Snake Doctor

By Irvin S. Cobb

In the North they call them Devil's darning needles. But in the South they are snake doctors, and for a reason. These harmless and decorative dragon flies with their slim, arrow-like bodies, their quick darting flight and their filmy wings, as though the arrows had been flecked with bits of drawn lace, are clothed down there with a curious fetish. When a cotton-mouth is sick—and if his feelings match his disposition he must be sick most of the time—the snake doctor comes hurrying to him with the medication for what ails him. Perhaps seventy-five or a hundred years ago some slave newly in from Africa saw a cotton-mouth moccasin sunning its flat, heart-shaped head on top of the yellow creek water, and along the creek came flashing one of these swift creatures seeking a perch upon which to leave its eggs, and the black man saw it suddenly check and hover and stand at poise in the air an inch above the snake's still head, and from that figured this strange bug was a voodoo bug, ministering to the ailing reptile. In such a matter any man's theory is as good as the next one's. The provable thing is that a good many of the whites and more than a good many of the Negroes believe in the fable for a fact; and nearly all of them, regardless of colour, know the libelled insect as snake doctor.

Now, one of the men I have intent to write about here was known as Snake Doctor, too; and for this, also, there were reasons. To begin with, he was very long and thin, a mere rack of bones held together under the casing of a taut yellow skin; and he had popped, staring eyes, and was amazingly fast in his bodily movements. See him slipping through the willows, so furtive and quick and diffident, with his inadequately small head, his sloped shoulders, his erratic side-steppings this way or that, and inevitably you were reminded thereby of his namesake. To top the analogy, he lived right among the moccasins, taking no harm from them and having no fear of them, seemingly.

Along Cashier Creek, where they throve in a wicked abundance, was his regular ranging ground. His cabin stood in the bottoms near a place notorious for its snakes. They were his friends, so to speak. He caught them and with his bare hands he handled them as a butcher might handle links of sausage. He sold them, once in a while, to naturalists or showmen or zoological collectors; there was a taxidermist in Memphis who was an occasional customer of his. In the season he rendered down their soft fat and drew it off in bottles and retailed it; snake oil being held a sovereign remedy for rheumatism.

By such traffickings he was locally reputed to have made large sums of money. But he rarely spent any of this money; so he went by the name of miser, also. Well, in a way of speaking, he was a miser; zealously he coveted what he got and kept it hidden away in the chinking of his log shack. But he was nowhere near so well-off as the community gave him credit for being. The snake business is a confined and an uncertain business and restricted, moreover, to its special markets. A dealer's stock in trade may be plentiful, as in this case, but his patrons must be sought. To be exact, Snake Doctor had ninety-seven dollars in his cache.

But swearing to the truth of this on a stack of Bibles a mile high wouldn't have made the people in the Cashier Creek country have it so. Popular opinion insisted on multiplying his means and then adding noughts. Nor could you, by any argument, have won over his neighbours, white or black, to a fair estimate of the man's real self, which was that here merely was a poor, shy, lonely eccentric touched in the head by hot suns and perhaps by spells of recurrent swamp

fevers.

They had contempt for him, but mixed in with the contempt was fear. To them he was to be shunned as one having commerce on familiar footing with the most loathly and the most hated of all the creatures that crawl. There was a solitary exception to the current rule of prejudice; a single individual among them who had a human compassion for him and a measure of understanding and right appraisal of him. This individual, curiously enough, was a woman. She was a minority of one. We'll come to her presently. The rest had forgotten his proper name or else had never heard it. By their majority voice he was Ole Snake Doctor. They knew he was familiar with the ways of the cotton-mouth; they half believed he spoke its language.

In this particular region ordinary folks believed many things that weren't so. Superstition, sprouting out of ignorance, had twisted honest nature into a myriad of perverted and detractive shapes. The innocent little blue-streaked lizard was a "scorpyun" and its sting killed. A porous white stone found in the bellies of rutting deer was the only known cure for a mad dog's bite; clap it on the wound and it clung fast like a leech and sucked the poison out. You never saw many jay-birds in the woods between dinner time and dusk on a Friday because then nearly all the jay-birds had gone below to tell the news of a malicious world to their master, the Devil. You rarely could hit a rain crow with a rifle bullet because this slim, brown, nervous bird enjoyed the special protection of old Nick. If a snapping-turtle closed his jaws down on your flesh he wouldn't let go till it thundered. A breath of warm air blowing across your path on a cool night in the woods meant a "witch-hag" had passed that way.

Or take snakes: the Prophet of Old put the curse on them forever after when in his story of the Garden he typified evil as a serpent; mankind has been enlarging the slander ever since. Moreover, in these parts, Caucasian ingenuity as regards snakes and their ways had overlaid a deep embroidery of ill repute upon an already rich background of African folklore. There was the hoop snake, which is mischievous and very deadly, and wears a deadly horn in its head, and there was the joint snake, which is a freak; both fabulous but both accepted as verities. All well-meaning snakes lay under the scandalous ban. Milk snakes, garter snakes, chicken snakes, puff snakes, blue racers and coachwhips were to be destroyed on sight; for their licking, forked tongues were "stingers" and dripped venom. If bitten by any snake your hope was first to drink all the raw whiskey you could get hold of. Or if within ten minutes after being bitten you clamped upon the wound the still-quivering halves of a young chicken which, while alive, had been split open with a hatchet or a knife, there yet was a chance for you. Lacking either of these cures or both of them, you must expire in torment. The bitteR part would swell enormously; the poison, spreading and magnifying in your blood, would rack you with hideous pains; then swiftly it would reach your heart and you were gone.

