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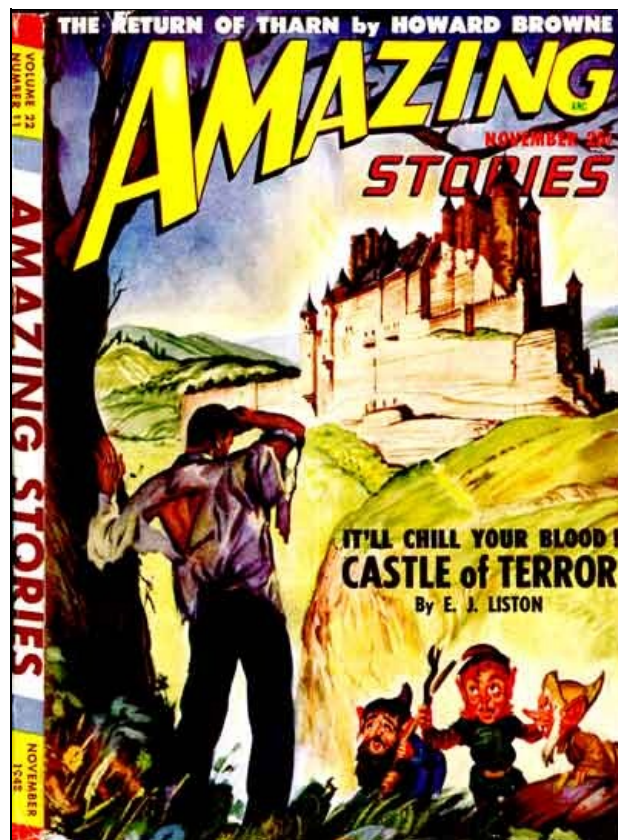
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## COLD GHOST

## by Chester S. Geier

All Hager had to do was slow the dogsled to a walk, and his partner died. A perfect crime—no chance to get caught!

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**I**n the valley, with the sheltering hills now behind them, the bitterly cold wind drove at the sled with unchecked ferocity. Gusts of snow came with the wind, thick and dry, the separate particles of it stinging on contact.

The dogs made slow progress through the deep drifts. Hager's smoldering irritation blazed into abrupt rage. From his position at the rear of the sled, he lashed out with the driver's whip that he held in one heavily mittened hand, shouting behind the wool scarf covering the lower half of his face. The dogs lunged in their traces, whining. A couple floundered in the powdery footing and were immediately snapped at by their companions behind them.



**Hager huddled before the fire, trembling with cold that filled him with terror.**

The snow was falling swiftly and with a sinister steadiness. It seemed to hang like a vast white curtain over the valley, obscuring the hills and the fanged outline of mountains beyond. The wind seized portions of the curtain and twisted it into fantastic shapes—the shapes of demons, Hager thought suddenly. For the scene through which he moved was a kind of hell, a white and frozen hell, with the howl of the wind like the despairing shrieks of tormented souls.

Hager pictured himself as one of them. And Cahill, huddled in furs on the sled, another. He cursed behind the scarf as he thought of Cahill. This was Cahill's fault, their being out here in the storm. If it weren't for Cahill, he would be back at the cabin, snug and warm, logs blazing cheerfully in the fireplace.

It was a rotten time for Cahill to have taken sick, Hager fumed. But it had happened. And it had left him with nothing else to do but pack their catch of furs, harness up the sled, and start out with Cahill for the doctor in Moose Gulch.

He almost regretted having taken the furs. With Cahill an added burden on the sled, it was too large a load for the dogs to pull with the necessary speed and endurance. But he hadn't dared to leave the entire season's catch unguarded at the cabin. If some wanderer appeared in his and Cahill's absence, the furs would be an irresistible temptation.

Fearing, thus, to leave the furs behind, and now endangered by their weight, Hager found the situation maddening. And the storm was making matters worse. It was near the end of winter, but the climate had chosen this moment to be at its most unco-operative.

