diggers, breaking two ribs and a shoulder, and of course Ed took the blame. All his elation was going and I secretly was sorry Big Mike had ever rumbled and trundled onto the scene. But it was evident to me that Ed wouldn't be running the shovel very much longer the way things were happening.

YES, it sure was a bad day Big Mike had turned up! Just how bad I didn't realize until an evening a month after Ronsford had disappeared. We'd gone to bed early and I was lying there listening to the night noises, those things, whatever you call them, that chirp and squeak outside as though they never got any sleep. I could tell from his breathing that Ed was awake too, and I guessed he was worrying how much longer they'd let him have his shovel. Or maybe he was worrying about other things.

I don't know which one of us heard the noise first but it didn't mean so much to me. Just a rumbling far off in the distance like a freight train makes crossing a distant

bridge at night. Then Ed said—I remember his exact words—"Vilma, you awake?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Funny noise," he went on, and we both listened.

The rumbling continued off in the distance. Then it seemed a little louder, or maybe the wind had shifted. We both lay there in the dark listening. Certainly, whatever it was, it was getting louder and it came to have a familiarity, but it was Ed who said, "Vilma, that's construction equipment. It's Big Mike!"

And I remember as he said it there was wonder in his voice, no more than that, just . . . wonder.

I asked, "What are they doing up there? Working any sort of night shift?"

"Naw. I'd know if they were."

Then in a few more seconds, "That noise is getting louder, isn't it, Vilma?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Somebody's running the damned machine." Ed started to get out of bed. It's coming this way. What's this? Some kind of joke?"

Suddenly something flashed through my mind. I'm not superstitious. I've never believed in ghosts or such, leaving that for the backwoods folks. But my thoughts tumbled out abruptly the way crazy ideas do at night.

"Ed, you don't suppose it's Ronsford running that machine, that he's come back all of a sudden?"

My husband laughed then, and it was unpleasant with an undertone of meaning.

"Not Ronsford," he replied, and almost boisterously, "Ronsford's not coming back, Old Girl. Maybe somebody's playing some kind of dumb joke but it isn't Ronsford!"

Still the sound bore down on us and the rumbling became a vibrating in the darkness. The crickets and insects and other night noises were swallowed up in it. Our bedroom was south and the construction spot was north.

"I'm gonna investigate," Ed had said, pulling on overshoes and a long coat.

He took a flashlight from the closet and clumped into the living room. I was annoyed by the vibration now. There was an ominous heaviness about it, and as it came closer, the vibrating became a throbbing

that dug into your temples almost like a blow. I heard the porch screen door slam and then it was that something made me decide to get up myself. I hastily got on some clothes and went out onto the porch. There was a flicker of light somewhere outside. That would be Ed. And beyond through the night came this bellowing, throbbing sound. There was an eerie awfulness about it. I realized I was shaking although the night was warm.

There was a rim of thin woods some ways across the field that stretched in front of the cottage. I could hear timber cracking in the wake of the rumbling. Ed's flashlight beamed forward, and although I expected it, it was a shock to see the giant outline of the steam shovel emerge like some prehistoric monster from the trees at the field's edge. It was too far away and too dark to make out the details, but I was sure it was Big Mike. The red operator's cab told me that.

The steam shovel continued forward, Ed's flashlight upon it, until it reached a spot halfway between the woods and our place. It stopped there and amazingly the shovel arm reached down and forward, the jagged biting teeth ripping into the earth. I heard my husband curse and yell then above the noise of the motor. The shovel's scoop came up full of earth and the trap under the scoop opened and dirt fell, only there was something else. Something that caught for a moment and then dropped like a long full sack . . . or a human body!

My husband screamed again, only instead of anger, the sound of his voice was now filled with animal fear. The beam of his flash flicked away from the steam shovel and the bobbing light told me he was racing toward the house. Big Mike's motor roared as it too came forward, a black hulk moving at incredible speed.

