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THE PARTRIDGE FAMILY #11

WHO'S THAT LAUGHING IN THE GRAVE?

Fiendish peril for rock's first family!



by VANCE STANTON

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Dicki

Hilbar

GRAVE BUSINESS

This couldn't be happening. It had to be a dream. A nightmare.

There Keith and Danny Partridge were, each tied to the top of a coffin, in a crypt lit only by flickering torches.

Around them were the robed and hooded figures of the devil-worshipping coven. And standing above Keith and Danny was the supreme leader of the evil band, the infamous witch, Theodora Moon.

But both boys knew this was no dream as they heard Theodora chant loud and clear:

"Icky-ticky-ricky-roo . . . tonight we shall have the death of two!"

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- #2 The Haunted Hall by Michael Avallone
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- #4 The Ghost of Graveyard Hill by Paul Fairman
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**THE
PARTRIDGE
FAMILY #11:**

**WHO'S THAT
LAUGHING IN THE GRAVE?**

BY VANCE STANTON



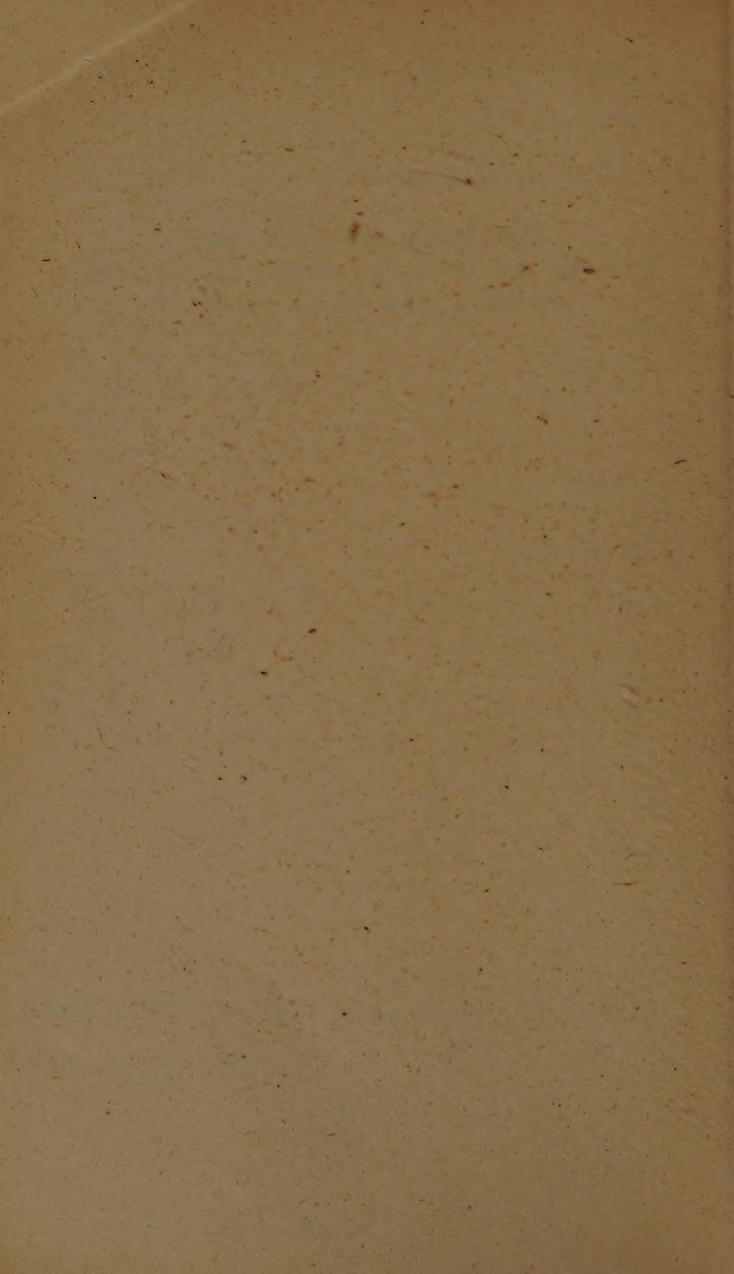
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NEW YORK, N.Y.**

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For Arlene and Billie Fox,
an extra bell for their wedding day, and for
Eddie, a hope for the future.



The Cast of Characters

THE PARTRIDGE

FAMILY Shirley, Keith, Laurie,
Danny, Christopher, Tracy
and Simone the dog.

REUBEN KINKAID their manager.

THEODORA MOON the Witch of Meadowville.

BROTHER GEORGE her devilish disciple.

PETER JANVILLE a handsome lawyer.

CHIEF JIGGS a policeman.

TOLLINGS KARLOKA ... a playboy.

OLD MAN KARLOKA ... the buried dead.

THE ALL-DESTROYING

HEX a monster.

NICHOLAS a black cat.

and many other things that go bump in the night!

FOR ALL
PARTRIDGE FAMILY
FANS—

□ Since it has been my good fortune to be the one to tell you of the numerous and adventurous events which have happened to the Partridge Family, I am sure you will be interested in the story that follows this Introduction. There have been many great and incredible mysteries since the beginning of Man's History. Fantastic tales and enigmas such as the ghost ship, *Maria Celeste*, which was found sailing in the middle of the ocean with none of its crew or passengers on board; the Abominable Snowman, who still stalks the icy wastes of Tibet; the man who fell a thousand feet and walked away from the accident without so much as a sprained ankle; and, of course, the truly amazing ghost story about the troopship which was torpedoed in mid-Atlantic and yet docked in France, and whose battalion went on to win a stirring battle in the First World War. You see, the troopship had actually *sunk* in the icy waters of the ocean and, but well—the story I am about to tell you about the Partridge Family and

the quiet cemetery on the outskirts of Meadowville is rather like that. You may refuse to believe it, though Keith, Danny, Laurie, Christopher, and Tracy—yes, and even Mom Partridge—all swear it truly happened! As does reliable old Reuben Kinkaid.

But, perhaps, the truth is in the telling.

Read and see for yourself.

Pleasant dreams!

Vance Stanton
99 Goblin Grove
Wraith, New Jersey

1. THE CEMETERY LAUGHS

“HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa.”

□ The frightening mirth, like a goblin’s giggling moan, rose in a piercing wail over the darkened environs of the Meadowville cemetery. Queerly and weirdly, the sounds seemed to roll and rise and drop and then grow louder again. A huge, round, white moon shone down on ghostly headstones and tombstones, and every crypt and vault showed starkly in the pale and eerie light. The ghoulish laughter, disappearing as suddenly as it had come, left Danny Partridge trembling and afraid.

He huddled closer to his big brother, Keith Partridge, his eyes as big as silver dollars. The freckles of his face were dancing.

“W-w-wh-what’s that, *what’s that*, Keith?”

“You and your shortcuts,” Keith snapped, but even he looked a trifle pale in the moonlight. “If we’d taken Mill Road like we should have, we’d practically be home by now—but, oh, no! You’re the genius who

insisted we climb that low wall back there, and now we don't even know how to get out of this place—"

"It is a shortcut," Danny insisted, but his voice was almost a whimper. "In the daytime, I always follow this route. But—"

"It's dark now, and you're not sure, right? Right! You nitwit. Find the path, will you, and let's get out of here. I don't want to go back the way we came. I'm not even sure we'd get it straight in the dark like this—"

"But what was that funny sound, Keith? Like somebody laughing—"

"The wind, that's all. Plays funny tricks out here, what with all the open space and the trees and all. It wasn't any ghost, if that's what you mean."

"It *sounded* like a ghost."

"Sure it did, and you're also the guy who said turn right at the Potter headstone, bear left until you hit the path, and then it was only going to be about a hundred yards to the other side of this graveyard. Well, we turned right at the Potter headstone, we bore left, and now all I can see is miles and miles of tombstones and no wall surrounding this place, and isn't that a kick in the head? We're lost in the middle of a cemetery, you knothed, and all because I listened to you."

"Gee, Keith. Don't lose your cool. I'll get you out of this predicament. I'm sure I can get us out of here. It's just that that weird laughing sound rattled me a little. I'm all right now."

"You'd better be," Keith replied grimly. "Or it won't be laughing sounds that'll bother you. Mom will rattle us both good if we don't get home by midnight. I let you talk me into taking you on my birdwatching expedition into Grove Wood, and it'll be on my head if I don't bring you back at a reasonable time. You're

still a young squirt, you know, and you need your sleep. It's different with us older fellows."

"Big deal," scoffed Danny. "Didn't I spot that yellow-bellied sapsucker for you? And that first robin of summer?"

"Yes," Keith said very patiently, still anxiously scanning the surrounding gravestone and tombstones jutting like grey silent sentinels against the inky black sky. If it weren't for the illumination of the moon, the cemetery would have been in total darkness. "And there is no such thing as the first robin of summer. That was a plain old oriole, Danny. Pretty, but fairly common to us birdwatchers."

"All the same. I carried your field glasses and our picnic boxes and made the fire and filled our canteens—"

"Okay, okay. You were a regular helper. Now let's get out of here, huh? It's cold and getting later by the minute."

Both boys struck off in the direction they had been heading. They had only halted because of Keith's growing suspicion that they were getting nowhere and merely walking around in circles. That was surprising, because from what he remembered of the cemetery in all the times he had raced by on his motorcycle, it simply wasn't all that big. Yet here they were, all turned around, unable to find the wall that led to the opposite side of the place, a point which would have them out on the dirt road no more than twenty yards from the main highway, which in turn would have put them within twenty minutes walking distance of home. It was all very peculiar.

And then that cackling, gobbling laughter had come.

From seemingly out of nowhere. Like a noise in a bad dream.

Nightmare kid stuff, that's all. Something to scare girls with!

As they stumbled along in the gloom, feeling the soft and flattened damp earth beneath their boots (for it had rained the day before and the ground was still loose and clinging), Keith wanted to kick himself for not bringing a flashlight. Yet, he had been so sure they'd be home long before this time. He couldn't have counted on Danny's shortcut winding them up like lost hikers in the woods. Danny was usually so sharp about things. Like the way he was about finances and business angles and the way he kept old Reuben Kin-kaid, the manager of the Partridge Family, on his toes all the time. Well, win a few, lose a few.

But this was getting to resemble a tight spot! A real squeaker.

They seemed to be wandering through a field of tombstones and headstones and massive, shadowy crypts, all crowding each other in the ghostly moonlight. There was a light, cooling wind fanning out over the ground, plucking at their clothes and faces and hair with clutching fingers. The muddy ooze beneath their hiking boots pulled, making each step a little difficult. It was like tracking through a dismal swamp. Danny stumbled once and bumped right into his taller brother, almost spilling him forward on his face. Keith recovered his balance and disgustedly shook his smaller brother off. "Watch where you're going, Daniel Boone. You little old pathfinder, you! You trying to break my ankle or something?"

"You're not exactly an Eagle Scout either, Keith Partridge," Danny sniffed. "And besides, it was an accident. I tripped."

"I could have guessed that. And you're the one that lost us, I didn't lose us—"

"We are *not* lost. We are merely sidetracked tem-

Both boys, in spite of themselves, practically hugged each other—a slightly comical arrangement, because little Danny was loaded down with a pair of field glasses dangling by a leather strap about his neck, a canvas pack on his back, and a cumbersome coonskin cap with ear flaps, and Keith was carrying the canteens slung together on their chains about his throat and holding in his right hand a stout length of hickory limb he had picked up along the way for protection. As the boys bumped together, the canteens rattled like tambourines, for they were made of metal, and the field glasses clinked. The sudden confusion of noises, however, could not drown out that weird laughter, floating eerily over the stone and tree-filled environs of the Meadowville burial grounds. The bizarre mirth had not ended.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa.

“Ohhhhhhhhh,” Danny quavered, rooted to where he stood, trying to hide behind Keith. “I don’t like that sound—” He pawed at his brother.

“Me, neither,” Keith whispered. “Listen, though—”

The laughter was bubbling now, making gobbling noises, rising up and down the scale like an insane melody. Musicians though they were, and very fine ones, the Partridge boys were in no mood for music appreciation.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

“Danny?” Keith whispered, gently pulling his brother’s hands away.

“Yes, Keith?” Danny whispered back.

“You feel like running?”

“Uh huh!”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

That was all the incentive either brother needed for instant action.

And the sudden silence was somehow more horrifying than before.

The wind wailed softly over the burial grounds.

A branch of a tree clattered sharply against a headstone.

The moon remained hidden.

And Keith and Danny unconsciously slackened their running pace, for they were out of breath now, and it was difficult to breathe properly.

Or even to think straight!

It seemed now that there never had been a weird, insane laugh. That it had all been their imagination, something in their minds, for surely there was no such thing as a crazy laugh in a cemetery. Suddenly they felt a trifle foolish, a little cowardly. Even though they were still somewhat lost in the Meadowville burial lots and still nowhere near to knowing just exactly how to get out of the darned spooky spot.

But before Keith and Danny could stare at each other sheepishly or compare opinions and notes, the next thing that happened clearly vindicated their judgment to run in the first place. All too abruptly, they came face-to-face with stark horror.

And neither of them had ever seen anything quite like it in their young lives. Not even in a monster movie on television! No way!

On the darkened path before them, even as they strained to catch their wind and pull their faltering nerves together, it appeared.

It.

A thing.

A phantom.

Or a spook.

Or a nameless horror from beneath the very earth under their feet!

Whatever it was, it froze the blood in the veins and made their two hearts thump as loudly as bongo drums. Their eyes bugged out of their heads, their jaws dropped open, their entire set of senses stopped working properly, and the black world of the cemetery with the moon yet hiding behind some clouds in the sky became an altogether terrifying house of horrors.

Keith cried out as if a snake had suddenly slithered up his leg.

Danny started to scream, but it choked off in his throat, as if he had been grabbed about the neck by two rough hands.

Standing on the path before them, where it had loomed like a ghostly vapor springing up into view—was it only the darkened shadows of nearby tombstones and headstones and vaults that made it seem so large?—was *The Thing!*

There was nothing else you could call it.

Large and black and shadowy in form and silhouette, with two large, burning eyes that shone like dazzling beacons and great tentacles, too many to count, all moving and unfolding and reaching out and slime-covered, as if overflowing the very path itself, so that the markers and stones bordering the path were engulfed too. A genuine blob of horror.

Keith and Danny Partridge could not move.

They were as immobile as statues in the very center of the narrow pathway. Two terribly frightened human beings.

Their private worlds had gone mad. Flipped over into insanity.

This was something that could not be!

And more heart-stopping and blood-chilling than anything was the simple, unavoidable fact that *The*

2. MEANWHILE BACK AT
THE NEST

□ Fortunately for Keith and Danny Partridge, no one was truly worried about them back home in the pleasant, homey, frame house with its measured lawn, white picket fence, and family garage where the group rehearsed for all the playing engagements which took them to all parts of the United States. Even the multi-colored school bus, which they had renovated into a private and personal conveyance to announce their comings and goings on the highways of the country, stood silently in the driveway. There was no immediate need for the Partridge Family to go on tour to fulfill a singing date at one of the many night clubs and schools which were happy to have their entertaining services. Reuben Kinkaid, their bustling and shrewd business manager, had decided the Family had deserved a well-earned rest from their musical triumphs. So, with nothing pending or important, each and every member of the Partridge brood was doing his own thing.

This also included bright and beautiful Mom—Shirley Partridge.

And the reason that no one was aware of Keith and Danny being a little overdue from their pilgrimage to watch for birds in Grove Wood, was that Shirley Partridge was doing something that evening that she infrequently did: in a word, she was out on a date for a change.

So she wasn't home at approximately eleven o'clock, to stare at the banjo-shaped timepiece on the kitchen wall, to worry and fret over the delayed appearance of her two biggest boys. Son Keith and Son Danny had been expected before midnight, at any rate, but unknown to them, one Peter Janville, an old school-chum of Mom's from her college days, had phoned that afternoon asking if the lovely mother of the famous clan would take in a movie that night at the Meadowville Drive-in. It seemed the latest Paul Newman film was showing, and since Shirley Partridge had always liked the blue eyes and the acting of Paul Newman, she readily consented to go. Apart from that, Peter Janville was a tall and very handsome bachelor, about forty years of age, a corporation lawyer with an excellent income yearly, and once Laurie Partridge got that out of her mother, when she had hung up the kitchen phone, Laurie insisted that Mom go on the date and that she would take care of little Christopher and littler Tracy until Keith and Danny got home.

Yes, the June night was balmy and romantic, so Shirley, feeling very much like dressing up and being feminine again, did so. She put on a very charming pale-blue dress with a high-necked collar that was most becoming to her trim figure, creamy complexion, blonde hair, and blue eyes.

Laurie watched with full approval. Though she was

still in her late teens, she loved to see Mom primping and making herself special for a man again. After all, it had been so long ago that Dad died, and Mom had done nothing but make sacrifices and stick her neck out for all the kids. It was high time she was thinking of herself again. It was the womanly thing to do. And very, very relevant, as far as Laurie was concerned.

Woman's Liberation and the proper place of the female in all matters and things were very close to the heart of Laurie Partridge. It figured.

As Shirley applied the finishing touches to her makeup in the oval mirror that was the center of her own bedroom, Laurie smiled at her reflection in the polished glass. Mom looked elegant. Any man would be glad to have such a woman. And smart, too—the way a woman ought to be.

"Mom, you look super." There was daughterly pride in Laurie's voice.

"Why, thank you, honey." Compliments were always welcome, too.

"You use your noodle, now. Don't play dumb tonight."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it's supposed to mean. We've discussed this often enough. This Mr. Janville asks you to marry him, you just say yes. Don't stop to think about us. We won't stand in the way of your happiness."

"Laurie! Peter Janville just wants to take me to a movie. I'm sure he doesn't plan on asking me to be his wife. After all—"

"That's what you say. From what you've told me, he's never been married, and he's getting on in years, right? Forty—you said. Well, I think he's probably come to the realization that he can't make it through life without the love of a good woman. So what does

such a man do? He phones my mother, from out of the blue, mind you—a woman he hasn't seen in like five years—and he wants to take you to see Paul Newman! Two to one, he's in a marrying mood, Mom, I'll bet on it. A Drive-in, besides. You'll be alone in the car!"

"You save your money," Shirley sighed affectionately, and turned away from the mirror to ready her small black handbag for the evening. "And, my dear daughter, forty is *not* getting on in years, the way you seem to think. Most men are just coming into the full maturity of their lives at that time. But you young ones, you think—oh, well. Just don't count on my coming home with a proposal, huh? I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"Just the same," Laurie flung her head back so that her long lovely brown hair fell in two folds past her face, "I can't think of any other woman with five children that looks as young and vital and well—just plain super—the way you do."

"Loyalty," Shirley sighed again, looking at her daughter fondly. "I love you too. Now, remember. You are the Mom for tonight. Chris is not to stay up to watch that horror movie, no matter how much he fusses. Remember the nightmare he had after watching *We Want Your Blood*, and just make sure Tracy brushes her teeth tonight. She's been careless about that, so warn her about cavities, okay? And when the Rover Boys get home, you feed them if they're still hungry. They ought to be back before twelve. And, for heaven's sake, don't let Simone chew up any more of my bedroom slippers. She bites one more pair, and I'll over-salt her Alpo!"

Laurie grinned. "I'll watch it, Mom. You just go have a good time and *you* remember what *I* said."

"I'll try. What are you going to do tonight, by the way?"

"Oh, crack a few books I brought home from the library. Those big ones on ecology and the plight of the Red Man in America—"

Shirley nodded, wistfully. "Real relevant, huh?"

"The most relevant. Beats bird-watching, doesn't it?"

"Now, Laurie. No more wild quarreling with Keith. Understood? You have to let people do their own thing, right? Well, birdwatching is his big interest now, and that's all there's to it."

"I know, I know," Laurie shrugged her shoulders, "but it strikes me that with all the real troubles and concerns in this world, my own big brother should involve himself with slightly more important things. After all, he's a symbol for so many young people, isn't he? They look up to him, they respect him, they love him. I just think he ought to set a more impressive example for them. Birdwatching. Hah!"

"It's a big world, honey," Shirley Partridge said sagely. "You'll understand someday that there is room enough in it for all things. Even something as trivial to you as Keith watching birds."

"Never," Laurie insisted stoutly. "It's kid stuff. I wouldn't mind if he was trying to save the birds or was interested in the species survival program. But no! Just likes looking for them, that's all. What a waste it all is. I wish you'd talk to him, Mom."

"Later. I promise. Right now all I can think of is Peter Janville and Paul Newman. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough." Laurie smiled. "Go have a good time. I'll watch the fort and put the chicks to bed."

"Partridges, you mean," Shirley laughed, and exited from the room, walking carefully down the carpeted stairway to await Peter Janville's arrival. Laurie went

to her own room to fetch one of the library books to read in the living room while Christopher and Tracy finished up their after-dinner baths. She could hear Christopher, whose turn it was to bathe first, across the hall, splashing noisily and merrily in the water. Little Tracy was visible through the open door of her cozy bedroom, dressing one of her numerous dolls. Tracy was talking to the wide-eyed doll in her usual patter of motherly scolding and affection: "Now, be a good little fun doll and I'll sing you a song. You be bad and I'll put you to bed—"

The time on the banjo-clock in the kitchen, and every clock in the household for that matter, was almost seven-thirty.