Every sort of snake was tricky and guileful but the moccasin of the low grounds the most so of all. Kill a moccasin and spare its mate, and the mate would track you for miles, set on vengeance. It was the habit of the moccasin when meat was scarce to lie beneath the yonkerpads—pond lilies, a Northerner would call them—with its head shoved up among the broad green leaves and its mouth stretched wide and gaping, a living lure for such luckless birds and bees as mistook the snare of the parted jaws with their white linings for a half-opened lily bud.

It was in accord with a quite natural law that the moccasin should be singled out for these special calumnies. Of the four venomous snakes of Temperate North America he is the least personable in looks and behaviour. He lacks the grace of his upland cousin, the copperhead, and he lacks the chivalry of his more distant kinsman, the rattler, which gives the enemy due warning before it strikes. He has none of the slimness of form nor patterned beauty of that streak of

fanged lightning which lives in the palmetto scrubs, the coral snake. He is mournfully coloured and miserably shaped. The tones of dull creek mud and of stale creek slime mingle in his scrofulous mottlings. There is leprosy in the pale foxings of his lips, and dropsy in his bloat amidships. Only in the eyes of the taxidermist does he redeem himself for these manifold shortcomings. Being without bright tints to fade in the mounting, his stuffed skin needs no special varnishing to make it seem authentic. It is a poor compliment, perhaps, but his only one. On all other counts and for all other qualities he is copiously defamed and folks generally are prone to believe the worst of him.

Japhet Morner did, for one. For him, swamp water a-thrive with typhoid germs, or rancid corn pones in which the active seeds of pellagra lived, or mosquitoes carrying malaria and chancre in their bills, conveyed no sense of peril. The mosquitoes were to be endured, the water was to be drunk. And biliousness was the common lot of man, anyway. At least, in this neck of the woods it was. But snakes, now, were different; any snake and all snakes whatsoever. He accepted for truth all the hard things that might be said of a snake. Certain other things he likewise believed, namely, that first, his nearest neighbour, Snake Doctor, held unwholesome communion with the cotton-mouths; that second, Snake Doctor had a treasure in money hid away in his shack—on this point he was very sure; and that third, the same Snake Doctor was entirely too fond of his, Japhet's, wife, Kizzie Morner, and she of him.

So it would appear he had a triplet of reasons for holding the other in disfavour—envy of him for his stored wealth, a gnawing suspicion from seeing in him a potential philanderer, and finally, that emotion of fearsome distrust bred out of stupidity and credulity which his kind were likely to have for any fellowman fashioned in different likeness from the run of them. That the shambling, soft-brained Snake Doctor was as sexless as a dirt clod would have been apparent to any straight-seeing observer; and it should have been as plainly visible even to this husband of hers that Kizzie Morner was a good woman and an honest one. But the jaundiced eye sees everything as yellow, and yellow is the colour for jealousy, too, and it suited Japhet Morner's mood to brew jealousy in his mind. Brewing it steadily there was strengthening his will for the putting through of a private project which for a long time he had been conning over in his thoughts. The issue came to a head on a certain day.

It was a day in that dreary season of the year when the birds have quit singing in the daytime and the locusts have started. Summer had sagged as though from the sheer exhaustion of its own wasted fervour. The lowland woods had lost that poisonous green sprightliness which came to them in early April and lasted until the August hot spell set in. Even the weeds, which in the bottoms grew rank and high and close-set, almost, as canes in a canebrake, were wilted and weary looking. The sun had come up that morning behind clouds. In the middle of the forenoon the clouds still banked together to hide the heavens, but the heat seemed intensified and pressed the unstirring air close down to the burnt earth. As Japhet Momer came out of the timber into the famished clearing behind his house the sweat dripped from him and he panted in the close, still humidity. His two dogs trailed him, their tongues lolling. One of them brushed against his leg. He hauled off and fetched the dog a sound kick in the ribs. He was not in a happy humour.

At sun-up, after a breakfast of cold scraps left from the night before, he had gone down to Cashier Creek to get a bait of sunfish. If he were lucky he might catch a catfish for his string. He had no luck, though. The creek was shrunken; it was lower than he ever remembered seeing it. The drought had sucked up its strength. At the shallows it was no more than a thin, sluggish trickle. In deeper places there scarcely was current enough to keep twigs and dropped leaves moving on the unrippled coffee-coloured surface.

