

Darkness

By Irvin S. Cobb

There was a house in this town where always by night lights burned. In one of its rooms many lights burned; in each of the other rooms at least one light. It stood on Clay Street, on a treeless plot among flower beds, a small dull-looking house; and when late on dark nights all the other houses on Clay Street were black blockings lifting from the lesser blackness of their background, the lights in this house patterned its windows with squares of brilliancy so that it suggested a grid set on edge before hot flames. Once a newcomer to the town, a transient guest at Mrs. Otterbuck's boarding house, spoke about it to old Squire Jonas, who lived next door to where the lights blazed of nights, and the answer he got makes a fitting enough beginning for this account.

This stranger came along Clay Street one morning and Squire Jonas, who was leaning over his gate contemplating the world as it passed in review, nodded to him and remarked that it was a fine morning; and the stranger was emboldened to stop and pass the time of day, as the saying goes.

"I'm here going over the books of the Bernheimer Distilling Company," he said when they had spoken of this and that, "and you know, when a chartered accountant gets on a job he's supposed to keep right at it until he's done. Well, my work keeps me busy till pretty late. And the last three nights, passing that place yonder adjoining yours, I've noticed she was all lit up like as if for a wedding or a christening or a party or something. But I didn't see anybody going in or coming out, or hear anybody stirring in there, and it struck me as blamed curious. Last night—or this morning, rather, I should say—it must have been close on to half-past two o'clock when I passed by, and there she was, all as quiet as the tomb and still the lights going from top to bottom. So I got to wondering to myself. "Tell me, sir, is there somebody sick over there next door?"

"Yes, suh," stated the squire, "I figure you might say there is somebody sick there. He's been sick a powerful long time too. But it's not his body that's sick; it's his soul."

"I don't know as I get you, sir," said the other man in a puzzled sort of way.

"Son," stated the squire, "I reckon you've been hearin' 'em, haven't you, singin' this here new song that's goin' 'round about, 'I'm Afraid to Go Home in the Dark'? Well, probably the man who wrote that there song never was down here in these parts in his life; probably he just made the idea of it up out of his own head. But he might a had the case of my neighbor in his mind when he done so. Only his song is kind of comical and this case here is about the most uncomic one you'd be likely to run acrost. The man who lives here alongside of me is not only afraid to go home in the dark but he's actually feared to stay in the dark after he gets home. Once he killed a man and he come clear of the kuhn' all right enough, but seems like he ain't never got over it; and the sayin' in this town is that he's studied it out that ef ever he gets in the dark, either by himself or in company, he'll see the face of that there man he killed. So that's why, son, you've been seem' them lights a-blazin'. I've been seein' 'em myself fur goin' on twenty year or more, I reckon 'tis by now, and I've got used to 'em. But ii am 't never got over wonderin' what kind of thoughts he must have over there all alone by himself at night with everything lit up bright as day around him, when by rights things should be dark. But I ain't ever asted him, and whut's more, I never will, he ain't the kind you could go to him astin' him personal questions about his own private affairs, We-all here in town just accept him fur whut he is and sort of let him be. He's whut you might call a town character. His name is Mr. Dudley Stackpole."

In all respects save one, Squire Jonas, telling the inquiring stranger the tale, had the rights of it. There were town characters aplenty he might have described. A long-settled community with traditions behind it and a reasonable antiquity seems to breed curious types of men and women as a musty closet breeds mice and moths. This town of ours had its town mysteries and its town eccentrics—its freaks, if one wished to put the matter bluntly; and it had its champion story-teller and its champion, liar and its champion guesser of the weight of livestock on the hoof.

There was crazy Saul Vance, the butt of cruel small boys, who deported himself as any rational creature might so long as he walked a straight course; but so surely as he came to where the road forked or two streets crossed he could not decide which turning to take and for hours angled back and forth and to and fro, now taking the short cut to regain the path he just had quitted, now retracing his way over the long one, for all the world like a geometric spider spinning its web. There was old Daddy Hannah, the black root-and-yarb doctor, who could throw spells and weave charms and invoke conjures. He wore a pair of shoes which had been worn by a man who was hanged, and these shoes, as is well known, leave no tracks which a dog will nose after or a witch follow, or a ha'nt. Small boys did not gibe at Daddy Hannah, you bet you! There was Major Burnley, who lived for years and years in the same house with the wife with whom he had quarreled and never spoke a word to her or she to him. But the list is overlong for calling. With us, in that day and time, town characters abounded freely. But Mr. Dudley Stackpole was more than a town character. He was that, it is true, but he was something else besides; something which tabbed him a mortal set apart from his fellow mortals. He was the town's chief figure of tragedy.

If you had ever seen him once you could shut your eyes and see him over again. Yet about him there was nothing impressive, nothing in his port or his manner to catch and to hold a stranger's gaze. With him, physically, it was quite the other way about. He was a short spare man, very gentle in his movements, a toneless sort of man of a palish gray cast, who always wore sad-colored clothing. He would make you think of a man molded out of a fog; almost he was like a man made of smoke. His mode of living might testify that a gnawing remorse abode ever with him, but his hair had not turned white in a single night, as the heads of those suddenly stricken by a great shock or a great grief or any greatly upsetting and disordering emotion sometimes are reputed to turn. Neither in his youth nor when age came to him was his hair white. But for so far back as any now remembered it had been a dullish gray, suggesting at a distance dead lichens.

The color of his skin was a color to match in with the rest of him. It was not pale, nor was it pasty. People with a taste for comparisons were hard put to it to describe just what it was the hue of his fane did remind them of, until one day a man brought in from the woods the abandoned nest of a brood of black hornets, still clinging to the pendent twig from which the insect artificers had swung it. Darkies used to collect these nests in the fall of the year when the vicious swarms had deserted them. Their shredded parchments made ideal wadding for muzzle-loading scatter-guns, and sufferers from asthma tore them down, too, and burned them slowly and stood over the smoldering mass and inhaled the fumes and the smoke which arose, because the country wiseacres preached that no boughten stuff out of a drug store gave such relief from asthma as this hornets-nest treatment. But it remained for this man to find a third use for such a thing. He brought it into the office of Gafford's wagon yard, where some other men were sitting about the fire, and he held it up before them and he said:

“Who does this here hornet's nest put you fellers in mind of—this gray color all over it, and all these here fine lines runnin' back and forth and every which-a-way like wrinkles? Think, now—it's somebody you all know.”

