

MAY

# Weird Tales

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... Strange whisperings and rustling in the willows

**"Whisper Water"**

**LEAH BODINE DRAKE**





# Weird Tales



MAY, 1953

Cover by Joseph Eberle

- WHISPER WATER** . . . . . Leah Bodine Drake 6  
*It seems to whisper . . . especially at sundown when the night hawks are flying and the breeze makes spooky rustlings in the willows.*
- THE LIVING EYES** . . . . . Justin Dowling 16  
*They protruded from their sockets as if on sticks; they writhed, expanded, twitched as she blinked. They were themselves alive!*
- I'LL BE BACK** . . . . . David Eynon 20  
*That was what all the G. I.'s said in France—I'll be back. Back how many years one was led to wonder?*
- STRANGE HARVEST (A novelette)** . . . . . Donald Wandrei 26  
*A whole orchard moved itself to a new location; potatoes sank instead of being dug up; melons receded from the pickers—what sort of agricultural report would cover all this?*
- MORTHYLLA** . . . . . Clark Ashton Smith 41  
*. . . after his death, he forgot that he had died.*
- A CORNER FOR LUCIA** . . . . . August Derleth 47  
*Lucia dropped out of sight right into a hole—not a hole in the pavement, but a hole in space.*
- A FOG WAS BLOWING (Verse)** . . . . . Stanton A. Coblentz 54
- BETWEEN TWO DREAMS (A novelette)** . . . . . Felix Marti Ibanez 56  
*The dream was taking on most abhorrent aspects. I was no longer a spectator, but a participant, and I didn't like it at all.*
- THE VENGEANCE OF KALI MAI** . . . . . Garnett Radcliffe 73  
*The temple had become a playground for monkeys. How easy it would be to remove the necklace of blood-red stones.*
- REQUIEM FOR A SINNER (Verse)** . . . . . Pauline Booker 77
- MANDRAKE** . . . . . Adam Hull Shirk 78  
*. . . one plant concerning which superstition is almost universal. Could it have a modern application?*  
(Copyright 1923 by Rural Publishing Company)
- WIFE OF THE DRAGON-FLY** . . . . . Paul Ernst 83  
*There was no shelter for an eavesdropper for fifty feet about them, yet their conversation was reported word for word.*  
(Copyright 1936 by Popular Fiction Publishing Company)

**THE EYRIE**

4

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 178  
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

# WHISPER WATER

by Leah Bodine Drake

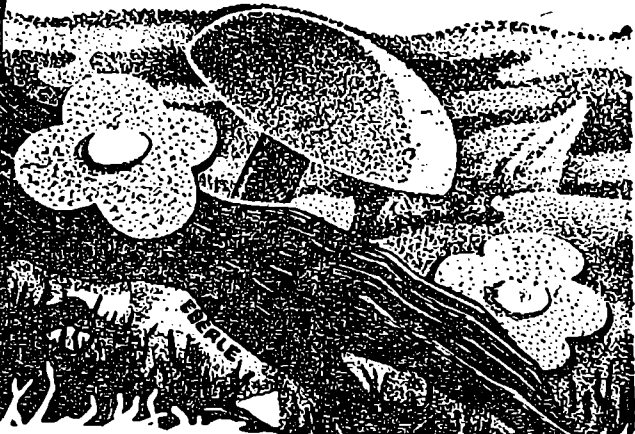


I ALWAYS said there was something different about Dan Redwine.

The Redwines had the big farm down the pike a piece from us and Dan was the only boy. He was a little, wispy fellow, with big gray eyes that always seemed to see a sight more than anybody else and he never was a talker. But he was happy-hearted and a right clever lad, and just about the best friend I ever had. Dan was a hard worker, too, for all his puny frame. Old Mr. Red-

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*... a kind of wispy idea that something heathen and powerful from old days lived along our branch.*



Heading by Joseph Eberle



wine was poorly, and Miz' Redwine was a slipshod, oh-let-it-rest woman, who rocked more than she worked. There were two Redwine girls, but they married early and moved into foreign parts, two-three counties away.