Simone was nowhere to be seen. She was probably curled up under a chair or in a corner somewhere, sleeping as usual. Simone just had to be one of the laziest canines in the dog world.

Thus was the Partridge domicile that evening, with all the Partridges, if not present, at least accounted for. The way it was supposed to be. The way it generally was, all things considered.

Not counting trouble-making times, that is.

Shirley Partridge was going to the movies with Peter Janville, an old school-chum, who just might or might not have more than a Paul Newman movie on his bachelorial mind. Laurie certainly hoped he was looking for a good woman to be his wife. After all, Mom shouldn't go through what was the rest of her life as an old maid, should she?

Laurie herself was going to read, for long hours, a very interesting and educational tome for one who was fond of the subject matter, a work called *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. She was also going to make sure that Simone made no further slipper raids in Mom's bedroom.

Christopher would retire early, in a huff, because he would not be allowed to watch that night's Horror Movie Festival showing, *The Monster Who Pulverized Pomona*. He would read a comic book instead.

Tracy would brush her teeth, not once but twice, and also brush the teeth of one of her very favorite dolls. After all, she didn't want her favorite doll to get any cavities either! So she brushed and brushed.

It was an evening when not a Partridge would touch a musical instrument, as was their usual habit. The guitar, the drums, the tambourines, the recording equipment, and all its accessories would remain silent.

Reuben Kinkaid had instructed the Family to take a vacation.

So they were taking it, with a vengeance.

As for Keith and Danny Partridge; well, they were supposed to be heading back home from a full day's outing in Grove Wood, where they had gone to watch for birds. Complete with field glasses, picnic boxes, canteens, and various pieces of hiking equipment.

Only they had taken a shortcut through Meadowville cemetery on their way back from the forested woods and somehow got lost and blundered into the strangest experience of their lives.

It was like Shirley Partridge always said.

Things just seemed to happen to the Partridge Family.

The crazier the things, the more likely they were to happen.

Especially to Keith Partridge and whomever was with him.

Where that angel trod, not even the Devil would have wanted to go.

If anybody ever thought of asking him!

"My, don't we look nice."

"Why, thank you, Peter. I must say you're looking very fit yourself. And I would have known you anywhere."

"It's been a long time, Shirley. People change."

"Not you. You always were the smartest and the—well, the nicest fellow I ever met in college. Peter Janville, Most Likely to Succeed."

"For that, you will get an extra bag of popcorn at the Drive-in."

"Mmmm. Paul Newman and popcorn. This must be my night."

Peter Janville had a fine little blue sportscar, and Shirley climbed into her bucket seat, feeling all the romantic nonsense which Laurie had put into her head. After all, Peter was tall, very handsome, successful, and every inch the perfect catch. Even though she wasn't looking for a husband, she had to admit the man was an attractive fellow, as he always had been. She still remembered the first dance she had had with him in the college gymnasium. He'd been a good dancer, too. Especially on waltzes.

"What time does the movie start, Peter?"

"Eight-fifteen, according to the local newspaper. We should be there in ten minutes or so."

"That's fine. I hate to walk in on the middle of a movie—"

"Walk?" he echoed, laughing. "This is a Drive-in, remember?"

As the car pulled out of the shrouded driveway, nosing onto the quiet and serene suburban road, the moon ducked behind a bank of dark clouds. Shirley Partridge smiled contentedly to herself and snuggled down into her bucket seat. Peter Janville was solid and protective by her side. Mom Partridge was feeling secure and happy, filled with blissful serenity.

Laurie was watching over things, and now, at last, she could have an evening to herself with an altogether nice guy from her past.

Everything looked just fine. Bright, rosy red.

If she could have been transported, a couple of hours later, to the gloomy insides of the Meadowville cemetery, she might not have been so calm and cheerful. Her heart would have dropped to her shoes.

If she could have heard the laughing, gobbling chuckle, she might not have been able to keep her own nerves. She might have fainted.

If she had seen the crawling, slithering apparition on that pathway in the heart of the cemetery—well, there is no telling what she might have felt. Or done. She just might have passed out a second time!

Not even Peter Janville, Paul Newman, blue eyes, or popcorn could have offset the terror and horror of those awful moments in the dark.

For her two sons, Keith and Danny, it was proving a night to remember. From the word *Go!*

To the word *boo!*

None of their wildest nightmares could match what was happening to them now. Never in a million years.

This was the living end, man.

Way out.

Like out of sight!

3. THE VAULT KEEPERS

□ Whatever the spell is which causes two frightened boys to be suddenly incapable of running, there is also another instinct which just as suddenly explodes and dissolves that temporary motionlessness and dynamites them into action, luckily for all badly terrified people.

Such was the case with Keith and Danny Partridge as the horrible apparition spread out and slithered toward them like a black fog.

There was precious little light to see by, for the moon was still behind a cloud, and only the burning eyes of *The Thing* provided any sort of illumination. Yet Keith and Danny cared not about that. All they wanted with all their hearts and souls was to stay out of the awesome, disgusting tentacles of the monster which advanced steadily toward them. In but a few seconds more, *The Thing* would have reached them.

Keith and Danny no longer allowed any grass to grow under their boots. They turned, as quickly as spinning, revolving doors, and *ran*.

Perhaps even faster than when they had first heard that crazy, echoing laughter in the dark and gloomy night.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

There was no denying the sound now. This was no figment of their imaginations. No optical illusion brought on by ice cream and pickles or the deviled egg sandwiches they had wolfed down that afternoon as a hiking dinner. No, sir! This was the Real McCoy!

They'd seen the monster, they'd heard it laugh. In fact, even now the gobbling maniacal laughter was right at their very heels. It was as if *The Thing* could just reach out its slimy arms and touch them . . .

That, more than anything, put wings on the heels of Keith and Danny Partridge. They literally flew along the darkened path, heedless of everything but the driving impulse to get out of the Meadowville cemetery as fast as the Law of Physics and their own natural speed allowed.

HaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

Keith galloped, the wind whistling out of his aching chest.

Danny pumped along, just behind him, making grand time for such a little guy. All the equipment he was toting made funny, odd sounds.

And no matter how hard and fast they ran, they sensed the hot breath of *The Thing* at their very backs, heard the insane cackling laughter thundering in their eardrums. Their terror was bigger than the Empire State Building, their horror as large as Disneyland.

Only this wasn't Disneyland.

This was more like a trip into the Devil's Playground!

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

Jeepers, *The Thing* sounded like it was gaining on them—

The dark cemetery, with the stones and larger vaults, gleaming pale and grey, seemed impossible to get out of. They just couldn't seem to locate the pathway leading to the iron gates that led into the grounds. The entrance—exit which all mourners and friends had to use when they visited the Meadowville cemetery.

Keith's heart seemed about to burst with panic.

Danny, right behind him, was wheezing like a puffing locomotive.

And then it was too late altogether. Much much too late.

The Thing reached out and *touched* them. Each of them, in turn.

Keith felt an icy, cold-as-a-funeral sensation up and down his spine. His legs suddenly refused to run anymore. From his throat erupted a terrified shout, loud enough to wake the dead. As for Danny, the identical emotion must have extended to him. He let out a whelping bawl of "*Lemme go!*" and then stopped saying anything at all. Paralyzed with fear but plucky nevertheless, Keith spun around to confront the monster and do battle.

Though his heart was in his mouth and his mind frozen with horror, he intended to go down swinging. He brought the stout hickory limb up and was ready to jab and poke with it, at whatever the shapeless monster was.

In whirling about to defend Danny and see the enemy face to face, he met with the unexpected again. And it was another incredible sight, piling amazement on amazement. And fear upon fear.

Now the big, round, white moon had abruptly come out from behind a wall of night clouds.

Ghostly, silvery light bathed the path directly before Keith Partridge. And if *The Thing* had dumfounded him, what he now saw, in the very few seconds left to him, was truly fantastic.

He saw little Danny, lost in a moving, furious confusion of tall and cloaked figures. Like the hooded riders of some dreaded nighttime band of beings who are not of the normal, everyday world. Danny was disappearing down into their midst, black shrouded bodies overwhelming him. In a split moment of explosive violence, he lost sight of Danny. For a full second, he couldn't think or organize his confused senses. There was no sign of *The Thing*, either, and that dreadful cackling laughter had ceased—but before he could be thankful for that, the cloaked, hooded horde swarmed all over him. He tried to defend himself by striking out with the stout club, but something or someone knocked it from his hand as though it were a harmless feather. And then there was no more time left for anything.

Great, heavy, frightening weights bore him to the soft earth. Black folds and angles, which seemed to be strong arms and legs, pinioned him as if he were a baby. He tried to kick out and punch but he was engulfed. He could smell a tangy, acrid odor of some kind, like burning sulphur or coal, but that impression went by swiftly, to be replaced by others, far more demoralizing. He couldn't see now at all. The moon had vanished once more. He felt as if a heavy black mass was closing over him, burying him under the very earth itself. Hopelessly, he tried to gather all the muscles in his throat to scream. No one had spoken, he could barely hear any sounds but fierce breathing, small grunts of noise, and almost-hissing garments. As if the folds of black cloaks and attire were protesting all the activity of whoever wore them. Before he pan-

icked altogether, Keith Partridge opened his mouth wide and brought a scream up from the pit of his stomach.

It was then that he felt, as if a tree had suddenly toppled over and crashed down upon him, the sickening impact of something on the top of his head. The result was as instantaneous and effective as a blackout of all the lights of a city. Or a state. Or a country. Or the world.

The shadows, the moon, the headstones, the crypts, the panic, the terror, *The Thing*, and the cemetery all vanished in the twinkling of an eye.

Or a star.

Keith Partridge saw a lot of stars, just the same.

All the stars there are in the Milky Way and all the stars there are when brought on by a hard blow to the head. A knockout punch.

He blacked out after that.

Nor could he hear the gobbling, laughing, giggling mirth that floated eerily over the shrouded landscape of the Meadowville cemetery.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

Somebody was laughing hysterically about something.

Somebody or *some thing* . . .

But Keith and Danny Partridge could not hear that laughter.

In a rather fashionable and yet mysterious apartment in the outer suburbs of Meadowville that same night, not very long after the odd circumstances which befell Keith and Danny Partridge, a telephone in the bedroom rang. The room was in darkness, so that the jangling sound of the phone sounded like an eerie summons. Soon, on the eighth ring of the unseen instrument, a light clicked on and someone lifted the

receiver off its black-as-a-beetle stand. A weird blue light shone in the room, and for a second anyone observing would have seen a rather curious spectacle. A bed of four enormous posters and adornments. Gargoyle heads and satanic figures, carved and somehow very frightening in the blue glow of a bedlamp, glittered as if alive. And then a curious hand, all long-fingered and impossibly bony, drew the phone receiver to a hump of very bluish pillow on which reclined a head whose face and general appearance was not readily discernible. The room itself, dimly revealed in the pale-blue glare of the lamp, showed strange symbols and drawings painted on the walls. From the ceiling dangled mobiles quietly swirling and moving. At the end of each strand of black wire seemed to dangle frogs and toads and spiders.

In actuality, the suspended mobiles *were* frogs and toads and spiders. All stuffed and lifelike, thanks to the art of taxidermy. For this bedroom was truly the private retreat of Madame Theodora Moon, the only living *witch* in all Meadowville. She had just been awakened from a deep sleep of evil, for her thoughts were mostly black and demonic, at exactly the witching hour. Midnight. Twelve o'clock, when all witches and their faithful followers prefer to do their dark and awful deeds. Madame Theodora Moon was a disciple of Satan. She believed in the Devil, and she had come to Meadowville to live and ply her fiendish hobby, with the Meadowville Police Department and Chamber of Commerce blissfully unaware of her presence in town. If they had known, they would have been very unhappy indeed.

For the Madame, that incredible old woman of whom so little was known, had left a trail of terror and evil behind her in every city and town in which she had chosen to live during her sixty-odd years of

life. Odd, indeed. It was this same Madame who had caused the water supply in the tiny hamlet of Wallace, Ohio, to go bad; the lady who had made the entire lighting system of Dudsworth, Illinois, go out for a full eight hours; the female demon who had caused the sleepy village of Hayworth, New Mexico, to shudder under the stormy violence of a hurricane in the middle of winter! Oh, yes. The Madame was a unique and unholy terror.

And now, in Meadowville, the phone rang in her bedroom in the dead watches of the night, and she sat upright against her blue pillows and spoke into the black mouthpiece in her bony hand. Spoke strangely.

"Speak," she commanded, in a low voice that sounded like two sheets of sandpaper being rubbed together. "I am here."

At the familiar sound of her unforgettable voice, a lithe and black body suddenly shot up from the floor, landing on the bed. A very large and yellow-eyed black cat stalked across the blankets and only stopped when it could lie down and snuggle against the Madame's prominent knees, which thrust up toward the ceiling. The animal purred and mewed as his mistress' free hand petted the fuzzy curve of its back. From the ceiling, the mobiles seemed to stir into life with fresh vigor. The frogs, toads, and spiders spun and danced as if *breathing*.

"Madame, my Empress of Darkness," a man's voice, both humble and yet somehow imposingly positive and cold, came from the other end of the line. "You must come. There is an alienating power in our midst tonight. The Coven cannot continue unless you assist us."

"I am tired, George," the Madame said harshly. "Can you not handle the affair once without my help? I deliberately did not attend tonight because I desired

to see how you would conduct things without me. What has happened, George, that you feel you must call me at the first sign of difficulty? Really, George. If you intend to be my partner in evil—”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” George cut in. “Two intruders came tonight. Stumbling into our meeting place. You see how it is.”

Madame Moon, whose face was in profile, revealing a jagged-nosed, hooked-chinned, thick-lipped silhouette that simply cried out for a tall conical hat, suddenly stiffened. Her entire figure might have been made of stone. And her rasping, harsh voice rose an octave higher.

“You fool! Don’t be humorous with me. No one would be in the cemetery after sunset. No one! That is precisely why I chose the place for the meetings of the Meadowville Moon Coven. I don’t like humorous associates, George. So be warned! Just as I do not like those foolish mortals who do not believe in the existence of witches.”

“I believe in you, Madame Moon. You know that. Why else would I have given up my membership in the Christmas Club at my bank? No, no—this is important, I tell you. And something must be done about it, and right away. We had to subdue the intruders, and I almost released *The All-Destroying Hex* on them!” George’s voice was now a hushed whisper.

At that, Madame Moon emitted such a startled yelp that the black cat sprang from the protection of her knees and scuttled under the bed to hide. The Madame’s black moods bode ill for people and animals alike.

“You *what?*” she thundered in an awesome tone. “You are never to use *The All-Destroying Hex* unless I so command! Never, do you hear? Oh, you fool! I

see I must come, after all. I shall be there as soon as I can. And, pray tell me, George. Who are these intruders?"

There was a long pause, as if the unseen George were too embarrassed to reply. The Madame barked into the transmitter again, and George hurried his response. "Two boys. A teenager and a smaller one. They must be brothers or at least related."

"Why do you say that, George?"

"The smaller one was carrying all their equipment."

"I see. What kind of equipment?"

"Hiking materials. Field packs, binoculars, canteens. They must have returned from an excursion somewhere and come through the cemetery as a shortcut out to Mill Road and the Highway. It's the only possible reason for their presence in the place. Don't you agree?"

The Madame chose to ignore that theory.

"And where are they now, George?"

"In the meeting place. The Karloka Crypt. We must do something, Madame. The Coven is fearful of discovery. If the police come looking for these boys, then that's the end of us—"

"Quiet, you fool. And say no more. I shall be there within the next half-hour. And above all, maintain control of the Coven. They must not panic or act hastily. I'll hold you responsible for any further irregularities, George. Understand me. Should you fail—it is I who will turn *The All-Destroying Hex* on you!"

"No, Madame! Please!" Stark terror sounded from George's end of the wire. "I won't fail you. Only please don't—"

Madame Theodora Moon hung up the phone with a dramatic click of finality. The conversation was con-

cluded as far as she was concerned, and she knew, with her usual knowledge of such things and such men, that the hapless George would be putty in her wicked fingers from that moment forward. The gullible George was like all the rest of the mortals. A real frightened fool. A terrified human, afraid of his own shadow.

But more afraid than anything else of the dark shadow of Madame Moon, the Witch of Meadowville. And Vicinity.

All of which jibed very nicely with Madame Theodora Moon's opinion of her own unholy self. She wanted everyone to be afraid of her. Both friend and foe alike. Disciple as well as enemy. Fear was the weapon that fed the power that held the reins. The bony hands that controlled the wheel. The black brain which engineered all dark plots and sinister plans and programs. By Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness would have been proud of her.

She was a true daughter of the Devil!

The Madame rose from the bed in the bluish eerie light of the room and stretched her long arms sleepily. The silhouette she cast on the wall with this movement of her tall, angular body was like the outline of bat's wings. From beneath the bed, the black cat slowly pattered, its back arched and frightened. A low moan of sound escaped the feline. The Madame chuckled in a low raspy whisper and stared down at the animal. The Madame's coal-black eyes seemed to gleam as mysteriously and weirdly as the yellow orbs of the beast.

"It is time to leave once more, Nicholas. Would you like to come with me again? Out into the night on the business of the Master?"

The enormous cat purred happily, eyes glowing.

Madame Theodora Moon nodded, her witch-

profile showing stark and memorable on the wall behind her grotesque shape.

The mobiles of stuffed animals and insects spun and danced as if the breath of the Madame's words had revitalized them all.

The cabalistic and arcane symbols and designs—crescents, stars, zodiacal drawings, and foreign letters—shone from the four walls, tinged with the blue light of the bedlamp. Like a pale-blue fire, the room seemed to have a flickering movement of its own. Indeed, a *personality*.

And why not?

It was the private bedroom of a witch, wasn't it?

A real live witch!

"*Icky-ticky-ricky-roo*," the Madame's voice rose in a moaning, humming chant that made all the mobiles and blue lights of the room flutter and whirl as she swiftly dressed herself in a black garment hanging in the depths of the room closet. "*I'll bring you evil and witchcraft too.*"

The weird incantation, ancient and unknown to outsiders, hung in the quiet walls of the blue room like a misty vapor of dread.

Nicholas the black cat purred, and his pink tongue flashed, licking out at the empty air, as his mistress dressed in swift motions.

The Madame was going out once more.

And taking him along, as usual.

Nicholas liked that.

Very much.

It meant all sorts of dark and wicked pleasures!

For black cats as well as witches.

4. TERROR'S NIGHT OUT

□ The movie was so fine, the popcorn so good, and the company she was keeping so pleasant and attractive that Shirley Partridge felt about ten years younger. So much younger and more girlish, in fact, that when Peter Janville suggested they go for a moonlight drive after the movie, she readily accepted. Peter had been a perfect gentleman all evening, and not even the narrow confines of the bucket seats of the sportscar had made him forget his manners. So engrossed had they both become in the exciting plot of the Paul Newman film, they had hardly any time at all to catch up on old times. So the moonlight drive seemed like a fine opportunity to do so. Particularly since Mom Partridge had no qualms about the children.

Laurie was in charge, and she could see to things. As usual.

Besides, the night was still young—it was only about midnight—and Peter Janville was still a *very* handsome man, all things considered.

Deep in her mind was the echo of Laurie's words about marriage and being an old maid and not waiting any more for the children to get any older. Perhaps Laurie was right. After all, she *wasn't* getting any younger, and it *would* be nice to have a man around the house again. Keith was fine and all that, but there did come a time when a woman needs someone besides her own children to love. Still, she also had to admit to herself, she had never met anyone since her husband died who had interested her *that* much. Though that didn't really matter, if the children really did need a father. A second parent to help them through Life.

After all, nearly everybody else had *two* parents—why not the Partridges, for heaven's sakes? They were just as good as anybody else.

It did seem only fair. When you faced the facts, that is.

Her mood was such that when Peter Janville suddenly turned off the highway and took the short, winding, country road into Lovers Lane, she did not protest. The rather large clump of maplewoods and spruces, which formed a cozy bower of concealment and privacy from the passing vehicles on the main highway, had long been a romantic spot for young and old lovers alike. Not even the Meadowville Police ever disturbed anyone there. Many a courtship and loving marriage of Meadowville citizens had had its start here. Which was very peculiar, really. For not more than five hundred yards from the last maplewood tree rose the high ground of the Meadowville cemetery—a fact of life which never seemed to disturb the romantic souls who came to Lovers Lane. No one gave a thought to graveyard ghosts or superstitions or stuff like that. It was just such a peaceful spot, all in all.

Who would think of Death when they had Romance on their minds?

Or at least, that was the only possible explanation for the popularity of the quiet little haven in the woods off the main roadway.

Aside from romantic larks, that was to say.

Peter Janville slowed the Mustang between a shadowy maplewood and a pale spruce and turned the ignition off. He flicked the lights out, too. Shirley settled back against her seat and sighed, smiling.

