

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1946

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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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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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90¢. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1945, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 39, No. 4

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# Tunnel Terror

BY ALLISON V. HARDING

THEY were at first glance, a strange Mut and Jeff pair. To some slouch-battered, poorly dressed client of Ed's "Express Diner," there seemed little on the surface between the big man in work clothes and his small bright-eyed companion.

In a way, their friendship was an accident. It had started at Oceanside High School. Big Bill Van Hooten and little Tom Mead. Van Hooten with the muscles, Mead with the brains, making up in gray matter what he lacked in bulk. And the two got along,

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE



*Did you ever guess that under-water is a dimension all its own?*

or maybe it was a conspiracy of the expedition, for certainly Big Bill was too dumb to get far even on his muscles and Tom too small, likewise.

They'd drifted apart the way people do after high school, and Van Hooten got a job with a trucking company. Pulling at a wheel and loading crates were nearer to high-school football and baseball than sitting at an office desk somewhere. And anyway, remember, he was, as Joe Ferro, boss of the Acme, used to say with a significant finger-tapping at his forehead, "Thick!"

And Tom, just naturally it seemed, ended up on the *Big City Courier*. You know, that's that big almost-orange stucco building facing the wharves downtown where the presses go day and night, turning out five-inch headlines on everything from crime to scandal.

The two men lived in Oceanside though, and at night they'd meet often in the diner. Not to say much perhaps, because there wasn't always a lot to say, but just to be together for a moment like out of habit from old days and then go off with "G'nights" to their respective rooms.

Big Bill's father and mother had both been old beyond figuring when Tom first remembered them and they had been dead for several years. Let's see now, they died a couple of years before the tunnel went through from Oceanside to the city. All Tom knew of family was his aunt, who'd brought him up and seen him through high school and—he was glad of this, kind of like a repayment—to the first day he'd landed the job at the *Big City Courier*, and she said in an old tired voice full of tears, "I'm so glad for you, Tommy."

But the happiness of this added only a few more months to her life and then she was gone and he was as alone as Big Bill. So there didn't need to be much said at Ed's diner, but tonight there was. Big Bill was talking, wagging his massive head.

"It's Joe Ferro," he complained. "Can't please that guy, Tom. Always kickin'."

The little man continued to stare disinterestedly into the brown mud of his coffee, discouraging the thin cream from collecting on the top with the end of his cruller.

"I came through with some oranges this morning from upstate and Joe, he gets poking around in the back, and he says to me,

he says, 'Bill, what the hell's the idea? Lot of these things are spoiled. Whatja do, float 'em across the river,' and he's making out like I dumped 'em in salt water on purpose."

It was a long speech for Bill, and he thumped his ham fist on the diner counter, making Ed, the proprietor, look up.

When the two men finished their evening meal and parted, Tom noticed the worried look in his big friend's eyes. He slapped him on the back and walked a ways home with him. It was no use, he thought to himself, letting either a trucking foreman or a city editor get you down.

THE next night Tom was first of the two at the diner. He wondered with an amused anticipation whether Big Bill had taken his advice given last night, "Aw, poke him one if he gets tough, fellah."

He heard steps outside the diner, a heavy tread up the wooden stairs to the car and Van Hooten came in.

"Hiya," said Ed from behind the counter automatically, not looking up from apron-polishing a plate.

But the big driver didn't answer. And in his eyes as he lumbered across the diner towards the small man, Tom saw something that looked out of place there—fear! The hulking trucker settled heavily on the next stool.

"How's it?" said Tom.

Automatically Van Hooten started to eat the food the counter man placed before him, but slowly without relish. Mead knew his friend too well to push the conversation. He could see that a struggle was going on in the big inarticulate driver. Bill pushed back his pie plate only half finished.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and wordlessly Tom followed.

