
Black Wind Blowing

by

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CHAPTER I - "I Take This Woman!"

Emmett Glanton jammed on the brakes of his old Model T and skidded to a squealing stop within a few feet of the apparition that had materialized out of the black, gusty night.

"What the Hell do you mean by jumping in front of my car like that?" he yelled wrathfully, recognizing the figure that posed grotesquely in the glare of the headlights. It was Joshua, the lumbering halfwit who worked for old John Bruckman; but Joshua in a mood such as Glanton had never seen before. In the white glare of the lights the fellow's broad brutish face was convulsed; foam flecked his lips and his eyes were red as those of a rabid wolf. He brandished his arms and croaked incoherently. Impressed, Glanton opened the door and stepped out of the car. On his feet he was inches taller than Joshua, but his rangy, broad-shouldered frame did not look impressive compared to the stooped, apish bulk of the halfwit.

There was menace in Joshua's mien. Gone was the dull, apathetic expression he usually wore. He bared his teeth and snarled like a wild beast as he rolled toward Glanton.

"Keep away from me, blast you!" Glanton warned. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"You're goin' over there!" mouthed the halfwit, gesturing vaguely southward. "Old John called you over the phone. I heered him!"

"Yes, he did," answered Glanton. "Asked me to come over as quick as I could. Didn't say why. What about it? You want to ride back with me?"

Joshua jumped up and down and battered his hairy breast like an ape with his splay fists. He gnashed his teeth and howled. Glanton's flesh crawled a little. It was black night, with the wind howling under a black sky, whipping the mesquite. And there in that little spot of light that apish figure cavorted and raved like a witch's familiar summoned up from Hell.

"I don't want to ride with you!" bellowed Joshua. "You ain't goin' there! I'll kill you if you try to go! I'll twist your head off with my hands!" He spread his great fingers and

worked them like the hairy legs of great spiders before Glanton's face. Glanton bristled at the threat.

"What are you raving about?" he demanded. "I don't know why Bruckman called me, but--"

"I know!" howled Joshua, froth flying from his loose, working lips. "I listened outside the winder! You can't have her! I want her!"

"Want who?" Glanton was bewildered. This was mystery piled on mystery. Black, howling night, and old John Bruckman's voice shrieking over the party line, edged with frenzy, begging and demanding that his neighbor come to him as quickly as his car could get him there; then the wild drive over the wind-lashed road, and now this lunatic prancing in the glare of the headlights and mouthing bloody threats.

Joshua ignored his question. He seemed to have lost what little sense he had ever had. He was acting like a homicidal maniac. And through the rents in his ragged shirt bulged muscles capable of rending the average man limb from limb.

"I never seen one I wanted before!" he screamed. "But I want her! Old John don't want her! I heered him say so! If you didn't come maybe he'd give her to me! You go on back home or I'll kill you! I'll twist your head off and feed it to the buzzards! You think I'm just a harmless big fool, I bet!"

Grotesquely his bellowing voice rose to a high-pitched squeal.

"Well, if it'll satisfy you," said Glanton, watching him warily, "I've always thought you were dangerous. Bruckman's a fool to keep you on the ranch. I've expected you to go clean crazy and kill him some time."

"I ain't goin' to kill John," howled Joshua. "I'm goin' to kill you. You won't be the first, neither. I killed my brother Jake. He beat me once too often. I beat his head to jelly with a rock and dragged the body down the canyon and throwed it into the pool below the rapids!"

A maniacal glee convulsed his face as he screamed his hideous secret to the night, and his eyes looked like nothing this side of Hell.

"So that's what became of Jake! I always wondered why he disappeared and you came to live with old John. Couldn't stay in your shack in that lonely canyon after you killed him, eh?"

A momentary gleam of fear shot the murk of the maniac's eyes.

"He wouldn't stay in the pool," muttered Joshua. "He used to come back and scratch at the winder, with his head all bloody. I'd wake up at night and see him lookin' in at me and

gaspin' and gurglin' tryin' to talk through the blood in his throat.

"But you won't come back and ha'nt me!" he shrieked suddenly, beginning to sway from side to side like a bull about to charge. "I'll spike you down with a stake and weight you down with rocks! I'll--" In the midst of his tirade he lunged suddenly at Glanton.

Glanton knew that if those huge arms ever locked about him his spine would snap like a stick. But he knew, too, that nine times out of ten a maniac will try to reach his victim's throat with his teeth. Joshua was no exception.

Reverting completely to the beast, he plunged in with his arms groping vaguely, and his jaws thrust out like a wolf's muzzle, slavering teeth bared in the glare of the headlights. Glanton stepped inside those waving arms and smashed his right fist against the out-jutting jaw with all his power. It would have stretched another man senseless. It stopped the halfwit in his tracks, and blood spurted.

Before he could recover his balance Glanton struck again and again, raining terrific blows to face and head, driving Joshua reeling and staggering before him. It was like beating a bull, but the ceaseless smashes kept the maniac off balance, confused and dazed him, kept him on the defensive.

