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STREET & SMITH'S
UNKNOWN
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DANGER: QUICKSAND

By H. W. Guernsey

STREET & SMITH'S UNKNOWN

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"Let's not go any farther," Carol said. They were well into the marshes now; Andy McCarron was handling the big car, keeping the speed at a comparative crawl of ten miles an hour on the serpentine, seldom-used wagon track called Still Road.

—and the quicksand *crawled!*

"Hm-m-m," Andy responded noncommittally through his nose. His posture was lazy, but the uncertain wheel tracks ahead kept wandering away from the headlight beams, and his eyes were hawkishly bright. No remarks were offered from the rear seat, where Loren Hamilton and Ruth Calvert were; with McCarron at the wheel there was nothing to worry about. Andy was large. Hamilton was not really a shrimp, but Ruth was a big girl and made him a smaller man.

"May I ask why you wanted to come down here in particular?" Carol asked.

"Sentimental, probably," Andy answered. "When I was an infant I used to go exploring down here, and this is the last time anyone will use this road."

"I don't care, really. I suppose mud-flats are beautiful, but we can't see anything in the dark. It must be after two o'clock."

"Almost three," he informed her. "Ebenezer Still's haunted cabin is just a little bit ahead now. I'd like to take a look at it before it's under water."

"You're twenty-two years old," she reminded him. "If you get out of the car at this hour of the night to explore a haunted cabin, I'm going to call the university and make them take your degree back."

"We're not going to stop. I'll just turn the spotlight on it and we'll keep going. Sorry you're having a dull time."

"My dear, it isn't dull at all. Andrew," she said sincerely, "will you please turn around and go back? I mean it. I'm frightened."

"Honeybee," he said quietly, "you may have anything your little heart desires but that. We can't turn around, and it would be insane to try backing up all the distance we've come. Once we get off the road we're stuck, and we'd stay stuck. I wouldn't try it."

If Andy couldn't do it, nobody could.

And as far as getting stuck was concerned—the fun they had been having might develop into sudden tragedy. The Thurston Meadows through which they were winding were notorious for beds of quicksand.

A hiker, choosing to use Still Road as a short cut, instead of the much longer scenic parkway which followed the bluffs in hairpin curves which made speed impossible, might step on ground that looked as reliable as rock and plunge to his waist or shoulders in muck. Or he might find that it took more and more effort to lift one foot after the other, and look down, and see his shoes sinking in yielding ooze that climbed to his ankles and would keep on climbing. Then he would find that the strength of a giant was not enough, nor the miraculous strength of terror either, because he had gone too far. He was in quicksand. He would throw himself flat to distribute his weight. It wouldn't do any good. Crawling on hands and knees he would find that every direction of possible escape was wrong, and that paradoxically the route which had led him so far was the worst to retrace, if it had not disappeared.

On the winding, exasperating parkway along the bluffs at both ends of Still Road were signs reading, "WARNING: USE THIS ROAD AT YOUR OWN RISK. DANGEROUS." All along the river and along the road itself were the signs nailed to posts: "DANGER—QUICKSAND," in large block letters painted in black against white. The city of Thurston had a houseboat village, but none of the river people tied up along here any more. The rotting houseboat on the riverbank, a couple of hundred yards to the right of the road, was a landmark to avoid.

It was a mystery why Ebenezer Still had selected this place, and built his cabin on the rise of ground against the bluff. Just as great a mystery was what had become of the legendary old man. He knew the devious paths through the meadows and where not to go, and was supposed to have had considerable cunning, some gold, and a preference for solitude. The solitude was what he enjoyed; one night he left a thick plumber's candle burning and the pine-crate table set for dinner with the cracked, heavy plate of restaurant crockery which was the only china he owned. Alongside lay the big-bladed jackknife which he used for knife, fork, and spoon. The coffee cup was a burnished tin can with a curled-down strip of tin for a handle. There was a kerosene stove which showed how proud Ebenezer was with its bright metal. The cabin stank of burned coffee, the beans in the pot were bubbles of carbon, and all the kerosene had done its duty in the blackened cotton wicks by the time anyone paid Ebenezer a call.

Possibly there was more solid ground in the meadows then. The river was capricious, and paths of hard, compacted earth might have gone to mush in a day. The quicksand acted as though it were alive, wandering in patches according to the whims of river water in runnels searching underground. The complete skeletons of three men, unidentified, the bones as clear as though scraped with a scalpel, had been found at scattered points off the road. Locked behind the teeth in one of the skulls was a tobacco-stained tongue, in condition as prime as though it had spoken yesterday.

If the car got mired they would have to abandon it and proceed on foot, with no tarrying. The Thurston Dam was newly completed and had been opened officially only a matter of hours previously. By now, the river level had climbed within inches of the flats, over which water would sweep with a rush before morning. The water impounded by the dam would form a long lake on which the boat club would hold races; the road, and anything on it, the desolate meadows, and Ebenezer Still's cabin would be drowned deep.

Carol asked: "Andy, you're pretty sure you know the road?"

"Like the palm of your hand," he said.

The motor began to labor. He gave it more gas, then shifted quickly into second, into low, as though this level ground were the stiffest grade. For a moment they kept rolling, but more and more slowly, as though the hydraulic brakes were gradually locking because of air getting into the system. The motor stalled.

"Well, here we are," said Carol sarcastically.