I WRENCHED myself free from the bands of fear that were tied around my throat and legs pinning me to the porch and ran through the cottage to the back door. I stumbled over something and went down hard. I threw the carelessly left rake aside and got up, my ankle paining. I heard the screen door on the other side of the house jerk open and my husband's scream-

ing voice. I was on my feet by now and hobbling away as fast as my injured ankle would let me. Behind, the screams of fear continued and then came a sudden shocking splintering of wood as though the house were being torn up by its very roots. The rumbling sounds were fused with the splintering and crashing of timbers. There was one more terrible cry from my husband and then silence except for the splintering and crashing of the machine that was running amuck in our cottage.

The pain from my ankle made me feel faint and I was glad for the cool rain that began to fall. I looked behind once more and saw that the destructive rampage of the metal monster had started a fire in the remains of the cottage. Against the red flickering light I saw the bulk of Big Mike standing there. Pieces of painted wood and beaverboard from the wreckage festooned on its sides and broken over its shovel, and the conflagration, as it flamed up in the remains of the house, showed me more.

The shovel came to rumbling life, circling around the house to return the way it had come. As it did, the operator's cab was thrown in strong relief against the flames and in the cab—I swear it, I am very sure of this—there was no one! No one, I tell you. The cab was empty!

I GUESS I fainted then for I remember no more until I came to in a neighbor's house where I had been brought by the volunteer firemen who had been summoned to the blaze. It was hours afterward and no one would listen to my story. A doctor kept forcing sedatives on me. Although nobody would tell me at the time, I found out later that no trace of my husband had been found. The cheap wooden house had burned completely and only the torrential rain that had come up luckily right afterward had prevented the fire from spreading to the surrounding trees and woods.

I tried to tell them about Big Mike but everybody looked very stern and disbelieving. The more I tried, the more medicine I was given.

Finally, I was taken to the Northville Hospital. Gradually it dawned on me no one believed my story. The construction boss himself came to see me, and tearfully

I begged him to listen to me but he shook his head and turned away.

"That's absurd, Vilma. You've just been through a terrible experience. Big Mike was right where he always is the next morning and certainly there would've been tractor marks around your place."

Of course there would have, I thought.

"Weren't there?" I asked.

"No," he replied definitely.

Then the explanation came to me. The unusually heavy rainfall in that soft earth. That would obliterate the marks of treads. But he set his lips in a thin stern line, shook his head, and just said, "I'd better go now."

There were police officers who came, and I was glad the nurse never gave them more than a few minutes with me. They asked me endless questions about my husband and about Ronsford. It seems the body of the missing steam-shovel operator had been found lying out in the rain-filled field. It was obvious from his condition that the man had been dead for at least a month and that he had met his end violently. I knew then, of course, without too great surprise that my husband had murdered Ronsford. But that seemed to me so trivial beside the living menace of Big Mike.

After a while a doctor came in to talk to me. A psychologist or something, I was told he was. I tried again desperately to tell him what had happened that night, to try and make him believe. But I realized the more I talked, the more that set, decided expression came over his face. I was struck with a new fear then. Let them think me crazy. I didn't care. But I had to get out of Northville or somehow Big Mike would come down here. Even in the village hospital I didn't feel safe. Why, we were barely nine miles from the construction site. I had to get out, somewhere, anywhere.

So several days later when the hospital doctor and the psychologist asked me to sign a paper agreeing to go to a "sanitarium," I complied happily. I knew this was a—well, to put it bluntly—an insane asylum but I also knew that I wasn't crazy. But if I stayed here, that rumbling metal monster would get me.

The place to which I allowed myself to be committed voluntarily was no state booby hatch. We'd had a little money put away

upon which I now felt free to draw. And the semi-private sanitarium was thankfully out at the other side of the state several hundred miles away.

I REMEMBER the day I left Northville. The day had been hot, the sky was suffused with mistiness, and as we went out into the street to get into the taxi that would go to the station, I noticed that one of those sudden summer storms was coming up. My traveling companion was a male nurse, or maybe I should say, attendant. As we trundled away from the hospital, the beginnings of a feeling of relief stole over me. The streets grew darker suddenly, and then in the distance there was a rumbling. At first, like on that horrendous night, I could not identify the sound, but suddenly the fear came to me, catching me by the throat, that it was Big Mike, that he was after me, that he'd never let me leave Northville.