So it was up to Dan to bear a man's burdens, even in his youthful days. Many's the time I've wanted him to go hunting or to a play-party over in Hurdsville, and he'd say No, he had to mend a fence, or look for a cow that had strayed, or hoe the burley, or what-all. Yessir boss, Dan was a drivin' boy.

Maybe I'd better say who I am, although I have little to do with the story. I'm Jed Clay Bullion, and it was my Uncle Wade Bullion who was Sheriff of Tatum county the time we had those terrible goings-on that I will try to tell of. Uncle Wade has it all writ down and signed, what was a real, sure-enough death-bed confession, and I saw some and heard a lot of what went on, my own self.

Like I said, Dan Redwine worked hard, but he was still just a tad, time my story begins. He liked to prank around like other young ones, and he liked to fish, I mind, better than anything else. When he had the time he'd get his dad's ol' fishing pole and go down to a pretty little branch that cuts through Redwine land, named Whisper Water.

Whisper Water is well-called. I don't just mean because it seems to whisper to you when you walk by its banks, specially at sundown when the nighthawks are flying and the breeze makes spooky rustlings in the willows. I mean, there's always been whispers *about* it—mostly among the old folks—how a man might see and hear more than ripples and wind and fish jumping or a 'coon washing its dinner in those deep, brown waters. There used to be Red Indians around here, they say, in the old days—Shawnee, and Kickapoo and Cherokee. I reckon that any place where *they've* been will always have queer tales told of it. They never camped here permanent, just used to come down here for hunting and their little wars, and then go back again across the river.

But they slipped in and out of the state enough to leave shadows, so to speak, of their outlandish spooks and spirits, and

there was a kind of wispy idea that something from those old times, something heathen and powerful, lived in our branch. Nobody had ever described it, and 'twasn't known if it were good or bad, but whatever lived in Whisper Water never seemed to trouble its mind over humans. That is, never till once but I'm 'way ahead of my story.

DAN liked to hang around Whisper Water, particularly where it bulged out into a kind of little pool near an enormous old willow-tree. Many's the swim we've had together in that-there little pool. Dan liked to sit under that tree and fish, and play on a mouth-harp that he always carried in his jeans. He could play right good, too—"Sourwood Mountain" and "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane" and "Lord Lovell He Stood By His Castle Wall." But his favorite was the one that begins, "Have you seen my true-love with the coal-black hair?" Over and over, while the willow swayed in the summer wind and the catfish nibbled his line, he'd play that sweet, sad piece.

Dan took a kind of personal pride in that branch. Whisper Pool was just below the Redwine house a ways, and Redwine property so to speak. He used to keep it cleaned out good. You know how some folks in the country are—we incline towards using a branch-bed as a kind of dumpheap. It's against the law now, I reckon, but back when Dan and I were young lads there wasn't any such law, or if there was nobody in Tatum county had heard of it. But Dan saw to it that no old blowed-out tires or tin cans were cast into his part of Whisper, and he always tidied up after any picnickers who drove in here from foreign parts. Dan was fair silly about that stream, but whatever lived in it appreciated his care, because the way the fish bit for Dan was a pure wonder!

I asked him about his amazing luck, once.

Dan seemed kind of embarrassed. He muttered something about "an agreement with a brown lady."

"Brown lady?" I said scornful. I was at the scornful age then, around twelve or thirteen. "Boy, are you crazy? Don't nobody live around here except you-all and Old Man Tuttle up on the hill. *What* brown lady?"

Dan didn't answer and kept on fixing a worm on his line, pretending like he didn't hear me.

"Shoo," I went on, "she must have been one of those picnickers that worry you so. She was just a picnicker, having fun with you. Some of those foreign ladies are awful sassy."

But Dan shook his head and said No, wasn't any city-lady. That's all I could get out of him, because when it came to Whisper Water he always got mum-mouthed, for all we were friends.

Well, we got older and started going to the dances in Hurdsville and beaung the girls around and I guess Dan sort of forgot about "brown ladies," for pretty soon he was courting Honeybird Sanders.

