



# Death on Location

*by A. Boyd Correll*

*It seemed to be a very good location for filming a horror movie. In fact it was so good the most horrible of all creatures kept everybody's nerves on edge and finally ran off with the heroine*

**W**HEN my boss, Lon Manville, said, "Look, Tom, I gotta have a location that looks like a South Sea island," I immediately thought of Jane Morgan. Last year I'd met Jane in Hollywood and we'd made the joints together. She was a swell sport and we struck up a nice friendship. When I put

her on the Sunset Limited for the east coast, she said, "If you're ever in New York, look up my old man. He'll know where I am. And if you want a location for one of your sultry pictures of South Sea wenches, use the family estate back of Miami."

Lon's picture was about a marine flyer

that landed on a Pacific isle after his plane conked out. I went to New York and saw Mr. Morgan. He said it was O. K. to use the place, so here I was in Florida.

The location was made to order. Palm trees, Spanish moss, palmettos, lush swamp grass and a tropical lake—everything the boss had ordered.

However, instead of finding a deserted house and grounds, inhabited only by a lone caretaker, I found a lot of activity. Interesting activity, I'll admit. Unknown to her old man, who thought she was in Aiken for the horse shows, Jane had taken a breezer with three friends and a chaperone to the Florida estate and set up housekeeping in the mansion for a long week-end. An ideal spot, located in a remote section off the Tamiami Trail near the Everglades.

The three friends were Bill Drake, a handsome fellow, just out of Leyte and the army, with a Jap bullet in his leg; Betty Williams, his fiancée, a blonde with a figure and looks that would stop traffic at Hollywood and Vine, and a guy named Harrison, whom I did not get to see. Harrison had dived into the lake the first day they got there and cracked his head on the bottom. He had gone back to Miami to get it fixed.

The chaperone was a sweet old lady named Mrs. Smythe. She had a middle-age spread and grey hair frizzled into ringlets about her head, and she would go around punching pillows to make people comfortable when she wasn't in the kitchen cooking.

The first day was perfect. I subbed for Harrison with the cracked head. We danced and had a few drinks and looked at the moon and took a canoe ride on the lake.

That night, what with the lake breezes, I popped off to sleep like a baby. My room was on the second story, and it faced the lake. A long balcony ran the length of the house. A cool breeze blew across the lawn and filtered through the big windows at the foot of my

bed. It was through those windows that the gibbering came.

I thought for a moment I was dreaming. I lay still, with my eyes fixed on the big patch of pinkish blue that was the changing of moonlight into dawn.

It came again. A low, throaty, insane noise that grew in volume.

I slipped from the bed and flattened against the wall as a shadow swayed across the fluttering curtains. The shadow suddenly came into silhouette and developed into something out of a horror picture. It seemed tall, incredibly tall, though it stooped grotesquely, and its body was covered with coarse hair. But the head was what started me talking to myself. It was flat and long, covered with scales, and swung from side to side as though set on a pivot. The snout protruded and the jaws opened and closed with rhythmic regularity. An odor of rotting flesh swept in through the windows.

As it came into complete view I dived for my suitcase, where I had a .32. The thing was carrying a woman in its arms.

As I got to the window, I heard a thud. It had dropped from the balcony with its burden, and I could see it scurrying, crab-like, across the lawn. I didn't dare aim at it from that distance for fear of hitting the girl, but I blazed away over its head and saw it drop her and streak for the heavily wooded banks of the lake which bordered the far end of the sloping terrace.

I WHIPPED into a bathrobe, pounded down the stairs and out across the lawn. Then I stopped dead a moment. A figure, glistening in the moonlight, had risen from the beach of the lake and was running towards me. I dodged behind a bush and waited until the figure was opposite, then I dived for its legs. It was Bill Drake. He grunted and started to fight, then recognized me.

"What's all the shooting?" he

demanded.

“You swimming this time of morning—before daybreak?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I couldn’t sleep. I was on the beach and thought I heard shots.”

I said “Some refugee from Frankenstein dragged a girl by my window. I took a pot shot at it, and it dropped her near the lake.” I had pulled him back towards the pond. “There she is now,” I added as a form on the grass became visible in the moonlight.

