

SONG OF THE LASH

By Justin Case (Hugh B. Cave)

The whole village was up in arms. A young girl whipped to death! Some blamed the Night Riders, but Joe Bates had a different idea....



HER bare feet touched the ground, but she was not standing on them. Her knees were bent, her head lolled grotesquely, and she had long ago ceased to look at her tormentor. In the pale backwash of the lantern's yellow glow, she hung there like something in a madman's nightmare.

She was young, not more than twenty. Long dark tresses hung in a damp veil over her pain-twisted face, curled down over her bare shoulders and licked at the torn bit of silk which still clung feebly to her heaving breast. The ropes held her arms straight out from her body, and the weight of

her body threatened to tear the arms from their sockets.

She had stood erect at first. Had stood there, protected only by the bits of flesh-colored undergarments which his vicious fingers had failed to tear from her quivering form, and cursed him, defied him. Then the long black bull-whip had begun to sing its song of torture, and her defiance had dissolved into piteous pleas for mercy. Her knees had sagged. The pain in her brain had swelled into a vast, red-rimmed mass of darkness.

He was still there, still staring at her, but the lash had ceased to sing its song. It lay curled behind him, a tired snake sleeping on the soft carpet of dead leaves and decayed vegetation. There was no sound anywhere.

He paced forward. The lantern created a monstrous shadow of him and flung it against the black wall of the forest. The red robe hung shapelessly from his gaunt frame; the crimson cowl robbed his face—if he had one—of all form. His eyes glittered with a strange light in the cowl-slits. His gloved hands reached out to touch the girl's slender body.

"It hurts, no?" he whispered. "The whip, it has teeth that bite deep. But I am not finished with you yet, my darling. There can be but one penalty for being unfaithful—and that is death."

She had strength enough left to raise her head and look at him. Her face was a white, twisted mask of agony. The whip had licked at it, torn her lips. The whip had curled about her slender legs, caressed the youthful curve of her quivering white waist. The whip had sung its torment-song against her arms, her neck. Methodically and patiently it had sought out the pain-centers and made of her a cringing, whimpering creature in which life was slowly dying.

"Dear God," she moaned, "what have I done to you? Who are you?"

He laughed, and the sound was a cruel rasping that came from deep inside him. Savagely he gripped her sagging body, pulled her erect, held her against him. "A farewell embrace, my beloved . . . and then . . ."

He lifted the cowl, glued his mouth to hers for a moment, then released her. Her body went limp again.

He turned, paced away from her and picked up the whip. His arm swung back, forward again. The lash whistled about her legs, climbed to her waist. The third time, all his strength was behind the curling black snake as it whined forward.

It looped about her throat with a sharp crackling sound. A scream died on the girl's lips. She fought for breath, and in the yellow glow of the lantern her agonized face turned purple.

"Farewell, my beloved," he said softly. "Farewell . . ."

JOE BATES lowered his mouth to the warm red lips that trembled fervently beneath it. "You know," he whispered, "there'd be all hell to pay if old Jonathan knew you were here, darling. Sometimes I think that's why you come. You enjoy the thrill of danger."

She shook her head. Irma Henderson was young, twenty years old next January, and blessed with a clean, fresh-air loveliness which would have made her the envy of any city siren. She had spent all her life in the little village of Cordray, and now, at nineteen, she was the most beautiful, the most desirable thing in the whole of Kent County. At least, she was to Joe.

"No, Joe," she said. "It's you I love, not the danger of coming here. The danger is too real. You don't know my father when he is angry."

"If he ever laid a hand on you, darling, I'd—"

She silenced him by pressing her hot, quivering lips against his own. Her slim young body nestled in his arms, vibrant and yielding, and there was a strange kind of eagerness in her kiss that surprised him. More than once he had wondered how the daughter could be so utterly different from the father. Old Jonathan Henderson had a heart as cold as stone, no understanding whatever of the flames of love which could blaze in a human soul. Irma was red-blooded and responsive to love, unashamed to show it.