Japhet fished and fished and was rewarded with no nibbles whatsoever; seemingly, even the littlest fishes were too languid to bite at the worms he dangled for them in likely spots. He came downstream to the Big Hole, so called, where, an eighth of a mile up from Snake Doctor's shanty, the creek widened to thrice its usual breadth. Here a tight wedge of driftwood blocked the waters. Each successive freshet added flotsam to the rude dam—lost cross-ties, uprooted trees, corn stalks, chips, dead weeds, sticks. Ordinarily this lesser riffle would cover the pool so thickly that, with the top dressing of cream-coloured foam, there was created the simulation of a solid footing; a stranger might have been pardoned for believing he could walk across and keep dryshod. But now all here was clear of gently eddying debris. The consumed stream, instead of slapping against the spanning driftage, ran under it with an oozy, guzzling sound. Directly in the middle there was a busy little whirlpool, funnelling downward.

On one of the lowermost of the bared logs a cotton-mouth was twisted up, taking his ease in the congenial fever warmth. He was a big fat one—fully two feet long and as thick through his girth as a boy's arm. From the bank edge above Japhet saw him and looked about for something to throw at him. In a section where gravel is rare and all rock formations are buried a hundred feet down under the silt, the verb "to stone" is neither used nor known. Your weapon invariably is a "chunk" and with it—a hard clod or a lump of wood or whatever it is—you "chunk" away at your target. The man found a sizable missile, a heavy, half-rotted sycamore bough, and he snapped it off to suitable length and flung it, twirling, at the motionless mark. His aim was good. The stricken snake flapped out of coil and dragged its broken loops from sight into an interlacing of naked limbs on the farther side of its log. The stick bounced hard and splashed in the pool. Japhet saw how then it swirled around and around and then, briskly, was sucked beneath the jam. With a quickened curiosity he moved downstream a rod or two and waited. Although the jam was now, so to speak, a suspension bridge, and in places stood inches clear of the water, the stick did not emerge into view below it. No drift showed there, either; the creek for a space flowed clear of rubbish. Evidently, objects caught in that small whirlpool above were carried in and under to lodge and be held fast by some submerged trap-work of soaked and sunken limbs. Probably they would stay there for months, perhaps stay there always. Turning the matter of the phenomenon over in his mind, he flung away his bait can, spun his fishing cane so that the line wrapped around it, and made off through the woods for his home, nearly a mile away. The two dogs racked along at his heels. Coming out of the woods one of them made the mistake of nudging him.

Having disciplined the scrooging dog with his boot toe he slouched out into the six-acre "dead'nin'." His puny patch of corn, for lack of the hoe, was smothering in weeds. In bare spots where the thin soil was washed so close down to the underlying clay-pan that here not even weeds would sprout, the crawfish had pushed up their conical watch towers of dried mud. Tall ash boles, girdled and dead, threw foreshortened shadows across the clearing—shadows such as gallows trees might cast. His house, of two rooms and built of unpainted up-and-down planking, squatted in the inadequate shade of a stunted chinaberry tree. A well was at one corner. There was no flower bed, no truck patch, no fencing. Across the open space, with the heat waves dancing before him, the outlines of the house seemed to waver and twist like an object seen through smoke. It stood a foot from the earth on log props. Because of seepage there were no cellars in this neighbourhood. The inevitable dogs lived under the houses and bred their fleas there, and the hogs, too, if so he a house owner had any hogs.

It was nearly noon now. His wife, in a skimpy blue frock open at the throat, was cooking the midday meal, the principal meal of the three. He came up to the door and she, looking up from

the cook stove where she was turning the strips of sizzling fat meat in the skillet, saw the look on his face. Her mouth twitched apprehensively. By the signs she knew when he was in one of his tantrums.

"Ketch anything, Jafe?" she asked, nervously.

"Ketch anything this weather?—whut'd you expect I'd ketch?" From his voice it might be figured that, vicariously, he blamed her for the failure of his expedition.

He hunkered down on the doorstep, his fishing pole still in his hands.

"That pore old Mist' Rives come by here a spell ago mighty nigh shook to pieces with a chill," she said, after a bit.

"Oh, he come by, did he?" His tone, purposely, was disarming. "Well, did he come in?"

"Jes' fur a minute."

"Jes' fur a minute, heh? And whut did he want?"

"He wanted could I give him somethin' fur his ailmint. He jes' about could drag one sorry foot before the other— barely could make it up here from his place. I reckon he must be down in bed with the fever by now; I could tell by the touch it wuz risin' in him when he left here and started back home ag'in. It'll be mighty pitiful, him down flat of his back and nobody there to do nothin' fur his comfort. I give him a dos't out of our Butler's Ager Drops. I would 'a' give him a little smidgin' of licker only—only—" She left the sentence unfinished. "That pore shacldy Mist' Rives, he—*Oh,* please don't, Jafe!"

Turning, he had cut viciously at her with the long cane. She shrank back as it whipped through the air, and took the lashing stroke on her forearm, thrown up to fend off the blow.

"Mist' Rives! Mist' Rives!" He mimicked her, furiously. "How many times I got to tell you that there old hoodoo' s name is Snake Doctor? Him that'd skin a louse fur its hide and taller and you callin' him 'Mist' Rives'! You'll be callin' him 'Honey' and 'Sugar' next without I learn you better. Pet names, huh? Well, I aim to learn you.