Outside they walked along the dusk-streaked avenue. It was a poor section of the industrial town, hard by the river, and the damp, moist smell was as much a part of Oceanside as the red-brick factory chimneys, the poor run-down houses, and Ed's "Express Diner." The sound of their leather heels on the stones echoed hollowly from the buildings on either side as the men walked. Finally, abruptly, Big Bill spoke up.

"Had more trouble with Ferro today, Tommy."

"Whyn't ya sock him?" was Mead's comeback.

"I'm still hauling for the grocery account," went on Van Hooten, his tan brow wrinkled up perplexedly, "and Ferro blames me. Things I don't have nothin' to do with."

"What happened?"

"Well, I made my usual run up to Bureau Market and came back with a load of lettuce. I specially watched 'em load it in at the market. Looked like mighty good stuff to me. We get back here and whadda think I got in there?"

"What?"

"Seaweed!"

The two men stopped under a street lamp.

"Some kind of joke, huh?"

"Naw," persisted Van Hooten. "There's lettuce in the crates but a lot of old dirty green salt water seaweed too, and Ferro gives me the devil."

"Well," said Tom Mead after a moment's thought, "what's it to do with you? You're just the trucker. You don't contract for any of this food or buy it or even load it at the market."

The big man nodded. "That's what I told Ferro, Tommy, but there's sumpin' else. I been thinkin'. 'Member I told you about oranges yesterday soaked with sea water?"

The reporter bobbed his head.

"I figure it's to do with me coming through—the tunnel! Don't you get it, Tommy? Those funny things are happening in the tunnel."

Mead grinned. "Are you kidding, big boy? Whaddya think, that the seaweed and salt water just dropped through all that steel and concrete into your truck? Whaddya think, the river's got a grudge on you, Bill?"

The big man looked wise. And scared.

"It's the river," he whispered, as though two blocks away it might hear him. "It's what's in it, Tommy. What's in it down at the bottom where the tunnel goes!"

The reporter's first reaction was to laugh, but you don't laugh at a friend. Especially when "scared" is standing out all over him.

"You think I'm crazy," the big man put in, almost as though intuitively sensing the other's thoughts, "but I'm not. I got something to show you, Tommy. Will you come up to my room right now?"

Mead followed unquestioningly. As they

walked through the dark streets, he found himself worried about his big friend. Does a trucker overwork and have to take a vacation? Well, why not? Maybe Bill had lugged a bit too much of that junk through the tunnel.

THEY climbed the steps to Van Hooten's fourth-floor room. Tom had been up before. It was plain, neat. No books he'd ever seen. Just a few magazines. Nothing to take much brain work or imagination. But after Big Bill's latch key had let them in, Mead noticed an old trunk in the middle of the room. It was dark-colored with a rusty hinge that squeaked as Van Hooten lifted the cover. For a moment Tom thought romantically of a pirate's treasure chest. He felt that inside certainly there would be crossed cutlasses on top of doubloons.

Instead, there came the fragrance of old clothes and then the clothes themselves. Precious few, belonging to Big Bill's parents. With a tenderness that was pathetic in one so large, Bill took the dresses and suits out. Mead found himself marveling at the culture of the Old World. These people, or their people before, had been somebodies in Holland across the sea. At the bottom of the trunk was a book, its yellow cloth cover stained with the passing of the decades. It was labeled simply with the flourishing strokes of an ancient dress hand, "Van Hooten."

The trucker did not offer the volume but took it on his knee as he sat by the table light, and again the reporter's eye noted the incongruity of the scene. The huge trucker in his rough work clothes, his big gnarled hands caressing a book that looked centuries old. And then he spoke and it seemed his harsh voice took on a softer quality. "Some of my people, Tommy, were about the first in this country. It tells all about them in this book." He frowned down at the pages before him and turned them idly, "About Peter Minuet and New Amsterdam and the Dutch fighting the English. It's kind of like school history books but it's my family."

The two sat quietly for a moment and then Van Hooten sighed.

"Take it," he said extending the book. "Take it and read it, Tommy. You'll see what I'm thinking."

