

# WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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crowded in for good measure**

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# The Weaving Shadows

By W. H. HOLMES

**C**HET BURKE was lazily reclining in his favorite easy chair, absorbed in a rare book on alchemy and black magic, when his sister answered a summons at the door.

In addition to managing the household affairs of the apartment in which she and Burke lived alone, her duties also consisted in scrutinizing the many visitors. Most of them could be persuaded to call at the book stall, which Burke conducted when not devoted to some criminal mystery that held him until it was solved. Others, whose cases were urgent, were admitted to the apartment, thus infringing on Burke's only recreation, reading and study.

The visitors were Chief Rhyne, a friend of Burke's, of the Rhyne Detective Agency, and a stranger.

Burke laid aside his book and greeted the callers with a friendly nod. Rhyne, a portly, flushed man, settled his sturdy body into a convenient chair. The stranger an intelligent-looking man, appeared ill at ease. He stood self-consciously beside Rhyne, absently running the brim of his soft hat through browned, muscular-looking fingers.

"Burke," grunted Rhyne heavily, "meet Mr. Hayden. He is bothered about a very mysterious affair. It has worked on his nerves until he has de-

cid-ed to consult an expert. It's beyond me, so I brought him around to you."

Rhyne sighed with relief, and eased back in his chair.

Hayden stuck out a rough, calloused hand to Burke. His bronzed face flushed slightly at Rhyne's statement.

"I am more concerned," he said, in a surprisingly agreeable voice, "about how you will receive what I have to relate. I can hardly believe yet that the things exist, although I have seen them three nights in succession."

He shook his head in doubt, and sat down mechanically in the chair that Burke drew up.

While Hayden was gathering his thoughts, Burke quietly sized him up. Hayden appeared to be a man of about forty-five. His face was deeply tanned, and his appearance suggested many hours spent out of doors. Burke noted at once his trait of eying one direct from warm brown eyes. He was garbed quietly, and evidently in his best. His dark suit was set off by square-toed shoes, above which glared white socks. A low, soft, white collar, with a black string tie, completed his obviously habitual concession to dress. On the whole, Hayden struck the detective as a whole-some type of the practical mechanic.

"Now, Mr. Hayden," said Burke mus-ingly, his eyes half closed and vacant,

"state your case fully. We will try not to interrupt you."

The detective lounged down in his chair, his heavy lips slightly drooping, and his long legs crossed indolently in front of him. His eyes had their customary vague stare through the tortoise-shell glasses that veiled them.

Hayden drew a long breath, then exhaled it in a long sigh. With a brisk straightening of his shoulders he said:

"I am a carpenter. Until recently, or, to be exact, until four days ago, I lived in New Orleans. I am a bachelor, and it doesn't make much difference to me where I live, so long as I can find work at my trade. Therefore I came up here, to Sunken Mine, in the Highlands of the Hudson, to live with a widowed sister and her daughter."

He paused, and his eyes grew reflective. For a moment he was evidently measuring his words. With a quick intake of his breath, he resumed:

"My sister lives in an aged, pre-Revolutionary house, deep in the mountains. It is a lonely place, and a secluded dwelling. At one time it was probably a restful appearing country farmhouse. Today it is a weathered frame building, set in a grove of dead and whitened chestnut trees.

"The house is a one-story-and-attic affair, with rough stone fireplaces at the side, and a long sloping roof that pitches low at the rear. Owing to its age and the condition of the place, it is a dreary spot for one used to the city. My sister affects ancient, antique furnishings, which does not lessen the impression of living in the past. As soon as I crossed the door-sill I was affected by this vague, misty remembrance of being there before.

"It may strike you as strange that my sister picked out a place of this type to spend the remainder of her days. But she had, to her and her daughter, good reasons. Both she and my niece are earnest spiritualists. Both receive messages, and are, in truth, sincere mediums. For some reason, my sister claims that the atmosphere of the old dwelling helps them to materialize those that have gone before. I myself have consider-

able faith in those things, although I treat it in a practical manner. I only believe what I actually see. What I am about to relate, I have both seen and felt."

Hayden paused for an instant to stare earnestly at Burke. The detective nodded to him to continue.

