

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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# WHEN THE RATS FED

by William B. Rainey

Author of "Whispering Death"

*A girl's piercing scream drew Byron Kent to that inner room where the blind old man, the giant idiot and the cursing crone sat in ghoul-  
ish glee—as the rats fed!*



**B**YRON KENT, leaving behind him the swamp in which he had lost his way, walked a half mile before twilight thickened into a dull, bleak grayness. His dog Lobo, an Irish setter, followed at his heels. They had just crossed a field of broom straw, when Kent saw a fringe of pine trees reared black against the sky, and beyond the pines a house. At first he could see nothing except the outline of the place and the light burning behind a window on the right.

Kent's face was lean and sunburned, with level black eyes and a wide, pleasant mouth. He wore khaki hunting trousers, a flannel shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and a leather jacket. On his left side hung a stained hunting bag con-



taining a half dozen partridges. He carried a shotgun in the crotch of his left elbow.

He passed through the fringe of pines and stopped at the edge of the weedy, unkempt yard. The house was square, two-storied, with tall columns, a type often found in the South. The walls and the columns were gray and weather-beaten. The left corner of the building sagged. The windows, without curtains or blinds, stared like sightless eyes. The steps had long since rotted away and loose planks had been put across the braces.

For a moment Byron Kent hesitated. There was something unnatural, something sinister and evil about this place, about the utter, motionless silence that closed it in. Far off to his left he heard the dismal notes of a whippoorwill. "The bird of death," he thought, and smiled crookedly.

It was then, before he had even stepped into the yard, that he noticed the smell. Something touched his leg and he looked down to see Lobo, the setter. The dog was standing with his head low and forward, his tail erect. Kent reached down to pat him and the dog began to growl softly.

"I don't blame you, fellow," Kent said. "I don't like that stink either. We won't stay *here* tonight."

Kent wrinkled his nose, tried to locate the odor. It was a sickening mingling of smells. "Like a dead rat in a keg of whisky," he muttered, half aloud. The dog growled again, bristling the hair along his back. Far off beyond the fringe of pine trees the whippoorwill whistled.

Kent looked at the dull light behind the window, and decided only to ask how to reach the main road. It would be better to walk all night than to stay at this place. There was something more than the odor that he didn't like here—some-

thing that he could almost feel in the air.

He started toward the house, the dog close beside him.

The planks that formed the steps to the front porch were loose and made hollow, thudding sounds under Kent's boots. Some of the braces had rotted away and he had to step carefully. The flooring of the porch was rotting, but still firm. He stepped on it, and looked up.

The light in the front room had gone out.

Kent stood flat-footed, staring at the dark, blank window. He had heard no sound, no movement. It was strange that the light had gone out. There couldn't be many visitors at this place, and country people in the South were usually hospitable.

The soft padding of Lobo's feet sounded on the rotting steps. Then the dog rubbed against Kent's leg, growling. Kent shifted the shotgun in the crotch of his left arm, walked across the porch and stopped before the open door. Beyond, a pitch-dark hallway gaped like an empty tunnel. He raised his right hand and knocked. In the deep stillness the knocking sounded amazingly loud. Echoes rumbled along the dark hallway and faded.

Kent dropped his hand to Lobo's collar, and stood waiting. The dog growled, then pushed close against Kent's leg. The odor was heavier here, sickening, oppressive. Kent shrugged his shoulders, against the odor and against the chill in the night air. An unbroken quiet thickened with the darkness.

Abruptly the dog snarled, lunged toward the door. Kent's fingers tightened about Lobo's collar, jerked him back. The man's eyes peered into the darkness of the hallway, and went suddenly round and cold with fear.

Two bright balls of green fire glowed upward from the floor.

KENT staggered, dropping the gun from the crotch of his arm to catch the balance with his left hand. Subconsciously his right hand clung to Lobo's collar.

The green fire balls swam closer. Kent saw a shadow move in the darkness behind them, heard a hiss and snarl. Lobo lunged again and Kent, seeing what it was now, jerked him back, laughing harshly, nervously.

"By God! That cat scared me," he said, and his voice sounded hollow.

The cat was almost at the doorway now, its tawny body a blurred shadow. Kent stared at it, amazed. It was nearly a foot high, almost as big as a bobcat. Its body was fat, bloated, and it moved with a rolling, lazy motion. The dog was struggling against his collar, snarling.

"Down, Boy. Down," Kent said.

For a moment the cat stood staring at them with green, round eyes. Then it turned, without a sound, and vanished. Lobo growled once more, but quit struggling.