Mead placed the book carefully in a paper. "Sounds mighty interesting, Bill. You never told me anything—"

Van Hooten waved his hand. "These things you don't think about until something makes you. If they can be forgotten, they're better forgotten. You read the book, Tommy. It'll tell you."

The reporter rose. "For you I'll be glad to. Don't worry now, Bill. So what if they're blaming you for some crates of bad oranges and hauling seaweed instead of lettuce. I can find a spot for you at the paper."

The pleasantries were not appreciated. Van Hooten stood in the center of the room, looking not exactly at Mead but through him, beyond him, as though at those other people who'd once been a part of the things in the trunk, those others of his kin. It gave Tom the creeps, and with a quick good night he turned and left, with the wrapped book under his arm.

The reporter hurried his steps home, and once in his own room took forth the old volume, settling himself on the frame bed with the table lampshade tilted. For some of the letters in the book were nearly illegible with age. As he turned the pages, idly reading here and there, his interest dissolved somewhat and he began to wonder what it was Van Hooten had wanted him to read. It was seemingly the usual family record of trystings and marriages, births and deaths. Here was a notation concerning the first branch of the family to come from Holland to the New Land.

His eyes sharpened as he read on. The meticulous and penned letters spelled out the words of adventure of the early days of the middle seventeenth century, of sea battles with the English. The name of Hendrik Van Hooten attracted Mead. Big Bill's father was a Hendrik Van Hooten and he'd heard the name before. Surely a direct antecedent of the burly trucker. The words on the yellowed brittle pages seemed to come alive. Ancient and stilted as the phraseology might be, the tale was one of excitement and blood. Hendrik Van Hooten the First had been junior master on a Dutch ship that had fought valiantly in and around the waters of New Amsterdam.

But the pages implied that "English, or other interests" had got to members of the

crew. There had been the surrender of large tracts of east-coast land to the Britishers in the early 1860's, and Van Hooten, against the advice of his own blood cousin, had suddenly destroyed his ship in the river rather than go out into the bay and surrender it and its cargo to the enemy men-of-war.

THE story continued. Van Hooten had blown the bottom of his ship out with dynamite and the Dutch vessel had plunged to the bottom with all hands. Some said, the diary reported, that old Van Hooten himself had escaped, but this was not known for sure. Certain it was though, that from that time on there had been hatred in the divided ranks of the family.

An old-world curse had been leveled at Hendrik Van Hooten—"For him this river shall ever be closed by the doings of his own evil hand, nor shall it be passed over nor up and down for any purpose, sayeth the curse," and the diary gave a day and year in the late middle seventeenth century.

The family history went on then to affairs of birth and marriage. The details of events so all-important to those concerned and so trivial to an outsider. Tom was about to lay the book aside when another item caught his attention. It concerned another Hendrik Van Hooten who had been lost in the river one stormy night and presumed to have died. His body was later recovered, washed up opposite the city at Oceanside. The pages commented pithily that the poor doomed man was "purple in color, swollen, his mouth choked full of seaweed, showing that this was no ordinary act of God but the workings of the Van Hooten curse."

Mead closed the volume then and lay back to consider its possibilities. Certainly the old wives' tales had affected his friend's rather simple mind. The recent seaweed-in-the-lettuce episode, of course, recalled to Big Bill the ominous words in the family volume about an earlier Van Hooten. Tom lay awake for some time that night, enthralled with these pages from the past. As a youngster, Big Bill had probably been imbued with wild tales of the family curse, and even in the unimaginative soil of his mind, the legends had stuck. Mead fell asleep considering the

somewhat irrelevant aspect of what a splendid newspaper feature the whole yarn would make.

The next day he did his copy at the office and covered an afternoon sporting event for the paper, but all the time his thoughts were on Big Bill. He was waiting in Ed's diner again when their meeting time rolled around. Van Hooten's eyes were less troubled this time and he nodded at the diner proprietor, one or two other familiar customers, and Tom. Mead handed him the paper-wrapped volume.

