

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Phantom of the Forest, by Leroy Yerxa

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Phantom of the Forest

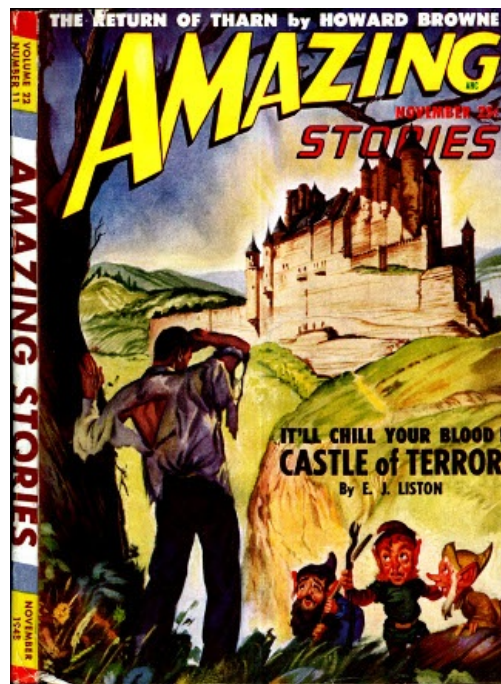
Author: Leroy Yerxa

Release Date: June 19, 2010 [EBook #32891]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PHANTOM OF THE FOREST ***



PHANTOM OF THE FOREST

By LEE FRANCIS

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Amazing Stories November 1948. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

The automobile reached the crest of the hill, skidded and started toward the ditch. Earl Robinson twisted the wheel savagely, got the feel of the ice hidden under the snow, and deftly straightened the car. Roy Starr awakened at his side and sat up. His eyes were narrowed with sleep.

"Lord," he groaned, "how much farther?"

Robinson spoke through gritted teeth.

"About three miles. Might as well be a million."

The car was moving forward about twenty miles per hour. Three people slept in the rear seat. They were packed under pieces of equipment. There were half a dozen guns stacked across their feet.

The snow came down thickly, endlessly. It drifted across the road. Almost eight inches had fallen

Every year men slaughter deer by the thousands; it seems only fitting that the tables be turned once in a while....

since sundown. Tomorrow, there won't be any traffic moving, Robinson thought, not without a plow to break the trail. The valley will be a lost world.

"Shangrila," he said softly.

"Huh?" Roy Starr was almost asleep once more.

Robinson said, "Skip it."

He was thinking about the war, and the deep, lost valleys he flew into when he flew the "hump."

He tried to concentrate on the road once more. They had come six miles from Indian River. The road was just a white line, leading up and down long rows of dark evergreens. The snow filled the air, tangling his thoughts, filling the world with stinging, blinding particles of white. The snow actually seemed to hurt his eyes. It seemed to be hitting his eyeballs.

He shook his head angrily. *Sleep* was stinging his eyes. He watched the trackless road with an intensity of a man hovering between life and death. Sleep—and death. Trying desperately to avoid both.

One more long hill.

Taking a long chance, he pressed the gas pedal down as far as it would go. The motor roared, protested and the car leaped ahead like a monster alive. The speedometer said fifty—then fifty-five. Sixty. At sixty they hit the sharp incline. Roy Starr was wide awake now, holding tightly to the door-handle, as though it insured him against an accident. Someone stirred in the back seat.

"Almost there?" It was a girl's voice, sleepy and disinterested.

"Almost," Earl Robinson said, and twisted the wheel again. The car went crosswise with the road. It slid forward, up the hill, careened wildly and straightened its course once more. Robinson sighed.

"Close," he said.

"*Earl, for God's sake, stop!!*"

Roy Starr's voice welled out of him, filled with stark horror. Robinson saw the weird, shadowy form on the road just in time. He pressed hard on the brake and the car jerked into the ditch, and stopped with a sickening jolt.

The girl in the rear seat clawed her way forward, clutching Starr's shoulder.

"A man on the road," she cried. "Earl, you hit him."

She started sobbing as though her heart were breaking.

