

The Invaders

BY BENJAMIN FERRIS

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Magic—there's no such thing. But the crops were beginning to grow backwards....

Big Joe Merklos was the first of them. He appeared at the Wide Bend National Bank one day, cash in hand. The charm of him, his flashing smile, the easy strength in his big body, were persuasive recommendations. But the bank's appraisal scarcely got that far. Wasn't he the first buyer in fifteen years for that bone-yard of lonely dreams, Dark Valley?

The county seat of Wide Bend presided over three valleys, corresponding to the forks of the

Sallinook River. Once, Dark Valley had been the richest of these. Solid houses and barns stood among orchards laden with fruit, fields chock-full of heavy-bearded grain ... till, one Spring, the middle fork of the river had dried up.

The farmers called in specialists who sank wells and pilot holes, measured the slopes. They heard much talk about water tables, about springs undercutting rock formations. But when it was done the fact remained: Dark Valley's water supply was choked off beyond man's ability to restore it. In the end the farmers gave up, left their dusty houses and shriveled orchards, and Dark Valley died.

Boys hiked over there occasionally. Men scouted for fence posts or pipe. Young couples passed quickly through on moonlight nights. And at least two stubborn old-timers still squatted at the upper end.

Now that Joe Merklos had bought it, of course, they would have to move.

"Well, won't they?" Henderson asked.

Jerry Bronson looked around at the other members of the Wide Bend Businessmen's Club. "Doesn't take a lawyer to answer that, Hen."

"Dam' shame," said Caruso, the barber, who always championed underdogs.

"They've had no equity in that land for years. The bank just let them stay on."

"They can move on over the hill."

Jerry nodded. "Maybe somebody ought to suggest that to them."

"Don't look at me," Caruso said. "Those old coots ain't been near my shop for years."

When the chuckles died, MacAllister, the druggist, voiced the thought that rested unspoken on all their minds. "I wonder if that fellow realizes what a worthless piece of land he's bought."

"He looked it over." This was Hammond, of the bank.

"Course, you didn't try to talk him out of it!"

"Would you have?" Hammond retorted indignantly.

Henderson jabbed the air with his cigar. "I think he was a coal miner, back East. Saved up his money to get on the land."

"I think he's a gypsy," Caruso said.

"You ought to know," Tipton, the grocer, laughed. Caruso got fined for his reply, and with the tinkle of coins in the luncheon club kitty the men dispersed.

Joe Merklos' relatives arrived that night. Henderson, who told Jerry Bronson about it, had made an early morning delivery of feed nearby, and driven on to take a look at Merklos' purchase. From the ridge, he viewed Dark Valley's three miles of width and six or so of length. Figures were moving about the gaunt and windowless farm buildings. At least one plow was in operation, and the good blue friendliness of smoke arose here and there.

"Looked like a lot of people, Jerry. But you know—I didn't see any cars or trucks around."

Jerry's blue eyes crinkled. Human nature didn't like puzzles any more than it liked strangers. He

returned to the tedious civil case he was working on. About three o'clock, he decided he was tired and bored enough to call it a day. He got into his car and headed for Dark Valley.

Aside from his curiosity, he thought he might talk to the two old squatters at the far end. The Carvers were independent and truculent. Now that Joe Merklos' relatives had arrived in full force, there was danger of a clash.

As the road topped the ridge, it left green fields and orchards abruptly behind. But Dark Valley had a wild sort of beauty, cupped as it was between two rows of hills which curved together as higher, jumbled foothills to the west.

Jerry's car trailed a plume of dust as it slid down to the dry riverbed. He made a left turn and started up the valley road. At the first farm he saw dark, plump women in billowing dresses, wearing peasant scarves over their heads. They moved about the barnyard, raking dead leaves and scratching busily at the baked earth of the old truck gardens. Chickens and ducks strayed, and Jerry caught a glimpse of children. He waved to the group and was answered by nods and flashing smiles.

Then he had a shock. One of the women was working the handle of a pump that had been bone-dry for fifteen years—and a slender stream of clear water spilled into her wooden tub!

Somewhat dazedly, Jerry drove on. He saw more of the Merklos people at other farms. Men were working in the withered orchards. New fence posts and rails were going up; bright axes flashed in the dry and scraggly wood lots.