"Well," Bill asked. "Whatja think of that?"

"It's interesting," answered the reporter. "It would make a nice Sunday feature story but you don't believe that curse business, do you? Why, they've practically given up that idea in the movies!"

Van Hooten shook his head. "It's no kid, Tom. This business is real."

"Aw, stop it, big boy," the reporter chortled. "You think the Van Hooten curse is reaching out of the river for you, huh?"

The look on the big driver's face straightened Mead's smiling lips, though.

"You can laugh, Tom, but it's all true. That river's bad for us of the Hendrik Van Hootens."

The look of worried conviction on the plain square face of the driver was almost comical. Lord, thought Mead to himself. I never thought a physique like that could have an *imagination*. The other toyed with the salt cellar for a moment, and then, "Did I ever tell you about my father, Tom?"

Mead nodded, "Well, some. He seemed to be a grand old gentleman."

"Did I tell you about how he died?"

"People die," reasoned the reporter. "He was a mighty old fellow, Bill."

"No, it wasn't any act of God," persisted the big driver, "but like the curse said. You didn't know much about it, Tom, at the time. The doc said my father took sick from the shock of my mother dying but nobody thought . . . nobody thought he was going to die, and if I hadn't been away from home, I never would've let the doc do what he did, 'cuz I would've *known*."

"See, he thought my father should come in to City Hospital and he got an ambulance and everything to take him. Across the

river. Do you get it, Tom? On the ferry and during the trip a squall came up. That's how the doc explained it to me. He just died sudden and unaccountably."

Mead looked doubtful. He blurted out, "I suppose there was seaweed around too."

"That's right," said Van Hooten. "Seaweed there on the ambulance bed where he lay, 'cuz the doc told me and he wouldn't lie or make things up not knowing anything about our family and the river being after us!"

The two were silent for a minute and then Mead asked, "How did today go, Bill?"

"Okay," said the trucker. "I was working over to the border of the state, didn't go near the river all day. Tomorrow though, I gotta go through, Joe Ferro says."

THE next day Mead made time to go to Oceanside City Hall and look through the death certificate archives. There, sure enough, was one made out to Big Bill's father, Hendrik Van Hooten. The death did take place on the Oceanside-Big City ferry in a hospital ambulance and the laconic comment of the attesting physician was, "Shock." That, of course, fit in neatly with the legend of the Van Hooten curse but might also, and to his mind was beyond question, just a coincidence. With sudden inspiration he looked up at the clock, on the wall of the record room. It was three. He still had some time before he was needed back at the newspaper office and he quickly phoned the Acme Trucking Company.

He got someone gruff, uncommunicative, disagreeable, as he imagined Joe Ferro probably was. The replies were laconic but he gathered that Big Bill Van Hooten was picking up canned goods stock at the North Street Depot at the outskirts of Big City. He was due back here sometime after six. Yes, the loading took an hour or so.

Mead tore out of the City Hall, hopped a cab, and directed the hack driver to the food depot. They started through Oceanside streets, headed towards the river past the big orange brick "breather," through the toll gate of the tunnel and into its illuminated tube, the tires swishing damply on the red-brick road surface. As they sped through its length, Tom could not help but think of the legend of the Dutch ship that

had gone down to nestle somewhere near in the river bed. He noted grudgingly his own feeling of relief when the cab poked its nose up out of the underground like a mole. Sunshine slanting down into the opening of the tube which they were approaching was a welcome sight.

In twenty more minutes they reached the North Street Depot, and Tom's heart leaped at the sight of the big red Acme truck. Bill was in the driver's seat even as Tom threw a bill to his cab driver and sprinted.

"Hey," he yelled, "I'm hitching a ride with you back!"

Big Bill hesitated for a second, then threw open the door of the cab and grinned.

"Hiya, Tom," he said. "Glad to see you. Did the *Courier* fire you?"

