

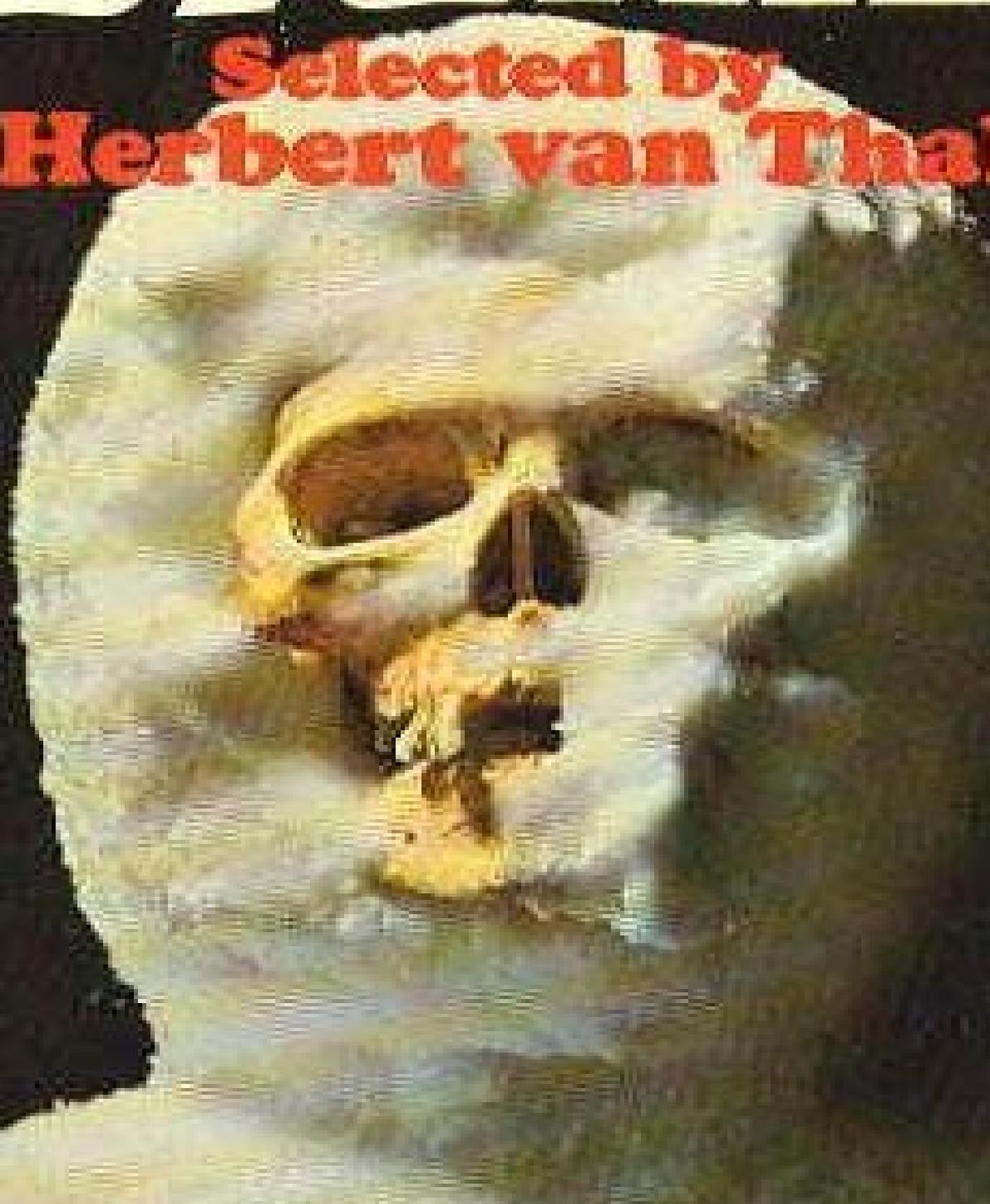


Pan Books

THE TWELFTH PAN BOOK OF

HORROR STORIES

**Selected by
Herbert van Thal**

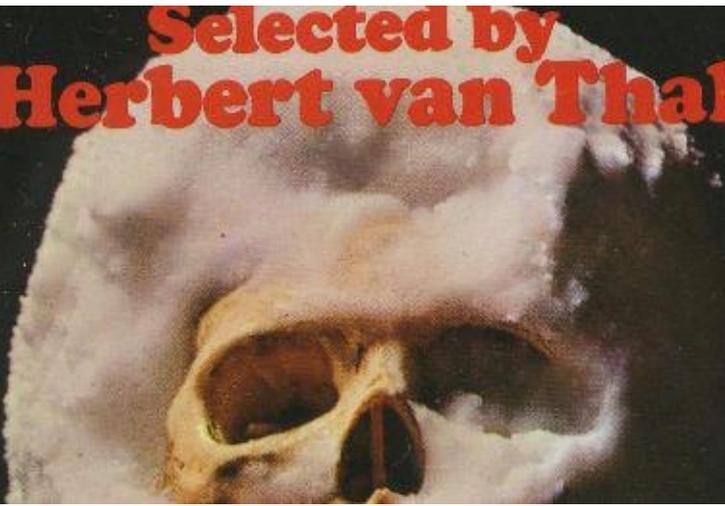


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1: David Case - The Hunter

1

It was a fine bright morning.