Jerry's thoughts kept returning to the water in that first pump. Could it be that they had learned the valley had a supply again? That would be a mighty joke on Hammond and the First National Bank.

The road, badly rutted by erosion and drifted over with sand and dry leaves, began to rise. Jerry shifted into low gear. Then, suddenly, he stopped. He'd had another shock. He had just realized this road was *unused*. He recalled the twin ruts, patterned with rabbit and bird tracks, clear back to the turn-off. Without question, his car had been the first to mark the road since winter.

Then how had these dozens of people come, with their chickens and ducks and children and tools? He had seen no cars, no wagons, no carts. *How had these people come?*

Jerry sat back in the seat and grinned. He fished out his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe. There were times when he considered himself fairly mature, fairly well balanced. Yet he was as ready as the next to build a house of mystery out of the insubstantial timber of ignorance.

Of course there was a reasonable explanation. They must have walked from the railroad. It was a good many miles, but it was perfectly possible.

Feeling better, Jerry followed the tortuous road to the western crest. His long legs hadn't taken him far from the car when he heard a harsh, "Hold up!"

First one, then the other Carver brother stepped out from a scrub oak thicket—short, leathery old men, with ragged whiskers and dirt seamed into their faces and wrists. They eyed him malevolently over raised shotguns.

"Came to talk to you," Jerry said mildly.

One of them—he thought it was Ed—spat.

"Ah, now," Jerry went on in an aggrieved tone, "that's a fine way to treat a son of Jack Bronson."

The Carver brothers glanced at one another, then the shotguns lowered. "Come along," they said gruffly. In the littered yard by their cabin, they pointed to a bench and squatted down before it on

their thin old shanks.

"New people in Dark Valley."

They nodded.

"They've bought it from the bank. They own it clear to the ridge line, including your place, here."

"We been here forty years," said Ed.

"If I owned it you could stay forty more."

"They send you?" the voice was sharp, suspicious.

Jerry shook his head. "I just thought you'd like to know about it."

For a couple of minutes the Carver brothers chewed tobacco in unison. They stood up, reached for their guns. "We'll see," they said.

Jerry nodded. They walked beside him, kicking thoughtfully at the leaves. The brother named Mike rubbed his whiskers. "Get much of a look at 'em when ye passed through?"

"Some."

"They furriners?"

Jerry sighed inwardly. "Maybe. They look like hard workers."

The Carver brothers cackled suddenly. "They better be! To farm that land."

Jerry passed back through the valley. A man knocking out stumps waved to him. A woman in a barnyard swished out her big skirts, shooing chickens. At that first farm, a trickle of water still ran from the pump....

Wide Bend was a normal community. Along with its natural curiosity there was a genuine feeling of neighborliness—heightened by the conviction that these hardworking strangers had thrown their money away on a hopeless venture. So, one way and another, a fair percentage of the town's population found excuses in the next few days to get out to Dark Valley. Bit by bit the reports filtered back to Jerry, and they all added up about the same.

Joe Merklos and his people were incredibly industrious. Already they had cleaned up the yards, repaired sagging barns and roofless sheds. Curtains fluttered at the windows. Cows had appeared, and sheep, even a few horses. Somehow, perhaps from accumulated seepage, they were still bringing water from the rusty pumps. And—though it was surely an illusion—Dark Valley seemed to have taken on a tinge of green again.

Wide Bend's womenfolk brought gifts of home-made preserves, jelly, canned vegetables ... and came away puzzled. No, they hadn't been badly received. All was politeness and smiles. But there was—well, a sort of remoteness about these people. The kids went out of sight the minute you turned into a place. And you just couldn't get close to the grown-ups. Dark, they were, and heavy-looking. They smiled a lot, jabbering in an unknown language. They had beautiful white teeth, but no jewelry or ornaments, such as gypsies might wear. They always appeared pleased that you brought them something. But on the way home you discovered you still had your presents, after all.

The best guess as to the number in the tribe (somehow, that seemed the best way to describe them) was sixty, give or take a few.

The general verdict was expressed by Henderson at the next club luncheon. "They're odd, but they're hard workers. Darned good thing for the community."