"I have read deeply," went on Hayden, and in my spare time I could be called a bookworm. I work at my trade, but live much in the past, especially in books. For this reason, I could be sympathetic to my sister's idea of living close to her life's hobby, or her "mission," as she calls it.

"There is one more reason why my sister purchased the place, six weeks ago. It was the original settling place of the family, before the Revolution. As the result of a family tragedy, some hundred years or more ago, the place passed into other hands. Few new buildings are constructed in that sparsely settled, unfertile section, and most of the houses have stood for generations. Consequently, the old Hayden house was never disturbed. At the time it came back into the family it was vacant and for sale.

"They had been living there about two months when I came there to live with them. The room I occupied Sunday night is on the second floor. It is a semi-attic room, lit by one window. Before I came, the room was occupied by my niece. On my arrival it was arranged for me, and the girl and her mother occupied a bedroom downstairs.

"It was around eleven-thirty Sunday night when I went to bed, and was soon asleep. I awoke with the feeling that something was stifling me. It was as if I had a heavy cold and found difficulty in breathing. This peculiar sensation of suffocation finally caused me to rouse into complete wakefulness. The strange smothering seemed to ease as I got more fully awake. Unable to fall asleep again, I lay looking out of the window at the stars. The bed is at the end of the room, and the window was in direct sight.

"The house was intensely still. I noticed this in particular, as I remarked

the absence of the city noises I had been used to. I can't recollect that there was so much as an insect stirring. My own breathing, as in imagination I still struggled for breath, was the only sound. It appeared to fill the room with a hoarse, rasping murmur. I likened myself to a dying man, gasping his last breath. This fancy, to one of my usual practical trends, was perplexing to myself. Still, in the few moments before the things appeared, my thoughts apparently dwelt on uncanny ideas. At the same time I was conscious of a queer, tingling of my body.

"As I lay staring at the faint light of the sky, I slowly became conscious of a singular illusion, or, as I am at times led to believe, a startling visitation. The dark shadows of the room appeared to be dancing rapidly before my eyes. They were streaming in long wreaths, coiling in fantastic spirals, and wafting through the room in wide, level films of blackness.

"I don't know how I could see this, but it was plainly visible. Yet the room, except for the faint light that came from the clear, moonless sky, was in fairly deep darkness. It seemed that the moving shadows that formed before my eyes were only discernible because of their greater density. I can only liken this uncanny movement of the shadows to swaying and floating clouds of tobacco smoke, when one is smoking slowly and freely.

"For some moments I watched the movements of the shadows. Then I observed that they were forming in a more stable order. They were now lying in long, round coils of blackness, horizontally across the room, and twisting rapidly. For several moments they lay motionless, except for their rapid turning, then, as if stirred by a firm direct breeze, they undulated toward the head of the stairs. This drift brought several horizontal layers into contact. At the moment of their touching, the shadows seemed to weave into huge rolls, which streamed from sight rapidly down the stairs. The room now appeared to grow lighter, and the air

clearer. Also, all sensation of smothering had left me.

"I lay there quietly after the disappearance of the shadows, pondering over the strange affair. So far, I was fairly calm, except for the wonderment of the thing. The return of the shadows was the cause of my fears and suspense as to the final outcome.

"My eyes were gazing absently out of the window, as I had not turned my eyes from the stairs after the black rolls had streamed down them. Slowly, so slowly that it scarcely seemed to move, I saw a black, humanlike form rise above the sill of the window. I could just see the top of it as it mounted the stairs. I watched it with a keen realization that it had something to do with the shadows.

"Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, the round, headlike shape continued to rise. I could now see it plainly, outlined against the lighter sky. The shape now rose to its full height. It had the form of a shapeless human figure. That is, I could distinguish the smaller head shadow above, and what would answer for a body, if one were at all imaginative. The thing passed beyond the window and drifted into the darkness at the end of the room. Yet, I could still make out its vague form by its greater blackness.

"My eyes went back to the window. Another figure was slowly blocking the cheerful light of the sky. Again a black form emerged to its full height. It joined the first. I am not a coward. I lay quiet, wondering what the thing presaged.

"The two figures advanced to the center of the room. They were now fairly discernible. One of them walked to an old-fashioned dresser at one side of the room, stood there a moment, then joined the other figure. With this, both shapes turned and passed down the stairs.