Hager muttered blackly against the storm, wondering why he had allowed his trapper's dream of wealth to lure him to this far northern corner of Alaska. It was a cold, bleak and hostile country. Tiny settlements, like Moose Gulch were few and far between. Of course, furs were at their best and most plentiful here. He and Cahill had proved that, for their catch was a large one. Hager's thoughts soared briefly above his bitter mood as he thought of the money the furs would bring. And of the things that the money would bring back in civilization.

Added to what he had so far managed to save, his share would make almost enough to start a fox breeding ranch. Or a mink ranch. Almost enough—but not quite. That meant he would have to spend another winter in this location, and Hager flinched at the thought. He hated loneliness and

the bitter, subzero cold. Most of all he hated the cold. Only a fur breeding ranch, with large, warm living quarters, would have made it bearable.

Hager didn't know when the idea came to him. It must have been lying dormant for a long time in a far, dark corner of his mind, only now surging to the fore. Subconsciously he must have prepared himself for this moment of inspiration. He wasn't sure. He was aware only of an interval while he plodded behind the sled, drawn by the struggling and panting team, cursing the dogs, cursing Cahill and the fierce cold that mischievously searched out the most tender portions of his face beneath the hood of his parka. There was that moment, and then—

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**A**nd then he found himself toying with the thought of murdering Cahill.

With the other out of the way, the entire proceeds from the sale of furs would be his. There would be no necessity to split. He could start the fur ranch at once. He wouldn't have to spend another winter in this vicious cold. He—

A dozen fascinating new possibilities opened up to Hager. It was as though he had been blind and was able to see only now. Breath-taking vistas blossomed before his awakened eyes. There was music in what he visioned, music and the voices of women, bright lights, color, movement, and the warmth of gentler climes.

The brightest part of the picture was that Cahill's death need not be outright murder. The man was sick. His life depended on getting him into the hands of the doctor in Moose Gulch as quickly as possible.

If Hager were simply to delay in reaching the settlement, Cahill would die as surely as though from the thrust of a knife or the impact of a bullet. Exposure to the biting cold would finish him. And nobody would know. Hager could always claim that he had hurried as best he could under the difficult, hampering circumstances of the storm, but that Cahill had died on the way. As easy as that. If Marshal Art Maddox stuck his long nose into the matter, Cahill's unmarked body would be proof that there had been no foul play.

Hager felt satisfied that his scheme was without loopholes. The idea had become a definite plan. And now his square lips hardened with determination behind the scarf. He looked at Cahill, dozing feverishly on the sled, with deep-set gray eyes that were bleak and implacable.

Cahill would never reach Moose Gulch alive.

With his grim purpose giving new drive to his actions, Hager glanced about him. It was difficult to see through the curtain of snow that hung between him and the landscape, but by squinting steadily through momentary rifts made by the frigid, lashing wind, he was able presently to discern that they were near the pass leading out of the valley. Beyond the pass, he knew, was a forest, dipping down to the banks of a frozen stream. The stream ran for several miles until it branched into a river, which in turn led directly into Moose Gulch. With these landmarks to guide him, a traveler through the snow-bound wilderness could reach the settlement easily and quickly. But Hager didn't intend to do that. He now had time to kill. He chuckled darkly over the accuracy of the phrase.

Plodding toward the pass, he deliberately slowed his steps. He no longer used the whip or shouted at the dogs for greater speed. The animals were grateful for the respite. They slackened their pace, tongues lolling and bushy tails waving as they bobbed in their plowed path through the white drifts.

Cahill dozed on. Once or twice he moved restlessly amid the furs piled about him. It was as though some deep, vague instinct warned him that something was wrong.

Hager watched the other sharply for a time, then desisted to give his attention to maneuvering the sled through the pass. The forest appeared, the trees wraith-like under their thick, white mantles of snow. Hager didn't follow the dip in the land that led toward the frozen stream. He guided the dogs in the opposite direction and began watching Cahill again. He hoped that the man would not awake until less familiar territory surrounded them.

Cahill didn't awake. He dozed and tossed, his lips moving occasionally in a soundless mutter. His gaunt, leathery face was pale under its growth of grizzled whiskers.