Everyone to his own taste, is what I thought when Dan took to Honeybird. I'll admit she was a fair sight in those days—tumbled red hair, snappy blue eyes and smart and sassy. But man, was she a tartar! She could flare up over a trifle, and then her blue eyes would spark and her mouth tighten up, and she'd look like she could kill you. Besides that, she had too much of a roving eye to suit me. But Dan married up with her. Or rather, Honeybird married *him*, being a mighty purposeful woman when she wanted something. At that time she wanted Dan Redwine, and the Redwine land, maybe, it belonging to him now that his dad and ma had died.

A funny thing happened at the wedding. There was a right smart lot turned out for it, and I thought I knew most everybody present. But there seemed to be one person I couldn't quite place. It looked like a woman, but I never could see her real plain. She was always just slipping away behind somebody, or just beyond the corner of my eye, and when I'd turn to look at her she'd be a little way out of my range still. It was the aggravatingest thing! I got the idea that she was small and dark and dressed kind of odd, in what looked like old-fashioned, but handsome greeny stuff—like fine, store-bought velvet, maybe. I also thought she was bare-foot, and I recall saying to myself, "Well, Missy, seems like you could have wore your shoes to a wedding!"

Nobody else seemed to notice her, and as

she didn't go into the church with the rest, I forgot about her. I thought I saw Dan look around kind of sharp-like, once or twice, like you'll do when someone comes up behind and speaks suddenly to you. But who it was, if anybody, I never did see.

The wedding party went off fine and dandy; and Dan and Honeybird settled down at his place and for a while things went along peaceable enough.

Peaceable for Honeybird, that is, but maybe not so much for Dan. Honeybird's temper didn't quiet down any, and her tongue was still razor-sharp. She had a rough hand with beasts, too. I mind one time Dan brought home a baby muskrat whose mother had died in a trap. He cared for it and petted it, just like he did all small, helpless things. Honeybird got the rifle down when he was over in Hurdsville, and killed it. But instead of being merciful and shooting it, she beat its head in with the butt! She told Dan it had bit her, but I don't think he believed her, because he never again brought any young creatures to the house.

**T**HE worse she got, the more he took to going off by himself to Whisper Water and sitting by the willow to fish or just play his mouth-harp and brood, where it was quiet and peaceful. He had to practically sneak off, though, as Honeybird had a powerful dislike for that branch. It got to be more—it was a kind of nameless fear with her.

She showed this one day when the Redwines were walking home from church with me and my Sally. When we turned off the pike to take the short cut through the field by Whisper Water she stopped dead.

"You-all can go back along the branch," she said, "but I'm staying on the pike."

"Whatever for, Birdie?" said my Sally. "It's a slight hotter and dustier."

"Hot or dusty or not—the last time I come along Whisper that big willow hit me in the face. All right, *laugh!*" she snaps, although nobody had. "A great, long willow-wand reared back and smacked me right square across my face and left a big red welt. My laws, it felt just like some living person had slapped me!"

"All right, Birdie girl, we'll go with you

along the pike," said Dan, looking, I thought, a little worried.

We ought to have seen that—here was a token, but human beings are funny. They hate to admit that there are things in this world that are more, or less, than human, with powers for good or ill, according to whether it's good or ill that's done them by men. Honeybird never would walk by the branch again, though, and knowing what I do now, I can't blame her.

She and Dan had been married now about ten years. I reckon it got lonely for her up at the Redwine place, Dan being such a quiet man, and there never being any children. If she'd had a passel of young ones to busy her mind things might have been different. But she never did, and sometimes I wonder if Whisper Water was to blame—but maybe I'm fanciful.

**A**NYWAY, things perked up when some oilmen came down here and leased some of Dan's land. Pretty soon they moved in a big rig, with cable-tools, and the contractor—Mr. Bill Brady, his name was—brought in a crew and they started drilling. Two of the boys located themselves in Hurdsville and drove to work every day around noon. But Mr. Brady, who helped drill, and his toldresser got themselves fixed at the house for room and board. They were going to run tower (as they called it) at night, and it was a sight handier to live on the place.

