



Prayle pulled the sheet off the body

THE RATTLER

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

Prayle knew the girl was deadly—but it wasn't her killing looks that gave her husband that bad case of rigor mortis!

DEPUTY Sheriff Roger Prayle's steely blue eyes shifted from tawny-haired Daphne Hagar's young face to her

husband's horrible swollen blue-green leg, with the two small holes in it. The rest of Henry Hagar's body was covered with a sheet,

for he was dead.

The snake was still on the floor of the living room of the two-room Hagar guest house.

It was a rattler, its severed head lying near a big lounge chair a yard from its body. The dead man was lying on a bed in the bedroom.

Questions packed Prayle's eyes as he looked at narrow-faced Lawrence, the butler. Lawrence, at this hour of the morning, was in a black coat with tails, bat-wing collar, black four-in-hand and striped trousers. That was city folk in the mountains for you, Prayle thought

"It did the master in," Lawrence said, staring at the reptile. "A bit unusual. That's why I called your office."

"Quite right," approved a man who had introduced himself as Dr. Phillip Maine. "It was quite the thing to do."

His inflection, and the rebuke in the glance he shot at Lawrence, told Prayle that he didn't approve at all of Lawrence's having called in the sheriff.

Dr. Maine, like Lawrence and the huge, ornately-rustic Hagar mansion with its remote guest house, was incongruous in this isolated resort. Maine wore golf knickers, a jersey, heavy walking shoes, a stiff white shirt and tie, and spectacles on the end of a black ribbon. His age, Prayle decided, was about forty. He was just going soft around the middle.

"We sent for you, Prayle," Maine said, his small eyes shifting beneath a high brow, and willfulness showing in the thin line of his mouth, "because of the unusual, as Lawrence puts it, circumstances surrounding the death of my dear friend and patient. Yet, when you consider everything, Henry's being bitten is not so odd. As you know, rattlesnakes are common to this area in August."

"Just what did happen?" Prayle asked Daphne Hagar. "Give me the whole story."

He measured the woman, whom he believed was not more than twenty-five, with far deeper than official interest. He had been intrigued by her sophisticated beauty for three summers now. She was sun-tanned, straight and, as Sophie McChesney, the postmistress, sniffed, "proud and haughty."

Prayle, from a distance, had watched Daphne Hagar on the raft down at the lake many times. She was tantalizingly rounded and long limbed in her scanty two-piece bathing suits which left her bronzed midriff bare. Her brown eyes, like bright agates under her wide brow, had stirred him. The lights in them, had often made him stare, yet she had ignored him. Her full lips, in a high-cheekboned face, unknowingly had enticed him, mocked him, told him they were something he couldn't have.

PRAYLE had watched Daphne's fishlike grace, her long legs in powerful, rhythmic beat, her arms and hands cutting the water like burnished knives. And Prayle knew that, of an evening, as she passed the drug store in the village, a silence cloaked the loiterers, stilled their usual coy whistles, as if here was something far beyond reach.

"I'm sorry," her throaty voice was telling him now. "I know nothing about what happened here. Perhaps you'd better ask Dr. Maine."

"The rattlesnake got into the guest house," the doctor said promptly. "Henry was reading or sleeping in that chair there, I think, the big one set on the carpet near the fire."

He pointed. Prayle glanced at the chair.

"Go on," he said.

He watched a shaft of early morning sunlight do tricks with Daphne Hagar's hair which the sun had bleached into two-tone strands. She had swept the hair back in a long bob which curled above the neck of her figure-revealing, tan angora sweater.

Prayle looked at the body on the bed. Henry Hagar, he judged, had been about sixty years old. Then there was a sound at the outside door, beyond the living room, telling of the arrival of someone new.

"I didn't find him until this morning," Dr. Maine was saying. "I woke up early in my room in the east wing of the main house. My first thought was to see how he was."

"Why did Hagar sleep in the guest house?" Prayle asked.

