

# Black of the Moon

by Merle Constiner



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before the right people figured  
you were worthy of their confidence**

68

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**T**HE backwoods bus pulled away from the watering trough in the village square and Crockett picked up the suitcase. He crossed the street and entered the cafe.

It was a typical hilltown restaurant, dingy, bare. The proprietor, a fat man with reddish fuzz on his forearms, was lounging on a wire-legged chair beneath an old calendar depicting a girl in an air-brushed

bathing suit watching a flock of wild geese. Crockett laid the suitcase self-consciously on the table, said, "What will you give me for it? I don't want to pawn it, I want to sell it."

The fat man mounted good-naturedly to his feet. "You jest git off the Knoxville bus?"

"Yes."

"Broke, eh?"

"No."

The hillman looked long and hard at his visitor. The young man was modestly but not shabbily dressed; he was blond and thin, with lean cheeks and tired expressionless eyes. The suitcase, a tiny thing in striped canvas, was about eighteen inches in length. The fat man cleared his throat, "Looks like a woman's satchel."

Crockett hesitated. "It's too small for me. I never should have bought it."

The fat man walked back to the kitchen. When he returned he was carrying a long barreled pistol; he said, "Holden's a town of law and order." He reached down, snapped the lock, opened the bag. It was full of feminine garments, a pair of hose, a pink slip, a brassiere. He said placidly, "Set down. I done sent fer the marshal. He's on his way."

MARSHAL PICKERING was a wiry, hunched little man with rosy cups on his cheeks; his manner was entirely impersonal. As Crockett accompanied him down Main Street, he judged the town to have a population of maybe seven hundred. The business section, a block and a half long, was of old brick and in the soft spring twilight the warped pavement was a dappled pattern of purple shadow and mellow shopglow. There was the sour smell of budding trees and the pleasant spicy fragrance of wood burning ranges.

The jail was a small cement building

behind the town hall. Pickering opened the door. "Step in."

The walls were whitewashed, there were a tier of iron bunks and a grilled door. The marshal declared coldly. "That hain't no way to make no living. Stealing luggage from buses! I'll take you up before the Squire tomorrer."

Crockett said cautiously, "I didn't steal anything from anybody. I want a lawyer."

"I'll tell Mart Chaffin. This hain't no county seat, he's the oney lawyer we got." He closed the door; Crockett heard the bolt click.

. . . Mr. Chaffin appeared twenty minutes later. He came alone and Crockett recognized him instantly as an old-time small town attorney. He had a stolid, thoughtful face with a bony, boxlike forehead. There were cunning wrinkles at the corners of his eyes; his hair, old style, was combed back over his temples. He sat down on a shuckbottomed chair, easily, as though the jail were his own personal property. "What's your name, sir?"

"Lew Crockett."

"Frankly, Mr. Crockett, petty thievery is not in my line. Seeing, however, that you are a stranded wayfarer—"

The blond young man grinned slowly. He took out a pigskin wallet, extracted five small squares of yellow paper and a twenty dollar bill, handed the sheaf to Mr. Chaffin.

With great dignity, the lawyer stuffed the banknote in his watch pocket, examined the yellow papers. "Why these are sales slips! They prove you purchased the suitcase and its contents in Knoxville. What's the meaning of this?"

"I want to talk to you. And I don't want any spotlight turned on us. In a small town there are two persons that know what makes the wheels turn. The preacher and the

lawyer. The preacher, of course is out. That twenty dollars is just a retainer.”

“What do you want to know?” Mr. Chaffin was wary.

“I want the lowdown on the Hazelton robbery.”

“Why that happened twenty years ago!” The lawyer smiled mirthlessly. “You’ve chosen a pretty hard nut to crack. I’ve a fairly good brain myself and for two decades it’s had me thinking in circles. I was present when it happened. There was some sort of flimflam involved but I can’t quite put my finger on it.” He paused. “May I tell it in my own way?”

“Please do.”

