

Bride of the Winged Terror

by Grendon Alzee, 1895-1949

Published: 1936
in »Dime Mystery Magazine«

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Dick Mervale sought to bring a criminal to justice—and to avenge the cruel death of his best friend... But when huge, sable wings sailed out of the terror-ridden night, and sharp, hooked talons ripped at the tender flesh of a lovely, helpless girl, he knew that there was another—and far more dangerous mission—which he must first perform...

Chapter I

Bird of Death.

THE dirt road had been climbing for five miles, and Dick Mervale knew from the increasing difficulty with which he breathed that they must be very high. But there was the greater height on the right of the road along which their open-topped roadster traveled: a grey cliff which rose almost perpendicular for a thousand feet, and then became a thickly forested slope running back, but still upward, until it seemed to hang in the overcast sky, a vast, dark, looming shape, somehow foreboding.

„Buzzard Mountain,“ Fred Harris said, jerking his head toward it. „If my hunch is right, Gorham Carstairs is somewhere up there. Winburg’s a mile ahead, around the bend. Remember the story. We’re driving through to Haleton. We got twisted off the highway, but someone told us it was better to keep on than to turn back. Better let me do the talking.“

„No chance of someone’s recognizing you, is there? Like you did Carstairs’ photo when the reward circular came into the office?“

„Hell no! I was a kid of fourteen when Mom died an’ Uncle Leslie sent for me. Carstairs was a grown man then. *He* didn’t change much in the twenty years he was working in the bank, except that he’s got grey. But we got to watch ourselves. These hillbillies hate furriners worse’n poison, an’ they stick together like glue. If they suspicion we’re lawmen our bird’ll be gone when we get to his hideout, an’ five grand reward will be gone with him. Five grand, an’ our big chance to show up the cops an’ wedge in on the Bankers’ Association business.“

Harris might have left the hills twenty years ago, but the hill dialect clung to him; and he was wiry, lean-faced expressionless as all the mountain breed. Dick Mervale was burly, gigantic by contrast; his hard-boned countenance heavy-jowled. But there was an air of competence about him too, and undaunted courage in his grey, level eyes.

„Lord,“ he grunted. „You don't have to keep rubbing it in that this break means we'll start eating regular at last. I was about ready to pack in the private dick racket and crawl back on the force when...“

Harris granted suddenly, and pitched forward over the wheel. Mervale grabbed for it, kicking Fred's foot off the accelerator, pounding his own heel on the brake, and fighting for a frantic moment to keep the lunging car from running off the curving road, from catapulting into a shaggy, thick tree trunk that loomed suddenly straight ahead.

The roadster stopped, and Mervale's shoulder-holster automatic was in his fist. But there wasn't anyone to shoot at. There was only the thick greenery of the tree clump that filled the bend where the road curved, and screened the halted car from the heights. There was only the grey glimmer of the cliff-face through the clustered trunks.

„Fred,“ Mervale whispered. „Are you sick? *Fred!*“

Harris lolled against him, limp and utterly motionless. „Fred,“ his partner groaned, sighting a little black hole in the left side of brown-thatched skull, and a dribble of blood that ran down a leathery cheek. Not very much of it. Dead men do not bleed.

DEAD. It took a little time for the realization to percolate into Mervale's numbed brain that his buddy was dead. They hadn't expected anything like this. Not from the grey little man who had been an inconspicuous, trusted bank clerk for two decades, and then had absconded with fifty thousand dollars. They had thought it only a question of tracing Carstairs down, putting the cuffs on his wrists and taking him back with them to the city.

No lead from a pocket-gun had made that little hole. It was steel—a steel-jacketed rifle bullet that did not spread. The hole was an inch above Harris' ear, raked downward. It had come from above, from far above...

Mervale recalled a sharp crack, like the snap of a broken bough, that sounded just before his companion had slumped. It had been so distant he had paid no attention to it. Distant—The lethal shot had come from far up the mountain.

He glanced up, involuntarily. The leafy tree-tops which had saved him from sharing his partner's fate blocked his view of the height. But against the leaden sky he saw a black-winged shape wheel and circle. He remembered the name of the mountain, and shuddered.

The buzzards were already gathering to pick Fred's bones. But they wouldn't get the chance... If he drove into Winburg he'd have to explain what had happened. The quick suspicions of the hillbillies would be aroused, and Carstairs would be warned.

Little muscles, knotting, made a ridge along Mervale's jaw, and his eyes were bleak, dangerous.

There was only one practicable way to climb Buzzard Mountain. Harris had sketched it for him: a narrow, ledge-like path that started a half-mile beyond Winburg and zigzagged up the face of the cliff. Mervale was going up that path. He was going up there alone, and he was going to bring Carstairs down it. Or leave him up there, food for the buzzards.

But he'd have to reach the foot of that path first, and he'd have to pass through Winburg to do it. Well, there was a carpet of dead leaves under the trees there. And there were scattered rocks that could be piled over a corpse and keep it safe from carrion birds, till its murder could be avenged, and it could be given decent burial.

Fifteen minutes later the roadster, with a single occupant now, purred through the shielding woods, rounded a shoulder of Buzzard Mountain...

Again Dick Mervale's heel came down hard on the brake.

A gaunt, cadaverous man was in the center of the road, where it became a street running between a half-dozen ramshackle, unpainted houses. There was a sawed-off shotgun in his gnarled hands and it was lifted to snout straight at Mervale's heart.

„What's the idea?“ the detective growled. „This a stick-up?“ A pulse pumped in his wrists. Had he been observed concealing Harris' body? Or were Carstairs' friends making sure that no stranger passed through the valley alive?

The armed man came closer. There was a curious wariness in the way he moved. There was something like fear in his faded, red-rimmed eyes. Like fear that had dwelt there a long time. Nor was it fear of Mervale or of any human thing.

