

Robert McCammon

Night Ride

A Story from Matthew Corbett's World

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NIGHT RIDE

ONE.

Matthew Corbett noted three things of particular interest in his late-night visitor.

First...the gentleman wore a beautifully-tailored gray suit with a ruffled shirt and a dark blue cravat. Matthew had taken notice of such attirements since he, being such a local celebrity after the affair of the Queen of Bedlam during the summer—and the *Earwig* proclaiming him to be so worthy—had invested in some fine suits, tailored of course by his friend Effrem Owles.

Second...the gentleman's fingernails on the long thin hands were sharpened into small knives and curved downward ever so slightly, though very carefully manicured. Matthew figured the better to get a grip on whatever he wished to tear with those talons.

And thirdly...the gentleman had brought a strange odor with him into Matthew's dairy house home. It was up under the man's lemon-scented cologne—a fragrance used quite liberally in an effort to disguise the other—but there it lingered, all the same. *Festered* might be a better word, Matthew thought, because there was something of decay in it. What did it remind him of? Well, he couldn't remember at the moment. Indeed, his mind was still a bit drowsy since he'd been on the verge of blowing out his candle-clock at just after eleven and drifting into a sleep that was hopefully not haunted by the recurrent mental image of Professor Fell's blood card he'd so recently received.

"I appreciate your giving me the time, young sir," said the gentleman, holding his dark blue tricorn down at his side. "I also regret disturbing you at this hour, but my problem requires immediate attention."

Matthew simply nodded. The gentleman also had a strange accent. Prussian, perhaps? Oh, that was all he needed, to become involved with the escapades of another Prussian! Three candles burned in their holders and a lantern hung from a wallhook. The illumination was sufficient to see that the gentleman had a sharp-nosed bony face under the pallid makeup and cheek rouge he had chosen to apply, and that he had thin streaks of dark eyebrows below his white wig. Below the brows, the eyes were nearly as pale as the makeup, but perhaps were a peculiar shade of gray.

"If I may ask," Matthew ventured, "the hour being so late, can this not be discussed at my office tomorrow?" He liked saying that: *my office*. "It's at Number Seven—"

"I know the location. The clerk at the Dock House Inn informed me when I asked if there was a person here to solve my problem. I explained the situation. He sent me here."

Not exactly, Matthew thought with a slight twist of the mouth. The clerk had sent this gentleman to Marmaduke Grigsby's house. A knock at Matthew's door had roused him and lo and behold there stood in his doorway Berry Grigsby holding a lantern, dressed in her own nighttime flannels—as this October of 1702 had arrived with an early chill—and the lemon-scented, saber-nailed gentleman standing at her side. "You have a visitor," Berry had said, and she'd made a quick face that asked in confidence, *Who is he?*

Too late, Matthew wished he'd at least picked up a shoe from his bedside to whack at one of Professor Fell's minions come to splash blood on the blood card, but again his mind was drowsy from the book he'd been reading on *One Hundred And One Chess Openings*.

"I'll leave you," Berry had said, and of course she knew nothing about the card, and Matthew wanted it to stay that way. "Goodnight, Matthew."

"Goodnight," he'd replied, and then the gentleman had slipped in like a shadow, removed his tricorn, and stood there waiting until Matthew had decided he couldn't leave his door open all night.

Time to go to work, and display to Sir High-And-Mighty Hudson Greathouse that Katherine Herrald—who, if the wind had been providential, was now comfortably in England—had not been mistaken in granting him the position of "problem-solver".

"How may I help you?" he asked.

"I must get a message to my brother. It is *vital*."

"All right. Well...that's easily—"

"Not easily," the man interrupted. "Pardon me for not introducing myself. I am Karlis von Eissen. And you are Matthew Corbett, whom I have been reading about in the news sheet. Such as it is," he added, with his own little twist of the mouth. "My brother does not live here. He lives... I will have to show you the map." As von Eissen brought a folded paper from within his coat, Matthew picked up the nearest candle and held it closer.

"You see?" The paper was unfolded and a manicured saber pointed to the neatly-drawn image. "This road, what you call the Boston Post. And here, this many miles north along the Post, is another road that takes one to the river. It is a house here where my brother lives."

"Two days ride, at least," Matthew figured. "But why can't you take the message to your brother yourself?"

"My profession does not currently allow travel."

"Hm. What exactly *is* your profession?"

"The shipping of crates," said von Eissen.

"Crates holding what?" Matthew had to ask.

And the answer, given curtly: "More crates."

There was a moment that Matthew nearly thought he had what that aroma – that *smell* – reminded him of, but then it slipped away.

"The message must be delivered as soon as possible," von Eissen continued. He refolded the map into careful squares. "*Vital*," he repeated. "I will pay any amount you request."

Oh ho! Matthew thought. One of his first "cases", if it might be called that! And not only a way to show Greathouse he was up to the job, but a money-maker as well. Did he dare? He did.

"Ten pounds," he said.

"Agreed," spoken with not a hint of hesitation. "I have my purse here." And again he delved into his coat, returning with a black leather purse and an envelope securely sealed with yellow wax. He held the envelope out to the problem-solver, who still wore his beige flannel sleeping-gown. Matthew took the envelope and watched as von Eissen unbuttoned the purse and began counting out the coins in a foreign tongue...but not Prussian, Matthew thought...something else. The coins – a sudden wealth – glinted merrily on a table in the candlelight.

"Now," said von Eissen when the money lay out all asparkle, "there are some things you will consider." His tone was different...a bit haughty...the master speaking now to the servant. "You are correct in that it is a journey of two nights, if you keep a sufficiently brisk pace. Which I expect you shall. The first night you will stop at a tavern operated by Joel Beckett and his wife. There will be no other choice, and it is a mile or so from the road that leads to my brother's house." Von Eissen suddenly turned away from Matthew and walked the step-and-a-half to the dairyhouse's new window, where he unlocked the shutters and cracked them open to peer out into the night. Over the man's shoulder, Matthew could see a silver three-quarters-moon in the sky shining like another coin. He would be glad for its light out there in the forest, for the way to von Eissen's brother's house was going to be through some pretty trackless country.

"I regret asking – *requiring* – you to go at this time," said von Eissen as he closed the shutters and bolted them again. "But, alas, the message is –"

"Vital," Matthew finished for him. "What do you mean, 'this time'?"

"Of the month."

"What's the difference? One day is as –"

"I require you to deliver the envelope to my brother at night," came the quietly-spoken statement, yet delivered with a compelling authority. "No

one else should touch it. Do not tell the Becketts. Tell no one. Only given to my brother. At night. Do you understand that, young sir?"

"I understand the part about giving it only to your brother, if it's so important. But why specifically at night?"

"He has a condition that causes him severe pain in sunlight. *Any* daylight, as a matter of truth. He only goes about at night."

"Do you share this condition? That's why you couldn't see me at my office tomorrow morning?"

Von Eissen didn't reply for a moment. Then he gave a small slight smile that made his mouth for a few seconds look like a razor wound.

"Yes, I do. It is a family condition."

"I'm sorry."

"And why should you be? You didn't cause it. Let me continue. You will leave the Becketts and turn your horse upon the road as it is marked on the map. It will be, by my reckoning, another full day to reach my brother's house. After you give him the envelope, you will accept his hospitality, spend the night there, and begin your return trip the following morning. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Ah. Good. Well...you should make sure you carry a pistol. Two would be better. And prepare them for firing."

Matthew had been staring at the coins on the table. Now he tore his gaze away from the beauties. "*What?*"

"You did hear me."

"The Indians are a danger up there?"

"Indians...bandits...beasts of the forest. Two pistols. Three, better yet."

Matthew swallowed hard and hoped von Eissen didn't hear it. "I think...this may best be a task for my associate, Hudson Greathouse." *Or a militia*, he thought. He hated to say it, but he had to: "I'm not sure I can handle this for you. I mean to say, I don't have as much experience as—"

"Oh, you're joking! Pulling my leggings now, aren't you? After all I've read about you in the news sheet, and what I've heard about you? I wouldn't believe any associate of yours could do the job half as well as you shall!"