"As they were disappearing, I called. The forms were so clear, and I was by this time so far from sleep, that my mind hit on a logical reason to explain the thing. It was evidently my sister

and my niece. They had wanted something from the dresser, and, not wishing to disturb me, had come up quietly, got what they wanted, and then returned to their room.

"Getting no answer to my call, I sprang out of bed to convince myself of the truth of my belief. I went downstairs, and to their room. Both were in bed and fast asleep. I awoke them. Neither one had been up since retiring. I did not tell them of the black forms, but made some excuse for awakening them. The remainder of the night I spent in the kitchen, sleeping in a large rocking chair."

Hayden paused and stared at Burke.

"GO ON," said Burke shortly. "This would not have brought you to me." Hayden shook his head.

"No," he said, "it was what came after. This same night, as I arose from the bed, following the disappearance of the two forms down the stairway, I had reached the center of the room when I became conscious of standing in something that was wet to my feet. I was barefooted, and when I looked at my feet I found them soiled with blood.

"Naturally I thought that I had cut myself; but a close examination revealed no cut or bruise of any sort. I lit a lamp and went back upstairs. My first glance was at the spot where I had first felt the wetness. A glance revealed the cause. Directly in the center of the bare board floor was a large pool of fresh blood. It was slowly spreading out over the floor, and sinking into the dry wood. I cleaned it up as much as possible, and then searched the room thoroughly. There was absolutely nothing that I could find that would explain the blood.

"The next morning, both my sister and my niece complained of feeling languid and fagged. My niece, a very white, frail girl, was even more colorless than usual, and her mother, noticeable for her deep intense eyes and the black rings that encircle them, seemed listless and indifferent to everything. Noting this, I scrubbed up the bloodstains before they made up the room, and said nothing of what I had seen.

"Things were normal until Monday night. Again, about the same hour, I was awakened by a smothering sensation. Once more I heard my own breathing as I gasped for air. As I got more fully awake, I found that the smothering sensation grew more intense. I sat up in bed, crouched over like one suffering with the asthma, and striving to fill my lungs with air. But this did not relieve my distress.

"Unconsciously, my eyes were fixed across the dark room. Again occurred the weaving of the shadows. Panting, stifling, and seemingly unable to arouse myself enough to get out of bed, I watched the repetition of the scene of the previous night. Once the horizontal streams of shadows were formed, my breathing became more normal, and I seemed to regain the power to move and think clearly.

"I then deliberately waited to see the finish of the affair. The banks of twisting shadows disappeared down the stairway, and the two figures repeated their previous trip. As soon as they had descended past the window, I sprang from bed and lit my lamp. My eyes went at once to the floor. The pool of fresh blood was there for the second time. I let it lay and tiptoed down stairs, and to the women's room. Both were in a sound sleep, but I was struck at once by the haggardness of their features.

"I did not awake them. Getting a basin and water, I returned upstairs. I again scrubbed up the floor, this time with much care, as the stain had now gone deep into the aged boards. Leaving the lamp lit, I went back to bed. Finally I fell asleep. Nothing occurred during the remainder of the night.

"The morning after this second visitation," resumed Hayden, "I again remarked the extreme pallor of my niece and the haggard, gaunt face of her mother. Still, I remained silent, determined to solve the riddle for myself.

"Last night I retired early, and I took several precautions. First, I secured an electric flashlight. Next, I powdered the stairs with flour. I also sprinkled the floor on the attic room. I now had a

trap that no human being, or any mechanical figure, could tread over without leaving a trace. This done, I blew out the lamp and went to bed.

"I lay awake for a matter of two or three hours. I was determined to stay awake until the shadows commenced to form, or until I began to feel the smothering sensation. In this way, I would have a grasp on it from beginning to end. But in spite of my resolution, I fell asleep.

"I was again awakened by an uncanny feeling. Firm hands, or, rather, some peculiar force, seemed to hold my arms down on the bed. I sought to draw up my legs in order to slip out of bed, but found them held by an unyielding power. Finally, I discovered that I was unable to move any part of my body. I was certainly awake, yet I was as helpless as a person in a nightmare, who fancies that his body is totally paralyzed.