Miller, the jeweler, agreed vigorously.

"Self-interest," Jerry murmured, "is a wonderful thing."

They turned on him. "They haven't bought a thing from us! And what if they did?"

"Kidding, boys. I've got something to sell, too." Then Jerry frowned. "They haven't bought *anything*?"

Around the table, heads shook.

"Probably," Caruso growled, "they wear their hair long, too."

In the laughter, the matter was forgotten.

But Jerry remembered it that night, sitting on the porch of his house. There must be hundreds of items—tools and nails and hinges and glass and wire and sandpaper and oil and rope and seed and salt and sugar—that the tribe needed. How could they—?

There was a step on the path. "You there?" Caruso called.

"Yep."

The barber sat in the other chair, hoisted his feet to the railing. "You know how kids are."

"Um."

"That boy of mine, he couldn't stand it about Dark Valley. He was out there with a couple of pals, poking around."

"Yes?" Jerry didn't realize his voice was sharp.

"Oh, no trouble. But the middle fork of the river's started to run again!"

For a long time after Caruso had gone, Jerry sat with his cold pipe in his mouth. There were reasonable explanations for every one of the small oddities that had cropped up with Joe Merklos and his people. But he couldn't shake a growing feeling of uneasiness.

Jerry went to bed muttering, for he was a man trained to keep emotion and fact well separate. But the feeling was still with him when he awoke, and he recognized it later on Henderson's face.

"We got to get the boys together and talk this thing over," the feed and fuel owner said.

"What's up?"

"This stuff that's missin'."

Jerry gave a start. He had just spent at least half an hour looking for this garage lock.

"Every day of this week," Henderson went on heavily, "I've had people in to replace some little thing that was lost. Hatchets and feeding troughs and spare parts and panes of glass and things like that. A couple of old chicken brooders that was stored. Ten salt blocks Anderson had in his barn."

Just then MacAllister stepped over from his drugstore to join them. "Dammit," he said

plaintively, dusting off his store jacket, "I been in the basement the last hour looking for an old pipe wrench. I swear I left it there!"

Jerry met Henderson's glance. "All right," he said. "Let's get the gang together for lunch today."

Sheriff Watson joined them in the back room of the restaurant. When the coffee came Jerry rose to explain the purpose of the meeting. "Our problem," he began, "may amount to nothing at all. Or it could turn out to be mighty nasty. Hen and I thought it was time to talk it over."

Briefly he recapitulated Dark Valley's reawakening. He described Joe Merklos and his people—their odd clothing, their independence, their alien language.

"Point one," he said, "most people don't like strangers."

He described the tribe's arrival without cars or wagons, without even a mark on the abandoned road. He spoke of the pumps that came to life, the river that now ran again. The progress the tribe had made seemed almost beyond human capacity.

"Point two," Jerry said, "most people don't like mysteries." He turned. "Okay, Hen."

First Henderson explained that none of the tribe had bought supplies of any kind in Wide Bend. He got corroboration from other businessmen present. Then, as he summarized the missing articles, heads began to nod. Faces got red and lists were clenched. Jerry got to his feet again. "Point three, I don't need to spell out. Much more of this and carloads of men with guns will be heading for the ridge. There'll be the kind of trouble we don't want on Wide Bend's conscience."

"Should we let 'em rob us blind?" shouted Tipton.

"No wonder they do so good!" Caruso cried.

"How about the water?" Hammond asked sarcastically. "You think they stole that, too?"

Someone shouted back, and a heated discussion raged. Jerry finally banged on the table with a sugar bowl. "Let's hear from the sheriff."

Watson hoisted his big frame, and sighed. "Jerry's right, boys. We got a nasty situation building up. Right now, my old woman's so mad at the Dark Valley people she could spit. And why? Only because she can't figger 'em out."

He brushed his mustache and looked at Tipton. "Them people are human bein's, ain't they?"

Tipton scowled, but nodded.

"Anything they done that couldn't be explained by natural causes, no matter how silly or complicated?"

Tipton thought about it, and had to shake his head.

"Believe me, boys, the only thing to get excited about is the stuff that's missin'. If they're pinchin' it, we can catch 'em, and punish 'em. They may be foreigners but they sure as hell have to obey the law of the land!"