Mr. Brady was a youngish man, pleasant-spoken if a mite school teacherish, and no great shakes for looks. But his toldresser, that Foley, was a humdinger!

Big, blackeyed and rowdydow, always laughing and pranking and shining up to the girls! He was the sweet-talkingest man I ever did see, poor soul! He just naturally made a set for Honeybird, and she was smitten with him from the start. After living alone with slow-spoken Dan for ten years, she was pleased and flattered to have such a big, good-looking man like Foley Mathers shine up to her. That was the toolie's name—Foley Mathers. Lard, how can I forget it?

Right away Honeybird smartened up like she hadn't since her wedding. She put

herself out to cook better than since the honeymoon. Sweet potato pie and her best peach preserves on the table every day! She even took to curling her hair again and pinning on a ribbon or two, and when Honeybird set her mind to it, she was a right taking woman.

Foley just ate it up. Lots of time when I was there, around noon, when Mr. Brady and him would come off tower, Foley'd come busting in the kitchen roaring, "Where Miss Honeybird? Where's that good-looking landlady of mine?" and she'd giggle and prime herself like a girl.

Working half the night like they did, Mr. Brady and Mathers slept a good piece of the afternoon. I hate to scandalize anybody's name, especially when they're dead and gone, but seems like Foley wasn't sleeping all that time.

Mr. Brady had the spare room to himself, and he was a little hard of hearing, so what went on when Dan was down in the low ground at the corn, or hoeing the burley by the woodlot will never now be rightly known to man. But it's certain there was enough between Foley and Dan's wife to make her jealous of other women.

One noon I was over at Redwines' returning a harrow I'd borrowed. Mr. Brady was in the kitchen unlacing his field-boots, when Mathers came in the back shed. He started washing up, but pretty soon he stuck his head around the door and said, "Who's that cute little black-eyed gal around here, wears her hair in two big braids over her chest?"

"No grown woman'd be silly enough to wear her hair like that," snaps Honeybird, "nobody but a Red Indian, that is, and there've been none of them kind around here for many enduring years, that's certain."

"Say!" bawls Foley, "Come to think of it, that's just what she looked like—a cute little Indian squaw, like I've seen out in Oklahoma, time I was working on a well near Nowata."

He stepped into the kitchen. "Mean, too, like an Indian woman can get. Man, did she give me a dirty look as she passed me! Like she's ready to scalp my hair off. Br-r-r!"

"What had you done, Mathers?" asked

Mr. Brady, in a casual way. "Make a pass at her?"

"Why, Mr. Brady, you know I'm as innocent as a lamb around women!" Foley answered, big-eyed and mock-solemn. "Anyway," he went on, half to himself, "I don't think she cared much for me, because she made some kind of a funny movement with her hand—like she was pushing me away, or gesturing me off or something."

"Where did all this take place, Mr. Mathers?" I asked him.

"Down by Whisper creek, Mr. Bullion," Foley answered. "It was kind of funny—I met this good-looking gal just before I come up to that big willow. You know, that real, big one by the bend, where the creek is kind of a pool. She was walking towards me, big as life and mad, like I said, when all-a sudden—whoosh! she wasn't there! Wham! Gone—just like that!" He snapped his fingers. Then he sort of studied a minute. "It looked mad, too, shaking all over," he added. "That tree, I mean."

Mr. Brady was interested by now. He leaned back in his chair and said in that school-book way of his, for all he was a young fellow, "I understand that this used to be Shawnee camping-ground once. Is that so, Mr. Redwine?"

Dan, who had kept his head turned aside during these speeches, muttered, "I reckon so," and I could tell by Honeybird's back, where she stood over the stove, that she was all ears.

Brady went on, "That's interesting what Foley said about an Indian girl, or someone who looked like one. Now if we were superstitious redmen we'd say that Foley'd met the guardian spirit or goddess of something around here, most likely something along the creek, what you folks here call the branch. Our red brothers believed that all things had their good or bad spirits, and they could take any shape or size they wanted. Indian legend is full of bear-women and tree-lovers and buffalo-girls, who sometimes fell in love with human beings. Sometimes I guess they fell into *hate*, too, if I may put it that way." He turned to Foley smiling. "Looks like the mysterious lady of the creek didn't take to Foley here."