Glanton was beginning to tire, and he wondered desperately what the end would be. The moment his blows began weakening Joshua would shake off his bewilderment and lunge to the attack again--

Abruptly they were out of the range of the car lights, and floundering in darkness. In panic lest the maniac should find his throat in the blackness, Glanton swung blindly and desperately, connected glancingly and felt his man fall away from him.

He stumbled himself and went on all fours, almost pitching down the slope that fell away beneath him. Crouching there he heard the sounds of Joshua's thundering fall down the slant. Glanton knew where he was now, knew that a few yards from the road the ground fell away in a steep slope a hundred feet long. It was not hard to navigate by daylight, but by night a man might take a nasty tumble and hurt himself badly on the broken rocks at the bottom. And Joshua, knocked over the edge by Glanton's last wild haymaker, was taking that tumble.

It might have been an animal falling down the slope, from the grunts and howls that welled up from below, but presently, when the rattle of pebbles and the sounds of a heavy rolling body had ceased, there was silence, and Glanton wondered if the lunatic lay senseless or dead at the bottom of the slope.

He called, but there was no answer. Then a sudden shudder shook him. Joshua might be creeping back up the slope in utter silence, this time maybe with a rock in his hand, such a rock as he had used to batter his brother Jake's head into a crimson pulp--

Glanton's eyes were getting accustomed to the darkness and he could make out the vague forms of black ridges, boulders and trees. The devil-begotten wind that shrieked through the trees would drown a stealthy footstep. When a man turns his back on peril it assumes an aspect of thousand-fold horror.

When Glanton started back to the car his flesh crawled cold, and at each step he expected to feel a frightful form land on his back, gnashing and tearing. It was with a gasp of relief that he lunged into the car, eased off the hand-brake, and clattered off down the dim road.

He was leaving Joshua behind him, alive or dead, and such was the grim magic of the gusty dark that at the moment he feared Joshua dead no less than Joshua living.

He heaved another sigh of relief when the red spot that was the light of John Bruckman's house began to glow in the black curtain ahead of him. He disliked Bruckman, but the old skinflint was sane at least, and any sane company was welcome after his experience with a brutish maniac in the black heart of this evil night.

A car stood before Bruckman's gate and Glanton recognized it as the one belonging to Lem Richards, justice of the peace in Skurlock, the little village which lay a few miles south of the Bruckman ranch.

Glanton knocked on the door and Bruckman's voice, with a strange, unnatural quaver in it, shouted:

"Who's there? Speak quick, or I'll shoot through the door!"

"It's me, Glanton!" called the ranchman in a hurry. "You asked me to come, didn't you?"

Chains rattled, a key grated in the lock, and the door swung inward. The black night seemed to flow in after Glanton with the wind that made the lamp flicker and the shadows dance along the walls, and Bruckman moaned and slammed the door in its ebon face. He jammed bolt and chain with trembling hands.

"Your confounded hired hand tried to kill me on the way over," Glanton began angrily. "I've told you that lunatic would go bad some day--"

He stopped short. Two other people were in the room. One was Lem Richards, the justice of the peace, a short, stolid, unimaginative man who sat before the hearth placidly chewing his quid.

The other was a girl, and at the sight of her a sort of shock passed over Emmett Glanton, bringing a sudden realization of his work-hardened hands and hickory shirt and rusty boots. She was like a breath of perfume from the world of tinsel and bright lights and evening gowns that he had almost forgotten in his toil to build up his fortune in this primitive country.

Her supple young figure was set off to its best advantage by the neat but costly dress she wore. Her loveliness dazzled Glanton at first glance; then he looked again and was appalled. For she was white and cold as a statue of marble, and her dilated eyes stared at him as though she had just seen a serpent writhe through the door.

"Oh, excuse me!" he said awkwardly, dragging off his battered Stetson. "I wouldn't have come busting in here like this if I'd known there was a lady--"

"Never mind that!" snapped John Bruckman. He faced Glanton across the table, his face limned in the lamp-light. It was a haggard face, and in the burning eyes Glanton saw fear, murky bestial fear that made the man repulsive. Bruckman spoke hurriedly, the words tumbling over each other, and from time to time he glanced at the big clock on the mantel sullenly ticking off the seconds.

"Glanton, I hold a mortgage on your ranch, and it's due in a few days. Do you think you can meet your payment?"

Glanton felt like cursing the man. Had he called him over that windswept road on a night like this to discuss a mortgage? A glance at the white, tense girl told him something else was behind all this.

"I reckon I can," he said shortly. "I'm getting by--or would if you'd stay off my back long enough for me to get a start."

"I'll do that!" Bruckman's hands were shaking as he fumbled in his coat. "Look here! Here's the mortgage!" He tossed a document on the table. "And a thousand dollars in cash!" A compact bundle of bank notes plopped down on the table before Glanton's astounded eyes. "It's all yours--mortgage and money--if you'll do one thing for me!"

"And what's that?"

Bruckman's bony forefinger stabbed at the cringing girl.

"Marry her!"

"What?" Glanton wheeled and stared at her with a new intensity, and she stared wildly back, in evident fright, and bewilderment.

"Marry her?" He ran a hand dazedly across his head, vividly aware of the loneliness of the life he had been leading for the past three years.

"What does the young lady think about it?" he asked.