They were alone, the two of them, in Joe Bates' camp, and the hour was eleven-thirty. A lamp burned low on the table, casting warm, intimate shadows on the log walls. Outside, the night was still, and the lapping of miniature waves on the lake-shore was plainly audible.

Joe Bates drew the girl's slender body closer in his embrace, kissed her dark eyes, her hair, the soft curve of her lovely throat. He had met her a month ago, soon after his arrival in Kent County to take over the job of Chief Fire Warden. Carstairs, the ex-warden, had introduced her to him, and that very night Irma had come to Joe's camp. After that, every third or fourth night she had somehow managed to escape the watchful eyes of her widowed father and find her way to Joe Bates' arms.

She sighed contentedly now and pressed her slim form against him, drew his lips down to hers again. Her thin cotton dress had inched above her knees. The lamplight fell on white, smooth flesh. She was a little thing, almost too small, yet every

inch of her was woman, laden with a woman's emotions. . .

His fingers gently caressed a bare shoulder. She snuggled closer in his arms. Her mouth blended with his and the fragrance of her was like strong whiskey coursing through him. He forgot about her father then. He forgot everything—until a sudden alien sound jerked him erect, drew his gaze abruptly to the door.

RAPID, heavy footsteps came surging out of the night's silence. A fist banged the door until the hinges rattled. A hoarse voice called out: "Joe! Joe Bates! Open up, for the love of God!"

Scowling, Joe unlocked the door. Into the room staggered a chunky young man with disheveled yellow hair and wide, frightened eyes. Lester Agnew, deputy fire warden and one of Joe's assistants.

Agnew blurted out his message—most of it—before he saw that Joe was not alone. "There's been a murder!" he croaked. "Ruth Neglin, the Postmaster's daughter—found dead in the woods over near the Ridge Road! Whipped to death, Joe! The whole village is up in arms!"

"Whipped to death?"

"Yes! By—" Agnew saw Irma Henderson for the first time, and was suddenly silent, staring at her. A strange expression twisted across his face. When he spoke again, he chose his words with more care.

"They—they think the Night Riders did it, Joe. There's going to be hell to pay; you mark my words."

Joe Bates strode to the other side of the room, lifted his holstered pistol from the peg on which it hung, and whipped it around him. "You got your car?"

"Yes."

"Let's go, then. We'll drop Irma off at her house on the way."

Agnew hesitated, then shook his head. "She'd better stay here, Joe."

"Here? Why?"

"She'll be safer here." His eyes said more.

Joe Bates scowled. "Well, all right if you think so." He took the girl in his arms, looked down into her wide eyes. "He's right, darling. If there's trouble in the village, you'll be better off here. No

one ever comes here." He held her close to him, kissed her until her slim, trembling form threatened to melt against him and become a part of him. "You lock the door and wait, honey. I'll be back just as soon as I can."

HE and Agnew went out, strode down the path to the road where Agnew's car was waiting. Just once Joe looked back. Irma Henderson stood in the doorway, with the light glowing softly through her thin cotton dress, limning the alluring roundness of her legs, revealing every enticing curve of her perfect young form. She waved. He waved back.

"What's the story, Lester?"

"There's hell to pay. This girl was found murdered, tortured, most of her clothes torn off. Some fiend with a whip had made a horrible mess of her. They're blaming the Night Riders—and you know as well as I do who's head of the Night Riders."

"Irma's father? I'm not so sure of that."

"Well, everyone else is sure. The whole village is out lookin' for him now, and if they find him—God knows what they'll do to him. It will be ghastly."

Seated beside his deputy as the car growled forward, its headlights flooding the dark with an eerie brightness, Joe Bates began to realize how grimly serious this thing was. In the beginning, he had heard only vague rumors about the activities of the strange, white-robed cult known as the Kent County Night Riders. Later, from scraps of authentic information picked up here and there, he had built up a pretty accurate picture of the entire set-up.