"Maybe I should ask Hudson Greathouse to go with—" He stopped himself.

No. Don't even think that.

It would be like asking Hudson Greathouse to refer to him as a 'moonbeam' for time and all eternity. And, in truth, wouldn't he *deserve* the title?

Before she'd left for England, Katherine Herrald had expressed so much confidence in him. Confidence that he could successfully undertake any situation presented to him. Wasn't this a testing of that confidence? And as much for himself as for anyone else?

He had survived an attack by a bear and the ordeal associated with the Queen of Bedlam. Indians and bandits could be dealt with, and if he retreated from this, he would be a failure certainly in the eyes of Hudson Greathouse. And particularly in his own eyes.

"Very well," he said, steadying himself. "I'll take two pistols." Which he might rent from someone, using a portion of the coins laid before him.

"Excellent. You will leave by eight in the morning. If you make haste you will arrive at the Becketts soon after nightfall."

"I'll leave at seven," Matthew said. "If I can get sufficient sleep, that is."

"Oh! Of course! You must get your sleep." Von Eissen scanned the interior. "A charming home," he said. "I myself like the smaller spaces." His gaze came back to Matthew and fixed there. "No one but my brother is to take possession of the envelope. No one is to know you are carrying a message. You are to place it into his hand. At night. Do you understand? At night."

"Many times repeated," said Matthew. "First time understood. Thank you for your confidence and your business, and now goodnight."

With the envelope and the map lying on the table alongside the money, von Eissen clicked his heels together, gave a little bow, replaced his tricorne atop his wig and took his leave.

Matthew blew out the candles. He would pack a small travelling bag in the morning and go in search of two pistols he could borrow or rent. Mr. Winekoop at the stable might be able to help...and as a last resort Matthew thought he could approach Gardner Lillehorne and pay him for a pair of pistols from the town's arsenal. But then again he would have to explain why he needed the weapons, so that was only if push came to kick. There was no need to inform Hudson of his impending journey; the money placed into the coffers at Number Seven Stone Street would tell its own tale. He was about to extinguish the lantern when he realized what the man's smell reminded him of.

Ashton McCaggers' attic of horrors. Full of dried bones and old odors of tombs. An aroma of death, if one got down to the essence of it.

Matthew considered that for a moment. Then he left the lantern lit, went to bed, and after playing two games of chess in his mind, at last he fell asleep.

TWO.

Night had fallen and the chill that came with it made Matthew glad he'd decided to wear a heavier gray fearnaught coat, a flannel scarf, and a gray woolen cap. He was prodding his horse, Suvie, to a canter, but the mount had kept up a steady pace during the long day, and so he wished not to pressure her too very much...yet the Becketts' tavern must be close at hand, and with it a meal and rest for both of them.

The Boston Post Road was a lonely track this far out from town. He had passed several small settlements, had paused in one of them to water Suvie and wet his own whistle from his leather canteen, then back upon the road once more. He had seen a lumber wagon heading for New York, had seen a coach fly past going south, had been passed by one on its flight north, had seen a couple more riders going to town, but otherwise the road belonged to him.

The forest on both sides looked as if God had decided to throw down every huge crooked tree, ugly maze of thornbrush, dangling cascade of vines and wall of impenetrable thicket fashioned from the Book Of Creation. It was a forbidding sight, and that was during the day. At night it was just black upon black, a cavern world. The stars were out and the three-quarter moon did shed a little illumination, but it was a distant candle in a huge ebony cathedral. At least he was entertained by the hooting of owls along the way, and he saw no Indians, bandits, or wild beasts so all to the good.

Matthew caught a whiff of smoke. Suvie rounded a bend and—ah yes!—there stood a small house on the right with yellow candlelight at the windows and smoke rising from two stone chimneys. Behind the house was a barn and a corral, and beyond that the utter darkness of more forest. Matthew wasted no time in securing Suvie to a hitching-post at the front door. He took his canvas travelling bag—with the two pistols and their necessary implements inside—from where it hung down beside the saddle. Then he knocked at the door, as even if it was a public tavern, he found it better manners not to barge in and possibly frighten anyone.

His knock was answered by a gray-bearded and gray-haired gent dressed in brown trousers and a cream-colored shirt and smoking a long-stemmed clay pipe.

"Mr. Beckett?" Matthew inquired. He figured the man to be in his late fifties.

"The same. Come in, come in! Ella, we have a guest!"

Matthew thanked his host and walked straight across the neatly-kept room to the fireplace to catch some warmth. Ella Beckett, also gray-haired and about the same age as her husband, came in from the back, welcomed

Matthew with a friendly smile and bright blue eyes, and took his fearnought to hang on a wallhook.

"Travelling north or south?" Joel Beckett asked.

"North."

"Ah, then. Yes, get yourself warm. Chilly for so early in the season, but we had a light snow this time last year so you never can tell." He looked out a front window at Suvie. "Take care of your horse for you. Thought we'd have coach passengers stopping with us by now, didn't we, Ella? But again you never can tell. Likely broken down somewhere, as they do. Going so fast they throw their wheels. What will you drink? A cup of mulled wine?"

"That would be very excellent."

"I'll fetch it," said Ella. "I have chicken in the pot, boiled turnips, and cornbread. Does that suit?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

Matthew found himself in the delightful and comfortable presence of two people who seemed to thoroughly enjoy being of service to travellers. He told them his name and that he was from New York town, that he was heading north...and that was all. The envelope and map were buttoned in an inner pocket of his suit jacket, where he meant for them to stay until needed.

At dinner, as a small polite fire cracked in the kitchen's fireplace, Matthew took further delight in a meal that easily ranked with the best of Sally Almond's cooking. During the meal—which really was a feast, with the amount of the food supplied—there came a knock at the door and Joel excused himself. Matthew expected it to be coach passengers, and was surprised when Joel returned to the kitchen in the company of two Indian braves wrapped up in blankets. They both eyed Matthew quickly, making some judgment about him, and then Matthew watched as Ella wrapped a large wheel of cornbread in a piece of cloth and gave it to one of the braves, who nodded his approval. They left without a word, and Joel returned to the table.

"Our Indian friends," Joel explained. "Their village is some distance away, to the south. But they travel far to get some of Ella's cornbread, and we're happy to oblige them."

"It's a compliment," Ella supplied. "Sometimes they bring us venison, and they make a kind of beer that Joel likes but when I tried it I thought I had tasted fire." She shrugged. "It's nice to know they accept us as friendly."

Indians...bandits...beasts of the forest, Matthew thought. Well, at least the Indians were not a concern.

"You spoke my name," said Joel as he lit his pipe from a candleflame.

"Pardon?"

"At the door. You spoke my name. Who told you about our tavern?"

"Um...another traveller who evidently stayed with you."

"Oh? And what is *his* name? Ella and I both have good memories."

Matthew hated to concoct lies, but where to go from here? "I didn't catch the name. It was in a tavern in town." Amazing how easily a lie slipped out, even though one detested it.

"Are you a pipe smoker? I have several extras I offer to guests."

"No sir, but thank you all the same."

Joel smoked for a moment in silence and Ella offered Matthew another helping of everything, which he gladly accepted.

"So you're heading north?" Joel asked. "Where to?"

Boston, he thought he should say, but that seemed a lie too far. Besides, what matter if these two people knew his destination? But of course *not* about the envelope...never that.

"Actually," said Matthew after he'd taken another drink of the equally-excellent mulled wine, "I'm visiting someone. I understand it's another day's ride. I believe the road is a mile or so ahead, on the right?"

Joel had been steadily puffing his pipe. Now he ceased the puffing and took it slowly from his mouth. "Matthew...if I may...*who* are you going to visit?"

I have been sworn to secrecy, Matthew thought he ought to say. But then again...what matter that these people should know? The name wasn't going to hurt anything.

"A gentleman named von Eissen," he replied.

Joel glanced quickly at Ella and then returned his attention to the young man from New York town. "If you're talking about the road that takes you to the river cliffs, and I believe you are...no one named von Eissen lives there. Do you mean the Vyden house?"