The muscles in Kent's shoulders felt cold and jittery. "Lord!" he said. "I never saw such a place." He took his hand from Lobo's collar and struck the door sill. The sound boomed.

"There ain't nobody there, stranger."

Kent spun in his tracks, his hand still raised. The man who had called to him was a darker spot against the gloom of the yard.

"Oh, hello," said Kent. He paused, added, "I saw a light in here a few minutes ago. It just went out."

The man in the deep gloom answered: "There ain't nobody there." His voice was flat, final, as if these were the only words he knew, and the answer to all questions.

Kent shrugged. He went across the porch, down the rotting steps and across the yard. The man did not move or

speak. He was dressed in overalls and a blue shirt. A stubbly beard covered his face, and small, close-set eyes peered from under the matted hair which fell across his forehead. He held a shotgun in the crotch of his right arm, muzzle down.

Kent peered through the gloom. "I was hunting," he said, "and got lost. Came out of that swamp on the wrong side. How can I get back to Tuscaloosa without going through the swamp again?"

"Huntin' huh?" the man grunted.

Kent grinned. "Birds, too. Not liquor, though I could use a drink." He stuck his hand in his hunting bag, pulled out a dead partridge, dropped it back into the bag. "Those folks in there must have thought I was a prohibition agent."

The man's little eyes shifted toward the house, then back to Kent.

"There ain't nobody there," he said.

"All right," Kent answered. "How do I get to Tuscaloosa?"

The man swung the muzzle of his shotgun northward. "Keep goin' thetaway 'bout two mile and you'll find a road. Follow—"

A wild, terrified, choking scream split the darkness! The cry came from the house, and it rose high, shrill, in one long ghastly note! But the man's voice broke only for a second.

"Follow thet road 'bout a half mile to yore right," he kept saying. His voice was louder now, harsh against the scream. "You'll run into another road what'll take you to the main one." The cry had suddenly stopped, and the man's last words had been louder than necessary.

Byron Kent had whirled to face the house, gripping his shotgun with both hands. His wide mouth had jerked hard. He stood tense, head thrust forward.

"There ain't nobody there," the man repeated. "Jest that damn cat."

Kent started toward the house.

"That was a woman," he said, without stopping or turning his head.

He had one foot on the bottom step when the countryman spoke, "Don't go no further, mister. Unless you wanta get shot in the back."

**K**ENT stopped, his foot still on the step, and turned. The man had tucked the butt of his shotgun under his right armpit; the muzzle centered on Kent's head.

Kent took his foot off the steps. He carried his own gun in his right hand, holding it by the barrel, and walked back toward the countryman.

"Now get on toward Tuscaloosa," the man said. "We ain't lookin' for no trouble round here."

Kent stopped, less than a yard from the muzzle of the other's gun. "All right," he answered. "I'm going. Which way did you say?"

"Thetaway." The man waved his gun muzzle northward.

Byron Kent swung the butt of his own gun with a twist of his wrist, slammed it down hard on the man's toe. The man cried out in surprise and pain; and swiftly Kent swung his left foot forward, his shoulder coming inside the muzzle of the other's gun; then brought his left fist up from the hip. It landed flush on the man's jaw, knocking him over. Kent dropped his own gun, caught the countryman's with his right hand, and twisted.

The man hit the ground in a sitting position. He snarled like a dog, lunged toward Kent's legs. Kent slapped the butt of the gun against his head, hard. The man rolled over, made a gurgling sound, and went limp.

Lobo sprang, but Kent pushed the dog aside. "Down!" he said. "Be still."

He broke the shotgun, put the shells in his pocket, dropped the gun. After

picking up his own, he patted the man's pockets, found nothing, and turned to the house.

The hallway was a tunnel of darkness. At the far end Kent could see the heavy gray of the night, but inside he could make out neither walls nor floor. Lobo crouched close against his side, growling at the silence.

Kent stepped over the sill, the shotgun in his left hand. His shoes made soft, thudding noises on the flooring. Lobo's feet were a damp whisper behind him. Kent took three steps down the hallway, and stopped, listening. Two more steps and total darkness had wrapped itself around him.

Then he saw the eyes again, near the far end of the hall, big and green. Lobo barked once, sharply. Kent grabbed for the dog, touched his tail as he flew past. There was a rushed tapping of padded feet, the cat's snarl; then the green eyes vanished. Kent saw two streaks of darkness as cat and dog hurtled from the other end of the hall into the night.