Drake struck a match. “God! It’s Betty!” he said.

On the grass, her clothes half torn from her body, Betty Williams lay whimpering. I dropped down beside her and laid my hand against her throat. A fast pulse pounded. “She’s O.K. Just out from fright.”

Drake lifted her and she moaned. “Everything’s all right,” he said. “This is Bill.”

“Take her back to the house and give her a shot of brandy,” I said. “I’m going to look around for that small edition of King Kong.”

I slipped fresh cartridges into the .32 and pushed into the heavy underbrush where I had seen the monster disappear. A few broken bushes showed where it had fled; but the trail was soon lost in the darkness. I went on toward the lake, but, after half an hour of wandering, the ground became so marshy that it was almost impossible to go further.

I turned back, cut sharply to the right, and came to the cottage of Middings, the caretaker. When I knocked, there was no response. However a light showed through a shaded window and I tried the door. It was unlocked. As I entered I sucked in my breath.

On the floor, with lips tightly curled in a hideous grin of death, lay an old woman. Her eyes, almost protruding from her head, seemed to be fixed straight on my face. I half expected to hear a scream of insane laughter come tearing out of that horribly grinning

mouth. Something had torn away her throat. Blood still welled softly from the ghastly wound into an ever-widening circle on the worn carpet.

I glanced around the ill-lighted room and yanked at the .32 when I spotted a figure crouched in a corner. Then I relaxed. It was a girl of about eighteen. A rough gingham dress, faded and torn, clung to her body. She was barefoot, and her face—beautiful in a savage way—spoke of stark terror. I walked towards her.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Me and Maw come over to see Jake?” the girl stammered.

“At five o’clock in the morning?”

“No, sir. We come over last night. We live a ways down the creek. When we started home, Maw got skeered and we come back. Jake let us sleep here and said he’d take the tool house out back.”

I nodded towards the corpse on the floor. “Was she your mother?”

The girl kept her eyes on mine. “Yes, sir. Likewise, that is, she ain’t my real maw, but I been livin’ with her since I can remember.”

I studied the girl. A product of the swampland, beautiful, half-savage, with a mass of black hair framing her oval, olive face, she was shivering like a high-strung, sleeping dog.

“Where’s Jake Middings now?” I asked.

She lifted well-rounded shoulders. “I reckon he went up to the big house. I woke up when somebody was shooting. I thought it was Miss Morgan’s friends hunting ’possums. I must of gone off to sleep again. Next thing I knowed, there was that lamp lit and something awful was a-hanging over Maw. It had a ’gator head. I got so skeered I musta fainted, because the next thing I knowed you was here and Maw was on the floor—”

She started shaking as though on the

verge of hysterics. I pulled her to her feet. “Come on, we’re going to the house. I’ll call the sheriff and get a posse here. What was your mother’s name?”

The girl huddled close to me as we went through the doorway. “Folks just called her Maw Tober. I’m Lissa.”

AT THE house, Betty Williams was lying on a couch. Bill Drake sat beside her, an empty glass in his hand. Mrs. Smythe stood by with a bottle of smelling salts. The brandy and salts had partly restored the girl’s nerves.

Jane Morgan ran to me as I entered. She had a touch of her old man’s square, stubborn jaw, but her face would have made a movie scout turn handsprings. “Betty told me what happened,” she said. “Did you find anything?”

Middings, the caretaker, came in and interrupted my reply.

“Miss Jane,” he said. “The phone’s dead. I can’t get the operator.” He turned to me. “Mister, did you really see it?”

Middings was a typical son of the soil. A large man, stooped from a lifetime of hard work, and a face lined from squinting in the Florida sun. He rubbed his hands together and I could hear a whispering rasp from his calloused palm. His voice was a soft-spoken Southern drawl.

I nodded to his question. “Yes. I saw it.”

The caretaker backed away and I saw fear in his eyes. “Oh, Lawd!” he moaned. “I never believed it till now.”

“Believed what?” I asked sharply.