The snow-covered land rose, became rocky and difficult. The dogs began laboring with increasing weariness in their efforts to keep pulling the heavy sled. Hager realized he couldn't go in this direction much longer. When a ravine suddenly presented itself, relatively free of snow, he decided to call a halt.

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**U**nfastening the dogs, he left the ravine and began searching through the snow for brushwood. It took time, but Hager was in no hurry. He gathered an armful and finally returned to the sled.

Cahill was awake. He had propped himself feebly among the furs, his gaunt face blank and drab

with sickness. His filmed blue eyes fastened on Hager.

"Water," he whispered. "Water, Matt."

"Coming up," Hager said. "Just you wait a minute, Ben, and you'll get all the water you want."

Cahill fell back among the furs, and Hager leisurely shaved kindling and stacked the wood and then set it ablaze. The ravine was shielded from the wind, and the wood ignited without difficulty. At last Hager went to the sled and removed the small pack he had fortunately thought to bring along. His experience with the wilderness had trained him never to overlook the smallest precautions.

Hager took a handled pan from the pack. He filled it with snow and then held the pan over the flames. When the snow melted, he filled a tin cup with the liquid and went over to Cahill. He had to steady the cup as the other drank.

Finally Cahill nodded. His eyes seemed to clear. He glanced about him, and a dim worry moved in his face.

"Matt, where are we?"

"Somewhere near Boot Valley."

"You ... you mean we're lost?"

"I sort of got mixed up in the storm. Nothing to worry about."

Cahill shivered suddenly. "We got to reach town, Matt. Got to see the doctor."

Hager nodded. "How do you feel?"

"It's getting worse. I can feel it getting worse. I'm cold now, Matt. Before ... before I was...." Cahill's voice trailed off. He had to make an effort before he was able to speak again. "Got ... got to see the doctor, Matt. Can't waste any time."

"I know," Hager said. "But the team needs a little rest. They've had a lot of heavy hauling, and there's still a distance to go."

Cahill nodded miserably, shivering. He burrowed into the furs, still shivering, breathing rapidly through parted lips. Slowly the chill left him. His eyes clouded again. Then his lids fell, and he dozed once more.

Hager brewed tea and drank it slowly, squatting before the fire. Then he packed and lighted his pipe. He stared into the flames with narrowed eyes, seeing his dreams pictured there. They were pleasant dreams.

Hager remained in the ravine until the supply of wood was gone. Then he fastened the dogs back into their traces and resumed his position behind the sled. With shouts and cracks of the whip, he guided the animals out of the ravine, following the downward slope of the land this time.

The snow stopped falling after a while, but the wind and the cold increased. The cold hung on the air like an enormous, transparent weight. Somehow it seemed to give an impossible crystalline purity to the snow blanketing the trees and the land. In doing so, it emphasized and magnified its very presence. It made itself something almost alive and sentient, icily malignant, overbearing, utterly cruel and without mercy.

Hager cursed the cold with redoubled venom. Despite the thickness of his fur parka and the layers of clothing beneath the cold seemed to soak into him like an all-penetrating liquid. He had to wave his arms and stamp his feet to fight back a creeping numbness.

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**B**ut the terrible chill could not subdue the flame of purpose burning in Hager's mind. That part of him remained keenly alert. The sled was moving in the direction of the stream, and he was careful to judge the distance carefully. He didn't want to approach too close. At just the right moment he turned the sled at angle back toward the way from which it had come. It was his plan to keep zigzagging, approaching the stream and then retreating, always at a tangent. A great deal of time would be consumed in this way, with very little actual forward progress toward Moose Gulch.

He repeated this maneuver again and again. Cahill roused a few times to inquire weakly about their progress. Always Hager gave the same answer.

"We're getting there, Ben. It won't be long now. Don't you worry."

After that Cahill was silent. It seemed evident to Hager that the man was sinking rapidly. But not as rapidly as Hager wished. He knew he couldn't bear the paralyzing cold much longer, and his hatred of it grew.

The sled reached a group of slab-like rock outcroppings that offered shelter from the slashing wind. Hager stopped the sled behind their protection for a short rest. The additional delay suited his plans.