Ralph Conrad came out of the Bridge Hotel and shrugged his knapsack into a more comfortable position across his shoulders; smiled at the low sun and mopped his florid brow with a red polka-dot handkerchief. There were several motor-cars in the parking lot, but no traffic on the road at this early hour, and Ralph was very much at peace with himself. He felt especially peaceful because the hotel clerk, befuddled and sleepy, had made a ten-shilling error in

Ralph's favour, and Ralph was of a thrifty nature. That was why he was on a walking tour of Dartmoor. When he had first retired several years before, he had contemplated taking up golf for exercise, but the expense of that game had troubled him more than his inability to predict the direction the ball would travel, and since the exercise gained by walking through open country was certainly equal to that gained by pursuing an elusive little white ball through various frustrating hazards and roughs, Ralph had forsaken golf in favour of leisurely walking to-

urs. He had walked through the Lake District and Northern Wales and this was the third day of his tour of Dartmoor. He planned, vaguely, to walk on the Continent some day, but that

wasn't definite or immediate; it was a thing to think about rather than do, because Ralph liked the English life he was accustomed to, liked to have a destination where he would find a hot meal and a comfortable bed, familiar food and conversation in a familiar language beside an open fire when he relaxed after a long day's tramp. He had also heard that the Continent was frightfully expensive.

Ralph walked up to the highway and along the shoulder for several hundred yards, anxious to progress some distance before the clerk discovered his error. He wore stout shoes and carried a walking stick with an electric torch built into the handle; he had an Ordnance survey map and knew how to cross rough country without getting lost, impressing the landscape upon his mind and using his wristwatch and the sun to estimate the points of the compass. This ability pleased him, since it had saved him the expense of purchasing a compass. He carried a light lunch and a Thermos of coffee and had planned to arrive comfortably at his next stop around dinnertime. His route had been meticulously laid out on the map, and presently he turned from the road and set out across the moors.

The sun was hot. Ralph thought that perhaps it would be unpleasantly warm later in the day, and he walked rather more quickly than usual so that he could slow down later, if the heat made it necessary. His route took him along the crest of a hill. A narrow stream wound through the marshy land below on the left, and a higher ridge of land studded with rocky tors bordered his path on the right. The tors were individually marked on his excellent map and he judged his progress by them, admiring the formations as he studied the terrain. This was some of the loveliest and most desolate country in England, and Ralph appreciated it greatly. He was all alone. There was no noise of motor-car or factory to disturb his tranquillity, no scent of petrol or fumes of industry to overwhelm the dry perfume of the heather, no black smoke twisted against the fluffy white clouds. The stream twinkled through the mossy ground and his heavy shoes crunched on the coarse tufts of grass, squelching occasionally when he

moved too low on the slope. Ralph drew deep breaths of clean air into his lungs. He had stopped smoking years before, when the rising tax on tobacco had made the expense greater than the satisfaction, but this pure air was even better than nicotine, and he complimented himself on the willpower it had taken to forsake cigarettes, not even considering the economies of the sacrifice.

When he had been walking for nearly an hour, Ralph came to a low, flat rock and sat down to rest. He scraped some mud from his shoes with the tip of his stick and unscrewed the cap from his Thermos jug, poured some coffee into the cap and was about to drink when he noticed something in the reeds near the stream. He lowered the cup and looked harder. He couldn't quite make out what it was. The sun was bright and he had to squint and shield his eyes. He wished that he had sunglasses, but didn't think the frequency of sunlight justified buying them; he thought that he really should have a pair of field-glasses and wondered what they might cost in a pawn shop.

Ralph didn't want to move down the hill because the land was damp and marshy there and he hated to get his feet wet, but he was basically a curious man, and who knew but what the object might be something valuable? He knew he would never forgive himself if he walked on without investigating.

He climbed up on the rock to get a higher angle, but still couldn't make out what it was. It looked almost like a man, he thought, but that could hardly be possible. A man wouldn't be lying in that swampy ground, surely. Not with the exorbitant prices that dry cleaners charged these days.

He climbed down again and finished his coffee, still undecided whether he should risk the dampness, replaced the Thermos jug in his pack, looked ahead, then shrugged and started cautiously down the incline.

The lower he went, the softer the ground became. His feet squished as the mud sucked at them, his stick sank deeply and gave little support. Reeds replaced the coarse grass, and he found it more difficult to keep the object in sight since, although he was closer to it, he no longer had the advantage of elevation. He was just about to deny his curiosity and return to

the high ground when he came upon a shoe.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at it. It was quite definitely a shoe, sunk well down in the muck. He crouched and pried it up with his stick; lifted it between thumb and forefinger. It had apparently been sucked off as its owner walked or ran through the mud and abandoned there. Ralph turned it about and saw that it was in fairly good condition, a bit run down at the heel but with a great deal of wear left in it; measured it beside his own shoe and decided it would be too small for him.