„Who are yeh?“ the fellow demanded, hitching a shirt-sleeved shoulder to keep the frayed strap of his once-blue overalls from sliding off. „Whar yeh comin' from an' whar yeh gwine?“

Mervale forced a mirthless smile to his tight lips. „Why all the questions? This town quarantined or something?“ There was something queer about the place, some brooding strangeness that was seeping into it with the dusk, making it silent and—evil.

„I'm doin' th' askin'.“ The man's flesh-less lips seemed not to move at all. „An' you th' answerin'—ef yeh're smart.“

„All right. Keep your shirt on. My name's Dick Merton.“ There were initials on the bag strapped to the luggage-carrier, lucky they were his own and not Fred's. „I'm driving through from Louisville to Haleton.“ Mervale's look slid covertly past the gun bearer.

There were others on the crazily canted wooden sidewalk bordering the street—all men. There wasn't a woman to be seen, nor a child. The door of each house was shut, its windows covered by shutters or tattered cloths.

The men were all armed, all silent... They watched him with lackluster eyes in which there lurked that same add expression of ancient fear.

„Haleton, huh. Whut yeh doin' on this road?“

„I got twisted, back a way. By the time I found I'd taken the wrong turn I'd gone about two miles. I was told I might as well keep going, it wasn't much farther this way. That right?“

„Right enough. Who tol' yeh thet?“

„He didn't introduce himself.“ Out of the corner of his eye Mervale saw that the other men were closing in on him, moving stealthily, as though they hoped he would not notice. Their ill-shod feet slid through the grey dust of the road, and the dust was a grey film powdering them from head to foot. There was a creeping menace in that slow encircling, and yet he was aware that they were all in the grip of a nightmare dread.

„Whut'd he look like?“

Mervale's expression did not change, there was no flicker in his level, steely gaze. But apprehension ran in his veins and tightened his scalp. He was caught. They would know every inhabitant for miles around... In the nick of time he remembered a figure glimpsed at the edge of the woods, peering as if surprised at the passing roadster.

„He was about sixty. He had a scrubby white beard and there was a white scar on his cheek, like this.“ The detective gestured in description.

„Thet's Elton Stane, Zebediah,“ a new voice behind him said. „Thar's a Louisville newspaper wadded under the strap here on his bag. Date on it's th' twenny-fust. Thet wuz yestiddy. Guess th' furriner's story's squar'.“

The threatening shotgun wavered, dropped. Mervale relaxed. He had passed the cross-examination...

And then he stiffened again as Zebediah asked another question. „D'je see anythin' flyin' in th' sky, mister? Like a big, black bird?“

They knew something then, or suspected something, about what had happened behind the mountain spur. They had seen the buzzard...

„No,“ the detective answered. „No, I saw no bird.“

The corners of Zebediah's mouth twitched briefly. „Yeh will,“ he muttered. „Yeh'll see it afore yeh're many hours older. An' mebbe yeh'll feel it.“

„What do you mean?“ Mervale rapped the question out, his neck cording with sudden anger. Was it a threat? Was it a prophecy that his own body would lie out on the mountain, carrion for the buzzards. „What the hell are you driving at?“

„Show him, Elmer. Let him see.“

„Gee, Pop!“ It was agonized protest, wrung from the throat of a tow-headed, gawky youth of about nineteen. „Gee—I...“

„Show him,“ the man with the shotgun repeated inexorably.

Elmer turned and shuffled to a burlap-covered, shapeless heap which lay on the paintless boards of a stepless porch that crowded the road. He bent, pulled back the drab rag.

Horror twisted at the pit of Mervale's stomach. It was a child who lay there, a flaxen-haired little girl. It *had been* a child. Now it was a contorted, stiff cadaver over which black flies crawled and buzzed; a corpse whose breast and throat were gashed open, *ripped* open, by fierce, sharp talons. He could see the marks of the lethal claws, the long, ragged gashes where they had dug in, striking for a firmer grip.

„Thet's whut I mean,“ Zebediah's voice was utterly without intonation, without emotion. „She ain't th' fust, nor th' last.“

„Good—Lord,“ Mervale husked, his fisted hands pushing down on the steering wheel, lifting him from his seat. „I get it now. You're hunting the thing that did that. I'll help. I'll...“

„Set down! An' get on. We uns'll take care of our own troubles. Git on whar yeh were gwine, an' keep yer mouth shet, Winburg don't need no help from no furriners. *Git!*“

He meant it. And he was going to enforce his order with a shotgun that was lifted again, a gnarled finger tight on its trigger. Dick Mervale shot away from that strange group, in that strange, stricken town. He felt their eyes, in which terror

dwelt, watch him until he had rounded the spur of the cliff that hid him from them.

Shuddering with the memory of the thing he had seen, with the memory of the queer men who would keep their vengeance to themselves though their blood was watery with the fear in their veins, Mervale almost passed the point where the zig-zagging path started up the cliff to where Gorham Carstairs hid. But he saw it in time, and braked the roadster to a skidding halt.

He too, had a mission of vengeance. He too, would carry it out alone, though Satan himself should try to stop him.

There, on the right of the road, was a clump of bushes where Fred had planned to conceal the car. Climbing the face of the cliff he would be hidden from the killer above. But there would be no concealment from the black bird, the sight of whose work still sickened him.

Chapter II

The Flying Fear.

THE chill of the high forest struck through Dick Mervale's thin topcoat to his very marrow, but he dared not kindle the fire for which every exhausted cell of his big-boned body cried. He dared not even use his flashlight to find a nook that might shelter him from the steady, unrelenting flow of the icy wind that had sprung up as darkness rushed down the side of Buzzard Mountain to blot cliff and valley from his straining sight.

The smallest light would carry appallingly far in the starless dark. Carstairs would inevitably see it, and his rifle would make another corpse to lie unmoving in the silent night.

Well, Mervale thought, he'd just have to make the best of it till dawn made it possible to go on with comparative safety. He'd been lucky, at that, to have gained the top of the precipice just as it became too dark to see anything any more. He was lucky, in the fading light, not to have made the single misstep that would have plunged him off the narrow trail and sent him catapulting down to smash on the rocks a thousand feet below.