She flinched at the threat, rubbing the welt on her skin; but he made no effort to strike her again. He sat glowering, saying nothing at all as she made hurry to dish up the food and put it before him; she hoped the weight of victuals in his stomach might dull the edge of his temper. For her part, she had the wisdom to keep silent, too. She ate on her feet, serving him between bites and sups, as was the rule in this household.

After dinner he stretched himself on the floor of the inner room. But he did not sleep. He was busy with his thoughts. One thing he had seen that day, and another thing he had heard—he was adding them together, as the first sum in a squalid equation. She drew a cane-bottom chair outdoors and sat under the chinaberry tree, fanning herself and "dipping" snuff with a peach twig which she scoured back and forth on her gums. After a little while she was driven into the kitchen. It began to rain in sharp, violent showers. The rain made the house inside no cooler; merely changed it from a bake-oven to a putrid steambox.

It was getting along toward four o'clock before Japhet emerged from the front room. He drew on his heavy knee-length boots, which he had removed before lying down, and laced them up. This done, he spoke to her for the first time since noon.

"Where's that there vi'l of licker?" he said. "Fetch it here to me."

They kept a small store of whiskey by them—all in that district did the same—for chills and possible snake bites. She brought him a pint flask nearly full and he shoved it into his hip pocket. Then immediately, as though moved by a fresh idea, he hauled it out again and put it down on the kitchen table.

“Come to think about it,” he said, “I won’t be needin’ to tote no sperrits along with me where I’m goin’. Cotton-mouths is all down in the slashes or else along the creek, and where I’ll be all this evenin’ is up on Bailey’s Ridge in the high ground.”

He was not given to favouring her with explanations of his motives or accounts of his movements. This departure from fixed habit emboldened his wife to put a question.

“Fixin’ to go shootin’, Jafe?” she asked, timidly.

“I aim to gun me a chance of young squirrels ’twixt now and dusk time. I heard ‘em barkin’ all ’round me this mornin’. Ef they’re that plenty in the low ground they’ll be out thicker’n hops after the mulberries and the young hick’ry nuts up Bailey’s Ridge.”

He took up his single-shot rifle where it stood in a corner, and from an opened box on a shelf scooped a handful of brass shells. Then he went outside and tied up both his dogs. One was a hound, good for hunting rabbits. It was proper that he should be left behind. But the smaller dog, a black mongrel, was a trained squirrel dog. As his wife stood in the doorway, Japhet read the dumb curiosity which her face ex pressed.

“With the leaves ez thick ez the way they air, still huntin’ is best this time o’ year,” he explained. “So I won’t be needin’ Gyp. Don’t let neither one of ‘em gnaw hisself loose and follow after me. Set me up a snack of cold supper on a shelf. Likely I won’t git back till its plum’ nighttime— gunnin’ fur them squirrels is best jes’ before dark, and I’ll be away off yonder at the fur end of the Ridge, three miles from here, when I git ready to start back. ’Tain’t ez ef I wuz rangin’ in the low ground.”

He turned north through the struggling corn rows and in a minute was gone from her sight into the dripping woods. He kept on going north for nearly a mile until he came to where a wild red mulberry tree stood in a small natural opening. Some of the overripe fruit, blackened and shrivelled, still clung to the boughs; and where there are mulberries in the summer woods, there squirrels almost certainly will likewise be. Very neatly he shot two young grays through their heads. Japhet was a master marksman. It was his only gentlemanly accomplishment. In all other respects he was just plain white trash, as one of his negro neighbours would have phrased it—behind Japhet’s back. But unsuspected by any who knew him, he had a quality of mind which is denied many of his class—an imagination. It was in excellent working order this day. He now was proving that it was.

He tied the brained squirrels together and swung them, tails downward, over a strap of his suspenders. If needed, they were to be evidence in his behalf—part of his alibi. Next he sat down under a tree awhile. He sat out two brisk showers with the intervals between them. Then, getting up, he set off, keeping always to the deeper woodlands, in a swing which would bring him down Bailey’s Branch, now wasted to a succession of lazy dribbles, and along the skirts of Little Cypress Slash to the sunken flats edging Cashier Creek. The arc of his swing was wide. It took him all of two hours, travelling carefully and without haste through the steamy coverts, to reach the point he aimed for.

He came to halt, cautiously and well sheltered, behind the farthermost fringes of a little jungle of haw bushes where the diminishing woods frayed out in a sort of green peninsula fifty yards or so back of Snake Doctor’s cabin. This was his chosen destination, so here he squatted himself down in a nest of sodden leaves and grass to wait. It had begun to shower again, good and hard. He was drenched. No matter, though; he figured he would not have so very long to wait. As it turned out he didn’t.

There was no house dog to come nosing him out and barking an alarm. That Snake Doctor owned no dog would have marked him, in this part of the land, as a person totally different from

his fellows, even had there been lacking other points of variance. What Snake Doctor did own was a mare, or the ruins of one. She was housed in a log crib a few rods behind the only slightly larger log cabin of her owner. Where he stooped, Japhet could hear her stirring restlessly in her stall. He might have seen her through the cracks between the logs of her shelter except for a brush fence which bounded the small weed-grown clearing.