It was such a lovely night. A full moon was in view, riding right over the trees, big and round and white, sailing just above the high crest of earth where the cemetery was, off in the distance. She could just about make out the low stone wall running around the grounds.

The June night was delicious: a cooling wind, a pleasant aura of tranquility, hardly a sound in the air. And no thoughts of the children. No dishes to wash, clothes to mend, or errands to perform—nothing to do but be herself and enjoy the company of a handsome man. She could make out the dim outlines of other vehicles parked among the trees, but they might have been merely large rocks or mounds of earth. It was as if she and Peter Janville had the whole place to themselves. And she didn't once wonder if Christopher had seen the horror movie, if Tracy had brushed her teeth, or exactly *what* time Keith and Danny had returned from their hike through the woods. She was in that sort of carefree, reckless mood.

"Thanks for the movie, Peter. It was just fine."

"You're welcome, Shirley. I thought it was kind of fun too."

"And now," she said with a mock-serious tone in her voice, "may I ask what brought you back to Mead-

owville all of a sudden? Thought you were out in New York being a great lawyer and all that."

"I was. And I am. In fact, it's all that which has brought me back to this lovely little town. I was glad of one thing, though. It did give me an opportunity to see you again."

It wasn't the compliment that made her turn in her seat to look at him, as nice as *that* was; it was the abrupt, sober, calm and seriousness of his voice. He sounded almost *troubled*. Like a man with a problem.

"Peter, is there something wrong?"

His face was to her in profile. Handsome, clean-cut, and very compelling. Now he, in turn, faced her at the odd tone of her question.

"Nothing I can't handle, Shirley. But it does put a damper on our date, such as it is. I'm afraid I brought you here for ulterior motives. But I'm sure you'll understand, when I tell you."

"I beg your pardon?" That shot out of her like a maidenly protest.

His smile and accompanying laugh was too good-natured and infectious to maintain an air of injured pride and vanity before. She laughed too, but she touched his arm and earnestly said, "All right, so you didn't bring me to Lovers Lane to hold my hand and maybe try to kiss me. Okay. I'm not offended, though I suppose I should be. But why on earth did we come here, Peter? It seems to be some big secret of some kind."

"It won't be any longer," he admitted, "for I'm going to reveal it to you right now. I wanted to wait until we got out here, you see."

"So reveal it. I haven't been told a good secret since Danny confessed to me that he doesn't like guns at all. Though he knows that all boys are supposed to. He is definitely anti-violence as a way of life."

"Good for him." Peter Janville's eyes glittered strangely in the dim interior of the car. Suddenly, he raised an arm and pointed in the direction of the cemetery. "The Meadowville cemetery is my secret, Shirley. It's why I've come back to town. Quite a story in that."

"I'll just bet there is," Shirley nodded, a bit amazed. "Tell me more. I don't know any secrets about cemeteries, now that I think of it."

"No, I'm serious," Peter Janville said briskly. "As you know, I'm with a legal firm in New York. Name on the front door and everything. Well, one of our sidelines is handling the estates of terribly rich people. And one of our biggest clients just happens to be the Karloka family tree. Does that give you any kind of a clue?"

"Karloka?" Shirley echoed, brain flying. "Why, of course! Old Man Karloka—the Meadowville millionaire—silver or oil or some such. He's buried in the Meadowville cemetery. I remember now. He died ten years ago, and he was like ninety-two years old or something."

"It was eleven years ago, and he was ninety-four, and it was most definitely silver. The biggest silver lode in the state of Nevada, not counting the Comstock Lode of the last century. But you're beginning to get the idea. Since I come from Meadowville originally and am one of the brightest lights of the firm of Hays, Dawson, Schneider and Janville, I was elected to come down here and play investigator."

"Investigator," Shirley said slowly. "Which means exactly what?"

Peter Janville shook his head, almost sadly.

"There seems to be one sole, surviving heir to the Karloka millions. A rather brainless young playboy nephew named Tollings. Tollings Karloka. The old

man was buried here in Meadowville because it was the place where he was born before he went out to Nevada to discover that silver. Well, at any rate, the crypt is here. An enormous vault, I understand. Have you seen it at all, Shirley?" The query was low-toned and very urgent.

"Why, yes. Last year. When we were in the cemetery. A school-friend of Danny's had died of pneumonia, and we all attended the funeral. At the time, I remember remarking to Laurie how big and lavish it was compared to everything else in the cemetery. The vault, I mean. It's incredible."

"Yes, I've seen photos of it in our office. And that's why I am here. The firm has reason to believe that the Karloka mausoleum is being put to uses other than the ones usually prescribed for mausoleums."

"Come again, Peter? I don't get the drift of that."

"Shirley, Tollings Karloka is a silly young man given to wild and stupid gestures. We have every reason to believe that he gave the keys to that vault to someone who has no business having them. In short, this nephew of the old man, who should keep the keys to himself and permit no outsider to have them or know about them, has turned them over to a very peculiar woman. In fact, an almost legendary sort of person who has the power, it seems, to make even strong men weak and do as she wants them to. In the case of Tollings Karloka, it was even simpler than that. Like taking candy from a baby. Anyhow, I am here to see that the vault has not been disturbed in any way. And to make certain that this woman turns the key back to my firm, as legal guardians of the Karloka Estate."

Shirley Partridge could only blink, shake her head, and try not to smile or say anything foolish. But it was all too much for her. He'd been going too fast,

and the nice romantic June night had been spoiled somehow by a story which, for all its fascination and entertaining mystery, was still a little gruesome, when you got right down to it. *Brrrrrrrr!*

"Peter Janville, you've a perfectly fiendish mind. You know that? You've completely spoiled my mood. I'll have no peace of mind until you explain what you're talking about. *Who* would want the keys to a mausoleum? And for *what* reason, in the name of heaven? And why would a nephew give the keys to his uncle's vault to anyone at all?"

Peter Janville looked very grim indeed before he replied to all her blurted queries. And when he did, his tone was nearly angry, for she had somehow hurt his feelings. She did not know how.

"A woman named Theodora Moon, for one thing," he said very coldly, as though he were a lawyer in a courtroom, attacking a hostile witness. "And for the express purpose of using that mausoleum as a meeting place for her very own devilish affairs. She's a self-professed *witch*, and she lives right here in Meadowville. As for your third and last question, she is quite capable of taking over a man's mind, especially someone like young Tollings, and making him do what she wants him to do."

"But, but—that means—" Shirley couldn't continue.

"Yes," Peter Janville said, "I've come here in the dead of night because I want to go up to that cemetery, look around, and see for myself. I have a flashlight in the car, and I hope I have a woman with me who has the amount of nerve needed to go prowling there after dark. It couldn't be done in the daytime, for that is when nothing could go on in there. You understand? Now, are you game, Shirley, or should I take you home?"

Shirley Partridge swallowed nervously, trying to keep her heart from climbing up into her mouth. Suddenly, the high rising ground of the old cemetery with its encircling wall didn't seem very appetizing at all. To say the very least! And Peter Janville had come up with his secret and his surprise like twin bolts from out of the blue. Like twin spooks!

The idea!

Cemetery-prowling at night. With a man, yet.

At her age! What would everybody think of her?

And she the famous mother of a very famous family of six who were the talk of the Show Business world. A great and very renowned musical act.

What old *Variety*, the Show Biz Bible, called a SMASH.

"Peter," she gulped nervously, keeping her heart down. "I'm your girl. Let's go."

He smiled at her in the gloom of the car interior.

With affection. And added respect.

And a newer, deeper, more thrilling kind of admiration.

"I've always liked you. You know that, Shirley. But right now, I think you're the greatest woman in the world. Bar none."

"I'll shiver to that," Shirley agreed, smiling in spite of her sudden fear, "and take me with you before I lose my nerve and change my mind. This sure will beat going to a drive-in movie, you know."

"Trust in me. I'll take care of you."

"Oh, I will. Don't worry about that! But, Peter—"

"Yes, Shirley?"

"That woman you mentioned. Theodora Moon, was it? She can't be a witch. Can she? I mean everybody knows there's no such thing as a witch. That's all legend and fairy tales and make-believe." She stared at him very closely as they both got out of the car in the

stillness of the dark woods. "Don't tell me an intelligent man like you believes in that stuff?"

Peter Janville was tall and oddly statuesque in the darkness, next to her side, and his answer, when it came, was quietly sincere.

And fatalistically chilling. And it altogether dampened her ardor.

"I'll let you know if we find her broomstick, Shirley."

Shirley Partridge felt an icy chill along her spine.

"You're a great help, you are. You know that, Peter?"

Together, they pushed out into the shadowy night, toward the distant horizon which held the rising silhouette of the Meadowville cemetery. The moon, just disappearing behind a formation of clouds, limned it briefly in its glare, and then the entire scene vanished for a few minutes, leaving only a vague, blurred outline. A phantom.

Peter Janville took Shirley Partridge gently by the elbow and steered her through the maze of closely-bunched trees, taking care to stay out of the sight of any parked vehicles in the area. And spies?

Lovers Lane, thought Shirley Partridge, unhappily.
Hab! And double *Hab!*

It was getting more and more like a Halloween Night with each passing second. And the only trouble was, what were they really in for?

Trick?

Or treat?

Time alone would tell.

Time and—terror.

Back at the white frame house which all of Meadowville knew as the home of their local celebrities (and world-famous, too!), whom everyone knew and

loved as the Partridge Family, everything was just about as Shirley Partridge desired. Except for a few important items.

Christopher had gone to sleep at a reasonable hour, and so had little Tracy. Christopher had grown unaccountably sleepy, forgotten all about TV, and gone to bed. Tracy had curled up with her doll and crooned it and herself to sleep. As for older Laurie, the darnedest thing had happened to her. Something she hadn't done in the longest time.

She had drowsed over her Indian book and finally dropped off altogether, dozing with her head slumped over the arm of her chair in the living room. Not even the interesting pages of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* had kept her eyelids from closing. She had yawned so many times, she had nearly dislocated her pretty jaw.

And Simone, that furry brown-and-white rascal, had stolen right back into Mom Partridge's bedroom, found a pair of fluffy white pom-pomed slippers, and proceeded to gnaw them to a frazzle. Having a ball!

Something which was going to make Shirley Partridge very unhappy when she returned home from her evening out with Mr. Peter Janville.

But the main thing about Laurie's falling fast asleep in the big stuffed chair in the living room was that she was not awake to fret and worry and wonder about the lateness of the time. As she might have.

The clocks in the house, including the banjo-shaped one in the kitchen, were already well past midnight. And Keith and Danny were not home yet. In fact, they were at least an hour overdue. A very big hour.

So because there was no one awake in the Partridge domicile and Mom herself was still out on the town somewhere, there was also no one to raise a hue and cry about the missing boys.

As they could have, would have, or should have.

It's like that with families, all over the world.

Ask any father—or mother. Especially Shirley Partridge.

After midnight is just no time for a teenage boy and his little brother to be off gallivanting somewhere. No fit time at all.

Forgetfulness causing lateness or just sheer mischievousness is one thing. But genuine trouble is certainly another. Is it ever!

Like blundering around in a dark cemetery until you stumble smack into the sort of devilish doings you're only supposed to read about in books or see in spooky movies. Yessirree, Bob!

What was happening to Keith and Danny Partridge in the cemetery no more than twenty minutes from the place they called home shouldn't have happened to a dog.

No, not even Simone, as bad as she was being.

But not even a pair of pretty bedroom slippers could compare to the awful scene taking place in the huge, ornate, stone tomb above the earth, known as the Karloka Vault. The largest mausoleum in the cemetery.

There, in the dread shadows, was being enacted a scene from the pit itself. A very bad scene, indeed. A monstrous nightmare of terror.

Something you only wanted to *see* in a horror movie.

Not be a part of!

Unless you were stoned right out of your skull.

5. THE CREEPY CRYPT

□ There was no light in the tomb. No moon, no electricity, not even a matchstick blazing. That is, there wasn't a flicker of illumination at all, until someone fired up something, and then the steady and weird glow of a candle showed awful things. . . . It was only then that the terrible predicament into which they had gotten themselves, came home to Keith and Danny Partridge. It was like a blow to the brain, a punch in the stomach, and the flickering yellow candlelight revealed all their nightmares and wildest dreams come vividly to life.

For they had regained consciousness in a total darkness. A curtain of blackness in which their first concerns were for the rather severe bumps on their noggins. Each had received a knockout rap on the back of their heads from short heavy wooden clubs wielded by their phantom attackers, whoever they might be. Neither Keith or Danny had any memory or knowledge of being carried into this tomb. Actu-

ally, as their eyes fluttered and opened, accompanied by the aching agony of their bruised heads, they would not have been able to say they were still on the cemetery grounds. They were only aware of their own discomfort and the thick and heavy gloom and a curious scent forging into their nostrils like the sharp tang of something burning. But then the candlelight flared, and the place they were in spun into focus like a movie screen coming on, and in no time at all they could see and hear and worry about exactly the sort of mess they were in. Not even the sudden realization that their own hands were tied behind their backs and that they were sitting on a stone floor of some kind could quite measure up to the horror before them. When both boys tried to cry out, staring at each other in mute horror of the awesome spectacle they had seen and were now sharing, they were unable to make a sound beyond a moan. And a gurgling in their frozen throats. Tight swaths of cloth were wrapped about their mouths, tied in the back like a bunny's ears. And more than that, to either side of their huddled forms stood silent, ominous, cloaked figures whose hooded heads concealed faces. As the candle flame steadied, casting a full gleam about their surroundings, the entire tableau became a sight never to be forgotten.

Keith wanted to look at Danny, and Danny wanted to look at Keith, but something about the unearthly setting was so compelling, they were hypnotized with their own fear. They could not take their eyes away.

It drove every other thought out of their minds.

The night. The cemetery. The crawling, hideous blob. Being late going home. Mom worrying—*everything!* Including that cackling laughter.

This was truly the most horrible thing in all the world.

Keith Partridge had once taken a book out of the Meadowville Library on Park Street in town. *Dante's Inferno*, which was a long story in a kind of prose-poetry about a journey into Hades by two men. The book had been filled with hundreds of illustrations by a great artist named Gustave Dore, all of them showing his concept of what Hell might really look like and be like. What Keith and Danny were now seeing was too awfully close to those drawings for comfort. Too darn close!

The scene in this place was right out of a Dore illustration.

The burning candle, a tall yellow taper about a foot high, rested on a rounded silver tray, and this in turn was placed directly atop a long box of some kind that seemed about six feet long and two feet deep; its massiveness and indistinct formation was hidden in the darkness below the candle glare. The heavy box was upraised from the stone floor, supported by a stanchion at either end which was probably made of stone, too. In dawning horror, his breath rasping against the cloth wrapped over his mouth, Keith realized he was staring at nothing less than a coffin!

Or a mummy case or a huge casket that dead people lay in!

In rapid seconds, he understood where he and Danny were.

There were no windows in the tomb-like confines of their prison. Only small grilles of ironwork, without glass, placed in each wall. Now that he looked and tried to see, he caught sight of a random star, he thought. But he only imagined that, for now he could clearly see the dark material, draped like curtains, hanging down over the grillwork apertures to blot out the light from within, so that no telltale illumination might show outside this place. That single fact

more than anything else, more than even the ghastly situation they were in, made the blood in his body run cold, for it was more than a hint that their captors were up to no good.

Their captors—*talk about ghouls!*

It was impossible to tell how many of them there actually were. For as large as the tomb was, or vault or whatever, standing all about the huge long box stood massed figures. The peaked hoods which hid their faces made them seem like faceless phantoms from another world. They stood, ringed shoulder to shoulder, all around the perimeter of the massive coffin, as if staring down at the burning candle. No one was doing any talking, and the silence this made for was as frightening as anything else that had happened and was happening. It was like sitting and watching a play of some kind, for the candlelight flung tall, peaked shadows on the four walls of the tomb. The strong odor which had stung the nostrils of Keith and Danny hung in the atmosphere of the crowded place. It was a queer scent, like the burning of coal or sulphur. Or something unknown. And still none of the cloaked, quietly assembled figures spoke or moved so much as an inch. Not even the two tall figures to either side of Keith and Danny, standing like silent human bookends of some kind.

If they were human, at all. It was so hard to say for sure.

There was also no sound from without the walls of the vault. It was as if the world were sleeping, as if nothing were stirring. Not even the hoot of an owl or the thunder of a jet plane in the sky, which surely ought to have been heard if one were zooming overhead. But, no, there was no noise, and there was no great mental work needed for Keith to suddenly know where they truly were. No other place in his

lifetime would have fitted the description and character of this one. Not for a minute.

It just had to be *that* vault, the largest one in the Meadowville cemetery. He had seen it last year when he had attended that funeral for Danny's classmate, the poor kid who had died of pneumonia. Sure, he'd remembered how impressed Mom and Laurie had been with its obvious richness and great size, compared to all the lesser and more humble crypts and mausoleums on the burial grounds. The Kar—Kar?—the Karloka Vault! Sure, that was it! Old Miser Karloka, the Meadowville kids had called him, because he'd never donated a single penny to building any playgrounds or schools or ballfields of any kind. A very rich millionaire whom nobody had ever exactly loved—and now his vault was a meeting place for some kind of weird bunch of ghouls. Boy, that figured!

But now there was no more time to think about that.

Something was happening.

Something different. Something very very strange.

It wasn't anything he could detect all at once, but even in his frightened state he could sense a *change* in the atmosphere of the room. He strained against his bonds, peering toward the yellow light of the candle, trying to see into the hidden faces of the cloaked mob standing in a rectangular sort of circle about the enormous stone coffin.

He was so preoccupied with his own thoughts and fears, he had barely glanced at Danny. But he could well understand how the hooded horde might have thoroughly terrified his little brother. Even a practical kid like Danny, with his good head for business and financial matters, must be finding this all pretty hard to take. A terrifying pill to swallow.

For unless he was really crazy and just plain hard-headed, Keith Partridge just didn't believe in ghosts. In spite of that horrible *thing* that had crawled along behind them on the dark pathway, he was now convinced that he and Danny had stumbled into a secret, evil gang of some kind. That was bad, all right, very bad. No telling just how bad it was—but Holy Toledo—at least they weren't ghosts! It wasn't the Supernatural or ESP or any kind of thing like that. It just couldn't be!

And the curious, sudden change in the atmosphere of the chamber, the subtle stiffening all the hooded figures seemed to be undergoing an attitude of *listening*, of *waiting for something*. Or *someone* . . .

All at once, Keith Partridge had the answer to his question.

An answer he regretted wanting. And obtaining.

For suddenly, one of the cowed figures raised both arms, and the hands that suddenly exposed themselves, extending outward from the folds of black material, were ebony-gloved and claw-like. Bones covered over!

And the figure spoke, in a low yet clearly ringing voice, whose words seemed to resound off the four walls of the vault, like skeleton bones clicking together in a little wooden box. Hollowly and coldly.

"She comes! She comes! Oh, brothers and sisters of the Coven, look to the face of The Moon! She is needed, and she comes—"

There was a chorus of appreciative murmurs and sighs and mutters, and it rolled from the hooded assemblage like a hymn of devotion. As if all tied together on the same invisible string, all the hoods turned and faced the far wall of the vault. There, against the gloom and the pale reflection of faint candlelight, Keith caught his first sight of the door that

led into the vault. It was an enormous dark square set in stone walls. Keith held his breath in spite of the gag across his lips, his mind racing, sharing the eagerness of everyone in that candlelighted vault for the appearance of whoever the "*brothers and sisters of the Coven*" were expecting.

He heard a low whimper from Danny's direction.

It sounded like a frog eating a marshmallow. Or choking on an insect.

But there was no time to see to Danny Partridge.

Things were happening now, moving very swiftly.

The heavy, dark door was suddenly moving inward. Slowly, gently.

Soundlessly, without a squeak of noise, as if well-oiled hinges or smoothly linked bolts governed its movement, the portal swept back, and into the vault, literally entering like a masked intruder, came the most incredible woman that Keith Partridge had ever set his eyes on.

Outside of *The Wizard Of Oz* movie, that is. Ye Gods!

There was just no one or nothing else to compare her to than the Wicked Witch of the West. The only thing missing was the broomstick, and Keith couldn't be too sure of that, either. For the woman was extremely tall, far taller than the movie witch, and it seemed as if she could have hidden two broomsticks anywhere about her person. As well as play basketball!

He had never seen Madame Theodora Moon before, but he was never, ever going to forget her. Because she came into the vault crouching, bobbing, and then seeming to float, both long arms fluttering and moving about like winged birds of some unknown species. And that face! It was a caricature.

Even as the massed, cloaked figures, to a man and

woman, went down to their shrouded knees, lowering their hoods in homage of some kind, the horrendous woman paused behind the glare of the candle and stared through it with burning, coal-black eyes, toward Keith and Danny. Stared eerily.

And the great hooked beak of a nose quivered. And snorted.

The triangular-shaped face, with pointed chin, pointed ears, and sharp, fierce lines of mouth and eyebrows and cheekbones might have been a Halloween mask in a Meadowville store window in October. A real scary mask.