The detective was no coward. He had demonstrated that in more than one running gun-battle with city crooks. But, haunched on the ground, hands between knees that were drawn up to his chin as he huddled in a vain endeavor to ward off the penetrating cold by the warmth of his own blood, he was afraid now. Deathly afraid.

It was a new experience to Dick Mervale to be jittery, nervous as a rookie cop on his first night patrol. But it was a new experience too, to be so terribly, completely alone in a vast and sightless void.

City-bred, he had never known such silence as this. Such velvety, blinding darkness. It loomed above him to his right, alive with vague, ominous rustlings. It did Mervale no good to insist those sounds were only the stirring of the wind in

dense foliage and the scuttering of small, nocturnal creatures of the wild. Twenty years of urban dwelling could not wholly have robbed Gorham Carstairs of his woodcraft. He would make no more noise than that if he were prowling the thicket, hunting for the man who hunted him.

There were no sounds to Mervale's left. There was only the darkness filling an awful, empty abyss, dropping down and down to nothingness.

Winburg was down there, a thousand feet below. But no lights showed from the hamlet, no hint of human existence. They were scarcely human, the fearful-eyed people who lived there. They cowered under a pall of primordial fear, and for all their shotguns, for all their crusty refusal of outside aid, they knew they were helpless against the flying, taloned destroyer that ravaged them.

They had not told him so, but Mervale knew that more than the one clawed, ripped body lay unburied in that hamlet of horror. He knew that the terror would strike yet again—and that its lair was somewhere up here on the heights.

Could buzzards, he wondered, see in the dark?

The nape of his neck bristled at the thought—and then Mervale's muscles tautened in response to a blast of hoarse sound from the forest depths.

He jumped to his feet, his shoulder-holstered automatic magically appearing in his fingers. He peered into the stygian murk whence that flat, terrifying bellow had come.

Something screamed thinly, only yards away from him. The distance might have been miles, for all Mervale could see of the shrill, agonized sound's source. It cut off. The silence shut down again, the murmursome silence of the fear-filled forest.

He probed the darkness with burning eyes. That scream had been the voice of terror and torture and death. The hoot that had preceded it had been the voice of an unearthly killer sure of its prey.

The hoot... Hysterical laughter plucked at Mervale's larynx. That was it, of course. An owl had hooted, pouncing on a rabbit that had squealed, and died. A negligible incident, in the drama of death that is the life of the wild, had begun and ended. That was all.

He'd have to get a hold on himself. He'd have to stop acting like a two-year old, afraid of the dark. There was, really, only Carstairs he had to fear. And Carstairs would have to have second-sight to know he was on Buzzard Mountain. The place where he had shot Fred was the last spot on the road that was visible from up here. The absconder could by no possibility have seen Mervale leave the roadster and climb the cliff.

The bird terrorizing Winburg, whatever it was, would not attack a grown man. A child, yes; but...

Thought froze in Mervale's brain with the realization that something hovered over him, a shadow that had detached itself from the soaring shadows of the trees. His head jerked back.

There it was, a silently swooping black shape against the grey-black of the overcast sky. A winged thing, climbing some long, invisible slope of the wind. The owl...

That was no owl! No owl was ever so huge. No owl, and no buzzard, had a body five feet long, wings spreading twelve feet from tip to tip! This was some antediluvian monster, some horror from out of the dawn of time, survived

somehow, or reborn, preying upon human beings as the owl preyed upon the small animals of the wild!

Panic, appalling ancestral panic, shook Dick Mervale as a terrier shakes a rat. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the dreadful night and the unknowable, unseeable things that prowl the dark his forbears gave over to them, cowering sleepless in their dank caves.

His gun-arm jerked up, his finger tightening on the automatic's trigger. He hesitated. Carstairs would be sure to hear the shot and be alarmed. Even if, by good fortune, it struck the monster and brought it down, it would make death in another form certain for the detective. He could not hope to escape the human killer in the night-shrouded woods. He dared not attempt flight down the perilous precipice path with no ray of light to reveal its pitfalls.

Relieved breath hissed from between Mervale's teeth. The unbelievable bird wheeled, was gliding down again toward the woods. It hadn't seen him. It didn't know he was there. It merged with the arboreal shadows—vanished, a nightmare phantasm that could not possibly have been real.

But it was real. A whiff of fetid, oily odor drifting to him on some downward eddy of the wind told him that. Recollection of the burlap-covered horror on a porch of paintless, rotting boards told him that.

He clenched his gun with fingers of ice. Its butt ground into his palm, so fiercely that it broke the skin. Mervale didn't feel it. He felt only the ponderous mass of the darkness weighing him down. He heard only the muffled thud, thud, thud of his own affrighted heart beating against its caging ribs...

He heard a scream, high, and tenuous, and packed with ineffable terror, slicing out of the black woods!

And breaking, abruptly into a single word. „Help!“ A despairing, hopeless cry in a terror-thinned feminine voice! „Help!“

It slashed him free from the lashings of fear's paralysis that held him rigid. It flung him into the thicket, battling through snatching, ripping underbrush, caroming off tree trunks, hurtling toward a threshing tumult ahead.

He catapulted into an unexpected clearing. A vague illumination, light only by contrast to the woods' utter darkness, filled it. The sound of struggle came from the center of the opening. Mervale glimpsed a flurry of combat there, a swaying mass of filmy white and lusterless black.

He plunged toward it. He dared not shoot, for fear of hitting the woman who had cried for help. He thrust his gun into his pocket as he flung headlong across the clearing.

The white was the flutter of a feminine garment. The black was a towering, shapeless bulk, grotesquely human-form as a bird with folded wings might resemble a human. Mervale battered flailing fists at it.

His knuckles struck, rebounded from the queasy, revolting feel of oil leather. A scream of rage gibbered from the thing. It flung the woman from it, twisted to meet the assault it was only now aware of.

Mervale struck again, again unavailingly. A hooked something flashed out from the black swirl. He threw himself backward to avoid the lethal sweep, grabbed for his gun.

