

# COPPERHEAD KILLER



*Harper pointed to the window*

*Detective Dan Wade Breaks a Tough Case in a House of Hate!*

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THE flickering flames burning in the huge open fireplace cast a weird glow upon the man who sat in the big chair. In the shifting light of the fire his old face was like wrinkled parchment. Withered, talonlike fingers raked the chair arms, flabby lips parted in a toothless grin, and eyes that were black and bright like those of a crow stared at the white skull that was the solitary decoration of the mantel-piece above the hearth.

"It's not that I fear death," said the old man, his voice like the rustling of old paper that might crumble if handled too roughly. "I just don't like the idea of being murdered." There was no excitement in his voice, no more emotion than if he had announced he did not like rain.

Dan Wade sat watching and listening—a big man who was as strong and tough as he looked. He had thought this visit to old Craig Harper would be just a routine check-up. Harper was known throughout the small middle-western city as an eccentric old man. He often phoned the police department to complain childishly of various intrusions upon his privacy. A stray dog wandering about on his lawn, boys climbing trees not far from his house.

But this evening Craig Harper had insisted that a detective be sent out to his place at once. The old man had claimed that his life was in danger. Wade was the detective who had been sent to hear the old man's story and he did not like the job.

“Who is it you suspect?” asked Wade, as he sat watching Harper.

For a few moments the old man hesitated. Wade grew conscious of the stillness of the old house, the quiet that was never quite absolute silence in the cold winter night. Faint rustling noises, the creaking of old boards and timbers. The house was like an ancient ship on a calm sea—never entirely still, and yet the little sounds creating the illusion of motion.

“I don’t know,” said Harper finally. “That is what I want you to find out. That is why I asked for police protection.”

“Who else is there in the house beside you?” asked Wade.

“My nephew, Burt Lee, and my secretary, Susan Jeffery,” said the old man.

“Any other servants beside the butler who admitted me?” demanded Wade.

“Oh, yes. I forgot Martin, the butler,” said Harper. “He is the only servant here now. There was a cook and a maid, but they left this morning. Said they did not like this house.”

WADE had seen the butler when he had arrived, as he told Harper. The servant was a middle-aged man whose resemblance to the frog footman in “Alice in Wonderland” was striking. Harper’s nephew and secretary were as yet unknown to the detective.

“You think one of these three might want to kill you?” asked Wade, and then as the old man nodded: “Why?”

“They are tired of waiting for me to die,” said Craig Harper. “I’m ninety years old and they have been hoping I’d be gone long before this.”

“But have you any proof?” demanded Wade impatiently. So far the whole thing sounded like the product of the old man’s imagination. “Have there been any attempts to murder you?”

“No,” said Harper, with a shake of his head, “but I demand police protection.”

“I’ll see that you get it.” Wade got to his feet. “I’ll have all officers on this beat be on constant watch for trouble, Mr. Harper.”

“That won’t do,” said the old man. “I sent for a detective because I wanted someone in the house all of the time to protect me.”

“Afraid you’ll have to hire a private bodyguard in that case, Mr. Harper,” said Wade. “Nothing you’ve told me shows any sign of an actual attempt on your life. This is not a job for the police.”

“All right, all right!” the old man ran his claw-like fingers through his thick, white hair that he wore unusually long. “Might have known I couldn’t get any help from the police. Bunch of numbskulls—can’t even protect private property so a man can have peace and quiet.”

“Sorry, Mr. Harper.” Wade reached for his hat and overcoat. “We’ll give you all the police protection—”

From the semi-darkness near the door came a flash of flame and the roar of a gun. Wade ducked instinctively and heard the hum of a bullet whistling by his head. He dropped his hat and overcoat and snatched out the .45 automatic he preferred to carry instead of the regulation police revolver.

A soft thud came from somewhere near the door. Wade could not quite decide what made the sound. It had not been the door closing. He glanced at Harper. The old man sat in his chair, long fingers marching crab-like up and down the chair arms.

“Foolish!” said Harper. “Very foolish—should have waited until you were gone before firing that shot.” He shook his head. “Afraid the murderer is not very clever. More chance of killing me

if I had been alone.”

Wade switched on an electric lamp on a table. The light only deepened the shadows in the corners of the big living room. The open door leading out into the hall was a yawning blotch of black; casement windows were gray squares facing the snow-covered night.