"Forced to lay motionless, I saw the black shadows stream from various parts of the room. This time they formed over my bed. I could feel them drift across my face, spinning, waving, and twisting and contorting. It was an unearthly feeling, lying there helpless to avert anything that might happen. There is nothing I can describe that would be similar to the feeling of those black forms, ceaselessly in motion. It might be likened to some invisible force that presses on one, or to a heavy fog that a person seems to feel in a material manner, with a strong impression of its damper and chill.

"This helplessness and the weaving of the shadows went on for perhaps five minutes. Then, as the twisting rolls started to stream down the stairs, I could feel my body regaining its power. With the disappearance of the materializing forms, I became physically and mentally myself again.

"I then got the electric torch in my hand, ready to flash it at the proper moment. The figures rose above the stair, and I directed the bulb of the light toward them. I waited until they advanced to the center of the room, then I threw on the light."

**HAYDEN** wiped his mouth with a trembling hand. His lips were dry, and his face flushed.

Then, with a slight shudder, he went on:

"At the instant of the flash, the darkness of the figures was gone. Instead, I saw two faces. They were inhuman, horrible, and impossible to describe. They leered at me with their shadowy, devilish faces, scarcely discernible in the glow of the torch. They seemed to be mocking me. They were corpse-looking and repulsive, but the eyes were terrible. They were full and real, and glowing, with a hellish, vengeful fire. But with all the horribleness of the faces, it was not they that held me motionless.

"It was at that moment that I discovered the source of the blood. It was dripping out of the air, and falling in a steady patter. I glanced up at the ceiling, but it was firm and unbroken. While I watched—it was scarcely a second—the drops seemed to form in the air above the floor. They were rapidly ceasing when my nerves gave way for the moment, and I let out an involuntary yell. With the cry, the dripping blood suddenly ceased and the faces vanished.

"This brought me to my senses. I sprang from bed, determined to see the thing through. My first act was to scan my trap. I followed the flour down the stairs, but it lay in a white, unbroken dust, as I had scattered it. That night, also, I looked in on the women. Both were sound asleep. But I was deeply shocked by their distorted faces. Shaken both mentally and bodily, I once more spent the rest of the night in the kitchen rocker.

"And now I want some one to go up there with me, examine the house, and spend the night in the room. I am troubled, nervous, and frightened: both for myself and for those with whom I live."

"I will go there with you," replied Burke evenly, "and I think the two of us should accomplish something. We can probably handle two shadowy forms."

Hayden smiled dolefully. "They handled me last night," he said ruefully. "I'm a pretty strong man, but something held me as helpless as a baby."

BURKE alighted at a lonely way-station, standing on a strip of land between a wide marsh and the Hudson.

The marsh ran to the foot of the mountains, and lay sear and rippling in the September breeze. Hayden had stated that the dwelling stood back in the hills, a distance of some five miles. On Burke's suggestion, they started to walk. Burke wanted to study the country, and, incidentally, study his companion.

The country he found to be sparsely settled. The road wound up through forest-clad rocky hills. The dwelling stood beside a wide stretch of woods, with cleared fields to the north.

Burke scanned the dwelling as he approached it, and found it to be the usual type of farm house of a century ago, buried among dead trees.

The interior of the house was in keeping with the exterior. Oval frames held old prints, horse-hair upholstered, massive dark furniture contrasted with tables and stands covered with white marble tops, the chairs squatted grimly in the quiet rooms and rested on dull rag carpets. The woman and her daughter struck Burke like beings transported from the misty past.

The mother was a tall, spare woman, with heavy black rings about the eyes. The eyes, black and dreamy, held Burke with a steady, unwinking stare. The daughter was the opposite of her dark, sallow mother. She seemed a lifeless, colorless sprite, seemingly alive by the power and vigor of her more intense mother. She was about twenty years of age, although her chalky face, and thin, bloodless hands, together with her slight frame and indolent movements, seemed to signify an elder age, or some wasting disease. Both were of the dreaming, musing type, speaking softly and briefly, and moving silently about the quiet house, and both were garbed in dresses of white material.

Burke's first act was to visit the room upstairs. There was nothing to warrant his attention except the stained floor. He ripped up several splinters and put them in his pocket. He then announced his intention of visiting the nearest town, several miles to the south.

Hayden asked no questions, evidently placing the affair entirely in Burke's hands. He remarked that he would "walk down a ways" with the detective, and await his return.