"No, I...well, I mean...I was told a von Eissen lives at the end of the road."

"Who told you that?"

Matthew felt himself sinking into a swamp. To tell, or not? "His brother," he decided to say, just to try to clear up this clouded glass.

"Vyden had no brother. In fact, he died many years ago. When Ella and I had our farm along that road."

"Who," said Matthew, "is — *was* — Vyden?"

"Nicholas Vyden," Ella said, her expression gone to stone, "was an insane Dutchman who made his money in the shipping business in Holland, or that's what we heard. He built that house — that great scab

upon the earth—and then went about trying to control the shipping on the river below."

"Control it? How?"

"By building a huge barrier out of logs," said Joel. "A thing that worked on chains and pulleys, meant to be raised to block boats if a toll payment wasn't arranged. We understood he had an engineer come from Holland to build it for him."

"And it *was* built?" Matthew asked.

"Something went wrong. There was an accident of some kind. The engineer was killed and the barrier was wrecked. So it turned out that the cliffs below Vyden's house had splintered logs just beneath the surface and no boats could be docked there. A couple of supply boats from New York town tried, we understood from one of his servants, and they got their bottoms torn out."

"Hm," Matthew said. He frowned. "You say Vyden is dead?"

"Many years ago, when we still had our farm," said Ella. "We watched the funeral wagon pass by, and later the wagons carrying the furnishings away. No one lives in that house now."

"And hasn't for a very long time," Joel added. He blew a curl of smoke toward the ceiling. "So this supposed brother has foxed you, Matthew. Why in the world were you intending to travel down a cursed road to a dead man's house?"

Matthew may have touched the outside of the buttoned pocket. He wasn't sure, because everything seemed to be slowly spinning and out of focus and it wasn't the mulled wine. He heard himself speak: "A cursed road?"

"That's what the Indians say." Another curl of smoke ascended. "They wouldn't go down that road if it was the only place on earth to get Ella's cornbread. And we had our own experiences."

"Joel!" She reached out to cover his hand with her own. Her bright blue eyes were suddenly dimmed and watery. "Don't!"

He looked at her and smiled, and it might have been the saddest, most heartbroken smile Matthew had ever had the misfortune to witness. Matthew shifted in his chair, thinking that something terrible was coming.

"It's all right," Joel said quietly to his wife. "Really. That was a long time ago, too. We haven't told anyone for...years, have we? I think we should tell this young man, otherwise whatever we say...he might just leave here and go down that road anyway, just to see for himself. Yes. I think we should tell him."

Ella said nothing more. She got up and began clearing the plates away. Matthew saw that her mouth had become a grim white line and her face

was equally grim and pale.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Matthew said.

"I do. It might save your life, if you're the stubborn and stupid type." Joel reached for a deerskin pouch and began to refill his pipe. When the pipe was fired and going again, he said quietly, "Our farm. A few miles from here, along that road. Our home. Ella, me, and our son. Will. A fine boy, he was. Seventeen years of age when...seventeen years of age," he repeated, and he was silent for a little while. Dishes clinked together in Ella's hands as she put them into the wash basin and the kitchen fireplace spat a few sparks on a hard oak knot.

"It was after Vyden died," Joel continued. "All of a sudden...something started getting at our cattle. Tearing them up at night. Going for the throat, just awful bloody. We started hearing the howling from the deep woods. Wolves out there. Coming in at night to kill our cattle. But...a strange thing. I started a journal, keeping track of when we lost an animal. It was one attack a month. I mean to say...maybe two or three nights one right after another, but then it was not until the next month. I realized the things were coming in under a full moon, or nearly full either waxing or waning. Maybe they were roaming the land and their pattern brought them to our farm the same time every month. Who's to say? Wolves are smart. They're a thinking animal. Oh, we went out looking for them with our muskets, Will and me, but we never saw a one."

"He was a good boy," Ella suddenly said, her back to them as she washed the dishes. Matthew didn't want to see her face, because her voice was tortured. "Our Will," she said, like a sigh of wind in a graveyard.

Joel leaned forward in his chair, his dark brown eyes as intense as gun barrels aimed at their guest. "I reasoned out when the wolves would come again. I told Will we were to wait out in the pasture with the cattle, our pistols ready, each of us with a shuttered lantern, and when we heard a noise of something coming—and we would know when that happened, because the cattle would let us know—we were to open our lanterns, pick a target, and shoot. So we waited. First one night, then the next. The wolves didn't come. I figured they smelled us there...smelled where we'd walked...smelled our presence. But then, the third night...they were hungry, you see. They couldn't keep away."

"Please," Ella said softly, as if begging her husband to cease the telling.

"On the third night...under a waning moon...the cattle started lowing. Moving, being agitated I guess would be the right word. But what Will and I heard all of a sudden was something hitting the wall of the barn about fifty yards away, and the horses in there started screaming. Well, the barn door was latched...the wolves couldn't get in at them, but one of them—

more than one—was throwing itself against the boards. Will started running toward the barn. I shouted out for him to wait, but he was a fast runner. He unshuttered his lantern. I saw something moving...figures...blurred shapes...big things. I saw his powder flash and in the noise of the shot I heard a whine of pain. Only...it didn't sound exactly like an animal. It was...I still don't know."

Beckett had to pause. He put aside his pipe and ran a hand over his face. Matthew saw it tremble.

"I saw...something jump at him. Two or three of them. Will's lantern fell. I ran toward him, and...as I unshuttered my lantern...I was hit from behind. And when I say hit...I mean to say it felt like I was knocked down by a cannonball. When my face struck the ground I lost two teeth. Something—heavy, so heavy—was on my back, bearing me down. I could feel claws in my shoulders. My pistol...lost. And I heard my boy scream."

"Oh," came out of Ella, who stood frozen at the wash basin.

"I was trying to get up, but I could hardly move. And then...I felt the breath of the thing on the back of my neck, and I swear to you...I swear before God," said Beckett, "that it made a noise that was nearly human. Almost a voice, if you could make a voice out of muscles and razors. And it said 'No'. I fought, but later I found out my right arm—my gun arm—was broken. I was a pitiful shell compared to that thing on my back. And I had to hear my boy being torn apart. Thank God...thank *Holy God*—he didn't live too long."

Again, Beckett paused and this time tears glistened in his eyes.

"They took down two of the cattle," he went on, when he could. "Left my boy...scattered. Do you know what it's like to be in a nightmare that you can't wake up from, and you try and try and scream behind your teeth but you can't wake up? That was me out there." He drew in a long, pained breath. "It was all over by the time Ella got to me. All over, and they were gone. She had to see what those things had done to Will before I could stop her. She couldn't speak for nearly two weeks. Couldn't utter a word. That's what living on that road did to us, and to our boy."

"Damn," Matthew said quietly, but shocked at this story. "My God, that's terrible!"

"Yes," said Beckett. "Those things...they could smell us, and they were trying to draw us away from the cattle. I think...if Will hadn't shot one, they wouldn't have killed him. That one on my back...it could've finished me in an instant, but it didn't. Like I say, smart. *Cunning*. But oh my God... what killers they can be, when it pleases them. Well...we buried Will and we left the farm. We were going to move to New York but the couple we knew who owned this tavern were putting it up for sale. Ella didn't want to

stay so near to where it happened, but...I do go out there every so often to his grave. I just stand over it and speak a few words. But I only go in the daytime and I make sure I can get back here by dusk. We have a good life now. We enjoy being of service to the travellers, and we make a good coin. We keep plenty of candles lit. I'm sorry, Ella," he said to the still-frozen woman, "but I thought it best I tell this young man." He stared across the table at Matthew with red-rimmed eyes. "It was near twenty years ago. Sometimes it seems like it happened last night. Do you understand that?"

"I do, certainly. But...you kept referring to what attacked you as 'things'. Not 'wolves'."