Foley opened his mouth like he was going

to say something, then shut up and sat heavily down to the table. Honeybird was setting the biscuits in front of him, and as she passed me I could tell she was shaking. I had the queerest feeling, my own self, that I'd heard something like this talk before, but I couldn't figure out why it seemed familiar.

THEN Dan spoke up all of a sudden. "If I was you, Mr. Mathers, I'd not walk that part of the branch."

"Why not?" says Foley.

"Well," says Dan, "that bank's treacherous. Even in a dry spell like we're having now it's always muddy along Whisper Water, and when we have a big rain the bank crumbles fast.

"As for that . . . woman you met," he went on slowly, "I reckon that was old man Tuttle's granddaughter, come from Hurdsville to visit with him. Yes, sir," he added briskly, "I'd say that—there was Willie Pearl Wakefield."

I had to smile to myself, because Willie Pearl is a tubby little tow-head about eleven years old.

Honeybird wasn't smiling. All of a sudden she slapped the greens down and bust out with, "I hate that branch! I hate that Whisper Water, so dark and slimy! And I hate that big old willow most of all! Dan Redwine, I've told you and *told* you all these enduring years, to cut down that nasty old willow! It's bad—bad!"

She was just about screaming, and as we all stared at her she started to cry, ran out of the room and banged the bedroom door.

I made my fareyouwells right soon, as I was embarrassed for Dan's sake. I went home along the branch, like I always did, anyway, but this time with all my senses alert and my ears pricked, so to speak. When I got near the big old willow something dashed out from the brush and I almost yelled my head off. It was nothing but a little old rabbit, but I was taking no chances: I called after it, "Howdy, Mister Rabbit!" the way we boys used to, for good luck. Yes, sir, boss, I was feeling very polite towards *any* creature I met down by Whisper Water right then!

Like Dan had said, it hadn't rained for



weeks. August was slipping into September, and the weather held—hot, dry and terrible hard on the corn and only less so on the burley. The joe-pye weed's purple looked rusty, and the pasture grass was a sorry sight. The earth was hard, as a rock. The only soft spot around was the branch-bed and banks, because even in the driest weather Whisper Water always was full. Queer, come to think of it.

I was so busy hauling water and tending to my crops that I didn't go over to Redwines' for a couple of weeks. I heard bits of news, how the oil crews were hard put to it for water; how Dan's tobacco seemed to be doing a sight better than anyone else's; and how the goings-on between Mrs. R. and Foley Mathers was getting to be a scandal and a shame. Don't ask how those things get around, but I supposed the daylight crew noticed things, coming on and off tower, and talked about it in town. It worried me, on Dan's account, but I reckon I spent more time worrying about my corn and my tobacco than I did anything else.

ONE evening, as I finished milking, Dan came slowly around the side of the barn. He looked unhappy and mad and worried, all at once. In the bitterest voice I've ever heard from him, he said, "Jed Clay, it's true. It's damn true, and I've been a tomfool not to guessed it before this."

"Boy, what you talking about?" I said, though I feared to hear—because I reckoned I knew what was coming.

"Honeybird and that Foley Mathers," said Dan. "Honeybird's been disgracing her and my name with that loud-mouthed tool-dresser, that I ought to have knowed better than to take in my own house." He smashed his fist against the barn wall. "Damn these foreigners, Jed Clay! I wish I'd never leased my land to 'em. I wish they'd never come around here looking for oil."

"Hold on, Dan," said. "What makes you so sure?" I put my arm over his shoulder. "People just naturally talk about a good-looking man or woman, and they're both that. Mathers is a big-talking fellow, but I doubt that it's any more than just sweet-talk and compliments, and such."

"It's more than that, Jed Clay," he an-

swered. "That's all I'm going to say about it, but I'm facing them both with it tonight, and if he or she gets the least bit of a guilty expression, I'm going to light into that Foley and I don't know where I'll stop at."