And when they had given it up as a puzzle too hard for them to guess he said:

“Why, ain’t it got percisely the same color and the same look about it as Mr. Dudley Stackpole’s face? Why, it’s a perfect imitation of him! That’s whut I said to myself all in a flash when I first seen it bouncin’ on the end of this here black birch limb out yonder in the flats.”

“By gum, if you ain’t right!” exclaimed one of the audience. “Say, come to think about it, I wonder if spendin’ all his nights with bright lights burnin’ round him is whut’s give that old man that gray color he’s got, the same as this wasp’s nest has got it, and all them puckery lines round his eyes. Pore old devil, with the bags furever ridin’ him! Well, they tell me he’s toler’ble well fixed in this world’s goods, but poor as I am, and him well off, if wouldn’t trade places with him fur any amount of money. I’ve got my peace of mind if I ain’t got anything else to speak of. Say, you’d ’a’ thought in all these years a man would get over broodin’ over havin’ killed another feller, and specially havin’ killed him in fair fight. Let’s see, now, whut was the name of the feller he killed that time out there at Cache Creek Crossin’s? I actually disremember. I’ve heard it a thousand times, too, I reckon, if I’ve heard it oncet.”

For a fact, the memory of the man slain so long before only endured because the slayer walked abroad as a living reminder of the taking off of one who by all accounts had been of small value to mankind in his day and generation. Save for the daily presence of the one, the very identity even of the other might before now have been forgotten. For this very reason, seeking to enlarge the merits of the controversy which had led to the death of one Jesse Tatum at the hands of Dudley Stackpole, people sometimes referred to it as the Tatum-Stackpole feud and sought to liken it to the Faxon-Fleming feud. But that was a real feud with fence-corner ambushades and a sizable mortality list and night-time assassinations and all; whereas this lesser thing, which now briefly is to be dealt with on its merits, had been no more than a neighborhood falling out, having but a solitary homicide for its climatic upshot. So far as that went, it really was not so much the death of the victim as the survival of his destroyer—and his fashion of living afterwards—which made warp and woof for the fabric of the tragedy.

With the passage of time the actuating causes were somewhat blurred in perspective. The main facts stood forth clear enough, but the underlying details were misty and uncertain, like some half-obliterated scribble on a badly rubbed slate upon which a more important sum has been overlaid. One rendition had it that the firm of Stackpole Brothers sued the two Tatums—Harve and Jess—for an account long overdue, and won judgment in the courts, but won with it the murderous enmity of the defendant pair. Another account would have it that a dispute over a boundary fence marching between the Tatum homestead on Cache Creek and one of the Stackpole farm holdings ripened into a prime quarrel by reasons of Stackpole stubbornness on the one hand and Tatum malignity on the other. By yet a third account the lawsuit and the line-fence matter were confusingly twisted together to form a cause for disputation.

Never mind that part though. The incontrovertible part was that things came to a decisive pass on a July day in the late ’80’s when the two Tatums sent word to the two Stackpoles that at or about six o’clock of that evening they would come down the side road from their place a mile away to Stackpole Brothers’ gristmill above the big riffle in Cache Creek prepared to fight it out man to man. The warning was explicit enough—the Tatums would shoot on sight. The message was meant for two, but only one brother heard it; for Jeffrey Stackpole, the senior member of the firm, was sick abed with heart disease at the Stackpole house on Clay Street in town, and Dudley, the junior, was running the business and keeping bachelor’s hall, as the phrase runs, in the living room of the mill; and it was Dudley who received notice.

Now the younger Stackpole was known for a lawabiding and a well-disposed man, which reputation stood him in stead subsequently; but also he was no coward. He might crave peace, but he would not flee from trouble moving toward him. He would not advance a step to meet it, neither would he give back a step to avoid it. If it occurred to him to hurry in to the county seat and have his enemies put under bonds to keep the peace he pushed the thought from him. This, in those days, was not the popular course for one threatened with violence by another; nor, generally speaking, was it regarded exactly as the manly one to follow. So he bided that day where he was. Moreover, it was not of record that he told any one at all of what impended. He knew little of the use of firearms, but there was a loaded pistol in the cash drawer of the mill office. He put it in a pocket of his coat and through the afternoon he waited, outwardly quiet and composed, for the appointed hour when single-handed he would defend his honor and his brother's against the unequal odds of a brace of bullies, both of them quick on the trigger, both smart and clever in the handling of weapons.

But if Stackpole told no one, some one else told some one. Probably the messenger of the Tatums talked. He currently was reputed to have a leaky tongue to go with his jimberjaws; a born trouble maker, doubtless, else he would not have loaned his service to such employment in the first place. Up and down the road ran the report that before night there would be a clash at the Stackpole mill. Peg-Leg Foster, who ran the general store below the bridge and within sight of the big riffle, saw fit to shut up shop early and go to town for the evening. Perhaps he did not want to be a witness, or possibly he desired to be out of the way of stray lead flying about. So the only known witness to what happened, other than the parties engaged in it, was a negro woman. She, at least, was one who had not heard the rumor which since early forenoon had been spreading through the sparsely settled neighborhood. When six o'clock came she was grubbing out a sorghum patch in front of her cabin just north of where the creek cut under the Blandsville gravel pike.

One gets a picture of the scene: The thin and deficient shadows stretching themselves across the parched bottom lands as the sun slid down behind the trees of Eden's swamp lot; the heat waves of a blistering hot day still dancing their devil's dance down the road like wriggling circumflexes to accent a false promise of coolness off there in the distance; the ominous emptiness of the landscape; the brooding quiet, cut through only by the frogs and the dry flies tuning up for their evening concert; the bandannaed negress wrangling at the weeds with her hoe blade inside the rail fence; and, half sheltered within the lintels of the office doorway of his mill, Dudley Stackpole, a slim, still figure, watching up the crossroad for the coming of his adversaries.

But the adversaries did not come from up the road as they had advertised they would. That declaration on their part had been a trick and device, cockered up in the hope of taking the foe by surprise and from the rear. In a canvas-covered wagon—moving wagons, we used to call them in Red Gravel County—they left their house half an hour or so before the time set by them for the meeting, and they cut through by a wood lane which met the pike south of Foster's store; and then very slowly they rode up the pike toward the mill, being minded to attack from behind, with the added advantage of unexpectedness on their side.