He heard the soft pad of feet on the living room's rich, deep carpet. Then a man appeared. Prayle had seen him around the village and in cocktail bars with Daphne. He fought against a cold, personal resentment—a jealousy that had nothing to do with the job at hand:

The newcomer was about two inches over six feet. He wore tennis shoes, dungarees and a T-shirt that clung tightly to his rugged, muscular body. A crop of curly blond hair surmounted a tan brow. Prayle figured him to be in his late twenties, of a type who would describe, without much urging, the touchdown he had made against Notre Dame in the last big game before the war.

His face strained, he came into the bedroom and went protectingly to Daphne Hagar's side. Sympathy softened his square jaw line as he took her extended hand.

Prayle looked hard into her face, saw her eyes welcome him, and what he saw in their faces made him feel an outsider, if not an intruder. He was surprised to find himself thinking of Nell, a nineteen-year-old, red-headed waitress with hungry lips whom grizzled old Eli Draper had brought back as his wife from Los Angeles, and who made a habit of sneaking out the back door of drowsing Eli's cabin to be with the boys.

Daphne Hagar's rich contralto filled the room.

"Sheriff Prayle, I'd like to present my—our house guest, Doyle France."

The big fellow pushed aside Prayle's measuring, challenging look with a large outstretched hand. Prayle shook it stonily.

"Glad to meet you, Prayle," France said. "Sorry it has to be under these circumstances. Devil of a thing, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Prayle, anxious now to get on with it. He turned to Daphne. "Is everybody here?"

"Yes," she said. "But couldn't we go in the living room?"

"Certainly."

France took her arm. The others followed them out of the bedroom. Prayle turned to Dr. Maine.

"I was asking why Hagar slept in the guest house."

Maine coughed. He exchanged a quick glance with Daphne and France.

"He slept in the guest house for his health," he said finally. "He had insomnia—and he was afraid he'd disturb the others."

Prayle dropped it there. He pushed the toe of his shoe against the deep pile of the carpet, which covered most of the big room, and which must have cost a fortune.

"Go on with your story, Dr. Maine," he said.

"I came into the room here," the doctor said. "Henry was slumped in his chair. I spoke to him, and when he didn't answer, I went to him and shook his shoulder. I felt his pulse. I thought I detected a very faint beat. Then there was a rustling sound. I looked around, and I saw the snake wriggling over there." He pointed to the bare hardwood floor about five feet from the huge fireplace. "I took the ash shovel from the bronze rack and chopped off its head."

Prayle saw dried blood and scarred wood.

"Then," continued the doctor, "working feverishly, I half dragged and half carried Henry to the bedroom and hoisted him onto the bed. I cut off his boot, and started

working on him, but he was dead.”

“Very good, Dr. Maine.” Prayle looked from one face to another. “Did anybody hear any outcry during the night?”

HE WAS answered by the unanimous shaking of heads.

“Henry had a bad heart condition,” Dr. Maine offered. “The shock alone was probably enough to prove fatal.”

“You were treating Henry Hagar for alcoholism,” Prayle said.

He saw the blandness fall away from the physician, and the expressions of the others in the group tightened.

“How did you know that?” Daphne Hagar asked, blanching.

“You city folks don’t take time to know the village, Mrs. Hagar,” Prayle told her. “There is no keeping secrets from it. Your husband’s benders made him notorious. You have summoned Dr. Maine from the city many times during the past three seasons—over a party line and through the village switchboard.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Daphne murmured.

Prayle turned to Dr. Maine.

“I’d like to take another look at the body,” he said.

“Very well.”

The physician led the way, and the others stayed behind. An icy chill ran through Prayle’s veins as a backward look showed him France putting his arm around the tawny-haired woman.

Prayle pulled the sheet off the body. Henry Hagar was clothed in a heavy tailored flannel shirt and a pair of breeches, the left leg of which had been ripped to the knee. Prayle estimated the man’s weight as better than two hundred and fifty pounds. He once again covered the body with the sheet and looked around the room. Picking the counterpane off the floor, he spread it out and shook it gently.

A small column of dust flew upward. Then he rolled the counterpane up and laid it against the wall.

“I’ll want that again,” he said.

The tops of boots protruded from beneath the bed. He dropped to one knee and fished for them. He saw the empty fifth of rye then, under the bed and well back toward the wall. He left it there.