Only this was June, and Madame Theodora Moon, alas, was very, very real indeed. And in the flesh, as horrible and gruesome as Evil incarnate can be. Her teeth shone like great yellow fangs, glinting, crooked, and already damp with saliva at the expectation of human sacrifices.

Two human sacrifices. Two flesh-and-blood mortals.

In that awful, fixed moment, as her burning eyes blazed across the top of the stone coffin, seeming to penetrate far down into the souls of Keith and Danny Partridge, the world stood still. Came to a dead stop.

The world of fun and games and imagination, and toys and chocolate sodas and good music and warm sunshine and picnics and ice cream and the schoolroom, the playground, and the home all took a back seat to Horror.

And Madame Theodora Moon boomed her dreadful introduction. Her verdict.

“So! You seek to come among us and learn our secrets, dare you? Well, my fine fellows—we know how to deal with intruders and spies! I can promise you that! No one can witness a Coven and live—no one who does not belong to the profane order of

things. Oh, we shall have a merry time this night, my children of the Moon. Tonight, we will be able to sacrifice the blood of the lamb—two lambs, I should say.” The gobbling cackling laughter that now emanated from her mouth was just like that insane laughter of before. But this time, so close, so apparent its source, the mirth fairly bombarded the confines of the vault. “*Icky-ticky-ricky-roo tonight we shall have the death of two!*”

The chant, the lyrical, rhythmical outpouring of jargon and melody, was picked up and repeated in chorus by the hooded group all around the vault. “*Icky-ticky-ricky-roo.*” The voices rose in a blend of harmony and some kind of wild elation. Keith Partridge closed his eyes and shuddered. He just couldn’t bear to stare directly into Madame Moon’s eyes one second longer. As he supposed Danny was unable to. The woman was a frightening ogre come to life, leaping from the dark corners of the mind.

“. . . *tonight we shall have the death of two!*”

It was like a pronouncement of execution.

The terrible words echoed in the vault. Beating a maddening refrain in Keith Partridge’s musically schooled mind. He hated the sound of those words, dreaded the ugly meaning of them. The threat of them.

He was afraid, now. Really afraid.

Old Witch Face looked exactly like the sort of monster who kept her promises and pledges. And the chanted mumbo-jumbo wordage of those screwy words *icky-ticky-ricky-roo . . .* sounded like the Funeral March in Looney Tunes tempo. But that didn’t make them any less scary.

Or funny, either.

Holy Cow!

These crazy people sounded like they wanted to

kill him and Danny! Just for walking around in a cemetery after dark—

How could there be anything funny in that?

The vast patch of greyness and darkness lying between Lovers Lane and the encircling wall bordering the Meadowville cemetery was a lot longer than Shirley Partridge had thought. Even with Peter Janville steering her through the unfamiliar area, skirting tall trees until they both emerged on the sloping rise of earth which encompassed the grounds, she felt as if she had come a mile. Her flat shoes fortunately were a big help. High heels would have been murder. But even with all that, she just couldn't rid herself of a feeling that she was doing something both foolish and dangerous, despite Peter Janville's confidence and his assurance that they were not. Still, cemetery-prowling wasn't exactly an admirable social sport. Even as a hobby, it would have been very questionable. My, yes!

When they reached the low wall, Peter Janville's figure was a shadow again, for the moon had once more disappeared behind the clouds.

Shirley stayed close to him, mindful of the darkness all about and an almost death-like silence pervading the night. It was always a peculiar feeling, knowing that so many dead people were so close, lying peacefully in their coffins and pine boxes beneath the earth on which she and Peter Janville were about to trespass. It was a chilling thought, and it made her pause before Peter Janville turned to assist her over the low stone wall which was no more than several feet high. Beyond it, she could make out the pale dull slabs of gravemarkers and headstones.

"Peter," she whispered, trying to keep fear out of her voice.

"Getting cold feet, Shirley?" His tone was gentle, but chiding.

"You said it. I can't help feeling what we're doing is illegal. And well—just not very nice."

"I have an authorization from the Meadowville Police," he whispered back. "They know what I'm trying to do. In fact, they are going to cooperate with me when I have some substantial evidence. Okay?"

"Okay. But why can't we go through the front gates—"

"Locked, of course. The cemetery closes at dusk each day. Now, come on. I don't want to keep you out too long, you know. The sooner we get all this done, the better. Want your children to worry about you?"

"My children," Shirley Partridge said grimly, "had all better be safely tucked in their beds, dreaming what all little boys and girls dream about. Or else. I'm a permissive enough mother, but I draw the line on late hours and their not getting enough sleep."

Peter Janville took her hand, drew her toward the low wall, and then stepped up himself, waiting to draw her up when she was ready.

"You're a wonder, all right, Shirley. A real worrier for all your smooth talk and courage. Okay, step up, now, and it's just a short drop to the other side of the wall. Ready, get set—"

Shirley Partridge raised a foot, steadied herself on the stone parapet, and braced to swing upward and over, pulled by Peter Janville's firm hand. She never followed through on the movement. She halted midway.

Nor did Peter Janville tug at her. He too checked his effort.

For both of them had been rendered as motionless

as statues by the strangest, most terrifying sound in all creation. A horrifying noise.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa.

The laughter, floating, mocking, seemingly coming from the very depths of the darkened cemetery, danced toward them in the gloom.

The same wild mirth which had been the very start of all the troubles that evening for Keith and Danny Partridge. The signal for great danger.

Goblin, ghoul laughter. Fiendish, ghastly humor.

As if the Dead were enjoying some arcane, private joke.

At the expense of the Living.

They certainly seemed to be!

6. THE WICKED WITCH
OF MEADOWVILLE

□ "Brother George," Madame Theodora Moon said in her dry and crackling voice, "bring them to the table! The time has come to prepare their souls for the Infinite! We must delay no longer. The Hour of Darkness is here, and we must make use of it."

The tall old crone, more spectral and horrible than ever in her dark dress, with her long black hair hanging down the sides of her triangular face, clapped both hands. The sound this gesture made was like the cracking of knuckles, and it sent another icy chill racing down Keith Partridge's spine. But far worse than that was the sudden activity that Madame Moon's command triggered. It was as if the silent throng of cloaked minions standing in solemn conclave about the heavy coffin had only needed her voice to spur them into movement.

Rough hands seized Keith, hauling him to his feet. Danny was plucked up from the stone floor as if he were a bag of feathers. The two sentinels who had

been guarding both boys were very strong men. Or women—or whatever they were. Panic filled Keith's heart, for now all these strange and terrible people in the vault were behaving and working like mindless automatons. Robots doing the bidding of the weird old witch woman standing behind the long stone box. Science-fiction slaves.

Madame Moon had reached down and picked up the long yellow candle by its tray base, which had a ringed handle for such a purpose. The baleful illumination moved, casting more shadows against the wall behind her, and the top of the heavy coffin was suddenly in gloom. Beside Madame Moon's side stood a tall, cowed figure. And this was Brother George, the follower who had summoned Madame Moon to the vault with a phone call. While Keith and Danny had been unconscious, Brother George had used the telephone in the caretaker's cottage at the far end of the cemetery. The caretaker was a man named Finlay who fell asleep every night after dusk, not knowing that the cup of coffee he usually had with his quiet dinner was heavily drugged. Brother George had made the call without any trouble at all.

Keith tried to struggle, to kick out against the hooded figures pushing him to the stone table. Even little Danny, knowing the danger they were both in now was far more real than gibbering laughter and awful, ugly *things* crawling about the cemetery, was putting up a fierce tussle. But it was to no avail. Both boys were soon placed side by side atop the massive box. The lid was solid marble, and it was cold. Keith could feel the icy touch of it all the way through his light summer clothes. Suddenly and quite surprisingly, the gags stuffing their mouths were pulled out, and the sudden influx of air into their lungs was a little dizzying. But it was stale, confined air, for all of that,

and in the bargain their arms were being pressed down by awesome figures on either side of the coffin, figures which turned their peaked hoods in the direction of Madame Moon for further instructions and commands. Whatever those might be.

Silence had fallen over the group again. And the atmosphere of the terrible vault was broken only by Keith's racked breathing, as he tried to find his voice again, and Danny's tormented gasping.

And the horrible old lady, the woman who was more witch than human, drew closer to the coffin, holding aloft the blazing candle. Its yellow glare encircled her head like a halo. Only she was no angel. She would never be that! The hooked nose, the pendulous lips, the pointed chin, and the burning eyes were more satanic than ever. Truly devilish.

When she reached the side of the heavy box on which the boys lay in trembling, still-disbelieving terror, a crooked smile made her face more ugly than ever. She stared down at Keith and Danny. The candle hissed suddenly, and the noise was like a jar to the nerves. Danny yelped, and Keith tried to summon up enough strength in his lungs for a real loud yell.

"No, my boy," Madame Moon cackled dryly, seeing the intent in his young, determined face and pointing a bony forefinger down at him. "Do not even think of screaming. No one will hear you, dearie. This vault is so very thick, you see. Completely soundproof. But if you wish to know why I have ordered your gags removed, I will tell you. Oh, yes, boys. We are not as bad as all that! We of the Coven should like to hear what you have to say. By way of explanation or, say, confession? Now, boys, would you like to tell Madame Moon how you came here? It might go better for you, if you did. After all, we are not heartless. Are we, my Coven?"

From all about the vault came the deep, unified murmur of approval from her strange cohorts. A negative denial of evil intent. "No!"

The sound, a Greek chorus of trouble, didn't warm Keith Partridge's blood very much. If anything, it made him more frightened than ever.

"Let us out of here—" He was surprised at the sound of his own voice. It was thin and light, like a girl's. Boy, he sounded just like a hysterical kid! He swallowed nervously, keeping his eyes on the incredible apparition hovering above him, candle held high. He made his voice a little stronger. It wouldn't do to make this crazy old lady to think he was *so* scared he couldn't talk straight. "We don't care what your business is, Ma'am. But my brother and I—we—"

"Yes, dearie?"

Madame Moon drew closer until her awful pointed face was but a foot from his own. Keith tried to keep his head. It wasn't easy to do. This was like shaking hands with the Devil! And the candlelight was almost blinding. He could feel the hot breath of the flame. And that other scent—the burning sulphur or coal—now seemed stronger than before.

"I was going to say—" Keith said, as manly as possible, "that my brother and I were on our way home from a hike. We took a shortcut through the cemetery. We weren't prying or anything like that. I give you my word. In fact, if you'll just untie us and let us go, we'll go on home like we didn't see a thing. After all, it's a free country. If you want to worship the Devil, well, that's all right by me. I never argue with anyone about their religion. I'm sure Danny feels the same way. You just ask him!"

"Really?" The rich venom in Madame Moon's voice and the wild glint of anger in her dark eyes was not lost on Keith. He stopped talking and had to swal-

low again. "How good of you to be so liberal, my boy! Spoken like a man, indeed! You little nosebody! Do you imagine I could possibly set you free after all you and your meddlesome brother have seen here tonight?"

"But we won't tell anyone! Honest, lady—"

"Silence! It has been decreed by me that you and your brother must die! For your invasion of our privacy. For your intrusion into matters that no outsiders must ever see or know about. Do you think I would risk my precious Coven and my blood brothers and sisters for a pair of frisky brats? Never, I say. Never, never, never!"

Keith Partridge got hold of the last of his remaining nerve. He was powerless to move, for the men holding him down had hands like iron bands. And the vault was echoing with the muffled agreement and approval of the Coven. A witch's coven—and Keith now knew there had to be at least thirteen people in the vault, whoever and whatever they were. Thirteen, not counting the crazy old crone who seemed to be the boss of the bunch. The head witch. Gee whiz, he'd read so much about covens and even seen them in movie mysteries and on TV shows, but he had never thought he'd ever run smack into one, much less fall into their insane hands! Witch people!

"Ma'am, please." He tried some tact and sincerity, rather than desperation and humility. "You're making a great mistake. This is a small town. We live here, and there'll be people out looking for us. Probably right now. What do you want to go and hurt us for? We haven't done anything to you, have we? Honest, I don't care if you practice witchcraft or believe in the Devil. Please turn us loose. I swear we won't tell a soul about you."

Madame Moon sneered and thrust the lighted can-

dle down as if she wanted to push it into his face. Keith recoiled, trembling. He seemed to lose his voice again. A combination of terror and futility overwhelmed him. These people were crazy, crazy! And the old woman was the craziest of the bunch. Madame Moon recovered her poise and drew the candle back, but a snarl and a grimace yet contorted her ugly face.

"Fool!" she hissed. "Fool boy! Don't talk to me of souls! Or I'll cast a spell on your parents' house and burn it down to the ground. I'll show you what a real witch can do when she sets her cap to it. Why, I'll icky and ticky and ricky and roo—"

"Ma'am? May I have a word please?"

Astonishingly, little Danny's husky voice came swimming up to the surface abruptly and suddenly. Keith was so surprised to hear his brother sounding so calm and contained that for a second he thought he was dreaming that he was hearing Danny Partridge about to launch into one of his business conversations with Reuben Kinkaid. Even all the rest of the strange people in the vault seemed to sense the utter matter-of-factness of the littler boy's tone. Madame Moon herself frowned mightily and flung a glare down at him, as if he were some newer, peskier source of annoyance.

"And what have you to say, my fine little brat?"

Danny Partridge's calm remained undaunted, although strong arms held him fastened down to the coffin top and his freckled face shone damply with perspiration. Yet, remarkably, his tone was as steady as before.

"I am not a brat, Ma'am. Fine or otherwise. But that's beside the point. All I wanted to say is that you are not really using your head, you know. We can set-

tle this matter very easily if you will just hear me out."

Madame Moon's glare did not disappear, but her interest and own awe with this little boy who sounded so unconcerned showed in her growled retort.

"Well? What is it? Speak up, dearie. Speak up!"

"Very well." Danny's words, coming from his prone position on the coffin lid, rose like a recitation in a schoolroom. "It is obvious to me that you don't know who we are. My brother and I. I think it will make you change your mind about things. After all, a bird in hand is worth two in the bush!"

The old woman knelt over him, peering down into his face. Danny did not flinch, though the candle glow made Madame Moon more terrible indeed.

"Speak, brat! Or I'll scratch your eyes out. We haven't got all night to waste. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying," Danny Partridge replied, haughtily, "that it is very clear to me that you have no knowledge of the world and its affairs. I am Danny Partridge, and this is my brother, Keith Partridge. We are part of the Partridge Family. And since you don't know, we are perhaps the very top singing group in this country today. That means we sell a lot of records and albums, play all the best clubs and theatres, and right now, according to *Variety*, we are about to match the record of the Beatles—"

"Danny," Keith tried to whisper. "Cut it out! It won't do any good, and you'll only make her madder—" He tried to nudge Danny with his arm.

"Silence!" Madame Moon snarled. "Go on, dearie. Say what you wish to say. Though I confess you confuse me—"

"Confuse you?" Danny Partridge echoed, sounding disgusted. "Gee whiz, Ma'am. All I'm trying to tell

you is that we're worth more alive than dead. Don't you get it? You've already got us in your power so you don't even have to figure out how to kidnap us. Now all you have to do is sit down and write a ransom note to our mother. That's Mom. Heck, she'd pay all kinds of money to get us back safely. Why, even Mister Kinkaid would go along with that. You could ask her for just about any amount. I'd say you were sitting pretty right now. You have two Partridges worth a fortune. That's what I call real bargaining power, Ma'am. I'm sure all these friends of yours would say the same thing, if you should ask them."

The utterly incredible and astounding speech stunned the occupants of that tomb. Madame Moon was reduced to silence, blinking her coal-black eyes furiously. The candlelight flickered as her arm lowered. Behind her, close to her, Brother George stirred. Uneasily. Thoughtfully.

"Oh, Great One—" His tone was cold and clear but reverent. "There is much merit in what the boy says. And I do recognize the name Partridge Family. They are Meadowville's largest celebrities and do command a certain eminence in the entertainment circles of the country."

"So?" Madame Moon's snarl made the entire assemblage in the vault recoil, and Keith and Danny shuddered under the whiplash of her tone. "What are you suggesting, Brother George? Kidnapping instead of the Sacrifice to the Lamb God? I have been looking forward to such a rite tonight—"

"Forgive me," Brother George interjected. "I am only suggesting that the death of these boys, given the identity they have, would result in a tremendous investigation. No one would rest until their murderers were brought to justice. Surely, the Coven cannot

afford that. Not now. We have this meeting place, our plans for the future. We have yet to render the Black Mass to the Master of Darkness, to celebrate the descent into the Pit—we have all been looking forward to *that*.”

Madame Moon placed a speculative forefinger on the tip of her pointed chin. Her coal-black eyes looked puzzled. She sniffed the air.

“Hmmm,” she intoned. “No, we cannot have a witch hunt at this time. I do have such beautiful projects in the making. There’s the water supply to contaminate, that monument to Florence Nightingale in the public square which I should like to pulverize into dust—yes, yes, I suppose you are right. Destroying these brats might be a large nuisance. And yet, kidnapping is not as easy as all that. They would have to be guarded every second, we should have to be extremely careful—”

“A million dollars,” Danny piped up cheerfully again. “Mom would pay at least that much to get Keith and me back, I’ll bet.”

“Don’t be a piker, Danny,” Keith chimed in, realizing his insane suggestion had saved them both from a terrible death of some kind. “Two million, at least. Mom’s a real sport about kidnapping.”

Deep within his chest beat a drum of hope and joy. The relief he felt was unbelievable. His dizzy kid brother, with his usual interest in all things financial, had really saved the day! For the time being, anyway, and right now that was all that mattered. How he loved the little guy!

Danny had come through with the bases loaded. And you can’t do any better than that. In a tight ball game. Like Life vs. Death.

The shrouded assemblage waited for Madame Theodora Moon’s next words. Her final decision, as it

were. Brother George had his gloved hands clasped before him, as if he were praying. A low murmur raced around the vault. Madame Moon drew herself to her full height, bringing the candle yet higher above her head. The yellow light wavered and danced, flickering. The tomb was hushed. And never had it seemed more mysterious and evil to Keith and Danny Partridge, who had walked into the sunshine looking for birds and adventure and had stumbled back into the night, finding batty, evil weirdos and grave danger. The worst kind of peril. A nightmare!

Madame Moon's witch face and witch body trembled with inner fires.

Her elongated, crooked silhouette stretched along the wall behind her.

"It shall be done," the Wicked Witch of Meadowville intoned commandingly. "The intruders are to be spared. For a far richer reward that will benefit the Coven. Benefit us all. Are we agreed?"

"*We are agreed,*" rumbled the hooded group in full accord. In chorus again.

The Madame clucked her tongue and stared once more down at Keith and Danny Partridge, beaming, but the beam was a malevolent one. Full of all the ugly promise and reality of genuine Evil and dark power.

Madame Moon was a very chilling lady, all around.

"So it is settled, my dearies. And now, since the time does grow late and the brotherhood and the sisterhood must inevitably turn back to their own everyday lives, we shall see to your comfort, eh? You will both have to be tucked in for the night, you see. And for that, I shall favor you with a very special guardian. One you will be both privileged and no doubt thrilled to have. Brother George!"

"Yes, Madame." George's austere voice resounded in the tomb.

Keith and Danny squirmed to exchange glances. They were closer than the pages of a book, on the wide top lid of the mammoth coffin, which both were *very* certain had to contain a cadaver—something each had tried *not* to think about all night long. You could never be sure of anything with a mad old witch like this Madame Moon. There was no telling what she might do next. Or would do. It was a disquieting thought which made both Partridge boys very uneasy. After all, they were still the prisoners of crazy people. The kind of bad folks who still believed in Witchcraft and Satan.

The kind of individuals who are chock full of awful surprises.

Like, right now. Right this very second.

"Brother George," Madame Moon chuckled in a strange laughing voice. "Summon our creature of the night. Bring forth the one who will redeem us all from despair and misfortune! The Friend and Savior of us all!"

An undercurrent, like an electric shock, seemed to race around the vault. Each and every one of the cloaked figures moved, as if startled.

And Brother George seemed to be the most startled of all.

"Surely, Madame," his voice fell to a whisper. "You don't mean to say that—oh, no—" His hood trembled, as if he were wagging his head.

"Oh, but yes!" Madame Moon's voice boomed in a tone that brooked no argument or denial. "I mean to say exactly that. Call forth *The All-Destroying Hex!* What better guardian can we have for these two young gentlemen than *The Thing* that walks the graveyard?"

Keith Partridge shook his head, his nerves disintegrating. His heart skipped three beats, then dropped like a rock. Terrible, frightening memories and images rushed at him like an express train. Roaring head-on.

Madame Theodora Moon laughed harshly, tickled with some insane private jest of her own. She could see for herself the sudden stark and unrelenting terror in the faces of Keith and Danny Partridge. The horror.

Danny had shut his eyes tight, as if not wanting to look.

"Ah," Madame Moon said slowly and with great relish. "You have met *The All-Destroying Hex*, I see. You know what *it* is, what it looks like. Oh, but do not fear, my dearies, *it* hasn't eaten any small boys."