The Night Riders had been secretly organized about a year ago, to combat sin and depravity in the valley. Until tonight, the Riders had contented themselves with punishing men and women who strayed from the straight and narrow.

At least a score of persons had suffered at the hands of the Riders. But until tonight, the white-robed cult had not crimsoned their hands with murder-blood.

Joe Bates stared glumly through the windshield and said: "What did they kill this girl for?"

"No one knows."

"She was running around with some-foreigner, wasn't she?"

"She's been going out with one, yes. Fellow named Graube. Nick Graube. A no-good skunk if ever there was one."

"Did they—did they get Graube, too?"

"He can't be found."

Joe Bates was silent. The car had climbed a steep stretch of rutted road, and the lights of the village were visible now at the foot of the long, gradual descent which lay ahead. The lights themselves were significant. At this time of night the little village was generally sealed in slumber.

But something else, closer at hand, had snared Joe Bates' attention. Midway down the slope, a tower of flames rose luridly into the black sky, painting the mid-night heavens an ugly red.

"Good Lord!" Joe gasped. "They've fired Henderson's house!"

It was a weird scene. The house, set back from the road, was hidden entirely by the flames that enveloped it. The crimson glare reached out to paint, as with a brush dipped in blood, the mob of muttering men and women who crowded against the hell-blast of heat. Men and women from the village, normally good, God-fearing people, had been transformed into screaming, blood-mad beasts by the murder of Ruth Neglin.

Joe Bates leaped from the car as it jerked to a stop. Fists clenched, he shouldered his way forward, made a lane for himself through the mob. His destination was a seething knot of flame-reddened shapes that snarled and shouted around the cringing, sobbing figure of a woman. The woman was Mrs. Fischer, Henderson's housekeeper. Irma Henderson always referred to her as "mother." "Damn you!" Joe bellowed. "Leave her alone! Take your filthy hands off her!"

THE woman slumped into his arms as he slugged his way to her side. Evidently the villagers had dragged her from her bed before firing the house. She wore a white nightgown that was torn down one side and sagged in shreds from her shoulder, covering but little of her curved form. She was an attractive woman, about thirty, dark-haired, inclined to plumpness.

Joe Bates put an arm around her, kept his other hand clenched and glared defiance into the carmined faces of the men who surged forward.

His sudden arrival had bewildered them into inaction; now their bewilderment was turning into rage.



Throughout that mad nightmare he kept her always beside him.

"What's the trouble?" Joe demanded. "What has she done?"

"She knows where Henderson is, and we aim to make her tell!"

"I don't know," the woman sobbed. "I swear I don't! He went out about eight o'clock and hasn't come back. I don't know where he went to!"

Joe believed her. He looked down into her terrified face and grimly stood his ground against the threats of the mob. The woman's half clad body, painted red by the fireglow, huddled against him. Through the torn shreds of her nightgown he could feel her quivering, could feel the pressure of warm contours against his rigid body.

"Stand back!" he bellowed.

They began to close in on him, muttering threats, curses. His face blanched. He knew what would happen if they reached for him and he

lashed out with his fists. They would drag him down, fall on him like wolves. They *were* wolves.

"Back!" he cried hoarsely. A clawing hand fastened on him. His fist exploded against a bearded face.

Suddenly he was not alone. A tall, clean-shaven man, gray-haired, middle-aged, stood beside him, holding up a hand. "This is all wrong," the man said. "You people are degenerating into beasts, losing all sense of justice. Go home now."

They listened to him. His voice had a quality that would have made savage beasts listen. "Go home and think things over, he said. "You have burned the home of Mr. Henderson; that is enough. Remember, you have no proof, no positive proof, that Mr. Henderson is the leader of the Riders. Go home and think."

To Joe Bates the man said: "I suggest we take Mrs. Fischer to my home. She will be safer there."

Joe stared. He had heard of this man, this Stephen Nason, before, but had never before stood so close to him or exchanged words with him. Nason was a dignified, middle-aged bachelor who lived alone in the old Mangan house, on South Road. People respected him.