The abrupt ending of all sound made the quiet seem heavy and pregnant. Kent stood flat-footed, head forward, muscles taut. Then there was sound again. . . .

It was a squeaking sound, sharp and tiny, almost like the cry of a cricket. Another cry answered it, and another — small, shrill, squealing sounds that seemed to come from underneath Kent's feet, from close to the floor up and down the whole length of the hallway. Then little claws scraped on wood, and the cries became more numerous until the whole house was alive with tiny, high-pitched, whispered screams.

Byron Kent did not move when he saw the gimlet-pointed, red eyes peering at him from the floor, ten feet away. His own eyes had grown big and round in the darkness and he was breathing through his mouth in long gasps.

Then he saw more points of red flame, hundreds of them, and knew that the house was alive with rats.

The scream burst out again, close on Kent's right! He spun half around. The red eyes of the rats seemed to shut, and disappear. Nothing but blackness now. The scream died away.

From where it had sounded, there was a rush of approaching footsteps. Kent stepped back a pace, stopped. Something struck him full in the chest, staggering him. He flung up his right hand, clutched as small fists pounded wildly against his face and shoulders. He heard the torn sobbing of breath and knew that he held a woman in his arms. Then suddenly she went limp.

"There's a stranger in the hall. Light the lamps." The words shook through the darkness with the cracked sound of an old man's voice, but in them, too, was a full, confident, domineering note.

Kent held the woman against him with his right arm. She had ceased to struggle though she had not fainted. He could hear her heavy breathing, and her lips working, making soft, wordless moans. To his right he heard the scrape of heavy shoes. There was the rubbing of a match and a blue spurt of flame. Then yellow light fell through an open door on Kent's right, making a soft rectangle in the blackness of the hall.

**B**YRON KENT looked at the girl in his arms, and gasped. Her hair was yellow as lamplight, and long. It fell in disheveled curling masses about a pale, ghostly face and over slender shoulders. Kent could not tell the color of her eyes but they were large, and dulled with the shadow of insanity. Her face was oval, her mouth bow-shaped and soft, but the whole face was a picture of tired horror.

"Ann, get back to your chair." It was the same voice which had ordered lights.

The girl's lips continued to move, mak-

ing gibbering half syllables. She pushed away from Kent, went through the open door. Her dress was torn, but made of expensive material and stylishly cut. Kent followed her to the doorway and stopped. She went to a chair near the right wall and sat down. At the floor near her feet were two dead rats, one on top the other.

Kent's eyes went jerkily around the room. His face was bloodless and his lips twisted. His left hand still gripped his shotgun and the fingers of his right hand clinched and unclenched. The room was dimly lighted, and at first his eyes took in but one object at a time.

Directly across the room from the door an old man sat in a wheel chair. Thin white hair clung to his scalp. His face was a mass of wrinkles and dirt. His teeth had rotted away and his lips sagged back into a hollow, shadowed by a long, hooked nose. His eyelashes were abnormally long and white; and his eyes also were white, fixed motionless, and blind.

A tall, bleak, hard-faced woman stood directly behind the wheel chair. "What's he look like, Martha?" the old man asked her.

"He's one of them Tuscaloosa fellows," she answered. Her voice was flat, toneless, without emotion. "You better kill the s---, now that he's here."

"Maybe," the old man said. He put his thin, bony hands on the arms of his chair, stared with white, sightless eyes toward Kent.

Kent shifted his double-barreled shotgun to his right hand, let his eyes, now grown accustomed to the dimness, take in the rest of the room. On the far side, beyond the old man and to Kent's right, was a large fireplace. Near it, in a straight wooden chair, sat a bearded, square-faced countryman. He was dressed and built like the man Kent had knocked out in the front yard.

Beyond were two barrels. Liquor, Kent

guessed from the odor. So they believed him a prohibition officer. . . .

Kent's eyes swept over the barrels, and stopped. In the shadows near the right wall a giant of a man crouched on the floor. White, shaggy hair fell about a blank, idiotic face. In huge maul-like hands the giant held a golden-haired doll, rocking it, and crooning in a voice high pitched and shrill. Kent looked at him, and shuddered.

"You better kill that s--- - ----," the woman said.

Kent looked at her, then at the old man's blind eyes. "I don't give a damn about your liquor running," he said huskily. "I got lost hunting; that's what I'm doing here. But I'm not leaving until I find out about that girl." He nodded his head toward the one who had run into him. "She doesn't belong here."