Automatic in hand, Wade leaped to the door and peered out into the hall. A dim light burned just above the front door. Stairs leading to the second floor of the house were half hidden in the shadows. There was no one in sight.

Wade stood there in the doorway. To his right the smell of gunpowder was strong. The gun had been fired from this spot. His eyes swept to the dark walnut wainscoting of the room, stared at it intently for an instant.

From the second floor of the house came a wild scream. Wade raced along the hall, pounded up the stairs, gun in hand. He stopped when he reached the floor above. A girl was standing beside a closed door. Frightened blue eyes gazed at Wade, blond hair was bright gold in the light.

“Miss Jeffery?” he asked. “I’m the detective Mr. Harper sent for tonight.” He looked at her intently. “What happened? Who fired that shot?”

“It’s Carlo, Mr. Harper’s pet snake,” said the girl. “It’s loose in there. Crawling around on the floor.”

“A pet snake.” Wade frowned. “What kind?”

“A copperhead,” answered Susan Jeffery. “It’s dangerous—deadly poisonous. All of us are afraid of it except Mr. Harper. It never bites him. Usually it is kept in a basket in there in Mr. Harper’s den—but now it is loose.”

“I’ll have to take a look at it,” said Wade. He wasn’t afraid of snakes. A friend of his who had been a herpetologist had taught him quite a bit about reptiles.

He dropped his gun into the side pocket of his coat, stepped to the door and opened it. “Wait here, please, Miss Jeffery.”

He closed the door from the inside. A mottled snake writhed across the floor toward him. Wade’s hand flashed out as he leaned down. He caught the snake in a firm grip just back of its flat head. Its tail curled around his arm, but he paid no attention. The copperhead hissed and lanced its fangs at empty air.

Wade smiled and found the snake’s basket. He placed the copperhead inside without difficulty and closed and fastened the lid of the basket. Then he stepped out into the hall. As he did so the girl appeared from another room. She now had on a hat and coat, and there was a traveling bag in her hand.

“I’m leaving,” she said. “I can’t stand any more of this.”

“Then we had better go down and see Mr. Harper about it,” said Wade quietly. “What’s wrong with him? Sounds a little crazy to me.”

“In some ways,” said Susan Jeffery. “He hasn’t been right mentally since his right side became paralyzed six months ago.”

“Paralyzed?” demanded Wade. “You mean he can’t move?”

“No, he can still move around if someone helps him, but his right side from the waist down isn’t of any use to him.”

**T**HEY reached the foot of the stairs and walked back along the hall to the living room.

The old man was still hunched down in his chair. He frowned when he saw the girl was wearing her hat and coat.

“Where are you going?” he demanded, square fingers motionless on the chair arms. “Are you leaving, Miss Jeffery?”

“I am.” Susan nodded. “I can’t stand it any longer. That horrible snake was loose

again.”

“Carlo loose?” There was a note of alarm in Harper’s voice. “Where is he now? Not roaming around the house, I hope.”

“So do I,” said a voice from the doorway.

Wade swung around. A thin, sandy-haired man stood there, hard eyes gazing at the detective.

“Don’t you like snakes, Mr. Lee?” asked Wade calmly. He was sure the thin man was Harper’s nephew, Burt Lee.

“Hate them,” said Lee, as he looked at the old man. “This the detective you sent for, Uncle?”

“He is,” said Harper. There was a white gleam as he smiled. “I feel much safer now that Mr. Wade is here.”

“I’m going,” said Susan, turning toward the door. “I’m leaving, Mr. Harper. Sorry, but I have made up my mind.”

“May I have a word with you, Miss Jeffery,” said Wade.

The girl nodded, and followed him out into the hall. Wade spoke when they were out of earshot of the others.

“You’d be safer if you went back upstairs and locked yourself in your room,” he said. “I can’t be responsible for what might happen to you if you go outside now.” His tone was grim. “Harper is right—there is a murderer loose in this house tonight.”

She gazed at him for an instant, blue eyes frightened. Finally she nodded mutely and went quickly up the stairs. He waited until he heard a door slam and then breathed a sigh of relief.

“Miss Jeffery leave?” asked Lee as he strolled out into the hall.

“Yes,” said Wade quickly. “She’s gone.”