“Twenty years ago the big establishment in this end of the county was Holden’s general store run by Tom Hazelton. Hazelton’s since retired, he’s about eighty. He settles estates now, has a houseful of antiques he picks up from bereaved heirs at a song. In those days he was sort of a rural czar. You could buy a saddle at his store, or stick candy, or have your grandpappy embalmed. He was an independent cotton buyer, too; outside buyers couldn’t pick up enough good staple hereabouts to wad a shotgun.”

The lawyer closed his eyes, opened them. “In those days there was no bank in Holden and when cotton was in bale and the buying season came around, Hazelton had the money sent over from Sycamore City, the county seat eleven miles away. A sheriff’s deputy brought it. He brought it in a black brief case. This particular year he brought thirty-five thousand dollars.”

CROCKETT nodded. Chaffin continued, “Hazelton’s emporium was two stories high and a half block long. The office was on the ground floor, at the rear, by the alley. There were two rooms in the office, the main room with a safe as big as a piano, and the small

enclosed entry room where complaints and charge accounts were handled. I was Hazelton’s attorney and was back in the sanctum the night it came off.”

The lawyer’s eyes veiled in memory. “Hazelton was home for supper. Outside it was dark. Back in the inner office, Burt Nicholls and I were talking politics. Nicholls is a schoolteacher and in those days he worked evenings at the store. Out in the anteroom Charlie Lamberton was behind the desk, waiting for the after-supper rush. Lamberton was a new-comer to town; he died a couple of years ago but his daughter is still around. Dorothea Lamberton and Burt Nicholls have been keeping company for a good many years. But that’s another story and not a very interesting one, in my opinion.”

Crockett said, “It’s dark. Hazelton is home to supper. What next?”

“Then it comes.” Mr. Chaffin spread his palms. “We hear a car stop in the alley. A minute later Lamberton walks in with the black briefcase. He locks the briefcase in the safe and lays a paper on the desk by Burt and me. It’s the receipt for the cash. Lamberton had signed it; automatically, I put my name to it and so did Nicholls.”

He pulled down the corners of his lips in a smile. “What happened after that is history. When Hazelton came in and checked, the money was missing. The real deputy, a man named Latch, was found along the road five miles out of town. The cash wasn’t on him and neither was the receipt, of course. Lamberton, a stranger in town, had transacted the deal in the shadows of the alley. The imposter hadn’t got out of the car, just handed the briefcase through the window. Lamberton couldn’t identify anybody!”

Crockett grimaced. “Whew! That certainly smells.”

“To put it mildly, sir, it does. Latch

was slain and robbed yet someone took the briefcase on in to town—for a receipt! Don't ask me why. I've often wondered that myself. And so did the sheriff, and so did Hazelton."

Crockett got to his feet. "I want to get out of here—and I want to use a typewriter. Can you arrange it?"

"Certainly. There's no reason to hold you."

They stepped out into the night. Mr. Chaffin drew up before town hall, unlocked the door. "You'll find a typewriter within. Good evening, sir, and good luck."

Crockett flicked on the wall switch; there was a machine on the clerk's desk. He sat down, found a sheet of bond in a drawer, fed it into the roller. He took an envelope from his pocket. It said:

*Crockett Detective Agency*

*Gentlemen:*

*Come to Holden and find out what Mark Savage is doing back in these parts and maybe you'll discover who stole thirty-five thousand dollars from Tom Hazelton.*

The page was unsigned. He slid it back in its envelope. Laboriously, using two fingers, he wrote:

Crockett Insurance Agency

Dear Lew:

When you run over to Holden would you look up Mark Savage. His life insurance policy has lapsed. It isn't a large one which is all the more reason that he might want to keep it valid.

Yours,

Wimberton B.

Percheron,

Special Agent.

The signature he did with his pen, a beautiful job of scrolls and flourishes.

MAIN STREET was deserted. The sign on the window said, *THE BLUE TRUNK, Ladies' Wear, Men's Wear, Notions*. A high school girl with four inch heels and mascaraed eyelashes put down a comic book and came forward, movie style, as though she were carrying a housecat balanced on her head. She said, "Papa and Mamma are home to supper."