The woman kept looking at the old man. Her voice was toneless. "You better kill the s--- - ----, Mister."

The old man stared with sightless eyes at Kent, but he did not speak.

Abruptly the girl began to scream. She shrieked high, flat notes, one after another. Kent jerked around. She was sitting in her chair, feet flat on the floor, eyes staring straight ahead. She kept screaming, cry after cry.

Beyond her Kent saw the giant. He had left his doll, was crawling silently along the floor near the wall on hands and knees. His eyes had grown suddenly bright; his lips were pulled back; his breathing rapid but silent. Suddenly he stabbed out his hand, slapped it down at the corner of wall and floor.

Kent heard the sharp cry of a rat. The giant held the vermin in one hand, stared at it with bright eyes. His lips had curled into a smile and he was breathing loudly now. With one push of his thumb he broke the animal's neck. He started crawling toward the girl, carrying the rat.

She sat without moving, leaning forward in her chair, screaming. Her mouth stayed half open and the cries broke from it, high pitched, flat and monotonous.

Kent took one step toward the girl, his face ghastly.

"Tommy!" the old man said. The giant froze, the rat still in his hand. He had almost reached the girl. Kent stopped, and the girl suddenly became quiet.

"Go back to your doll," the old man ordered.

The giant's face clouded like that of a sulky child. He put the rat on the floor, turned and crawled back to his corner.

THE old man had never moved. His face was still fixed on the spot where Kent stood in the door. "There ain't no need of thinkin' Tommy would hurt Ann," he said. "He thinks she's another doll."

The muscles in Kent's face were working and his chest felt hollow. He had ceased to notice the odor, but a sickness stirred in his belly. The muscles in his left hand ached from his grip on the shotgun.

"Tommy'll have to do without her," he said. "She doesn't belong here. I'm taking her away. I'll find who she is in Tuscaloosa."

The woman said again, "You better kill the s--- - ----, Mister. He's gonna cause trouble."

"Shut up, Martha," Mister said.

Kent heard the sound of heavy shoes on the rickety front steps. He moved backward, put his shoulders against the wall, and half turned so as to see the door, the old man, and the countryman near the fireplace. The steps shuffled down the hallway, growing louder. Inside the room there was no movement.

Then the man Kent had knocked down came through the door. He shuffled in, his eyes on the floor, his hands twitching,

fear written large in his face. There was a bump over his right ear.

Kent held his shotgun in both hands, muzzle toward the newcomer.

"There ain't nobody here, huh?" he said.

The countryman looked at Kent, then back toward the floor at the old man's feet. His mouth twitched and his cheekbones showed in dark lines across his face. His voice cracked with fear as he said: "I tried to stop him, Mister. I tried to stop him. He hit me with his gun. I—"

The old man had never moved. His lined, dirty face was utterly impassive. "I told you to send him away," he said.

"I tried! He hit me with his gun. I—"

"He's got that gun now, Ed," the old man cracked.

The fear in Ed's face grew to stark terror. His breath came in long gasps. Kent could scarcely hear the words when he said, "Yas, sir."

The wrinkled, dirty face, the white sightless eyes never changed, as the lips said: "Take it away from him."

Ed's breathing was a husky noise. He raised terror-stricken eyes to the passive face in the wheel chair, moved them slowly toward Byron Kent.

Color seeped into Kent's gray face and his lips began to smile at the prospect of action.

"You or anybody else try to take this gun," he said softly, "and I'll blow your damn head off."

Ed stood midway between Kent and Mister. The stubble of beard showed gruesomely black against the bloodless skin of his face. His loud breathing filled the room with its only sound. His eyes wavered, white and fearful, between the blank, unmoving face of the old man and the muzzle of Kent's gun. His breathing grew more rapid, louder, straining toward a breaking point.

Mister's cracked voice said, "Take that gun, Ed."

Ed shifted his weight slowly onto the foot next Kent. Large beads of sweat had broken out on his forehead and cheeks, showing plainly between the stubble of beard. His face turned toward Kent. Kent's finger curved around the trigger.

Ed leaned his weight forward, prepared to dive. He saw Kent's trigger-finger tighten. He stopped. He whirled suddenly and leaped toward the motionless old man.

Kent did not see a muscle flex in Mister's face or hands; yet Ed, almost on him, stopped suddenly. He yelled once, a wild cry of fear and agony, and pawing at his face pitched sideways to the floor! The sound of his writhing arms and legs was a flailing drumbeat that ceased abruptly. Then Ed lay without moving and Byron Kent saw that his face was a ghastly purple.