"Take it easy, Dan—you're admitting right now you ain't really sure. Sleep on it tonight, boy, and don't be so hasty in your anger." I was really scared that Dan *would* jump Foley, and considering the difference in their sizes, Dan was liable to be the worst-used one in *that* ruckus.

I talked and jollied him and thought I'd quieted him down some, because he promised to think it over during the night. But when he turned away to head for home, I had the feeling that I'd never see him again. I started to call him back and ask him to stay the night with Sally and me, and I wish to glory, now, I had.

I worried so about Dan that a couple of days after that I went over to Redwines'. The house looked quiet, and I figured the night-crew were still asleep, it being around four in the evening. I knocked softly on the porch floor, and after a long while Honeybird came to the door. She looked kinda wild and sick. "Dan's not here," she said. "Dan's gone on a trip."

"Gone on a trip?" I said. "Where to?"

"Down to Memphis," she said, in a defiant, you'd-better-believe-me way.

"Memphis?" I guess I yelled it. "*Memphis?* Whatever for? What's Dan doing in Memphis?"

"He's a-visiting some of his kinfolk," she answered. "He's been away couple of days now, visiting his kin down in Memphis."

I was stumped. "I never knew Dan had any kinfolk in Tennessee. He never mentioned any to me, that I recollect."

"Well, he has, and that's where he's went," she snaps back and starts to close the door.

"He's picked a fine time to take a trip," I said. "Right when the burley needs cutting, he goes to *Memphis*—to visit his *kin!*"

"Don't you yell at me, Jed Clay Bullion!" Honeybird's temper was rising. "Can I help it if Dan Redwine's a fool? Always *was* a fool, to my mind."

"That's enough, Miss Honeybird," I said, very mannerly, because I was getting mad.

myself. "Dan's my friend, and if he wants to take a trip to Memphis, I reckon he knows what he's doing. Funny, though—nobody in town said anything about it when I went in yesterday. Seems like somebody would have seen him take the train, or something." Then just to end the conversation on a pleasanter note, I asked, "How's the oil-well coming? Struck oil yet?"

That did it. She just blew up. "That Foley! That big, drunken ox of a man!"

"Why, what's Foley done?" I asked. "I thought he was your star boarder, Birdie."

"You shut up!" she began, when we heard a sound which most of us had been honing\* to hear for weeks—a crack of thunder. Whilst we were talking the sky had begun to clabber up with big purplish clouds, and as we stood there a wind sprang up that smelled of rain not far distant. Lightning split the purple masses, thunder banged away, and the first warm drops fell. Then more of them, and faster, and cooler.

I felt like dancing. "Fare-thee-well, Miz Redwine my bonny-o!" I sang out. "I'm fixing to get home before she busts open and Whisper starts to spill over. Don't want to be caught in the low ground when Whisper starts to flood."

At that I thought she'd gone crazy. She staggered back against the screen door and put her hand to her mouth. "The branch!" she said, like to herself. "O my Lord, the branch!" and slammed both doors shut and I heard her lock the inner one.

Well, I'll swanny, I thought to myself, what a woman! No more manners than backwoods trash. But I forgot about Honeybird, because it was now raining buckets, and our Tatum county clay was already turning slippery under my boots and I had to set my mind on getting home in a hurry. The sky was now one big bruise with white forks of lightning playing over it every few minutes and the rain seemed to come down harder every step. When I passed the rig I saw the daylight crew, Collins and Mack, huddled up in their "dog-house" away from the storm. That made me think of the other crew at the house, and I thought, they

won't get much sleep with all this racket. Then another thought struck me—something Honeybird had said. How she'd called Foley a drunken ox . . . "drunken?" Mathers was kind of a blow and sweet on the ladies, but he never drank anything stronger than buttermilk!

What had made him a "drunken ox" all of a sudden?

THAT night's storm was the worst I ever did see. Sally and I and the youngones bunched up together in the kitchen, and Sally prayed a little, and I thought about Dan and Honeybird and Foley, and how troublous life can be. I said to Sally, "I'd sure hate to have to go out in *this* tonight! Don't reckon the boys will do any more drilling till it's over. It's not a fit night for a hound dog to be out in," little knowing it wouldn't be many hours before I'd be clumping around in the wind and rain and thunder, looking for a murderer!