"You'll do fine." Crockett smiled engagingly. "I'm trying to locate a friend. He's about six and a half feet tall, has a long red beard, and goes scooting about in a wheelchair. His name is Mark Savage."

Her eyes widened. "I ain't never seen that man. My Redeemer! The only Mark Savage I know is a pore little feller in dimstore spectacles that wears dirty overalls and cowhide brogans!"

"Know him well?"

"He come in a few days ago and bought a blue serge suit and a cardboard traveling bag. I never seen him before."

Crockett sauntered to the counter. A tray of cheap costume jewelry glistened in the harsh white light. Brooches, clips, pins. He selected a sunburst brooch of glass rubies and emeralds, centered with a showy imitation diamond. "How much?"

"Fifteen cents. You got a girl friend?"

He paid her, opened his penknife, pried out the fake diamond. He dropped the brooch back in the tray, wrapped the phony stone in a cigarette paper and put it in his vest pocket. She was speechless. He leered at her, said intimately, "Maybe they got them mixed up at the factory! For fifteen cents what can I lose? Maybe I've bought me a fortune!"

She wet her lips nervously with her tongue, spoke as though she were addressing a child. "You better go now. Goodbye."

THE little white cottage was back in a clump of flowering syringas; a trumpet vine cascaded from a trellis across the porch, making a lush black canopy. Crockett ambled up the glazed brick walk, heard low friendly voices. He called, "Hello! Anyone home?"

As he put his foot on the step, a soft rose light came on. Back in the box-like cave of the porch a man and woman sat side by side on a wooden swing. A table lamp with a frilled pink shade was on a wicker taboret by the woman's elbow.

The woman, in her late thirties, was plump and amiable looking and wore a short kittenish frock of mauve linen. The man was middle-aged; he had a pompous, horselike face and was dressed in rumpled seersucker. They blinked as he came forward. He said effusively, "Mrs. Burt Nicholls, I presume?"

"I am Mr. Nicholls," the man declared in a ponderous baritone. "This is Miss Dorothea Lamberton. This is her home. "Whom did you—?"

Crockett produced the bogus insurance letter. Miss Lamberton glanced at it, handed it to Mr. Nicholls who returned it. "Who is this Mark Savage and where can I find him?"

"We were just talking about him," Miss Lamberton said. "He dropped in to see me several days ago. Mr. Nicholls tells me he paid him a visit too."

Nicholls said aggressively, "As a matter of fact, we're not clear as to what brings him back to town, he hasn't been around for twenty years. He was a suspect in the Hazelton business. Are you familiar with that case?"

"Oh, yes. Yes indeed."

Mr. Nicholls appeared torn between hostility for the uninvited guest and a fascination for his subject. "A deputy named Latch brought in a large sum of money; he was killed and robbed just this side of Fern

Spring on a lonely stretch of road. Mark Savage, an itinerant from Alabama, had a vagabond camp at the spring. They tried to fasten the thing on him but there was no evidence. Savage left town as soon as they released him."

"He was gone for twenty years—and then suddenly hove in again? What was he doing in the meantime?"

"From the way he talked the other day, I got the impression that he'd been in prison down in Alabama." Mr. Nicholls looked prim, said significantly, "Just think, according to you suh, he's been keeping up insurance while he was in confinement!"

"Very thrifty of him," Crockett answered vaguely. "If he's making it an old home week, maybe he's visited this Hazelton, too. Perhaps I'd better—"

"Tom Hazelton's at the lodge tonight," Miss Lamberton put in helpfully. "He won't be home until nine-thirty." She looked disturbed. "I don't know what's come over the old man lately. He's suddenly taken to drinking!"

Crockett clucked his lips sanctimoniously. "I'm sorry to hear it."

She frowned. "The other evening he did the strangest thing! It gives me the creeps to think of it! I dropped in with a coffee cake and he led me into his livingroom and offered me a chair. Suddenly he picked up a cut glass water bottle from the mantel shelf and smashed it on the hearth! I looked alarmed and he said, 'From now on, I'll never drink another glass of water. I don't want no pond scum in my stum-mick and I don't intend to swaller no little lizard eggs neither!' He looked wild. I got scared and left."