"Shut up," Robinson snapped. His nerves had reached the breaking point. Then, in a gentler voice. "There's a man there all right, Marge. I didn't hit him. Get hold of yourself. Glenn, Glenn, take care of her, will you?"

All three people in the rear seat were wide awake now. Glenn Starr, dark, serious, in full control of his wits, drew the sobbing girl back beside him.

"Take it easy, kid," he said. "Earl will take care of everything. We haven't done anything wrong."

The other man, sitting on the far side of the car, pushed the door open and climbed out.

"Man, this is a storm, and I don't mean perhaps. Nice little ditch we got ourselves into."

Robinson and Roy Starr got out. Roy pulled his collar up tightly around his neck. He walked back a few paces and kneeled beside the snow buried corpse. Earl Robinson, tall, solid, stood over him as he pushed away the snow.

"Nobody I know," Roy said, and turned away so he wouldn't have to stare at the dead, frozen face.

Robinson bent over and pushed more snow away.

"I'll be damned."

The chest was badly crushed. Blood had frozen in the snow next to the wound.

"Hit sometime before the snow came," Robinson said.

Roy Starr was brushing snow away from the corpse.

"Maybe," he said softly. "A car never hit him, though. There aren't any blood tracks. The hole is in the direct center of his chest. The ribs aren't crushed on either side."

Robinson's voice was a little hushed.

"That's what I was thinking. Looks like a bear might have mauled him."

Roy Starr came slowly to his feet.

"Look," he said, "we aren't kidding ourselves. Something hit him, hard, in the chest. It wasn't a car because it didn't break in the whole bone structure. It wasn't a bear, because a bear would have done a more thorough job of it. Shooting is out. That isn't a bullet wound."

Robinson shrugged.

"What's left?"

"The same thing that's been killing hunters for the past five years," Starr said grimly. "For lack of a better name, the phantom buck."

Robinson turned away, looking toward the car.

"You're crazy," he said. "Let's say we're both crazy. Our imaginations are running riot. I think the rest of the party ought to know about the *automobile accident*. We can't do any good here. We'll go on to Rosewood if we can get the buggy out of the ditch. We can call the sheriff from there. This is the sheriff's job, not ours."

The three people who had ridden in the rear seat were in the ditch, pushing snow away from the wheels. Glenn Starr was saying quietly:

"We ought to get him out of the road."

Robinson went to work with the shovel, digging the right rear wheel out of the snow and the thick, half-frozen mud.

"Forget all about it," he said. "No one will be driving through here tonight. We'll call the sheriff from Rosewood. Outside of that, it's none of our business. Automobile accident. Wasn't our fault. We've done all we can."

They worked hard, all of them trying to forget the body on the road and concentrate on the task of freeing the car from the ditch. In twenty minutes they were on their way, crawling slowly down the opposite side of the hill into the cup-like valley where a country store, church and schoolhouse had been flatteringly named "Village of Rosewood!"

Marjorie Wrenn was still crying softly. Glenn tried to comfort her, but the girl was exhausted mentally and physically. The snow still blotted out everything but a few yards of the road. Once in the valley, Robinson released his grip on the wheel and relaxed.

"Roy," he said softly.

"Yea?"

"About that phantom buck story. I wouldn't talk too much. On the square, though I'm inclined to wonder."

Roy Starr's voice sank to a whisper.

"You think—maybe...?"

"Yea," Robinson answered, "I think—maybe...."

The electric light flashed on, making the world of swirling snow friendly once more. The car was parked beside the house, close to the barn. The place was a huge country store with the living quarters attached like a toad-stool to the side of it. There was a wood-pile in the yard, hidden under a foot of snow, looking like a crouching, white monster. A single pole had been buried in the ground, and from it hung a six-point buck. The deer had been gutted, and blood made little red blobs on the snow.

Glenn Starr climbed out and helped Marjorie Wrenn to the ground. He saw the overcoated figure emerging from the woodshed.

"Norm, you old horse. Got any snake bite medicine?"

Norm Boody, a well fed duplicate of Slim Summerville, was clad in a heavy overcoat drawn over a flannel night-shirt. His feet were hidden in vast, felt slippers.

"Thought you people weren't gonna get here. It's almost three in the morning. About those snake bites. What's the matter? Snow snakes biting tonight?"