"Because I don't really know *what* they were. I'll tell you also...I've been able to pick up some of the Indians' lingo. There's one who comes occasionally who speaks pretty fair English, too. The Indian word for 'cursed' also means 'diseased'. That's what that road is. Diseased. And to travel to the river cliffs to that empty house—and you wouldn't reach it before nightfall, even if you left at first light—would be an act of insanity. Or suicide," he said. "No one lives there, but the Indians still hear howling at night from the woods around it, under the full moon. Those things are still out there, after twenty years. So now you know."

Matthew couldn't find any words. The envelope in his buttoned pocket suddenly felt as heavy as a gravestone. And all the coins that remained in a small bag under Matthew's bed at home...payment to Charon?

"A fine feast, wife of mine," said Beckett, his good nature if not entirely returned then somewhat recovered. "Matthew, let's go sit by the fire in the front room and tell me exactly why you intended to go to that house."

"That great scab upon the earth," Ella remarked.

As Matthew sat with Beckett in the agreeable light and warmth of the front room's hearth, he was torn by his obligation. To go, or not to go? To tell, or not to tell? "I am employed," he decided to say, "by a gentleman asserting himself as brother to a von Eissen who is supposed to be living there, and to deliver a message. I cannot say what the message is and further than that I can't reveal any details. Other than I'm required to deliver the message at night."

The pipe had returned to Beckett's mouth. He removed it and blew a thick cloud of smoke that curled upon itself, reached toward the hearth and slinked up the chimney.

"That's a death sentence," he said. "If you venture to the river cliffs, you won't come back alive."

THREE.

At first light, Matthew faced a choice.

The day promised to be sunny and bright. Birds chirped in the trees. There was not a cloud to be seen. By sunlight the surrounding forest looked more inviting than dangerous, yet Matthew knew only an Indian could make his or her way through that wild tangle of vegetation.

What to do?

He had spent a restless night in an otherwise comfortable featherbed in one of the tavern's guest rooms. He had shaved, washed his face, changed his shirt and stockings, and then breakfasted on ham and eggs with the Becketts, who went about their pleasantries as if not a word about their son or the cursed road had been spoken last night. He had repacked his travelling bag and put on his fernaught, for the morning was yet chill. He had paid for his stay with a coin from von Eissen's fee, and was now sitting astride Suvie in front of the tavern with Joel and Ella saying farewell.

What to do?

"We hope to come to New York town soon," said Joel. He put his arm around his wife. "A woman does like to shop."

"Yes," Matthew said, but he was asking himself *what to do?*

"Good journey to you," Ella said. "So nice to have your company."

And another question Matthew had to consider: *What would Hudson Greathouse do?*

This was over his head. *Far* over it. He didn't have enough experience for something like this. Hell's bells! he thought. Get back to New York as fast as Suvie will –

Hudson's gravelly voice, speaking: *I knew you were a weak-minded moonbeam.*

Joel stepped forward and rubbed Suvie's neck. He looked up, squinting in the early sun. "You're going through with it, aren't you?"

"I..." He stumbled over this question that might mean life or death. But he had two pistols, and he would get them out and ready by nightfall! Still...Joel and his son had had two pistols as well, hadn't they?

And then it came out, as Matthew knew it must. "I have to," he said.

"I tried," Joel answered. He gave Suvie a final rub and stepped back alongside his wife. Both their faces were blank. They indeed had tried. "Good luck to you," he said, and with that they turned away.

Matthew urged Suvie onward, heading north.

In time he came to the road.

It was a track hardly wide enough for a post coach. On both sides the forest was so thick it tried to bully the very sunlight into submission. As it was, the daylight was dimmed to a green haze speckled with the orange and red bursts of hardwood trees that locked arms twenty feet above

Matthew's head. The air itself smelled not of fresh growth but of old rot, wet in its decay of roots and vines. He pulled back on the reins and paused at the entrance to this tunnel of threat, for a tunnel is what it appeared. It curved slightly to the left a distance ahead and climbed upward.

Suvie grumbled underneath him. She felt it too, but what Matthew felt, he didn't fully understand. It just was a sensation of gloom as heavy as ten fearnaught coats draped around his shoulders.

He had to go.

Didn't he?

Hudson Greathouse would.

Wouldn't he?

Before Matthew could start going down that road in his mind, he flicked the reins and started Suvie along the physical road. He would stop further on and prepare his pistols. He thought he was stupid and should have turned back for New York because he wasn't ready for a task of this nature...but then again, he'd survived other dangerous situations...deadly situations, in fact. He bore the scar of a bear's claw on his forehead to prove it.

And what really made him go on was that his curiosity—that devil!—had awakened and taken flame. If no von Eissen lived in the house at the end of this road, then who was supposed to accept the envelope? Ten pounds was a great deal of money. He hadn't been paid such an amount to take an envelope to an empty house, that was for certain! So who was waiting at the river cliffs for the message...in a dead man's house...a great scab upon the earth....

Who?

The day wore on.

Matthew stopped several times to let Suvie rest and take water from his canteen. He prepared the pistols and hooked them to a rope he'd brought so that the guns hung on either side of the saddle in front of him.

Then in mid-afternoon, following a road that curved back and forth as if drawn on a map by a town's drunk, and rising and falling in equal measures, Matthew came upon a huge oak tree on his right that had two words painted on its massive trunk in red, the words faded by time and nature but still frightfully legible.

Go Back.

Matthew reined Suvie in as if a puppeteer had jerked his arms.

He sat for awhile, staring at that sign with one hand on a pistol grip. He realized it had been some time since he'd heard birds singing. All here was silence but for the sound of the wind moving through the interlocked branches above.

"Suvie," Matthew said, keeping his voice low as if the forest might hear and sprout fiends to attack him then and there, "I am one damned fool. Don't you think?" To her credit she didn't answer. "I don't think that was written by an Indian or a wolf, do you?" Which begged another question and threw more logs into the fire of his curiosity.

He went on. Not a quarter mile further he passed a road that turned to the left and approached what appeared to be a ramshackle farmhouse, a barn broken by the hard hammer of weather, the remnants of a split-rail fence, and a pasture overgrown with weeds. Somewhere over there was a grave.

Another hour, another fall and rise of the road, another curve, and Matthew noted that the sun was dropping through the trees. Had the sun ever dropped so fast in New York before? He felt the dark edging in, and with it a deepening chill.

Then he came upon the hanging man.

This time it was in his face as Suvie rounded a bend, and he would never tell Hudson Greathouse that he wet the breeches of his fine dove's gray suit a little bit before he realized the figure hanging from a branch down upon the road at his eye-level was made of straw and dressed in dirty rags.

Once more he stopped Suvie and this time she gave a nicker and a snort and wanted to back up. "Easy, easy," he said, speaking as much to himself as to the noble mare.

The straw man was caught by a breeze and swung slightly back and forth, twisting as it swung with an old discolored rope around its neck.

Matthew suddenly felt himself being watched. He was sure of it. The nape of his own neck prickled too much. He turned in the saddle and looked back. Nothing there but road and forest, forest and road. Dare he call out? He did: "Anyone there?"

An Indian, maybe? Watching there from the woods? If so, you never saw an Indian unless they wanted to be seen, and this one—or more than one—did not.

Matthew again took stock of the hanging figure. Eyes were on him, he had no doubt of it. He aimed his voice toward the forest on his right and said loudly, "I have business ahead! I mean no one any harm, but I have to go on! Do you hear? A straw man is not going to stop me!"

Of course there was no reply, and Matthew had expected none.

"I'm going on!" he said. And something he immediately wished he hadn't said: "Mark it, I'm carrying two pistols!" Then, that foolish statement out in the air revealing his limitation of two shots if one or both of the weapons didn't misfire, as often happened, the problem-solver from New

York gritted his teeth against the Fates and made good his intent to continue, even going so far as to give the straw man a knock as he passed it, which of course made the figure swing back into his own self before he got clear.

As Suvie carried Matthew further on, the dark descended through shades of pale. With the nightfall, which cast a nearly-absolute ebony blanket upon the road, Matthew grew more and more tense and Suvie seemed more and more agitated. He could see a little bit, as the waxing moon glimmered through the high branches in lighter puddles on the dirt, but he was aware that if Suvie made a misstep it was finish to this journey with possibly fatal consequences.