Bruckman snarled impatiently.

"What does it matter what she thinks? She's my niece, my ward. She'll do as I say. She

could do worse than marry you. You're no common ridge-runner. You're a gentleman by birth and breeding--"

"Never mind that," growled Glanton, waving him aside. He stepped toward the girl.

"Are you willing to marry me?" he asked directly.

She looked full into his eyes for a long moment, with a desperate and pitiful intensity in her gaze. She must have read kindness and honesty there, for suddenly, impulsively, she sprang forward and caught his brown hand in both of hers, crying:

"Yes! Yes!*Please* marry me! Marry me and take me away from *him* --" Her gesture toward John Bruckman was one of fear and loathing, but the old man did not heed. He was staring fearfully at the clock again.

He clapped his hands in a spasm of nervousness.

"Quick! Quick! Lem brought the license, according to my instructions. He'll marry you now--now! Stand over here by the table and join hands."

Richards rose heavily and lumbered over to the table, fingering his worn book. All this drama and mystery meant nothing to him, except that another couple were to be married.

And so Emmett Glanton found himself standing holding the quivering hand of a girl he had never seen before, while the justice of the peace mumbled the ritual which made them husband and wife. And only then did he learn the girl's name--Joan Zukor.

"Do you, Emmett, take this woman..." droned the monotonous voice.

Glanton gave his reply mechanically, his fingers involuntarily clenching on the slim fingers they grasped. For, pressed briefly against a window, he had seen a face--a white, blood-streaked mask of murder--the face of the halfwit Joshua.

The maniac's eyes burned on Glanton with a mad hate, and on the woman at his side with a sickening flame of desire. Then the face was gone and the window framed only the blackness of the night.

None but Glanton had seen the lunatic. Richards, paid by old John, lumbered stolidly forth and the door shut behind him. Glanton and the girl stood looking at each other speechlessly, in sudden self-consciousness, but old John gave them no pause. He glared at the clock again, which showed ten minutes after eleven, jammed the mortgage and the bank notes into Glanton's hand and pushed him and the girl toward the door. Sweat dripped from his livid face, but a sort of wild triumph mingled with his strange fear.

"Get out! Get off my place! Take your wife and go! I wash my hands of her! I am no longer responsible for her! She's your burden! Go--and go quick!"

CHAPTER II - "Tell Them--In Pity's Name"

In a sort of daze Glanton found himself out on the porch with the girl, and from inside came the sound of drawn bolts and hooked chains. Angrily he took a step toward the door, then noticed the girl shivering beside him, huddling about her a cloak she had snatched as they were evicted.

"Come on, Joan," he said awkwardly, taking her arm. "I think your uncle must be crazy. We'd better go."

He felt her shudder.

"Yes, let us go quickly."

Richards, characteristically, had left the yard gate unfastened. It was flapping and banging in the wind which moaned through the junipers. Glanton groped his way toward the sound, sheltering the cowering girl against the gusts that whipped her cloak about her.

He shivered at the thick-set, cone-shaped outlines of the junipers along the walk. Either of them might be hiding the maniac who had glared through the window. The creature was no longer human; he was a beast of prey, ranging the night.

John Bruckman had given Glanton no chance to warn him of the madman. But Glanton decided he would phone back from his ranch house. They could not loiter there in the darkness, with that skulking fiend abroad.

He half expected to find Joshua crouching in the car, but it was empty, and a feeling of relief flooded him as he turned on the lights and their twin beams lanced the dark. The girl beside him sighed too, though she knew nothing of the death that lurked near them. But she sensed the evil of the night, the menace of the crowding blackness. Even such a dim illumination as this was comforting.

Wordless, Glanton started the car and they began the bumping, jolting ride. He was consumed with curiosity, but hesitated to put the question that itched on his tongue. Presently the girl herself spoke.

"You wonder why my uncle sold me like a slave--or an animal!"

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Glanton in quick sympathy. "You need not--"

"*Why shouldn't* you wonder?" she retorted bitterly. "I can only say--I don't know. He's my only relative, as far as I know. I've seen him only a few times in my life. Ever since I was a small child I've lived in boarding schools and I always understood he was supplying the money that lodged, dressed and educated me. But he seldom wrote; hardly ever visited me.

"I was in a school in Houston when I received a wire from my uncle ordering me to come to him at once. I came on the train to Skurlock, and arrived about nine tonight. Mr. Richards met me at the station. He told me that my uncle had phoned and asked him to drive me out to his ranch. He had the license with him, though I didn't know it at the time.

"When we got here my uncle told me abruptly that I'd have to marry a young man he had sent for. Naturally, I--I was terrified--" She faltered and then laid a timid hand on his arm. "I was afraid--I didn't know what kind of a man it might be."

"I'll be a good husband to you, girl," he said awkwardly, and thrilled with pleasure at the sincerity in her tone as she replied:

"I know it. You have kind eyes and gentle hands. Strong, but gentle."

They were approaching a place where the road had been straightened by a new track, which, instead of swinging wide around the sloping edge of a steep, thicket-grown knoll, crossed a shallow ravine by a crude bridge and ran close by the knob on the opposite side, where it sheered off in a forty-foot cliff.