The grim smile on Kent's face had frozen. His hands were cold and clammy about the gun and his heart beat loudly in his breast. As if from a distance he heard the cackling voice of the old man: "Mac, you and Tommy get that gun."

There was no hesitation now. The countryman and the giant swept across the room in one headlong rush. Kent's frozen muscles moved slowly but he got the gun around. He saw the countryman's bearded face a yard away, and squeezed the trigger. The recoil drove the gun butt back against the wall. The explosion shook the room like thunder. The man's face suddenly went black, then showed a mangled pool of blood and bone.

Kent tried to dodge as the second man came in, but stumbled against the wall. He saw the sweep of the giant's hand, the glint of lamplight on the golden hair of the doll. Then lights burst and whirled before his eyes—and utter blackness followed.



**D**ARKNESS stirred with darker creatures. Tiny lights showed here and there, revolving slowly through a swimming mist. From far off came dull meaningless sounds . . . high pitched, monotonous beating sounds.

Byron knew that his eyes were open, had been open for more than a minute before they began to focus and consciousness returned to his brain. He tried to wipe one hand across his eyes, over his throbbing head, but the hand wouldn't move. He tried again, harder this time, and abruptly he knew that his hands were tied behind him.

He shut his eyes and held them shut, even against the high monotonous sounds that beat through the mist. When he opened them again, the mist was gone and he could see, could smell once more the rotting, sour, sickening odor.

He was lying in the middle of the floor where he had fallen. Both hands and ankles were tied. There was a puddle of blood near his face and a smeared stream of it ran down past his feet and out of sight.

The girl, Ann, sat leaning forward in her chair, her face white, her eyes blank and fixed straight ahead, her mouth half open. And from her mouth ripped scream after scream, never varying in tone or pitch. Her whole body was rigid, and the cries came mechanically, endlessly.

Kent twisted his head and saw the old man. His head was slightly forward and turned as if to listen better to the girl's cries, and he was smiling. Behind him stood Martha, looking at Kent. Both were nearer the fireplace than formerly, and crouched on the floor beside them was Tommy, the idiot. He had the smashed head of the doll in his hands, rocking it and moaning. The bodies of the two dead men were gone.

Then Kent saw the rat. Only its head was out of the hole where earlier Tommy

had caught one with his bare hands. Its head was raised high, its whiskers twitching, its eyes bloodshot. There was something horrible, something fascinating about the rat and Kent stared at it with cold, paralyzed muscles.

The rat moved until its entire, eight inch body was out of the hole, then stopped. Behind it Kent saw another head appear. And then he heard the squeaking of innumerable shrill, tiny voices.

Byron Kent jerked his wide, swollen eyes away from the rat. He rolled over, his mouth wide, his face gray and bloodless while his eyes went jumping in horror around the corner of floor and wall.

There were a dozen rat holes in the room and in every one of them showed a black, loathsome head, red eyes, and little lips twitching back from pointed needle-sharp teeth. . . .

The girl kept screaming, high, flat, endlessly.

The rats moved further into the room . . . their long, hairless tails sweeping, their black whiskers twitching at the smell of blood. And Byron Kent realized then that he lay in the pool of blood made by the man he had shot. There were dead partridges in the hunting bag at his side. His clothes were stained with blood. Those, giant, starved rats would be on him in another minute, gnawing at the blood spots in his clothing, eating through. . . .

Insanely he fought at the ropes around his hands and feet, writhing, cursing, snarling. The rats scampered back to their holes in terror and stood there, bodies hidden in the dark, red eyes glowing. But the exertion soon tired his weakened body. And when his strength was gone and he lay gasping, the rats came from their holes again and started across the floor toward him.

Weakly he rolled to face the other direction. The girl had not moved. The

cries ripped endlessly from her throat.

Through horror-widened eyes Kent saw the old man. His bony hands were folded on the arms of his chair and his face was lighted by an almost beatific smile. His lips were working over toothless gums.

"She's crazy, Martha," he said. "At last she's crazy. It's been twenty years since her pa made Tommy insane, but I ain't forgot, Martha. Tommy was just a little boy then. Remember, Martha? A little boy. And he was sick and her pa was operatin' on him. . . ." He laughed, a cackling laugh. "Listen at her! She's crazy."

"Yas, she's crazy," the woman said. "You got yore revenge. Now you better kill the s- - - on the floor. . . ."