He had no idea of the exact time, and wished there had been some way to bring a lantern to bear upon the way ahead but there was not. He began to seriously wonder if ten pounds was too cheap a price to pay for a horse's broken leg and the life of—

His musings were very suddenly interrupted as Suvie rounded a bend and there stood in the middle of the road a figure holding a torch.

Matthew reined Suvie in. It was a man—a large dark-bearded man, husky with wide shoulders—wearing what appeared to be stitched-together blankets as clothing. On his feet were wrappings of cloth laced up with vines.

“Off the horse,” he commanded, in a voice that only needed a strike of lightning to go with its low growl of thunder.

Matthew hesitated. One hand had already gone to a pistol's grip. Then he was aware of more figures emerging from the forest all around him, some with torches and others standing just at the edges of light. He quickly counted six men and four women, all of whom appeared to be dressed in rags and in a wretched condition of cleanliness.

“You'll never live to cock that pistol,” the first man said, and the tone of that voice told Matthew no truer words had ever been spoken.

He got down, noting with some small measure of gratification that no weapons were in sight. But some of these men and women in their dirt-stained and ragged condition, all hard sinews and jutting bones, looked to be deadly weapons enough.

Thunder Voice approached. Matthew nearly shrank back, for the man had a bestial face with a low sloping forehead under a dirty mop of dark hair, thick dark brown brows, eyes black as cinders of sin, and gray streaks in the coarse bristle-brush of beard. The man held the torch out so close to Matthew's own face that the younger man feared ignition. Others in this strange group were coming forward, ringing him and Suvie, who strained and nickered against the bit Matthew was holding.

"Jack, take the horse," the man said, and another bearded brute came forward to do so.

Matthew and the first man stared at each other, until Matthew found a shred of his shrinking courage and said, "Good evening."

"Who are you?"

"Matthew Corbett, from New York. And you?"

"Have they forgotten how to read in New York?"

"Pardon?"

"You passed a sign. Painted on a tree. Is your eyesight in danger?"

"Only from the torch you're holding too closely to my face. Do you mind?"

The torch did not retreat. Matthew felt someone come up behind him and pluck at his coat, and he looked around to see a thin black-haired girl about twenty years or so staring at him as if she'd never before seen another human being.

"Corbett," the man repeated, as if rolling it around in his mouth for the taste. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I am on my way to—here! Stop that!" He had realized one of the other men had plucked his travelling bag down off Suvie, and that one and another were pawing through it. "Those are my personal items!" he protested into the torch.

"We have no personal items here," came the reply. "On your way to *where*?"

"I think that's my business. I don't care to be mauled in the middle of the night. Who *are* you people?"

"The only place you *could* be going," said the man, his face and voice impassive, "is the Bodenkier house. So...why?"

"Bodenkier? Who is that?"

"Take his pistols," the man told another. "Tie the horse here." And to Matthew, "You're going to take a walk with us. Cause us no trouble. If you try to run, I'll break both your legs." He motioned toward the woods with his flame. Matthew noted that he glanced quickly up through the trees at Selene's growing orb. The man pressed his free hand against the back of his neck and shivered, and at the same time Matthew thought he heard one of the women give a small whimper of pain.

"Move," said the man, and Matthew had no choice but to obey.

FOUR.

An hour's walk in that forbidding tangle was a test of the legs, the balance and the spirit itself, because as soon as Matthew freed himself from one

creep of vines or claw of thorns he was attacked by another. All around him strode the strange people with their torches, moving as if upon an uncrowded New York block, so sure was their footing. In fact a few ran ahead, which Matthew would have thought an impossibility. He plodded onward with the evident boss of this troupe at his back and the raggedy girl with black hair traipsing around him and grinning in his face like a lunatic.

"I'll tell you that people in New York know where I am," Matthew lied, to save his hide; in this case a lie might be a life-saver. "If anything... unfortunate... happens to me, they'll—"

"Quiet," growled the man. "Don't make things worse for yourself."

At that, Matthew really did start sweating.

A little further on, one of the men out on his right gave a guttural cry and fell to his knees. Matthew imagined he heard the cracking of a bone. At once one of the others picked up the man's fallen torch but no help was offered to the fallen individual. Everyone kept walking, as the man curled up and shivered in the brush.

"Aren't you going to help him?" Matthew asked the boss.

"There's no help for him."

"I understand there are wolves in the forest."

The boss stopped and gave a terrible grin that was intensified in its ferocity by the torchflame. "He says," he announced to the others, "that he understands there are wolves in the forest." Then his grin shattered into an equally terrible laugh echoed by one and all.

"What's the joke?" Matthew asked.

"You are. Move on."

The raggedy girl suddenly capered in and sniffed—actually *sniffed*—at Matthew's throat. As he drew back, the girl bent down and sniffed at his crotch.

"Perla! Stop that!" the boss snapped, and she scampered away. "She's in heat," he said to Matthew.

This was the damnedest group he'd ever seen. As they continued on into the woods, Matthew thought that they were certainly not Indians nor wild beasts of the forest, and they could not be bandits for what band of brigands would be out here on a road no one travelled. So...another log on the curiosity bonfire...who *were* they?

The glare of more torches appeared ahead. They came to an area that was not so much cleared as it was that the vegetation was somewhat thinner. A rock face jutted upward, a stacking of ancient boulders like a throw of God's dice. Matthew saw other figures crouched around a central fire. There stood a few haphazardly-cobbled wooden shacks, and at the

base of the rocks the entrance to a cave. Torches had been driven into the earth and cast shadow-edged light. The people of this strange congregation – obviously as poorly-lived as the most wretched of creatures on the earth – came around to stare at the new arrival. The boss gave him a hard shove toward the cave’s entrance. He passed men and boys, women and girls, all in rags and as dirty as muck. Over there stood a woman with leaves in her wild blonde hair, an infant suckling at one breast. Before he was pushed again into the mouth of the cave Matthew judged this group of tribal savages to number between thirty and forty individuals. Then he was in a darkness broken only by the glow of a few candles, and the man behind him had given his torch to one of the others and now commanded, “Sit down over there.”

A hard floor was no compliment to Matthew’s behind. The man took a seat on a flat rock somewhat higher than the floor, with candles on either side. He was joined by two other bearded bulls of the woods and a thin-faced woman with long gray tresses who settled themselves also on either side. Matthew noted uneasily that the woman did not sit; she crouched, her tattered dress barely covering her body and her feet bare, and there was something about her that looked terribly hungry.

“Matthew Corbett,” the boss said. He laced his dirt-stained fingers together. “From New York. A long way from this place.”

“Too long, I fear.” Matthew had decided he could approach this situation one of two ways: either begging for his life, or showing some courage that he definitely did not feel. But false courage or not it would have to do, for he felt begging was a short trip to a grave. “To whom do I have the dubious pleasure of speaking?”

“You can call me Murdo.”

“That suits.”

Murdo grinned again. This time it wasn’t as fierce, but a grin on that face had something of a snarl in it. “Listen to him!” he said to the others. “At our mercy, and he shows an admirable bit of courage! We can smell your fear sweat, boy.”

Matthew chose his next words carefully. “I think I’m entitled, don’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose. Daniel, fetch him some water.” One of the other men instantly got up and loped out. “Now...let’s get down to business. Why are you travelling to the house of Walloch Bodenkier?”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of the name.”

“But it’s not the first you’ve heard of the *house*. What? Did someone in New York employ you to be his servant?”

"May I ask a question?" Matthew went ahead before a *no* could be given. "Who are you people and what are you doing out here?"

"That's two questions!" the woman snapped. She had eyes like holes bored in metal. "And two questions too many!"

"Forgive my curiosity, madam. It's my nature."

"*Madam!*" she cackled. "He called me 'madam!'" Her crooked smile faded to a sad slant. "It's been so long since anyone addressed me as such. I can hardly recall."

Matthew decided these people must have escaped from an institution for the mentally deranged. Perhaps a wagon broke down, and they all fled to the protection of the—

A skull was suddenly thrust into his face. It was turned upside down—an animal's skull of some kind, the openings sealed up with dried mud except for the cup that held a portion of liquid. The one called Daniel was offering him a drink.