Joe picked the woman up and carried her to Lester Agnew's car and put her in it. She was on the verge of collapse. When he lowered her onto the rear seat she slumped sideways and sat there with her eyes shut, her bosom twitching convulsively as she labored for breath. Nason got in beside her. Joe got in front with Agnew. There were no protests from the crowd as the car droned away.

"A terrible thing, all this," Nason said heavily. "And so senseless. They have no proof that Henderson is guilty. They have no proof that the Night Riders are involved at all. It could have been the girl's sweetheart—the foreign youth, Nick Graube."

THE house was about a mile distant, and there were lights in the downstairs rooms. Nason produced a key, unlocked the front door. "I keep it locked," he apologized, "because of my paintings. Some of them are quite valuable." Joe Bates followed him over the threshold, carrying the woman's limp body in his arms.

"Listen," Lester Agnew said. "I'm goin' back to see if that mob broke up. If it didn't, there'll be

trouble before this night's over, you mark my words."

"An excellent idea," Nason declared.

Agnew left. At Nason's direction, Joe Bates carried the woman upstairs to a bedroom. Nason brought warm water and stood watching, his face expressionless, as Joe bathed her wounds. She moaned now and then at the touch of his clumsy fingers on her bruised flesh.

The mob had used her roughly. Cruel fingers had gouged strips of flesh from her shoulders. A purpling blotch on the white flesh of a rounded thigh was unmistakable evidence that someone had brutally kicked her.

The woman slept. Joe and Nason went downstairs to await the return of Lester Agnew.

He came at last, his face gray with fright, eyes bulging, face running with sweat. "The whole valley has gone mad!" he croaked, wringing his hands. "Nick Graube's father is leading them. He says the Riders are responsible for what happened. Says they punished Nick only a week ago for goin' out with the girl, and threatened him with death if he went with her again. My God, they're goin' into people's houses now, searchin' for the white robes of the Night Riders! They found one in Jed Michael's house and used it to hang him with! They're insane!"

Joe Bates' face turned gray. Fists clenched, he strode to the door. "I'm goin' for Irma!" he shouted. A hideous vision swam before his eyes: a vision of a snarling, blood-hungry mob breaking into his camp, seizing the girl he loved, dragging her out and mauling her, tearing the clothes from her cringing body as they tortured her. She was the daughter of old man Henderson, leader of the Riders. They would show her no mercy.

He flung himself into Agnew's car, backed the machine out of the yard and sent it growling through the night. When he reached the top of the ridge a few minutes later and looked back into the depths of the valley, he realized that Agnew had not exaggerated. Flames climbed skyward in three separate places. The road itself was dotted with moving spots of light, torches, in the hands of marauders.

Murder Valley! Valley of Madness!

His heart was in his throat when he leaped from the car and ran toward the shack at the edge of the lake. The camp was in darkness, and the

darkness frightened him. Had the villagers been here already? Was he too late?

THE door was locked. He hammered on it, and presently a light glowed inside, a low voice, not too steady, demanded: "W-who is it?"

"Me! Joe!"

The door opened. With a sob of relief he took the girl in his arms.

She was almost as frightened as he was. Scared, no doubt, by his wild banging on the door. "I—I put the light out and tried to go to sleep," she whispered. "I was afraid, being left here alone, Joe." He crushed her against him, kissed her eyes, her hair, her trembling lips. The wild ride through the night from Nason's house had told him something; told him his little affair with Irma Henderson was not just an adventure, not just a dangerous game which he played because of her warm red lips and gorgeous figure. *He loved her.* A moment ago he had been sick with fear for her, and now his heart was pounding out a song of thanksgiving.

He hugged her to him until her lips parted with a little sob of pain and she said: "You—you're hurting me, Joe!" Then he lifted her in his arms, strode out to the car. When he took his place at the wheel she huddled close to him, her slim little body warm and soft against his own, so close that he could feel against his arm the rapid beat of her heart.