“Too bad that she forgot her bag,” said the thin man.

WADE frowned as he saw that Susan had left her traveling bag in the hall. Lee’s grin was cold.

“I’m not a fool, Wade,” he said. “Where is she?”

“Thought she would be safer if she locked herself in her room,” answered Wade. “You’re not really afraid of snakes, are you?”

“No.” Lee shook his head. “Not afraid of them. I just don’t like Carlo.”

“Or your uncle,” said Wade.

“Why should I like him? My parents died when I was a boy. Craig Harper let me be placed in an orphanage until I grew up. Then I came here to live at his request. He has treated me worse than he would a servant ever since.”

“Then why have you stayed?” asked Wade.

“I inherit fifty thousand as next of kin when the old man dies, provided that I am still living with him at the time, and have no occupation of my own,” Burt Lee scowled. “He enjoys having a poor relation at his beck and call.”

“Not a very nice old man,” said Wade.

“I can’t blame anyone for wanting to murder him.”

Lee turned and started up the stairs. Wade stood in the hall watching the thin man ascend.

“Hope the girl has sense enough to keep her door locked,” said Wade softly.

He went to the front door, opened it and gazed out into the night. A cold wind blew against his face, the snow-covered ground was an eerie white blanket in the moonlight.

Again the girl screamed. Wade slammed the door shut as he heard her. He ran swiftly up the stairs. Burt Lee was standing in front of a closed door, the snake’s basket in his hand.

“What’s wrong, Susan?” he demanded loudly. “Let me in!”

Wade reached him. The gun in his pocket covered the thin man.

"Leave her alone," snapped Wade. "Maybe she doesn't like you."

"And you're Sir Galahad, I suppose," said Lee. "I thought my dear uncle might enjoy playing with Carlo."

The sandy-haired man walked along the hall and on down the stairs carrying the snake's basket. Wade let him go.

When Lee had disappeared Wade knocked on the door.

"It's Wade, the detective," he said. "What frightened you this time?"

A key rasped in a lock and the door opened. Susan peered out at him.

"Someone knocked and then tried the door," she said. "When I asked who it was they didn't answer. It frightened me and I screamed."

"Probably just as well you did," stated Wade. "Keep your door locked—and don't let anyone in. If they pretend to be me, be sure not to take any chances."

"But suppose it really is you—how will I know?"

"I'll tell you what I've been thinking ever since I first saw you." Wade grinned. "You've got the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen."

"Oh!" Susan laughed and then slammed the door and locked it.

Wade was still grinning as he started back down the stairs.

From below there suddenly came a wild cry of terror. Wade pulled out the automatic as he leaped down the stairs. He reached the lower floor, and then paused with a curse as he saw a figure sprawled out on the hall carpet.

He went closer and looked at the still form. It was Burt Lee. The thin man was dead, a knife wound in his heart, and a bloody dagger lying in the palm of his outstretched hand.

"Help, help!" It was Craig Harper

calling from the living room. "He is going to kill me!"

Wade dashed back along the hall. From the living room there came the roar of a gun. The big detective rushed into the room. Smoke was pouring out of the big fireplace, filling the room.

"He went through the window," said Harper, coughing from the smoke and pointing. "Something wrong with the fire—help me out of here."

Wade caught up a pitcher of ice water that stood on a table. He dashed it over the flames in the hearth, putting out the fire. The room cleared as the smoke drifted out through the open casement window.

"It's all right now," said Wade. "Who fired that shot?"

"Martin, the butler," answered Harper sinking back into his chair. "I told you I suspected him."

"You acted like you suspected everybody," snapped Wade curtly.

"It was Martin," said Harper. "He killed Lee."

"Martin," said Wade slowly. "Tell me more about him, Harper. I only got a glimpse of him. Give me a description of him."

"He's five feet seven and a quarter inches tall," said the old man. "Weights one hundred and forty-seven pounds. He used to be a character actor, but left the stage five years ago and came to work here."

"Why should he want to murder you?" demanded Wade.

"I left him twenty thousand dollars in my will," said the old man.

"And Burt Lee was to get fifty thousand," said Wade. "How much did you leave your secretary?"

"Ten thousand," said the old man.

"Suppose your nephew and the girl died before you did?" asked Wade. "Who gets the money then?"