**T**HE girl kept screaming, high and flat, and through it all Byron Kent could hear the hungry squealing of the rats, the tiny scraping of claws on wood. He fought for control of himself, rolled on his back and swept his eyes around the room.

The floor near the walls was black with a hundred rats and more were crowding out from every hole. They would be coming in upon him soon again. And his struggles would be useless. Was there no way of escape from this sickening, awful fate? . . .

It was at that second that Kent's mind went coldly deliberate, though the muscles of his body kept twitching. . . .

The biggest puddle of the already clotting blood was near his face, and a dark stream showed where the body had been dragged from the room. Beside the door was Kent's shotgun.

Kent wriggled so that his hands came close to the puddle of blood, began to rub the ropes that bound his wrists in the puddle. The woman watched him blankly. Mister kept smiling and listening to the

girl's screams, hoarse now. The giant sat with the broken doll in his hands, moaning.

Kent twisted again, moving his head as far as possible from the puddle of blood, and began to rub his ankles and the ropes about them in the blood. The woman, looking at him, said, "You better kill the s- - - - -."

Mister's bony hands tightened on the arms of his wheel chair. The smile showed like a light through the grime and wrinkles of his face.

"She's crazy, Martha," he whispered. "At last she's crazy. Twenty years, and her pa thought I'd forgot."

A rat was less than a foot from Kent's face. He could see the twitching of its lips and whiskers, the sharp white teeth. Kent lay motionless.

Something twitched at his ankles, then at his waist. He rolled his head to look down his body. The floor was a black mass of swarming, snarling rats. One black giant stood on Kent's belly, gnawing at the bloody hunting bag, making sharp, squealing sounds. His ankles were covered. And then sharp pain flicked through his right wrist and he knew that small teeth had dug into his flesh.

Consciousness remained with Byron Kent but dimly. He lay on his side, holding his head from the floor, waving it and cursing in short, hollow, flat-toned words. Twice he felt himself writhing, kicking, shouting, and felt the tiny claws of rats across his face. Then he would fight himself to lie still again, holding his head from the floor. He strained at the ropes, felt them give slightly, hold again.

Sharply then, he heard Lobo bark, heard the patter of feet on the back porch! He began to kick, shouting, "Lobo! Lobo!" The ropes gave around his wrists and he leaned forward, tore at the ones about his ankles.

"Kill the s-- - - ----!" the woman screamed.

"Tommy!" the old man crackled.

Tommy leapt from his crouch, bounded forward across the room. Kent snapped the ropes from his ankles, slipped to one side to avoid the rush of the giant. At the same second Lobo and the great cat whirled with a flying, snarling mass of rats into the room. The girl's screams went shrill again, fiercer.

The giant crashed past Kent, whirled to leap at him again. Rats squealed and smashed under his feet. Kent leaped, caught the shotgun. Tommy was almost upon him as he spun about with the gun coming up. Blindly he pulled the trigger. The giant's face seemed to disappear behind the charge of bird shot. He keeled over backward. Kent saw the woman rush past him and out the door.

Something struck the wall beside him with a small, plunking sound. He leaped for the girl, caught her up in his arms. Lobo crashed with a mad whirl against the old man's wheel chair, flinging it over. Kent saw the man's head strike the corner of the fireplace, saw the sudden rush of blood cover his cheek.

From the old man's toothless mouth fell an inch-long tube. Byron Kent looked at the wall where he had stood a moment before. He saw what it was that had struck there, and now he knew how the

man Ed had died. A tiny poisoned dart shot from the miniature blowgun in the old man's mouth. . . .

With the girl in his arms, Kent stumbled into the hallway, out the front door and down the sagging steps. Even just outside the house, the air seemed fresh and clean by comparison with what he had left behind. He breathed deeply, stood erect.

Lobo had followed him out and was at his feet, waiting. Kent released the girl and she stood alone. She was no longer screaming.

He turned, took a few steps toward the house, then stopped. Let the woman Martha do what she would with the shambles; he had had enough of this. He turned back toward the girl. She stood, very still and pale in the thin moonlight, waiting for him to come to her. Her eyes seemed saner now.

Kent stood clinching and unclenching his fist, looking at the girl's pallid, lovely face. He didn't know much about madness, but he knew that the kind not hereditary and brought on by fear could be cured. Standing there, he swore it would be.

He took the girl's hand in his, held it tightly. Side by side, and with Lobo following close behind, they started down the road together, toward Tuscaloosa. Kent still held her hand tightly in his own.

**THE END**