The others were getting stiffly out of the car.

Earl Robinson said solemnly:

"Those snow snakes bite before you can go ten feet. We had a little trouble, Norm."

Boody found a half filled bottle in his coat and passed it around.

"Bad country to drive in a storm," he said.

"Worse than usual," Robinson said. "There is a dead man laying down the road a mile or two."

Norm Boody gulped from the bottle, choked and spewed the whiskey on the snow.

"It—wasn't Bill, was it?"

Robinson shook his head.

"No one I know. Dressed in hunter's outfit. Didn't find his gun. Probably buried under the snow."

Boody sighed. He looked uncertain.

"Bill went into Indian River for some stuff. He didn't come back."

"Look," Glenn said suddenly. "Marge is freezing and we're all tired out. We better get inside."

Norm Boody sprang toward the door and held it open.

"Sure, sure," he said. "The wife's got both coffee pots steaming by now. I oughta be shot for not getting this poor girl inside the minute she came. It ain't fit weather...."

Robinson smiled.

"Let's get to that coffee."

Inside, they all greeted Mrs. Boody. While she poured coffee into the cups on the kitchen table, Robinson cornered Norm Boody and led him into the living room. It was a low-ceilinged, warm, homey place. A telephone hung on the far wall. Robinson dialed the sheriff's number at Indian River, put the receiver back in place, lifted it and tried again. He shook his head.

"Trouble?" Boody asked.

"The line must be down. Phone won't work. Guess we'll sleep tonight and make that call in the morning."

The two men sat down in the darkness of the living room. Mrs. Boody, a grey headed, smiling woman who looked as though she might be anyone's mother, came in with two steaming cups.

"You better drink before you freeze," she said. "That darned stove takes so long to heat up."

She turned to her husband.

"Norm, what's wrong?"

Norm Boody grimaced.

"Man dead down the road. Something mauled him. Killed before the snow came this evening. Earl most ran over him."

The room was deathly silent for a moment. Then the woman's voice came, almost in a sob.

"Norm, Norm, it wasn't Bill, was it?"

Robinson said quickly:

"It wasn't Bill. I saw the face. No one I've ever seen before."

"Thank God for that," Mrs. Boody said. "You called the sheriff?"

"Can't," Norm Boody said. "Line's out of order. We'll get in touch with town in the morning."

"I don't think we'll sleep much tonight," a soft voice said from the door.

Earl Robinson chuckled. It was an attempt to put the whole thing off lightly. It didn't sound very sincere.

"You'll sleep all right, Marjorie. After that trip, we'll all sleep."

The girl smiled wanly.

"I hope so. It's hard—thinking of that—that...."

Daylight brought a peaceful, untroubled look to the valley. For ten miles, without a track save for the animals who had moved during the night, the valley stretched upward on all sides to the wooded hills. The big general store, schoolhouse and country church nestled in the center of the snow cup, with trackless roads leading away to the four points of the compass.

Blue-gray smoke lifted straight upward from the house, drifted two hundred feet into the sky and wafted away into nothingness.

Robinson came out of the woodshed with his black and red plaid coat wrapped tightly around him. It was a grand hunting morning, and he didn't intend to let last night's incident spoil it. The country was beautiful but there was nothing gentle about it. You had to face violence and forget it—quickly. Death wasn't easy to look at, but here, people learned that when it came, there was

no point in letting it interfere with their life.

Bill Boody hadn't come in last night. His car wasn't to be seen. Robinson went back into the woodshed. He climbed the steps to the kitchen and walked in quietly behind Mrs. Boody, who was bent over the kitchen stove.

"Where's Norm?" he asked.

Mrs. Boody looked worn and tired, as though she hadn't slept.

"Milking the cows. Bill didn't come home last night."

He knew that she was still suspicious of him. She wasn't sure that he told the truth about the body on the road.

"Bill will be okay," he said. "Are any of the others up?"

Mrs. Boody smiled.

"Roy came out a few minutes ago. He took one look at the thermometer outside the kitchen window, groaned and went back to bed."

Robinson started for the bedroom.