I guess maybe I leaned forward a bit on the taxi seat, for when there was a flash of lightning, big fat droplets of water exploded against the taxi window and I sank back with relief, I noticed that the attendant was looking at me closely. Of course, the rumbling had been thunder. Probably Big Mike was up beyond the other end of town shoveling away busily, all thoughts of me gone from his metal mind.

Still I was glad to get on the express, glad with every mile that clicked off as we headed across the state. The male nurse—his name was Simpson, I learned—was a nice enough fellow, but he was always eyeing me as though he half expected me to do something strange. The joke, of course, was on them, for I was escaping from something or someone who had had it in for the Meglunds, whether Ronsford's ghost or not, I didn't know or care. I just knew there was some terrible menace back in Northville. It had gotten Ed and I didn't want it to get me. Also, my "condition" had cut short the nosy police questioning. I can say with a clear conscience that I had nothing directly to do with the death of Ronsford.

Oh, I suppose I knew what was going to happen, my husband being the kind of man he was, brooding around about wanting to

operate that damn shovel, and nights he'd skulk around outside in the woods between the little rented cottage and the construction site. But honest to God, I never knew the real story. Ed didn't last long enough to tell me. Sure, I heard him digging out there one night in the soft earth and it was the next day that Ronsford was just gone. But Vilma's not the one to stick her nose into other people's business. That steam-shovel job brought more money too, and that was okay by me. You think a girl wants to grow old and never have any of the nice things? You're crazy. Let Ed be the big shot and run the steam shovel, I thought. I'll take the extra dough, and if he keeps his mouth shut, I'll keep my mouth shut. So I couldn't be implicated in anything as unpleasant as murder, could I?

Five hours across the state and out at Belfast, a dozing little village considerably smaller than Northville. We climbed off the railroad coach and I stood on the platform watching the train puff away into the soft summer evening, leaving behind a plume of lightish brown smoke that dispersed slowly in the heavy air. Simpson had engaged a cab and we and my luggage distributed ourselves around its interior.

I remember that drive with crystal clearness. The country in this part of the state is flatter, but in spite of it, the land is beautiful. I looked around with greater interest than I had shown in anything for weeks and Simpson seemed pleased with my remarks about the beautiful trees and flowers.

BYERLY HOME was a scant fifteen-minute ride from the depot, and as we wound up its dirt driveway, the thought came to me that after all a life such as the one I had embarked on since that fateful night had its advantages. There were no responsibilities, no decisions to make, no personal crises, just a regular schedule, care, relaxation.

As though to second my unspoken thoughts, when we drew up at the white-board main building, we were met by two people, a man and woman, the woman dressed in ordinary clothes and the man having about him no hint of the medical except for the peeping end of a stethoscope in his coat pocket.

Simpson got out first with my luggage, and the woman, who was introduced to me as Miss Meadows, took me by the arm very kindly and led me up onto the porch and inside.

"You must be tired," she said in a soothing voice.

My room, I found, was at the extreme end of the house on the second floor and over the deep porch that spread three quarters of the way around the wooden building.

I remember that first night at Byerly's Home. I'd had supper down in the main dining room, and as far as I could see, it was such like the dining room of any country inn or hotel. To be sure, a woman at one of the tables in the corner had started to cry. Convulsive sobs that were not pretty to hear, but Miss Meadows and another woman had gone over and helped her out of the room. Nobody else seemed to pay much attention.

I remember my dominant thought that night. Here I was, perfectly safe. The others there might be worried about how they could get out. I patted myself on the back for being at a place where nobody, nothing, could get in—nosy police officers, or anything else.

I had several sessions with Dr. Blake. I told him what had happened that night back at Northville, the night Big Mike stampeded after us, killed Ed, and tried to get me too, and I could see the same thinly veiled look of incredulity on Blake's face that I had seen on the physician's face back at Northville.