"Why, Martin would," said Harper. "Or Miss Jeffery, or Lee if they were the ones who still remained alive."

"With a will like that you certainly asked for somebody to murder you," said Wade.

"I—I realize that now," said the old man.

Wade glanced at the snake's basket that was sitting on the floor behind the old man's chair.

"I guess I had better talk to Miss Jeffery," he said. "I left her locked in her room."

"Yes, do," said Harper. "I'm worried about her."

Wade nodded. He reached out quickly, unfastened the cover of the snake's basket, then hurried out into the hall. He went halfway up the stairs, paused, stood waiting. Moments passed and there was no sound save the constant groaning and creaking of the old house. A feeling of disappointment swept over Dan Wade. It was not what he had expected.

He descended the few remaining steps and went back along the hall. Just as he reached the door there came a howl from the living room.

**C**RAIG HARPER was dancing around in terror, his horrified gaze fixed on the copperhead that was crawling around on the floor.

"That damn snake!" he shouted. "It bit me—and it's deadly poison!"

"You're right," said Wade grimly. "A man who has been bitten by a copperhead doesn't live long—and you won't either, *Martin!*"

He reached out and grabbed the long white hair. He gave a tug and a wig appeared in his hand.

"Then you knew!" gasped the butler, sinking weakly back into the old man's chair. "My disguise was perfect."

"Not quite," said Wade. "When I first talked to Harper I noticed that he was very nervous. He kept running his long thin fingers along the arms of the chair. Your fingers are square and blunt-ended. He grinned at me and I saw he didn't have any teeth. You forgot to black out your teeth so they wouldn't be noticed, Martin. I saw them later when I came back with the girl and you talked to us."

"But you said nothing," protested Martin.

"I know," Wade frowned. "I couldn't tell whether Burt Lee was working with you or not. He acted like he might have been. That's why I let him do what he pleased. Oh, you made a lot of slips, Martin. Telling me your exact height and weight when you gave me your description. Other people seldom remember anything like that to the last pound and inch.

"What you did was murder the old man with the dagger while I was upstairs finding out why Miss Jeffery had screamed the first time. You had to work fast so you stuffed Harper's body up the chimney of this fireplace. It gradually cut off the draft and filled the room with smoke, even though you opened a window to let it out."

"But the gun—someone did fire at me," cried Martin.

"No, they didn't," said Wade. "That was a crazy idea of Craig Harper's. He realized that the police might refuse to guard him unless he could convince them that somebody was trying to take his life. So he—"

**W**ADE dropped to the floor as he saw the butler press a hidden button built in the arm of the chair. For the third time a gun roared from a spot near the door. He saw the panel that had opened revealing a guntrap that had been built into

the wall.

His own automatic was in his hand covering Martin as he scrambled to his feet. He glared at the butler.

“Tried to get me,” he snapped. “That’s another attempt at murder—but you’ll die in the electric chair for those other two killings.”

“Never get me there,” Martin laughed wildly. “I’ll die from the snake bite long before the rest of the police even get here.”

“No you won’t,” said Wade. “There’s nothing poisonous about that copperhead. If there had been, Harper would never have kept it around as a pet. Its poison sacs have been removed. I made sure of that when I looked it over upstairs.”

“What—what happened?” demanded Susan Jeffery as she appeared in the doorway. “I heard the shooting and just couldn’t stay up in my room any longer.” Her eyes widened as she saw Martin. “Is he—?”

“He’s the murderer,” said Wade as he handed her his gun. “Keep him covered while I phone for the police.” He picked

up the phone in one corner of the room, dialed a number and spoke swiftly. “Wade speaking. I’m at Craig Harper’s house. That routine investigation turned out to be a double murder. Send some of the boys around. I’m holding the killer until they get here. Right.”

He put down the phone, and his eyes rested on the grinning skull on the mantelpiece. The death head grinned back at him, as though it knew that it had been Harper’s pet snake who had finally brought the old man’s murderer out into the open.

Susan shuddered and drew closer to Wade as the copperhead wiggled out into the hall.

“About those eyes,” said Wade, still keeping Martin covered with his gun as the girl handed him back the automatic. “I still think they’re swell.”

“Maybe,” said Susan. “But from the way you have seen what’s been happening around here tonight—you’ve got pretty good eyesight yourself.”