Chance, though, spoiled their strategy and made these terms of primitive dueling more equal. Mark how: The woman in the sorghum patch saw it happen, She saw the wagon pass her and saw it brought to a standstill just beyond where she was; saw Jess Tatum slide stealthily down from under the overhanging hood of the wagon and, sheltered behind it, draw a revolver and cock it, all the while peeping out, searching the front and the nearer side of the gristmill with his

eager eyes. She saw Harve Tatum, the elder brother, set the wheel chock and wrap the lines about the sheathed whipstock, and then as he swung off the seat catch a boot heel on the rim of the wagon box and fall to the road with a jar which knocked him cold, for he was a gross and heavy man and struck squarely on his head. With popped eyes she saw Jess throw up his pistol and fire once from his ambush behind the wagon, and then—the startled team having snatched the wagon from before him—saw him advance into the open toward the mill, shooting again as he advanced.

All now in the same breath and in a jumble of shock and terror she saw Dudley Stackpole emerge into full sight, and standing clear a pace from his doorway return the fire; saw the thudding frantic hoofs of the nigh horse spurn Harve Tatum's body aside—the kick broke his right leg, it turned out—saw Jess Tatum suddenly halt and stagger back as though jerked by an unseen hand; saw him drop his weapon and straighten again, and with both hands clutched to his throat run forward, head thrown back and feet drumming; heard him give one strange bubbling, strangled scream—it was the blood in his throat made this outcry sound thus—and saw him fall on his face, twitching and wriggling, not thirty feet from where Dudley Stackpole stood, his pistol upraised and ready for more firing.

As to how many shots, all told, were fired the woman never could say with certainty. There might have been four or five or six, or even seven, she thought. After the opening shot they rang together in almost a continuous volley, she said. Three empty chambers in Tatum's gun and two in Stackpole's seemed conclusive evidence to the sheriff and the coroner that night and to the coroner's jurors next day that five shots had been fired.

On one point, though, for all her fright, the woman was positive, and to this she stuck in the face of questions and cross-questions. After Tatum stopped as though jolted to a standstill, and dropped his weapon, Stackpole flung the barrel of his revolver upward and did not again offer to fire, either as his disarmed and stricken enemy advanced upon him or after he had fallen. As she put it, he stood there like a man frozen stiff.

Having seen and heard this much, the witness, now all possible peril for her was passed, suddenly became mad with fear. She ran into her cabin and scrouged behind the headboard of a bed. When at length she timorously withdrew from hiding and came trembling forth, already persons out of the neighborhood, drawn by the sounds of the fusillade, were hurrying up. They seemed to spring, as it were, out of the ground. Into the mill these newcomers carried the two Tatums, Jess being stone-dead and Harve still senseless, with a leg dangling where the bones were snapped below the knee, and a great cut in his scalp; and they laid the two of them side by side on the floor in the gritty dust of the meal tailings and the flour grindings,

This done, some ran to harness and hitch and to go to fetch doctors and law officers, spreading the news as they went; and some stayed on to work over Harve Tatum and to give such comfort as they might to Dudley Stackpole, he sitting dumb in his little, cluttered office awaiting the coming of constable or sheriff or deputy so that he might surrender himself into custody.

While they waited and while they worked to bring Harve Tatum back to his senses, the men marveled at two amazing things. The first wonder was that Jess Tatum, finished marksman as he was, and the main instigator and central figure of sundry violent encounters in the past, should have failed to hit the mark at which he fired with his first shot or with his second or with his third; and the second, a still greater wonder, was that Dudley Stackpole, who perhaps never in his life had had for a target a living thing, should have sped a bullet so squarely into the heart of his victim at twenty yards or more. The first phenomenon might perhaps be explained, they agreed, on the hypothesis that the mishap to his brother, coming at the very moment of the

fight's beginning, unnerved Jess and threw him out of stride, so to speak. But the second was not in anywise to be explained excepting on the theory of sheer chance. The fact remained that it was so, and the fact remained that it was strange.

By form of law Dudley Stackpole spent two days under arrest; but this was a form, a legal fiction only. Actually he was at liberty from the time he reached the courthouse that night, riding in the sheriff's buggy with the sheriff and carrying poised on his knees a lighted lantern. Afterwards it was to be recalled that when, alongside the sheriff, he came out of his mill technically a prisoner he carried in his hand this lantern, all trimmed of wick and burning, and that he held fast to it through the six-mile ride to town. Afterwards, too, the circumstance was to be coupled with multiplying circumstances to establish a state of facts; but at the moment, in the excited state of mind of those present, it passed unremarked and almost unnoticed. And he still held it in his hand when, having been released under nominal bond and attended by certain sympathizing friends, he walked across town from the county building to his home in Clay Street. That fact, too, was subsequently remembered and added to other details to make a finished sum of deductive reasoning.

Already it was a foregone conclusion that the finding at the coroner's inquest, to be held the next day, would absolve him; foregone, also, that no prosecutor would press for his arraignment on charges and that no grand jury would indict. So, soon all the evidence in hand was conclusively on his side. He had been forced into a fight not of his own choosing; an effort, which had failed, had been made to take him unfairly from behind; he had fired in self-defense after having first been fired upon; save for a quirk of fate operating in his favor, he should have faced odds of two deadly antagonists instead of facing one. What else then than his prompt and honorable discharge? And to top all, the popular verdict was that the killing off of Jess Tatum was so much good riddance of so much sorry rubbish; a pity, though, Harve had escaped his just deserts.

Helpless for the time being, and in the estimation of his fellows even more thoroughly discredited than he had been before, Harve Tatum here vanishes out of our recital. So, too, does Jeffrey Stackpole, heretofore mentioned once by name, for within a week he was dead of the same heart attack which had kept him out of the affair at Cache Creek. The rest of the narrative largely appertains to the one conspicuous survivor, this Dudley Stackpole already described.