"You better let Marge sleep," Mrs. Boody said. "She was all worn out. She needs the rest."

"Earl," the woman at the stove said. There was a quality of urgency in her voice that stopped him short. He pivoted.

"Yes?"

"You think the phantom buck might have done the killing?"

Here it was again, he thought. They weren't satisfied to let the whole thing pass as an accident. They had to bring up dead dogs, fall back on superstition. Everything was perfect for hunting, and they had to spoil the spirit of the thing.

"That phantom buck business is a damned fairy tale," he said.

"But you think it was the phantom buck, all the same."

Robinson said nothing. The woman pushed the coffee pot back on the stove and went to the window. She stared out at the snowy world.

"Bill *saw* the phantom buck once."

"I know," Robinson said. He wished she wouldn't talk about it. She was getting herself all excited. "Probably Bill had been drinking some of that snake bite medicine."

Mrs. Boody shook her head.

"Bill don't touch a drop." Her face was very red, maybe from the stove. "Bill said the buck was the biggest deer he'd ever seen. He went right by Bill, and disappeared, right in broad daylight. Bill looked for tracks after he was gone, and there weren't any."

She wet her lips and went back to the stove.

"I wouldn't worry, Mrs. Boody," Robinson said.

She looked up then with frantic eyes.

"It isn't Bill, out there on the road, dead?"

He went swiftly to her and put one hand on her shoulder.

"I wouldn't lie to you. It wasn't him."

She seemed to relax for the first time since last night.

"I guess you're telling the truth. I wish Bill would come home, though. They used to say that anyone who saw the phantom buck was getting ready for an early death."

Norm Boody came up from the barn with two steaming pails of milk. Roy Starr was getting dressed in the kitchen, close to the stove. He was muttering threats against his brother, Glenn.

"Never let a guy sleep," he groaned. "Always the first guy up and the only man on earth who can't let other people stay in bed when they want to."

Glenn Starr and Marjorie were already at the breakfast table. The others drifted in and sat down. A girl and a husky, sleepy-eyed man came down from upstairs. Roy Starr greeted the girl by chasing her around the stove and left her alone only after she picked up the poker and threatened to use it on him.

Robinson introduced the fifth member of the hunting party at the breakfast table.

"Pete Larson hasn't hunted before," he said. "Pete, you know our own bunch. You know Norm and Mrs. Boody now. The tall, fair damsel holding the coffee pot is Norma, Mrs. Boody's best assistant housekeeper and daughter. The sleepy eyed creature at her side is her husband, Floyd."

Larson himself was heavy set, and a slightly ponderous man who wore light rimmed glasses and a rather awed look on his face.

"I guess I've let myself in for some rugged country and some heavy eating," he said. "Anyhow, I always did like a fifth cup of coffee and the supply looks adequate."

"It *was* rugged last night, all right," Roy Starr said.

Instantly there was silence. Norma, the tall, slim girl, looked at her mother questioningly.

Robinson broke in before she had time to speak.

"We found a dead man on the road last night. Nobody we knew."

He heard Norma and her husband catch their breaths quickly. Then the telephone rang and he was on his feet. Norm Boody was closer to the phone and answered it. The remainder of the group went on eating, but every ear was tuned to the conversation.

"Yes?"

He listened for a time, then said:

"I got a party of hunters who came in last night. They saw him on the road. We tried to call you but the wires were dead."

Then:

"Oh? So that was it. Okay, we'll keep an eye open. Haven't seen Bill, have you? He's coming in behind the plough? Good. We were worried about him."

"Telephone linemen came through this morning," he explained. "They picked up the body. That was Sheriff Walt Beardsly calling. He ain't blaming you boys. Says your tracks went right around the body. Says a bear must have mauled the guy. They found his gun in the ditch."

Earl Robinson said:

"Yea, that's what happened all right. Bill's okay, isn't he?"

Boody nodded.

"Spent the night at the sheriff's house. Couldn't drive in. He's coming in a couple of hours."

Mrs. Boody went out for some more coffee. Larson, managing a smile, said:

"Guess we can go hunting without worrying about anything—except bear."

Norma tickled her husband between well padded ribs.