The thing lurched toward him, curiously ungainly, awkward. The gun was caught in the lining of Mervale's pocket, would not come out.

The creature was not altogether black. Where its head should be there was a pale oval, the blurred, indistinct features of a face—of a *human face!* This thing that flew and ravaged and killed was possessed of a human face.

The realization robbed Mervale of all capability of movement for a frantic instant. The impossible apparition's hooked talon flashed once more. It sliced across Mervale's chest, through coat and jacket and shirt, searing him with red-hot agony.

He somersaulted backward, sprawling on the ground. Twisted, lithely, leaping to his feet, his gun free at last. It spurted orange-red flame at the lunging monster.

The flash of brilliant light blinded Mervale for a fleeting instant. He could see again, at once. The thing was gone. It was not plunging at him. It was not floundering, wounded, on the ground. It had vanished—utterly.

It might have darted into the woods. But no sound came out of that interlaced thicket. No threshing of a heavy body forcing its way through. No sign that anything alive disturbed the shrubbery.

Was the thing alive? It was real. It had existence—no possibility of denying that, with the agony of its slash ripping across his chest, wetting his skin with seeping blood. But was that existence life, or some strange, eerie state of being that enabled it to appear and disappear at will?

There had been something so outré, so macabre, so utterly beyond experience about it. About the shuddersome feel of its skin, the carrion stench it exuded, its grotesque shape...

And its countenance that was a *human face!*

These speculations, trailing across Dick Mervale's brain, were interrupted by a sobbing whimper that turned him from the darkness. His dilated pupils mirrored the prone, white form of the woman he had rescued.

She lay at the opposite edge of the clearing, a wan, vague form in the dimness. She lay so still that she must be badly hurt.

Mervale moved toward her. He watched the forest, the lowering sky above, as he moved. His finger was on the trigger of his gun, and he was taut, quivering with apprehension of the thing's return.

He stood above her, wincing with the pain of his wound, trembling with the queasy fear that was unlike any fear he had ever known. There was only silence about him, utter silence now; the insects and the woods creatures stilled by the crash of combat that had burst among them. There was only the faint whimpering at his feet.

Mervale knelt. His gaze fell to the girl. She was very young. Her gauzy frock—it seemed to be her only garment—revealed the slim, lissome lines of her figure. Where it had been ripped in the struggle he could see white, satiny skin seeming to glow by some inner light, and the swelling, firm curves of just-budding womanhood.

Luxuriant hair, blacker than black, made a tumbled cushion for her head. In the dimness her face was a pallid mask of pagan beauty, high-cheek boned, thin-nostrilled. The quivering lips were dusky-red rose petals. There was a smear of

blood where the singing line of her throat melted into the misty ecstasy of her bosom.

A cold rage at that which had dared to defile so much beauty choked Mervale. His fear was no longer for himself but for her. That he had not been in time to save her from the monster. That she was dead...

A sigh whispered from her. Her eyelids flickered opened...

Gazing down into their tawny depths Mervale saw again the brooding dread, the boding horror, that had made dreadful the bleared eyes of Winburg's beleaguered citizens.

„It's all right,“ he said, low-toned, comforting. „You're all right. It's gone.“

„Gone.“ A little of the terror faded in the deep pools of her long-lashed eyes. Her hand, its fingers white, tapering, lifted to the smear of blood at her throat, rubbed.

The blood rubbed away. There was only a tiny cut beneath it, a cut that might have been made by a sharp-pointed tooth, just breaking the skin.

„That's nothing,“ Mervale spoke again. „Just a scratch. If that's the worst hurt you have...“

„The worst!“ It was a groan, wrenched from her by some obscure dread. Then she was sitting up, her movement even from that awkward position indescribably graceful. „It's the worst. I—I must have fainted.“

„Swell!“ Mervale spoke with a hearty confidence he did not feel. „We'll get you home then. Where is it? What's your name?“

„Elise.“

„I'm Dick. Come on, Elise, up you get.“ He must get her to shelter, quickly, without alarming her. He slid an arm about her shoulder, lifted. Came erect with her, holding her close to him. Holding her warm, soft body to him; tingling suddenly, with the electric, prickling sweetness of it.

„Elise,“ he breathed. „I...“

The words died on his lips. Mervale froze, staring at the figure that stood just within the margin of the clearing.

It was a little, grey haired man. He held a rifle, its long barrel snouting at Mervale and the girl. His scrawny, dungareed body was rigid. And his face was the face Fred Harris had recognized on the police circular that had placed five thousand dollars within the reach of two bankrupt private detectives.

He was Gorham Carstairs!

Chapter III

Death Stalks the Forest.

IF it had not been for the girl, Dick Mervale might have shot it out with the murderer. His gun was in his hand, it would have taken only an up-flip of his wrist, a quick pressure on the trigger.

But Elise was between him and Carstairs. She would be caught in the crossfire. She would surely be killed...

„Elise.“ Startled, uncomprehending, Mervale realized that Carstairs' brooding gaze was fixed on her, not on him. „What are you doing here?“

„Blackie wa'n't in his kennel, Pop. I were lookin' fer him.“

Pop! Elise was Carstairs' daughter! She was the daughter of the thief, the killer Mervale had come to capture. She was...

„You were looking for a dog—in the woods at night, without reckoning what might happen Elise! Something did! Your dress is torn. I heard a scream, a shot...“

„A panther jumped me. This gentleman shot at it, chased it away. I—I were only scratched a little, Pop. T'aint noth-in'.“

She was lying to her father. Deliberately, without hesitation, without a quiver in her voice, she was lying. Why? In God's name why?

„A panther! You might have been killed.“ Shock in the old man's voice, anxiety, but no doubt. He must know about the ghastly bird-thing that ravaged Buzzard Mountain, yet he did not seem to question her assertion that it was only a wildcat that had attacked her.

