

*This is a Tale of the Weirdest  
Game That Ever Was Played*

# THE SIXTH TREE

By EDITH LICHTY STEWART

*Police Headquarters,  
Los Angeles, California.*

Gentlemen:

*The coroner's inquest held over the mutilated body of Professor Carhart to account for the baffling circumstances surrounding his death gave the verdict: "Met death at the claws and teeth of some wild beast, presumably a mountain lion."*

*Considering the prominent and honorary positions held by the professor in some of our foremost universities, I felt justified in suppressing the astounding diary, herewith enclosed, found by me in the dead man's room after the inquest.*

*I submit the diary without comment. Any conclusion derived from its perusal can be only too ghastly and unbelievable.*

*Respectfully,  
J. Donohue, Operative.*

July tenth.

AS WE entered the canyon, that dreaded sensation of oppression and suffocation surged upon me and I tore away my collar and lifted the hat from my throbbing head.

There are hypocrites who prate rapidly of the exaltation and exhilaration inspired in the human by these same mountains. Liars! Who should know more of mountains than I, who for thirty years have studied them, chipped away at their exteriors, articulated every rock and stratum in their towering frames, explored and explained their very entrails? Why, I have even proved to myself that they possess a soul, or souls—personality—malignant human emotions. God! What I have suffered!

Is it in revenge for my exhaustive knowledge of them that they torture me so? When night comes—it is night now—they shake from their torpor and become monstrosities crowding closer and closer, stooping to compress the air about my fevered head, crushing into my brain. It is only by ignoring them that I gain relief, so I am writing now in a frenzy to escape them.

As I said, we had entered the canyon. There were only the stage driver and I.

I had been dismissed from the university with only the explanation that my course of study was becoming erratic. Why had I selected the little lodge at the source of this rugged ravine for my retreat? It should have been the last place in the world for me to seek rest. Yet I was here. The gray road twisted its dusty way into the gathering dusk of the mountains. The stage driver essayed a few conversational stupidities, but I soon silenced his chatter. He looked at me askance and whipped up the horses. The trail turned abruptly. The door behind was closed. Mountains reared about me on either side and a feeling of panic assailed me. I was indeed in the enemy's territory.

An hour passed in silence. Suddenly a bend in the road interrupted the monotony of the scene. With what emotions I beheld a cabin—an adobe cabin crouched back from the road against the hill! Five—no, six—gaunt trees—that might once have been willows—stood in a ghostly row before it. Its windows, glassless and shadeless like the lidless eyes of a skull, leered and peered down at us. A glance had seared it on my mind—and then we had passed it.

"What place was that?"

The driver lashed his horses to greater speed.

"A good place to keep away from after dark."

I waited impatiently for him to volunteer further information, but the fool was evidently sulky. I would wheedle.

"My good man, your reply only arouses my curiosity."

He slowed down. The road lay straight. Turning, I could see the haggard eyes of the house as it watched for the effect the driver's tale would have upon me.

It seems that some years before, after a heavy rain, some hikers had found in front of the deserted cabin five shallow graves, one beneath each tree. Each grave had contained a man. Investigation had identified them as a group of shepherders—rough customers at the best. They had evidently spent the night in the cabin, for the place was littered

with empty bottles, cards and poker chips.

Who had committed the wholesale murder and buried the bodies was never discovered. Rumor had it that the five shepherders had located a mine back in the mountains and had hired a geologist to go with them to assay the ore, but this was never substantiated. There was no one who had actually seen the geologist or knew much about the mine.

"Where are the bodies now?"

The driver shrugged.

"Nobody claimed them, so they were thrown back into their graves, the dirt shoveled on again, and left till the judgment day."

"Well, if they are dead and disposed of till the day of judgment, why are you afraid of this place?" I asked with some scorn.

He shook his head darkly.

"There's six trees and only five have graves under 'em."

"Well?"

"They say there's a curse on this place until the sixth tree has a dead man, too."

"Bah!" I cried, "Nursery tales!"