"Take Floyd along. He'll chase all the bears to the other side of the mountain."

Floyd grinned.

"Guess you boys can take care of yourselves."

Roy Starr hadn't taken an active part in the conversation for some time. He brought his fist down on the table with a bang.

"To hell with the phantom," he stood up. "Ten minutes ago you were all tied up inside with a damned silly superstition. Now you're kidding yourselves that everything is okay. You're *still* ready to believe in ghosts and goblins at a moment's notice. What's the matter? We all too scared to think clearly for ourselves?"

Robinson got up.

"Come on, Roy," he said. "Let's go out and get chains on the car. We'll need them to make that south hill."

Roy Starr was trembling. Something had slipped inside him. Something that made him angry at all of them. Who did they think he was? Could they handle him like a ten year old kid?

"You want to lead Junior outside and give him a lecture," he snapped. "Please don't scare these good people. Well, you can all go to hell. I'm going after a deer. If it turns out to be the phantom buck, I'll get *him*. I'm going alone and I don't need you or the car or anything else. I still got two good feet."

They sat there and watched him go. Robinson sat down a little weakly. They heard Roy pick up his rifle in the kitchen and waited until his footsteps faded beyond the woodshed.

"Well," Robinson said at last, "I guess Junior is on the warpath."

Glenn Starr looked at his watch. He halted in the protection of the evergreen grove and turned his back to the wind. Marjorie Wrenn caught up with him.

"Better rest," Glenn said. "It's after noon."

He found some sandwiches in his pocket and passed her one. The girl's face was very pale.

"The tracks didn't come out of the swamp," she said.

"Forget the tracks," Glenn said gently. "It's been snowing since ten o'clock. They were Roy's tracks all right. The snow drifted in and covered them up. He probably headed for home hours ago."

"I—can't eat, Glenn. Let's go back. Let's try to find the tracks again. I'm scared, Glenn. I'm so scared my teeth are chattering."

Glenn took her rifle.

"Follow me," he said abruptly. "You're all done in. I'll take the shortest route."

The girl took half a dozen faltering steps and sank down into the snow. When he reached her side, she was out cold. He rubbed her wrists and cheeks until her eyes, full of tears, opened slowly.

"You're gonna be all right," he said, and picked her up in his arms.

Slowly, for he knew it was going to be a rough trail, he headed across the valley toward home.

Earl Robinson moved more slowly now. He and Larson had swung down from the north and crossed the three sets of tracks. Larson, puffing from his first day of marching, came behind him. Robinson stopped finally. He waited for Larson to catch up. He pointed at the almost covered tracks.

"Here's where they missed his trail," he said. "I think we can still follow it if we take our time."

"Look," Larson said abruptly, "you don't believe that phantom buck business, do you?"

Robinson didn't answer. He started away through the swamp, watching for a broken twig here, an almost buried footprint there. It took him two long hours to find the end of the trail. It had started to snow again. The boy was half covered with the drift. A thick growth of cedars had protected him from the full force of the storm. His eyes were wide open and he showed signs of recognizing Robinson as the big man bent over him. He tried to smile, but he couldn't. There was blood around his lips and his jacket was torn open to reveal a deep, bloody gash in his chest.

Robinson built a fire hurriedly and Larson kept the blaze alive with dry logs.

Robinson swore softly as he found bandages in his kit and administered first aid. He swore at the cold, and the snow, and the thing that had done this to the kid.

They carried Roy Starr out that night, and it was close to midnight before they met Norm Boody and the party who had come in search of them. Mrs. Boody had coffee on the stove when they got in. Robinson, once Roy Starr was warm and fairly safe once more, fell into a chair and slept like a child. An hour later, he was on his feet again, staggering, half dead from exhaustion, giving orders to the doctor who had come from Indian River.

Roy spoke in a whisper.

"Earl?"

He was in pain. Bad pain. Earl took his hand.

"It's okay, kid. I'm with you. It's all over."

"Earl," the voice was a sob. "Earl, it's true about the phantom. I saw him."

"I know," Robinson said softly. "Keep quiet. We found you in the swamp. Larson and I brought you in. The Doc says you're okay. Few days rest."