"Now," Hammond said, "we're talking sense."

"Give me a list of what's missin'," Watson added, "an' I'll go to Dark Valley this afternoon and take a look around the place."

"Everybody satisfied?" Jerry asked.

Everybody was.

Sheriff Watson frowned at the list as Jerry drove into the first barnyard. They scattered chickens, ducks, and children—seen blurrily as they scrambled to hide. They remained a few minutes, ostensibly visiting, then went on to the next farm, and the next...

Beyond the last one, on the rise that led to the Carver cabin, Jerry stopped the car. They looked at one another. Watson rubbed his face irritably. "I'm beat, Jerry. There's somethin' here I can't get my hands nor my head onto."

"I know."

The sheriff banged one big hand against the crumpled list. "That butter churn of Mulford's. By God, I saw it! Same brand, same color. Even had scratches around the base where that old cat of his sharpened her claws."

"I know," Jerry said again. "But it had a letter 'Z' cut into it. Worn and weathered, so you'd swear it had been there for years and years."

"That spring-toothed harrow of Zimmerman's."

"Except the one we saw had twelve teeth instead of fifteen. And even the man who made it couldn't find where it had been altered or tampered with."

It had been the same with a score of other things. Each one slightly changed, just different enough to make identification impossible to prove.

Slowly, Jerry said, "Wood gets weathered, metal oxidizes, honest wear is unmistakable. And these all take time, which can't be faked."

His implication hung in the air. If the things had been stolen, then altered to avoid identification, whoever did it had more than human ability.

"Magic," Watson muttered.

"There's ... no ... such ... thing!"

"No, there absolutely ain't."

They sat looking with troubled eyes out over Dark Valley, till Jerry said abruptly, "I'm going on up to see the Carvers."

Watson reached for the door handle. "They don't have no use for me. I'll wait here. I got plenty to think about."

Jerry nodded. The sheriff would be remembering the seeds already sprouting in the kitchen gardens. The leaves that had jumped out on the old fruit trees. The lambs and calves capering in pastures washed with the green of new grass.

The road was smooth, its ditches cleared and deepened. Bright clothing napped on shiny new clotheslines (those were on the list, but how can you identify a roll of wire?). Cordwood was stacked in every yard. New shingles spotted the roofs, the windows held glass again, fresh paint glistened on porches. In the fields, corn and oats and hay were shooting upward....

Jerry found the Carvers waiting for him, their wrinkled old faces tense. They didn't answer his greeting, just jerked their heads. They led him past the cabin, through open brush, and halted at a bare place. Slowly, Jerry sank to his knees.

Except for its size, it could have been a splayed-out cougar print. But it was two feet across, and

pressed more than an inch into the hard, dry soil.

Finally Ed Carver nudged Jerry. The gnarled finger pointed to a twig of wild lilac eight feet off the ground. Caught on the twig were several coarse black hairs, six inches long. Jerry looked from them back to the Carvers, then down at the ground again. He didn't speak. What was there to say?

As they started back toward the cabin, Ed Carver said harshly, "We found that two nights ago."

Jerry brooded for some distance, then he said, "Ned Ames has the best hunting dogs in the country."

They looked at him disgustedly.

"Dammit, you have to do something! Come back to town with me. We'll get some of the boys together, and hunt it down."

They had passed the cabin and reached the car. The Carver brothers looked out over Dark Valley and shook their heads. "We've lived alone," Ed said. "We'll fight alone."

When Jerry told the sheriff about the giant spoor, Watson gave a derisive snort. "Those old coots got bats in their belfries!"

"But I saw the print."

Watson dismissed such evidence with a wave of his hand. "They made it up, probably. Forget it till you see the animal itself. You'll have time to believe it then. We got enough to worry about already."

Jerry couldn't forget it. But there was a kind of reassurance in such hearty skepticism. With each passing minute, that huge print seemed more unreal.

Halfway through the valley they stopped to look at the river. The bed was half full—muddy, debris-laden, with a sheen of dust on the surface. But it was water—wet, tangible, undeniable.

Watson took off his hat and rubbed his head and swore.

"Good afternoon."

They turned. Joe Merklos was smiling at them.

"Hello," Jerry said. Watson just glowered.