Tom slid onto the leather seat beside the burly driver, and the big motor surged forward in first gear. Van Hooten sent the vehicle into the highway traffic expertly. They took a road downward that traversed the river. The last of the sun sliding into the west warmed Tom's face. He turned and looked at Big Bill. The driver's huge hands were knotted on the black steering wheel. His massive body was set and his eyes squinted ahead. There was a white look around his mouth.

And suddenly Mead spoke, "Why don't you quit your job, Bill? If there's sumpin' that bothers you, it's not worth it. I know to tell another guy his worries is nothing and doesn't do much good. There's not many truckers better than you, kid. You could hook on with a company anywhere in the city probably. How about it?"

Bill turned for a minute and looked at his companion, trouble in his eyes.

"I've thought of that, Tom. I don't like it, this that I have to do, but somehow something kind of draws me like a magnet. Like today. We're going back through the tunnel and I don't want to, yet I do. D'ya understand? I can't explain it better'n that."

Mead turned his face away again and gazed at the river, his forehead wrinkled perplexedly. The drone of the tires took on a sharper quality as the truck ground up an incline and then slowed for a red light. Van Hooten set the tonnage rolling again expertly, and they weaved into the line of cars jockeying for the tunnel entrances.

Somehow, inexplicably, tension grew in Mead. It was absurd, he reasoned with himself, absurd to let the old wives' legends and crazy ideas of another affect oneself.

Before he could reason further, the truck had wound its serpentine way into the slow lane of the truck tube. They started down the decline, the concrete giving way to the red brick of the tunnel. Ahead, the white tile sides and inset lights stretched. Truck traffic was light at this time of day and they seemed alone. A solitary policeman stood just inside the opening on the catwalk to the left. The heavy ply tires of the truck began to swish damply as the roadway slanted downward.

Bill switched on fender indicator lights and the dash dials. The thunder of the motor reverberated back from the light walls. The truck used up its coasting speed and hit the straightened-out level of the tunnel. Tom found himself peering ahead intently, looking for something, he knew not what, and he jerked his eyes away from the dim tube ahead. He turned then to look at Bill and the driver grinned back. But despite the welcoming smile, the reporter saw that the big fellow was keeping tight rein on himself. The inside side lights slipped by monotonously and Mead suddenly became conscious of the biting pressure of his fingernails against his palms. He had been sitting stiffly with tightly clamped fists. The truck droned on, and except that here and there a patch of fog, made up perhaps of exhaust fumes as yet undispersed by the air intakes, the red composition road tube stretched harmless before them.

Actually, the entire trip through the tunnel takes but seven or eight minutes, but Tom felt he had been underground for half an hour under tons of water and surrounded by the dim, deep mysteries of the river bottom. Silent, brooding secrets that allowed for no solution.

Tom's mood changed abruptly as the truck crawled into increased engine life, taking up the load as the long slope leading upward began. "Well," he remarked loudly above the road and reverberations of the vehicle. "Wasn't much to that, kid."

It was the first word either of them had spoken since going in at the Big City entrance. Van Hooten smiled back and, visibly,

strain had left him too. With a grinding of gears, the truck stuck its square nose up and rumbled its way out the Oceanside end of the underwater highway. Now that they were out, the whole of the episode seemed ridiculous to Tom Mead and he said as much to Big Bill as they slid to a corner a block away from the newspaper office.

That night the big trucker did not show up at Ed's diner and Mead ate alone. He waited for some time after he'd finished, then decided to take in a movie. Outside the theater though, he stopped. He'd go by Van Hooten's anyway and see what the trucker was up to.

It was dark by the time he walked the several blocks. The steps creaked ominously as he climbed the flights to Big Bill's. He knocked on the door. There was no answer. He tried again louder. Finally, just as he was about to turn away, he heard a step from within and fumbling hands on the lock. The door swung open then and the driver stood in front of him, his hugeness unsteady, his eyes dilated. He jerked his head almost imperceptibly for Tom to come inside. Then with actions that were swift in spite of their unsteadiness, he quickly relocked and bolted the door.