„Elise was born in these woods. She is as untamed and uncontrollable as any of its creatures.“ Carstairs was speaking to Mervale now. „She simply will not realize that it has become dangerous to wander at night on this mountain. This time, it seems, she did blunder into danger. I must thank you, sir, that it was not worse.“

„I'm glad I could do something.“

What the devil! Carstairs was a hunted fugitive from justice; he had killed one of the men who pursued him. Yet he seemed unperturbed by Mervale's unexplained presence. He was as suave, as smoothly courteous, as though he had nothing at all to fear. But that rifle was very steady in the crook's hands. Its muzzle never swayed from its point-blank aim at the detective's breast.

„It was a great deal. I happen to love my daughter, Mr.—“

„Merton.“

„Mr. Merton, I am grateful to you for saving her. But keeping you out here is a poor way of showing that gratitude. Your wound must be taken care of. And you must not sleep out in the open. I can offer you shelter of a sort.“

That was it, of course. Carstairs wouldn't kill him, unless forced to, in the presence of his daughter. He was stalling till he could get the detective alone. But he was taking no chances. Any untoward move on Mervale's part would bring steel-jacketed death winging from that unwavering rifle.

„Thank you.“ Mervale imitated the other's amazing calm. „You are kind.“

„We had better get going. Oh—your pistol! Elise is as familiar with it as you are, and she would be quicker to scent any prowling animal on the way. Give it to her, please.“

There was a sudden steely note of command in his voice and there was nothing to do but obey. The moment when Mervale might have made a fight of it was past. The detective disarmed himself, his lips twitching with a wry smile, stood waiting for the next move.

„The path is narrow, Mr. Merton, and we shall have to go in single file. Elise will lead the way. You follow her and I will bring up the rear.“

„You're the boss.“ Mervale shrugged. He understood the little man's plan. A shot in the back, excused as an accident—the result of a stumble, of a twig catching the rifle's trigger. Neat. Very neat.

Would they bury him deep enough, Dick Mervale wondered, to foil the buzzards?

The girl's lissome form was a pale glimmer gliding into the black mystery of the thicket with eerie soundlessness. Mervale sensed by feel alone that he was in a steadily descending path. The dense, throbbing darkness closed in on him. The wind had died down, but his feet stirred up a dank, earthy odor, the smell of putrefaction and death. The smell of the tomb.

It was to be his tomb, this haunted forest...

A muscle twitched in his biceps. His eyes slitted, and wrath was a tight band constricting his temples. Wrath at himself for having allowed himself to be so easily overcome. Fiery wrath at the man who had killed his friend, who was about to kill him.

And underneath it there was a quiver of gelid fear, only half-acknowledged, that was not fear of Carstairs' rifle or of Mervale's own automatic in the girl's hand. It seeped through him from the woods themselves, that lay hushed and tense in the spell of a strange dread. Memory of the thing he had seen and fought flooded back on him, of the gigantic bird-shape that had the face of a man!

The feel of it was still on his knuckles, of the oily, leathery skin that was not skin...

Elise's vague form was suddenly blotted out by blackness!

An exclamation tightened Mervale's larynx, unuttered as the feathery touch of leaves against his arm told him the path had twisted to the right. He went around the bend...

Then he dived, his muscles exploding like unleashed springs, into the underbrush to the side of the path! If Elise had been momentarily hidden from him, taking that bend, he was briefly as much screened from Carstairs! Realization and act had been almost simultaneous as Mervale seized the one tenuous, thousand-to-one chance of escape.

He threshed through the whipping, searing thicket, the noise of his passage thunderous. He pounded hard on dank loam, slithered away from the spot where he had fallen, his every cell recoiling from the expected blast of gunfire, from the smashing impact of the bullets Carstairs must inevitably loose at his flight.

They did not come! Mervale lay flattened against the earth, holding his breath till his lungs were tortured, waiting for probing slashes of steel-jacketed death that did not come.

„Pop!“ he heard, instead, Elise's startled cry. „Pop! He—he jumped into the woods. He—he's run away.“

And Carstairs low, unsurprised reply. „I rather expected it. When I asked him to come home with us he looked as if he'd like to refuse but didn't dare. Well, if he'd rather take a chance with a night on Buzzard Mountain, that's his own lookout.“

„But he doesn't know what it means, Pop. He doesn't know about—“

„About what, Elise?“ Carstairs purred the question, and there was a curious, ominous quality to his voice.

„The wildcats, Pop.“ Elise found speech once more, but Mervale knew she lied. That was not what she had started to say.

Carstairs laughed, shortly, humorlessly. „Of course he knows about those.“ Had he put the slightest, most elusive, of emphasis on the last word? „You told me he

saved you from one, just now. If he wants to take his chances with them we should not interfere.“

„But...“

„But nothing. He—*What’s that?*“ Abrupt, sheer terror in those two words. „*What was that sound?*“ And then sudden, shuddering silence out there where the two had been talking.

Silence from them, but Mervale heard that which had brought the silence. Overhead it was a faint, hissing whisper. Like the wind flowing over silent wings. And a smell threaded the earthy aroma of the forest; a fetid, oily smell. The smell of the flying fear.

„Run, Elise!“ Carstairs’ cry was a thin, terror-filled scream. „Run for the house. Come on.“

She answered him with a throaty whimper. Then a burst of sound told Mervale that they were running through the brush, scuttering like a pair of rabbits from the hovering doom that threatened them. Only briefly he heard the sound of their flight, then there was the sharp slam of a door, and the rattle of hastily thrown bolts.

The forest was hushed once more, cringing under the shadow of dread that drifted aloft on black wings. Mervale cowered, flat against the damp loam, his throat dry, his blood a slow, dark flow in his veins.

No wonder Carstairs had not fired at the sound of him in the thicket. There had been no need to betray himself thus. He had left the manhunter to a surer, more horrible death, to the rending talons and ripping beak of the monstrous materialization of evil that guarded the fugitive on Buzzard Mountain far more efficiently than whistling lead.