The two women were still unaware of Burke's vocation, and accepted without comment Hayden's statement that Burke was a friend that was to remain over night.

As soon as Burke arrived in town, he went at once to the Chief of Police. Here he inquired for some one qualified to make an examination of the blood-stained splinters. He was directed to a doctor who maintained a laboratory. The latter, after a lengthy analysis, confessed himself puzzled. Something was missing in the composition. He could not account for the peculiar results he obtained. It was human blood—and yet it was not.

Burke returned to the Chief of Police and inquired about the Haydens. The Chief was unable to give Burke any satisfaction, but directed him to an old settler in the vicinity who could probably furnish the desired information.

Burke found the family without trouble. They were willing to talk, but they knew very little about the Haydens—though a good deal about the house.

Over a hundred years before, they said, a widow and her niece had lived in the then new dwelling. The place, a flourishing farm, which had since been cut up and sold off, was managed by the woman's step-brother. The family were more or less secluded, and seldom seen.

In the course of weeks it was noticed that no one had seen the two women. The brother was at the house alone, and refused to talk. This led to an investigation. No trace of the women was found. The brother was never brought to trial, continued to live on the place until he died of old age, and had



prospered. His heirs had taken over the place, and it had been gradually dissipated, until only the house and an acre or so of land remained.

Burke listened politely, then, thanking the old couple, returned to the Hayden house. Hayden was awaiting him.

That evening, Burke sat beside the open fireplace, listening to the low, earnest conversation of the others. The woman and her daughter he observed closely. They seemed to be possessed of some restless emotion that caused them to wander aimlessly around. On the contrary, Hayden appeared to be sluggish and incapable of extended speech. This struck Burke as queer, as he had remarked the vivid description Hayden had given of the attic room.

At ten o'clock the women announced their intention of retiring. Bidding the two men good-night, they withdrew to their rooms. Burke and Hayden, the latter almost stupid and listless in his movements, went up the narrow stairs to the room above.

Both lay on the bed fully robed. Burke saw Hayden take a revolver from his pocket and shove it under his pillow.

"What shall we do?" asked Hayden heavily, seemingly unconscious of anything around him and staring vacantly at the ceiling.

"Well," replied Burke quietly, "first, we will blow out the lamp."

He got out of bed and put out the light. Returning, he crawled on the further side of Hayden, leaving Hayden on the outside. Burke had no desire to be on the firing side of the revolver in the event that Hayden should start shooting.

The detective lay for an hour, pondering over the strange case. Finally he spoke to Hayden. The latter did not reply. He was apparently fast asleep. Yet, as Burke listened closely, he could discern no signs of the latter's breathing.

Burke now experienced a singular emotion aroused by the intense silence of the room. The longer he lay the more impressive it became. Downstairs he heard the low chime of a clock.

It struck eleven. The minutes lagged along in the forbidding silence.

The clock chimed the half hour. Fifteen more minutes passed. Hayden, breathing heavily now, commenced to move. Burke half arose on his elbow and listened. Hayden was muttering in his sleep.

Burke eyed the dark shadows of the room with keen eyes. Nothing met his gaze. He glanced to the window. Nothing there. Hayden was suffering tortures in his struggle for breath.

The detective was on the point of shaking him, when, with a heavy, prolonged gasp, Hayden sat up. Burke sensed the horror of the man, yet he remained motionless. His eyes were fixed on the dark, silent room, wandering frequently to the window.

Nothing unusual was to be seen, and he watched the vague form of his bed-mate. The latter was now rigid, struggling with the weight that oppressed his lungs, and apparently staring off into the room. Then, to Burke's amazement, Hayden started to breathe normally.

"Burke," he whispered hoarsely, "did you see it? Did you see them pass down the stairs?"

"Eh?" grunted Burke sleepily.

"My God!" muttered Hayden, "you were to watch, and you fall asleep. They have gone down the stairs. They'll come back again in four or five minutes. Watch!"

Burke made no reply. He, with his wide-awake companion, was staring intently at the window. Suddenly he felt Hayden stiffen.

"The head is just coming up the stairs!" whispered Hayden.