Tradition ever afterwards had it that on the night of the killing he slept—if he slept at all—in the full-lighted room of a house which was all aglare with lights from cellar to roof line. From its every opening the house blazed as for a celebration. At the first, so the tale of it ran, people were of two different minds to account for this. This one rather thought Stackpole feared punitive reprisals under cover of night by vengeful kinsmen of the Tatums, they being, root and branch, sprout and limb, a belligerent and an ill-conditioned breed. That one suggested that maybe he took this method of letting all and sundry know he felt no regret for having gunned the life out of a dangerous brawler; that perhaps thereby he sought to advertise his satisfaction at the outcome of that day's affair. But this latter theory was not to be credited. For so sensitive and so well-disposed a man as Dudley Stackpole to joy in his own deadly act, however justifiable in the sight of law and man that act might have been—why, the bare notion of it was preposterous! The repute and the prior conduct of the man robbed the suggestion of all plausibility. And then soon, when night after night the lights still flared in his house, and when on top of this evidence accumulated to confirm a belief already crystallizing in the public mind, the town came to sense the truth, which was that Mr. Dudley Stackpole now feared the dark as a timid child might fear it. It was not authentically chronicled that he confessed his fears to any living creature. But his

fellow townsmen knew the state of his mind as though he had shouted of it from the housetops. They had heard, most of them, of such cases before. They agreed among themselves that he shunned darkness because he feared that out of that darkness might return the vision of his deed, bloodied and shocking and hideous. And they were right. He did so fear, and he feared mightily, constantly and unendingly.

That fear, along with the behavior which became from that night thenceforward part and parcel of him, made Dudley Stackpole as one set over and put apart from his fellows. Neither by daytime nor by night-time was he thereafter to know darkness. Never again was he to see the twilight fall or face the blackness which comes before the dawning or take his rest in the cloaking, kindly void and nothingness of the midnight. Before the dusk of evening came, in mid-afternoon sometimes, of stormy and briefened winter days, or in the full radiance of the sun's sinking in the summertime, he was within doors lighting the lights which would keep the darkness beyond his portals and hold at bay a gathering gloom into which from window or door he would not look and dared not look.

There were trees about his house, cottonwoods and sycamores and one noble elm branching like a lyre. He chopped them all down and had the roots grubbed out. The vines which covered his porch were shorn away. To these things many were witnesses. What transformations he worked within the walls were largely known by hearsay through the medium of Aunt Kassie, the old negress who served him as cook and chambermaid and was his only house servant. To half-fearsome, half-fascinated audiences of her own color, whose members in time communicated what she told to their white employers, she related how with his own hands, bringing a crude carpentry into play, her master ripped out certain dark closets and abolished a secluded and gloomy recess beneath a hall staircase, and how privily he called in men who strung his ceilings with electric lights, although already the building was piped for gas; and how, for final touches, he placed in various parts of his bedroom tallow dips and oil lamps to be lit before twilight and to burn all night, so that though the gas sometime should fail and the electric bulbs blink out there still would be abundant lighting about him. His became the house which harbored no single shadow save only the shadow of morbid dread which lived within its owner's bosom. An orthodox haunted house should by rights be deserted and dark. This house, haunted if ever one was, differed from the orthodox conception. It was tenanted and it shone with lights.

The man's abiding obsession—if we may call his besetment thus—changed in practically all essential regards the manners and the practices of his daily life. After the shooting he never returned to his mill. He could not bring himself to endure the ordeal of revisiting the scene of the killing. So the mill stood empty and silent, just as he left it that night when he rode to town with the sheriff, until after his brother's death; and then with all possible dispatch he sold it, its fixtures, contents and goodwill, for what the property would fetch at quick sale, and he gave up business. He had sufficient to stay him in his needs. The Stackpoles had the name of being a canny and a provident family, living quietly and saving of their substance. The homestead where he lived, which his father before him had built, was free of debt. He had funds in the bank and money out at interest. He had not been one to make close friends. Now those who had counted themselves his friends became rather his distant acquaintances, among whom he neither received nor bestowed confidences.

In the broader hours of daylight his ways were such as any man of reserved and diffident ways, having no fixed employment, might follow in a smallish community. He sat upon his porch and read in books. He worked in his flower beds. With flowers he had a cunning touch, almost like a woman's. He loved them, and they responded to his love and bloomed and bore for him. He

walked downtown to the business district, always alone, a shy and unimpressive figure, and sat brooding and aloof in one of the tilted-back cane chairs under the portico of the old Richland House, facing the river. He took long solitary walks on side streets and byways; but it was noted that, reaching the outer outskirts, he invariably turned back. In all those dragging years it is doubtful if once he set foot past the corporate limits into the open country. Dun hued, unobtrusive, withdrawn, he aged slowly, almost imperceptibly. Men and women of his own generation used to say that save for the wrinkles ever multiplying in close cross-hatchings about his puckered eyes, and save for the enhancing of that dead gray pallor—the wasp’s-nest overcasting of his skin—he still looked to them exactly as he had looked when he was a much younger man.

It was not so much the appearance or the customary demeanor of the recluse that made strangers turn about to stare at him as he passed, and that made them remember how he looked when he was gone from their sight. The one was commonplace enough—I mean his appearance—and his conduct, unless one knew the underlying motives, was merely that of an unobtrusive, rather melancholy seeming gentleman of quiet tastes and habits. It was the feeling and the sense of a dismal exhalation from him, an unhealthy and unnatural mental effluvium that served so indelibly to fix the bodily image of him in the brainpans of casual and uninformed passers-by. The brand of Cain was not on his brow. By every local standard of human morality it did not belong there. But built up of morbid elements within his own conscience, it looked out from his eyes and breathed out from his person.

So year by year, until the tally of the years rolled up to more than thirty, he went his lone unhappy way. He was in the life of the town, to an extent, but not of it. Always, though it was the daylight life of the town which knew him. Excepting once only. Of this exceptional instance a story was so often repeated that in time it became permanently embalmed in the unwritten history of the place.

On a summer’s afternoon, sultry and close, the heavens suddenly went all black, and quick gusts smote the earth with threats of a great windstorm. The sun vanished magically; a close thick gloaming fell out of the clouds. It was as though nightfall had descended hours before its ordained time. At the city power house the city electrician turned on the street lights. As the first great fat drops of rain fell, splashing in the dust like veritable clots, citizens scurrying indoors and citizens seeing to flapping awnings and slamming window blinds halted where they were to peer through the murk at the sight of Mr. Dudley Stackpole fleeing to the shelter of home like a man hunted by a terrible pursuer. But with all his desperate need for haste he ran no straightaway course. The manner of his flight was what gave added strangeness to the spectacle of him. He would dart headlong, on a sharp oblique from the right-hand corner of a street intersection to a point midway of the block—or square, to give it its local name—then go slanting back again to the right-hand corner of the next street crossing, so that his path was in the pattern of one acutely slanted zigzag after another. He was keeping, as well as he could within the circles of radiance thrown out by the municipal arc lights as he made for his house, there in his bedchamber to fortify himself about, like one beset and besieged, with the ample and protecting rays of all the methods of artificial illumination at his command—with incandescent bulbs thrown on by switches, with the flare of lighted gas jets, with the tallow dip’s slim digit of flame, and with the kerosene wick’s three-finger breadth of greasy brilliance. As he fumbled, in a very panic and spasm of fear, with the latchets of his front gate Squire Jonas’ wife heard him screaming to Aunt Kassie, his servant, to turn on the lights—all of them.