He drove slowly now. The road was deserted; there was no particular need for haste. She would be safe at Nason's house, he reflected, and then he himself would go out and find her father. If, indeed, her father was the leader of the Night Riders, he would smuggle the old man out of Kent County until the madness died down. For Irma's sake he would do that, even though it might be a dangerous procedure.

But something was wrong. He knew it as soon as he drove into the yard. There was an eerie stillness in the air, a deathlike silence that seemed to ooze up out of the ground to strangle him. The house was in darkness.

He fumbled for a flashlight, found one, and approached the house slowly, his right hand hovering over the holstered pistol at his belt. His fear was contagious, and Irma Henderson trembled at his side; her hand was cold on his arm.

The door hung open. The flashlight's glow reached in to yellow the living-room. Joe Bates stepped cautiously over the threshold, stiffened, and stood staring.

The house was not deserted. In the middle of the living-room floor lay a sprawled, silent shape, its head turned so that the ghastly grimace on its face leaped full into the glare of the light in Joe's fist. A bullet hole gaped in the center of that white forehead. Blood had gathered in a thick red pool on the carpet.

"Agnew!" Joe whispered hoarsely. "Agnew. . . dead! Good God!"

He pulled the girl inside, pushed the door shut and stood there, staring. The blood in his veins was ice. The flashlight sent a nervous lane of light around the room.

Nothing was out of order. Nothing had been disturbed. But Lester Agnew lay there in a pool of his own blood, dead.

Joe Bates advanced slowly, pulling the girl with him. He dared not leave her behind, dared not release her hand even for a minute, lest the thing which had slain his deputy should suddenly come snarling out of the dark to claim another victim. Slowly he paced across the room, entered the dining-room. Five minutes later he had explored every room in the house and knew that the house was empty.

Back in the living-room he sank onto a divan and stared again at the murdered man. "I don't understand it," he muttered. "Where's Nason? Where's Mrs. Fischer?"

The silence had no answer. Irma Henderson, wide-eyed with fear, huddled against him and he put an arm around her, did his best to calm her.

For the time being, he and she must remain here. Must wait for Nason to return. The inaction, the strain of waiting would drive him mad, most likely, but he could not leave Irma here alone.

"Let's have another look around," he muttered.

Once again he prowled through the house with the girl in tow, but this time his search was more thorough. This time, in a little upstairs room which was obviously Nason's workroom, he found something.

He found a scrap-book, lying there on a table cluttered with paints and brushes.

IT WAS a queer room. The walls were covered with oil-paintings and water-colors, most of them; depicting nude women. A hundred or more-canvasses were stacked in a corner, and they, too, were mostly nudes. Joe Bates was no judge of art, but this stuff looked like the work of a master. One picture in particular—a life-sized portrait of a girl about twenty years old—captured his gaze and held it.

The girl wore a tiny string of jewels about her hips, a fuzzy bit of porous, transparent cloth about her lilting young breast. Nothing else. She stood with her head high, her slender arms outstretched. She was beautiful. Beautiful in a warm, sensual way which sent a queer thrill coursing through Joe Bates' blood.

The artist's name, lightly lettered on the canvas, was Stephen Nason. The same name appeared on all the other pictures.

Joe Bates bent over the scrapbook, thumbed its thick pages. It puzzled him. It was full of circus handbills, newspaper clippings, circus programs. Some of the handbills were highly colored. All of them advertised, in large letters, "The Masked Marvel of the Argentine! Master of the Whip! See Him Snap a Cigarette from a Girl's Mouth, from Fifty Feet Away! See him perform with the Fifty Foot Bull-whip!" And more of the same.

There was a picture, in color, of a girl standing with a cigarette in her lips, her arms clasped behind her head, while the "Masked Marvel," garbed in faded red robe and red cowl, coiled the long black whip in preparation for his act. Joe Bates stared at the girl for some time, then turned abruptly and gazed at the portrait on the wall. It was the same girl.

Frowning, he glanced at the newspaper clippings.