"Nerves," Mr. Nicholls declared. "Old Hazelton had always been high strung." He got up, said austerely, "Shall we be going, suh?"

Crockett lowered himself on the

porch swing beside Miss Lamberton. He said, "That's a mighty pretty lavender dress, mam."

Mr. Nicholls stiffened in anger. "Shall I take this man with me, Dorothea, or do you prefer that I leave him here?"

Miss Lamberton pretended maidenly confusion.

Mr. Nicholls strode dramatically down the path.

Crockett stood up. "Goodnight. Tomorrow he'll propose. Do you want to bet?"

She didn't answer. He couldn't tell whether she was laughing or crying.

A LOAFER in front of the drug-store directed him to Tom Hazelton's. His wristwatch said seven minutes to nine; if he worked quickly and ran into no difficulty, he should have plenty of time. He was just crossing the village square when the woman spoke to him. She stepped out from behind the dilapidated bandstand and said, "Howdy."

The light from the distant shopfronts made a golden pollenlike nimbus about the grassless commons. She was a hill woman, big-boned, in a faded cotton dress. Her hair was gray and twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck. She raised a lank arm, pointed to an object a few yards away. "Whut's that yonder, friend?"

Crockett peered. She was gesturing toward an old wheelbarrow. He said, "It looks like a wheelbarrow. Why?"

She nodded. "That's right. Now tell me how do you shave?"

"Did you say how do I shave?"

"Yessir, please."

"Well, I take a little hot water and make a lather. With my razor in my right hand I stand at a mirror and—"

She nodded her head gravely. "I'm much obliged. I gotta think this over. Likely

I'll see you in the morning." She melted into the shadows and was gone.

A circlet of cold sweat broke out across Crockett's forehead. He said soft to himself, "Good old Holden. Never a dull moment!"

Mr. Tom Hazelton's home was hidden from the street by a line of funereal cedars. The brick house was dark but for a glimmer of phantom starlight on the windows. Crockett yanked the bell pull and listened. There was no response.

He flipped on his flash. A toothpick had been thrust between the door and the jamb. The lock was an old mortise affair; his third skeleton key threw the bolt. He entered, closed the door behind him. He took two steps and his ankle broke a black thread tied between the newelpost and the hall tree. Massive doors led into the livingroom and their knobs had been dusted slyly with flour.

Ex-grocer Hazelton was a man who liked his privacy—and he had his own homespun methods of checking on prowlers.

The living-room was high ceiled, with a bay window and a carved marble fireplace. The rug was turkey red and the wallpaper was patterned in pheasants and grapes. Everywhere were antiques, chairs, loveseats, glassware. He'd come in search of a desk and to his amazement, he counted seven. One by one, beginning with a delicate rosewood secretary, he went through them. All seven were empty.

It was in the window seat, within the embrasure of the bay, that he found the ledgers. They were neatly stacked, the complete file of Hazelton's business accounts from nineteen-nine to thirty-six.

In the volume labelled 1924 he came across two interesting entries. Under the account of *Martin Chaffin*, he read:

July 7

1 lb whippoorwill peas

1 lb salt pork  
 1 S&W revolver, cal. 32-20  
 1 gal sorghum

And on precisely the same date, under the account of *Burt Nicholls*, was written:

July 7  
 2 cans sardines  
 1/2 lb crackers  
 1 box fifty cartridges, cal.  
                   .32:20

Crockett returned to the rosewood secretary. He took a pencil stub from his vest, removed its eraser. He got out the glass diamond that he'd bought at the Blue Trunk, crammed it into the little tin cylinder at the end of the pencil, and restored the eraser. He placed the pencil in a pigeonhole—and left the house.

THE Holden Hotel was at the shabby end of the business block. Spring sunlight was pounding through the grimy window in coruscating copper when he awoke. Mr. Martin Chaffin was waiting for him in the lobby. The lawyer was in excellent humor; his black felt hat was on the back of his head and there was a merry twinkle in his squinting, triangular eyes. He asked, "How's the bankroll this morning? Is it worth ten dollars to know that your life is in jeopardy?"