Another mocking laugh exploded against the stone walls of the vault. Madame Moon's baleful black eyes sparkled, gleamed evilly.

"Not *yet*, that is," she sighed, as if hopefully. "And one never can be too sure about these things, *can* one?"

Keith and Danny Partridge couldn't have agreed with her more.

It certainly looked as if things were going to get a heck of a lot worse before they got any better!

Far, far worse.

7. MEET ME IN THE
GRAVEYARD

□ Peter Janville was angry. Ripping mad, in fact. Shirley Partridge had never seen him so angry. Not even back in College when he had fought for the rights of all students, whether upperclassmen or not, to have the privilege of using a special shelf of reference books in the university library. Then he had been angry, but he had maintained an air of studious, thoughtful intelligence, knowing his argument was right and just. But now—now, thanks to a slow-witted and rather self-centered Police Chief of the Meadowville Department, dear Peter Janville had really lost his cool. And all because Chief John Joseph Jiggs simply refused to believe what Peter was trying to tell him. And also equally refused to get out of bed at one o'clock in the morning to do anything about it. Why, heck, according to Chief Jiggs, if he was to answer every fool trouble call at such an hour, even when it came from such a highly reputable source as one Peter Janville, Attorney, why they'd never get

any work done at all down at Headquarters! Not a lick.

Besides, couldn't it wait until morning, at a decent hour, when the Police Department could get at the problem in a more orderly and organized manner? No, it could not, Peter Janville had flared back, and that was when the fur had really hit the fan.

But all this came about later. After the graveyard incident.

About an hour after Shirley Partridge and Peter Janville had leaped back over the low wall at Meadowville cemetery. Leaped back because Peter, growing impatient and upset that not even with a flashlight could he discover the source of that horrendous, gibberish laughter which kept on sounding over the quiet, spooky graveyard. The terrible laugh had seemed to come from all over, and Peter simply couldn't locate the source. Certainly the laugh had shocked Shirley and himself out of their wits, at first, and even level-headed Peter Janville had thought twice about poking around the Karloka Vault. Especially with Shirley Partridge in tow. Now that there truly seemed to be something funny going on, something downright fishy, and he'd had no success finding out what that was, even with a trembling Shirley to help, he had done the next best thing. He led Shirley back to the parked car, still shaking his head over the ghoulish laughter, promising to take her back home as soon as he phoned Chief Jiggs at his home. Peter had not wanted to talk to anyone else about his investigation, it seemed. Whatever his reasons were. It also seemed that Chief John Joseph Jiggs was one of the authorities who knew the purpose of Peter Janville's sudden reappearance in the town of Meadowville. From out of the blue.

In spite of her fear and excited state, Shirley had

never been more thrilled in her life. It was like a grand adventure. That awful hideous laughter coming from nowhere, from everywhere, had filled her with mingled terror and vicarious exaltation. She had quivered and trembled like jelly as Peter's flashlight roved among the dark corners of the cemetery. She would never forget how the torch beam picked up headstones and crypts and mounds of earth, outlining them in a steady arc of light. Peter was so brave, so daring! Even with the mocking laughter still cackling and floating over the eerie graveyard, he had pushed on. Trying to find it, trying to pin down the thing or *who* or *what* was making such a noise. Finally, when he had given up, deferring to Shirley's presence, he had herded her back to the car, convinced that further exploration could be far more dangerous than even he had thought. So it was that an hour after midnight, he drove into the all-night diner on the highway, told Shirley to have some coffee or tea, and hurried to phone Sheriff Jiggs at home. Shirley, not wanting to miss any of this unique evening, tagged along right behind him as he had his infuriating phone conversation with the chief dispenser of Meadowville's brand of law enforcement.

She had long since forgotten about the kids. Besides, safe at home in their beds, what difference did it make what time she herself got there? She was that certain that Laurie could have handled any emergencies in her absence. Actually, Laurie was still fast asleep in the living-room chair!

Squeezed into the narrow booth with Peter Janville, Shirley was able to hear the entire dialogue between Chief Jiggs and Peter Janville. She knew how exasperating it was to Peter, too, for he kept clenching his teeth and looked like he wanted to pound the phone box.

Huddled up close to him in the booth, she saw that his eyes were very brown and glinted with green when he became angry. She had her ear pressed to the receiver, alongside his. Their cheeks were touching, and it was romantic and *interesting*, in spite of the occasion.

“—dag nab it, Mr. Janville,” Chief John Joseph Jiggs’ fuzzy-with-sleep voice rumbled on the wire. “You waking me this time of the night to tell me all this? Can’t it wait until morning?”

“No, it can’t, Chief Jiggs. Don’t you see? Something is going on there right now. Even as we’re talking. They’ve hooked something up. A record or something. Of this insane, horrible laugh. It can only mean one thing. A device used to scare away any trespassers.”

“Couldn’t a been a ghost, I suppose? Or a spook of some kind?”

“No, it could not. Don’t you remember what we talked about in your office the other day? My whole mission here in town is just for something like this. Someone is using that cemetary—the Karloka Vault specifically—and now tonight proves it. As soon as I stepped over that wall leading into the graveyard, that infernal laugh broke out. As if on cue. Or a rigged hook-up of some kind—”

“Yeah, sure. Look, Mr. Janville. You go on home, now. First thing in the morning, you come to my office. We’ll drive out there in a squad car and give the whole place a looking-over. That all right with you?”

“The morning will be too late! They’ll go underground again. Whoever they are. Hide all the tools and trick devices. We have our chance now, Chief. Yes—to catch them red-handed. There’s probably a coven sitting in the Karloka Vault right now even as we’re arguing—”

"We're not arguing, Mr. Janville." The Chief's voice was suddenly unfuzzy and no longer sleep-filled. "I'm telling you. *Tomorrow*. Now say good-night and let me get back to bed. It's been a heavy day."

Shirley could see Peter Janville fighting to control himself. The smooth-talking lawyer was obviously losing his grip, for some reason known only to himself. Or some deep-seated contempt for small town officialdom. The green was glinting dangerously in his brown eyes.

"But, Chief Jiggs, don't you—"

"Goodnight now, Janville, and that'll be enough of this talk. You hear a laugh in a graveyard, and you want me to rush out of bed to go hear it for myself! Well, I won't. *Tomorrow's* time enough for a look—"

It was then that the last of Peter Janville's cool dissolved. He literally exploded with rage, his words edged with scorn and laced with righteous wrath. The condemnation bubbled out of his mouth like molten lava, and his full glare at the mouthpiece would have stopped a clock.

"Why, you poor excuse for a sheriff! You listen to me. In all my years in Law, never have I run across the likes of you. I present you with an investigation, with some facts to go along with it, and then when I do find some evidence of crime and fraud, you sit on your fat butt and tell me to wait until tomorrow morning. Well, hear me good, Chief Joseph John Jiggs or John Joseph or whatever it is, when the smoke clears and I do learn what's going on out there in Meadowville cemetery, rest assured that you will be absolutely the last person who—"

Peter Janville went on and on like that until he suddenly realized just how much he had lost his temper, and by that time, it was much too late to remedy

the situation. It was also apparent from his expression that Chief John Joseph Jiggs had blown his stack too and then hung up on him. When Peter followed Shirley out of the booth, he looked like a man who'd lost his best friend. Or at the very least, something very important to himself. Shirley took one of the leather-lined booths close to the front door of the diner and ordered coffee for both of them from a tired waitress, nearly yawning in her face. That made her think of the time, so she glanced at the tiny watch on her wrist. It was bearing on one-thirty. And getting later by the second. Time she ought to be home in bed, too. As exciting as the night had been, there *was* a limit to everything.

Especially a time limit, when you have five children to take care of.

"I apologize, Shirley," Peter Janville said, a mite sheepishly, across the table. "That fat old chief simply gets my goat."

"Maybe I should apologize to you," Shirley smiled, trying to cheer him up. "I voted for him in the last election."

"You're too pretty to fight with," Peter growled, mockingly. "But I shouldn't have lost my head with him. I'll need his help if I'm going to get anywhere investigating that vault." He stared at her soberly. "Not sorry you came along tonight, are you?"

"What, and miss all that fun? I haven't been so scared and thrilled, together and at the same time, since the day Laurie had to make her Class Valedictorian speech. You know how that is. You're proud and hoping that your child won't fumble and mess up her lines."

Peter Janville nodded, as if he could understand that, bachelor or not, but he still looked a little miserable about the phone call.

"Cheer up, Peter. Sheriff Jiggs isn't so bad, really. You woke him from a sound sleep, probably, and he wasn't too happy about that."

"No," Peter shook his head. "He was pig-headed, blatantly stupid, and barely interested. In fact, he made me suspicious of his motives."

"In what way, Peter?"

"I can't say for sure. But the Karloka name means a lot of money in Meadowville, and Jiggs could be on Theodora Moon's payroll. It would be in her interests to have a police chief who would look the other way while she used the big vault in the cemetery. You see what I mean?"

"I do," Shirley nodded, "but it's not very likely, is it? A self-confessed witch and nice fat old Sheriff Jiggs? Uh uh. I can't see it."

"I'm not too keen on the theory," Peter Janville admitted wryly. Their coffee came, so they spent a few seconds suiting their cups to their own particular tastes. It seemed Peter Janville preferred his black with one lump of sugar, while Shirley went all the way. Cream and two lumps.

"Peter, tell me something?"

"Of course."

"About that laugh. Do you think, could it possibly—"

He chuckled, not unkindly. "Not a chance. No ghost or goblin could ever laugh like that. Considering there are none such. That was a manufactured laugh if I ever heard one. Like the laugh track on a TV show. Canned, as they say. Trouble is, if you're in that graveyard at night and you hear a terrible thing like that, you don't stop to think very clearly. So the only reason it didn't flip me out, as the new generation likes to say, is because I was expecting something like that. I wasn't disappointed, either."

"It sounded so spooky and real. And awful."

"That it was. But it's still a fake and a trick. And I'm going to pin it down tomorrow. So help me, Sheriff John Joseph Jiggs."

They both laughed at that. It was a pleasant, more light-hearted moment. Peter Janville sipped the last of his coffee, looked at his own watch, and sighed, "Well. Two o'clock. Time I was getting you home, Shirley."

"That late already? Time sure does fly, doesn't it?"

"Sad to say, yes." His eyes looked unhappy about that, too.

On the way home in the snappy little blue car, he hardly spoke at all. He was strangely weary-looking and quiet, so Shirley let him be. After all, it had been a hectic night all around. And there was just no telling what an average day in the life of a lawyer like Peter Janville was usually like. Was this the norm, or unusual for him too?

There was no way of knowing that without asking him right to his face, but Shirley didn't do that, either. It just wasn't her place. When he wanted to tell her, and if he wanted to tell her, well, that would be different. For now, after just one date, she had no right to ask.

The house was dark when they wheeled into the driveway except for a light burning in the front room. But that was all right and meant nothing, because sometimes one of the kids forgot to turn everything off. And out. Nothing to be alarmed about. Anyhow, Laurie could still be up, reading or something. And maybe Keith and Danny were too excited from their long day to settle down in bed yet. Anyway, it looked all quiet on the Partridge front. The entire neighborhood, the block itself, seemed fast asleep.

"Goodnight, Shirley. And thanks for your help."

"Not much I did except tag along, Peter."

"Just the same. Glad you were there. Call you tomorrow?"

"Please do. It was a lovely night, honestly."

"Maybe we can do it again?"

"That is up to you, kind sir."

"Leave it to me, then."

He took her hand, shook it warmly, and then ducked his head back into the car. Surprised that he hadn't kissed her but not displeased in spite of that, Shirley waited until the sportscar had nosed out of the driveway, disappearing from view beyond the rows of hedges and dark trees. The stabbing headlights, going away, winked out and she knew the car was gone, turning a corner. Humming to herself, light of heart though her head was yet filled with the intriguing mysteries of the evening as well as with Peter Janville himself, she found her housekeys and opened the front door. She was still humming, a catchy little love song, as she went to check on the rooms, as was her familiar, everyday habit. And maternal duty.

She went up the carpeted stairway, running lightly.

To one of the greatest surprises in her life. And the worst fears.

Two empty beds in the boys' rooms.

Two beds that should have been filled with peacefully sleeping Partridge brothers. Keith and Danny, back from their day-long expedition.

Two beds as empty as a schoolyard on Sunday.

As she stared down in numbed disbelief at the vacant, still carefully-made beds, she tried to still the rising panic in her bosom.

But she was still their mother—Mom Partridge—so that wasn't very easy to do at all. In fact, it was downright impossible.

A sob caught in her throat as she rushed back out of

the room, heading for the other bedroom down the hall. Laurie's room.

That was it. That had to be the answer.

Laurie certainly must know where they were—

And if she didn't—

Shirley Partridge tried not to think about that at all.

Not even for a second!

On the way back to his own apartment in town, Peter Janville was unable to get something out of his mind. It kept nagging at him, bothering him so that his driving wasn't as careful as it should have been. He ran through one red light and nearly took a wrong turn before he finally surrendered to the vague and irritating notion in the back of his mind.

In the end, he did not go home as he possibly should have.

Almost without thinking, he spun the car around at the corner of Freeman and Ward Streets and took the long thoroughfare that curved out to the main highway. But the highway was furthest from his thoughts. It was something that lay along the route to the highway that was drawing him back relentlessly, like some kind of gigantic magnet. The car leaped beneath the feel of his hands and the pressure of his foot on the gas pedal, zooming along the deserted precincts of Meadowville.

He was exceeding the speed limit for automobiles, but there was no policeman around to deter him. Perhaps, he thought with a grim satisfaction, they were all home in bed like their fat Chief, John Joseph Jiggs.

The blue little car shot toward its destination.

Meadowville cemetery.

And crazy laughter in the night.

The moon had disappeared from the heavens altogether.

And the stars had one by one twinkled out of sight. A dark and stormy night seemed to be in the making.

A night almost ideal for the further exploration and prowling investigation of a place where dark deeds might be transpiring.

Peter Janville had no doubts or misgivings about that at all.

In a world thoroughly corrupted and made evil with the wrong kind of people and the wrong kind of thinking, he knew that there were people who really believed they were witches. People who believed in the Devil.

People, such as Madame Theodora Moon, who would go to any length, the greater the better, to achieve her own dark ends. Her own foul desires. Peter Janville was thoroughly familiar with the history, character, and personality of Theodora Moon. The woman was a she-Devil incarnate!

And she had to be stopped, at all costs.

He jammed his foot to the floorboards of the car.

The car raced on through the darkness, leaving the lights of Meadowville and the suburbs far behind.

Roared on, an energetic little mechanized bug rushing to do some kind of midnight battle with some darker, greater, more monstrous foe.

Peter Janville stared straight ahead, watching the flashing stab of his headlights piercing the darkness before him.

He could not shake the feeling that he was on the right track.

That tonight was the night to strike.

He had no notion of where that idea came from, but he could feel it right down to his shoetops. Right down to every pore in his body.

The car motor thundered, keeping rhythmic time

with the chaos of his thoughts. The pounding intensity of his determined mood.

Had Shirley Partridge been able to see him then, she would easily have noticed that the brown depths of Peter Janville's eyes were showing green again. Bright, angry, glinting green.

The sort of green danger signal which had preceded the lawyer's explosive rebuke of Chief John Joseph Jiggs. That blistering tirade!

There was no telling now what that signal bode for Madame Theodora Moon, the Wicked Witch of Meadowville.

That remained to be seen.

One way or another.

But whatever it meant, it surely indicated one thing.

There was going to be a hot time in the Meadowville cemetery tonight.

Hotter than anyone ever could have imagined. Including Madame Moon.

Yet not even Peter Janville could have foretold that as he raced in his little blue car toward the distant cemetery, silhouetted on the dark horizon in the distance. That place of tombstones, gravemarkers, and vaults.

Not even a laughing goblin would have expected trouble at that ungodly, unearthly hour of the morning. Ghost or otherwise.

The Dead just don't ever expect the Living to make so much trouble!

It wasn't only unlikely, it was just plain indecent.

And certainly not the proper behavior for any graveyard.

Not even the Meadowville cemetery, for all its hi-jinks and hanky-panky.

And ghoulish, devilish doings.

8. GHOUL OF MY SCREAMS

□ There were two items, or rather *things*, which no one in the dreaded confines of the Karloka Vault had paid any attention to. All had been so busy listening to the Madame's horrible threats and weird incantations that both of these objects had gone singularly unnoticed. To begin with, the darkness of the corners of the tomb, for all the glow of the candle, was intense. And after all, with Madame Moon hovering over the held-down figures of Keith and Danny Partridge, little reason would there have been for noting what lay in the corners of the vault.

Yet these unseen and very interesting items were to play important roles in the strange drama that was still unfolding. Still to come. For with Madame Moon's pronouncement that *The All-Destroying Hex* was to guard the prisoners, the hooded assemblage had all trembled and shown great agitation of some kind. As if they too dreaded whatever *The All-Destroying Hex* was and had no desire to see it again.

That attitude, more than anything else, and clearly visible to Keith and Danny, made both boys try to lash out with their feet and squirm from the top of the coffin, away from their captors. But the effort was futile. With Madame Moon chuckling in a low, fiendish undertone and motioning Brother George with a wave of her claw-like right hand toward the door of the vault as if sending him off to *fetch* the horrible Hex monster or whatever it was, the two items of unobserved importance in the dark corners of the tomb came into play.

One of these was Nicholas, the large black cat with the round yellow eyes, which had entered the vault when Madame Moon had made her appearance but had obediently and silently stalked to a quiet corner to curl up, lie down on his haunches, and stare at the strange proceedings without so much as a single purring sound. No one had seen the animal at all, because no one had stared down at the stone floor, having eyes only for the spectral mistress of Nicholas. The Great Madame Moon.

And now Nicholas was stirring suddenly, strange yellow eyes alert and fixed. It was not immediately apparent what had caught the attention of the enormous black cat. It would have been difficult to say, since the lower half of the vault was practically in total darkness.

The other item of interest was Keith Partridge's field glasses.

This was lying across the room, in another corner of the vault, where it had been haphazardly flung by Madame Moon's minions when they had dragged the boys into the vault, stripped them of their hiking equipment, and bound their hands in preparation for the arrival of the Witch of the Meadowville Coven. It was clear that everyone had forgotten entirely

about the hiking packs and accessories of the two intruders.

Yet, by some strange arrangement of the Laws of Physics and perhaps Fate and yes, a feline's imagination, the rounded lens of Keith's field glasses caught the reflected gleam of Madame Moon's blazing candle. In so doing, two burning yellow spots winked in each of the lens. Winked and glittered like two yellow eyes glaring from the darkened recesses of that corner of the vault. The effect was uncanny and startling, Magical.

To Nicholas, across the stone floor, staring past a veritable sea of cloaked legs and moving bodies, it was suddenly a warning. A clue that there was another animal in the room. Another cat, probably!

Nicholas' great tawny black body rose from the floor slowly. His back arched and curved like a bow-string. His jaws opened, his fangs shone, and his eyes sent great messages of anger and death across the room. For one long supercharged moment, Nicholas might have been the statue of a cat crouched to spring, rather than the living animal itself.

Though Nicholas' excellent smelling senses gave no indication that another beast could have been in that vault, the evidence of his own eyes was too damning to ignore. Keith's field glasses shimmered and blazed with the reflected yellow glare of Madame Moon's candle.

"Go, Brother George!" Madame Moon's deathly cackle sounded. "Bring forth *The All-Destroying Hex*. Our dear boys wax impatient. As for the rest of you, if you cannot bring yourself to look upon the face and form of our Friend of Darkness, I give you leave to go—"

Upon the word, before the offer was gone from her mouth, there was a concerted rush and scramble of

cloaked bodies for the door to the vault. Madame Moon stepped aside, leering like an ogre, and the candle in her claw-hand moved again, sending another change of lighting into the corner just behind the head of the large stone coffin.

The gleaming lens of the field glasses seemed to jump and leap and dance. And change direction, too. With lightning rapidity.

And that was all the incentive that Nicholas needed.

He balled himself in an electrifying crouch and shot from his haunches, right across the floor of the room, in a hurtling, flying, spitting, and hissing bundle of sheer fury and passion. He flashed like a black comet, snarling and shrieking all the way. A streak of darkness.

And as if his stunning appearance and violent action were a signal of some kind, all pandemonium seemed to break loose in the place known as the Karloka Vault. It was as if someone had pulled the lid off the top of a garbage can, releasing a veritable pack of bawling and fighting alley cats. Nicholas, in his fighting wrath, turned the world upside down.

All in one lightning-bolt burst of screaming anger.

One sudden action always triggers another, and this one was no exception. In fact, it was completely typical of unexpected sources of action.

Nicholas' flying body shot right past the bewildered eyes of Madame Moon, and devil though she was, the old woman leaped back in great fear. In so doing, her hand struck the wall behind her, and since it was the claw that held the candle which was the only light in the vault, the impact knocked the object from her hand. This development, coupled with the cloaked forms trying to scurry past her out of the tomb to avoid confrontation with *The All-Destroying Hex*,

whatever that might be, was the only touch needed to completely upset the order of things in the vault.