While the dogs huddled together in the snow, Hager went around the sled to get the pack. He glanced at Cahill's face—and his muscles became tense. Cahill's eyes were open. Cahill was watching him with a terrible steadiness and a soul-searing clarity. Cahill ... *knew*.

Hager realized that Cahill must have been awake for quite some time, watching the actions of the sled. The man had clearly discovered Hager's deception.

Hager felt transfixed by the accusing brightness in the other's eyes. He sensed that his guilt was written vividly and unmistakably in his face. He fumbled for words that would form an excuse, an apology, some sort of plausible lie—anything that would remove the dreadful knowledge in Cahill's eyes. But no words came.

After a strained, bitter moment Cahill spoke. His voice was low, yet somehow curiously distinct. "You're trying to kill me, Matt. I see it now. You aren't going straight toward Moose Gulch. You're tracking back and forth to waste time. You ... want me to die!"

"That isn't true," Hager blurted. "I ... I got lost. The storm and cold got me mixed up."

Cahill went on as though he hadn't heard. "It's the furs, isn't it, Matt? You want all the money for yourself. With me out of the way, you won't have any trouble."

"I got mixed up, I tell you," Hager insisted.

Cahill said nothing further. With a burst of energy as sudden as it was amazing, he gripped the sides of the sled and began pushing himself erect. His strangely clear eyes were fixed on Hager.

Mastering a brief surge of panic, Hager threw himself forward, forcing Cahill back into the sled. Cahill struggled a moment, but the reserve strength he had managed to summon quickly gave out. He fell back into the sled and lay limp and quiet, his eyes closed, breathing harshly and rapidly.

Hager watched for several minutes, the cold creeping slyly into him with the inactivity. Then, assured that Cahill would make no further trouble, he obtained the pack. He fed the dogs this time, tossing them pieces of dried meat. They would need renewed strength and energy to take him the remaining distance to Moose Gulch. Finally, gathering brushwood, Hager built a small fire and brewed tea. He ate a couple of thick sandwiches as he drank the tea, chewing with methodic slowness and glancing at Cahill.

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**T**he other hadn't stirred since making his accusation. But when Hager finished eating, Cahill's eyes opened once more. He looked at Hager for a long, breathless moment. Only a vestige of the unnatural brightness that had been in his eyes remained now. With what must have required a tremendous effort, he spoke.

"You aren't going to get away with this, Matt. I ... I'm going to get you. I'm going to make you pay."

A moment longer Cahill looked at Hager. And then the last remnant of brightness left his eyes. His lids fell slowly. He looked exhausted and seemed to be resting. But several minutes later, acting on a sudden realization, Hager felt for Cahill's pulse and found that the man was dead.

Triumph spread through Hager like a heady warmth. It was over. The money from the furs would be his alone. He would have the fur ranch, now. But there was no hurry about that. He would travel a little first and have some fun.

The best part of it was that he would never have to worry. Cahill's body was completely unmarked. It was very obvious that he had died of illness. There couldn't possibly be any suspicions.

Then Hager recalled the threat Cahill had made before dying. Cahill had promised revenge, but there was nothing he could do now. Hager shrugged the memory away. The dead were dead. They could do no harm.

Hager now lost no time in reaching Moose Gulch. He drove the dogs relentlessly, trotting behind the sled. Elation gave him a strength that took him easily over the miles.

A short time before he entered the settlement it began to snow again. Hager was pleased. The snow would cover up the tracks he had left in the event that Art Maddox did any snooping.

He went directly to the doctor's home, carrying the body of Cahill inside. He cleverly played the part of a man reluctant to believe that his partner had died.

"Isn't there something you can do, Doc?" he asked anxiously. "Maybe it isn't too late."

The other straightened from his examination of Cahill and shook his white thatch. His round, ruddy features were sympathetic. "I'm afraid it's all over. Ben Cahill's as dead as he'll ever be. Most likely he passed away some time before you were able to reach town. Nothing left to do now but turn him over to the undertaker. That's me, in case you don't know. In Moose Gulch it takes two, three jobs to keep a man fairly busy."