Roy felt all choked up and hot inside. He squeezed Earl's hand.

"Tell Larson he's okay. You're okay. Earl, we got to get out'a here."

His fever was rising.

"Listen, junior," Robinson said sternly, "I said everything's okay, and it is. Lay still and sleep."

Roy wasn't hearing him now. He tried to force himself up on one elbow. His eyes were filled with memories—of terror.

"I was a sap, Earl. I tell you I saw him. He was big and beautiful, big as a nightmare. He snorted right close to me and there was fire shooting out of his nostrils. He hit me like lightning, Earl. I—don't remember—after—that."

He sank back, breathing hard.

Glenn Starr came in from the bedroom.

"How's Roy?"

"He's going to sleep now, aren't you Roy?" Earl asked.

"Yea—I'm gonna sleep."

"I can't sleep," Glenn Starr said. "If we'd kept him here this morning, he'd have been all right."

"Is Bill up?" Earl asked.

"Yea! He's talking with the Doc in the kitchen. Doctor hasn't left yet."

"Send in Bill and tell Doc to wait a little while," Robinson said grimly.

Bill Boody came into the darkened room and sat down quietly by the couch.

"How's Roy?"

"Okay, Bill," Robinson said. "I been doing some thinking."

"About what?"

Bill Boody was tall, slim, and well put together. His face, burned dark from sun and rain, was sensitive and mirrored friendliness and intelligence.

"About the phantom buck," Robinson said.

"We all have," Boody said. "Norm told you I saw the phantom once, didn't he?"

Robinson nodded.

"Why didn't the phantom attack you, Bill?"

Boody shook his head.

"I don't know. It was the phantom all right. He was big—and grand, like sort of a God."

Neither of them said anything for a while. Roy was sleeping. His breathing came easier now.

"I guess I sound a little corny," Boody said. "I don't mean to."

"No," Robinson answered. "No, I wasn't thinking of that. Roy says it was the phantom that attacked him. He felt kinda like you do about it."

Robinson stood up and walked to the window. He stared upward toward the dark, moonlit forest.

"When did you see the phantom?"

Bill looked thoughtful.

"It was just before dusk...."

"I guess I'm not making my question clear," Robinson interrupted. "I mean, was it during hunting season?"

"It was last spring. We were plowing the north field."

"Were you carrying a gun?"

"No," Boody said, puzzled.

"That's what I thought."

Doctor Peterson was a frosty looking old chap with black rimmed specs and a grey beard.

"You about ready to go back to town, Doc?" Robinson asked.

Peterson grinned.

"After I drink all the coffee in sight," he said. "And it looks like I have."

Mrs. Boody was with them in the kitchen. The house was quiet.

"I've got to get gas and oil. Guess I'll follow you in," Robinson said.

"Good. The boy's all right. I'll be out again tomorrow. Ready to go?"

Outside the snow had finally stopped falling. The early morning was clear, with a promise of a bright day to come. Robinson started his car and warmed it up. The Doctor said good night to Mrs. Boody and came out to climb into his Model T. Robinson backed out slowly and followed the car down the road toward Indian River.

It was just daylight. Robinson left the car a mile from Rosewood and entered the woods. He had taken his time in town, found an all-night gas station to refuel his car and parked it here just as the sun came up, coloring the frosty, blue-gray hills above him.

Half a mile from the road he turned and entered the swamp where he had found Roy the day before. He started walking swiftly. He was weaponless, having left the rifle in his car. Two hours passed and he had penetrated deeply into the swamp.

He was cold. He had seen no fresh trails. A black squirrel chattered at him, and hid itself on the far side of a cedar tree. A fox hurried across his trail, a red blur against the snow.

Far away, he heard the sudden dry "snap" of a twig. He found a stump and seated himself. He was very quiet. Suddenly an icy coldness penetrated his entire body. It wasn't the wind or the natural cold that troubled him now. It was the feeling of death—sudden death—poised only seconds away.

Death—behind him, and he dared not look around.

He waited perhaps sixty seconds, and they seemed like hours. He stood up very slowly and started to move his arms rhythmically in a back and forth motion as though to restore circulation. At the same time, he made it evident to anyone—*anything*, looking at him, that he carried no weapon.