“Ever since the last big wind,” he said, “folks been talking about something prowling the swamps nights. Dogs been bit and tore on dry land where no ’gator ever was, yet the way they was chewed up was just like a ’gator does. Maw Tober heard something last night when she left my place. She and Lissa was so scared they come back and spent the night at

my shack.”

I thought of the pitiful body lying on the caretaker’s cabin floor. “I’m driving to Ferndale to get the sheriff,” I told them. I headed for my room where I changed my pajamas for a rough jacket and slacks.

It was light as I entered the barn which served as a garage. Inside were three cars—my coupe, Jane’s Mercedes roadster and a station wagon.

I swung into the coupe and pushed the starter. The motor whirred but nothing happened. I tried again and still no response. I got out, lifted the hood, and found every spark plug smashed off at the base.

I checked the Mercedes next, then the station wagon. Each had been sabotaged. Things were shaping.

I had a tingling down my spine as I turned to go out of the barn. At the door I ran head-on into a man. He grunted and dropped his pipe. I backed off, fingering my gun.

HE WAS a seedy-looking character. Pig-eyes that were bloodshot, a worn coat of loud plaids, and a denim shirt opened at the throat. He reached down and picked up his pipe. “Morning. Just taking an early stroll through old man Morgan’s grounds,” he said.

I looked down at his shoes—and saw one pants-cuff covered with blood.

The stranger followed my gaze. “Horse of mine got a wire cut,” he explained. “I was fixing his leg this morning.”

“You live nearby?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yep. Next estate. Name’s Sterling. John Sterling. Maw Tober, who does my cleaning, said some folks were here. I was coming over later and pay my respects.”

“Come on up to the house,” I said. “My name’s Ferguson.” We walked a hundred yards in silence. The name Sterling rang a bell. I had seen the names Sterling and Morgan on the financial sheets of the Los Angeles papers. The two were big competitors

in Wall Street.

Sterling whipped at the grass with a crop he carried, then chuckled. “You been here long enough to see the phantom ’gator?”

I looked at him sharply, saw him grinning, but he avoided my gaze, still whipping at the grass.

“Yes,” I said. “It tried to kidnap one of Miss Morgan’s guests—”

Sterling’s grin vanished. He stood still and gaped at me. “You kidding?” he shrilled.

I told him no, and explained what had happened that morning. We walked on towards the house. He kept shaking his head. “You know, there’s been tales going around the natives about an alligator that walks on its hind legs, and has eyes that flash fire and that sort of rot—You sure you saw this thing?” He was staring at me now.

We had reached the steps of the house. “Yes,” I said, “and I’m going to notify the sheriff. Do you have a car I can borrow? The ones in the barn have been put out of commission.”

Sterling shook his head. “No. Mine’s in Miami getting new rings. But I can give you a horse. You could make Ferndale in a couple of hours.” Suddenly what I had said dawned on him. “Good God Almighty! What do you mean, ‘put out of comm—’”

Jane Morgan came out of the front door and interrupted his shout. I introduced her neighbor and he smiled with crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. I could see she didn’t like him as she turned to me. I pulled her aside.

“Listen,” I said. “Someone smashed the plugs in the three cars. This fellow Sterling has offered us a horse, so, if it’s all right with you, I’ll send Middings to Ferndale to get the sheriff. Things are getting too thick for me to leave.”

She nodded silently and I could see she was frightened. I patted her shoulder. “I’d better get Middings started. I want to pick up

this alligator’s trail now that it’s light.”

I called Middings, and he left with Sterling for the latter’s place to ride for the sheriff. I crossed the wide lawn and splashed into the marshy ground that bordered the lake.

Dank underbrush slashed my legs and, as I went further into the swamp, the thick growth covered my head. Brush slapped at my face and tore my hands. For a moment I had an eerie feeling that those twigs and branches swayed as though alive. Palm trees rattled their fronds with a noise like that of giant lizards slithering over a wall.

A raindrop hit my forehead. Glancing up, I saw that clouds were gathering fast and obscuring the sun. I hurried towards the woods at the far end of the lake, reaching them just as the storm broke.