That once was all, though—the only time he found the dark taking him unawares and threatening to envelop him in thirty years and more than thirty. Then a time came when in a hospital in Oklahoma an elderly man named A. Hamilton Bledsoe lay on his deathbed and on the day before he died told the physician who attended him and the clergyman who had called to pray for him that he had a confession to make. He desired that it be taken down by a stenographer just as he uttered it, and transcribed; then he would sign it as his solemn dying declaration, and when he had died they were to send the signed copy back to the town from whence he had in the year 1889 moved West, and there it was to be published broadcast. All of which, in due course of time and in accordance with the signatory's wishes, was done.

With the beginning of the statement as it appeared in the *Daily Evening News*, as with Editor Tompkins' introductory paragraphs preceding it, we need have no interest. That which really matters began two-thirds of the way down the first column and ran as follows:

“How I came to know there was likely to be trouble that evening at the big-riffle crossing was this way”— it is the dying Bledsoe, of course, who is being quoted. “The man they sent to the mill with the message did a lot of loose talking on his way back after he gave in the message, and in this roundabout way the word got to me at my house on the Eden's Swamp road soon after dinnertime. Now I had always got along fine with both of the Stackpoles, and had only friendly feelings toward them; but maybe there's some people still alive back there in that county who can remember what the reason was why I should naturally hate and despise both the Tatums, and especially this Jess Tatum, him being if anything the more low-down one of the two, although the youngest. At this late day I don't aim to drag the name of any one else into this, especially a woman's name, and her now dead and gone and in her grave; but I will just say that if ever a man had a just cause for craving to see Jess Tatum stretched out in his blood it was me. At the same time I will state that it was not good judgment for a man who expected to go on living to start out after one of the Tatums without he kept on till he had cleaned up the both of them, and maybe some of their cousins as well. I will not admit that I acted cowardly, but will state that I used my best judgment.

“Therefore and accordingly, no sooner did I hear the news about the dare which the Tatums had sent to the Stackpoles than I said to myself that it looked like here was my fitting chance to even up my grudge with Jess Tatum and yet at the same time not run the prospect of being known to be mixed up in the matter and maybe getting arrested, or waylaid afterwards by members of the Tatum family or things of such a nature. Likewise I figured that with a general amount of shooting going on, as seemed likely to be the case, one shot more or less would not be noticed, especially as I aimed to keep out of sight at all times and do my work from under safe cover, which it all of it turned out practically exactly as I had expected. So I took a rifle which I owned and which I was a good shot with and I privately went down through the bottoms and came out on the creek bank in the deep cut right behind Stackpole Brothers' gristmill. I should say offhand this was then about three o'clock in the evening. I was ahead of time, but I wished to be there and get everything fixed up the way I had mapped it out in my mind, without being hurried or rushed.

“The back door of the mill was not locked, and I got in without being seen, and I went upstairs to the loft over the mill and I went to a window just above the front door, which was where they hoisted up grain when brought in wagons, and I propped the wooden shutter of the window open a little ways. But I only propped it open about two or three inches; just enough for me to see out of it up the road good. And I made me a kind of pallet out of meal sacks and I laid down there and I waited. I knew the mill had shut down for the week, and I didn't figure on any of the hands

being round the mill or anybody finding out I was up there. So I waited, not hearing anybody stirring about downstairs at all, until just about three minutes past six, when all of a sudden came the first shot.

“What threw me off was expecting the Tatums to come afoot from up the road, but when they did come it was in a wagon from down the main Blandsville pike clear round in the other direction. So at this first shot I swung and peeped out and I seen Harve Tatum down in the dust seemingly right under the wheels of his wagon, and I seen Jess Tatum jump out from behind the wagon and shoot, and I seen Dudley Stackpole come out of the mill door right directly under me and start shooting back at him. There was no sign of his brother Jeffrey. I did not know then that Jeffrey was home sick in bed.

“Being thrown off the way I had been, it took me maybe one or two seconds to draw myself around and get the barrel of my rifle swung round to where I wanted it, and while I was doing this the shooting was going on. All in a flash it had come to me that it would be fairer than ever for me to take part in this thing, because in the first place the Tatums would be two against one if Harve should get back upon his feet and get into the fight; and in the second place Dudley Stackpole didn’t know the first thing about shooting a pistol. Why, all in that same second, while I was righting myself and getting the bead onto Jess Tatum’s breast, I seen his first shot—Stackpole’s I mean—kick up the dust not twenty feet in front of him and less than halfway to where Tatum was. I was as cool as I am now, and I seen this quite plain.

“So with that, just as Stackpole fired wild again, I let Jess Tatum have it right through the chest, and as I did so I knew from the way he acted that he was done and through. He let loose of his pistol and acted like he was going to fall, and then he sort of rallied up and did a strange thing. He ran straight on ahead toward the mill, with his neck craned back and him running on tiptoe; and he ran this way quite a little ways before he dropped flat, face down. Somebody else, seeing him do that, might have thought he had the idea to tear into Dudley Stackpole with his bare hands, but I had done enough shooting at wild game in my time to know that he was acting like a partridge sometimes does, or a wild duck when it is shot through the heart or in the head; only in such a case a bird flies straight up in the air. Towering is what you call it when done by a partridge. I do not know what you would call it when done by a man.