The patients didn't mingle very much, but I took long walks in the surrounding country with Miss Meadows and I had what they called an occupational therapy class where I did some kind of silly weaving.

I remember my third session with Blake. I was trying to tell him about Big Mike, persisting against questions which seemed to me to have nothing to do with that night. The physician was asking me about my previous life, about my childhood, school days, living with Ed, things that as far as I could see, had no bearing on anything. I stubbornly insisted on talking about Big Mike. I saw Blake's lip curl almost in scorn and I realized in a flash the contempt most of these people felt toward anyone deranged.

For of course I knew full well that I was not. I think then I felt a bit sorry for the other patients who were really mentally sick. Well—as sorry as I've ever felt for anyone outside of Vilma.

It definitely seemed to make Blake angry to have me continue to talk about the steam-shovel episode. His parting remark to me as he ushered me out of his upstairs office was, "You know, Mrs. Meglund, you have to help us—help you!"

THAT night I did some long and deep thinking. You're still young, Vilma, I told myself. After all, you *are* in a nut house now. You don't want to say here all the rest of your years, do you, Kid? I realized Byerly Home had had a purpose. It had been the right thing for me to do to come here, but from now on my ticket was to cut out the Big Mike talk. Nobody believed it. The biggest joke of all—and I swear this wasn't wishful thinking—I began to wonder, myself.

That experience in the recent past had been so horrible that my mind—under the shock of Ed's death and the Ronsford business—had kind of thought up a lot of things that, well, maybe weren't so. I'd poked here and there in my mind for the memory of the official explanation of that night as given me in the Northville Hospital by the solicitous doctor when I'd come to. Ed had died in the fire. Somehow I'd gotten out, and that was that.

I suited my conduct to my plan of action. I said no more about Big Mike. I was myself completely, except for putting on a bit of palaver with the nurses and doctors. I think I was beginning to fool them. I knew I was the day Dr. Blake called me and said:

"Mrs. Meglund, it seems to us that your condition has taken a turn for the better. You had a very great shock, a shock of the sort that can temporarily, shall we say, affect one's mind, but we feel you've weathered the storm rather well. I think the time is coming when you will be able to go back out into the world.

"Oh, perhaps there will be relapses. You will have fears and anxiety, and I should certainly suggest that you keep in occasional touch with someone who understands your

problem, at least for a while. But on the whole your picture looks quite rosy, Mrs. Meglund."

He beamed, obviously taking the full credit himself. As I left his office, turning over in my mind the words I would have liked to have said to him, telling him what a stupid little man he was, telling him how I'd fooled them all, and now when I chose it, they thought I'd gone from sickness to wellness, I realized I was no longer afraid of anything outside, even of Big Mike.

That much of Blake's explanations probably was true. I'd built up this thing, and of course it was impossible. It was absurd! I sat in my room feeling very satisfied, drumming my fingers against the ledge and looking out. It was very early fall now, and the trees and shrubbery were beginning to lose some of their lush greenness. I hadn't wanted to seem eager to Blake. I hadn't wanted to say, "Doctor, when can I get out of this joint and the sooner the better!"

It would fit the whole picture better if I continued to let him play the big shot, to let him think he'd guided me along.

Three days later in the morning Blake sent for me.

"Mrs. Meglund," he greeted me, "I feel you can go home anytime now. Have you plans? Perhaps you'll return to Northville."

I TOLD him, no, I didn't think I'd do that. There was a little money left from my husband's insurance, I mentioned candidly, and I thought I'd travel a bit.

"Good," he nodded sagely. "When would you like to leave?"

I bit my lip and kept "Today, as soon as possible," from popping out.

"Oh, sometime tomorrow afternoon," I suggested with an airy wave of my hand as though I really didn't care to leave at all.

Vilma's smart don't you think?

"Tomorrow afternoon? Splendid!" echoed Dr. Blake.

He talked to me further then for well over an hour, I'd say, and I struggled to keep any trace of boredom from my expression. He wrung my hand.