Merklos moved beside them and looked down. His brilliant teeth flashed. "Good, is it not?" The guttural words came out flat, one at a time, as though shaped carefully.

"Better than money, in this part of the world." Jerry's eyes narrowed. "Did you know about the water when you bought the valley?"

Merklos smiled again. He was bare-headed, dressed in dark trousers and a loose, short-sleeved blouse. His neck and muscular forearms gleamed bronze in the sunlight. "You like what we do here?" he asked in his deep, hesitant manner.

"You've done wonders," Watson said shortly.

Merklos' smoky eyes held Jerry's. "My people are used to work."

Slowly, significantly, Watson said, "The thing we don't understand is how you managed to bring

so much equipment. The exact things you needed—right down to the last nail."

Merklos' inscrutable gaze swung around. The smile lingered on his face. "We are a careful people. We plan a long way ahead."

Watson opened his mouth for another question—and shut it. Merklos' attention had left them. The man was listening, his head slightly cocked. After a moment he turned. "I am happy to see you making a visit. I hope you come again." He nodded and walked swiftly away.

Wordlessly, Jerry and the sheriff got back in the car. "Could you hear what he was listening to?" Jerry muttered.

"I didn't hear a thing."

"Notice anything else about Dark Valley?"

Watson shook his head.

"No flowers. Not one dog." Jerry's hand tightened on the steering-wheel. "And who has ever gotten a single, clear look at one of the kids?"

Jerry spent a restless night. On the way to his office the next morning he met Watson, talking to a farmer on the courthouse steps.

"Listen to Carson, here," the sheriff said grimly.

Carson's straw hat bobbed as he talked. "I'm waitin' to see the farm adviser. Somethin's gone wrong out at my place on the South Fork. I'm on good bottom land—highest yield in the county. But in the last two, three weeks my corn, my wheat, even my berries has *stopped growin'*!"

Jerry's eyes jumped to Watson.

"Yep," Carson went on, "every single ear o' corn is still a nubbin." He threw out his arms. "And, by God, even my wife's radishes has stood still. Ain't anything on earth that'll slow up a radish."

"How about other stuff? How about eggs?"

"Same thing. Cut right down. Hens lay one in ten now, mebbe. An' my alfalfa has turned a funny gray-green. Even the fruit—"

"What about the river?" Watson broke in. "You still got water in the South Fork?"

"Way down for this time o' year. But we got enough."

Several people had stopped to listen. One of them, a big, tow-headed Swede, burst out excitedly. "Mister, you got the same trouble as my cousin. His crops, they're growin' *backwards*!"

There was more of the same impossible talk. Jerry made an excuse to get away to his office. He sat at his desk and stared out the window.

There wasn't any problem, he tried to tell himself. Anything he could not measure by experience and logic was out. And that had to include giant paw-prints and mysteriously missing objects as well as radishes that wouldn't grow.

Dark Valley was taking on life and freshness. Fact. The South Fork, and portions of the North Fork, seemed to be losing fertility. Fact. But to conclude from this that Dark Valley was gaining at the expense of the others—that was the road no reasonable man could allow himself to take.

From his window, he saw the huge old trees that shaded Wide Bend. They looked suddenly wrong. Weren't they less green, less thick than before? The buildings and streets looked dingier, too. And when did all those broken fences, cracked windows, missing shingles show up...?

Jerry lunged from his chair and strode up and down the room. Then the telephone bell tore through his nerves. He grabbed the instrument.

"Watson. I just wanted to tell you, two boys have been reported missin'."

"No!"

"The Simmons kids. But they've run away before. They'll be back."

Jerry's hand went slowly down. The sheriff's voice echoed hollowly from the lowered receiver. "Well, won't they?"

It was after midnight when the doorbell rang. It didn't wake Jerry—he was sitting in bed, staring into the darkness. There was a pile of books beside him; he knocked them over getting up to answer the door.

Mike Carver stumbled in. He dropped into a chair, panting. Jerry went for a bottle and glass. Carver gulped the drink, then held the tumbler out for another.

"I run all the way down the ridge," he gasped, "till I caught a ride. I figgered you ought to know what happened. It got my brother Ed."

Jerry's lean face hardened.