He couldn't understand this. Someone had recently passed this way in a hurry - such a great hurry that he had not paused to retrieve his shoe. Such reckless abandoning of a useful article was beyond Ralph's comprehension. He looked around, hoping perhaps to find the other shoe. They might fit him, after all. There was no other shoe, but he noticed an indentation in the ground and moved to it. It looked like a footprint. Water had seeped into it and the edge had crumbled. There was another similar indentation beyond, and Ralph moved in that direction, the shoe still gripped gingerly in his fingers. He was very curious indeed now. After all, one shoe was useless to its owner, and there seemed a reasonably good chance that the mate had also been abandoned.

Then he saw the object that had first caught his attention. The footprints led in that direction, and looked like a bundle of rags glimpsed through the reeds. Perhaps, he thought, a complete outfit of clothing cast off in some moment of insanity.

Ralph approached warily; halted abruptly.

It was certainly a pile of clothing, and from one end protruded a human foot. Ralph stared at the foot. It wore a sock but no shoe. Ralph looked at the shoe he held and then back at the foot. He felt confused and dazed. He had never come upon a situation like this before in all

his rambles; he felt that he should do something but had no precedent to help him decide what steps were called for. After a few moments he took a firmer grip on his stick and advanced with resolution and determination, until he was standing beside the body. One arm was outflung, the other hidden in the shredded rags. The rags were darkly stained with blood and

the coat had been pulled above the shoulders so that it covered the man's head.

'I say there,' Ralph said.

There was no reply.

'I say, my man. Are you all right?'

The rags were silent.

Ralph took a deep breath. He hated to get involved in difficulties that didn't concern him, but saw that he had no choice. He crouched and drew the coat down so he could see the man's face.

And then the peaceful countryside was shattered by his scream.

The man had no head. And Ralph had never encountered such a thing before...

2

John Wetherby was in the habit of dining several times a week at his club in St James's. He invariably ate the same well-balanced meal, drank the same full-bodied burgundy, and then went into the bar for the same excellent brandy and Havana cigar. But Wetherby was not a creature of thoughtless habit. He simply found this a comfortable and satisfying routine, and saw no reason to alter it, any more than he would have changed his tailor or the rather out-dated cut of his suits.

Wetherby's club was The Venturers. He had been a member for many years, and, not being plagued by a compulsion to join and belong, he subscribed to no other club. The Venturers had, however, changed considerably over the years. It had become fashionable rather than purposeful and the requirements for membership were based more on social standing than accomplishment. It was no longer the sort of club that Wetherby would have selected for himself, but he didn't contemplate a change; he doubted if any new club would prove more suitable and thought, if he thought of it at all, that it was more likely the tempo of the world rather than the tone of his club which had changed. Or perhaps, he sighed at the idea that he

himself had changed with age, and failed to keep up with life.

There were times when he regretted this, such as when he walked into the bar and saw the younger members lounging about in well-cut suits and seldom-cut hair, with pretence and affectation. Wetherby was a tolerant man. He could regret without resenting. But he felt a definite longing for former days, when there had been mutual interest among the members -

adventures to be recalled over the brandy or, better still, further adventures to be planned and anticipated. But this was in the past. It had been a long time since Wetherby had had an adventure, and even if some of the old members had been present, the conversation would of

necessity have dwelt on the past; it would have been a sad pleasure, recalling things that could no longer be.

Wetherby glanced around the dining-room. There was no one there he knew. There seldom was now. Of all the friends and companions he could recall from better days, only Byron had not succumbed to the advance of age; only Byron, timelessly pursuing his curious theories of life and death, might have had some new tale to tell. But Byron never came to London now. He still lived a life of adventure, and had no need to reminisce about the past. Wetherby admired Byron without envying him, approved of the man without approving of his methods. It had been nearly ten years since he had last seen Byron and Wetherby vividly recalled that evening.

They had been drinking brandy at the bar. Byron had just returned from Africa and Wetherby had just decided it was time for him to give up big-game hunting. They had talked for a while about the last expedition they'd been on together, in north-west Canada, and then Wetherby had mentioned his decision to retire. Byron had been annoyed, almost angry, about it.

Wetherby himself was rather sad, but the decision was unalterable. He was no longer young, his eyes and his reflexes had lost the sharpness required. He had spent his youth practising a passion for hunting; but now his youth was over, and Wetherby did not care to pursue danger

when he might not enjoy it, might prove a liability rather than an asset to his companions.

But hunting, to Byron, was far more than a pleasure or a pastime; it was more than a passion, it was a philosophy of life. Byron had become excited, trying to convince Wetherby he was making a grave mistake in deciding to live a life of comfort in London. Byron's voice was resonant and deep, and with the fervour of his words, he began speaking loudly, gesturing widely.

Several of the younger members had been standing beside them at the bar, and they looked on with interest, obviously amused by the intensity of Byron's speech, undoubtedly considering him an anachronism in their modern world. One of them, a large young man with an insolent face, drew closer. A leader of the liberal new aristocracy. He winked at his companions and hovered beside Byron. He was so close that Byron, despite his impassioned monologue, could not fail to notice him.