Pulling out the boots, he saw that the right one was whole and undamaged, but that the left one had been sliced from top to sole.

“I had to do that to get the boot off,” Dr. Maine explained. “The leg was so swollen.”

“All this monkeying around you did,” Prayle said, a chill in his voice, “was all right if you thought Hagar was alive. But if he was dead, and you knew it—”

He saw fire in Maine’s eyes.

“Are you questioning my ethics?”

“Take it or leave it,” Prayle said, studying the left boot.

He examined the fang holes, noting the distance up from the heel. He pulled back the sheet again, and measured the holes in the boot against the marks on the dead man’s leg. To pierce the skin, the fangs had gone through an eighth of an inch of leather.

“What treatment have you been giving Hagar for alcoholism?” he asked.

“Intravenous injections of a solution that makes the system intolerant of any form of intoxicant.”

Prayle led the way back into the living room. Lawrence, the butler, was still standing, waiting. Daphne Hagar and Doyle France, their backs turned, were at the wide bay window, looking out over the lake beyond the sprawling Hagar summer home.

As Prayle and Dr. Maine entered, France swung around to face them.

“It seems to us,” the young man said, “the snake must’ve been looking for warmth. The nights are chilly now, and there was a fire

here all evening. The snake must've got very close to Henry, sitting in the big chair there. Henry probably moved and alarmed it. It struck, sinking its fangs through his boot."

Prayle looked at the big lounge chair. A book, opened, lay on the carpet beside it.

"He probably dozed," Daphne suggested, "dropped the book, and that made the snake strike."

Prayle picked up the volume, thumbed through it, and put it back. He turned to Lawrence abruptly.

"What did you do with the two bottles of rye you bought last night at Archie's Liquor Store?"

"Why—sir, I—" Lawrence began, but before he could finish Prayle whirled on Dr. Maine.

"You surely didn't allow Lawrence to buy liquor for Hagar under the circumstances, did you, Doctor?" he asked.

"Of course not."

Fear made Lawrence sputter.

"Mr. Hagar threatened to sack me if I didn't, sir," he said. "He told me he'd cut off the money he'd left me."

Prayle gave Dr. Maine an oblique look.

"Your cure, apparently, wasn't working so well."

The physician leaned forward, flushing.

"See here, Prayle! I've given you the straight of it. Now don't go twisting it into something it isn't!"

France laid a heavy hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Phil," he said.

"I know, you want to satisfy me that this was an accident," Prayle said "But, unfortunately, it's plain that it's a murder."

"Oh no!" Daphne Hagar gasped, one hand flying to her throat.

"You're crazy," Maine said, bunching his fists. "You get the devil out of here."

Daphne stepped in front of him.

"We've got to hear him through," she said, "no matter how preposterous he is. He's the sheriff."

DAPHNE'S full lips, curling downward, appraised Prayle.

"Mrs. Hagar," Prayle said, "Lawrence suggests your husband had a will. Who collects?"

"I get the bulk of his estate," she said, "after certain bequests. Dr. Maine gets one hundred thousand dollars. Lawrence has taken care of Henry for years, and he gets fifty thousand. A similar amount goes to a son of Henry's by a former marriage." She paused. "And now, Sheriff Prayle, you'd better explain your ridiculous murder theory—and do it fast."

Prayle's white teeth showed in a humorless grin.

"Very well," he said. "In the first place, if Hagar had drunk two fifths of rye in a couple of hours, he wouldn't be in any condition to read a book. In the second place, there's a motive for all of you except France. If it wasn't for the moonlight and a chance to marry a wealthy young widow, he'd be out of this case completely."

"How do you mean that?" France asked, his slight smile and his voice indicating he was just humoring a stupid, hick sheriff.

"I get around," Prayle said. "I'm the fellow who came on you and Mrs. Hagar on Inspiration Point last week. When old men marry young women, there's always something like that going on behind their backs."

He watched the interplay of glances among them. Stepping forward, he bent swiftly and picked up the fat, ugly body of the snake. He held it out to Lawrence. "Get rid of this," he said. "We're through with it."