But it had no beak! It had a mouth, the mouth of a man. Mervale recalled the shuddersome thing he had seen, the vague, blurred oval of a human face that had been the countenance of the thing from which he had rescued Elise. What was it? In the name of all that is holy, what was it? What freak of nature, or of forces at odds with nature itself?

There was some shelter here. The dark tree-boughs were interlaced overhead, too closely for any flying thing with a twelve-foot wing-spread to penetrate. If he remained here he had a chance to survive. But Dick Mervale, unarmed, helpless, started moving, started crawling towards where he had heard a door slammed and bolted against the black threat.

He moved slowly, with infinite caution. The throbbing wound across his chest made each inch of progress a separate agony. His fear of the night-borne flier was a viscous, invisible miasma through which he must force his limbs. There were more material things against which he had to struggle; thorns that caught him, that lacerated him, vines like unbreakable wire he must creep beneath, impenetrable darkness.

A shimmer of light through a leafy veil ahead of him warned Mervale to even more cautious progress. Then there was only a tenuous screen between him and a treeless space more extensive than the glade where he had fought the monster.

It was level. There were buildings in it. A small, squat shed, black and deserted-appearing, hunched close to the dim grey loom of a precipitous rock some thirty yards high. Another was a great deal larger, though still of only one story. It was

from this that the light came, from a shaded window that was a yellow, wavering oblong against the black wall of the forest that hemmed in the clearing except where the perpendicular cliff face completed it.

This was Gorham Carstairs' lair. The skin tightened along Mervale's jaw, and his hands fisted till his nails dug into their palms. There, not twenty feet away, must be the man he had sworn to capture. But he was armed. He was behind a bolted door. More insuperable than these, that open space lay between. Once out there a man would be exposed to the swoop of the Satanic hawk that hunted human beings.

Mervale's eyes travelled along the cabin wall. There was another window, unlighted. There was a door, a blacker rectangle against the blackness of the wall...

A flicker of movement pulled Mervale's eyes back to the illuminated window. It was a shadow that moved across the shade, the slender silhouette of Elise, her virginal curves clearly outlined.

There was a tightening in his throat of pity, of longing. In that poignant instant Dick Mervale knew with a certitude somehow terrible that he had fallen in love with Elise Carstairs.

Strange irony, that after years of bachelorhood he gave his heart to the daughter of the murderer of his best friend...

Mervale crouched in the scanty shelter of the clearing edge. Dared he chance crossing the clearing, lighted now only by cloud-filtered moonlight, and try to gain entrance to the house? Perhaps the winged monster was gone, seeking its nightly victim in the valley. Perhaps...

The soft hiss of wind on a leathery wing, the fetid odor of leathery oil, dashed that hope. And then Mervale saw the thing again.

It poised for a moment, a tremendous shadow of dread in the murk, the paradoxical pale oval of its man's countenance a mask of death in the shadow of its wings. Mervale watched it, shuddering with a glacial fear such as he had never known. He watched the great wings fold, watched the ungainly, gigantic body swerve and begin to move, awkward but strangely silent, toward the cabin. Toward the very window behind which Elise Carstairs lay.

Metal snapped. There was the rasp of wood on wood. There was a blotch of black against the wan rectangle of the window into Elise's room.

The Thing was climbing into that room. Baffled on its first attempt, it had returned for a new attack on the girl!

Chapter IV

Out of the Grave.

DICK MERVALE shouted something unintelligible. Somehow he was across the clearing. Somehow he was the center of a flurry of mad combat, of a dizzy whirlwind of battering, leathery wings that clubbed him, of a floundering, oily body

into which his fists thumped, and thumped and seemed to have no effect except to bruise themselves.

Red-hot fire ripped his shoulder, his side. He held his head down, taking the buffetings on the top of his skull, striving to protect his eyes. That was a mistake. A terrific blow crashed on the back of his neck. It smashed the darkness into his brain. He went down into a weltering, swirling darkness.

Just as consciousness left him he heard a scream, and the blast of a shot. Then oblivion claimed him...

A stygian-feathered buzzard perched on Mervale's chest, keeping its balance by the fierce grip of its talons. Its beak tore strips from his shoulder, his side. It would not be so bad, he thought, if it would eat more rapidly. But this leisurely ripping away of quarter-inch wide lengths of bleeding flesh was unbearable torture.

He was dead, and he shouldn't feel the pain. He felt it, therefore he was not dead. If the buzzard knew he wasn't dead it would stop eating him. He must tell him. He must... but it was so hard to say anything. His best efforts produced only a wordless moan.

The buzzard was gone, but not the pain. A flower had replaced it, a tiny yellow flower that danced where the left tip of the bird's wing had been. It wasn't a flower. It was a candle-flame. The candle was stuck upright in a little mound of its own drippings, on a debris-cluttered floor. Mervale was lying on the same floor. He was in a cell-like room, walled by planed, uneven logs. There wasn't any furniture in as much of the room as he could see. But there was an odor in the room, the odor of grease-smear leather.

The nauseating smell was strong, overpowering, in here. As consciousness and memory grew stronger in Mervale's brain he knew why. This was the lair of the thing he had attacked, the thing that had overpowered him. It had not killed him at once. It had carried him here, so that it could destroy him in its own sweet time.

Mervale rolled, his terror giving him strength to roll—and there it was! His hands flailed against the splintered flooring, thrusting him up to a sitting position.

It wasn't the monster that stared at him. It was a man, stiffly erect, his eyes light-less, glazed. It was—*Fred Harris!*

Mervale's icy lips moved. „Fred,“ he husked. „Fred! Why are you looking at me like that? Why...?“

Fred didn't answer him. He didn't move, not so much as a finger. There was something wrong about his fingers, on his left hand. They were too short. They were red.

Good God! They were bitten, gnawed away!

Dick Mervale's hand beat on the floor, hard. He was trying to hurt himself, trying to wake himself out of this nightmare. Trying to banish the terrible dream.

It was a dream, of course. Fred couldn't be here. He was dead. He was a thousand feet below, buried under dead leaves and heavy rocks. He was dead, but he was here. He was standing...