Byron paused in the middle of a sentence and turned towards the young man; stared at him. Byron's eyes were piercing, he did not stare the way a man stares in a city, he stared as one does, with full concentration and awareness, in the jungle. He said nothing. The young man tried to return the gaze but his civilized eyes faltered, and he sought refuge in words.

'I couldn't help but overhear you, sir,' he said. He had a cultured voice and emphasized the 'sir'.

Byron didn't seem to hear.

'You are, I understand, a big-game hunter?'

Byron said nothing. Wetherby said, 'That is correct, young man. We both are.'

But the man wasn't interested in Wetherby. His face had become flushed under Byron's eyes.

'Perhaps you can tell me - something I've always wondered - what on earth is the pleasure that full-grown and presumably intelligent men get out of murdering defenceless animals?'

It was not the thing to say to Byron.

Wetherby was angry himself. Tolerance has limits. The young man's cohorts moved closer, grinning behind their champion. But Byron still said nothing. He continued to stare but, slowly, his expression shifted until he was regarding the man in precisely the same manner as one might some foul object upon which one has inadvertently trod.

The young man became intensely uncomfortable. His friends were expecting him to make some brilliant comment which would terminate the encounter, and yet he could not force himself to look at Byron's eyes.

'I don't mean to intrude, of course,' he said. 'But tell me -' Encouraged by the sound of his own educated voice, he smiled again. "Tell me, is it a sense of power? Of accomplishment? Some regression to the past, when killing was an honourable and necessary thing?'

'I cannot tell you,' Byron said.

'I thought not,' the man said. He started to turn away, his lips smirking. His friends grinned at the clever comrade.

'However, I could show you,' Byron said.

The young man turned back, surprised. Byron had moved out from the bar. He was smiling, too. They say a tiger smiles and a hyena laughs, but perhaps they are mistaken.

'I beg your pardon?' the young man said.

'The pleasure I get from killing,' Byron said. 'I could show you just what it is. I think it would be very great pleasure, showing you, although I doubt you would die with the nobility of an animal.'

Everyone was very quiet. The young man's lips parted, but he said nothing. His friends no longer smiled. They had seen something very dark in Byron's eyes, something they would never comprehend. After a moment the young man turned away; Byron shrugged and leaned on the bar again. Wetherby let his breath out slowly. He had seen Byron kill, and he knew that face very well. It was not a face one could forget. The young men left very soon.

'I thought, for a moment -' Wetherby said.

Byron nodded.

'It would have been so easy,' he said.

Wetherby didn't doubt it.

That was Byron...

The waiter brought the bill, knowing from long experience that Wetherby would not take brandy at the table. Wetherby signed it and stood up; headed for the bar, through the solid, oak-panelled rooms. He was a tall man with steel-grey hair and angular features, wearing a new suit which was tailored so well that it looked old. Middle age may have dulled his vision and blunted his reflexes, but a life of civilized comfort had not harmed him noticeably. He was lean and hard and straight, and weighed exactly the same as he had on his last hunting trip, with Byron in Canada. Wetherby was thinking about Byron as he entered the bar. It was a strange coincidence.

Detective Superintendent Justin Bell was drinking a pint of beer at the bar. He had a brick-red face and a nondescript grey suit and looked very much like a policeman. He raised his glass and Wetherby joined him. He was pleased to see him; Bell was one of the older members, and Wetherby had seconded his application, following a tongue-in-cheek discussion over whether police work qualified as adventurous endeavour and, therefore, met the requirements of membership. That was before the rules had been changed, when The Venturers had a purpose. Bell was well liked and had the proper outlook and temperament for the club, and so he had been admitted to the rolls, even though his occupation was suspect.

'Hello, John,' Bell said.

'How are you, Justin?'

'Tired.'

'You haven't been here for quite a while.'

'No time. I envy your life of ease. Always have. It's a fortunate man who can retire from a

life of pleasure to a life of relaxation without a period of work in between.'

Wetherby laughed. He had always felt the same way; had, without the slightest taint of snobbery, considered himself very lucky to have been born wealthy.

'Drink?' he asked.

Bell finished his beer and slid the glass across the bar. The barman wore a wine-coloured jacket and was very efficient and polite; although young, he was able to distinguish between the old-established Venturers and the fashionable new members; knew the difference between dignity and familiarity. Wetherby had a brandy and Bell had another pint of beer. His preference for beer had begun to extend his waistline slightly, but that merely made him look more like an efficient lawman.

'It's good to see you,' Wetherby said.

'As a matter of fact, I came here to see you. Thought you'd be here.'

'Good Lord. Not about that parking ticket?'

They laughed at the private reference to a slight bending of a minor law.

After a moment, Bell said, 'I need your advice, John.'

'Whatever for?'

'Possibly a murder.'

Wetherby blinked. Bell drank.

'At least, we're treating it as murder. I don't really know that it is.'

'Surely there's no advice I can give you on that?'

'Perhaps not. Not if it actually is murder.'

'This sounds very mysterious,' Wetherby said. He began to fill his pipe very carefully. He hadn't tasted the brandy yet.

'Well, it is, in a way. I expect you've read something about it. The headless body on Dartmoor. I believe that was how the newspapers billed it.'

'Oh yes. Yes, I did see something about that. A bit out of your territory, isn't it?'