As the knoll grew dimly out of the windy darkness ahead of them, a grisly premonition rose in Glanton's breast. Joshua, loping through the mesquite like a lobo wolf, could have reached that knob ahead of them. It was the most logical place along the road for an ambush. A man crouching on the thicket-clad crest of the cliff could hurl a boulder down on a car passing along the new stretch of road--

With sudden decision, Glanton wrenched the car into the old track, now a faint trace grown up in broom weeds and prickly pears.

Joan caught at him for support as she was thrown from side to side by the jouncing of the auto. Then as they swung around the slope and came back into the plain road again, behind and above them yammered a fiendish howling--the maddened, primordial shrieking of a baffled beast of prey which realizes that his victims have eluded him.

"What's that?" gasped Joan, clutching at Glanton.

"Just a bobcat squalling in the brush on that knob," he assured her, but it was with convulsive haste that he jammed his foot down on the accelerator and sent the car thundering down the road. Tomorrow, he swore, he'd raise a posse and hunt down that slaving human beast as he would a rabid coyote.

He could imagine the madman loping along the road after them, foam from his bared fangs dripping onto his bare, hairy breast. He was glad the lamp was burning in the parlor of his ranch house. It reached a warm shaft of light to them across the windy reaches of the night.

He did not drive the car into the shed that served as garage. He drove it as close to the porch as he could get it, and opened the car door in the light that streamed from the house, as old Juan Sanchez, his Mexican man-of-all-work, opened the front door.

Glanton was briefly aware of the bareness of his residence. There had been no time to adorn it in his toil to build his spread. But now he must have a front yard with a fence around it and some rose bushes and spineless decorative cacti. Women liked things like that.

"This is my wife, Sanchez," he said briefly. "Senora Joan."

The old Mexican hid his astonishment with a low bow, and said, with the natural courtliness of his race:

"Buenas noches, senora! Welcome to the hacienda ."

In the parlor Glanton said: "Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, Joan. It's been a cold drive. Sanchez, stir up the fire and throw on some more mesquite chunks. I'm going to call up John Bruckman. There's something he ought to know--"

But even as he reached for the phone the bell jangled discordantly. As he lifted the receiver over the line came John Bruckman's voice, brittle with fear and more than fear--with physical agony.

"Emmett! Emmett Glanton! Tell them--in pity's name tell them that you've married Joan Zukor! Tell them I'm no longer responsible for her!"

"Tell who?" demanded Glanton, all but speechless with amazement.

Joan was on her feet, white-faced; that frantic voice shrieking from the receiver had reached her ears.

"These devils!" squalled the voice of John Bruckman. "The Black Brothers of--aaagh--Mercy!"

The voice broke in a loud shriek, and in the brief silence that followed there sounded a low, gurgling, indescribably repellent laugh. And Glanton's hair stood up, for he knew it was not John Bruckman who laughed.

"Hello!" he yelled. "John! John Bruckman!"

There was no answer. A click told him that the receiver had been hung up at the other end, and a grisly conviction shook him that it had not been John Bruckman's hand who had hung it up.

He turned to the girl, who stood silent and wide-eyed in the middle of the room, as he snatched a gun from its scabbard hanging on the wall.

"I've got to go back to Bruckman's ranch," he said. "Something devilish is happening over there, and the old man seems to need help bad."

She was speechless. Impulsively he took her hands in his and stroked them reassuringly.

"Don't be afraid, kid," he said. "Sanchez will take care of you till I get back. And I won't be gone long."

CHAPTER III - Dead Madness

As he drew the old Mexican out onto the porch a glance back showed her still standing dumbly in the center of the room, her hands pressed childishly to her breasts, an image of youthful fright and bewilderment lost in an unfamiliar world of violence and horror.

"I don't know what the Hell's happened over at Bruckman's," he said swiftly and low-voiced to Sanchez. "But be careful. Joshua, the halfwit's gone on the rampage. He tried to kill me tonight, and he laid for us at the knob where the new road passes. Probably meant to brain me with a rock and kidnap Joan. Shoot him like a coyote if he shows his head on this ranch while I'm gone."

"Trust me, *senor!*" Old Sanchez's face was grim as he fondled the worn butt of his old single-action Colt. Men had died before that black muzzle in the wild old days when Sanchez had ridden with Pancho Villa. Sanchez could be depended on. Glanton clapped him on the back, leaped into the Ford and roared away southward.

The road before him was a white crack in a black wall, opening steadily in the glare of the headlights. He drove recklessly, half expecting each moment to see the shambling figure of the maniac spring out of the blackness. Grimly he touched the butt of the pistol thrust into the waistband of his trousers.

Aversion to driving under that gloomy cliff was so strong in Glanton that again he swung aside and followed the dimmer, longer road that wound around the opposite side of the knob.

And as he did so he was aware of another roar, above that of his own racing motor. He caught the reflection of powerful headlights. Some other car was eating up the road, racing northward and taking the shorter cut. As he drove into the open road beyond the knob he looked back and glimpsed a rapidly receding tail-light. A nameless foreboding seized him, urging him to wheel around and race back to his own ranch.