“So then I closed the window shutter and I waited for quite a little while to make sure everything was all right for me, and then I hid my rifle under the meal sacks, where it stayed until I got it privately two days later; and then I slipped downstairs and went out by the back door and came round in front, running and breathing hard as though I had just heard the shooting whilst up in the swamp. By that time there were several others had arrived, and there was also a negro woman crying round and carrying on and saying she seen Jess Tatum fire the first shot and seen Dudley Stackpole shoot back and seen Tatum fall. But she could not say for sure how many shots there were fired in all. So I saw that everything was all right so far as I was concerned, and that nobody, not even Stackpole, suspicioned but that he himself had killed Jess Tatum; and as I knew he would have no trouble with the law to amount to anything on account of it, I felt that there was no need for me to worry, and I did not—not worry then nor later. But for some tune past I had been figuring on moving out here on account of this new country opening up. So I hurried up things, and inside of a week I had sold out my place and had shipped my household plunder on ahead; and I moved out here with my family, which they have all died off since, leaving only me. And now I am about to die, and so I wish to make this statement before I do so.

“But if they had thought to cut into Jess Tatum’s body after he was dead, or to probe for the bullet in him, they would have known that it was not Dudley Stackpole who really shot him, but

somebody else; and then I suppose suspicion might have fell upon me, although I doubt it. Because they would have found that the bullet which killed him was fired out of a forty-five-seventy shell, and Dudley Stackpole had done all of the shooting he done with a thirty-eight caliber pistol, which would throw a different-size bullet. But they never thought to do so.”

Question by the physician, Doctor Davis: “You mean to say that no autopsy was performed upon the body of the deceased?”

Answer by Bledsoe: “If you mean by performing an autopsy that they probed into him or cut in to find the bullet I will answer no, sir, they did not. They did not seem to think to do so, because it seemed to everybody such a plain open-and-shut case that Dudley Stackpole had killed him.”

Question by the Reverend Mr. Hewhitt: “I take it that you are making this confession of your own free will and in order to clear the name of an innocent party from blame and to purge your own soul?”

Answer: “In reply to that I will say yes and no. If Dudley Stackpole is still alive, which I doubt, he is by now getting to be an old man; but if alive yet I would like for him to know that he did not fire the shot which killed Jess Tatum on that occasion. He was not a bloodthirsty man, and doubtless the matter may have preyed upon his mind. So on the bare chance of him being still alive is why I make this dying statement to you gentlemen in the presence of witnesses. But I am not ashamed, and never was, at having done what I did do. I killed Jess Tatum with my own hands, and I have never regretted it. I would not regard killing him as a crime any more than you gentlemen here would regard it as a crime killing a rattlesnake or a moccasin snake. Only, until now, I did not think it advisable for me to admit it; which, on Dudley Stackpole’s account solely, is the only reason why I am now making this statement.”

And so on and so forth for the better part of a second column, with a brief summary in Editor Tompkins’ best style—which was a very dramatic and moving style indeed—of the circumstances, as recalled by old residents, of the ancient tragedy, and a short sketch of the deceased Bledsoe, the facts regarding him being drawn from the same veracious sources; and at the end of the article was a somewhat guarded but altogether sympathetic reference to the distressful recollections borne for so long and so patiently by an esteemed townsman, with a concluding paragraph to the effect that though the gentleman in question had declined to make a public statement touching on the remarkable disclosures now added thus strangely as a final chapter to the annals of an event long since occurred, the writer felt no hesitancy in saying that appreciating, as they must, the motives which prompted him to silence, his fellow citizens would one and all join the editor of the *Daily Evening News* in congratulating him upon the lifting of this cloud from his life.

“I only wish I had the language to express the way that old man looked when I showed him the galley proofs of Bledsoe’s confession,” said Editor Tompkins to a little interested group gathered in his sanctum after the paper was on the streets that evening. “If I had such a power I’d have this Frenchman Balzac clear off the boards when it came to describing things. Gentlemen, let me tell you—I’ve been in this business all my life, and I’ve seen lots of things, but I never saw anything that was the beat of this thing.

“Just as soon as this statement came to me in the mails this morning from that place out in Oklahoma I rushed it into type, and I had a set of galley proofs pulled and I stuck ‘em in my pocket and I put out for the Stackpole place out on Clay Street. I didn’t want to trust either of the reporters with this job. They’re both good, smart, likely boys; but, at that, they’re only boys, and I didn’t know how they’d go at this thing; and, anyway, it looked like it was my job.

“He was sitting on his porch reading, just a little old gray shell of a man, all hunched up, and I walked up to him and I says: ‘You’ll pardon me, Mr. Stackpole, but I’ve come to ask you a question and then to show you something. Did you,’ I says, ‘ever know a man named A. Hamilton Bledsoe?’

“He sort of winced. He got up and made as if to go into the house without answering me. I suppose it’d been so long since he had anybody calling on him he hardly knew how to act. And then that question coming out of a clear sky, as you might say, and rousing up bitter memories—not probably that his bitter memories needed any rousing, being always with him, anyway—may have jolted him pretty hard. But if he aimed to go inside lie changed his mind when he got to the door. He turned round and came back.

“ ‘Yes,’ he says, as though the words were being dragged out of him against his will, ‘I did once know a man of that name. He was commonly called Ham Bledsoe. He lived near where’—he checked himself up, here —‘he lived,’ he says, ‘in this county at one time. I knew him then.’

“ ‘That being so,’ I says, ‘I judge the proper thing to do is to ask you to read these galley proofs,’ and I handed them over and he read them through without a word. Without a word, mind you, and yet if he’d spoken a volume he couldn’t have told me any clearer what was passing through his mind when he came to the main facts than the way he did tell me just by the look that came into his face. Gentlemen, when you sit and watch a man sixty-odd years old being born again; when you see hope and life come back to him all in a minute; when you see his soul being remade in a flash, you’ll find you can’t describe it afterwards, but you’re never going to forget it. And another thing you’ll find is that there is nothing for you to say to him, nothing that you can say, nor nothing that you want to say.

“I did manage, when he was through, to ask him whether or not he wished to make a statement. That was all from me, mind you, and yet I’d gone out there with the idea in my head of getting material for a long newsy piece out of him—what we call in this business heart-interest stuff. All he said, though, as he handed me back the slips was, ‘No, sir; but I thank you—from the bottom of my heart I thank you.’ And then he shook hands with me—shook hands with me like a man who’s forgotten almost how ’twas done—and he walked in his house and shut the door behind him, and I came on away feeling exactly as though I had seen a funeral turned into a resurrection.

Editor Tompkins thought he had that day written the final chapter, but he hadn’t. The final chapter he was to write the next day, following hard upon a denouement, which to Mr. Tompkins, he with his own eyes having seen what he had seen, was so profound a puzzle that ever thereafter he mentally catalogued it under one of his favorite headlining phrases: “Deplorable Affair Shrouded in Mystery.”