'Well, there are curious aspects. It baffled the chief constable down there and he asked for assistance. Good judge, I'd say. It baffles me, too. Anyway, the commissioner assigned Thurlow and me to the case. I've just come back from there. Came back to see you specifically.'

Wetherby had the briar filled; he lighted it, tamped it down and touched the flame again.

He smoked Afrikander and, like most good tobaccos, it didn't smell as good as it tasted. Bell lit a cigarette.

'Well?' Wetherby asked.

'There's a very distinct possibility that this killing was the work of some animal. Everything, bar one curious fact, points to that. And I can't think of anyone who would be more qualified to advise me on that. One way or the other.'

'I see,' Wetherby said. He tasted the brandy. 'What sort of animal did you have in mind?'

'None. I don't know a damn thing about animals and Thurlow knows less. My wife had a cat once, but it ran away. And I think there's a mole in my garden. That's the lot.'

Wetherby smiled.

'I thought maybe you could tell me by examining the marks on the body and the plaster casts of the tracks.'

Wetherby nodded. 'Yes, I should think I could,' he said. 'Were the tracks plain?'

Not very.'

'Well, I can certainly get an idea what sort of animal it was, if nothing else. A carnivore, I assume?'

'I don't know. The body wasn't devoured, if that's anything to go on. But it was savaged.

Mangled. The police doctor swears that only a wild and savage animal could have done it. In

fact, we would have been definite on that, except for the one curious fact - the one the papers stressed, of course - the remarkable incident of the decapitation, as Doyle might have said.

That was what confused the local police. The chief is a doddery old sort anyhow, all vintage

port and confusion.' Bell gestured with his pint.

'We never did find the head,' he added.

Wetherby thought for a few moments, drawing on his pipe. It was rather like old times, pondering a problem at this bar, although the conversation on all sides dealt more with fashion and art than life and death.

'So this animal - if it was an animal - was something powerful enough to tear a man's head off, eh?'

Bell shrugged.

'In England? It seems doubtful. Possibly a pack of wild dogs, but I shouldn't think so.

You've checked with all the zoos and circuses about an escaped carnivore, of course?'

Bell looked pained.

Wetherby said, 'Of course. Sorry, Justin.'

'It's a bit more confusing than that, actually,' Bell said. 'The head wasn't torn off. Not the way an animal would tear a body. The body was ripped and clawed, almost shredded, but the head was severed quite neatly.'

Wetherby frowned through the tobacco haze.

'That would mean enormous strength. Some animal powerful enough to take the skull in its jaws and yank it off with one explosive jerk. And hold the body down at the same time.'

'As clean as a knife or a guillotine,' Bell said. His face was clouded as he recalled the corp-se. 'What animal could have done that?'

'I don't know. Perhaps if I saw the tracks. A buffalo, for instance, might be able to hook a man's head off with one stroke of its horns. But if the body was clawed - I don't know, Justin.

Perhaps some madman with a weapon that inflicted wounds like talons?'

'No. They were claw marks, all right. Fangs, too. No man could have done that.'

'Well, I'll be glad to help you in any way I can.'

'Could you come down to Dartmoor with me. On expenses, of course. The ground was soft

and we've got some fair casts of the prints. You might recognize them.'

Bell remembered that he, too, was on expenses. He signalled for another round.

'It's been a long time since I've done any tracking. Still, I suppose that knowledge doesn't leave entirely. I could give it a try.'

Bell was unfolding a map. He spread it out on the bar, holding one corner down with his beer glass. Several of the young members looked over in interest. It had been a long time since a map had been studied at that bar. Wetherby leaned over and Bell pointed with a thick finger.

'The body was found -' The finger described a circle, then jabbed on to the map. 'Here. Beside this stream.'

Wetherby nodded, automatically forming an image of the terrain as he studied the contour map. Then, as his area of interest widened, he looked surprised; he took the pipe from his mouth, frowning.

'You knew Byron, didn't you?'

'Oh yes.'

'Why, he lives there.' Wetherby looked at the map again. It was remarkably detailed. 'His house can't be more than a mile from where the body was discovered.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You could have saved yourself a trip by asking his advice. Or isn't he in the country?'

Bell looked uncomfortable.

'Actually, I did go to Byron,' he said. 'He wasn't interested in helping me. Always was a strange sort. The whole damn thing seemed to amuse him and he said something about it being just as well to kill people off, to counterbalance the population explosion. Said there were too damn many people in the world as it was.'

'Yes, that's Byron. But surely he would have been interested in a challenge of this nature?'

He was interested in the plaster casts, all right. Looked at them for quite a while, and I thought he had an idea what might have made them. But then he just shrugged and wouldn't ven-

ture an opinion. In fact, he suggested that I see you. Said you'd be more interested and concerned about what happened to humanity.' Bell paused. 'Of course, I intended to see you anyway. I only went to Byron's first because it was closer.'

Wetherby grinned.

'Rather like hunting tigers in Africa,' he said. 'Are you sure you checked the zoo?'

They laughed and Wetherby bought a round of drinks.