But there was not necessarily anything sinister in a car speeding northward even at that hour. It was probably some ranchman who lived north of Glanton returning home from Skurlock, or some traveling salesman bound for one of the little cowtowns still further

north, and leaving the paved highways to take a short cut.

There was no light in the window of the Bruckman ranch house as Glanton approached it; only the glow of the fire in the fireplace staining the windows with lurid blood, crimsoning it without illuminating. There was no sound but the moaning of the ghostly wind through the dark junipers as Glanton went up the walk. But the front door stood open.

Pistol in hand, Glanton peered in. He caught the glimmer of red coals glowing on the hearth. The dry, toneless ticking of the clock made him start nervously.

He called: "John! John Bruckman!"

No answer, but somewhere a moan rose in the fire-shadowed darkness, a low, whimpering of anguish, thick and gurgling as if through a gag of welling blood. And a steady drip, drip of something wet and sticky on the floor.

Panic clawed at Glanton's spine as he moved toward the smoldering hearth, instinct drawing him toward the one spot of light in the room. At the moment he did not remember just where stood the table with the oil lamp on it. He must have a moment to gather his wits, to locate it.

He groped for a match, then froze in his tracks. A black hand had materialized out of the shadows, faintly revealed in the light of the glowing embers. It cast something on the coals while Glanton stood transfixed.

Little tongues of red grew to life; the fire rose and the shadows retreated before the widening pool of wavering light. A face grew out of the darkness before Emmett Glanton--a grinning face that was like a carven mask somehow imbued with evil life. White pointed teeth reflected the firelight, eyes red as the eyes of an owl burned at him.

With a choking cry Glanton lifted his gun and fired full at the face. At that range he could not miss. The face vanished with a shattering crash and Glanton was showered with tiny particles that stung his hand.

But a low laugh rang through the room--the laugh he had heard over the phone! Whence it came he could not be sure, but in the flash of intuition that came to him, as it often comes to men in desperate straits, he realized the trick that had been played upon him, and wheeled with a gasp of pure terror. Pointblank he fired, with the muzzle jammed against the bulk that was almost on him--the bulk of the fiend that had crept *upbehind him while he was staring at its reflection in front of him.*

There was an agonized grunt and something that swished venomously ripped away the front of his shirt. And then the monster was down and floundering in its death throes in the shadows at his feet, and in a panic Glanton fired down at it again and again, until its thrashing ceased and in the deafening silence that followed the booming of the shots he

heard only the dry tick-tock of the clock, the drip-drip on the floor and the moaning that rose eerily in the gruesome dark.

His hands were clammy with sweat when he found the oil lamp and lighted it. As the flame sprang up, sending the shadows slinking back to the corners, he glared fearfully at the thing sprawled before the hearth. At least it was *aman* --a tall, powerful man, naked to the waist, his shoulders and arching chest gigantic, his arms thick with knotting muscles.

Blood oozed from three wounds in that massive torso. He was black, but he was not a Negro. He seemed to be stained with some sort of paint from his shaven crown to his fingertips. And the fingers of one hand were frightfully armed, with steel hooks that were hollow nearly to the points and slipped over the fingers, curving and razor sharp, making terrible, tiger-like talons.

The thick lips, drawn back, revealed teeth filed to points, and then Glanton saw that he was not painted all over, after all. In the center of the breast a circle of white skin showed, and inside that circle there was a strange black symbol; it looked like a blind, black face.

An arrangement of mirrors fastened at right angles to the mantel and to the wall, one shattered by his bullet, revealed the trick by which he meant to take Glanton off guard. He must have made his arrangements, simple and easy enough, when he heard the car driving up. But it was diabolical, betraying a twisted mind.

From where he had been standing, Glanton could not see his own reflection in the mirror on the mantel, but only the reflection of the black man behind and to one side of him, like a spectral face floating in the shadows.

What takes long in the telling flashed lightning-like through Glanton's mind as he looked down at the black man; and then he saw something else. He saw old John Bruckman.

The old man lay naked on a table, on his back, arms and legs spread wide, so that his body formed a St. Andrew's Cross. Through each hand, nailing it to the wood, and through each ankle, a black spike had been driven.

His tongue had been pulled out of his mouth and a steel skewer was driven through it. A ghastly raw, red patch showed on his breast, where a portion of skin as big as a man's palm had been savagely sliced away. And that piece of skin lay on the table beside him and Glanton gasped at the sight of it. For it bore the same unholy symbol that showed on the breast of the dead man by the hearth. Blood trickled along the table, dripped on the floor.

Nauseated, Glanton drew forth the skewer from John Bruckman's tongue. Bruckman gagged, spat forth a great mouthful of blood and made incoherent sounds.

"Take it easy, John," said Glanton. "I'll get some pliers and pull these spikes out--"

"Let them be!" gurgled Bruckman, scarcely intelligible with his butchered tongue. "They're barbed--you'll tear my hands off. I'm dying--they hurt me in ways that don't show so plainly. Let me die in as little pain as possible. Sorry--would have warned you/*he* was waiting for you in the dark--but this accursed skewer--couldn't even scream. He heard your car and made ready--mirrors--always carry their paraphernalia with them--paraphernalia of illusion--deception and murder! Whiskey, quick! On that shelf!"