Even as Nicholas' lithe black body descended point-blank on the offending field glasses, midst cries of terror and wild shouts of confusion and command from everyone scrambling to get away, the fresh darkness that closed over the vault was like a terrible blackout of all the senses.

But not a complete one, for Danny and Keith.

As frightened and bewildered as everyone else was, they nevertheless reacted instinctively to the sudden gift of darkness. They couldn't see their captors, but the cloaked gang couldn't see them either! And since the general direction of the door leading to freedom was but a scant few feet away, they galvanized into sudden, almost coordinated action.

Like a pair of circus gymnasts, they rolled off the coffin top down to the floor, landing on their feet, which luckily were still untied, and then lowered their heads and ran. Bulling forward, heedless of the solid bodies blocking their way, mindless of any thought but one: wanting to get out of that cursed tomb, and the quicker the better! They had lost all sight of everybody, and there was nothing now but grunts and groans and sounds of bodies smacking together. They pushed past the scrambling horde streaming through the opened door, and the gloom outside was almost as intense as the darkness they had left. Keith thought he felt the hot breath of Madame Moon washing over his face as he ran by a dark figure, but he didn't wait to see if he was right. Nor could he stop to check on Danny. One of them had to get away or they were both done for! That thought more than any sent him flying from the vault like a runaway kite.

Screams, shouts, and the angry, harsh voice of Madame Moon rose on the night air, behind him. "Stop

them, you fools! If they get away, we're all lost! That darn cat—" Nicholas suddenly let out a bleat of pain as if he had been kicked or thrown across the room at the wall.

But Keith was no longer listening. He was flying down the road, hands tied before him, legs pumping, dimly aware that little Danny was right at his heels. The uproar behind them sounded like a small war and spurred his feet to greater speed. And he could hear Danny panting and whistling through his teeth. They had gotten away!

"Keith—"

"Don't talk. Run."

"But I got a pain in my side! Like a stitch—"

"Oh, no!"

"I can't run anymore—honest—"

Tombstones shone, gravemarkers thrust up on all sides. The cemetery was pitch-black now, and though there were no sounds of pursuit, Keith could yet hear the tumult of shouting behind them. Turning, he quickly took Danny's outstretched hand, swung him deftly over his own shoulder in a fireman's carry, and was off again. As dark as it was, and in spite of the fact he had no idea how to get out of the Meadowville cemetery, he just kept on going. Danny wasn't heavy at all. Not when you were scared half out of your wits! Keith headed straight forward, his feet finding the dirt pathway that formed a lane between the plots of ground that held all those headstones and markers. There was nothing to do *but* run. No time to stop and think, to consider alternatives or anything else. The fact that they were no longer in the clutches of that terrible woman and her faceless followers was joy enough. But still—they had to get out of this place before they were captured again. And more-bad things happened—

The beam of light suddenly materializing ahead of him from somewhere on the path was like the abrupt emergence of a star. The light was steady and powerful. And searching. Roving rapidly over the earth. Keith trembled, his heart sinking. A hunt was on for them already, it seemed, and some of them had circled around to cut them off from leaving the cemetery! His tongue dry in his mouth, Danny suddenly a very heavy load, Keith tried to veer in another direction, hoping to avoid that roving beam of light that surely must have been a flashlight or a lamp of some kind.

It was then that all the former horror and terror returned in all its terrible glory and ugly magnificence. With bursting speed.

That too was like a flash of lightning and thunder in the sky.

HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . . .

There it was again!

That cackling, goblinessque laughter, filtering across the open ground, seeming to come from every direction. From all sides, like a maddening peal of mirth delivered by a crazy man. Or a demon or a ghoul. Or a ghost! Keith's flesh froze; his legs were suddenly like leaden weights. He heard Danny gulp out, "*Oh, not again!*" close to his ear, and then the circle of light up ahead stopped, centered, and then came lunging forward as if propelled by a catapult. Running feet sounded, slapping the soft earth of the dirt pathway. *HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa. . .* The awful laughter was moving with it! Or so it seemed. Keith whirled, trying to backpedal furiously. And it was at that precise moment, that flick of time, that he saw he had miscalculated or misjudged the situation entirely. Danny saw it too, for he suddenly squawked like a parrot whose tailfeathers have been caught in the cage door. And Keith was just as suddenly powerless to

move. His eyes bugged out, he gasped in fear, and his jaw dropped in a gape of terror and fresh disbelief. Gone were all thoughts of Madame Theodora Moon and her mysterious Coven that held meetings in a dead man's tomb in the cemetery.

Coming toward Keith and Danny was a sight they did not wish to see ever again. A spectacle so awesome and deadly that it paralyzed every muscle in their bodies and iced over all the blood in their veins.

It was *The Thing* again!

That liquid, gummy, many-tentacled, shapeless, glowing-eyed mass of darkness and slime. Oozing toward them, billowing and extending, and changing form grotesquely. The crawling horror they had seen once before and had never hoped to see again. Not on this planet!

The All-Destroying Hex!

It came on. Slithering, squirming, reaching out. Its shape and form undulated, as terrifying as a horrible nightmare. Danny cried out once more, and Keith tried to back up. He stumbled! And went down! And the boy on his shoulder fell away from him. And as they lay on the darkened pathway, trying to scramble to their dazed feet, the terrifying apparition, no more than five yards away in the gloom of the lane, advanced like a wave of ugly Death, rolling toward them. In a moment more, they would be engulfed, for there was no escape. No place to hide. *The Hex* would be upon them!

Madame Moon's Friend of Darkness. *HaHaHaHaHaHa . . .* laughing Horror.

The secret weapon she used to bend men and women and all fools to her will. Whatever it might be — *HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa . . .*

Keith, rising to his feet, threw up his clenched fists, ready to strike out, to defend himself and Danny

against this weird night monster. Plucky Danny lurched to his side, eyes popping, breathing hard, but he too intended to go down swinging. There was a hush now, a stunning silence, broken only by the slithering, squishing, hissing noises being made by the shapeless, glowing-eyed mass closing in on them.

In a few seconds, it would be over—no laughing matter anymore!

The awesome mass grew larger, *neared*, and then extended long and slimy tentacles outward. Reaching, clawing, seeming to fill the entire world of darkness and terror and imagination. The moment froze in Time.

And then that world exploded with bursting, shocking violence.

Something, it felt like a hand, slammed into Keith Partridge's back and swept him aside. He skittered across the path, almost bowling into a tombstone. He was dimly aware of a shadowy form dashing past him. He heard Danny yell, as if he had suffered a similar surprise and fate. And then everything went too fast. Like a rapid-fire cartoon in which everything and everyone moves faster than is possible.

The darkness and the night came alive with orange gunfire and thunderous explosions. *Bang! Bang! Bang—*

Peter Janville, still clutching in his left hand his flashlight, which he had flicked off as he approached silently to see what was confronting the two boys, had quickly stepped between Keith and Danny, pushed them out of harm's way, and raised the .38 calibre automatic in his right hand. The one he always carried in the glove compartment of his car. Just in case. Never had it seemed a better idea. Never more than now!

Taking dead aim, leveling the gun directly into the

center of that squirming, squiggly mass before him, which his civilized mind refused to accept as reality but which his emotions had to deal with all the same, he started firing. And he kept right on firing. *Bang!*
Bang!

Bang!
The thunder and rocking violence of the automatic erupted in the stillness. A nighthawk screamed somewhere in a tree and wheeled off in terror. And when the last bullet exploded and the trigger pulled on an empty chamber, Peter Janville lowered his gun. And stared. He had fired six times.

And Keith stared, shaking his head.

And Danny stared, his eyes as big as saucers.

Right before the eyes of all of them, an incredible change was taking place. A change or a reality again. It was difficult to say.

Stranger things have probably happened, but it couldn't have been proven by Keith and Danny Partridge. Or Lawyer Peter Janville, to tell the truth.

The All-Destroying Hex—The Thing—transformed magically.

There was a sharp hiss of air, then a rush of violent movement, and incredibly, swiftly, too fast for the human eye to follow, the great glowing eyes winked out and hard on a writhing, wriggling, and collapsing motion of some kind. The monster was no more. It was gone!

It disappeared. Almost literally.

Just like that.

In a flash.

In a terrific spurt of speed.

And the darkened pathway on which it had stood gave no clue or immediate proof of just how such an amazing miracle had happened.

It was as if the Night had swallowed up the monster.

As if *The All-Destroying Hex* had never been.

As if it had been a *mirage*.

Or just something in people's minds.

Like all the nightmare demons and giggling goblins and distorted images of childhood dreams. Or worse.

Keith Partridge, unable to think, continued to stare at the path before him. Danny, trembling, still amazed, stood at his side, nearly hiding behind his elbow. Neither of them even had a moment's thought for the mysterious stranger who had materialized in the night, coming to their rescue like a hero in an adventure novel. They were both still too dazed to think straight, no longer even considering Madame Moon and her Coven, which might still be lurking close by. It was as if with the death of *The Thing—The All-Destroying Hex*—all dangers had ceased. Passing them by, never to come again. Never to be seen again.

"It's gone—" Keith whispered, awed. "Where did it go?"

"Yeah," Danny nodded, talking just as low. "First it was there, and now it isn't. Keith, I'm scared—let's get out of here—"

Peter Janville chuckled, very grimly, and twirled the automatic in his hand. He raised the flashlight and pointed it. Toward the ground.

"Take it easy, men," he said softly. "It's still there. It hasn't gone any place. And in a second, you'll see exactly what it was. Had me going for a minute there too, but watch this—"

He flicked the flashlight on. The beam stabbed outward then down, and Keith and Danny Partridge saw exactly what *The All-Destroying Hex* was. Or rather, had been.

Either way you looked at it, it was a fiendish thing.

9. SO ENDS OUR FRIGHT—
FOR AWHILE, ANYHOW

□ "But where could they be?" Shirley Partridge wailed for the dozenth time in the solemn quiet of the kitchen. "They should have been home hours ago! Wait till I get my hands on them—"

"Gosh, Mom," Laurie Partridge murmured, crest-fallen and looking very guilty about falling asleep over her copy of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. At that particular moment of her young life, she felt worse off than *Lo, The Poor Indian!* In an effort to calm Mom's nerves, Laurie had hurried to make her some tea while they both waited out the late arrival of Keith and Danny. It was tough, though. Mom was all for calling the police and reporting two missing Partridges, but Laurie had prevailed, begging her to wait one more hour before doing an irrevocable act. The house was so deathly quiet, too. It was like sitting at a wake. Thank God, both Christopher and Tracy were still sleeping. And Simone had long since given up

gnawing on that pair of Shirley Partridge's *pom-pommed* slippers.

After three cups of tea, Mom was drained of all courage and patience. The utter stillness of the house, the darkness without, and the fact that both her sons were out there somewhere, maybe hurt or unable to come home or just plain—well, it was making Shirley Partridge's lovely face take on added lines and signs of anxiety and fear. The pleasant and exciting night with Peter Janville had gone up in a puff of smoke. The only thing in the world now was Keith and Danny Partridge, and *oh, where were they, the little tortments?*

"I can't help it! They've been gone so long, and they're just boys, even if Keith thinks he's big enough for everything."

"I'm sorry I dozed off, Mom. It was a dumb thing to do."

"What difference would it have made? You just would have been worried a whole lot sooner, that's all. Oh, darn!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Laurie," Shirley said very firmly, keeping the tears back from her eyes and rising from the table, "I'm going to call the police! I have to. Sometimes when you delay calling them, it makes all the difference between Life and Death. Oh, I don't want to be an alarmist but—" her eyes happened to glance at the banjo-shaped clock on the wall above Laurie's head—"oh, Laurie, it's almost three o'clock in the morning!"

And that did it.

She began to blubber. Like a baby. And Laurie rushed to comfort her, and soon Laurie was sobbing, too. There was far more than hit tunes and show-business success that bound the Partridge Family. They all adored one another, let the truth be told. As

all families should but sometimes don't, which can be one of the greatest misfortunes on this earth.

"Mom, they'll be okay, wait and see—"

"I know, I know. But where are they?"

"On their way, probably. You know Keith. Mr. Excitement himself. Probably saw something interesting and lost track of the time."

"But it's still three o'clock in the morning, honey!"

"Yeah. I know. That is a little *too* late—even for Keith."

"All right—I'll give them ten minutes more—then I don't care whether I'm being hysterical or not, I'm phoning the Police. And I don't care what Chief John Joseph Jiggs has to say about *that*, either!"

Laurie smiled at that through her tears, for Mom had told her all about the wild adventure with Peter Janville in the cemetery, but Mom's fears about the boys had taken all the fun out of her recital. Darn that Keith, anyway. Always getting into scrapes of some kind. Only this time he had included little Danny in his troubles. Trust Keith!

A minute was left of Shirley Partridge's ten minutes of grace when both women suddenly heard a familiar sound. The front door had closed with a slight thud, and footfalls were coming! The radiant smile on Shirley Partridge's face was a portrait no artist could have ever painted. And Laurie herself felt a quickening of her own heartbeat and a flood of relief that was very nearly dizzying. Both Mother and Daughter sprang from their chairs, racing each other toward the living room. They could hear a low blur of voices—Keith's, Danny's, and—and—

Peter Janville, looking tall and handsome and still grim, smiled very pleasantly as Shirley and Laurie burst into view. "Hello," he said evenly, "I decided not to wait until tomorrow to see you again, Shirley."

Keith Partridge and Danny Partridge, bedraggled, grimy, and without their usual flippant, breezy manners, were both looking down at the floor, as if they found it hard to stare directly at their own mother. It was as if they were both stubbing their toes in embarrassment.

Shirley Partridge braked to a halt, staring at them. Laurie was at her elbow, standing close by, just in case.

"Keith—Danny—" Shirley Partridge said in a faint whisper.

At that, Keith raised his head. His eyes twinkled, and a little smile creased his unforgettable face. Love and admiration filled his expression. He shrugged and put out both arms, like the rascal he was.

"Hi, Mom," he said. "A funny thing happened on the way to the cemetery—"

Shirley Partridge saw no more and heard no more.

Through a haze of tears, she gathered both Keith and Danny into her arms, hugging and kissing them like the affectionate and adoring mother and woman that she was. The hen with her chicks back. And safe.

Peter Janville and Laurie Partridge looked on, smiling happily.

It was an idyllic moment that even a bachelor like Peter Janville could understand and admire and respect. And regret, somehow.

But perhaps something could be done about that too!

Given enough time. And encouragement from the proper party.

Yet, first there was the not-so-slight matter of the Witch of Meadowville to be taken care of. And the Karloka Vault mess.

For which he already had most of the answers.

If—not the solution.

God willing.

Something had to be done about Madame Moon, all right.

Before the satanic old witch took over all Meadowville!

And maybe everything else there was to take over.

Later on, in the happy household, after all the embraces and the joys of reunion, Peter Janville held court in the living room. He kept his voice down, for it was still very early in the morning, and upstairs in their own bedrooms Christopher and Tracy slept away the night. Keith and Danny had recounted their incredible adventures and close brush with the Devil and Death, and Shirley Partridge felt that pang of maternal fear, realizing how close the boys had come to genuine trouble. But the happy ending of Peter Janville's miraculous rescue and the disappearance of Madame Moon and her Coven stilled all the panic within her. At least, it was over now. And that terrible old woman would get her just desserts in the morning, when Peter Janville told the whole story to Chief John Joseph Jiggs. The fat old sheriff would have to listen to Peter now! Think of it. A real witch in a quiet little town like Meadowville! It made you think, didn't it?

And that gobbling laughter, which she had heard herself.

And that *thing* which the boys had described in awed voices.

Thank the good Lord, she hadn't seen it herself! She was certain she would have fainted. Trick or no trick, real or not real.

"A *balloon*, you said?" Laurie Partridge asked keenly, deeply interested in the 'relevancy' of the

whole story. "You mean like one of those gigantic floats in say the Macy's Day Parade on Thanksgiving in New York? Something like that, huh?"

"Exactly," Peter Janville took it from there in a quiet courtroom voice which held all his listeners spell-bound. "Maybe the Madame is a real witch, maybe she isn't. Maybe she has strange powers, perhaps not. But it is obvious now that she is not above using tricks and fraudulent articles to increase her power over her followers. True, she looks more like a witch than Margaret Hamilton even did in *The Wizard Of Oz*. But her *All-Destroying Hex*, as she called it, was no more than a hoax. A large balloon, rendered in the art and shape of a mythical monster, which when inflated and operated by an electrical cord and other mechanisms, was enough to scare the pants off—well, let's say John Wayne, let alone boys walking in the cemetery after dark or gullible members of the Coven. You see, the Madame was using the tomb of Karloka because it was so big and convenient. And the old caretaker of the cemetery, one Finlay by name, was no problem. He's over seventy, should have retired years ago, and is easily drugged, so that he's not awake to see anything. Or hear anything peculiar, either."

"Like a goblin laughing," Shirley shuddered, recalling the awful sound. "How was that done, Peter?"

"With a wiring device rigged within the vicinity of the walls and close to the vault. So that it tripped off the laughter, whenever anyone stepped into it or across it. You'd never know you had, actually. Keith and Danny tripped the wire, as you and I did earlier tonight when you and I stepped over the wall on the west side of the cemetery."

"The Coven," Keith cut in, warming up to the grim-

details again, his eyes glinting with interest. "And the Madame. They wanted to kill us. Would they have gone through with that?"

"I don't know," P eter Janville admitted wryly. "But I wouldn't bank on anything when it comes to eccentrics like Madame Moon. She might do anything when it comes to protecting her rights and claims to witchcraft. My firm was right, you see. Tollings Karloka had no right to give such a notorious woman the key to his father's vault, to use as she wished. That is against the law, whether he's the legal heir or not. As for the rest of the Madame's Coven, I'm sure they are just plain ordinary Meadowville citizens looking for a thrill. Not really believing in witchcraft at all. When we find out who they are, don't be surprised. They could be your local farmers, grocers, druggists, or just about anyone. Chief Jiggs had better cooperate with me tomorrow or I'll have his star."

Danny Partridge squinted, looking thoughtful.

"Mister Janville, sir."

"Yes, Danny?"

"Did you know *The Thing* was a balloon when you fired your gun into it? That took a lot of nerve, you know."

"I only knew it *wasn't* a monster," the lawyer said easily. "There are no such things. But it was a menace, certainly. As you saw, it just deflated when the bullets hit it, same way a balloon crumples when you stick a pin in it and all the air rushes out. We didn't see it right away lying on the ground until I put the flash on it. That's why you and Keith thought it had vanished. It was nothing more than black rubber, painted and shaped to resemble a monster when inflated."

"Wow," Danny murmured. "Was it ever real-looking! They haven't got anything like that at Disneyland."

"Thank heaven," Shirley sighed and everybody laughed. "All parents would go on strike and picket the place."

"Yeah," Keith agreed grimly. "Who needs it?"

Shirley had another question for Peter Janville, the fount of information and masculine charm. And a hero, besides. A real one.

"Where is this Tollings Karloka now?"

"Skiing in Europe, of course," Peter Janville snorted. "A genuine, irresponsible playboy type. He doesn't care what Madame Moon does with the vault, obviously. No skin off his nose, as long as he has all the money he needs. And that he has. Old Man Karloka left him a millionaire, twice over."

"Money corrupts," Danny affirmed, nodding his head. "And Power. Me and Mister Kinkaid are always having discussions on that subject."

"Arguments, you really mean," Laurie interjected, laughing. She stared around the little group. "Well, what's next on the agenda?"

"Sleep," Shirley said very firmly. "Time you all got some real rest. You've had a busy day, all of you. Me too. And I'm sure Peter has a lot to do in the morning. Arresting that old witch woman."

"Amen to that," Peter Janville said quietly, rising from his seat on the lounge. He grinned at Keith and Danny. "You two warriors get to bed like your Mother says. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn never had what you had tonight. Believe me, Mark Twain."

"I believe it, I believe it," Keith chuckled. "And thanks to you, we'll be able to tell our grandchildren about it."

"What grandchildren?" Danny blurted. "I am not even married yet."

Keith poked him. "Thank Mister Janville again for saving our lives."

Danny, with great dignity, said, "Thank you, Mister Janville."

"You're both welcome. It was a real pleasure, gentlemen."

"That's enough now," Shirley Partridge at last put her maternal foot down. "Off you go, all of you. Upstairs to bed."

When the last Partridge offspring disappeared up the steps with goodnight, happy kisses all around, Shirley saw Peter Janville to the door. There was one thing that still troubled and puzzled her. She asked him about that just before he took his leave for the second time within the space of a mere four hours. What a mad night it *had* been!

"Peter, I want to ask you something."

"Fire away, Shirley Partridge."

"When you left me tonight—why did you go back to that cemetery? You weren't planning to all the time. I know that somehow."

"You know, you're right? I intended to go straight home, as mad as I was about Jiggs. But something kept gnawing at me. You know what I mean? I felt like I had left something undone. So I went back."

Shirley restrained a cold chill that raced up her spine.

"Thank God you did. No telling what would have happened if you hadn't. Those poor kids. It must have been horrible."