Then, without betraying fear, he turned.

Not ten feet away, poised with every splendid muscle tense and alert, was the biggest buck he had ever seen. The great animal stared at him without fear. Its antlers were held high.

The eyes frightened Robinson. They weren't soft, brown deer eyes. They were, instead, black and beady, like twin windows to Hell.



There was the baleful glint of Hell in the monster eyes

The head swung back. The hooves pawed at the snow. With a snort, the creature sprang into the air. Robinson ducked quickly to one side, but there was no reason for him to flee. The phantom buck, for he was sure the animal *was* a phantom, moved past him with incredible speed and was gone in the forest. He was aware of a terrific burst of speed—of a perfectly proportioned body, and that was all.



With a burst of speed, the magnificent buck rushed past him

For a long time, Robinson stood there by the stump. All the education that goes into a man, to bring him culture, was reviewing itself in his mind. All the hunter instinct drained out of him. There was only humbleness left, and respect for wild things.

He knew he would find no tracks, even though he forced himself to look for them. Six inches of untouched snow covered the spot where the phantom had stood.

Robinson shrugged and started back along the lengthy, circular trail to his car.

Norm Boody came out of the house with Roy Starr's rifle. They were all gathered beside the car. Roy, a trifle pale, was wrapped snugly, and resting on the rear seat. Glenn Starr sat beside Roy, his arm about Marjorie. Norma smiled at Glenn.

"I know a secret," she said.

"Better not tell it," Glenn made a pass at her with his open palm. Norma stepped back and laughed loudly.

"Glenn's a hero. He carried Marge out of the cruel woods. He carried her three miles, and now she's consented to marry him."

Glenn gave a war-whoop and started after her. Norma ran into the house and slammed the door.

"You may as well face it," Robinson said. "Roy isn't so weak that he can't kid the daylights out of you all the way home."

Pete Larson spoke from the far corner of the front seat.

"How about the little secret *you're* keeping, Earl. That was quite a little research trip you took into the woods this morning."

Robinson looked startled.

"You didn't..."

Larson chuckled.

"When you and the doctor left last night, I was suspicious. I went down the road this morning and located your car. *I* took along a gun for protection. Spent an hour in the swamp. Got tired of tracking you after that."

Norm Boody had been studying them curiously.

"Bill said you were asking a lot of questions last night, Earl."

Larson spoke again before Robinson could answer.

"Of course we all go at things a little differently," he admitted. "However, I got an idea that the phantom wouldn't attack a man who didn't carry a gun. Earl left his in the car when he went into

the swamp."

Robinson nodded.

"I went into the swamp," he admitted. "I had an idea the phantom might be sort of a ghostly protector of the herd. We have quite a slaughter of deer up here every fall. It must be hard on them if they have any feeling at all. What's so damn much different between men killing deer, or a deer killing a man? If the Phantom exists, he's sort of a protecting angel—or a God. If I had met him ..."

"You didn't?" Norm Boody asked sharply.

Earl grinned.

"If I *had* met him," he went on, "I guess I'd do something about it. I guess I'd think he was a pretty grand old guy, standing up to fight for his kind. I'd probably look him over and pray for mercy, and get the hell out of his domain. If I hunted again next year, I'd either find new territory, or prepare to get myself killed."

Norm Boody looked solemn.

"Well, I ain't much for hunting myself," he admitted. "But if I *did* like to hunt, and I *believed* a story like that, I'd leave my gun at home when I went into the woods. Ain't that the general idea?"

Roy Starr said weakly:

"Gosh, I'm getting awfully weak already. How about a shot of snakebite medicine."

Glenn found a half bottle and passed it around.

"Might as well finish it. My wife-to-be says I gotta stop drinking as soon as we're married."

"And where are *you* hunting next year, Larson," Robinson asked.

Larson grinned.

"How about a good week hunting jack-rabbits? I don't think I'd be very scared if I met the God of the jack-rabbits, even if he did shoot fire out of the corner of his nostrils."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PHANTOM OF THE FOREST ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any

way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.