The rain came down in crashing sheets as I halted by a huge fallen palm at the edge of the lake. It had left a small cave where its roots had been, and into this I crept. The waters of the lake lapped into the front of the hole, but further back it was drier. I crouched there, watching the storm for almost an hour. In spite of my uncomfortable position, the steady pounding of the rain made me drowsy. My eyes had become fixed on a little pool of water in the cave. The rain made the surface shimmer like silver.

As suddenly as it came, the tropical storm stopped. The water of the lake shivered and became placid. The little pool I had been watching became mirror-clear. As I crawled from under the bank, a bright object on the bottom of the pool caught my eye. I rolled up my sleeve, thrust my arm down, and picked up a coin. Kneeling in the water, I examined it and found it to be an old Spanish gold doubloon.

And then it came again—that insane gibbering, starting low and increasing in volume until it reached a screaming crescendo, hammering upon my ears. Mirrored in the pool was the image of the

monster, poised over me, its mouth opening and closing.

I tried to roll and pull my gun, but the monster crashed down, and thrust me into the pool. My head smashed against a stone and the lake and palm trees seemed to spin. There was a smell of rotting flesh as claw-like hands closed around my throat. Then the water closed over me and I was out.

I WOKE up slowly to a throbbing headache. I heard a slight rustling noise and opened my eyes.

“Feelin’ better?” a soft voice drawled.

I looked up. Standing over me was the swamp girl, Lissa. The room was dimly lit and furnished with rustic pieces of home-made furniture. I was on a bed and over me were piles of blankets. I tried to sit up.

The girl leaned over and put her hand on my shoulder. “Just be quiet. You’re in Maw’s and my cabin. Here.” She handed me a steaming glass of whiskey toddy.

I drank obediently, studying the girl. She had changed from the gingham dress she had worn when I first saw her into a pair of jeans and a man’s shirt.

I finished the drink and fumbled the glass to the floor. “How’d I get here, Lissa?” I asked.

“I fetched you,” she answered with a quick smile. “Found you laying in the path just outside this cabin, with a knot on your head and you soaking wet.”

The drink burned pleasantly in my stomach and the throbbing of my head subsided. My mind skipped back to the lake, the rain, and gold coin and the gibbering thing that smelled of putrefied flesh. I sniffed and wondered if the odor there in the cabin was a trick of imagination. No, it was there—a faint, elusive smell of the dead.

I shoved the blankets aside and swung my feet to the floor. The girl had said I was lying on the path outside the cabin. I went to a

window and pushed back the flour-sack curtains. Rank undergrowth pushed against the side of the house.

I turned to Lissa. “How far is it from the lake?”

“Bout half a mile. Judging by the bump on your head, I figger you wandered around and happened to end up here. The path leads from the lake.” She turned towards the kitchen. “I got your jacket drying by the stove. I’ll get it.”

As Lissa disappeared through the door, I wondered how she knew I had come from the lake. Funny she didn’t ask about the crack on my head. She was supposed to be at the Morgan house. Obviously, she had come back to her cabin through the rainstorm, because she had changed clothes. I sniffed again. That damned smell of rotting flesh—

I glanced about the room. Dimly outlined on a packing case, at the far side, ticked a battered alarm clock. I walked towards it. Four o’clock. It had been morning when the monster attacked me. I had been unconscious several hours, if that clock was right. I felt dizzy again, and rubbed my hand over my face and massaged my eyes. As the blur disappeared, my eyes focused on the packing case. Stenciled on its sides was “MARINE EQUIP. SALVAGE CO., KEY WEST.” I wondered if it had contained parts for a motor boat, then remembered that the lake boasted of nothing more than a couple of row boats and three canoes.

THE entrance of Lissa interrupted my thoughts. Over one arm she carried my jacket, and in her hand was another steaming glass. As she brushed through the kitchen door I noticed even more strongly that stench of death.

From outside came a crackle of the underbrush. The girl’s eyes widened and her gaze shot towards the window. The drink she held slopped over and burned her hand; the

glass crashed to the floor. She turned madly and dived into the kitchen, slamming the door. I heard a bolt shot into place.