"It was," Peter Janville said soberly. "Tell you this much, my dear. ESP—extra-sensory-perception—can also be on the side of the angels, too. Something pushed me back to that cemetery. Something that was a power for good. Do you believe that, Shirley?"

"I believe it, I believe it," she smiled, aping Keith Partridge.

Peter Janville chuckled, and then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, he lowered his head and kissed her full on the lips, without touching her with his arms. As she stepped back in surprise, he winked at her, turned on his heel, and swept through the open doorway. She watched him go, pleased and surprised and a trifle sad. Sighing, she closed the door, put her back to it, and looked at the house around her, reveling in its warmth, in its coziness, in the fact that it was her own place, her own corner of the universe. And a house with a foundation of love and mutual respect.

Above all, she gloried in the simple fact that all of her children were now safe in their beds, and another hectic, dangerous day had come to an end. A day which might have ended in tragedy. And despair.

Instead of happiness and a fresh new joy in the future.

A future that would be much brighter once Madame Theodora Moon was finally gone from Meadowville for good, and could no longer put her evil hand and ugly spirit in the hearts of people.

A future that just might have a man in it. A good man, too.

Mr. Peter Janville, Attorney-at-Law. Nice sounding name, that.

But first there had to be tomorrow. An important tomorrow.

And taking care of that wicked old witch. The Moon woman.

First things first!

Humming happily once more, Shirley Partridge extinguished all the lights in the house and went upstairs to bed.

Dawn was already streaking the sky beyond the

white-painted outline of the pleasant little house in the suburbs of Meadowville.

It was later, much later, than even Shirley Partridge had thought.

The cock would crow soon enough, heralding the beginning of another June morning. Another twenty four hours of life for the world.

And for Meadowville, U.S.A.

And, of course, the Partridge Family, one and all.

Including Simone, the dog, who liked to chew on slippers.

The naughtiest canine in existence.

In that blue-tinted boudoir in the lavish and oddly adorned apartment somewhere on the outskirts of town, Madame Theodora Moon was on the telephone. Not even the weird blue lighting nor the cringing form of Nicholas, a much-chastened black cat with yellow eyes, hiding under the bed, would have indicated that the Madame was in a terrible mood. She had raced home from the frenzied cemetery with all of her plans and projects in ruins, but even a witch can control her temper and her nerves. It is that quality which makes witches. The ability to create disaster *from* success, to separate issues and events. Not even the shambles of the Meadowville cemetery were going to make Madame Moon surrender. The mob scene in the dark, with all of the flock scattering in terror and those boys escaping and somehow destroying her wonderful apparatus, was simply but a stumbling block that would have to be put aside. And so, the Madame, stealing home before dawn on her own very private motorcycle, had quickly phoned Brother George, whom she was sure was already home, trembling in his underwear, the fool! George Dunne, the respectable shoe salesman

who wanted to be a warlock by night but didn't have the brains of a flea! Still, he had been useful, bringing all the others into the Coven, with their sizable donations of money and equipment. And time.

As the floating, dangling, stuffed frogs, toads, and spiders twirled above her head, Madame Moon dialed George's home number.

He answered almost immediately, his clear voice hesitant and guarded. "Yes? Who is this, please?"

"Idiot! It is I. Have you stopped running long enough to listen to your Leader? There is much to do, Brother George."

"Madame!" The relief in his voice was an explosion. "We are lost! Our hiding place is known—and *The All-Destroying Hex*—it was only a toy! A contraption—that man with the gun—I ran away—I was frightened! Oh, Madame, what are we to do now—our beautiful Coven—"

"Stop babbling, you fool, and listen! Control yourself. I, Madame Moon, cannot be beaten. Hear me, now. Disband the flock. Tell them they are never to go to that vault again. The police are sure to raid it soon, once those brats tell their story. As for the man, I'm sure he is one of those nosy private detectives or some such. In any case, we will all go underground. Tell the others to hide their robes and instruments. I will find another place for the Coven to meet. As soon as I do, I shall contact you. Understand me, Brother George. Fail me now, and you will wish you had never been born! Would you like to wake up some morning with a thousand warts all over your body?"

"No, no, no—" He was whimpering like a frightened child.

"Then do as I say! And nothing will happen. We have only lost a meeting place. We have not lost the Coven and our calling."

"Y-y-esssss, Madame—"

"Yes, Brother George. Till the Hour of Thirteen, then. Goodbye."

The Madame hung up. She lay back against her bluish pillows, hooked nose and blazing eyes and incredible face somehow tranquil. She heaved a vast sigh, and her brain whirled with fresh plans.

Underneath the dark bed, Nicholas whimpered, also like a terrified child. He, like Brother George, was afraid of the Madame too.

The Wicked Witch of Meadowville was just not someone to anger or ever to cross. Nicholas would go to his feline grave never really knowing how a pair of field glasses could resemble another cat.

But, no matter now.

Madame Theodora Moon had forgotten all about Nicholas' fall from favor. There were much more important things to consider.

Such as how to leave town in a hurry and where to go.

And how soon to perform such a deed.

Meadowville had already become too hot a place for a confidence woman well versed in the black arts and the gullibility of suckers.

It was time for the Madame to pull up stakes and find fresh fields to conquer. And fresh suckers to trim of their money and their dreams.

Theodora Moon had realized at twenty-one that she looked like a witch and talked like a witch, so she had been cashing in on it ever since.

To the sorrow and the fleeced pocketbooks of a world of fools.

There was always more than one way to skin a cat, you see.

Cats, other than black Nicholas.

10. TO CATCH THE MOON

□ The next morning was a very fine day: blue sky, white clouds like boat sails, and a sun so warm and blazing that it seemed more like late August than the calm month of June. The thermometer soared.

And there were goings-on in Meadowville that belied the serenity of the peaceful day. Indeed, behind the scenes, the little town was jumping. A circumstance that only the Partridge Family was aware of, thanks to their inside, front-row seat to the entire drama of *The Wicked Witch of Meadowville*. Peter Janville kept them posted all the way.

For one thing, he had called on Chief John Joseph Jiggs as soon as the sun was up and related all that had happened the night before, and even the fat old sheriff was impressed sufficiently to fill two squad cars with armed deputies and race out to the Meadowville cemetery. The lawman acted so fast that Peter Janville buried the hatchet with him on the spot. Together, and with the ready guns at their disposal, they ex-

plored the burying grounds. They found the trick wiring leading to a metal box which contained a long-playing tape whose only recorded sound was the most fiendish, gibberish laugh that Chief Jiggs had ever heard. They found the collapsed rubber mass with six bulletholes in its rubbery body, which, even in the daylight, was a hideous contraption. There was a long bit of electrical wiring which connected to the thing and led directly to a spot just alongside the door of the Karloka Vault, from which point the monster balloon could be manipulated in any direction. And the vault itself, was an eye-opener. It had been curtained inside, and there were odd floor rugs with occult designs woven into their woolen surfaces. As well as a host of blunt clubs, a deck of Tarot cards for telling fortunes, and of course the remainder of the hiking equipment that belonged to Keith and Danny Partridge. The field glasses, which had so fooled Nicholas and contributed to the boys' escape from the hooded conclave, now had one of its lens glasses broken. Nicholas' fury had scored a blow, anyway.

Lastly, and far from unimportant, Chief Jiggs' squad of deputies raised the heavy and cumbersome lid of the ornate stone coffin. One look was all that was needed before the lid was lowered once more. Madame Moon had not gone *too* far, after all. Old Miser Karloka's mummified cadaver was intact, exactly as it was the day it was interred in this bald vault.

Finally, with nothing left to claim or bring back to Headquarters as evidence, Chief Jiggs gave Finlay, the Caretaker, a thorough, scathing sermon on the proper care and keeping of nice old cemeteries.

Then he and Peter Janville piled back into the police cars and sped back to town to try once more to locate the unknown apartment of Madame Theodora

Moon. She was unlisted in the Meadowville Directory, but after a frantic hour of pulling the necessary strings and cutting red tape, Chief Jiggs hit paydirt. A reluctant official of the Bank of Meadowville revealed a safe deposit box in the Madame's name and a corresponding address. The Chief himself drove the squad car out to the residential area where Madame Moon had lived since she came to town a few months back. Peter Janville was amazed at Chief Jiggs' sudden and zealous devotion to duty, considering his talk of the night before.

Well, a new day was a new day, after all.

The Moon apartment, once they had broken the door down, was as empty as a cookie jar in a house with seven children. The witch had flown, leaving all the furnishings and all the weird artwork and figures and ornaments she had owned, but all the clothes closets and dresser drawers in the bedroom were bare. Not a stitch of apparel or an article of footwear could be found. Not even Nicholas, the large black cat.

"Dagnab it," Chief Jiggs rumbled. "Flown the coop. We're too late."

"She can't have gotten far," Peter Janville reminded him. "It's ten o'clock, and we last saw her around four this morning. If she drove out of town or took a train or a taxi—"

"Maybe she flew out on her broomstick," Jiggs winced sourly. "Darn slick woman. Wish I'd listened to you last night, Janville."

"You can make up for it, Chief." Peter Janville was smiling.

"How's that?"

"Just help me catch her before she gets much farther away. Fair enough, Chief?"

"Fair enough," Chief John Joseph Jiggs beamed. "Let's git!"

They got, hurrying from the apartment, the armed deputies pounding down the hallway stairs right behind them, disturbing the whole house.

As Peter Janville had just said, the time was roughly ten o'clock in the morning. And he was closer to the truth than he thought. For at that approximate time, Madame Theodora Moon was still in town. In fact, her tall, gaunt, incredible figure, garbed in the familiar black, was very much in evidence in a very particular location in Meadowville. A definite spot.

Walking purposefully and grimly toward the front door of the white-painted house known to one and all as the home of the Partridge Family.

Actually, she was no more than a moment away from ringing the front doorbell. Standing before the house was a small, dark, touring car, whose trunk was packed with all her worldly and witchly possessions. Nicholas himself was purring silently on the front seat, watching his Mistress and keeping an eye peeled for enemy animals. And suspicious strangers.

Madame Moon had a reason for calling on the Partridge Family.

A very dire and dark reason. One that was truly no good reason.

She was going to put one last and masterful hex on the boys known as Keith and Danny before she left town to elude the Law, which, she was certain, had no way of knowing where she was or what she was doing.

Madame Theodora Moon wanted to leave Meadowville a legacy it would always remember. Something they would talk about in fearful whispers for the years to come. To add to her own slick confidence game, the Madame also deluded herself. She really believed she could put a curse on people.

No one had ever proven her wrong in that surmise. Not yet, at any rate.

"*Icky-ticky-ricky-roo,*" Madame Moon chanted as she stretched a long and bony forefinger toward the black enamel buzzer on the front door. "*I'll bring you magic and burn your house down too!*"

She pressed down on the black buzzer, hard.

A long, cheerful, chiming melody sounded from within the house. Madame Moon licked her pendulous lips, her hooked nose quivering. Her coal-black eyes blazed. In broad daylight, she was truly a frightening apparition. Dressed all in black, bony and tall, she was a visual horror, complete to the last wrinkle on her crone's mask of a face.

Light footfalls came from behind the bright yellow door.

Madame Moon tensed, prepared to hurl a curse and malediction into the face of whoever answered the doorbell. Anyone with the name of Partridge would serve. Blood *was* thicker than water.

The door swung inward, and the Madame raised a long and claw-like hand, eyes burning, fingers crooked for a withering hex sign.

Reuben Kinkaid loomed on the threshold, smiling and courteous. That is, he was until he got a full view of the ghastly horror on the doorstep.

Reuben, the manager of the Partridge Family, had just dropped in for a surprise visit to the favorite talent in his stable of clients, coming by taxi from the airport and delighting everyone in the family.

He had answered the door because Shirley's hands were full of baking dough, for she was making a cake to celebrate Reuben's visit. And Keith and the rest of the kids were in the garage, warming up for a rendition of a new tune which Keith had written and

wanted to play for Reuben before he had to catch the plane back to Chicago late that afternoon.

Reuben blinked, the smile faded, and he got a good, hard look at Madame Theodora Moon. The Madame, quick to recover her poise, delivered her malediction at the top of her crackling voice, full-blast.

After all, she might have thought that Reuben Kinkaid was Mr. Partridge, the head of the family, instead of the much-harassed, much put-upon business manager he usually was. Poor Mister Kinkaid, as he was always called by Danny Partridge. He was born to suffer.

"TO YOU I SAY, THE HOUSE WILL BURN AND YOUR CHILDREN WILL FRY! YOU CANNOT ESCAPE NO MATTER HOW YOU TRY!"

And Madame Moon glared, her eyeballs rolled, and her thoroughly evil and horrible face was like a nightmare come true. A mask of terror.

Reuben Kinkaid did the only thing he could do under such extraordinary circumstances. Ten o'clock in the morning is just no time to meet a witch. Or even see one. Much less be cursed by one.

He fainted.

Dead-away on the Partridge Family threshold.

In the noisy garage, with Keith trying to restore some kind of melodic semblance of music to the combined guitars of Danny and Laurie and Christopher's drums and Tracy's tambourine, things had come to a moment of truth. The kids just weren't cutting it. They hadn't found the true combination to the mood of his latest original composition, *When I'm Blue I Want You*. Slightly annoyed, he called a halt and surrendered to the general feeling of listlessness he felt in

the atmosphere of the very garage in which the first hit Partridge Family record had been born.

"Okay, crew," he sighed, putting down his own guitar. "Let's take a break and get back to it later. I'm not feeling right about it, either. We'll try it again about an hour from now."

Everybody seemed in favor of that, even Simone, who was never very far from Tracy's feet. As they all filed out of the garage, Danny fell in step with his older brother, making certain that Laurie and the rest of the kids couldn't hear what he wanted to say. Simone was barking.

"Gee, Keith. You feeling the way I'm feeling?"

"Say what you mean, squirt."

"I dreamed about that woman, you know. Madame Moon? Worst nightmare I ever had. I dreamed she was chasing me on her broomstick, trying to stick a very long needle into me. Like I was a balloon."

"Yeah," Keith sighed again, as they swung around the corner of the house, heading for the front door. "I know just what you mean. I've had the heebie-jeebies since I woke up. I keep expecting her to pop right out of the ground. Man, was she ever ugly."

"The ugliest," Danny agreed very seriously. "Do you think Mister Janville and Chief Jiggs will ever catch up with her?"

"I hope so, Danny. Woman like that. She shouldn't be allowed out after dark. *Brrrrrr*. Gives me the creeps just thinking about last night." Keith headed for the porch. "I know Reuben wasn't very happy when Mom told him about it. He lectured me plenty again about all the scrapes I get into. Though I'm sure he didn't believe a word of it."

Danny Partridge rocked to a full stop. He stared long and hard at the front door of the house. His freckles and his eyes both seemed to do a dance. Keith

frowned at him, tugging at his arm. Danny was shaking!

"Hey—what's the matter with you—"

Danny was having difficulty speaking, it seemed. And his eyes wouldn't stand still. Nor his freckles. Finally, in a burst of desperation, his arm raised and his hand pointed, or rather his index finger. Keith Partridge, baffled, wheeled about to see what had upset his brother so.

His mouth dropped, and his own eyes bugged out in disbelief.

He saw Madame Theodora Moon, stepping down from the porch of the house, her tall black figure indescribably unforgettable in the bright sunshine. He saw the prostrate form of a man. He didn't recognize Reuben Kinkaid immediately, but he could clearly see the soles of two shoes on the threshold, poking into view from the depths of the inner doorway of the house. The Madame was starting to hurry forward, casting darting looks all about her, and for one paralyzed moment of inactivity, Keith Partridge was rooted to the ground where he stood. As was Danny. It was last night in the Meadowville cemetery all over again. Come back with a double vengeance. He was either seeing things or just living a very bad dream. Nightmare, when Madame Moon was involved!

Suddenly, somebody was yelling. Shouting.

He was startled to realize that his own voice was the one that had shouted. Though he had no conscious memory of so doing. Nor of what he said.

"HEY—YOU THERE—WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING—"

Madame Theodora Moon jerked as if a string had pulled her. Her face rotated like a top, and suddenly, burning, blazing eyes were staring across the measured green lawn, directly at Keith. The Witch of

Meadowville hissed and lifted both her hands, and both those terrible claws looked as if they were going to hurl lightning bolts across the intervening space between her tall, elongated black figure and the cowering Partridge brothers.

“*Icky-ticky-ricky-roo—*”

The dreaded chant, the crooning curse, rose on the morning air. Profaning the sunlight, the clean atmosphere, the pleasantly rural environs. A great flash of anger went off in Keith Partridge’s brain. And for a few chaotic, frenzied moments, he was more than just a growing boy.

He was an outraged human being, a giant ten feet tall, a bold warrior out to protect the sacred precincts of his own home. His own way of doing things. His own bag, to put it very bluntly. His very life.

Crimson with rage, his muscles tightening into hard steel, he left his transfixed feet and literally leaped across the green earth. Directly at the fantastic, ugly, Godless creature trying to depart as she had come. Like a witch in the daytime. Furtively, stealthily.

Madame Theodora Moon saw him coming, and her ugly face leered in the ghastliest smile this side of *Dante’s Inferno*. A venomous mask of a smile.

Her claw hands reached out, long fingernails ready to rip and tear and rake at the oncoming boy’s unprotected face. To scratch and kill.

And then Shirley Partridge screamed. A full scream from the doorway of the house, for Reuben Kinkaid had just never come back from answering the doorbell. Shirley’s flour-streaked hands left fingermarks on her own pretty face as she flung up her hands in horror at the sight that greeted her eyes. *Keith—that woman*—her own front lawn—it was just too wild and impossible to accredit so early in the morning.

So early on a June day. With the sky so blue and tranquil.

So soon after the hideous night before. Seemingly only hours ago!

Danny Partridge emitted a bleat of enthusiastic support, and he too flung himself across the lawn, going to his brother's aid. Shouting encouragement.

Keith Partridge reached Madame Theodora Moon in less time than it takes to tell it. The old crone's fingernails, long and horrible, flashed out at him, as deadly and dangerous as any knives could be. Filthy and ugly weapons. The further armament of a very bad woman, indeed.

And the battle was on. In the glint of a long fingernail.

One that all Meadowville would never forget.

Keith Partridge vs. The Wicked Witch of Meadowville.

A young boy against a very old lady.

But the boy was an Eagle Scout, and the old lady was a witch.

And he had a song in his heart, and she had a curse in hers.

It was no contest, strictly.

11. THE WIZARD OF ODDS

□ The fight was quick, violent, and unbloody.

After all, Keith Partridge didn't want to hurt an old woman, no matter how much of a witch and evil character she was. There is a limit to everything. And hitting little old ladies was one of them. For Keith, at any rate. Though Theodora Moon was not little at all. There was hardly a taller woman in all Meadowville.

Still, there was none more dangerous, either!

The vicious fingernails, long and sharp, were very deadly. Even as Keith waded into Madame Moon, diving to one side and ducking and dodging, it would have gone very badly for him if one of Madame Moon's claws had raked his face. The witch was spitting and snarling, her face twice as ugly as ever, and even the smell of her made Keith's nostrils curl in disgust. It was that smell of burning sulphur again. Like fire and brimstone, the very scent of all things satanic.

Danny saved the day again, as he had with his

clever talk about kidnapping instead of sacrifice in the huge Karloka Vault. Good old Danny!

With Shirley's screams still ringing in their ears, both boys combined with that sort of teamwork that wins baseball pennants, overcomes stronger opponents, and does seem to work when it's coordinated so well. The Madame was kicking with her feet now and flinging her arms in wide circles, hoping to catch either of the Partridge boys with one of her terrible claws. Danny shrewdly avoided the ancient crone and ran around behind her, where she couldn't keep her eyes on him because Keith was keeping her busy in the front. Little red-haired Danny went down to his hands and knees, as though he were playing a game. Keith took the cue, immediately. He charged right into the Madame, thrust both arms between her wildly swinging claws, and shoved. He shoved very hard, pushing against the scrawny, bony chest of the old witch. And the move worked perfectly.

Theodora Moon reeled backwards, and her legs broke in half right across Danny's obstacle course of a back. She shrieked as if she had seen a mouse running across the green lawn, and went down like a tenpin in a bowling alley. And now, the rest of the Partridges, all holding back in horror, seemed to lose whatever terror had frozen them to motionlessness at the sight of Madame Theodora Moon. As she spilled to the earth in a tangle of arms and legs, Laurie, Christopher, and Tracy rushed forward *en masse* to help their brothers. Simone came at a run, yipping and barking. And that was the ultimate end of the Wicked Witch of Meadowville.

Keith jumped on her hard, literally sitting on her squirming body as she struggled to get up. And then Danny sat on her legs, adding his wiry weight to the load. And then the other kids all piled on too, and Ma-

dame Theodora Moon seemed to disappear beneath a writhing, twisting, heaving pile of children. Anyone walking by the Partridge house at that particular moment might have been forgiven for thinking that Shirley's brood was only having a roughhouse with some agreeable adult who liked to play with children. Instead of the wickedest woman in all Meadowville history!