Let us go back a few hours. For a fact, Mr. Tompkins had been witness to a spirit’s resurrection. It was as he had borne testimony—a life had been reborn before his eyes. Even so, he, the sole spectator to and chronicler of the glory of it, could not know the depth and the sweep and the swing of the great heartening swell of joyous relief which uplifted Dudley Stackpole at the reading of the dead Bledsoe’s words. None save Dudley Stackpole himself was ever to have a true appreciation of the utter sweetness of that cleansing flood, nor he for long.

As he closed his door upon the editor, plans, aspirations, ambitions already were flowing to his brain, borne there upon that ground swell of sudden happiness. Into the back spaces of his mind long-buried desires went riding like chips upon a torrent. The substance of his patiently endured self-martyrdom was lifted all in a second, and with it the shadow of it. He would be thenceforth as other men, living as they lived, taking, as they did, an active share and hand in communal life. He was getting old. The good news had come late but not too late. That day would mark the total

disappearance of the morbid lonely recluse and the rejuvenation of the normal-thinking, normal-habited citizen. That very day he would make a beginning of the new order of things.

And that very day he did; at least he tried. He put on his hat and he took his cane in his hand and as he started down the street he sought to put smartness and springiness into his gait. If the attempt was a sorry failure, he, for one, did not appreciate the completeness of the failure. He meant, anyhow, that his step no longer should be purposeless and mechanical; that his walk should hereafter have intent in it. And as he came down the porch steps he looked about him, but dully, with sick and uninforming eyes, but with a livened interest in all familiar homely things.

Coming to his gate he saw, near at hand, Squire Jonas, now a gnarled but still sprightly octogenarian, leaning upon a fence post surveying the universe at large, as was the squire's daily custom. He called out a good morning and waved his stick in greeting toward the squire with a gesture which he endeavored to make natural. His aging muscles, staled by thirty-odd years of lack of practice at such tricks, merely made it jerky and forced. Still, the friendly design was there, plainly to be divined; and the neighborly tone of his voice. But the squire, ordinarily the most courteous of persons, and certainly one of the most talkative, did not return the salutation. Astonishment congealed his faculties, tied his tongue and paralyzed his biceps. He stared dumbly a moment, and then, having regained coherent powers, he jammed his brown-varnished straw hat firmly upon his ancient poll and went scrambling up his gravel walk as fast as two rheumatic underpinnings would take him, and on into his house like a man bearing incredible and unbelievable tidings.

Mr. Stackpole opened his gate and passed out and started down the sidewalk. Midway of the next square he overtook a man he knew—an elderly watchmaker, a Swiss by birth, who worked at Nagel's jewelry store. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of times he had passed this man upon the street. Always before he had passed him with averted eyes and a stiff nod of recognition. Now, coming up behind the other, Mr. Stackpole bade him a cheerful good day. At the sound of the words the Swiss spun on his heel, then gulped audibly and backed away, flinching almost as though a blow had been aimed at him. He muttered some meaningless something, confusedly; he stared at Mr. Stackpole with widened eyes like one who beholds an apparition in the broad of the day; he stepped on his own feet and got in his own way as he shrank to the outer edge of the narrow pavement. Mr. Stackpole was minded to fall into step alongside the Swiss, but the latter would not have it so. He stumbled along for a few yards, mute and plainly terribly embarrassed at finding himself in this unexpected company, and then with a muttered sound which might be interpreted as an apology or an explanation, or as a token of profound surprise on his part, or as combination of them all, he turned abruptly off into a grassed side lane which ran up into the old Enders orchard and ended nowhere at all in particular. Once his back was turned to Mr. Stackpole, he blessed himself fervently. On his face was the look of one who would fend off what is evil and supernatural.

Mr. Stackpole continued on his way. On a vacant lot at Franklin and Clay Streets four small boys were playing one-eyed-cat. Switching his cane at the weed tops with strokes which he strove to make casual, he stopped to watch them, a half smile of approbation on his face. Pose and expression showed that he desired their approval for his approval of their skill. They stopped, too, when they saw him—stopped short. With one accord they ceased their play, staring at him. Nervously the bats-man withdrew to the farther side of the common, dragging his bat behind him. The three others followed, casting furtive looks backward over their shoulders. Under a tree at the back of the lot they conferred together, all the while shooting quick diffident glances toward where he stood. It was plain something had put a blight upon their spirits; also,

even at this distance, they radiated a sort of inarticulate suspicion—a suspicion of which plainly he was the object.

For long years Mr. Stackpole's faculties for observation of the motives and actions of his fellows had been sheathed. Still, disuse had not altogether dulled them. Constant introspection had not destroyed his gift for speculation. It was rusted, but still workable. He had read aright Squire Jonas' stupefaction, the watchmaker's ludicrous alarm. He now read aright the chill which the very sight of his altered mien—cheerful and sprightly where they had expected grim aloofness—had thrown upon the spirits of the ball players. Well, he could understand it all. The alteration in him, coming without prior warning, had startled them, frightened them, really. Well, that might have been expected. The way had not been paved properly for the transformation. It would be different when the *Daily Evening News* came out. He would go back home—he would wait. When they had read what was in the paper people would not avoid him or flee from him. They would be coming into his house to wish him well, to reestablish old relations with him. Why, it would be almost like holding a reception. He would be to those of his own age as a friend of their youth, returning after a long absence to his people, with the dour stranger who had lived in his house while he was away now driven out and gone forever.

He turned about and he went back home and he waited. But for a while nothing happened, except that in the middle of the afternoon Aunt Kassie unaccountably disappeared. She was gone when he left his seat on the front porch and went back to the kitchen to give her some instruction touching on supper. At dinnertime, entering his dining room, he had without conscious intent whistled the bars of an old air, and at that she had dropped a plate of hot egg bread and vanished into the pantry, leaving the spilt fragments upon the floor. Nor had she returned. He had made his meal unattended. Now, while he looked for her, she was hurrying down the alley, bound for the home of her preacher. She felt the need of his holy counsels and the reading of scriptural passages. She was used to queerness in her master, but if he were going crazy all of a sudden, why that would be a different matter altogether. So presently she was confiding to her spiritual adviser.