Burke felt the movement of Hayden's arm as it slid under the pillow. Then came the blinding flash of the revolver and its roar. Twice Hayden pulled the trigger. By that time Burke had flashed on his electric torch. The room was empty. Burke glanced at the floor. No blood was visible.

Hayden was panting and rocking back and forth.

"I feel awful queer," he groaned. "Something is dragging me."

Mechanically he arose from the bed and stumbled onto the floor.

"It tells me to kill. *kill!*" he mumbled. "Kill with my revolver. Kill—who shall I kill?"

Burke silently followed the plodding form of the other. With measured steps Hayden stalked to the stairs and passed down, with Burke close behind.

Hayden led the way directly to the room of his sister and niece. Without hesitating, his fingers grasping a loaded "Billy," Burke trailed close and waited for the moment when he should be needed.

Hayden appeared unconscious of the light furnished by Burke's torch, nor did he once turn on the short journey. Reaching the side of the bed in which the women were sleeping, he paused and stared rigidly down.

Burke joined him. His light was now on the two women. He was struck by the horrible contortions of the faces, seemingly drawn in agony.

With a sudden premonition, he bent down and felt the motionless forms. The girl's hand was limp and lifeless. He felt the pulse of the older woman.

*Both were dead!*

**T**HE detective turned to Hayden.

He was staring down, dry-eyed.

"I see," he said stupidly, "both dead. Kill, *kill!*—who was I to kill? Not them. They're dead. Something still tells me to kill!" He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Burke lit a lamp that stood on a heavy dresser and put out the torch. He stood looking down at the two women. He then noted that the room was growing shadowy. He glanced at the lamp. It was full of oil and the wick seemed to be burning freely, yet the light continued to lower.

Burke again glanced at the two women. Slowly, almost invisibly, he fancied that the agonized features were changing to the repose of death.

Hayden arose and came to the detective's side. He was muttering and softly moaning. Burke watched him.

Hayden, with a sudden start, looked across the room.

"They're coming back!" he mumbled, "weaving and twisting."

His eyes moved slowly from the opposite side of the room as if he were following some moving object. They came to rest on the women's faces.

"Streaming down their mouths!" he muttered. "They're sucking in the twisting rolls. *They're coming to life!*"

Burke glanced at the women. In the dim light he could have sworn that he saw traces of returning life. At that moment there came a crashing report at his side and a blinding flash.

With that, the light flared up bright, and the dead faces were revealed. Burke whirled around.

Hayden was sinking to the floor, a bullet hole in his head, from which the blood was slowly starting to emerge. Burke sank beside the man and lifted his head.

Slowly the heavy form relaxed. Hayden opened his eyes to stare with bewilderment at the detective.

In another moment he was dead.

Burke placed the body on the floor and went to the bed. Once again he endeavored to find a trace of pulse in the still forms. Both were lifeless. He fancied that both dead faces bore a peaceful look, and on the elder woman's slightly-opened lips there seemed to hover an exultant smile.

Closing the room, Burke got his coat and belongings, then locked up the house. Some hours later he was sitting with the Chief of Police, relating the tragedy. The Chief drove with Burke to the Sheriff of the county, and together they went to the house. The Sheriff had called up the coroner, and they found him waiting for them.

A brief examination of the women revealed that both had died of heart failure, probably induced by some unexplainable shock. Burke took the Sheriff aside. On the detective's suggestion, they wrecked the attic room in a thorough search. Burke wanted to locate the source of the dropping blood.

At the conclusion of their quest the mystery was finished, for Burke. But it was to Rhyne that he confessed his failure.

Returning to his apartment in New York, he found Rhyne there.

"Well," cried the latter, as soon as he appeared, "did you solve the mystery?"

"No," replied Burke. "I did not."

Rhyne's eyes opened. "Well—what did you find?"

"Over the attic room," said Burke musingly, "we found a small, cryptlike space between the ceiling of the attic room and the roof of the house. It was encased in plaster. As we broke through the ceiling, a mass of human bones

came tumbling down. The coroner pronounced them the skeletons of a woman and a girl. Both had been dead for generations.

"Through the shoulder blade of the girl's skeleton was a jagged hole. When the bones fell, the elder woman's skull rolled to my feet. I picked it up. Something rattled inside and I worked it out through the eye socket. It was a slug of lead.

"Both the woman and the girl had been murdered."

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