I went to the window and listened. Something was coming. The brush snapped and swished but the thick growth along the path hid whatever it was from view. I picked up my jacket from where Lissa had dropped it and ran my hand into its pockets for the gun. It was gone.

A heavy iron poker leaned against the clay fireplace. I hefted it, flattened against the wall by the door, and waited. There was a footstep on the porch and the doorknob turned slowly. I raised the poker.

“Lissa!”

It was Jane Morgan’s voice.

I pulled the door wide. The girl’s strained face turned to one of relief. “Tom. Thank God. I was afraid you were dead.”

I rubbed the welt on my forehead but said nothing.

Jane’s gaze swept the cabin. “Is Lissa here? She left the house shortly after you did. I thought she had gone to be with her mother at the cabin.”

Lissa came quietly into the room and leaned against the kitchen door. Hate smouldered in her eyes as she glared at Jane. “If you city folks hadn’t come down here, maybe—” She stopped. Fear again crept into her face.

“Maybe what?” I asked.

She became sullen. “Nothing,” she murmured.

I turned back to Jane. “Did Middings get back with the sheriff?”

She shook her head. “No. That’s why I’m so worried. Neither he nor Sterling returned. I’m afraid the storm caught them. There’s a creek to ford on the Ferndale road, and it might have flooded.”

I whipped into my jacket. Things were clearing. I grabbed Jane’s arm. “Come on. We’re going back to the house. This alligator

scare is still on the loose and there’s no telling where it’ll strike next. Besides, I’ve got a bit of swimming to do before dark.”

Jane looked at me to see if she had heard right. “Swimming?”

I nodded. I would explain later. “Have you a gun at the house?” I asked her as we pushed through the undergrowth.

“Yes, Bill Drake has one. We used it to shoot at tin cans the first day we got here.”

The three of us reached the house just as it was getting dusk. I went to my room, changed into swimming trunks and came downstairs. Drake handed me his gun and started to ask questions, but I brushed him aside. It was getting dark. I needed daylight and every minute counted.

I started at a trot across the acre-wide lawn, then slowed to a cautious walk as I pushed into the tropical growth and headed for the deep end of the lake. It was a twenty-minute walk and it skirted the caretaker’s cottage. The house was in shadows and the clapboards weather-worn—a crypt for the murdered body of Maw Tober.

AT LAST I reached the lower end of the lake and stood beside the fallen palm where I had met the monster a few short hours before. I glanced around for any sign of life, but only an eerie silence prevailed. The sudden “pung” of a bull-frog convinced me I was alone.

The sun was sinking fast but the water was still clear. I could see the sandy bottom. I took a deep breath and dived straight down.

The depth was deceptive. I went deeper and deeper and my lungs started aching. The lump on my head began its crazy tattoo into my brain but I fought my way to the bottom. At last I felt sand against my fingers, and scooped frantically with both hands. Hugging the sand close to my chest, I kicked my way to the surface, where I gasped for air. Then I looked at my sand. There were three gold coins in it, similar to the one I had

found during the storm. The bottom of the lake at that point was covered with the scattered gold of some ancient treasure.

A faint breeze stirred across the lake and brought to my nostrils the smell of death. Dead leaves rustled in the path above me on the edge of the lake. A gibbering rose and fell. I ducked under water and stroked silently to an overhanging bank. Directly over the cave where I had laid a towel, weighted down with the gun, was the alligator-monster. Its head pivoted wildly, its jaws opening and closing.

I ducked under water again and kicked my way fifty feet from the cave. Slipping out onto the path, now almost hidden in the darkness, I crept on hands and knees towards the yammering thing.

Suddenly there was a wild scream from a woman's throat. I jerked up and dived for the cave. By the water's edge, struggling in the grasp of the monster, was Lissa. She was fighting against the claw-like hands that gripped her throat.

As I went into a flying tackle it saw me and dropped the girl. I landed a belly-flopper on the towel and gun, and managed to roll upright. I held the .32 aimed at the belly. "Hold it," I said, "or you'll get blasted."