Mr. Stackpole returned to the porch and sat down again and waited for what was to be. Through the heat of the waning afternoon Clay Street was almost deserted; but toward sunset the thickening tides of pedestrian travel began flowing by his house as men returned homeward from work. He had a bowing acquaintance with most of those who passed.

Two or three elderly men and women among them he had known fairly well in years past. But no single one of those who came along turned in at his gate to offer him the congratulation he so eagerly desired; no single one, at sight of him, all poised and expectant, paused to call out kindly words across the palings of his fence. Yet they must have heard the news. He knew that they had heard it—all of them—knew it by the stares they cast toward the house front as they went by. There was more, though, in the staring than a quickened interest or a sharpened curiosity.

Was he wrong, or was there also a sort of subtle resentment in it? Was there a sense vaguely conveyed that even these old acquaintances of his felt almost personally aggrieved that a town character should have ceased thus abruptly to be a town character—that they somehow felt a subtle injustice had been done to public opinion, an affront offered to civic tradition, through this unexpected sloughing off by him of the role he for so long had worn?

He was not wrong. There was an essence of a floating, formless resentment there. Over the invisible tendons of mental telepathy it came to him, registering emphatically.

As he shrank back in his chair he summoned his philosophy to give him balm and consolation for his disappointment. It would take time, of course, for people to grow accustomed to the

change in him—that was only natural. In a few days, now, when the shock of the sensation had worn off, things would be different. They would forgive him for breaking a sort of unuttered communal law, but one hallowed, as it were, by rote and custom. He vaguely comprehended that there might be such a law for his case—a canon of procedure which, unnatural in itself, had come with the passage of the passing years to be quite naturally accepted.

Well, perhaps the man who broke such a law, even though it were originally of his own fashioning, must abide the consequences. Even so, though, things must be different when the minds of people had readjusted. This he told himself over and over again, seeking in its steady repetition salve for his hurt, overwrought feelings.

And his nights—surely they would be different! Therein, after all, lay the roots of the peace and the surcease which henceforth would be his portion. At thought of this prospect, now imminent, he uplifted his soul in a silent pæan of thanksgiving.

Having no one in whom he ever had confided, it followed naturally that no one else knew what torture he had suffered through all the nights of all those years stretching behind him in so terribly long a perspective. No one else knew how he had craved for the darkness which all the time he had both feared and shunned. No one else knew how miserable a travesty on sleep his sleep had been, first reading until a heavy physical weariness came, then lying in his bed through the latter hours of the night, fitfully dozing, often rousing, while from either side of his bed, from the ceiling above, from the headboard behind him, and from the footboard, strong lights played full and flary upon his twitching, aching eyelids; and finally, towards dawn, with every nerve behind his eyes taut with pain and strain, awakening unrefreshed to consciousness of that nimbus of unrelieved false glare which encircled him, and the stench of melted tallow and the stale reek of burned kerosene foul in his nose. That, now, had been the hardest of all to endure. Endured unceasingly, it had been because of his dread of a thing infinitely worse—the agonized, twisted, dying face of Jess Tatum leaping at him out of shadows. But now, thank God, that ghost of his own conjuring, that wraith never seen but always feared, was laid to rest forever. Never again would conscience put him, soul and body, upon the rack. This night he would sleep—sleep as little children do in the all-enveloping, friendly, comforting dark.

Scarcely could he wait till a proper bedtime hour came. He forgot that he had had no supper; forgot in that delectable anticipation the disillusionizing experiences of the day. Mechanically he had, as dusk came on, turned on the lights throughout the house, and force of habit still operating, he left them all on when at eleven o'clock he quitted the brilliantly illuminated porch and went to his bedroom on the second floor. He undressed and he put on him his night wear, becoming a grotesque shrunken figure, what with his meager naked legs and his ashen eager face and thin dust-colored throat rising above the collarless neckband of the garment. He blew out the flame of the oil lamp which burned on a reading stand at the left side of his bed and extinguished the two candles which stood on a table at the right side.

Then he got in the bed and stretched out his arms, one aloft, the other behind him, finding with the fingers of this hand the turncock of the gas burner which swung low from the ceiling at the end of a goose-necked iron pipe, finding with the fingers of that hand the wall switch which controlled the battery of electric lights round about, and with a long-drawn sigh of happy deliverance he turned off both gas and electricity simultaneously and sank his head toward the pillow.

The pæaned sigh turned to a shriek of mortal terror. Quaking in every limb, crying out in a continuous frenzy of fright, he was up again on his knees seeking with quivering hands for the switch; pawing about then for matches with which to relight the gas. For the blackness—that

blackness to which he had been stranger for more than half his life—had come upon him as an enemy smothering him, muffling his head in its terrible black folds, stopping his nostrils with its black fingers, gripping his windpipe with black cords, so that his breathing stopped.

That blackness for which he had craved with an unappeasable hopeless craving through thirty years and more was become a horror and a devil. He had driven it from him. When he bade it return it returned not as a friend and a comforter but as a mocking fiend.

For months and years past he had realized that his optic nerves, punished and preyed upon by constant and unwholesome brilliancy, were nearing the point of collapse, and that all the other nerves in his body, frayed and fretted, too, were all askew and jangled. Cognizant of this he still could see no hope of relief, since his fears were greater than his reasoning powers or his strength of will. With the fear lifted and eternally dissipated in a breath, he had thought to find solace and soothing and restoration in the darkness. But now the darkness, for which his soul in its longing and his body in its stress had cried out unceasingly and vainly, was denied him too. He could face neither the one thing nor the other.

Squatted there in the huddle of the bed coverings, he reasoned it all out, and presently he found the answer. And the answer was this: Nature for a while forgets and forgives offenses against her, but there comes a time when Nature ceases to forgive the mistreatment of the body and the mind, and sends then her law of atonement to be visited upon the transgressor with interest compounded a hundredfold? The user of narcotics knows it; the drunkard knows it; and this poor self-crucified victim of his own imagination—he knew it too. The hint of it had that day been reflected in the attitude of his neighbors, for they merely had obeyed, without conscious realization or analysis on their part, a law of the natural scheme of things. The direct proof of it was, by this nighttime thing, revealed and made yet plainer. He stood convicted, a chronic violator of the immutable rule. And he knew, likewise, there was but one way out of the coil—and took it, there in his bedroom, vividly ringed about by the obscene and indecent circle of his lights which kept away the blessed, cursed darkness while the suicide's soul was passing.