"I'll make all the necessary arrangements."

I left his office, for the last time I knew, and with my head turned away, I could feel

the smirk of satisfaction ooze across my face.

As I walked through the corridor toward the wing, I contemplated with what I thought was justifiable glee, the life that lay ahead of me. And not having Ed holding me back was more advantage than disadvantage. I'd get by and more!

I CLIMBED the one flight to my room. I supposed I'd better start getting some of my things together, but it was nearly lunchtime. I'd wait until afterward. I went to the window, looked out idly—and something hit me in the pit of the stomach. For there, the top of its upper structure almost on a level with my eyes, was Big Mike! I'd know that steam shovel anywhere! The red operator's cab on the left side, the rest of it drab-painted, the big bucket shovel—everything came back to me then.

The memory, the hysterical fear, the knowledge, yes, the definite knowledge that this was not something of dead steel and iron but an inspired, thinking, murderous monster!

"Miss Meadows!" I tried to take the edge of screaming out of my voice. "Miss Meadows!"

I heard the nurse's heavy steps on the stairs outside my room. My nails bit into the palms of my hands as I fought for control. Miss Meadows came into the room.

"What's the matter, dear?"

I pointed out the window. "What's that doing out there?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

The nurse looked. "Oh, didn't you know? We're going to excavate to build onto this wing. It's just a steam shovel, my dear."

I knew she was taking in my white face and I put my hands behind my back to hide their trembling. But despite my efforts, fear ran away with me. I sat down suddenly on my bed because of the weakness in my knees.

"Miss Meadows," I gasped. "I've got to get out of here quickly, as soon as possible? Dr. Blake is letting me go. We decided on tomorrow, but I want to get out of here today. I want to leave now! Please, oh, please!"

Miss Meadows had the usual answer, a pat on the shoulder, the same "Now just

take it easy, dear. You stay here and I'll talk to Dr. Blake."

I sat there and the minutes ticked away. I didn't want to get up and look again. I didn't want to see Big Mike, ever. I'd thought I never would see him again and here he was, and with him, the fear that choked me at the throat. Finally, I heard two pairs of steps coming up the stairs of the wing. Dr. Blake came in followed by Miss Meadows.

"What's all this about, Mrs. Meglund?"

I made a mighty effort.

"I . . . I just decided I wanted to leave today, Doctor."

I realized the danger of my position as Miss Meadows murmured, "The steam shovel outside seems to upset her, Doctor."

Blake looked out the window. He managed a hearty laugh.

"Is that true, Mrs. Meglund? Does that metal eyesore out there worry you?" He answered his own question. "Of course not. There's an unpleasant association, I dare say, but these are the things you must control."

I gripped the edge of the bed tightly.

"Can I please leave today, Doctor?"

He frowned a bit impatiently.

"I've made all the arrangements for tomorrow, Mrs. Meglund. You've been with us quite a few weeks, you know. Certainly you can put up with us one more day."

"It's just that I . . . that I have to go today!"

THEY were both looking at me sharply and I lowered my head. I could feel the hysterical tears course down my cheeks now. The doctor crossed to the bed and gripped me firmly by the shoulder.

"Now this is absurd," his voice was stern. "You've got to get ahold of yourself. I have just certified you as on the road to recovery. You're not going to make me reverse my prognosis, are you? Please stand up."

I did, and he led me to the window.

"Face this thing and understand what it is."

I looked. I looked at the cables and the machinery and the huge tub of a shovel, the cruel teeth that were slack, waiting—and by my side, Dr. Blake's voice droned on—"Don't you see it's all association . . .

that unpleasant night . . . the death of your husband . . . shock. . . ."

The monster, Big Mike, down there had a face and the face was looking at me grinning. The shovel was its mouth, the cab a red, baleful eye fixed on my window. I screamed then, whirled and ran for the door. I had to get away. That was all that mattered. I had to! I had to!