His plan was simple enough and yet, as he saw it, fault-proof. Feeding time was at hand; soon Snake Doctor, ailing though he was, surely would be coming out from his cabin to bait the old rack-of-bones. Japhet counted on this. He'd get him then, first pop. He'd teach him what the costs were of colleaguing with another man's lawful wedded wife, and the lesson would be the death of him. At a half crouch in his ambush, Japhet told himself that his motive was jealousy; that he was here as a white man and an injured husband for the satisfaction of his personal honour and in the defense of his threatened threshold. By a conscious effort of his will he kept in the background of his mind the other purpose that had brought him on this errand. It had to do with money—with Snake Doctor's hoarded money.

The next step after the principal act would be to dispose of the body. That should be easy. He could carry the meagre frame over his shoulder for a mile, if need be. And he wouldn't have to carry it for a mile, either—only as far as the Big Hole; then lower the burden into the water and let it slip in under the log jam. The chunk he had killed the moccasin with had stayed under there; skinny old Snake Doctor would stay there, too. This done, he would come back here to the cabin and hunt out the hidden treasure. He figured it shouldn't take him a great while to find it; he already had a sort of notion as to its whereabouts, a strong clew to start on. Having found it he would circle back up through the woods, reentering his field from the upper or northern side, with two squirrels flapping his flank for proof that he had been hunting on Bailey's Ridge. Suspicion never could touch him. Why should it?

He counted on the rain which was now falling to wipe out his tracks in Snake Doctor's horse lot. Anyhow, it probably would be days or weeks before any one missed the hermit and made search for him; in that time the tracks would have vanished, rain or no. It was greatly in his favour that when Snake Doctor was from home, or supposed to be, folks religiously refrained from setting foot on the premises. They mightily feared the cotton-mouths with which the recluse was reputed to consort. There was even a story that Snake Doctor kept for a watchman in his house the granddaddy of all created cotton-mouths and set this monster on guard when he stirred abroad. So he needed no locks on his doors nor bar for his single window, the legend amply protecting his belongings in his absences.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen, and Japhet was up on his knees, his rifle at poise, his eyes vigilant through the tops of the weeds which fringed the ambuscade. Something or other— something quick and furtive-stirred behind him. Startled, he turned his head, saw that the disturber was a belated catbird, and looked front again. In that brief space of time the victim had come into sight. Through the rain and the slackening daylight he could see, above the ragged top of the intervening brush fence, the white patch of Snake Doctor's loppy old straw hat and below the hat the folds of a dark coat drawn over a pair of hunched narrow shoulders as the wearer of these garments came briskly toward the stable, which meant also toward him. At this distance he couldn't miss.

Nor did he. At the shot, the figure jerked backward, then went over face forward. The killer rose upright, exultation contending with tautened nerves within him. He stole up to the fence, set a foot in the tangled brushwood with intent to climb it, and then, at what he saw, froze into a

poised shape of terror, his eyes bulging, his mouth opened in a square shape, and his rifle dropping from his twitching fingers.

He had just killed Snake Doctor—killed him dead with a 32-calibre slug through the head. And here on his doorsill stood Snake Doctor, whole and sound, and staring at him! And now, Snake Doctor, dead by all rights and rules, yet living, was uttering a cry and starting out of the doorway toward him.

Japhet Morner had sucked in superstitions with his mother's milk. He believed in "ha'nts," in "witch-hags" and "sperrits," believed in "conjures" and "charms" and ghosts and hoopsnakes; believed that those under the favour of infernal forces might be killed only with a bullet molded from virgin silver. And his mistake was, he had used lead out of a brass shell.

Power of motion returned to him. He threw himself backward and whirled and ran into the deep of the darkening woods, making whimpering, whining sounds like a thrashed puppy as he went.

Terror rode him into the dense timber. Exhaustion, dizziness, the feeling that he must get under the shelter of a sound roof, must have the protection of four walls about him, brought Japhet Morner out again; this was along toward midnight. The rain had ceased; the moon was trying to come forth. A short distance southeast of his place he struck a dirt road which would lead him there. Beyond the next bend he would be in sight of home.

Around the turn he saw coming toward him a joggling light—a lantern hung on a buggy or light wagon, he figured—and heard the creak of wheels turning in the muddied softness. Nameless horrors had made a fugitive of him; the fugitive instinct still possessed him. He flattened down in a clump of bushes to hide until the traveller passed.

Moving briskly, the rig was almost opposite him when, from the other direction—the same direction he had been following—came a call:

"Hello there!—who's joggin'?"

"Whoa! Stiddy, boy!" Whoever was driving pulled up his horse, which had shied at the sudden hail. "Me—Davis Ware," he answered back. "That you, Tip Bailey?"

"Yep, hoofin' it out from the Junction, and tolerable tired, if anybody should ask you. What's bringin' you out this hour of night, Davis—somebody sick?"

"Sick nothin'! There's been hell poppin' in these bottoms to-night."

Behind the weed screen ten feet away the listener stiffened, his blood drumming in him. He knew the speakers, both neighbours of his, one of them a local leader. The foot passenger hurried up alongside the buggy; his face, inquisitive and alarmed, showed in the dim circlet of lantern light.

"What do you mean?"

"A killin'—that's what I mean. An abominable, coldblooded killin' ef ever there wuz one."