Though he winced at the sting of the fiery liquid on his mangled tongue, Bruckman's voice grew stronger; and a blaze rose in his bloodshot eyes.

"I'm going to tell you everything," he panted. "I'll live that long--then you set the law on them--blast them off the earth! I've kept the oath until now, even with the threat of death hanging over me, but I thought I could fool them. Curse their black souls, I'll keep their secret no longer! Don't talk or ask questions--listen!"

Strange the tales that dying lips have gasped, but never a stranger tale than that Emmett Glanton heard in the blood-stained room, where a dead black face grinned by a smoldering hearth, and a dying man, spiked to a table, mouthed grisly secrets with a mangled tongue in the smoky light of the guttering lamp, while the black wind moaned and crawled at the rattling windows.

"When I was young, in another land," panted John Bruckman, "I was a fool. And I was trapped by my own folly into joining a cult of devil worshippers--the Black Brothers of Ahriman. Until too late I did not realize what they were--nor to what horrors my own terrible oath had bound me. I need not speak of their aims and purposes--they were foul beyond conception. Yet they had one characteristic that is so often lacking in many such cults--they were sincere--fanatic. They worshipped the fiend Ahriman as zealously as did their heathen ancestors. And they practiced human sacrifice. Once each year, on this very night, between midnight and dawn, a young girl was offered up on the burning altar of Ahriman, Lord of Fire. On that glowing altar her body was consumed to ashes and the ashes scattered to the night wind by the black-painted priests.

"I became one of the Black Brothers. On my breast was tattooed indelibly the symbol of Ahriman, which is the symbol of Night--a blind, black face. But at last I sickened of the revolting practices of the cult, and fled from it. I came to America and changed my name. Some of my people were already here--the branch of the family to which Joan belongs.

"With the passing of nineteen years I thought the Black Brothers had forgotten me. I didn't know there were branches in America, in the teeming foreign quarters of the great cities. But I might have known they never forget. And one day I received a cryptic message that shattered my illusions. They had remembered, had traced me, found me--knew all about me. And, in punishment for my desertion, they had chosen my niece, Joan, for the yearly sacrifice.

"That was bad enough, but what nearly drove me mad with terror was knowledge of the

custom that attends the sacrifice--since time immemorial it's been the habit of the Black Brothers to kill the man nearest the girl chosen for sacrifice--father, brother, husband--her 'master' according to their ritual. This is partly because of a dim phallic superstition, partly a practical way of eliminating an enemy, for the girl's protector would certainly seek vengeance.

"I knew I couldn't save Joan. She was marked for doom, but I might save myself by shifting responsibility for her to somebody else's shoulders. So I brought her here and married her to you."

"You swine!" whispered Glanton.

"It did me little good!" gasped Bruckman, his tortured head tossing from side to side. His eyes were glazing and a bloody froth rose to his livid lips. "They came shortly after you drove away. I was fool enough to let them in--told them I was no longer responsible for the chosen maiden. They laughed at me--tortured me. I broke away--got to the phone--but they had ordered my death, as a renegade brother. They drove away, leaving one of them here to attend to me. You can see he did his work well!"

"Where--where did they go?" Glanton spoke with dry lips, remembering the big automobile roaring northward.

"To your ranch--to get Joan--I told them where she was--before they started torturing me!"

"You fool! You're telling me this*now*," Glanton yelled.

But John Bruckman did not hear, for, with a convulsion that spattered foam from his empurpled lips and tore one of the bloody spikes out of the wood, the life went out of him in one great cry.

CHAPTER IV - Crackling Blue Flame

Like a drunken man, Emmitt Glanton left from that lamp-lit room where a black face on the floor grinned blindly at a blind white face lolling on the table. The black wind ripped at him with mad, invisible fingers as he ran in great leaps to his car.

The drive through the screaming darkness was nightmare, with the black wall splitting before him, and closing behind him, horror hounding him like a werewolf on his trail, and the wind howling awful secrets in his ears.

He did not turn aside for the somber knoll this time, but plunged straight on, thundered over the bridge and rushed past the black cliff. No boulder fell from above. Joshua must have left his ambush long ago.

Three more miles and his heart leaped into his throat and stuck there, a choking chunk of

ice. He should be able to see the light in the ranch house window by now--but only the glare of his own headlights knifed the black curtain before him.

Then the ranch house bulked out of the night and on the porch he saw a strange pale spot of radiance glowing. There was no sign of the automobile that had come northward. But he checked his own car suddenly to avoid running over a shape that sprawled in the fenceless yard. It was the mad Joshua, lying face down, one side of his head a mass of blood. He had come only to meet death.

Glanton slid out of the car and ran toward the house, shouting Sanchez' name. His cries died away in the stormy clamor of the wind and an icy hand gripped his heart.

His dilated eyes were fixed on the pale spot that grew in size and shape as he approached--a man's face stared at him--the face of Sanchez, weirdly illuminated. Glanton stole closer, holding his breath. Why should the face of Sanchez glow so in the darkness? Why should he stand so still, unanswering, eyes fixed and glassy? Why should his face be looking down from such a height?