The shock of Miss Meadows's heavy body brought me back to reality somewhat as the nurse stepped in front of me just before I reached the door, and threw her strong arms expertly around me. I realized then that I could never convince these people, or anyone else, about Big Mike, for to convince them of that would be to convince them of my insanity. One was so and one was not so, only I knew that. I had to get away now.

I struggled and writhed in the nurse's arms. My nails raked the square unimaginative face in front of my own. Meadows grunted in pain and stepped away momentarily but Dr. Blake had me by the arm and was calling down the stairs. I twisted desperately and jerked myself free. But crowding up the stairs now were two more nurses and a male attendant. I believe then I was out of my head for I threw myself down the stairs at them. The women went down under my weight with shrill cries of alarm and pain, but the male attendant caught me and held my arms to my sides as though I were a child. I kicked but it did no good.

I was taken back into my room, Dr. Blake discreetly shutting the door behind us. Then I was put to bed in a restraining sheet. Do you know what they are? I'd seen them used for other patients, never guessing, never thinking—You can hardly move once you are in one. You can't get away and your bed is the trap. You can wiggle and struggle and thresh and fight but you're held as though in a sack. Your head is out and you can move it but your arms and legs are securely imprisoned.

Dr. Blake forced me to take a sedative then, and after a while, one by one the attendant, Blake, and the three nurses left the room.

I would go to sleep now, I understood from their talk.

Miss Meadows was the last to go, her

bovine indifferent face looking back at me from the door. In a drowsy way—for the sedative was beginning to work—I was glad for the nail marks on her cheek. A black pit of unconsciousness opened up for me then as I slipped off into drugged sleep.

I don't know how long it was before I woke up. It must have been quite a few hours, for darkness had fallen. I finally figured that it had to be fairly late because the small sounds of the sanitarium kept up during the early evening were now all absent. I struggled briefly but the restraining sheet was still my complete master. I was thirsty, cramped, and very uncomfortable. I had to get out of this thing. I called. I screamed, and after an eternity I heard steps upon the stairs. My door opened and someone lit the light at my bedside. It was Miss Meadows. I swore at her, I cried, I pleaded, and she just looked at me silently. I could see her gaze was professional, to ascertain whether I was still snug and safe—safe, that was a good one—in the restraining sheet.

Satisfied, she snapped out the light and without answering any of my pleas to be let up, went out the door. I heard her steps descending the long stairs, and then there was the deep silence of late night.

I FOUGHT with myself then, using the weapons Dr. Blake had given me, things I had laughed at once but used now against my fear of the steam shovel. So what if Big Mike had come across the state for this job. There were reasons, logical reasons probably. It had nothing to do with me or the steam shovel. The Greene Construction Company was pretty big. Maybe Big Mike

was the only kind of shovel that could do this particular kind of job at Byerly Home. That last thought had an ominous significance. *Big Mike was the only kind of steam shovel that could do this job!*

Then came what I had been waiting for, what I knew would come, what I knew deep down I'd hear again ever since that first night I'd heard it in Northville. The tractor motor of Big Mike starting up, rumbling into life, vibrating and throbbing! The first sounds of the treads turning over as they scraped and bruised the earth, coming toward my window. Sounds no less horrible because I denied them and at the same time tried to drown them out with my own screams. The deep-throated combustion of Big Mike's engine was deafening now. It reverberated beneath me on the porch ceiling, which was also my own floor.

Then a new sound, a tautening of cables, the winch crying, steel against steel as the shovel part extended delicately and felt, felt through the darkness for what it wanted.

I prayed for unconsciousness and perhaps my prayers or my mad, frenzied struggles to get loose from the restraining sheet that held me caused me to become suddenly light-headed and faint. As I lay limp with a deeper blackness than of night exploding inside my eyeballs and head, there was still the last edge of consciousness, of life that registered crystal clear the thunderous sounds of Big Mike. The tearing, ripping shock of the shovel teeth at the wood under my bed, the close-by growl and snarl of this immortal monster, the sudden sickening feeling of crashing impact . . . of being scooped upward at great speed . . . and then . . . nothing!