"Yeah. It was prowlin' around. We went after it, an' shot it."

"But you said ..."

"I said it killed Ed." The old lips tightened. "We gave it one slug through the heart and one through the head. They didn't even slow it down."

"You mean," Jerry asked carefully, "that they didn't have any effect at all?"

Mike nodded. He tipped the glass, wiped his ragged sleeve across his face, and rose.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the cabin."

"Mike, you can't go there!"

"That's where my brother's body is."

"Look," Jerry said evenly, "you can't help him now. Stay here with me, and we'll go up in the morning."

Carver shook his head. "My brother's there at the cabin. I got to set up with him." There was no arguing against that tone of simple and utter finality.

"All right. Wait till I get some clothes on, and I'll drive you back."

A few minutes later they passed through Wide Bend's deserted streets and started out the road to the valley. Carver rolled down his window and spat tobacco juice. "Feller was up to see us," he said gloomily. "Told us people was losin' things all over the county—includin' two kids. Said

crops has shrunk. Said water in the forks is way down."

"He's right."

"Said people were gettin' the idea Dark Valley was livin' off the rest of the land. Feedin' on it, like a parasite. How crazy you think that is?"

Slowly, Jerry said, "I'm not sure it's crazy at all."

Carver brooded. "I shot that thing tonight. Should 'a been dead if a critter ever was. Then I seen it go after Ed."

"You know what all this means, don't you? Witchcraft. Something people haven't believed in for hundreds of years."

"Mebbe they better get started again."

They were nearing the divide that overlooked Dark Valley. "Mike, I've been reading up on it, for hours. Everything I could find. And it fits. It's been the hardest struggle I ever had—admitting such a thing existed. But it was either acknowledge that or lose my mind."

The night seemed colder as they started downward. Unaccountably, the headlights dimmed.

"Somethin' watchin' us," Carver said suddenly, as the car bored on through the thick and swirling darkness.

Jerry nodded. His hands gripped the wheel until the knuckles were white. Sweat began to glisten on his forehead.

The headlights picked out a dark spot, that looked like a yawning hole. Jerry stamped on the brake, skidded slightly. But there was only a shallow rut, deformed by shadows. He pressed the accelerator ... and the motor died. Hurriedly, he jabbed the starter button, pumped the gas pedal. Again he pushed it, and again, as the lights faded from the drain on the battery.

"What's the matter?" Carver's old voice was thin.

"Flooded, maybe. Better let her sit a minute."

The darkness pressed close around them, shifted and danced. Chill air moved over their faces.

"Mike."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't that animal come after, you, too?"

Carver breathed heavily for a moment. Then he took something from his shirt pocket and held it out. Jerry's fingers moved over it. A crucifix.

"My mother give it to me a long time ago."

"That's probably the only thing that could have saved you. From what I read, they can't stand a cross. And silver's got something to do with it." Jerry reached into his own pocket. "Feel this."

Carver's rough hand fumbled over the object.

"Made it this evening. Took a cold chisel and hammer to an old silver tray. Not fancy, but it was all I had."

"You done that, before I came and told you about Ed?"

Jerry nodded grimly. "I'm convinced we're up against something terrible. And believe me, Mike, I'm scared."

The shadows drew closer, thicker still. They seemed charged with menace.

With a catch in his voice, Jerry said, "Maybe now's the time to try it."

Carver's head jerked around.

"I mean smash Merklos and his tribe for good."

"How?"

"With fire, and the silver crosses."

After a long pause, Carver said, "What about Ed?"

"We'll get to your cabin. We're not far from the first farm. We can go right up the valley. If it works."

"And if it don't?"

"We might end up like Ed."

Carver turned and spat out the window. "I don't want to, but I will."

They got out of the car, into the humming darkness. They took gunny sacks and rags from the trunk compartment and soaked them in oil from the crankcase. They wired a bundle on the extension handle of the jack, and another on the radio aerial rod which Jerry unscrewed.

They tried to start the car once more, without success. So they turned off the lights and left it. With one torch burning, they started up the road for the first gate.

Dark Valley's shadowy legions closed in. There was a rustling and a whispering all around them. There were shiny glints where none ought to be. There was an overwhelming feeling that something frightful waited—just beyond the edge of darkness.