Then Glanton knew. He was looking at Sanchez' severed head, fastened by its long hair to a pillar of the porch. Some sort of phosphorus had been rubbed on the dead face to make that eerie glow.

"Joan!"

It was a cry of agony as Glanton flung himself into the darkened house. Only the wind outside answered him, mocked him. His foot struck something heavy and yielding just inside the door. Sick with horror he found a match and struck it. Near the door lay a headless body, riddled with bullets. It was the body of Sanchez. And but for the corpse the house was empty. The match burned down to Glanton's fingers and he stumbled out of the house.

Out in the yard he fought down hysteria and forced himself to look at the matter rationally. Joshua must have been shot by Sanchez, while trying to sneak up on the house. Then it would have been easy for strangers to catch the old Mexican off-guard. He had not expected an attack from anyone except the halfwit, nor would he have been expecting enemies to come in a motor car. He would have come to the door at a hail from a stopping auto, unsuspectingly showing himself in the lighted doorway. A sudden hail of bullets would have done the rest. And then--beads of perspiration broke out on his body. Joan, alone and undefended, with those fiends!

He whirled, gun in hand, as he thought he heard a noise like something moving in the bushes north of the house. It diminished, ceased as he went in that direction. It might have been a steer, or some smaller beast. It might--suddenly he turned and strode toward the car.

The body that had lain there before was gone. Had dead Joshua risen and stalked away in

the shadows, and was it he that Glanton had heard stealing northward through the bushes? Glanton did not greatly care. At that moment he was ready to believe any grisliness was possible, and he had no interest in Joshua, dead or alive.

He walked around the house, wiping the sweat from his face with clammy hands. The house stood on a rise. From it he could see the lights of any car fleeing northward, for several miles. He strained his eyes, but saw no distant shaft splitting the dark. The raiders must have already put many miles between them and the scene of their crimes. He must follow--but where? Northward, yes--but a few miles north of his ranch the road split into three forks, each leading eventually into a highway, one of which ran to New Mexico, one to Oklahoma, and one north into the Panhandle.

He twisted his fingers together in an agony of indecision. Then he stiffened.

He had seen a light--yet not a distinct shaft like a car light. This was more like a blur in the dark--like the glow of embers not yet extinguished. It seemed to emanate from a spot somewhat east of the road which ran north, and this side of the forks. Night made sight and judgment deceptive, but tracing out that eerie glow was better than sitting in racking inaction.

Fixing the spot in his mind as well as he could, he ran to his car and drove northward. As soon as he had descended the rise on which his house stood he could no longer see the glare, but he drove on until he reached a spot which he believed was the point where the road most closely approached the spot where he had seen the glow. A long wooded ridge stood east of the road at that spot.

He left the car and toiled up the western slope of the ridge, scratching his hands and tearing his clothing on rocks and bushes. And nearly to the crest he heard something that stopped him in his tracks. The wind had dwindled to a fitful moaning, and somewhere ahead of him there rose a weird sound that set his flesh crawling.

Chanting! Beyond that black ridge men were chanting in an evil monotone that brought up shuddersome racial memories, old as time and dim as nightmares, of grim black temples where clouds of foul incense smoke rolled about the feet of bowing worshippers before a blood-stained altar. In a frenzy Glanton charged to the crest, tearing through the thickets by sheer force.

Crouching there he looked down on a scene that wrenched his horrified mind back a thousand years into the black night of the medieval when madness stalked the earth in the guise of men.

At the foot of the ridge, in a wide, natural basin glowed a ring of fire. He saw its apparent source--boulders had been rolled to form a solid circle and these boulders glowed with a blue-white light that was like an icy heat beyond human comprehension. From them rose a glow that hung like an unholy halo above the shallow basin. It was this light he had seen from his ranch. It might have been a glow from the slag-heaps of Hell.

And devils were not lacking. He saw them, three of them inside the circle--tall, muscular men, naked, black as the night that surrounded them, their heads hidden by grinning golden masks made like the faces of beasts.

They stood about a heap of stones which glowed with a dull blue radiance, and on that crude improvised altar lay a slender, white, unmoving figure.

Glanton almost screamed aloud at the sight. Joan lay there, stark naked, spread-eagled in the form of St. Andrew's Cross, her wrists and ankles strapped securely. In that instant Glanton knew what it would mean to him to lose that girl--realized how much she had come to mean to him in the few hours he had known her. His wife! Even at this moment the phrase brought a strange, warm thrill. And now those devils down there were preparing, by some hellish art, to reduce that lovely body into ashes--

Madly he hurled himself down the slope, pistol in hand. As he went he heard the chanting cease, and was aware of a strange, yet curiously familiar humming in the air.

Whence it came he could not tell, but it sounded like the pulsing of a giant dynamo. Joan cried out. An edge of pain vibrated through her voice.

The halo over the circle mounted, grew more intensely blue. The rocks glowed with a fiercer light; pale tongues of flame licked up from them. The hue of the altar under the girl was changing. The blue was growing more pronounced, less dull. That the change in its color was accompanied by painful sensations was evident from Joan's cries and the writhings of her bound body.