"God! Who's been killed?"

"I'm fixin' to tell you, man. It happened jes' shortly before dusk at ole Snake Doctor's place."

"Was it him was killed?"

"Gimme time, can't you?" This Ware was one who must tell his tale his own way or not at all. "It seems like Snake Doctor's been chillin' lately. He wuz purty bad off to-day—I mean yistiddy. And so, right after supper time when the rain wuz lullin' a little, Mizz Kizzie Morner she footed it down from her place to his'n, fetchin' some physic with her and a plate of hot vittles fur him. It seems like she wuzn't feared to go there. I'd 'a' been, I'll own up, but she wuzn't. Well, purty soon after she got there it seems like he tried to git up out of his bed to go feed that old crow-bait sorrel nag of his'n. It had started in ag'in by then, pourin' down hard, and

so she made him stay where he wuz. And she put on his old hat and throwed his old coat round her to keep off the wust of the wet, and she started out of the back door to do the feedin'. And no more'n she'd got outside in the lot than a shot come from the aidge of the woods right over the fence and down she went with a bullet through her brains."

"God's sake! Dead?"

"No, not dead, but same ez dead. She barely wuz breathin' here not ten minutes ago when I left her house. Old Doctor Bradshaw, he's there with her now and he says it's a miracle she's lasted this long. Well, it seems like Snake Doctor jumped up at the shot and run out to see wliut had happened and there she lay a-welterin'. And him—well, he's been takin' on like all possessed ever since. I wouldn't 'a' believed he could 'a' had so much feelin' in him ef I hadn't seen him with my own eyes. It wuz him run for help, though—he did have sense enough left to do that. He found me in my tobacco patch and I dropped everything and took out fur there, and a bunch of us picked her up and toted her home on a wagon bed. She's shot in the left side of the head just over the temple; the bullet went clean through and come out on the right side."

"But who did it?"

"I'm comin' to that. 'Twuz that low-flung husband of hers done it—that's who. It seems like he must 'a' followed her down to Snake Doctor's and laid in wait fur her and felled her ez she come out. Gawd knows why onless 'twuz jes' pure pizen meanness."

"The murderin' dog! They're certain 'twas him, then?"

"Shore ez gun's iron 'twuz him. Snake Doctor ketched a quick look at him over the fence ez he darted off. And right there they found his rifle where he'd dropped it before he whirl't and run—fool thing fur him to do—and I seen his tracks myself, in the soft ground, goin' and comin', and where he must 'a' stood when he fired. I seen 'em by Lantern light after I got there-and fully half a dozen others did, too. There's a long red streak on her arm where he must 'a' been whuppin' her dunn' the day."

"Hangin's a sight too good! Did they catch him?"

"No, but they will. Some thinks he's made fur the slashes and hid out there-his tracks led off that way. There'll be a line of men throwed all the way round Little Cypress before sun-up. They're organizin' the posse at the Morner place."

"Sheriff got there yet?"

"No, but he's due by daylight or sooner. They telephoned in from Gallup's Mills to him and he's already started fur here with his pack of dogs. The trail ought to lay good, ground hem' damp the way it is. Ole Snake Doctor he's carryin' on and ravin' round, sayin' the Lord's goin' to strike the murderer down in his tracks. But I'm puttin' my main dependence on them bloodhounds—on them first, and then mebbe on a good stout plough line and the limb of a tree. Oh, they'll ketch him, and when they do I 'low to be there! I'm jes' puttin' out fur my place to roust out my oldest boy and fetch him back with me. There's a good size crowd already."

"Don't let me hold you up any longer, then," said the pedestrian, a deadly grimness in his tone. "I'm ready now— got a pistol here in my hip pocket. That poor thing! She always was a good-hearted, hard-workin' woman and mightily put upon. As for Jafe Morner—well, if I should be so lucky as to be the one to jump him out of the sticks, I'm goin' to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. I'll be waitin' there at Morner's, Davis."

He broke into a half run.

In the patchy moonlight which sifted through the shredding rain clouds Snake Doctor's house made a black square against the lesser blackness of its background. To it, panting in his haste, came the assassin, running. He feared the place—to the bottom of his desperate soul he feared

it—but a fear yet greater was driving him hither. Previously it has been stated that this man had a powerful imagination. To a literate person it might have been a gift. To him, in this emergency, it was a curse. It set his sore and smitten nerves on end; still, it honed his wits to a sharper edge.

What he overheard back there on the dirt road had remodelled his formless flight into a shaped intent. Now he had to deal, not with phantoms and haunting apparitions, but with tangible dangers; dangers not less frightful than those others perhaps, but to be coped with and—if his luck held—outwitted by physical devices. There was no remorse in him. After all, he fairly well was suited by the outcome of his mistake; getting safely away was what concerned him. In his present plight, weaponless, without a cent in his pocket, with the countryside rousing to hunt him, escape was out of prospect. But with money to buy his way along he'd have a good chance. Let the sheriff come on with his dogs, then, let the mob form, with their talk of a rope and cold lead. With any sort of break he'd best them. He would strike through the deep timber for the river; in six hours of steady travelling he could make it. At the river he would hire a shanty-boater to ferry him across to the Arkansas side; in some town over there buy clothes and get his hair cut; then catch a train and travel as far west or as far south as the steam-cars would take him. And it was Snake Doctor's cash that would buy the way for him! He had little time, though.

