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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Return of Orrin Mannering

By KENNETH P. WOOD

*A brief story of a jail-break and its ghostly sequel*

**J**UST how Orrin Mannering, murderer and fugitive from justice, was returned to the security of his cell is a ghostly legend down in Dunham County, Tennessee, although it occurred many years ago, and the ancient jail has long since been demolished.

In the fall of the year, Mannering was confined in the county jail to await trial for the brutal slaying of his brother-in-law. Mannering was a desperate man, a cold-blooded killer, and no coward. He had escaped prison by knocking down John Duff the jailer with an iron bar, then robbing him of his keys; after which he opened the outer door and stole out into the night. The jailer being unarmed, Mannering got no weapon with which to defend his recovered liberty. As soon as he was out of the town, he had the folly to enter a forest; this was, of course, when that region was wilder than it is now.

The slowly rising moon aided Mannering's flight, but as he had never dwelt in the immediate locality, he knew nothing of the lay of the land. He was not long in losing himself, for he had doubled several times. But he could not determine if he were getting farther away from the town or getting back to it—a most important matter to Orrin Mannering. He knew that in either case the sheriff, with a posse of armed citizens and a pack of bloodhounds, would soon be on his trail and his chance of escape was very slender. But he did not wish to assist in his own pursuit. Even an added hour of freedom was worth having.

Suddenly he emerged from the woods

into an old road, and there before him saw indistinctly the figure of a man with a rifle slung over one arm, standing motionless in the gloom, evidently posted there to intercept him. It was too late to retreat. The fugitive felt that at the first movement back toward the thicket he would be instantly shot down. So the two stood there like trees, Mannering nearly choking to death as his heart mounted into his throat; the emotions of the other are not of record.

A moment later—it may have been an hour—the moon entered a patch of unclouded sky and the hunted man saw that visible embodiment of Law raise his free arm without a word and point significantly toward and beyond him. Mannering understood. Turning his back to his captor, he walked submissively away in the direction indicated, looking neither to the right nor the left; hardly daring to breathe, for he felt a burning sensation between the shoulder-blades just where the rifle must be pointing. And his spine actually ached with the prophecy of leaden bullets.

Mannering was as courageous a criminal as ever lived to be hanged. That was shown by the conditions of awful personal peril under which he had coolly murdered his brother-in-law. It is needless to relate them here. They came out at his trial, and his calmness in confronting them came near to saving his neck. Nevertheless he was now doggedly plodding his way toward the town, a brave man beaten and submitting to the inevitable.

So the two men pursued their journey jailward in silence along the old road through the woods. Only once did Mannering venture a turn of his head; just once, when he was in the deep shadow of a big overhanging elm tree and he knew that the other was in the full light of the moon, he looked backward. His captor was John Duff, the jailer, as white as death and bearing upon his brow the livid mark of the iron bar. Orrin Mannering had no further curiosity.

**E**VENTUALLY they entered the town, which was all alight, but deserted. Not a soul appeared to be abroad. Straight

up the main street the criminal held his way; straight up to the entrance of the jail he walked and laid his hand upon the knob, opening without command the big iron-bound door. Passing through the dimly lighted corridor, Mannering opened a second door and found himself in the presence of half a dozen armed men who were crowding round a table. But the street door had not opened and closed behind him to admit his captor, so he turned round. Nobody else had entered.

The armed men walked quickly toward Mannering to catch him as he collapsed, for he saw on the table the dead body of John Duff.