But I must have spoken strangely, for his long whip curled out over the horses' heads and we swung around the last bend. No longer was the cabin visible, but I knew I would return.

IT must have been midnight as I approached the cabin, a midnight that held its breath and waited for something. A hush of expectancy had stilled every sound of the night. I stepped over the graves—one, two, three, four, five. There was no wind, and yet I am sure I heard a rustle, or better, a faint creaking in the naked branches of the sixth tree as I passed beneath it.

Suddenly I halted. My heart swelled and burst into a volley of stifled beatings. There could be no illusion; a wan lurid glow slowly grew from the surrounding darkness. There was a light within the cabin. Someone was there. I lashed my cowering senses to action and noiselessly approached the window.

Staggering, I clutched the window ledge for support. The uneven light from a guttering candle secured in an empty bottle disclosed what I had (God help me!) expected to see. They—one, two, three, four, five of them—they were there, the same and yet how infinitely horrible! Lifelessly, yet with terrible relentlessness, they played at their everlasting cards. Their dank hair hung in wisps over sunken eyes. The leathery skin of their faces sagged loosely over fleshless skulls. Their clothes hung in tatters, slimed with earth and mud.

And their hands! Fascinated, in terror, I watched those lean, blackened claws deal the mildewed and ragged cards. Their nails, long and broken, scratched over the rough table as they clutched at the chips. They were intent on their game, unaware of my presence. But even as I gratefully assured myself of this their eyes were on me. There was no hate, no fury, no fiendish glee in their expression, rather a blankness, a patient waiting. They had ceased to play. All the waiting in the universe concentrated about me. There was a vacant place beside the dealer. When I could resist no longer, I went within.

The dawn lay pallid on the hills when I flung away from the cabin. There was no sound or motion from the sixth tree as I shrank from its reaching fingers. When clear of it, I ran—ran in the mad-

ness of terror to the hotel, locked my door and fell sobbing in wrath and exhaustion on the bed.

I had lost! There was no depth to the agony of my soul. We had played for no obvious stakes, but only too well I knew the prize for which we fought. There would be two more nights of play with two more chances to win. I arose, bathed my scorching brow, and all day I sat figuring, figuring. As a man of science I had often scoffed at the thing called luck, for any game of cards must be reducible to some science or system. Night found me triumphant. Scarcely could I wait for the darkness that I might hasten to their humiliation.

And that night I won! I won, I say! They were waiting for me as before. The cards were dealt, and then I proved that all things are explained by science. A man so learned can hold the world in his hand, immune from the uncertainties of chance and accident!

MY triumph grew as the dawn approached. I grew reckless. I chuckled. I laughed. I taunted them in their ghastly dead faces. They sat immobile, playing, playing. Their silence infuriated me. I tried to sting them to retort, but my words found answer only in the angry mutterings of the echo from the hollow room. When, as before, the candle choked and expired like a dying

man and their wasted forms faded into the shadows of the cabin, I hurled the cards after them and went stumbling and laughing into the morning, drunk with my triumph. As I passed beneath the cursed tree it dared to trail clinging, warmthless fingers across my cheek. I jerked away in loathing and derision. I still can feel the iciness of its touch.

They have asked me, these curious ignorant fools here, where I spend the nights. They talk and whisper about me in little groups that grow silent and disperse when I approach. Well, tonight is the last night, and then I shall be free and far away. If I had not been a man of science and evolved a system, then I might have known defeat; and these gaping fools might have something to fill their empty brains and furnish them with silly chatter. They would find my mutilated body, clawed as though by a mountain lion flung into a shallow grave—beneath the sixth tree.

But I shall not lose! When this night curdles into dawn I shall stuff their own dirty cards down their withered throats and crowd them back into their filthy graves, stamping the dirt upon them until it fills their mouths and blinds their staring eyes. And the tree? I shall leave it to wring its bony hands forever in impotent chagrin.

But why am I lingering here? It is time for the game to begin and—they are waiting.

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