"Go ahead," said Murdo. "You must be thirsty."

They were all watching him. Did he dare refuse the offer? He really was thirsty...but to drink from the skull of a beast? Ashton McCaggers with his collection of bones might have given a gut-laugh over this situation. Matthew felt he had to do it. He took the skull in his hands and yet paused with his mouth over the brainpan.

"It's only water," Murdo said. "We get it from a spring up the way."

Matthew drank. Water indeed. Then he returned the skull to Daniel's waiting hands and realized one of the hands had a patch of bristly hair at the base of the palm. The skull and the hands withdrew into the dark.

"Walloch Bodenkier," said his host. "Why?"

The moment of truth. What the *hell* was this all about? He still considered himself to be keeping the confidence for von Eissen, but...yet... things had taken a decidedly sinister turn, and he felt his life at the moment not to be worth ten pounds nor even ten pence.

"Waiting," Murdo said. Matthew saw him give a quick wince as if something had suddenly pained him, and the man rubbed the mound of his left shoulder.

"I know nothing about Walloch Bodenkier," Matthew answered. "I was hired by his brother for a mission I am not at liberty to tell you."

Murdo remained silent for a few seconds. He ceased rubbing his shoulder, locked his fingers together and leaned forward. The candlelight played shadows across his face. "Not at *liberty*? Liberty. Now there's an interesting word. If Bodenkier had his way, the idea of liberty would be an ancient dream. It would be *nothing*. We are the only prevention of New York...Boston...Philadelphia...Charles Town...everywhere in these

colonies...losing their liberty. Or rather, having it stolen from them, by night. If you truly know nothing about that...*creature*...and I think I believe you...then I will inform you that we—as you see us—are soldiers, of a kind. We are fighting a war against a bitter enemy. This war...has been going on for generations. There can be no end to it until the Bodenkiere of this world—of *their* world—are totally destroyed. We are here to—” He suddenly had to stop, because Matthew had seen his lower jaw seemingly jump out of its sockets. As Matthew watched in a kind of stupefied horror, Murdo took both hands and popped the dislocation back into place.

“You never should have come along that road,” he said, his voice harsher than before. “This is no place for your kind.”

Matthew had so many questions he didn’t know where to begin. His expression must have betrayed him, because Murdo went on. “We have contained him in that house. We think he must not be able to use the river, or a boat would’ve already come to take him out. Oh yes, we know he has associates able to roam freely, but Bodenkieer is vital to their plans.”

That word again, Matthew thought. *Vital*.

“He cannot use the road,” Murdo said, “or we would catch and kill him. The whole of his sect. So the best we can do for the moment is containment, and we have kept him trapped in that house for...” He paused, thinking, measuring time. “Over twenty years,” he said.

Matthew’s voice was a quaver. “*Twenty years?*”

“We survive. You say you have a mission? So do we. Now...what is it you’ve been sent here to do for him?”

“I...really...I...” It spilled out: “Are you people *insane?*”

“What would be insane, young man, is for that monster to get out and into civilization, such as it is. We watch the house but it’s a large estate. We know he prepares traps on the grounds, and we’ve found that out the hard way. If we were to discover where he and the others sleep by day and kill them, before they were extinguished they would send out screams that could be heard not by the human ear, but by their kind even across the ocean. That would bring hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe, to join the war against *us*. If we could get to him—and all of them—by night, that alarm mechanism they have is negated. They die silently by night...but then again, they hardly ever die.”

Escaped from Bedlam, Matthew thought. All of them. Living out here twenty years. Their belfries were cracked. Talking about killing people who could scream across an ocean? It was utter madness!

And here he was, sitting in a cave in the midst of them!

“You were sent out here as a sacrifice,” Murdo told him. He stared at the back of one of his hands and flexed the fingers, again and again. “To be

food for them. We believe they survive on small animals they catch on the estate, enough to keep them from shriveling. Whoever sent you was offering them a meal they could make last for a year or more."

"Let me," Matthew said carefully, "go and bring help for you."

It happened so fast Matthew had no time to react. One second Murdo was up on his throne of rock and the next—a blurred shape, impossibly fast—he was in Matthew's face with a fist clenching the front of the young man's coat. And Matthew's own mind was losing its grip on reality because he imagined he saw a patch of hair ripple across Murdo's forehead and then be absorbed back into the flesh.

"You know *nothing*," Murdo whispered, as a thick musty animal odor assailed Matthew's nostrils. "Nothing. Your entire world is one room. But we do know...all those rooms in the mansion...so many...and so many are deadly dangerous. We are fighting for humanity. Everything we are...there's a purpose to us. Can you even begin to grasp it?"

But in the silence that ensued, with Matthew's heart pounding and the New York problem-solver smelling his own fear sweat, Murdo released him, drew back, and said bitterly, "No, you cannot."

"Are you going to kill me?" Matthew asked, because the time had come for him to prepare...fight and flight, the only chance and not much of one against these lunatics.

Murdo crouched down upon the ground. He sat there for a long while, brooding, his shadow thrown huge against the wall of rock at his back.

Then: "Daniel, you and Micah escort this young man back to his horse. Take Judd with you. Return to him his pistols and his bag. If Perla tries to follow, strike her down. She has designs on him." Murdo's hooded gaze came back to Matthew. "No, we won't kill you. We'll let Bodenkier have that honor. Go on now, and make haste."

Matthew was never so glad to stand up in his life. The gray-haired woman still looked like she wanted to tear him apart and then into further small pieces.

"Farewell, young man," said Murdo, who remained seated. And to the others escorting Matthew: "If it starts on any of you, understand I forbid him to be touched on penalty of castration. Being *neutered*, I might say," he said with a thin-lipped smile toward Matthew. Then his expression darkened as fast as any storm might move. He growled, "Get out!"

FIVE.

Was a night ever so long, or as much shrouded with mystery as with darkness?

In Suvie's saddle with his pistols and his travelling bag restored, Matthew had gratefully left his two escorts about forty minutes ago. Two only, because the third had suddenly lifted his eyes into the chill moonlight that filtered down through the branches, had given a piercing cry that made Matthew think a beast of the forest was about to devour them all, had dropped his torch, clutched his hands to his face and, doubling over like a hunchback, had run staggering into the woods.

"Keep moving," Matthew had been told. But the voice that spoke it sounded husky and strangely inhuman. "Just keep moving."

Matthew would have paid ten pounds and ten to get to the road faster, but for him it was again a long and hard trek. As soon as Matthew swung up into the saddle with a breathy *whoosh* of relief, the two men and their torches moved away through the thicket at running speed.

And now onward to the house on the river cliffs, that great scab upon the earth where dwelled people who could—ridiculous!—scream across the ocean.

Twenty years in that self-made prison. Of course they were all insane. And he was beginning to fear for his sanity as well, on this haunted night. He prided himself on his intelligence. He considered himself well-read and knowledgeable about the world, with all its bizarraties and strange happenstances, but all this strained the mind. Still...he thought it odd—extremely so—that the period of twenty years included the death of Will Beckett by wolves, yet that group in the woods seemed untroubled by wild beasts. In fact, they seemed much like wild beasts themselves. And all that about killing Walloch Bodenkier, and some kind of war that Matthew failed to understand...he couldn't make heads or tails of it.

He was still pondering the situation when the road ended. Moonlight shone upon a black iron gate and a fence topped with spear points, all of it at least seven feet high. He dismounted and found a chain and large lock securing the gate. Beyond the fence a weeded-up path led upward. There stood more darkness of trees and underbrush, with no house in sight.

But there! An iron bell and a pullcord attached to the gate.

You were sent out here as a sacrifice, Murdo had said.

The ravings of a madman. And yet...Matthew spent a moment fitting one of the pistols into the waistband of his breeches, under suit jacket and fernaught, and then the other was secured in his travelling bag. Satisfied at least with this precaution, he rang the bell.

The hollow sound of it was startling in the silence. He rang it again, and waited. When no light appeared beyond the gate and no one emerged from the dark, he steeled himself for that noise and rang it a third time.