Glanton yelled incoherently as his feet hit level ground, and the black men turned quickly toward him. His lips drew back in a wolfish snarl and the old single-action gun went up in a menacing arc as he thumbed back the fanged hammer. He meant to shoot these devils down in their tracks, like so many mad dogs--then his out-thrust left hand touched one of the glowing boulders. Merely touched it, but the contact was like the jolt of a fork of lightning. Glanton was knocked off his feet and rolled, blind and dizzy with brief but stunning agony. As he staggered up, snarling and still gripping his gun, he recognized the truth.

Somehow those boulders had been made conductors of electricity. They were charged with a voltage terrific beyond his understanding. And so was the altar, though as yet the full force had not been turned on.

The rising hum that now filled the air told its own grisly tale. Joan was to die by electricity, not swiftly shocked to death as in an electric chair, but slowly agonizedly, burned to a crisp--to white ashes to be scattered to the night wind.

With an inhuman yell he threw up his gun and fired. One of the masked men spun on his heels and fell sprawling, but the taller of the remaining two bent quickly and laid a hand on some sort of contraption at his feet.

Instantly the hum grew to a shriek. White fire danced around the ring, blinding and dazzling the man outside. He saw the tall black forms within it vaguely, through a dizzying blue-white curtain of flame.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, panic tugging at his soul, he fired again and again until the hammer fell with an empty snap. He could not hit them. The noise, the glare, bewildered him; everything was thrown out of its proper proportions; vision and perspective were distorted.

He hurled the gun at them and reeled toward the blazing barricade with his bare hands, knowing that to touch it would be death, yet choosing death rather than standing by and watching the girl die. But before he reached it a black shape hurtled past him, out of the darkness. Joshua! Blood clotted his scalp, but his primitive fury, his mad desire for the white body on that glowing altar were undimmed.

Like a charging bull he came out of the dark, headlong at the barrier. Running hard and low he bent, gathered his thews and leaped! Only a beast or a madman could have made that leap. He cleared the barrier with a foot to spare; one instant he was etched in mid-air, black against the glare, arms wide and fingers spread like talons, then he hit catlike on his feet within the ring of death.

And as he struck he lunged. The priests were naked and weaponless. The taller let go the lever he held, sprang aside, stooped and snatched up some object, even as Joshua struck his companion. It might have been a bull that smote and tossed the black priest.

Plain above the lessening hum and crackle of blue flame sounded the snap of splintering bones, the shriek of the priest. He was whirled from his feet, a broken, dangling doll, lifted high in apelike arms above the bullet-head and dashed head first to the earth with such fury that the broken corpse rebounded before it lay still. Head down, the killer plunged at the taller priest's throat.

It had been a pistol this man had snatched up, and a raking blast of lead met the charging madman--met him, but did not stop him.

With bullets smacking into his body at close range, Joshua bellowed with pain and swayed on his feet, but came on in an irresistible surge of fury and threw his arms about the black body of his foe. He must have been dying even then, but the blind force of his rush was enough to carry the priest off his feet. Together they hurtled on--to crash full against the blazing ring of boulders!

A crack like a clap of thunder, a blinding spray of blue fire, one awful scream--then the reek of burnt flesh filled the air. In the swiftly dying glare, Emmett Glanton saw two hideous figures--*both* black now--crumpled in a fused, indistinguishable mass against the dulling rocks.

Something had happened to the generator of that terrible power. The hum had ceased; the demon halo was dying. Already the stones of the altar had assumed their natural tint. But on it the girl lay limp.

As Glanton crawled over the barrier his heart was in his mouth. Tenderly he freed her and lifted her, grateful to feel warm, living flesh under his hands, but setting his teeth against what he might find--but her tender back and limbs showed none of the ghastly burns he feared.

Obviously no great amount of electricity had been turned into the altar. He saw wires running in all directions from the amazingly small, compact, black case-like thing that stood near the altar.

Before he carried Joan out of the ring he smashed the thing with a heavy rock. The Black Brothers knew secrets that were better kept from the world at large. Even clean science became hurtful black magic in their hands. That tiny dynamo, of a type undreamed of by the world, contained more energy than sane men conceived of--power to turn naked rocks into live wires. Such a secret could only be evil.

He whipped off his torn shirt and wrapped the girl in it, as carefully he carried her down to the road.

As he went, he thought of Joshua, and the only logical explanation offered itself. The bullet that had struck the madman had not killed him, but only creased him and knocked him out. When he came to himself, he started on the trail of the woman his crazed brain desired, drawn either by the same glimpse of the distant fire that had drawn Glanton, or by dark, psychic instinct.

Glanton had almost reached the car when Joan opened her eyes, stared about her wildly, then clung to him.

"It's all right, kid," he soothed her. "You're not hurt. You just fainted. Everything's all right now. Joshua paid his debt, without meaning to, poor devil. Look, it's getting daylight. The night's past."

He meant it in more than its literal sense. "Take me home, Emmett," she whimpered, nestling deep into his arms. Then, irrelevantly: "Kiss me."

And Emmett Glanton kissed his wife for the first time, just as dawn touched the eastern hills.

THE END

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