'It certainly isn't like Byron to pass up an opportunity like this,' Wetherby said. 'Not that he ever had much regard for life, human or otherwise - he was more concerned with death - but

if he thought this was a dangerous animal he'd be out with his gun. The more dangerous, the faster he'd be out. Last time I saw him he cursed me for giving up danger and living in town.

Either he doesn't think it's an animal or, perhaps, he didn't want to help the authorities. That seems more likely. He might be out looking for the killer on his own. And, knowing Byron,

he'll find it. Still, as you say, he's a strange fellow and I don't pretend to understand him.'

'Will you come down with me, John?'

'You could have brought the casts with you.'

'Yes, I considered it. But I'd like you down there. This is one of those killings without apparent motive which may never be solved. And the worst thing about them is they are so often repeated. Whether it was a man or a beast, there seems a good chance it will kill again.'

'And you'd like me there if it does.'

'Exactly. If anyone could track the killer, it would be you. And if, God forbid, it kills again, it would be better if you had a fresh trail. If we ever solve this, I think it more likely to be by physical means rather than deduction. As Doyle surely never said.'

Wetherby nodded. There was nothing to keep him in London, and the thought of getting into the open again was pleasant. He thought it might be nice to see Byron again, too. Byron and he had shared danger many times, and if that was the sole bond between them, it was a

strong bond.

'All right, Justin. I'll come.'

Bell folded the map and stuffed it in his pocket. His suit bulged with the encumbrance of such stuffings, and Wetherby wondered, smiling, if there was a magnifying glass somewhere in those drooping pockets. They sat at a table in the corner and had a last drink, making their plans go down to Dartmoor in the morning. More through habits of conversation, than because Wetherby needed the information, Bell filled in the details of the killing. There was a great deal and yet there wasn't enough. The man who discovered the body was certainly not connected in any way other than circumstance. The body, with some difficulty, had been identified. It was an old fellow named Randal who had lived a hermitic life in the area, and who had been arrested for poaching several times. It seemed likely that he'd been doing just that when his death found him. The tracks made it obvious that Randal had been walking along the firm ground higher up the hill, and had fled towards the stream when he had seen his killer. He had almost reached the water when it overtook him, and he had died at the same spot where his body had been found. There was no sign that he had been injured as he ran, as might have been the case had an animal worried him, snapping at his heels until he was brought down. As soon as his killer caught him, it killed him. There were some signs of short but violent struggle, Randal had rolled over several times and his fingernails were splintered. His clothing had been torn to shreds, but his pockets hadn't been emptied, and contained four shillings and half an ounce of rolling tobacco. Randal had been an amusing local character, an eccentric with no known enemies, and the killing seemed entirely pointless.

Bell stopped talking; shook his head.

'It was a particularly ugly death,' he said. 'I don't suppose it was any worse for poor old Randal than any number of deaths might have been, but I'll tell you, John - I don't relish the thought seeing another corpse like this.'

Bell shook his head again.

He was going to.

Damn me, thought Brian Hammond. Damn me for a fool.

He leaned forward, both hands clamped on the steering wheel, and peered out through the rain-washed windscreen. It was hard to see the road. The wipers left curved blurs across the glass and the headlights shot pale beams futilely against the trees. Hammond's dark-jowled face, illuminated in the green glow of the dashlights, was angry and worried. He was a salesman but he looked like a merchant seaman. He had, in fact, been a merchant seaman when he was younger, but then he had looked more like a salesman. It was the type of face destined to foil enterprise. Brian sat rigidly in the seat, a cigar clamped in his teeth, as he steered along the dark and winding country lane.

How did I manage to miss that turning? he wondered. And why don't they put signposts on these blasted roads. How do they expect a man to find his way without any signs? All the taxes I pay, and I can't even find a road sign. Not to mention a petrol station.

His eyes turned down to the fuel gauge. The needle was hovering on the empty mark.

Damn this God-forsaken area, he thought. All the local country bumpkins are asleep, no one to ask directions, haven't even seen a house. Can't see anything anyway in this damn rain.

Don't think I've got petrol for more than another mile or so. Damn car drinks petrol. Ought to get smaller car, except then I wouldn't have any room for all these damn samples. Not that

it would matter much. Haven't sold a damn thing all day. The boss will squawk like a stuck pig, too, damn him. How does he expect me to sell electronic equipment in this bloody area?

Nothing here but sheep. These yokels probably never even heard of electricity and I'm supposed to sell them equipment. Ought to give Cornwall independence, and then give them Dartmoor. Get rid of the damn place.

He turned a sharp corner and the lane rose ahead, dark and deserted.

That damn Ed Davis is working in London, too, he thought. Probably made plenty of sales today and now he's celebrating in the West End. Lucky bastard. Probably drinking champag-

ne. Damn him, anyway. Why should he get all the choice territory just because he's been with the company longer? It isn't fair.

The car banged against the high shoulder of the road and Hammond snarled as he turned the wheel. He felt very sorry for himself. If there was any justice in the world he would be home by his fireside watching television while his wife made him a nice cup of tea. I wonder what my wife is doing now? he thought. She hates it when I have to travel. 'Course, she knows I can't get into any trouble down here. I guess she just hates to have me be away. Real passionate, that wife of mine. I wonder if she went up to the pub tonight? He bit hard on the cigar. Ah, she wouldn't go to the pub alone. She's not like that. Faithful, my wife. But that damn Humphries is always trying to flirt with her in the pub. Caught her smiling back at him once, too. I'll bet she's gone up to the pub to flirt with Humphries.