Most of them were reviews of the circus, and failed to interest him. Through them he learned only that the girl in the picture was the wife of the Marvel, that the Marvel himself was supposed to be a Spanish nobleman. But the last page of the big scrap-book contained something else. Headlines.

CIRCUS GIRL SLAIN DURING PERFORMANCE! ROSITA, WIFE OF "MASKED MARVEL," MURDERED BY HUSBAND IN FULL VIEW OF 12,000 SPECTATORS! KILLER ESCAPES!

Irma Henderson looked over his shoulder, her body warm and soft against his, as he read it. And while he read it, his eyes narrowed with understanding, his fingers curled until his hands were fists.

"Last night, in full view of 12,000 horrified spectators, murder was committed under the big top of the Marshfield Bros. Circus, which came to this city last Thursday for a one week stand. The victim, Rosita Damon, had been scientifically undressed down to her circus tights, by her actor-husband, Manuel Damon, the 'Masked Marvel of the Bull-whip', who, with the fifty-foot whip, had flicked the raiment piece by piece from her body. The final stroke sent the tapered end of the whip whistling about her throat with such force that the jugular was severed. She died before medical aid could be summoned.

"Jealousy is believed to be the motive. Circus people volunteered the information that Rosita had threatened several times to sue her husband for divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Also that her friendship for another man, whose name was not revealed, had of late brought forth repeated threats of reprisal from her husband.

"The murderer escaped and is still being sought."

Joe Bates closed the book and stepped away from it, trembling. "You know what this means?" he cried hoarsely. "It means I've got to—" He stiffened, was suddenly silent.

Downstairs a door had slammed shut.

Bates pulled his pistol from its holster, tiptoed to the threshold. "You wait here," he muttered. "Wait here until I call you."

HE WENT down the hall slowly, groping with an outstretched hand for the stair-rail. There was another sound downstairs now: a hoarse sobbing sound, guttural as the death-rattle of an animal in agony. Someone down there was crawling over the floor, dragging limp legs behind a wriggling body.

Joe Bates threw caution aside, whipped his flashlight from his belt and sent a white lane of light stabbing down the stairs. He descended rapidly, jerked to a halt at the bottom as the light showed him a disheveled, sobbing figure kneeling there.

"Mr. Henderson!" Joe gasped.

The old man gazed at him with fear-glazed eyes. Utter exhaustion had claimed that frail body. The face was white as paste, gaunt as the face of a corpse. His clothes hung in tatters. His hands, his forearms, his legs were red with blood, hideously torn and scratched by thorns and bullbriars.

"They're after me!" he sobbed. "They'll kill me!"

Joe strode forward, lifted the old man off the floor and eased him into a chair. "What happened?" he demanded.

"I—I was visitin' at Mrs. Ellwood's house. I went there early this evenin'—to—to talk to her about the church. Her son, Phil, was down to the village, and about twelve o'clock he come rushin' home to tell me the villagers were lookin' for me—to kill me! They think I'm one of the Night Riders, Joe! It's not true! I swear it's not! But they'll kill me!"

"You say they followed you here?" Joe Bates snapped.

"They—some of 'em saw me leavin' Mrs. Elwood's house. I had to run for it—through the woods. I—I didn't know where to go. I just ran and kept on runnin', with them after me. Then I thought of Mr. Nason and figured he would protect me . . ."

Joe Bates stood wide-legged, staring at the door. "Let 'em come," he muttered. "I'll tell them who murdered the Neglin girl, and I can prove it to them! Right here in this house I can prove it. Let 'em come!"

"They—they'll kill me, Joe!"

Joe gazed at the old man and felt sorry for him. It was a long way from Mrs. Elwood's house, up on the ridge, to this place. Four miles, at least. Four miles of terrible going, through the woods at night.

"They won't harm you, Mr. Henderson. You just relax and—"

The words were slammed back into his mouth by a sound from upstairs. The sound came again, jelling his blood, emptying his face of color. It was a scream, a shrill, needling scream of terror, from the lips of the girl he loved.

With it came a harsh, bestial outpouring of guttural laughter.