**M**EAD knew immediately that the big man had been drinking, but there was something in him more than that. More powerful than alcohol. For the reporter had seen Van Hooten drinking before and it merely served to accentuate his usual boisterous, rollicking nature. Tonight the man who slumped into the chair in front of the reporter had been drinking, yes. But he was also mortally afraid. Mead knew his friend of old well enough to realize that a blunt demand for explanation would not serve. Van Hooten would speak when he was ready and not before.

Big Bill leaned in the chair for a time, his face working, his mouth forming syllables, words, that were given no sound but stayed like the ghosts of unspeakable things in the mind. Finally, his eyes rolled toward the ceiling, heavenward, and he gasped.

"I've sent for him."

"Sent for who?" said Mead in a small voice.

There was no answer, only the strange dis-

quieting workings of the man's face before him. Mead stood up and crossed to his friend. He shook him, first gently and then harder, but there was no satisfactory response from the big man.

"C'mon, snap out of it," said the diminutive reporter. He felt angry with Van Hooten, an emotion that was probably akin to the long-standing friendship he'd had with the trucker.

"Get ahold of yourself, Bill. Who's coming? What's all this mumbo-jumbo stuff about? You'll be seeing the ghost of Joe Ferro next."

But the driver was insensitive to the appeals and Mead let go of his shoulder.

"He's coming," Van Hooten said again through thick lips. "I've sent for him and he's coming."

It was then that Mead noticed the candle standing in the melt of its own wax on the far side of the floor. Beside it the volume that he had so recently thumbed through in his own room. More—crossed sticks and a pile of ashes on the floor. The Van Hooten volume was open, and when Mead peered down he saw a heading in a towards-the-back-of-the-volume page labeled, "Exorcise of the Curse." Tom bent closer and read, "—and for all these matters of the past, the present, and the future, the judge shall be the one before the first Van Hooten, keeper of these magic powers and bestower of both good and evil as justice may require—"

Mead was interrupted by the sound of a step from behind. Big Bill was almost on him as the reporter spun. Bill brushed the small man aside and stooped for the book. In his eyes Mead had seen the angry red fire of temper. Mead reached for the book again but Van Hooten shoved him away, this time brutally so that his friend fell heavily, and then, with an animal sound took a match out of his pocket and held it to the book. The crisp pages took quickly, and in a moment, the volume was a flaming square on the floor.

Mead had pulled himself into a chair and was watching. As suddenly as it had come and as the flames of the book died, the anger drained from Van Hooten's face. He moved over to where Tom sat, laid a heavy hand on the reporter's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Tom," he mumbled, and then as a propitiatory gesture, he brought over a



bottle of liquor and set out two cups, motioning the smaller man to join him.

They drank then and the time slipped past. Finally Mead lifted his wrist to look at the watch there after what seemed like hours. It was after midnight. Van Hooten was again slumped in the chair on the other side of the room, the worse for their several drinks on top of what he'd had earlier in the evening. Mead himself was sleepy from the liquor, and the single-yellow bulb burning on the center table was conducive to drowsiness.

Against his will and better judgement Mead found his eyelids dropping. He would force his head upward, look around the room, and make plans for getting to his feet and leaving, but the drowsiness came back and it was so comfortable. Big Bill was sleeping—a little nap wouldn't hurt.

THE next thing he knew, Tom Mead awoke, his back cramped in the uncomfortable wooden chair and the light of the room now subtly different. The center bulb had gone out but still there was illumination, strange yellow suffused with green streaked the room. He turned his head slowly to limber the stiffness in his neck, and as his head swerved to the left, his eyes focused, incredulously at first, on a figure that sat silently at the far end of the room.

Tom tried to force himself upward in the chair but it was as though a heavy weight bore him down. The figure was of a man, incredibly old, with parchment-yellow face and elaborate ancient clothes.