Mighty little. He knew the interior arrangements of Snake Doctor's one room—the pallet in this corner, the fireplace in that, the chair and table drawn out on the sagging floor. In the one spying visit he ever had paid Snake Doctor two weeks before, when this shooting scheme first formed in his mind, he had noted these things in detail. He had marked also the very spot where he felt certain the place of concealment for the money was. All through his stay Snake Doctor, tremulous and plainly apprehensive, had maneuvered to keep between the unbidden, unwelcome caller and the corner where his comforters and blankets were placed. Also, the recluse's eyes had helped to betray him; time and time again they had turned nervously to the wall just beyond and above the bedding, a point, say, five or six feet above it. Just about there, probably in a concealed gap between or behind the logs, the loot surely must be.

He thrust through the planked door, sagging on its leather hinges, and crossed directly to the fireplace. There was no fire in it, but, stooping and fumbling with his hands he found chips there ready to be kindled, and under the chips scraps of paper—good! He needed a light of sorts to search by. He had matches in his pocket, corked in a bottle, water-tight. He got them out as quickly as his shaking fingers would let him. There were only four of them. One after another he struck them. But the paper was damp from rain coming down the mud chimney, and no fire caught until the fourth and last match had been struck. Then it merely flickered; it ran slowly along the edge of the charring paper, threatening to go out.

All right, then, let it go out if it wanted to. He could see in the dark as well as the next one, and had hands to feel with. He made for the corner diagonally across the cabin and ran his hands swiftly along the exposed upper surface of a certain log, probing for any deep depressions in the rotted bark adhering to it, nicking the dried clay mortar with his nails. He tried that log without result, started on the log above it—and sucked in his breath as loose scraps of bark fell away at his touch from where they covered a niche in the joining. The cavity thus exposed was roughly circular in shape, the diameter, about, of a man's arm; he could tell that by fingering its edges. This must be the hole. Greedily he thrust his right hand in. It touched something—something slick and firm and smooth—and there came a quick darting sting as pointed things, sharp and keen, jabbed his thumb, tearing the skin as he jerked his hand out.

In that same breath the feeble flame in the fireplace caught well and flared up, its blaze filling the cabin with a wavery, unreliable radiance. Japhet Morner, flinging his hand up before his face,

saw by that red brightness that on the inner side of his thumb were two tiny torn punctures, half an inch apart, from which drops of blood had started; and then, on beyond, two feet away, at the level of his stricken eyes he saw the forepart of a thick snake, its hideous dull-marked head lifted and thrust back just within the round of the orifice, its mouth wide open, with the cottony linings revealed, its neck taut and curved as though ready to strike again.

He gave a strangled, slobbering howl and leaped to the other side of the room, sobbing, grasping, uttering fragments of formless sound. The blood pumped and spurted from his flirted thumb to prove the wounds though minute were deep.

He must have whiskey to drink or the cloven, hot carcass of a freshly killed chicken to bind fast to the bite, or he was done for. At his house half a mile away was whiskey and there chickens were asleep on their roost. He might make it. He whirled about, then recoiled as though a hard blow had stopped him. He couldn't go where men were assembling, ready and anxious to stretch his neck for him.

Now then, his brain told him that, already and thus soon, quick pangs were leaping down his thumb, through his hand, flaming along his wrist and up his arm. The poison must be racing in his veins, mounting and growing, as he had heard it would. He had a feeling that his hand was swelling, making the skin tighter and tighter. There was no help, and even did help come now it would come too late. He howled and dropped and rolled on the floor.

Up in the creviced wall the forward length of the snake showed, its head still guardingly reared on its slim neck, its lidless pale eyes, like twin bits of blurred glazing, aglow in the shifting firelight.

He got upon his feet, and a terrific pain struck at his heart, squeezing and wringing it. His throat closed and he choked. A second pain twisted his heart.

With a drunken leap he cleared the sill of the rear doorway, ran in a wavering course a few strides out across the horse lot and then, as his knees gave way under him, he pitched forward on his face, his lolled mouth full of weeds and muddy grass stems. The cramping fingers of his outstretched right hand almost touched a reddish black smear where the earth was trampled and the grass flattened down.

"Good reddance, by gravy! I'd call it that; wouldn't you, doc?"

The speaker was driving Doctor Bradshaw back to his home near Gallup's Mills. The other raised his head wearily. He had been up all night and he was an old man.

"Well," he said, "I'd not have wished the death he died on any man, no matter what he'd done to deserve it. Yet I reckon there was a sort of rough justice in it, too. Anyway, we've been saved a lynching or else a regular hanging. And one would have been a scandal on the county and the other an expense to the taxpayers. Maybe you have got the right idea about it, Jim Meloan.

"I'm looking at it more from the professional point of view. I've had two strange experiences this past night, Jim. I've seen an under-nourished, sickly woman, after being shot through the brain, linger for nearly seven hours before dying, and I've examined the body of a man who'd been killed by a snake bite-killed good and quick, too, judging by the evidences."