Joe Bates took the stairs three at a time, rushed blindly along the hall to the room where he and Irma had pored over the scrapbook. His flash flooded the chamber with light. The room was empty. An open window loomed ahead of him, and from the darkness outside came a second burst of that mad, blood-curdling laughter.

Joe stumbled to the window, looked down. His flashlight stabbed the inky blackness—but the thing spitting out that vile mirth was gone. Echoes of the laughter drifted up to him. Then the stillness returned, thick and heavy and strangling.

SICK with fear, Joe turned, blundered back across the room and down the stairs. The thing had sneaked up the back way, seized Irma Henderson, spirited her away. But he, Joe Bates, was chained here by his duty to the frightened old man who huddled there in the chair. He could not leave Jonathan Henderson here alone.

"She's gone!" he groaned. "Gone! My God, what can I do?"

Jonathan Henderson scowled at him. "Who's gone?"

"Your daughter! She was upstairs. I've got to go after her! But—"

The old man pushed himself erect, clawed at Joe's arm. "My daughter, Irma? Gone? Do something, man!"

"He's taken her away, into the woods," Joe mumbled. The rest of it he left unspoken, but in his heart he knew what would happen. It was dark out there. He might blunder through the woods for hours without finding the girl and her captor. By that time the fiend in red would have had his way with her; the bull-whip would have branded her lovely body, cut her white flesh to ribbons, curled around her throat and strangled her.

But old man Henderson was clawing feverishly at Joe's arm. "Listen," he croaked. "On my way here from Mrs. Ellwood's house I passed through a clearing. A woman was there—dead—almost naked—tied to a tree. My housekeeper, Mrs. Fischer. There was a whip lying on the ground. I stumbled over it. He'll take Irma there, Joe! There to that same place!"

Joe Bates lurched to the door, dragged it open. The old man stumbled after him. It was not dark out there—not at the front of the house. Red flares blazed in the road, and hoarse yells of

triumph burst through the night as Joe and Henderson emerged.

"It's Henderson! Old man Henderson! Get him!"

"Get both of them!"

Dark shapes rushed forward across the lawn, snarling curses, brandishing weapons as they stormed toward the house. But Joe Bates, after an almost fatal instant of fearful inaction, took the situation in his teeth and was too fast for them. Whirling, he slammed the old man back into the house, yanked the door shut and locked it. Then, seizing Henderson by a wrist, he ran with him to the rear door.

The door slammed shut behind them. The woods swallowed them.

"Now," Joe gasped, "lead me to that clearing!"

How long he crashed along behind the stumbling, staggering figure of Irma's father he never knew. The old man was frail, worn out, yet had amazing vitality. He knew the way and made no mistakes. Half a dozen times, when he fell, Joe dragged him erect again and snarled at him to hurry.

They covered a mile, a mile and half, through black woods, with bull-briars tearing at them, low hanging branches shredding the clothes on their bodies, hidden roots tripping them. Joe himself was twice on the verge of collapse, yet the old man kept going. And suddenly a light winked ahead in the darkness. A low sound vibrated through the dark to beat against Joe's brain.

A woman, moaning.

He seized the old man's arm, pulled him to a halt. "You stay here," he muttered. "I'll handle this alone. I've got a gun."

But he didn't have a gun. The holster had been torn from his hip during the mad race through the woods, and his hand, groping for the weapon, came away empty. He sucked in a deep breath, made fists of his hands and crept forward, toward the light.

IT WAS a lantern. In the pale yellow glow of it, a red-robed figure stood wide-legged, one gloved hand gripping the butt of a huge whip. Before him a limp, sagging, near-naked form was bound to the bole of a tree; bound with strips of her own garments. Hair hung in her eyes, licked

down at the turbulent, throbbing bosom. In the glow of the lantern her slim body was like a thing made of spun gold, flawless in its perfection. Rounded legs curved from the tattered rag that clung to her hips. Small, golden feet dug at the soft earth as she struggled vainly to free herself, moaning out her anguish.