Only an insane scream came from the creature as it sprang. I slammed four slugs into its belly in mid-air. It became limp as it fell, and a human, gurgling cough belched from it. The grotesque mask that formed the head lolled wildly a moment, then was still. I jerked it off, revealing Middings. The caretaker's fast-glazing eyes glared at me in impotent hate as a bubble of blood showed at the corner of his mouth. He gagged, and another belch brought a gush of blood. The stench of death was sickening.

I turned to the girl, who was making feeble efforts to get up. I raised her gently. "Are you hurt?" I asked.

"No," she said, and fainted.

Jane and Bill Drake met us half way

back. They had heard the shots and started out to find me. At the house we forced brandy down Lissa's throat and she came to. She stared around wildly.

"Is Jake dead?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"Thank God!" she said.

"You mean you knew Middings was the monster?" I asked.

"Yes," said Lissa. "You see, Jake found a lot of gold. It was a Spanish treasure that folks hunted for years 'round here. It'd been buried under a palm tree which was blowed down during the last big wind. When the tree fell, it flung most of the gold in the deep end of the lake. Jake told me about it, but said he'd kill me if I told anybody. He bought a diving suit, but the day he got it Miss Morgan and her friends come.

"Jake went crazy over the gold. Swore you all had come down to take it away from him. He rigged up an old 'gator head to fit the diving suit and covered the suit with 'coon skins; said he was going to scare you away or kill you all."

I interrupted. "Lissa, have you any raccoon skins at your cottage?"

SHE nodded. "Yes. Nailed up outside the kitchen."

"O. K.," I said. "Go on with your story." Now I knew where the stench came from. Skins drying in the Florida sun don't smell like attar of roses.

"I was afeared Jake was going to kill me after he got the gold," said Lissa. "Yesterday he tried to get Miss Williams."

Betty Williams shuddered and pressed close to Drake.

"I was afeared you all would get scared and leave," continued Lissa, "So I busted the spark plugs." She looked up guiltily at me and I grinned back at her.

"Last night Maw and me was over to Jake's and he told Maw about the gold. She



said he should write Mr. Morgan.”

That forged the last link. “So that’s why he killed her,” I said.

“Yes,” said Lissa. “Jake got mad and we left for home, but he must of run ahead and hid. He scared Maw and me so that we run back to the cottage. He come in a few minutes later; acted like he wasn’t mad and said we could stay over night. This morning he sneaked in, dressed in his ’gator suit, and killed Maw. I was afeared to tell on account of what Jake might do to me.

“When you started out this morning, I knew Jake was going to follow. Him going for the sheriff let him out easy. I made like I wanted to be with Maw. I followed Jake and caught him just as he was choking you. I talked him into not killing you; said it would bring the law down here and he’d never get his gold, so we carried you to my cabin.

“Tonight, when you said you was going swimming, I knew you had got onto the treasure and I knew if Jake caught you he’d kill you for sure, so when you left I sneaked out soon as I could. I got to the lake after Jake did. He saw me coming. He wouldn’t listen to me. Said I’d told on him and about his treasure. Then you come along and shot Jake.”

The sheriff came in then, followed by John Sterling, whose head was bandaged. He

explained that Middings had attacked him at his house and left him for dead. He’d come to several hours later and gone after the sheriff.

I told the sheriff the whole story. He rubbed his chin. “But how did you discover the gold?” he asked.

I explained. “When I found a gold Spanish coin in a hole I had crawled into out of the rain, I thought of the Spanish treasure story I’d heard in Miami. Later, at Lissa’s cabin, I saw a newly opened box from a marine company. The box suggested a diving suit, so I put two and two together and figured there must be more coins on the bottom of the lake, and that somebody knew about them.

“When I found out from Jane that Middings hadn’t returned, I decided he must be the one who knew about it.

“I went to the lake, dived down, and found the treasure scattered on the sandy bottom. Jake showed up in his alligator rig and attacked Lissa. I had to shoot him. That’s about all.”

The sheriff nodded. “Yep. I reckon that’s about all. Except for goin’ and gettin’ Jake’s body. Mind taking me to the spot?”

Once more I cut through the lush swamp undergrowth, but this time with the sheriff with me and no fear of things lurking in the dusk.