"No." Crockett shook his head. "That's nothing new." He slipped a bill into the lawyer's lax fingers. "—But I'd like to hear the sordid details."

"Someone is digging a grave for you." Chaffin inspected him with pleasure. "That, at least, is the interpretation I put on it. Someone broke into my toolshed last night and stole my long-handled shovel. Someone, in spite of our secrecy last evening, learned that we've been talking and

plans are being made for your disposal."

"Why my disposal? Why not yours?"

Mr. Chaffin smiled wryly. "You're the one, sir, who is stirring up the mare's nest. I know these people. I just thought you might like to hear." His lank face creased in an expression of annoyance. "My toolshed has a superfine lock. I wonder how he got in?"

"I'll be out this afternoon to look at it. By the way, did you ever buy a Smith and Wesson thirty-two twenty?"

"Never bought one, no. I owned one for a while, though. I got it in settlement of a case. Two brothers back on Scaleybank Ridge got into a fight over a girl and—"

"Thanks," Crockett said. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Mr. Chaffin arose and bowed. His thoughtful eyes were alight with speculation.

BURT NICHOLLS was bending over the iron pipe at the watering trough, taking a drink of water. Crockett had the impression that the school-teacher had assumed the posture as an excuse to speak to him. As the detective approached him, Nicholls straightened, said with a burst of unexpected cordiality, "What a beautiful spring morning! I wish I were a barefoot tike with fishing rod on my shoulder— By the way, I've been wondering. That insurance letter you showed us last night, you know, the one about Mark Savage. It was written on plain bond paper, there was no letterhead." He winked. "It was spurious, wasn't it. You're an investigator of some sort, aren't you?"

"Now I'll ask you a question," Crockett said crisply. "What kind of a gun was used when Deputy Latch was slain?"

"Ballistics said it was a .32-.20."

"Okay. Did you buy a box of shells for a gun of that calibre in the summer before the robbery?"

Nicholls seemed astounded. "I've

never fired a gun in my life!”

“It’s there in the ledger. One box of .32-.20 cartridges to Burt Nicholls on August 7, 1924.”

For a long moment, the schoolteacher meditated. “Lamberton kept the books. He must have made an error. He would never have done such a thing deliberately. He was as honest as the day is long. I suppose you’ve heard how he made restitution?”

Crockett remained silent.

“When Hazelton discovered the money was missing,” Nicholls explained, “he went up in the air. Suddenly he remembered that Chaffin and I and Lamberton had all signed the receipt. He tried to foist off the indebtedness on us, tried to make us split the loss three ways and make it good. Chaffin and I hooted at the suggestion, neither of us had any actual authority to sign a receipt and to this day I can’t tell you why we did. It was Hazelton’s responsibility pure and simple. Lamberton, however, felt that the blame was his and tried to relieve his obligation. He scraped together every cent he had, mortgaged his home and so on.”

“Did he pay it off?”

“About four thousand dollars, as I understand.”

Crockett said blandly, “Lawyer Chaffin wants us to come out to his house this afternoon about four. Can you make it?”

Nicholls looked bewildered. “If you say so, yes.”

Tom Hazelton was puttering around in the sunlight. He was so emaciated that the skin lay like a gray film over his skull and cheekbones but his frail shoulders were as straight as a youth’s. He was examining a pile of locust fenceposts stacked in a corner of the yard. Crockett said cheerily, “Getting ready to put in a fence?”

“Yep,” the oldster said, “when the

moon changes.”

Crockett smiled faintly. Hazelton said quickly, “And you don’t need to snicker. Hit’s you is iggerant, not me. I’m a-waitin’ fer the moon to git in the black. Put in a fencepost, or plant a potato, by the wrong sign an’ you’ll be durn sorry. The moon, hit’s like a magnet. I’ve seen fenceposts and sich sucked half out’n the ground when they was did in the light of the moon. . . . What you want here anyway? I don’t know you.”