Hager sighed and looked properly grief-stricken. "Well, I'll leave you to take care of things, Doc. Do a good job—nothing but the best, you know. Ben was the finest partner a man could ever have."

Hager left and proceeded to visit acquaintances in the settlement, spreading the news of Cahill's death. He was showered with condolences, which he accepted with a suitable air of melancholy. Later, eating supper in the tiny dining room of Moose Gulch's small, frame hotel, he was joined at the table by Art Maddox.

The marshal was a tall, raw-boned man with a long nose and protruding eyes that looked deceptively mild. His presence filled Hager with a vague dread.

"Heard Ben Cahill took sick and died while you were bringing him into town," Maddox began. "Sure is too bad. How did it happen?"

Hager explained, adhering closely to essential facts, though he omitted certain others and stretched a point here and there. He finished, "I tried to get Ben into town as fast as I could, but it was snowing hard and I almost got lost a couple of times. Ben was sick bad, and with the cold and all, he died on the way."

"It kind of looks like you expected that to happen," Maddox said.

Hager grew tense. "What do you mean?"

"The way you took the furs along kind of makes it look like you expected Ben Cahill to die. Besides, you ought to have known that the furs would slow you down on the trip to town."

"I was afraid to leave the furs at the cabin," Hager defended. "Suppose somebody stole them while me and Ben were gone? A whole season's catch. I just couldn't take a chance."

Maddox nodded with evident reluctance. "That's true enough, I guess. I was just sort of wondering about it." He stood up. "Well, sorry to have bothered you."

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**H**ager made a generous gesture. "No bother at all." He watched as Maddox left the room, grinning inwardly. Maddox apparently suspected something in his snooping, suspicious way, but the only point of attack he'd been able to find was one for which Hager had a satisfactory explanation. Hager felt certain that he wouldn't be questioned again. And with the snow blotting out the erratic trail the sled had left, he was confident that he had nothing to fear from Maddox any longer.

The grin crept out around his square lips. He was safe. He had committed the perfect crime.

Hager checked in at the hotel, and after a pleasant evening spent at one of Moose Gulch's two saloons, he returned and went to bed. He had a restless night. The hotel was warm enough, and the covers on the bed thick, but a strange feeling of cold seemed to envelop him. And though he emptied the bottle of whisky he had brought with him, the cold persisted.

He slept fitfully. Once he dreamed that he was tied, naked, to the sled and being driven by Cahill through a terrific snow storm. The cold was so intense it seared him like fire. He awoke, shivering, a vivid recollection of Cahill's gaunt, accusing features in his mind. Again he seemed to hear Cahill's dying promise.

*"You aren't going to get away with this, Matt. I'm going to get you. I'm going to make you pay."*

And now, shuddering with that weird cold that seemed to enclose him like a huge, vengeful fist, Hager wondered.

The cold remained with him in the days that followed. It not only remained. It grew more unbearable.

Hager began to have a persecuted feeling. The cold stayed with him wherever he went. Even near hot stoves, or in heated rooms, he felt chilled. No one else seemed to notice it. The cold seemed intended for him alone. More and more, he wondered about Cahill's threat.

He was materialistic. He didn't believe in ghosts. But he knew that he was being haunted by an unnatural cold that nobody else seemed able to feel.

He cast about for a method of escaping the cold. The obvious solution was to leave Moose Gulch, as he had intended all along. In his mind the cold was somehow connected with the settlement, through Cahill, who was buried there. A trip to one of the warm, southern regions in the States, he decided, should bring relief.

He sold the furs and with the money took passage on a plane that operated between the settlement and a large town some distance away. Continuing to travel by plane, he presently arrived in Seattle.

Still the cold remained with him. The miles he had put between Moose Gulch and himself hadn't done any good.

Nothing seemed to help. Heavy clothes, nourishing foods, whisky, vigorous exercise—nothing

brought him the warmth he was beginning to crave as an addict craves dope.