Hammond looked at his watch. It was past closing time.

No, she isn't in the pub, he thought. Must be home. I'd phone her if this damn place had any phone boxes. All the taxes I pay and I can't even find a phone box when I want one. But if I phoned and she wasn't home - Ah, she'd be home. I wonder if that damn Humphries is home with her? If I thought for one minute that she -

Hammond shook his head and squinted into the black night. The wipers skimmed ineffectively over a film of water and the car veered from side to side. The samples slid around on the back seat, the tyres hummed, the foul cigar smoke hung heavy in the air. He had to drive slowly and seemed he'd been driving for a very long time. And then the motor coughed and sputtered.

Oh no, Hammond thought.

The motor gulped the last ounce of petrol and the car glided to a silent stop. Brian sat scowling behind the wheel, thinking of the futility of joining the AA when he couldn't phone for aid. His mood was black. He felt sure that his wife was with that rogue Humphries and that he was going to lose his job because he'd sold nothing. He relighted his cigar and puffed away wondering what to do. He had no idea where he was, and saw little sense in trying to

~~walk somewhere in the dark. The rain was falling heavily. Hammond sighed and resigned~~
himself to a cramped night in the car. The battery wasn't new, and he turned the lights off. But the road was narrow and dark, and it was dangerous without lights in the remote possibility that another car might come along. He opened the glove box and took out the flasher, pulled his collar up and opened the door. The rain singled him out, finding chinks in the armour of his clothing, and he swore to himself as he walked back a few yards and placed the flasher on its tripod behind the car. He snapped it on and the red light began to blink. It lighted the trees with an eerie effect. It was very unreal. He stood there for a moment, watching the trees appear red and black, red and black. His cigar had gone out again and a loose leaf curled down. He was looking at the trees and then he was looking at something else that came out from the trees. For a moment he merely looked surprised, then his eyes widened and the cigar dropped as his mouth opened to scream. But only a whimper of fear came out. Hammond turned and ran, without thinking where he was heading. He ran past his car, blind and dumb with terror. He ran for perhaps fifty yards before it caught him...

4

John Wetherby sat by the dying embers of his fire, drinking a last brandy and considering the things that Bell had told him. It was a comfortable room. The grandfather clock ticked with soothing regularity in the corner, the pendulum catching flashes of reflection through the arc. The walls were lined with beautifully bound books, the carpet was deep and soft, heavy tapestries were drawn, across the wide windows. But, Wetherby, in his thoughts, was dissociated from this room; was back in a former way of life, with a different pattern of reason. He was trying to anticipate what he would learn in Dartmoor, to predict before seeing them what the tracks might be, what animal could be responsible for the unusual aspects of the case. And, not the least remarkable aspect, to one who knew Byron, was the man's failure to rise to a challenge of this nature, even for purely selfish reasons. That was a mystery in itself, quite apart from the killing. Byron was a man who had always gone out of his way to find a challenge; he invariably did things in the most risky and dangerous fashion simply to create a

challenge against his life itself. And, the older he got, the greater this need became. As Wetherby began to feel himself slowing down and relied on his experience to do things the safest and easiest way, Byron had seemed compelled to increase the difficulties of the tasks he took in hand. Wetherby had hunted with Byron many times, in India and Africa and once, the last time, in the wilderness of northern Canada. He vividly recalled that Canada expedition. Never had Byron taken a risk that seemed more pointless -danger for the pure sake of danger. Byron wanted a Kodiak bear, and he wanted it alone, insisted that Wetherby wait at a distance too great to be of any possible aid. And, although he had splendid guns, he had borrowed a 30-06 from their guide, a good gun but much too light for the job; a gun he had not even fired before. Wetherby had protested in vain. Byron was not a man to listen to reason, much less argument, and so Wetherby had waited. He could still recall the tenseness he had felt on that memorable day. He had been waiting on a hill, surrounded by evergreens. It was autumn. The forest was burning with colour, trees ablaze in reds and yellows. The ground was crisp with early frost and a chill wind stirred from the north. Wetherby had watched Byron's figure diminish as he strode away moving towards where they knew the bear was waiting. Byron looked very casual, but that was deceptive. His red and black plaid shooting coat blended against the background of leaves. He looked very small, drawing farther away, towards the dense thicket where his quarry waited. He was already out of effective range, Wetherby would be helpless from where he stood. He gripped his rifle, but knew it was useless. Byron was completely on his own.

Byron was almost at the thicket when the bear reared up. Even at that distance, Wetherby was astounded at the monster's size. He saw Byron raise the rifle, a tiny manikin only a few yards from those fourteen hundred pounds of power and fury. The bear's head seemed larger than Byron, towering three feet above him as the beast rose on its hind legs. And then the bear was off balance, twisting around and down, thrashing in death, and it seemed a long time

later that the sharp crack of the rifle reached Wetherby's ears. Byron had turned and raised the gun motioning for Wetherby to advance. Wetherby had advanced.