The butler whitened, retreating, his eyes wide and his trembling palms objecting.

Prayle thought he was going to faint.

“Okay,” Prayle said. He tossed the reptile onto the floor and faced Dr. Maine. “Hagar wasn’t reading that book,” he said, pointing. “It’s fiction. Some of the pages in the front are still uncut. Nobody starts reading a story in the middle. Furthermore, he wasn’t sitting in that chair. He was lying on the counterpane on the bed in the next room, fully dressed and out like a light. The dust from his boots is still on the spread. If you recall, Dr. Maine, you turned the spread and the other covers back when you laid Hagar’s body on the bed.” He paused, then added with unmistakable emphasis, “Thinking he was alive, of course.”

“That can’t be so,” Dr. Maine said, apprehension glittering in his small eyes. “I found him—” He paused. “Are you accusing me of murdering Henry?”

“You’re too smart to import a rattlesnake, and take all that bother and risk to kill your patient when you could have done it much more simply. He was already full of holes from that liquor cure. One more hole, made by a hypo needle filled with poison, wouldn’t be noticed. And then you could have assigned any cause on the death certificate.”

“Well, who did kill Henry then?” asked France, tolerantly.

“Lawrence didn’t,” Prayle continued. “He’s deathly afraid of snakes. You just saw that. He couldn’t have brought himself to drive the head of a live rattlesnake through his alcohol-soaked master’s boot, even though he might be capable of murdering him some other way.”

“Thanks,” said Lawrence, bitterly.

“I suppose you think I did it?” Daphne Hagar said. “Snakes, no doubt, are my hobby.”

Prayle shook his head.

“You aren’t strong enough to drag your husband’s body from the bed in there to the chair here, and then prop him up in it.”

Doyle France’s voice was smooth.

“Then that leaves me,” he said, smiling.

“That’s right, France.”

“You’re crazy. What are you trying to cook up? The snake got into this room. It bit Hagar sometime last night or early this morning. Dr. Maine killed the snake. That’s all.”

“No, it isn’t,” Prayle said. “You’re a city man, France. So you don’t know about snakes, and you set it up all wrong. The snake, of its own accord, couldn’t have bitten Hagar. It never would have tried to cross the carpet. If you knew reptile anatomy, you’d never have put Hagar in the chair. A snake uses its ribs to travel. The ends of the ribs connect with ventral plates which propel it. These plates depend on objects beneath them holding so that it can push itself forward. A snake moves with extreme difficulty on soft, thick-piled carpets. A snake would no more go onto a carpet like this than you’d walk down an icy, slippery pavement if a cinder path lay alongside it. Furthermore, with so little traction, the snake couldn’t have struck hard enough to go through Hagar’s leather boot.”

France’s hate-charged eyes made Prayle wonder how fast he could get his service revolver from its holster.

“I’ll kill—” France snarled, and started forward.

Prayle’s hand flicked at the revolver and it popped into his hand. France froze, staring foolishly at the muzzle, his hands working.

Daphne Hagar gave a hurt little cry, as if something was being torn from her. Prayle for an instant, again saw her in France’s arms in the car under the moon. He slipped manacles from the clip on his belt with his free hand, and clamped them on France’s wrists.

“We’ll find your fingerprints, not Hagar’s, on the book, France,” he said. “We’ll

learn how and where you got the snake. It'll be easy to sew up the case." He paused. "You should've learned more about snakes. You'll have plenty of time now—but it won't do you any good."

Prayle found himself feeling very sorry for stricken, white-faced Daphne Hagar, swaying there to one side of him—sorry that he was taking so much away from her. Then she was looking at him.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," her eyes said. "And I thank you."

Those eyes seemed to promise

something. It was vague, but it was there. And the derision, the anger, were gone.

Prayle hoped that the tragedy in the guest house wouldn't drive Daphne Hagar away from the resort. He wanted to see her on the raft again, her long, sleek body varnished with the clear waters of the lake, her tawny hair brown-gold in the sunlight. Maybe, then, if he swam up to the raft beside her, she'd talk to him. And maybe, after a while, things would go a little further than that.

At least, she couldn't ignore him any more....