NOW comes that part which even now seems mighty hard to credit, even though I saw some things with my own two eyes that no man could rightly disbelieve. But what with the confused and wild way in which Foley told his part of the doings, and the noise and fury of the storm that kept up while he was telling it, together with the downright unnaturalness of the whole business—well, that last part is none too clear after all these years.

Needless to say, Dan hadn't gone to Memphis. Seems that when he left me that evening and went home, he found Honeybird and Mathers talking in the kitchen. Dan walked up to him and asked him what Foley later said was "a very personal question," and one word led to another, and they started belting each other.

I'd always been afraid to see Dan get into a fight with big Foley Mathers, but it seems like he made a fair showing. He was mad and he was hurt, and righteous wrath hath its own strength. Anyway, Honeybird thought her sweetheart was getting the worst of it. Foley said all of a sudden he heard a funny, dull sound, like a squash had been cracked open, and Dan slumped down on the floor, with his head busted wide open

\* "honing"—Kentucky dialect for longing, fervent wishing.

—and Honeybird standing over him with a bloody poker in her hands.

She was like a woman made of stone. She told Foley to get Dan out of sight before Mr. Brady got back, and forbade him to go get a doctor, as Foley swears he wanted to do. She said Dan was dead, and she wasn't going to hang for it, and if Foley had any sense he'd help her bury him and pretend he'd gone out of town. They could think up what to do later, she said, and Foley was so dazed with fighting and fear of that awful woman he'd been fool enough to admire, that he followed her like a whipped dog. He slung poor Dan's corpse over his shoulder, and Honeybird got a shovel from the toolshed and they stole out of the house in the dusk.

—Hard and dry as the ground was, Honeybird had presence of mind enough to know there wasn't much use digging anywhere but the one spot where the earth was always soft—by Whisper Water. Much as she hated and feared that branch-side, she realized that there was the only place to hide away her husband's poor, broken body. The two of them stole around by way of the woodlot; and down by the branch, where he used to fish and play his mouth-harp, they buried what was left of Dan Redwine. A makeshift grave it was, too, but they were in a mighty hurry and dizzy with fear and, I hope, remorse.

Those next few days must have been plain hell for her and Foley—him having to dress tools and her cooking for him and Mr. Brady, as though nothing had happened and her husband had sure-enough gone on a little trip and would be coming back soon! That was when Foley started drinking, and nobody—almost—knew why.

Then the worst happened. It rained. That downpour that everyone welcomed so was doom and destruction for the guilty pair. No wonder Honeybird mighty near fainted when I mentioned the branch flooding—she had a clear picture of that shallow grave and the way the banks crumbled in a storm!

She rushed into the house and woke Foley, and let him have the news. If he were drunk then, it sobered him up good. He could hear the rain swishing down, and knew that pretty soon the water would un-

cover what they wanted desperately to stay hidden from the sight of man. I don't reckon they knew what they'd do when they got there, but they couldn't sit around the house in a plight like that—they had to make a stab at covering Dan up better somehow. They crept out of the house, hoping against hope Mr. Brady wouldn't hear them, and through the wind and the lightning and the wild wet they made their way down to Whisper Water. With all that clay pulling at their feet Foley said they ran all the way as if the devil was after them, and maybe he was.

Now here's the part where Foley shook so with pain and fright, and where he'd stop so often to pray or to curse, that it's pretty much of a blur in all our minds, mine and Uncle Wade's and the others who stood around his bed there in the Redwine leanto that night. He says that as they got to the branch, they could hear Whisper Water rushing away between her banks, like something strong and big and angry, and somehow alive. In the semi-darkness they saw that the willow was bending and shaking all over like a woe-begone woman, and the banks were flaking rapidly. The lightning flashes showed that they'd come none too soon! Two stiff, helpless boots and a stretch of blue jeans stuck out from the clay. The earth they'd heaped so hasty over poor Dan's body was washing away, and the husband Honeybird Redwine had murdered was silently condemning her.