Mead's unbelieving eyes then noticed that on the old man's knee rested a cutlass, rusty with age but once probably of fine workmanship. As he watched, powerless to move a muscle or speak, Mead saw the figure rise and start toward the center of the room—towards him. The strange greenish-yellow light caught the guard hilt of the cutlass and reflected bleakly for a moment, and then the old wax-like figure passed on by and Mead forced his eyes to follow the apparition's course. The aged figure stopped in front of Big Bill, extended the cutlass, and then with an inexorable gentleness lifted one of Big Bill's huge hands, relaxed in sleep, and carefully curled the fingers over the finely made cutlass.

Then slowly the figure turned and moved with measured tread back past the reporter over to the far end of the room where the fire had been, where the ashes still were. And suddenly, Tom Mead was overcome with the appalling nature of his experience. His senses swam. Things grew black for a moment or many minutes. He could not tell, when again his eyes opened.

But the figure was gone and he was alone in the room with the still-sleeping Van Hooten, and the first streaks of dawn were touching the plain yellow papering of the room. The big man had not moved. His hands still hung slackly, and there was no sign of the cutlass that Mead had seen in his dream—for a dream it certainly must have been. Soundlessly, Mead straightened his tie and shrugged himself into his coat, quietly tiptoeing to the door and letting himself out.

It was a chill early dawn with a dampness that permeated even to a man's soul. Clouds scudded across the horizon in the early sky. Mead shivered and rubbed the heel across his cold cramped back. From a few blocks away a river vessel hooted, and the sound was not reassuring. He made his way to Ed's diner and downed three cups of black coffee, one after another. Then he headed for the newspaper office.

THE girl in the front office raised her eyebrows questioningly as Mead came in. He had not been that early to work since his first month with the sheet. Reports of a three-alarm fire came in later in the morning and the city desk sent him north to cover the story. After he'd filed his paragraphs from the scene of the blaze, Mead turned the *Courier* sedan back towards home.

Storm clouds were blackening the sky now and the wind whistled at the sedan window. Suddenly, a compelling thought made Mead pull to the nearest drugstore. He placed a toll call to Oceanside, gave his name, and got gruff Foreman Ferro again. Sure, Big Bill had reported in to work that morning. Else he would have been fired. Get it! Yeah, he was over in Big City. He'd gone over early and was coming back through the tunnel in the afternoon with a shipment.

Tom slammed up the receiver and sprinted for his car. Up north here there was no tunnel but the mid-river bridge was only a

few miles distant. He jazzed the *Courier* auto across and headed towards the outskirts of Big City on the other side. His memory of the previous night loomed large in his mind as the day grew darker and more ominous. The strange actions of Big Bill, the startlingly realistic image of the old man of another age. And then one conclusion that had slowly crept into his consciousness sometime during the day. That was, that all the accidents so-called that had happened to the Van Hootens on the river since the curse was laid had come on bad days when the tempestuous black elements had conspired as it were to cloak an even greater danger.

Mead found himself racing the car along the roads that led into town, and by his very hurry, he realized he was tacitly accepting the legend, in part if not all. Anyway, he wanted to keep Big Bill from that tunnel run. But he sent his car lurching into the food depot just too late. Van Hooten had left for the south a few minutes earlier, he was advised. Undeterred, Mead took up the chase and rocketed the protesting sedan down the roads in pursuit.

Roaring up to an intersection he saw the Acme truck disappearing around a far corner. He speeded up even more and gained on the next incline. He tooted frantically but the truck gave no notice of acknowledgment. Twin lines of traffic developed then around an excavated place in the highway. For a moment, Mead was able to draw abreast and he yelled at Big Bill but the truck driver stared frozenly ahead, set and unnatural. In a moment more, moving traffic had jockeyed the red truck ahead.