The bull-whip streaked out, cracked against sensitive flesh, then snaked back through the carpet of dead leaves to coil itself for another agonizing strike. The girl screamed in pain, writhed against the tree.

The thing in red drew back his arm to strike again, but a yell of blind fury stopped him. He whirled, crouching, took a sudden backward step as Joe Bates lunged into the spread of light from the lantern.

There was murder in Joe Bates' heart. A red mist hung before his eyes as he charged. He saw the whip, saw it rise from the ground and snake out to meet him, but he had no thought except to seize that macabre red shape and destroy it.

The whip whistled around his waist, caught him in a grip as powerful as that of an octopus. He stumbled. The girl screamed in horror. But Joe Bates caught himself.

He caught himself, clamped both hands around the sleek black snake and with a superhuman wrench pulled the butt from the fiend's grip. And then, gripping the loaded butt like a baseball bat, Joe Bates surged forward.

He was merciless. Again and again the bludgeon crashed home with heavy, sodden thuds. The red-robed shape staggered back, fell to its knees, and even then Joe kept swinging. When he stopped at last, the crimson cowl was drenched with blood and the monster lay in a sprawled, lifeless heap at his feet. And the night was full of voices—hoarse, clamoring voices, and crashing sounds made by heavy feet in the underbrush.

Joe turned, prepared for the worst. Into the clearing stormed gaunt-faced men from the village, dragging with them the exhausted, stumbling shape of Irma Henderson's father. They stopped when they saw the robed thing at Joe's feet. Stopped and stared, bewildered.

Joe glared at them. "You're wrong about Henderson," he said grimly. "This is the man you want. This is the killer. And his name is Nason. Stephen Nason!"

Gaping, they crowded around.

"If you want proof," Joe snarled, "go to Nason's house and look at the scrap-book I found there. This man was once a circus performer. He killed his wife. Now he wants to kill others."

A tall, powerful figure pushed through the crowd, said quietly:

"No, Joe, you're wrong." Joe Bates stared with wide, unbelieving eyes. The man was Stephen Nason.

"You're wrong, Joe," Nason said. "This man was a circus performer, yes—and he did murder his wife. But that scrap-book you found in my house doesn't belong to me; it belongs to him. I stole it from his home two days ago."

NASON dropped to his knees beside the cowed shape on the ground. "If you read the account of that first murder, Joe, you know that this man murdered his wife because she loved another man. I was that other man, Joe. I painted her portrait, fell in love with her. When he killed her, and escaped, I vowed to find him if it took the rest of my life.

"I found him at last, Joe—here in the valley. But then he murdered Ruth Neglin. Murdered her because she looked a lot like Rosita. He's always been queer. Perhaps in his twisted mind he thought Ruth Neglin was Rosita, come back to life. He killed her, and then his mind snapped altogether. He became murder-mad.

"This is the Masked Marvel of the circus, Joe. This is Manual Ramon—known to you people as Isidore Graube, Nick Graube's father. And you've cheated me, Joe, by killing him. I—I wanted that job myself."

With tears in his eyes, Nason wrenched the blood-soaked cowl loose. The villagers crowded forward. The battered, evil face that stared up at them was the face of Isidore Graube.

"You've cheated me, Joe," Nason said again, dully, "but it was my own fault. I shouldn't have left Lester Agnew and Mrs. Fischer alone in the house I thought I could find this fiend myself, and square accounts with him . . . but it didn't work out that way."

Joe Bates was not listening. He held in his arms the limp, white body of the girl he loved, and with clumsy fingers was wrapping his own shirt

around her to hide her from the stares of the villagers.

He held her as he would have held a tired child, but the thrill that ran through him as she stirred in his arms and pressed her soft curves against him told him she was no child. He whispered words of comfort, and her arms crept about his neck, drew his mouth down to hers.

The strange light in her eyes, the ardent pressure of her parted lips as she strained against him were a promise—a promise that in the days to come she would forget the horror of this one night of madness which was now over.

THE END