“I’m Lew Crockett, a detective. I’ve come to Holden to find that thirty-five thousand dollars you mislaid twenty years ago. I want you to agree to pay me twenty percent for its recovery.”

Hazelton gazed at the sky. “I’ll offer three percent.” Crockett laughed; the oldster said, “Come into the house and we’ll horsetrade.”

In Mr. Hazelton’s high ceilinged living room, surrounded by his antique furniture, Crockett hedged. “I haven’t exactly found it yet, you know. But prospects don’t look too bad. Let’s review the case. Why on earth did Lamberton ask Chaffin and Nicholls to sign that receipt?”

“I couldn’t rightly say, Mr. Crockett; I was out to supper. Lamberton’s story to me was that Chaffin and Nicholls jest picked ’er up and signed her fer a smart alecky prank.”

“They tell me that Lamberton was conscious-stricken over his blunder and ran himself bankrupt paying off his debt to you. Yet his daughter, Miss Dorothea, appears fairly well off.”

“That’s right, Mr. Crockett. A aunt o’ her’n in Nashville left her a little money. I tried to get to hit but it seems like I cain’t tech hit.”

“That’s too bad,” Crockett said sympathetically. “Laws are a nuisance, aren’t they? What do you know about Mark Savage?”



Hazelton looked petulant. "I cain't figger that man. He's back in town. I used to think he was the critter that slewed Deppity Latch and thieved my money. Yet when I seen Savage the other day he was dressed in dirty ole overalls. 'Course he coulda spent that thirty-two thousand in the meantime but—"

"Maybe he buried it. Maybe he came back to dig it up?"

"That don't make no sense. Why would he wait twenty year?" The old man lowered his voice. "Mr. Crockett, my house was broken into last night. Yo're a detective; who done it and why?"

Crockett ruminated. He indicated the clutter of antiques about the room. "What's this stuff?"

"Them's antiques. I settle estates and buy 'em from the heirs as a sideline, while the arn is hot, jest after the deceased has deceased. I say, 'Folks I'll give you fifty cents fer this ole wormeaten table.' Hit works ever'-time."

Crockett strolled about the room. When he reached the rosewood secretary he put on a show of interest. "Very strange. An empty desk and yet—" He took his pencil from the pigeonhole, held it to his ear, shook it. "Where did this desk come from?"

"I bought her from the Tolbert family out on Red Fox Run. Why? Hey, what you doin' with that pencil?"

Crockett took the eraser from its socket, emptied the glass diamond into his palm. The old man's eyes protruded; he scuttled across the carpet, snipped it up in a quick grab.

"That explains your prowler," Crockett said solemnly. "Some Tolbert hid a diamond in a pencil and it got passed along in the desk to you. One of the relatives was in last night looking for it. By the way, you're turning it back to the heirs, of course?"

"Oh, shore. O'course!" Old Hazelton beamed. "Mr. Crockett, you and me is goin' to get along jim dandy. Yessirreebob! I'll see that the Tolberts gets hit back. Jest forgit all about hit and leave hit to me."

Crockett picked up his hat. "And meet me at Martin Chaffin's this afternoon at four. We're having a reunion."

"Anything you say, Mr. Crockett. Anything you say!"

HE WAS wandering about town, looking for Marshal Pickering—when he realized he was being followed.

It was the gaunt hillwoman that had spoken to him in the shadows by the bandstand the night before. She made no effort at concealment but tagged him a half block in the rear, persistently like a lonesome hound dog.

He took her for a jaunt, passed down Main Street, crossed the village square, turned into the alley by a feed-and-grain store and came out into a secluded hitching lot. He sat down on a weathered bench and waited. After a moment, she materialized in the alley-mouth and to his surprise approached him.

She was tall, a good head taller than he was, and in her baggy cotton dress she made a sepulchral figure as she advanced. She asked woodenly, "You got a pen?"

He nodded. She produced a sheet of cheap paper and a blank envelope from the folds of her apron. "I hain't no scholar," she remarked without embarrassment. "Will you write a letter for me?"