The branch was boiling and churning and the trees were tossing in the wind, as they grabbed and dug in the mud with their bare hands, when a terrible glare of lightning lit up the whole place. By its wild light Foley saw the big willow, that had been bending and thrashing like the others, sort of straighten up and hold itself rigid.

Then, before their eyes it seemed to tower into the dark, wild sky, higher and higher like a horrible, huge green fountain, before it swooped down on them like a thing alive! Foley fell over backward before its rush, and in the darkness beside him he felt Honeybird go down, too. He heard her give a fearful scream, and then a kind of awful gurgling noise. Another lightning glare came, and Foley saw what no human being

ought to ever see—instead of a willow tree, it was a huge, angry Indian woman, brown-skinned, black-braids and all, bending over them—but it wasn't a human woman.

"Then, O my God!" Poley'd cry, as he told and retold that awful scene. "She was reaching down for Honeybird, and choking the life out of her with her long, thin hands!"

**B**UT the worst is yet to tell. Foley's shrieks brought the crew from the well and Mr. Brady, and together they got him up to the house as best they could—what with his leg hanging broke, where it had caught in a root when he fell. Collins said afterwards that it was caught so tight they could hardly get him loose, "just like it was hands holding him down," he said.

There wasn't a sign of Honeybird. They laid Foley on his bed in the leanto, and Collins got out the Ford and slid and slithered into town for Doc Luttrell. From what he'd seen and heard Collins figured he'd best get the Sheriff, too. Uncle Wade rounded some of us up, and in the wind and rain we went out to look for Honeybird. The storm had died down some, but we still had trouble with our lanterns, and I don't reckon we'd have come across her when we did if it hadn't been for Coleman Tate's old dog Luby. It was really Luby that found Honeybird.

Away down stream, caught among the brush that overhung the bank, was what looked like an old ragbag. Coleman's hound nosed it and let out a howl. It was Honeybird. Wrapped around her throat, coil on coil, so tight that it cut 'way into the skin, was what looked like a thin green rope. Luby set up another howl, and when Coleman and I picked her up, we almost did our own selves.

Not because she was dead. I guess we'd kind of expected that all along. But because that wasn't any rope that had strangled the life out of Honeybird Redwine—it was a long, green willow-wand!

Poor Foley died the next day. Doc Luttrell took off what was left of his leg, but

he had a bad fever and what with the pain and the awful fright and . . . other things, like remorse, maybe . . . he just couldn't pull through. Dan was dug up and buried proper in the churchyard, with what was left of Honeybird—Lord pity her—along side him, although I recall there was some sentiment against it. Dan's widowed sister came over from Logan county to run the property. The drillers finished the hole with a new tooldresser Mr. Brady brought down, but they didn't get oil, so pretty soon they shut down and plugged the hole and went away. Things quieted down again, and after a while people sort of forgot about the Redwines, like you do forget things, even the worst.

But Foley had muttered something that night when he was raving and groaning—something that nobody else but me seemed to hear, and which never got into the statement my Uncle Wade writ out and had Foley sign. Yes, Foley seems to think he saw something else when that tree turned into that tall, goblin woman. He seems to have seen her bend down, after she'd cast away poor Honeybird, and sort of scoop up what looked like Dan's body out of his pitiful grave. Only it wasn't the blue-jeaned, dead body of Dan Redwine that Foley had helped bury. It was Dan, all right, but whole and unharmed, like he used to be, and naked as a new-born child! And in his hand he was holding on hard to something, some little object.

I could have told Foley what that was, and the tears come to my eyes to think on it. It was Dan's little old mouth-harp. Yes, sir, that little old mouth-harp that he was never without. And his ghost still held on to it!

Down by Whisper Water of a summer's evening, when the nighthawks are out and the fish are splashing, I've heard a sad, pretty little tune curling and creeping through the willow-wands: "Have you seen my true-love—with the coal-black hair?" and the breeze in the big willow by the pool is sort of humming along with it, like a happy woman whose lover's come to her at last.