Byron was smiling, looking down at the bear. It was a smile of pure pleasure. He had fired once, as the bear roared in warning, and the slug had gone up through the roof of that terrible mouth and into the brain. It had not emerged. There was no mark on the trophy.

'A fine shot,' Wetherby said.

'I couldn't very well have missed at that range. Couldn't afford to, either.'

'Not with that,' Wetherby said, looking at the rifle.

'Oh, a -30-06 will kill a bear if the shot is placed right.'

'Obviously.'

Byron was amused. 'Why should I use a heavier weapon than I need? That just makes a man sloppy. That 402 you carry, for instance. You could have dropped it even with a bad shot, broke its shoulder or shattered its leg and then finished it at your leisure. That isn't hunting, John. That isn't living. That's not the way to keep life and give death. You're a fine hunter and a splendid shot, but your values are wrong.'

'Perhaps,' Wetherby said with a mixture of admiration and annoyance, half understanding what Byron meant, and resenting an understanding he did not follow.

'Not perhaps. A categorical fact. An objective truth.'

'But if you hadn't made a perfect shot - if something had happened, if the bear had shifted just a few inches as you fired -you couldn't have stopped a wounded charge with a rifle that light. Even if your second shot had been perfect, it would have killed you through sheer impetus and reflex.'

Byron smiled again. This was a different smile.

'No,' he said. 'But that's a moot point.'

Wetherby raised his eyebrows.

Byron tossed the rifle to him. Wetherby caught it. He knew, absolutely, what Byron meant then. He worked the lever. The empty shell ejected. There had been only one bullet in the rif-

le.

'You're mad,' Wetherby said.

And Byron laughed in mad delight...

Later, by the campfire, Byron had been in a thoughtful, philosophical mood. His immediate pleasure had faded, and he seemed possessed with a need to share his attitudes with Wetherby. They were alone. Their guide was skinning the bear where it had fallen; it was too huge to move. Wetherby was still greatly disturbed by the enormous risk Byron had taken; a risk that seemed to border on the unbalance of madness.

'Can't you understand, John?' Byron said. He was almost pleading for understanding.

'I don't know. I see the emotion of it - even the accomplishment. But it's suicidal, Byron.

Some day -'

Byron silenced him with a gesture. His eyes were bright in the firelight.

'Danger, John. Only in danger are we alive. Only by risking our lives can we appreciate

them. How much fuller our existence is than that of a city man, castrated by civilization, emasculated by society and safety. There is no life there, no danger and no joy, no risk and,

therefore, nothing to risk. And we give life as we take it, John. That bear was never more alive than the instant before the bullet entered his brain. If we, the hunters, are more alive and aware, then we must work even more so for the hunted. I love the things I kill, John. The things that would kill me if I was too slow, if I failed to observe, if my shot failed. I love them, I say. I could have been the world's greatest animal tamer, you know. I have a rapport

with wild creatures. I can sense their thoughts, their feelings, and meet them on their own level.

There is no animal I could not manage, no bestial level upon which I couldn't meet them. If

I chose to befriend a beast, instead of killing it -' His voice softened, he looked off into the distance across the darkening hills of an endless wilderness. He did not look at Wetherby when he spoke again. Perhaps he was not speaking to Wetherby.

'But I like to kill,' he said. 'I think, perhaps, I might even like to be killed - in the proper fashion...'

Their guide returned, dragging the skin behind him on a travois, and they talked no more of such things. That was the last time they hunted together.

Wetherby felt a vague uneasiness, recalling these strange words from that faraway place.

Byron had often made him uneasy, in some indefinite way, in much the same way that he felt uneasy about an animal that was acting peculiar - when he couldn't tell if it intended to charge or flee. There were many traits of the animal in Byron, at that. A strange man. Wetherby wondered if he had changed at all with the years, and looked forward to seeing him again.

And that reminded him that it was late, and that he must rise early. He had arranged to meet Bell at eight o'clock in the morning, and didn't want to oversleep. Wetherby refused to have a telephone or an alarm clock, and depended on a method he had developed of setting his mind to awake at a given hour, but it had been some time since he had been forced to use this ability. He wasn't sure if it would still be effective; he decided that he had better go to bed.

Wetherby stood up and finished his nightcap, regarding the glowing embers. The door knocker clanked disturbingly through the quiet rooms.

Wetherby frowned, looking at the clock. It was a strange hour for visitors, and he didn't welcome unexpected visits at any hour. Then he shrugged, went into the hall and walked down to the door.

Bell stood on the threshold, looking flustered.

'Sorry to disturb you,' he said.

'Quite all right. Come in.'

Bell entered, holding his hat in both hands. He seemed uncertain, preoccupied, no longer the same man who had recently been with Wetherby at the club.

'Was there something you forgot to tell me?'

Bell shook his head.

'Come on into the study. There's a fire there. Will you have a drink?'

'I haven't time, John. I'll have to go down to Dartmoor immediately. I'd like you to come with me.'

'Tonight?' Wetherby said. He didn't relish the idea. 'Can't it wait until morning? I can take a train'

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