No! He wasn't standing, he was *hanging* here. His feet didn't quite reach the floor. He was hanging from—Mervale saw a row of curved meat hooks along the wall, level with Fred Harris' neck. There must be another hook like those, behind

that neck, jabbed into it. Fred's corpse was hung there on a meat hook, like the carcass of a slaughtered beef, ready for the butcher's knife!

Red rage at this desecration of the dead burst inside Mervale's skull, hurled him to his feet. An oath choked him, erupted from him. He sprang to the violated corpse, lifted it from the hook, laid it gently on the floor. He straightened...

There was a high, small window in the wall of the room. A gridiron of iron showed across it, in the dancing, eerie candlelight—a checkerboard of bars thick as a big man's thumb, welded together at their junctures. He could see that their ends were sunk deep into the framework of the window.

There was a door too, opposite the window. It was a single slab of wood. Mervale hurled himself to it, twisted its knob. It was locked. He had expected it to be locked.

He fell back panting, shaken and sick with his futile efforts. Sick with realization that he was a prisoner here, with his dead friend, helplessly immured in this place that must be the slaughter-house of the man-bird.

Sounds came in to Mervale, through the barred window. The rustle of wind-stirred leaves. A curious, snick, snick, like the sound a canary's bill had once made as he watched the yellow bird eat—save that this was preposterously, grotesquely magnified, till the crackling of seeds was changed to the crunching of bones. The bird with the face of a man was feeding, out there.

On what? On the tender flesh, the fragile bones, of Elise Carstairs?

The thought stabbed at his mind, and for a moment he was wholly mad. He darted to the wall where the window was, leaped. His fingers caught the bars, pulled him up to them. He perched like a baboon on the sill, peered through.

Blank greyness met his eyes. The greyness of perpendicular stone, of the cliff-like rock that had closed in one side of the clearing where Gorham Carstairs lived. He must be in the shack he had glimpsed, cowering under it. He was alone in it, with his dead friend, while Satan alone knew what horror was being perpetrated out there.

The scrape of a key, a rattle behind him, pulled Mervale down to the floor again. The sounds came from the door. Someone—or *something*—was about to enter.

Mervale sprang across the floor. Just as the key clicked over, he grabbed the doorknob with shaking fingers, braced his feet against the jamb on either side.

The knob twisted in his grip. He held it, arching his back, held it against the force that was pulling at it, that was trying to pull the door open. Even as he clung there, he knew that it was useless. He was weak, terribly weak. The thing had been terribly strong, the buffets of its wings sledgehammer blows. How could he hope to hold the door...?

„Mr. Merton.“ Amazingly it was Elise's voice that called to him through the thick wood. „Dick.“ The voice of the girl he had loved at first sight, and thought dead, worse than dead. „Let me in. Hurry—“

She was alive, but she was in danger. Mervale swung open the door. Elise jumped in, and he slammed it shut again.

„We've got to get it locked again,“ he grunted. „Where's the key?“

„Outside. In the lock.“ Her thin cotton nightgown was high-collared, fell to her ankles. But it clung to her, made her more tempting, somehow, more desirable. Even though shaken by terror of the thing that ravaged mountain and valley,

which was somewhere just outside, Mervale's pulses throbbed in his wrists and his arms ached to sweep around her. „I'll get it.“ He pushed the door open a little, slid a hand out, had the key. The door closed again—slid the key into the inner side of the lock.

„No!“ Amazingly she caught at his hand, trying to stop him. „No. We've got to get out there. We've got to hunt for Pop. I can't find Pop. I'm afraid...“

„The thing's got him. Maybe it has. I hope it has.“

Anger boiled up once more in Mervale's brain. „I'm not worrying about him. It's you I want to keep safe. You, Elise.“ He heard the massive bolt grate into its receptacle.

„Dick! Please!“ She was clinging to him. Her little face turned up to his.

His arms slid around her. She was close to him. Her warm breath played on his face, the sweet fragrance of her was in his nostrils. He felt a fire within her that lit an answering fire within him. His lips found her lips, drank greedily of the honey there. Nothing mattered, in that moment, save that.

A soft, scraping sound meant nothing to Mervale. She pulled a little away from him, still nestling in his arms. „You will help me, my dear. You will help my father.“

„There isn't any use,“ he said, hoarsely, thinking of the crunching he had heard through the barred window. „We wouldn't stand a chance against—against the bird. We can't save him.“

„I saved you.“ Her eyes were brown flame. „I heard you outside my window. I still had your gun. I shot at it. I didn't hit it, but it went away. Then I climbed out. I dragged you here, locked the door so that it couldn't get to you. I ran back to the house an'...“ She hesitated.

„And what?“

„An' Pop wasn't there. I called, and called but he didn't answer. Then—then I saw the light of your candle agin' the rock, an' I knew you must of come to. I ran back here to get you to help.“

„You didn't light the candle?“

„Why no. Didn't you?“

Mervale didn't answer. He asked another question instead. „Did you leave the key in the door?“

„Of course not. I took it with me.“

Someone had been in here after her. Had he brought Fred's body here then? Could a bird use a key, even if it had the face of a man? There was something incongruous here. If she were telling the truth...

The door was moving! Mervale saw it over the girl's shoulder, flung her to one side, remembering in that moment of terror the scraping sound he had disregarded, that he knew now had been the key turning in the lock. Turning under her hand, as she kissed him!

The door flung open. A black figure lunged in. Not the bird. A man, dressed in some close fitting garment of black—Gorham Carstairs!

„Pop!“ Elise screamed. „Pop...“

Chapter V

Magdalene!

THERE was something in Carstairs' hand. It lashed at Mervale, a reptilian whiplash of oxhide. It curled around his waist, flung him backwards to crash against the wall, slithered from him.

„Wanton!“ the man hissed. „Magdalene!“ The whiplash was a grey haze, so fast did it move. It reached Elise, snipped a long tear in her nightgown, not touching her skin. „I knew it was no dog you hunted in the woods. I'll kill you...“

Mervale sprang, his hands fisting. The whip met him, gashing him, hurling him back. It flicked back to the attack on Elise.