Desperately, he resumed his trip, traveling by air and then by train, and finally grasping at any means of transportation that happened to be most convenient. The cold traveled with him. It enveloped him like a shell. It was an invisible prison, shutting him away from the world of warmth.

The climate grew increasingly mild and balmy as he progressed southward. But the chill that always surrounded him grew worse.

More often, now, he thought of Cahill's grim promise. "*I'm going to get you. I'm going to make you pay.*" It repeated itself over and over in his mind. It was emphasized by the invisible blanket of cold wrapped inescapably about him.

Once, in a hotel room where he had been drinking steadily, Hager's despair rose in him to the point of madness. He leaped from the bed, hurling an empty whisky bottle against the wall, screaming mingled curses and entreaties.

"Damn you, Cahill, leave me alone! Haven't you had enough? How much longer are you going to keep torturing me? Leave me alone, do you hear? Leave me alone!"

Cahill didn't seem to hear. Or if he did, he paid no attention. The cold stayed.

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**H**ager began to lose weight. His stocky figure became gaunt, his cheeks sunken. Dark hollows cupped his feverishly bright eyes. His hands trembled. He jerked nervously at sudden noises.

In Los Angeles he yielded to a wild impulse and visited a doctor. He explained his symptoms, omitting their true cause, and pleaded for help.

The doctor gave him a complete physical examination, though it was evident from the man's expression of perplexity that he had learned nothing. "I can't understand it," he told Hager. "There's nothing seriously wrong with you. All you need is plenty of food and rest. You're probably just imagining things."

Hager groaned, paid his bill, and fled.

Several days later found him in Mexico. It was warm—but he didn't feel it. He knew with a terrible certainty that he would never feel warmth again. And he was tired of futilely trying to escape something from which there was no escape. He rented a small house on the outskirts of a town far from the Border and hired an elderly Mexican named Pancho to attend to his needs.

Pancho was a good servant. But he was evidently greatly puzzled by Hager. According to the stories Pancho told his cronies in the town, his *gringo* master insisted that a hot fire be kept going constantly in the fireplace. And in this warm weather, too! As if that alone wasn't enough, the *gringo* also kept himself wrapped thickly in blankets. It was all very strange. The *gringo*, he said, was being tormented by a demon.

The people of the town, a simple folk to whom the supernatural was as real as the sun in the sky, were sympathetic. A priest at the church promptly volunteered his aid. He had, as Pancho subsequently explained to Hager when he appeared with the man, an enviable reputation for his skill in exorcizing devils and evil spirits.

Hager seized at the hope. He clutched at the priest eagerly.

"Try it! Pray for me! Do something—anything!"

The priest nodded gravely and began his task.

It worked.

Hager felt warm again.

A wild delight filled him. For the first time he became aware that the room was stifling, but the mere fact that he was able to feel it seemed the most wonderful thing in the world. He had a sense of freedom as complete as though he had been released into the sunlight after long confinement in a lightless dungeon.

He wrung the priest's hand, forced money on him, and then told Pancho he was throwing a *fiesta* for the entire town that evening. Pancho was to take care of the details immediately. No expense was to be spared.

For the rest of the day, Hager soaked himself in the sunlight, reveling in the delicious warmth. And when evening came he attended the *fiesta* in high spirits. He ate *tortillas*, drank wine, and danced with innumerable dark-eyed *senoritas*.

It was late when he returned to the house with Pancho. He found a robed figure waiting patiently at the door. It was the priest. Something about the man's solemn expression filled Hager with dread.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Has something happened?"

In his halting English, Pancho translated the gist of the priest's explanation. "The *padre* say he no can help you, *senor*. He say he have how you call vision. It tell him you must pay."

There was more. But Hager didn't need any more to know that he was being refused further help for the crime he had committed.

A short while after the priest left he felt the cold again.

Pancho built a fire in the fireplace, and Hager crouched before it, huddled in blankets and shivering. He was still there when Pancho went to bed. And he was still there when Pancho awoke in the morning. But he was no longer shivering. He no longer felt the cold.

He was dead.

It had been a warm night. The fire had been, hot, the blankets numerous and thick. Yet Hager had *frozen* to death.

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