"Well, doc, ain't that the way a cotton-mouth always does kill a man—sudden like? I've always heard tell "

"Never mind what you've heard," said the old doctor; he was cross because he was sleepy. "I'm going by the facts, not by fairy tales. I was born and raised down here, and I've been practising medicine in this county for going on forty-six years. And I tell you that in all my life I've never known of but two or three people actually being bitten by water moccasins, and until

this morning early I never had personal knowledge of anybody at all dying from the bite of any kind of snake. Horses?—well, yes. Dogs?—maybe so. But not a human being.

"Still, the proof is clear enough in this case. I think I'll write a paper about it for the next meeting of the State Medical Society. The places were the fangs nipped him were right there in the ball of his thumb—two bloody deep little scratches, side by side. And then there was that look on his face—ugh! I'm fairly hardened, but I'm not going to forget Jafe Morner's face in a hurry. He died quick, I'd say offhand, but he died hard, too; I'll swear to that part of it. Well, he was the kind who likely would flicker out pretty brisk under certain circumstances. Ever notice the colour of his skin and those heavy pouches under his eyes? Bad whiskey and bad food and swamp fevers didn't put those signs on him. The late Japhet had a rotten bad heart, Jimmy."

"He shorely did," agreed Meloan, fervently. "Yistiddy proved that."

"I don't mean exactly in that sense," explained the physician. "I mean there was an organic weakness. Curious thing, though, there was no swelling round the wounds nor any swelling in his hand or arm; no noticeable blotching of the skin, either. And yet, if there's anything in the accepted theories of the toxic effects of a venomous snake's bite, those conditions should have been marked. Oh, I'll have quite a paper to read before the Society!"

"Mebbe the swellin' had done went down before you got to him," suggested the morbidly interested farmer.

"No, he couldn't have been dead more than a short while when they went down there to set the dogs on the trail and found him; Sheriff Gill tells me he was still warm. And I was there not ten minutes after that. It's a mighty unusual case-several features about it that puzzle me. F'rinstance now, what about the snake that gashed him? Which-a-way did it come from beforehand and where did it head for afterwards? I didn't see any snake tracks in the ground close to where he was laying—I looked for 'em, too. Still, the horse lot was pretty well trompled. Now, that poor forlorn old creature that you people in this neighborhood call Snake Doctor, he's got his own pet theory about it. He keeps on saying it was the vengeance of the Lord falling upon a red-handed murderer. He thinks the fellow was drawn back to the seat of his crime—well, that might be so; I've heard of such things before-and that the Divine Wrath lit on him. But if I was him I'd be poking under the stable or the cabin for a whopping big snake.

"He tells me, though—and he ought to be an authority on the subject if anybody is—he tells me that a water moccasin never travels many yards away from the water and that nighttimes they always den up somewhere, being cold-blooded creatures that love the sunshine. And on top of that he swears to me that there never have been any moccasins close about his diggin's unless he'd brought 'em there dead or else as prisoners in a sack."

"Why, looky here, doc," broke in Meloan, "he lied to you, then. There's always been a sayin' round here that Snake Doctor kept a huge big cotton-mouth right with him in his house all the time!"

"Yes, that's true. I saw it myself, not an hour ago," said the doctor, smiling a little. "I reckon the old fellow's smarter than folks give him credit for being. He took me in his shack and showed it to me."

"But I thought you jes' now said—"

"Wait till I finish. He took me in and showed it to me, just as I'm telling you. But it was deader than Hector. It was a stuffed snake-with glass eyes and all. It seems a professional taxidermist who was up here from Memphis some years ago mounted it for our eccentric friend. Well, I'll tell the world he made a good job of it. Lifelike?—you bet you! See it in a poor light and you'd

almost be ready to swear you saw it move its head. I wouldn't have the thing round me for any amount of money. But it seems this old fellow had a purpose in keeping it.

"That point came out in a sort of a peculiar way, too. It's been common gossip, I understand, that Snake Doctor had a store of money laid by. No doubt you've heard exaggerated stories about the size of his wad; but I'm prepared to tell you it wasn't much—just under a hundred dollars, all told. After he'd calmed down he told me he didn't crave to keep it any more. He said he wanted it spent, paying for a proper funeral for that poor woman—said she was the only friend he'd had in the world; the only one that ever gave him a kind look or a kind word. So he asked me and Tip Bailey to take charge of it and then he took me in his shanty and got it out from the secret place where he'd kept it hid. It was tucked down in behind a break in the chinking between two of the side logs. And—listen to this, Jim—right in front of it, just back inside the mouth of the opening, he'd set that stuffed cotton-mouth of his, figuring that the bare sight of it, with its neck all bent like as if it was fixing to lunge, and its jaws wide open, would kind of discourage anybody who might take a notion to start exploring in there.

"And then, for a further precaution—oh, he's plenty smart in his way!—he'd gone and lined the inside of the hole all round the edges and halfway down to the bottom with coils of barbed wire, with the points sticking up every which-a-way. Anybody who rammed his hand in there suddenly would certainly get gaffed. Not that anybody would who'd seen the snake first."

The old doctor yawned heavily. "Purty cute little notion, I'd call it."