"The gate," Carver said hoarsely.

Jerry unclenched his jaws and lit the second torch. The flare-up reflected from the blank windows ahead.

"What about the wimmen? What about the kids?"

Jerry spoke jerkily, his eyes on the house. "There aren't any kids. What we saw was something else. The women are the same as the men, the same as the thing that killed Ed. Don't worry about them. Hold the cross in front of you, and for God's sake hang onto it!"

The darkness swelled like a living thing. It swayed and clutched at the torches. Somewhere a high whining began, like a keening wind.

There were sudden sounds from the house—bangings and scramblings. Carver faltered.

"On!" Jerry said savagely, and began to run. He touched his home-made crucifix to the wood of the porch, and with the other hand brought the torch down. Blue sparks jumped out at him. The dry wood hissed and blazed up furiously.

A frightful scream rang out. There was the tinkle of breaking glass. Formless figures thudded to the ground and scuttled away on all fours, headed up the valley.

Within minutes the farmhouse was a mass of roaring flame. Jerry backed away from it. He saw Carver outlined against the glowing barn, which he had fired. They came together and hurried back to the road. There they stopped to watch the pillar of flame and smoke, boiling upward.

"It worked," Carver said.

Jerry nodded. "We can't kill them. But we can drive them out."

"Wimmen and kids," Carver said bitterly. "Did you see them things that came out?"

"Yes." Jerry was drenched in sweat and the torch trembled in his hand. "Let's get on to the next one, Mike."

They went on to the neighboring farm, and to the one after that, while the shadows pulsed in an unholy turmoil. The night swarmed with malignant invisible forces, that tried to blow the flame from their torches, that flayed them with the naked sword of fear. There were hideous shapes, half-seen. There were waves of terror like a physical shock. There were puffs of ordure, so rank they gagged.

But they plodded through it, faces set, sweating and agonized. Till, halfway up the valley *it* came....

Carver knew it first. His leathery face paled; his hands fumbled instinctively for the gun he was not carrying.

Then Jerry said hoarsely, "Mike, did you hear that?"

Carver nodded dumbly.

Clearly, now, came the sound of those huge paws, padding first on one side of them, then the other. Jerry clutched his cross till the rough edges bit deep into his hand.

It seemed that his very life was bound up with the torch that now smoked and struggled to burn. If its feeble flame went out, that meant extinction, black and final.

Then he became aware that Carver was no longer beside him. He whirled. Ten yards behind, the other was bending down, scrabbling frantically in the dust.

"I dropped it!" he shouted. "I can't find it!"

Jerry tried to reach him, but the other thing was quicker. A whirlpool of blackness engulfed Carver, blotted him out. Then Jerry was confronted by an unbelievable sight—a great, savage head, towering over him, its eyes glowing redly and foam creaming over gigantic, open jaws.

Desperately, he shoved his cross straight at it. The thing spat and roared deafeningly. The thud of its paws shook the ground. It lashed out with monstrous claws that sliced his skin. Half-stunned, Jerry kept lunging toward it, till finally his cross touched its coarse hide. There was a crackle of blue flame, a shriek that split the night, and the thing disintegrated in roiling clouds of bitter smoke.

Jerry swayed. The hand that held the cross was numb and tingling. Like an automaton, he turned, went back, and knelt beside the crumpled shape that had been Mike Carver. Then he rose, still carrying the feebly flickering torch, and plodded on....

They met him as he was coming back—Watson, Henderson, Caruso, Miller, Hammond and the rest. They had flashlights and guns and tear gas, and their faces were grim and desperate.

"We found your car," they said. "We could see the flames from Wide Bend. What in hell has been going on?"

Jerry stared at them. He dropped the dead torch. One hand tried to put the cross back into his pocket. His face was black, his hair singed, his side wet with blood.

"It's all over," he croaked. "They're gone. Dark Valley is free again."

Big Joe Merklos was the first of them. He appeared at the Rocky Mountain Trust Company one day, cash in hand. The charm of him, his flashing smile, the easy strength in his big body, were persuasive recommendations. But the Company's appraisal scarcely got that far. Wasn't he the first buyer they had ever had for that suburban real-estate fiasco, Hidden Acres...?