"Nice going, coach," Keith grinned at Danny as they both held the struggling woman down. "Unless I miss my guess, you really do have some brains after all! Boy, that was close!"

"Hold her tight now," Danny cautioned, his freckles gleaming in the sun. "She's still a witch, you know—don't let her make any more spells, or we'll be in for it all over again."

Laurie, Christopher, and Tracy, to whom first sight of Madame Theodora Moon had been like a punch in the nose, could only continue to hold the terrible apparition down, their faces awed and duly impressed with the entire situation. Simone only barked.

"Brats!" Madame Moon screamed from somewhere beneath the pile of human flesh. "You little brats—let me go, do you hear—let me go right now or I'll *icky* and I'll *ticky* and I'll *ricky* and *roo*—"

The strange words came out muffled and garbled, but Keith Partridge heard them all the same. He stared grimly down at the crone and kept her arms pinned, as well as her shoulders. He was still very angry.

"No, you won't, you old witch," he puffed. "You've ridden your last broomstick, you can bet. The party's over, Madame Moon!"

He got another imprecation for his pains. A blasting oath of a curse.

Meanwhile, Shirley Partridge had retained enough

presence of mind to rush back into the house to phone the Police Department.

The entire world might have been crumbling, but it's always a mother who knows just what to do in a pinch. When someone has to do something constructive and intelligent, like calling for official help.

On the shaded porch, blissfully unaware of all that was taking place, Reuben Kinkaid began to stir wakefully. Yet, when he managed to sit up, blink his eyes, and pass a hand over his damp forehead, he had total recall of the ghostly face which had greeted him when he had answered the chiming of the front doorbell. For that, he had his usual and somewhat pleading answer. His eyes rolled heavenward, as if seeking divine assistance, and the familiar Kinkaid prayer emanated from his lips.

"Why me?" he asked, almost whimpering. *"Why is it always me?"*

Nobody could have answered that one.

Not the Good Lord.

And certainly not the Partridge Family.

All the rest of that sunny day, the Partridge household continued to be a veritable beehive of activity. The weird incidents and events which had begun with a shortcut through the Meadowville cemetery had come to a happy conclusion. Meadowville squad cars had driven up, sirens all ascream, and Chief John Joseph Jiggs and his men had grimly and happily put Madame Theodora Moon in handcuffs and led her away. The old woman, still shrieking curses and spitting out venomous threats, was hauled off to one of the many cells down at Headquarters. No one was very sorry to see her go. Least of all, Keith and Danny Partridge. They were quite sure they would remember her all the rest of their lives, and they were

equally positive they would dream about her often. Especially during Halloween or any night when the moon was full and there were dark shadows in the sky. She was a thoroughly unforgettable person. Bad, all right, but memorable, no matter how you looked at it. As was that old black cat of hers—that big, yellow-eyed animal which had tried to run away when he saw the deputies coming with his mistress in handcuffs. What a monster he was!

It had taken three of Chief Jiggs' youngest deputies to hunt him down before he bolted out of the neighborhood like a black flash. After all, nobody wanted a creature like that roaming about the town, frightening children. Enough was enough! Simone had leaped to help collar black Nicholas, cornering him in the backyard garden behind the house. Just this once, Simone, usually a lazy cuss, had jumped in and helped, yipping and barking like a pack of hounds. Nicholas had surrendered meekly.

"Ugh," Danny said when Madame Moon and her cat were finally gone. "Seeing that ugly old witch has soured me on *The Wizard of Oz* forever. I'll never be able to watch that on the tube again. Never."

"Don't be silly," Keith smiled. "What's one thing got to do with the other? The movie's great. And funny, too. It won't remind me of old Madame Moon. Don't let her spoil a good thing for you, Danny."

"Just the same," Danny murmured, still unconvinced.

Laurie wanted to know more about everything, so Keith and Danny filled her in on the rest of the story while Shirley Partridge apologized to Reuben Kinkaid all over again. The hapless manager of the Partridges was taking everything in with his mouth hanging open. How could such a nice family get in so much darn trouble? It was incredible, really, but they al-

ways did. Without fail. They were as regular as taxes!

"I'm sorry, Reuben. These things just seem to happen."

"Don't they though?" agreed Reuben, feeling surly. "I'm surprised you haven't got a gray hair in that beautiful head of yours, Shirley. Honest to Pete. Don't these things age you at all?"

"A little," she had to admit, ruefully. "Whenever any of them is overdue, like the boys were last night, well—I'm no Joan of Arc, you know. I fold up like an umbrella."

"That's what you say," he sniffed. "But you always seem to keep your nerve and a stiff upper lip. That Keith—wow. Spy hunts, haunted houses, airplane crashes—though I was in on that one, wasn't I?—and that time he thought he wanted to be a ballplayer and give up the guitar. And leave me not forget little Danny Partridge. Now, there, *there* is a bundle of trouble, all right. If he was my son, I'd—"

Shirley chuckled. "Yes, Reuben? If he was your son, what would you do? I'd really like to know."

Reuben Kinkaid shuddered grimly.

"I'd join a monastery in Tibet, where there was no phone, have my food sent in to me, and never ever subscribe to *The Wall Street Journal*. That's what I'd do, so help me, Shirley Partridge."

At that particular moment, Danny Partridge and Keith and Laurie came wandering in from the kitchen. Tracy and Simone trailed after them. Seeing the woebegone expression on Reuben Kinkaid's face, Danny arched his eyebrows. There wasn't a nuance of Reuben Kinkaid's face and many moods that Danny wasn't tuned in on.

"You don't look so good, Mister Kinkaid. Anything wrong?"

"No, no, Danny. Your mother and I were just talk-

ing. Passing the time of day, you know, before I catch my plane back to Chicago."

"Happy talk, Mister Kinkaid?"

"Of course, of course—" The manager looked at him in surprise. "Why, you little refugee from a Swiss bank account, what makes you think I'm unhappy? Do I look unhappy or something?"

Danny nodded sadly. "Yes, you do. You look as if you're still bothered about seeing old Madame Moon. Must have been a shock to you, all right. Opening the door and seeing *her*. She's no pretty valentine."

Reuben Kinkaid shuddered again. "That has got to be the understatement of the year, Danny. I'll see her in my nightmares."

There was a murmur of assent from the rest of the kids.

Danny shrugged. "One has to live with these traumatic experiences. You'll get over it. I'm sure of that. Be brave, Mister Kinkaid."

"I'll try," Reuben Kinkaid sighed. "Honest, I'll try, Danny."

"Good man. That's the spirit."

Keith Partridge changed the subject before Reuben had apoplexy right in front of all of them. "Gee, Mom. Where's Peter Janville? Thought he was coming back after he left the Chief's office."

"He'll be here, Keith," Shirley frowned a little, for the lawyer was now overdue. "He wanted to call his people in New York to tell them he straightened out the Karloka Vault business. And to remind them to put a bug in young Tollings Karloka's ear that he can't give keys to tombs away, the way he has been doing."

"He's a great guy," Keith exulted. "You should have seen him with that gun last night. *Pow, pow!* A regular Fastest Gun in the Cemetery."

"Yes," Laurie Partridge said very slowly and very

deliberately. "I think he would make some woman a very fine husband. He's a real catch all down the line. Looks, intelligence, money—"

"You," Shirley Partridge said, with a smile, "bite your tongue, young lady. And that's an order."

The Partridge Family all exchanged knowing grins, and Reuben Kinkaid stared around the room, puzzled. Something was going on again, as usual, and as usual, and perfectly according to schedule, he was sure he was going to be the last one to know. But he was too limp to protest, so he sat back in his stuffed chair and wearily wondered aloud if he could have another cup of coffee and another slice of the angel food cake which Shirley had finished baking when all the excitement had died down.

"Reuben," Keith said, "we *will* play the new song for you. Right before dinner. Okay?"

"Sure. We can always use a new hit record to swell the coffers."

"This one is good," Keith said firmly. "It's got the beat. I like it myself, and that's a pretty good sign."

"Mister Kinkaid." Danny Partridge had that old familiar note in his voice. "About hit records. Now that you've brought the subject up, I'd like to give you my ideas on profit-sharing. It strikes me that the author and composer of the tune should receive a bit more than ninety percent of all the rights—"

Reuben Kinkaid raised his eyes to the ceiling of the room.

He closed them.

He shuddered inwardly as Danny rambled on with fervor and facts.

Why me? Reuben asked silently once more, *why is it always me that these things happen to?*

As ever, there was no one to answer him.

Nobody ever gets answers to questions like that.

"Peter?"

"Thanks for coming out to the car, Shirley. I wanted to make my goodbyes in private."

"Goodbye? But—"

Peter Janville, standing alongside his blue sportscar on the sidewalk before the house, never seemed taller or handsomer. Or yet grimmer. It was as if he might still have been thinking of the Meadowville cemetery and all the terrible things that had happened. Yet Shirley somehow sensed that his attitude had nothing to do with those things. It had to be something else. He was too brave a man to dwell on the past. It must be something else, something perhaps far more serious.

It was. Unfortunately.

"I called my firm in New York, as you know. They're very happy the investigation worked out so well. Too happy, in fact. They've offered me something I can't refuse. A branch office. In England, no less. They want me to head it and they—want me to go over right now to get things going. It means at least six months in Europe, Shirley. If I take it."

She smiled, happy for him and a little sad for herself.

"You take it. You'd be a fool not to. Six months isn't forever, Peter. The Partridge Family will still be here when you come back. And I will to. So what's the problem?"

His smile was almost as wide as his shoulders.

"There is no problem, not now. Kiss the kids for me. There's no greater gang of kids in captivity. I love them all. Not to mention their dear lovely Mom."

"Oh, Peter—"

He kissed her, a long and ardent kiss, and then he stepped back into his car and drove away from the block and out of her life almost as quickly as he had

come. Peter Janville. Laurie was right. He'd make some lucky woman a very fine husband indeed.

Shirley Partridge walked back into her house, convinced that God was in his Heaven and all was right with the world. As Browning had so joyfully committed to poetry. With a song in his words.

The Wicked Witch of Meadowville was a thing of the past.

And Mother Partridge and her flock were clicking on all six cylinders again. As they usually did, when the chips were down.

Not even a witch and all the hexes in the world would ever ruin what they had. Not all the witchcraft in the underworld.

And no way!

As Keith Partridge liked to say.

12. MY SON, THE GREATEST

□ "Mom."

"Yes, Keith?"

"Can we rap a little? There's something I want to talk to you about. It's been bugging me a little."

"Certainly, honey. We haven't had a good old-fashioned mother and son session in—well, a week, at least."

It was several days after the sensation which had rocked all Meadowville. The discovery and apprehension of a famous witch. Also, Peter Janville had flown to Europe, and Reuben Kinkaid was back at his desk in Chicago, busily managing the affairs of the Partridge Family. Things had settled down, just a little bit, for a mother of five.

The weather was still beautifully seasonal and pleasant. There was always sunshine, blue skies, fleecy clouds, and balmy breezes.

"Well, what's bothering you, Keith?"

They were in the kitchen, and it was almost high

noon of the new day. The rest of the kids were in the garage, tuning up their instruments for a rehearsal that Keith had called for after lunch. Reuben Kinkaid had found them a playing date, and their vacation was over. Two weeks in late July at the fabulous Monmouth Room in St. Louis.

"It's about Madame Moon—and all that fuss." Keith looked a little pale around the gills. Which was surprising, because he was wearing a blue turtleneck shirt and cream-colored bellbottoms, and those sort of clothes usually complemented his appearance very nicely. "I think maybe that old witch wasn't as crazy as we all thought."

"What do you mean by that?"

Shirley stopped stirring the pot of simmering tomato sauce. She didn't like Keith's tone one bit. He sounded—*funny*.

"Well, you remember the curse she put on us? On the whole house? And she even threw Reuben in for good measure. Now, I don't believe in ghosts or witchcraft or—gee whiz, Mom—"

"Keith Partridge, if something is wrong, you'd better tell me quick. I can't stand surprises—"

He looked as helpless as he had when he was six years old and couldn't get his hand out of the cookie jar he had tried to steal from.

"Mom, I—oh, darn—will you look at this?"

Suddenly, he had put both his hands on the bottom of the turtleneck shirt and rolled it up rapidly. He never wore an undershirt, as his mother knew, but all she could do was gasp and drop her spoon at the sight of his bared flesh. His stomach, in particular, was enough to make the heart within her drop to her shoe-tops. Enough to scare any mother.

Great, ugly, red, poisonous-looking welts and splotches covered nearly the entire area of his

abdomen. Even his navel was spotted with a flaming patch of infection. The surface of his skin was nearly completely dotted and spotted with a rash of some incredible type.

"When did you get *that*?" she wailed, like every other mother in the world, rushing to him to examine the sight more closely.

"Came on me last night. I tried not to scratch it. Used a ton of that pink ointment in the bathroom. But nothing worked. It's worse this morning—I had chicken pox when I was a kid, didn't I, Mom?"

"You certainly did! And the mumps and the measles and scarlet fever. Oh, Keith—I've never seen a rash like that before—"

"Then I was right," he mumbled, in an awed tone. "The old witch put a curse on me. She's paying me off. But the rest of the kids are all right, as far as I know—"

"You stop that kind of talk, right now," she flared at him angrily, because she was frightened herself. "It's that dirty old cemetery you were in all night. Or your hike to Grove Wood. You must have brushed against a poison ivy bush or something. Don't talk nonsense, Keith."

"Then what is it?" he demanded truculently. "You said yourself you never saw anything like it before. Well, I never have either."

"Get out the bus," she snapped with authority, taking off her apron and turning off the jets on the stove. "We'll go see Dr. Argus right now. I won't have you worrying or imagining all crazy sorts of things about this. It's bad for you, and it's not natural. Come on, now. I'll go tell the kids lunch will be a little later than usual."

"But, Mom—"

"No buts, young man. I'm still your mother and

still your boss until you get a woman of your own. And don't you forget it for a minute! Now, you go warm up that bus of ours while I phone Dr. Argus and tell him it's an emergency."

Keith Partridge nodded, very, very meekly.

"Yes, Mom," he said, still sounding like a scared child.

Within less than ten minutes, they were off and running to the kindly doctor's office, leaving a puzzled family standing in the driveway, wondering why Keith looked like he wanted to scratch himself to pieces and Mom looked as if she wanted to eat nails.

"Oh, well," Danny Partridge sighed to the rest of the children. "Never a dull moment. That's us Partridges."

"*We* Partridges," Laurie corrected him, as puzzled as everyone else. She'd seldom seen Mom so intense and scared-looking.

"Either way," Danny said. "What's the difference?"

Laurie Partridge had to agree with that.

There was none that she herself could see.

Keith Partridge, a real genuine smile on his face, got behind the wheel of the big bus. Mom had driven him to the Doctor's office. But he felt so relieved and so good, he had to do something. So he was going to drive Mom back home in style. The sun was shining again.

Shirley lingered a moment longer on Dr. Argus' doorstep.

"I knew it had to be something," she said brightly, "but I just couldn't tell what for sure."

Dr. Argus was round, chubbily cheerful, and wore glasses as big as Keith's binoculars. A kindly man who had been the family physician for years. But not even he had ever seen a case like the one young Keith had

fallen victim to. Oh, well. One learned something new every day. Especially in a community with so many young people.

"Poison Oak. No more, no less, Shirley."

"Thank God," Shirley Partridge said fervently. "Sweet, blessed, scratchy old Poison Oak. I couldn't be happier, Dr. Argus."

The Doctor blinked at his office door. Patients could be peculiar.

"Poison Oak makes you happy?"

"You'll never know how happy. When I think of what it might have been. There are far worse things in the world, you know."

"Well, it's a lot more severe and dangerous than Poison Ivy, of course. You'll have to watch him. Use plenty of that lotion. And above all, he mustn't scratch. It spreads like a plague."

"I know. I'll do just what you told me. Well, good-bye, Dr. Argus. Thanks again. You've been a great help."

"Just tell him to stay out of Grove Wood. He can go watch the birds somewhere else, can't he?"

"Don't worry. He will. He's going to stay home and watch the Partridges. That's all the birds he'll need for now."

Dr. Argus chuckled at the jest, waved a hand, and went back into his quiet office. Shirley tripped gaily down the stoop, walking with a bouncing stride back to the big bus waiting for her. She felt very young, just about nineteen years of age and going on her very first date.

The sky seemed bluer, brighter than ever.

"Home, James," she caroled sweetly to Keith as she stepped up into the bus and took the seat just behind the driver's place.

"Well, you're feeling okay, aren't you?"

"And why not? My loving son has a bad case of Poison Oak. But he has not been put under an evil spell, there is no such thing as curses and the house will not burn down. Amen to that."

"I was scared," Keith admitted, putting the bus into gear. It roared with life, throbbing. "And you were too. Come on, now. Fess up. Confession is good for the mother."

"Good for the son, too. Yes, I was scared."

"Then that makes us even, Mom."

"We'll always be that, Keith. At least, I hope so."

Keith Partridge nodded, swung the wheel, released the brake, and the huge old rainbow-painted bus nosed into the street and headed home. This time a NERVOUS MOTHER was not driving. Just a RELIEVED SON.

"Say, Mom."

"Yes, honey."

"You really kind of liked that Mr. Janville, didn't you?"

"I can't say no to that, Keith. He's a fine man. Almost as fine as your father was. I like men like Peter Janville."

"Good for you. The kids and I all took a vote, and we think he's aces, too. So if you feel like marrying him, why, you go right ahead."

"Gee, thanks. That's awfully sweet of all of you . . ."

"You being sarcastic, Mom?"

"Who—me? Whatever gave you that silly idea?"

Keith Partridge did not answer but merely shrugged, and concentrated on his driving. Traffic was heavy for Meadowville at that hour of the day. Everybody seemed to be out, going somewhere.

Shirley Partridge stared at the back of his handsome head, and her heart filled with love. And that never-

changing emotion that a mother can have for her very first child. Keith Partridge.

My son, she thought.

The Greatest.

Even if he did have the worst case of Poison Oak Dr. Argus had ever seen. A classic case, the Doctor had admitted.

Rash, red patches and all, she adored her Number One Son.

There was always enough love left in Shirley Partridge for all the rest of the children, from Keith right on down to little Tracy.

With Laurie and Danny and Christopher in between.

The family that truly *played* together did stay together.

And nobody ever played any better than the Partridge Family.

13. OVER THE RAINBOW

□ There was a rather bizarre postscript to the strange tale of Theodora Moon, the Wicked Witch of Meadowville. An eerie finale which did very little to make the citizens of that little town, as well as the Partridge Family, very happy. And something that made many an idle tongue wag, a frightened head shake, and a God-fearing person look fearfully over his shoulder on dark and moonless nights.

Sometime in the last days of July, when the Partridges were in St. Louis, playing to delighted audiences in the Monmouth Room and making music lovers stomp their feet in appreciation, something bad happened down at Chief John Joseph Jiggs' very fine police station.

Madame Moon was a guest of honor, of course, occupying the strongest cell, the one with a double-padlocked door and very thick steel bars. And yet—well, on this particular night, when the turnkey came to bring the old crone a tray of dinner, he experienced

a tremendous shock of surprise. In fact, he was so startled, he dropped the tray of food and made an awful mess.

For the door to Madame Moon's private cell was hanging open.

The cell was empty.

No one was in it.

Certainly not the Madame, and neither was Nicholas, the large black cat which Chief Jiggs had let her keep for company.

A hue and cry was raised, of course, and squad cars and deputies went on a witch hunt that lasted through the night and the next day. Without success. The Madame had vanished into thin air.

No one knew how she had gone or where she had gone.

And the biggest mystery of all was how she had escaped from a well-protected, double-padlocked cell. The Madame's trial for witchcraft-practicing and cemetery-trespassing had been but a few days off, but that alone didn't seem to explain the fantastic flight from jail. There had to be some other explanation for her sudden escape.

But—Madame Theodora Moon was never found, sad to say.

And never seen again. Not ever.

It was as if the earth had swallowed her up.

And all anyone could do, in their heart of hearts, was hope and pray that she never decided to come back to Meadowville again.

Meadowville didn't need a witch. And never would.

The only sign that the jail cell had held the fabulous and awesome personage of the legendary Madame Moon was a curious bit of chalked writing on the back wall of the chamber.

In big yellow letters, for all the world to see, and for Chief John Joseph Jiggs and his frightened men to puzzle over for the rest of their natural lives, was the following weird wordage:

ICKY-TICKY-RICKY-ROO—

To this day, no one, not anybody, knows or understands what the quaint and strange message means.

How could anybody, really?

Unless he was a witch himself.



SPOOKED!

The Partridge family had always come out on top in their battles with the forces of evil—but now rock's first family faced a new and weird creepy kind of danger.

Theodora Moon, the witch-i-est witch of the West, is hunting the Partridge family. Aiding her is her satanic brother, Brother George. And at her command was the occultic force called **The All-Destroying Hex.**

From the moment the first icy shivers of terror hit them, all the Partridges knew that they were in for a scary adventure that was really out of this world!

A thrilling, chilling, new novel based on the great Screen Gems series on ABC-TV, starring Shirley Jones.