He flattened the paper on the bench seat, held his pen in readiness. She spoke slowly, "Dear Mark, the man that give you that money to leave town is spranglin' around tryin' to hang the whole bad business on you. Got yore letter this morning and in answer would like to say burn that affidavit, it won't bring us nothing but grief. Don't

forgot you got a prison record, honey. Yore faithful wife, Vereena.” She took a big breath. “Thank you, sir. Now if you’ll jest back the envelope. The address is William Henery Jones, General Delivery, Chattanooga.”

He handed her the document. “We’ve met before, haven’t we? Why did you stop me last night and give me all that rigmarole?”

“I was tryin’ you out,” she said sombrelly. “On *mirror* and *wheelbarrow!*” When she said the words, her *r*’s were melodious, flutelike. “You spoke ’em like a Yankee and I knowed you was a stranger and would do. This letter is kinda personal and I couldn’t take the chance of having the folks around here writin’ hit for me.” She started across the hitching lot, stopped, said over her shoulder, “I’m surely beholden to you, sir.”

“Not at all,” Crockett remarked graciously. “The pleasure is all mine. I hope everything comes out all right.”

LAWYER CHAFFIN’S green shingle bungalow was at the edge of town, set in a crotch between two red-clay hills. Beyond, holly and scrub oak struggled up the ridge to a hazy sky. It was eight minutes to four as Crockett stepped through a break in the osage hedge and approached the house. Old Tom Hazelton, smoking a thin cigar, was seated with the lawyer, on the veranda.

Mr. Chaffin arose, came down the steps to greet his guest. “It’s back here,” he said under his breath. Crockett followed him around the corner of the house.

An old pine door was set flush in the hillside, locked by a hasp and an expensive padlock. “It’s got me whipped,” Mr. Chaffin declared. “This is my tool-shed. How did he get in?”

Crockett shrugged. “See that new staple in the hasp? He simply pried off the

old staple and put in a new one. Open up. I’d like a look inside.”

Mr. Chaffin’s toolshed was a small square cave, carved from the red clay and floored with scrap lumber. There were a few garden tools, a scythe, and an old barrel-topped trunk. The lawyer said, “It was over there, my shovel. Now it’s gone.”

Crockett lifted the trunk lid. It was full of mildewed clothes, old papers. Chaffin said, “When Lamberton died, he died in debt and his property was up for sale. I bought it at auction to give to his daughter. Miss Dorothea wouldn’t accept it. Too proud, I guess.”

Crockett said, “Let’s go back to the house.”

BURT NICHOLLS, arrived and Marshal Pickering drove up in his tan coupe. Mr. Chaffin brought out extra chairs and the little group sat silently in the hot evening as dust rolled up from the road and settled among the magnolia boles. Already, in the uplands, night noises were beginning, the skirl of the tree frog, the cough of the bobcat.

Finally Crockett spoke. “Well, gentlemen, we can get this over with in a hurry. I know who our killer is. I know exactly how the thing was worked.”

Mr. Chaffin sank back in his chair, listened intently. Burt Nicholls smiled encouragement. Old Hazelton fiddled with his cigar.

“Let’s go back once more to the night of the robbery,” Crockett suggested. “Deputy Latch drives into the alley behind the store, turns over the briefcase to Lamberton and waits for his receipt—”

“That’s Lamberton’s story,” Hazelton broke in. “I’ve allus believed Lamberton’s deppity was Mark Savage, I’ve allus figgered they was together. Could be that Savage kilt Latch on the way into town,

took his car and brought the briefcase to Lamberton for a signature on the receipt. Jest to ball us up, which hit did!”

“No. Lamberton’s story was true in every detail,” Crockett declared. “Here’s the way it was done, and a slick trick it was. Latch was an accomplice. The killer persuaded him to bring an empty briefcase in, convincing him that the receipt would absolve him, that suspicion would center around the safe in the office. *Deputy Latch was killed on the way home*. He was slain for security reasons, of course.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Marshal Pickering asked quietly, “Who done it, Lew?”

“Martin Chaffin did it,” Crockett said. “He’s your man.”