Was someone there? For suddenly a figure emerged from the dark, and moonlight through the bars of the gate touched the pallid face of a thin young girl with long dark hair.

She stood without speaking, staring at him with strangely-luminous eyes. Dressed in a long gown of some kind, Matthew saw. A sleeping robe?

"My name is Matthew Corbett," he said. "I've come from New York with a message from Karlis von Eissen. I had supposed his brother lived –"

He need say no more, because she was reaching toward the lock with an ancient-looking key. The lock clicked free, the chain rattled away, and she pulled the gate open on rusted hinges that made a shrieking noise so loud Suvie almost jumped loose of Matthew's grip on her bit.

"Tie the horse here," the girl said when he started to bring Suvie through. Her voice was as soft as if spoken from a dream. "The way is dangerous for an animal."

"Dangerous? How?"

"The master has set traps for the beasts that roam these woods. Sometimes they are so insolent they scale the fence. Tie the horse here," she repeated.

Matthew hesitated. Murdo had mentioned the traps. This night ride should've never been taken, not for ten times ten pounds.

"Are you coming, or not?" the girl asked. He noted she seemed to be scanning the woods over his shoulder.

"Don't you carry a light?"

"I know the way. Coming, or not?"

Not, he wanted to say. But he was supposed to stay in the house until morning, and truth was he and Suvie had just about ridden themselves out this night. Also, it was a long way back to the Post Road and he'd have to go past those lunatics again in the dark, which he despised to do. A damnable choice to be made!

"Sir?" she prodded, her voice still soft...dreamily so.

He tied Suvie to the gate. She locked it at his back. "Walk directly behind me," she instructed. "Do not deviate from my path."

"I wouldn't dare deviate. You can make your way with no light?"

She was already walking, if that strange cadence of a glide could be considered a walk. Matthew got right up behind her, and so doing he caught the faintest whiff of that same odor he'd detected from von Eissen... the dried bones and musty death aroma of McCaggers' attic museum. It was then that he thought he had made a terrible mistake, that he and Suvie should've immediately turned back, sore butt and tired horselegs be damned, and take their chances with the Bedlam Bunch, because

something was at work here that made the witch hunt at Fount Royal seem like the plaything of a child.

"Watch your step here." The girl pointed down at the ground on his left. "Keep directly behind."

"I can't see a thing. What kind of traps are set?"

"Pits with stakes and broken glass at the bottom. Wires that when disturbed swing spiked planks down from the trees. Other things."

"Lovely," Matthew said. "Your master made these things?"

"He is quite clever in using what is at hand...the metal window frames, the window glass and such."

"You're his servant?"

"We are all his servants. Duck your head here. *Lower,*" she commanded.

By the time they went up the stone steps of a large turreted house that had not a glint of light in it nor it seemed any glass in the windows, Matthew was sweating bullets and thinking it was a wonder he hadn't been smacked in the face by a spiked plank. At the huge yawning hole of the entrance—no door, either? Used for the traps, he supposed—the girl said, "You will wait here," and then she merged with the dark.

Matthew realized that now he couldn't make his way back if he wanted to, and he wanted to in the worst way. New York seemed the distance of another world from here. And he had begun to think that the forest lunatics were better hosts than people who lived in total darkness, in some kind of weird castle taken apart to create animal traps.

One light began to show beyond the entrance.

A single candle, it looked to be, and a stub at that. As the small glow neared, Matthew saw that it was carried on a flat piece of wood by a frail-looking little boy maybe ten or eleven years of age, wearing what might be called a youngster's sailor suit, darkened with grime and sagging on his frame. Atop his head was a white wig also suited for a child, sitting somewhat crooked on the scalp.

"Hello," the child said, and managed a smile that showed teeth far past the need for dental correction. "Please come in."

Matthew didn't. "I have a message from Karlis von Eissen for your master, whom I understood was his brother." He reached into his coat, unbuttoned the pocket, removed the envelope and held it out at arm's length. "I am to deliver this only to your master."

"That would be myself," said the child. "I am Walloch Bodenkier."

Matthew couldn't speak. This was the 'creature' the madmen wanted to kill? And a *child* had devised those traps? It was total insanity!

Bodenkier just kept grinning.

A thought ripped through Matthew's brain. Murdo said they had contained Bodenkier and his 'sect' in the house for over twenty years. Had he meant this boy's *father*? When he could find his tongue, what came out was: "Where are your parents?"

"Unfortunately, long extinguished. Come in and meet the others."

Extinguished. Murdo had used that word. "Who else is in the house?" Matthew asked, and heard his voice tremble but the truth was he was beginning to feel strangled by a kind of cold fear he had never experienced before.

"No need to be afraid, young sir," said the boy. "One step across the threshold and you will be among lifelong friends."

Matthew was aware of movement behind Bodenkier, there in the dark. And an instant later he realized that the hand holding the piece of wood with the candle on it bore the curved claws of Karlis von Eissen. "Just take the envelope," he said shakily. "Then I'll ask your girl to lead me back to the gate."

"I fear she's indisposed."

Another impression...that grime on Bodenkier's clothing...particularly around the neck collar, and in splotches down the front...grime...mold...or bloodstains?

The boy's eyes had taken on a crimson glint. He lowered his light. "I can't quite reach the envelope. Hold it nearer, won't you?"

"Here." Matthew dropped it at the boy's dirty bare feet, the nails also long and curved. "I want someone to lead me out."

"Impossible at the moment. I think you should—"

There came a thudding sound followed by a strident scream from back toward the gate, and then the scream changed to a mangled high-pitched howling.

Every hair on Matthew's head and body stood up. "*They're here!*" Bodenkier shouted, in no longer the voice of a child but a voice ancient and aflame with rage. His face changed—lengthened, contorted—as if the very bones behind it were in motion. With a single move the boy had lunged forward and swept Matthew aside like a wheat straw, using one arm. Matthew went down upon the steps. The candle was dropped and went out. Bodenkier stood at the threshold giving a bellow into the night that made the iron bell sound mute, and as Matthew struggled to get up, a shape massive and gnarled hurled itself past him and smashed into the boy, who was whirled backward like a dried leaf. Then another and another massive shape rushed in, and more and more, an animal smell in the air, the smell of fury, frenzy, and violence beyond Matthew's ken. He

crawled away, tried to stand again, heard shrill cries and the tearing of flesh, eerie keenings, crashes upon a floor.

He was picked up. In his state of dazed horror he felt claws dig into his back. He had lost his travelling bag. He was being carried, faster and faster, away from the house. Something made a whining noise, there was a rush of air, and an object of some kind hissed past his ear. Whatever was carrying him jumped from side to side, a leap here and a leap there. Matthew felt coarse hair pressing against his face. Then he must have been at the gate because he heard Suvie screaming too, kicking and jumping in an effort to get loose.

"I'm throwing you over." It was Murdo's voice, but changed. Harsh, guttural, hardly recognizable as human. "Don't look at me!" he rasped when Matthew tried. "I thank you for showing us the way."

"What?" Matthew said stupidly. "What?"

"Through his traps. We followed your scent. Their reek...everywhere... your scent, fresh. Poor Daniel...a misstep. Listen to me. Get on that horse and ride like hell, for Hell will be after you." Murdo's body shivered. Matthew felt the arms that held him grip harder, as if the man's power was on the edge of explosion. "Some I can't control...they hate your kind." And the last word, a snarl from the depths: "*Over.*" With that he flung Matthew upward and out.

Matthew's fearnaught caught on the spear points. He dangled there, thrashing, until he tore himself out of his coat and dropped to the ground. Then it was a matter of untying Suvie and holding on, trying to get himself up in the saddle as she – no fool, that mare – broke into a wild gallop away from that great scab upon the earth.

Matthew rode like hell. Whatever was going on back there, he was quits with it.

SIX.

Cold wind was in his face. The puddles of moonlight swept past. Matthew leaned forward and let Suvie fly. She was in charge now, and he simply the hanger-on.