Just before they reached the tunnel, the traffic slowed and stopped. Quickly Tom swerved the newspaper's sedan to the roadside, hopped out and ran. He caught the guard rail on the rear of the truck just as the cars started in motion again. Straining mightily, he pulled himself upright as the vehicle gathered speed, and with furious twisting got the back van door open and let himself inside where he fell sprawling midst the crates.

Picking himself up he scrambled forward and came to the glass-paneled portion that separated him from the driver's compartment. He hammered on the pane but the thick stiff neck and back of Van Hooten

ahead paid no heed. Through the glass and out the truck's sides the reporter could see they were nearing the tunnel entrance, and as he looked, the day's blackness suddenly gave way to rain and the quickening tempo of drops on the steel roof lent strength to his blows on the panel. But Big Bill never so much as looked around. And then past the toll gates, the truck picked up speed and swung careeningly into the curving decline of the tunnel entrance.

Mead gave up his attacks on the thick glass and looked frantically around for some sort of heavy object. The crates were heavy but too large for one man to lift, and there seemed to be nothing else.

As he searched, the sound of raindrops on the roof increased—the sudden realization of this made him straighten with a gasp. For they were in the tube. There could be no rain here! There could be no water—but river water!

**M**ead crowded forward again, peering through the pane and the cab into the tunnel. It was not his imagination that the roadway ahead was darker, almost obscured in a green-yellow mist. Even the white-tiled sides and the set-in lights seemed many yards away instead of a few feet. His breath began to catch in his throat. The dampness made each inhalation a heavy task. But Van Hooten, as though transfixed, sat woodenly at the wheel and the truck roared on into the misty shadows of some unspeakable hell.

Mead felt it then. From the torrent of water that fell on the roof, his upturned face caught a drop or two and it came to him with a new horror. The sudden sharp salt taste. That could mean only one thing. Dear Lord, the tunnel was going! She'd sprung a leak and they'd be drowned down here. Trapped under tons of water in their own white-tile and red-brick tomb!

The truck slackened speed so abruptly then that it threw Mead to his knees. He felt his way in the gloom along the floor and crawled to the back opening. His pulses were pounding as he forced the metal frame open, and as he did, a wet slimy substance, not water exactly but heavier, much heavier than air, slipped in around him with chill octopus fingers, and he seemed to be swirling out in-

to the dim green-yellow streaked light of the underwater highway. The sound of the truck's motor had long ago been lost, for the swishing and plopping and splashing was heavier, noisier. Mead thought of Van Hooten sitting in his cab. He struggled a few steps forward but his body seemed not to obey him.

It was as though he were floating, that last step of consciousness before, ether-like, you float into a swirling blackness.

He did not know afterward exactly what happened but somehow he crawled, staggered, or swam his way out of that tunnel hell. He was treated by an ambulance surgeon at the mouth of the tunnel where he collapsed, and by that time word of the tragedy inside the tube had come out.

It was a confrere of his from the Courier who told him, big-eyed, self-important, not sparing him because of his friendship with Big Bill or the experience he'd just been through. Van Hooten was dead, sitting there in his truck, unaccountably, that is, by all the laws of logic.

There is nothing briefer than a police in-

vestigation of a death that has no forthright logical explanation, but what explanation could you have for a man who had died of drowning sitting at the wheel of his truck in the middle of a tunnel, seaweed in the cab? And yet, of course, no one could drown in a perfectly sound tunnel.

Port of Authority officials hastily put out statistics of the number of million cars that had transversed the tunnel without accident. Then too, there was no logical explanation for the cutlass that was found in Bill Van Hooten's right hand, grasped tightly, its blade stained red with fresh blood, not his own obviously, for there wasn't a mark on him anywhere.

Tom Mead's part in the whole episode was considered thoroughly unimportant and the official verdict was "Heart attack." Mead was let go after some questioning and testimony brought forth his friendly relationship with the deceased. His only memento from the episode, the clothes he had had on, rotted now, a few months later, from soaking they'd received from the vengeful salt river water—where none could possibly be!