Chaffin shook his head scornfully. “What nonsense. I expected better than that from you—”

“We’ll study your bank deposits. At first you banked the money out of town and later brought it in. Holden had no bank at the time which made the subterfuge easy.”

Chaffin laughed. Mr. Nicholls asked, “Who brought you to Holden?”

“An anonymous letter about Mark Savage. I suspect your fiancée wrote it.”

Pickering leaned forward. “What’s Savage got to do with this?”

“Plenty. He saw the murder of Latch at Fern Spring. A little later he got socked in jail, when he finally got free he came back to apply a little blackmail. Chaffin paid him off once—and then killed him.”

The lawyer said lugubriously. “Now I’ve killed Mark Savage too!”

“You did indeed. And that’s where we’ve got you. You walked into Hazelton’s living room while Savage was spilling the works. You knocked him into the fireplace, breaking his dimestore spectacles. Later when Miss Lamberton was visiting Hazelton, our elderly friend observed some

shards of glass in the hearth and broke a water bottle to cover up.”

TOM HAZELTON clamped shut his jaw. “That I deny.”

“You’re innocent, but you’re afraid of Chaffin. That’s why you have those homemade prowler snares all over your house.” Crockett’s lean face went bleak. “The trouble with you, Chaffin, is that you think you’re a heap smarter than you are. You think outsiders, like me, are pretty dumb. I suspected you from the beginning, when you sat there in the jail and told me your version of the incident. Lamberton and Nicholls belonged in Hazelton’s office that night, you were the extra quantity.”

Crockett sighed. “Since my arrival last night you’ve had me on a merry-go-round. And all your red herrings were premised on the supposition that an outlander like me wouldn’t understand the mechanics of a village like Holden. You were in Hazelton’s ledger for a pistol so you added a box of shells to Burt Nicholls’ account to confuse the issue. You send some woman—I bet she’s your housekeeper acting on blind orders—around to dictate a letter implying that Savage is alive in Chattanooga.” He glanced at the marshal. “She’s tall, wears a faded cotton dress, has gray hair—?”

“Aunt Betty, the town bum,” Pickering said promptly. “She’ll do anything for a bottle of popskull whiskey.”

“You were getting alarmed,” Crockett went on. “You gave me a silly story of a stolen shovel to bring me out and show me Savage’s grave. That was to convince you in your own mind that you were absolutely safe.”

Marshal Pickering asked calmly, “Where is Mark Savage buried?”

“Back of the house, under the floor of the cyclone cellar. Chaffin calls it his

toolshed—to explain the lock on the door—but I’ve seen hundreds of those cellars in these hills and he didn’t deceive me for a moment. Cyclone cellars don’t have locks. He put that on after he buried the body.”

“But why,” asked Nicholls, “why should he kill Savage at Mr. Hazelton’s and then cart the corpse all the way home?”

“My guess is that he was afraid of the moon,” Crockett said. “He’s superstitious. It’s the wrong sign and he was afraid that if he buried the corpse out in the hills the moon would draw it to the surface of the earth. He was waiting for the moon to get in the black. Am I right, Chaffin?”

Chaffin said desperately, “I was a victim of circumstances. I can explain everything—”

Marshal Pickering snapped on the handcuffs. “Nice work, Lew. But you made one mistake. That business about the moon hain’t no superstition. I’ve seen fenceposts

drawed up till—” Nicholls and Hazelton nodded.

. . . After it was all over, Crockett walked back to town with the schoolteacher. For a while, neither spoke. At last Crockett said, “There’s one thing more I’d like to get fixed up. I’m thinking about you and Miss Dorothea. Why put it off any longer? Why not make up your mind and marry the girl.”

The schoolteacher came to a sudden stop, rocked back on his heels. “You, too! I’ve never told this to a soul, but she’s the one that puts it off. Every night I propose and every night she diverts me. Why does the cruel world always assume that it’s always the male who—?” His face was a mask of self pity in the gathering dusk. “A-a-ah! Such torment!”

“Excuse me,” Crockett said hastily. “I didn’t realize what I was getting into.”