What had been during the trip an easy walk for Suvie punctuated at times by a trot was now a wild headlong race for survival. He thought one mile had been galloped through, then a second, and Suvie was lathering and straining, and he feared she might fall dead beneath him, but still she rushed on, until at last...at last...she staggered and stumbled and he had to fight the reins to draw her in before she did indeed kill herself.

He got her down to a canter, but still she shrieked and snorted and turned in confused circles. "Easy, easy," he kept saying, though he was aware they were still way too far from the Post Road and way too near that scene of demonic destruction. When Suvie finally slowed herself to a walk in a straight line—definitely *away* from the river cliffs—Matthew dismounted, still carefully holding her bit in case she bolted, and gave her a few handcups of water from his canteen, then took a long swig himself.

He let her rest for an anguished fifteen minutes, and then he climbed back into the saddle and started her off again. She kept straining against the reins and he kept holding her back until finally she accepted his command to trot, even though he again feared her earlier exertions might burst her heart. But there was no respite for either of them out in these woods, on this road, on this night.

They passed the hanging man, which Matthew didn't see until straw scraped his shoulder. Not much further on, he heard distant howling from the forest on his left. Two calling, one answering, it sounded like. With that noise, Suvie gave another start and he had to fight her once more. Matthew thought that if he ever got home he was going to kiss the dirt of his floor and he would buy Suvie golden horseshoes, if there was such a thing. If not, there ought to be.

"We're getting out of this," he told her. "Yes, we are. Getting out of this. God grant it, we are."

The sounds of howling faded. Matthew reined Suvie in from her trot and she settled on a walk, which he knew she didn't like and he surely didn't like but a dead horse in this case probably equaled a dead man.

They had gone on at this pace probably another hour when Suvie at first grumbled deep in her throat. Then a moment later she gave a high whinny and Matthew felt her flesh crawl.

By that, his heart nearly stopped...because he knew Hell was coming.

He needn't look over his shoulder. He wouldn't see it coming, and the monster—yes, *monster*—would likely be attacking through the woods. It would come silently, would leap through the shards of moonlight, would first rend him to pieces and then Suvie. He dug his pistol out and cocked it, the cold sweat rising on his face.

Suddenly Suvie made the decision for him.

She bolted.

The mare's panicked strength rocked him back and almost out of the saddle. He lost the reins. She ran, faster than before, faster than ever he would've believed the horse could run. Her heart surely must explode at this, or her legs give way. He grasped around her neck to keep from being

thrown off by her forward momentum, and then he did make the mistake of looking back.

The fright of it made the flesh of his face go so tight his teeth were exposed in a macabre grimace. For a massive hideous shape had burst from the forest on the left and with horrible speed and leaping bounds was gaining on them. He fired stupidly, without aiming, but aiming was impossible aboard a galloping horse. The smoke rushed away and the monster was still there, now so much closer than before.

"Go go go go!" Matthew shouted, but Suvie was at her limit. And now that shape was clawing toward Suvie's hindquarters and in another few seconds it would make its leap up the mare's back and fall upon Matthew Corbett, rest in pieces.

He didn't think, he just threw the pistol at it, and it was hit but slowed only a claw's length. Now he could sense more than see it tensing itself to jump, and he in turn twisted his body while still hanging on to Suvie's neck for dear life to kick at the beast when it came.

Now...it was coming...now...

A flame shot through the night from the other side of the woods. The flaming arrow lodged itself in the beast's side and the creature twisted almost as if to pluck it out with its front claws. A second flaming arrow... missed over the body. A third...right into the thing's neck, and by the flame Matthew had an instant to see that the beast had gray hair and in its malformed, elongated head eyes like holes burned in metal. Then, in the following instant, it had turned away, and with what Matthew might have described in better circumstances as a graceful leap silently re-entered the forest.

And was gone.

But another figure ran out of the woods, rushed into the road and hurled itself at Suvie. Matthew had a clench of renewed horror, until he realized the figure had feathers in its hair and was draped in a blanket. The Indian had hold of Suvie's bit and was fighting the horse to a stop. He was dragged a distance but he hung on, and Suvie tried to rear up but failing at that started kicking like an enraged mule. Still, she was more-or-less under control enough for Matthew to reach for and grasp the reins, and then he had to hang on as she bucked a couple of times. Totally exhausted, she gave a shiver and a snort that blew one of the Indian's feathers out of his hair...but at last she stood at some measure of calm, her head bowed forward as if to find blessed sleep right then and there.

Matthew slid out of the saddle. His legs wouldn't hold him. He sprawled out on the cursed road. And pushing himself up to a sitting position he saw three more Indians approaching him, all with bows and

quivers of arrows, the brave in the lead carrying a lantern in which burned a pair of tapers. The one with the lantern was a tall, rather gaunt man with three feathers in his mound of hair and was wearing not a blanket but a pair of dark breeches, boots, and a soldier's redcoat jacket.

"Stand," he said. "Can you?"

"Yes." Then: "Not yet."

"Foolish, to travel that way."

"Yes," Matthew agreed.

The brave with the lantern spoke to one of the others in their language, a nearly musical sound. A piece of something grainy was offered to him. Cornbread, he realized. He took it and ate. "I saw you...at the Becketts'," said Matthew.

"Not me. Two of the others. We don't come for the bread only. We come, this period, to see Joel and Ella are safe." He spoke again to the others. A small pig's bladder was unstoppered and held forth. Matthew took a drink of beer that seared the back of his throat and brought tears to his eyes. He had a second sip, same as the first. Damned good.

"What are you...what are you doing out here?" Matthew asked, and with the help of the strong beer he got to his feet.

"Watched you leave yesterday sunrise. If you returned at all it might be...in a *haste*, you English would say? Decided to wait until next sun, just to see. I am..." He searched for the proper English word. "Curiosity," he said. He took the bladder and returned it to its keeper. "But we go only this far, not wise to travel on."

"I wholeheartedly agree with that, sir. Thank you for saving our lives... myself and my horse." Matthew felt near collapse, but he was hanging on. "You said...'this period'. What did you mean?"

"Moon time," said the brave, and motioned toward the orb with his lantern. "They prowl at moon time. Like you would say...*clockwork*?"

"Yes," Matthew said. "Clockwork, indeed."

"Walk from here. Will walk with you. Horse needs rest."

"How far?"

"Sunrise, not far."

Matthew nodded. He didn't exactly understand, but he thought the brave was saying they would reach the Becketts' tavern at dawn.

"English word," the brave said. "*Advice*? Joel and Ella should not know. We watch for them. They have good lives."

"Yes," Matthew replied. "They do." And not only was there to be no word about this to the Becketts, but there would be no word to Hudson Greathouse either. That beast of a man would either laugh himself silly or have Matthew chained up and carted to that lunatic asylum down in

Pennsylvania where he could join the Queen of Bedlam for lunch and checkers. No, better to make up a story about the ten pounds...which was going to have a dent in it, to pay for two lost pistols. Better to say he'd delivered a message to the King of Siam rather than to...

...Walloch Bodenkier...whatever that creature had been. He doubted he would ever see Karlis von Eissen again, but if he did...message delivered, sir, if not exactly to his hand, thank you for your business and here's a kick in the nutsack to go with it.

Matthew thought he was going to forget this night ever happened, if he could. He was going to blot it from his memory, if he had to find an Indian and buy seventeen bladders of beer to make it so. No one should know. *Ever.*

And the people in the woods? Mad wretches, all. Yes. Leave it at that.

From the distant forest came howling. But different than before. There was no violence or anger in it, no rage, no cry for war. A chorus of voices, soaring up and up, twisting and twining, a strange and oddly beautiful symphony of the night.

"They sing," said the brave with the lantern. "I wonder why."

Matthew just gave the faintest of smiles.

He was looking at a patch of moonlight there upon the earth. He could hear Greathouse saying *you're a moonbeam now, and always will you be a moonbeam.*

It seemed to Matthew that there was an awful lot of power in a moonbeam. More than Greathouse would ever know.

And Matthew's answer would be *I try.*

He took Suvie's reins, and he and his horse walked with the Indians toward the dawn.