He sprang again. Dizzy, blind almost with pain, he sprang again to divert Carstairs' terrible weapon from the girl. But this time he ducked low as the snaking lash reached for him, so that it came down on his back, pounding him to the ground. The momentum of his dive carried him to Carstairs' feet. He smelled fetid, oiled leather.

It was Carstairs' strange garment that smelled thus? Was it a garment, or his skin? Was he the monster and had he appeared in the midst of some strange metamorphosis...

„Flay you to death,“ he grunted. „My daughter a wanton. Skulking night after night into the wood for carnal delight.“ The whip cracked again. Elise's arm was sleeved with blood.

„Stop.“ The word was wrung from Mervale by horror. „Don't...“ He realized that he was making no sound, that his protest was only a husked rasp. It was Elise's shriek that rang out, knife-edged with unendurable pain.

Mervale's teeth bit through his lips, his blood salty on his tongue. He tried to thrust knees, elbows, down on the floor, to somehow lift himself, to somehow fling himself at the homicidal maniac that was beating his daughter to death. He managed to get his head up...

He saw the sudden black swoop of something in through the door. He saw black wings spread wide, and close again, folding around Carstairs!

It was Carstairs who screamed now, as the whip flew from his nerveless hand. The sound of that scream was the cry of a soul plunged into hell's deepest caldron. It pierced deep into Mervale, dissipated the paralysis that had held him helpless.

The whip had fallen near him. He snatched it up, leaped to his feet, flailed it at the black, swaying mass out of which that terrible scream still came.

The lash staggered the monster. A curious crackle, as of breaking small bones mingled with its report. The man-bird dropped its victim, twisted to meet Mervale's berserk attack. A seamed, grey face stared out from between the towering black wings, a face convulsed, distorted by utter evil. The face of Satan himself. Mervale's whip cracked across it, and it was a scarlet mask.

A curved, scythe-like knife arced at him. He ducked it, slashed again with the whistling whip that was so terrible a weapon. It caught the monster squarely around the neck, made a noose that Mervale drew tight. Then he pulled, pulled...

The thing that was a bird and a man, and neither, collapsed, thumping to the ground in the midst of a vast snapping. It lay there, a still, shapeless mass of black, oily leather, through rips in which protruded the broken splinters of—not bones but split bamboo sticks!

Then it was that Dick Mervale began to get a glimmering of the truth. The monster, the thing that had ravaged Winburg, that had made night a horror on Buzzard Mountain, was a man. His wings were the wings of a glider, a motorless monoplane more efficient than any yet displayed at the air meets, yet in principle no different from them.

Elise, naked, blood-smeared from head to foot, was crawling across the floor. She reached the mangled, torn form of Gorham Carstairs, lifted the head whose grey hair was blood-matted, whose skin was waxen already with approaching death.

„Pop,“ she moaned. „Pop, I’m not—I’m not what you said. We—we only kissed. We didn’t do anything else.“

Lips that were scarlet with viscid life-fluid moved. „You wouldn’t lie to a dying man, Elise. You wouldn’t...“

„No, Pop. As God is my witness...“

„Then forgive me, as He will forgive me. Forgive me for the terrible thing I did to you.“

„Ther’s nothin’ to forgive, Pop. You had a right—by the law of the hills.“

„I tried to do my best for you, Elise. I tried to make up to you the wrong I did when I abandoned you, a babe in your mother’s arms, to go out and make money enough to develop the coal mine under Buzzard Mountain. It took so long, Elise, so eternally long. Then I got word of the trouble in Winburg, and I knew that your Uncle Saul was tired of waiting, and was trying to drive the people away from Buzzard so that he would not have to pay for the lands where the vein runs near the surface.

„You see, I remembered how he used to lie and study the buzzards. I remembered he once said how a man could fly like they did, and how he could do most anything he had a mind to, without fear of being caught, if he did that.

„I knew he was the flying fear that terrorized Winburg. So I stole fifty thousand dollars, Elise, to buy the lands with so he would stop.“

„Pop! You didn’t steal it. You didn’t...“

„Yes, daughter. I stole from the foreigners, for my own people. But when I came home I found that the killing, and maybe the flying, had made Saul a devil. He was doing it for his own sake, now, not for the mine.“

„I knew, Pop. But I didn’t think you did. I didn’t want you to know. I was trying to make him stop. He wouldn’t listen to me, but he wouldn’t hurt me. Till tonight.

„Something queer came over him tonight. He was terrible.“

„That was because he saw two foreigners riding along the Winburg road, and before I could stop him he shot one of them from the top of the cliffs. Somehow that gave the last bit of him to Satan. He would have slain anyone then. You or me. He—he did kill me, didn’t he? He did! He threatened to when I tried to argue him out of going down for the foreigner’s body.

„He was going to start a trophy room in here, he said...“

„Pop!“ The one word was breathed horror.

„Yes. He—Saul—“ The fingers of death closed on Gorham Carstairs‘ throat. They squeezed blood from his lips—and then he was very still.

A sob tore from his daughter’s throat. Then she too was very silent, very still. The people of the hills do not bemoan their dead.

Dick Mervale turned away, feeling that to look any longer at the grief on her face would be blasphemy.

But he whirled, again, at the sudden clang of metal.

Elise had the scythe-like knife in her hand. She had lifted it, was plunging it into her breast!

Mervale’s flying leap across the room was in time, just in time, to dash the blade from her hand. „Why did you do that?“ he grunted, swaying on the knees to which he had thudded. „Why did you want to kill yourself?“

She looked at him queerly. „‘Cause a good woman dassn’t be seen naked ‘cept by her husband, an’ live. That’s th’ law o’ the hills.“

„Except by her husband.“ Mervale managed a smile, in the midst of that shambles. „Elise—dear... is it all right, by your law, if the man who sees a good woman naked becomes her husband right after that?“

He did not need any answer other than the light in her eyes.