"Stuck?" inquired Hamilton amiably.

Andy looked out. The car stood on solid, level ground; the tires were not embedded. He reported, "Nope. We're all right."

He started the motor, gave it plenty of gas and engaged the clutch. The machine lunged ahead for a dozen feet and the motor stalled again.

"My word," said Andy, which was the nearest he ever came to profanity. He was an enormously self-contained young man, and something of a snob.

"The brakes are on, you chump," said Hamilton.

"The brakes are not on." He started the motor again, and this time they moved only a few inches before stalling. He checked on the brakes, got out and went behind the car. He told Carol, "Try the pedal a few times."

She extended a rounded silken limb obediently and shoved the pedal down with her foot. Andy called, "All right," when the red taillights winked on and off, and got back into the car.

"Well?" Hamilton inquired.

"The brakes are not on."

"What's holding us, then? Are we up to the hubs?"

"No. The road's perfectly hard here and the tires are up on top." He tapped the starter again. The sound of the motor rose from a scarcely audible purr to a roar of power. He eased the clutch-pedal up, but the machine was frozen where it stood. He engaged the clutch in a series of jerks, tried reverse, and the machine went backward with a surge that almost cracked Carol's head against the windshield. She turned her head indignantly, but before she could say anything to Andy he had the car in low gear again and they leaped forward.

The twelve-cylinder power plant was pulling with a roar, wide open. But they were being irresistibly dragged to a halt again and Andy played with the clutch, kicking them forward in jerks that were shorter and shorter. From the tires came loud, inexplicable sucking reports. With the motor thundering he let the pedal snap up, and they wrenched forward; he did it again, and the exhaust sounded like something getting a terrific battering. They were all sitting rigid and alert now. Carol shifted aside from Andy and stared into the path of the headlights.

First the front tire on the right let go like a pistol shot. In swift succession the three remaining tires exploded, and the body of the heavy car hit the springs and bounced. From the wheels came the slobbering sound of tough rubber being torn to shreds. Andy turned the ignition key and yanked the service brake up.

"My word," he said.

"If you say that again," Loren Hamilton proposed pleasantly, "I'll kill you with a wrench."

"I'll tie your arms and legs in some new knots," Andy offered as an alternative, and got out of the car. He made a complete circuit, gazing at the phenomenal damage. All the rubber was stripped, torn off the rims completely and lying on the road in chewed hunks like goods which had been dynamited. He rested his fists on his hips and said, "Well, I'll be ___"

"Broken glass, or nails, or what?" Loren asked.

"We didn't run over anything. The road's bare," Andy reported. "Take a look for yourself."

Loren opened the rear door, sat on the floorboards with his heels on the running board and looked melancholy. It was warm and muggy, and all of them were covered with a film of perspiration. Loren wiped his forehead on his sleeve. He said very loudly, "Nuts!"

"I don't like your tone of voice," said Andy, as though he had figured something out. "Are you blaming this on me?"

"You bet I am! What did you want to come down here in the meadows for?"

After a silence Andy said, "Sorry. We'll keep beaming right on on the rims."

Loren sounded raving mad. He said violently, "On the rims! How can we climb the hill up the bluff at the other end? Rims, hell!"

"We have two brand-new spares in the trunk," Andy reminded him. "We'll hang them on the rear wheels, and that'll give us all the traction we need. Let's get going."

Loren set his feet on the ground disgustedly and stood up. He lighted a cigarette, and while he was waving the match out he looked down. He joggled his hundred and thirty-five pounds of weight experimentally, and called to Andy, who was unlocking the trunk, "Hey, pal. Just in case you didn't notice it, this is kind of funny ground."

"Shut up," Andy said; he didn't want to worry the girls.

He was alarmed. He liked danger, and had used this road many times, and knew every curlicue of it. But now he felt baffled because he had never before seen the road in this condition.

The ground was rubbery, resilient. It gave underfoot, but not like quicksand. The surface was suggestively yielding, and took weight like elephant-hide. Walking on the stuff was as insecure in balance as juggling. All of them had been drinking a little; Andy would admit that he might be wavering moderately on his legs; he didn't want to admit that the ground was in haphazard motion. But the ground under his feet was astir when he looked down at it, shrinking and eddying and making him change the set of his feet, and stagger.

It annoyed him because he had never drunk enough to become intoxicated, and he didn't believe he was that way now. He had had two cocktails at the bar in Thurston with the party and then quit, continuing with plain club soda and ice. It would be about three ounces of rum altogether in those stingy cocktails. Not enough to make his feet misbehave so.

He raised the lid of the trunk with a flip of his arm, exasperated almost to fury. Perspiration beaded his face and hands in glistenings. He stumbled, raised himself.

"Going to help me?" he asked Loren. He had to overcome a sudden rage and keep it out of his voice.

"Sure. A twist of the wrist and the task is accomplished," said Loren. He climbed back into the car to lift a seat and get tools for the change of tires.

Andy waited, scanning the desolate landscape painted by starlight and a greenish-yellow peeling of moon. The moon was a rind. Underfoot the ground stirred, and Andy changed the position of his feet. He looked down incredulously.

Under the red taillights the ground looked like hide. The smooth surface of skin was sprinkled with pores, and there was a growth of short, barb-sharp black hair in clusters of three. The surface was incrustated with dirt—soily. What made Andy stare was that these stalks, which upon inspection had to be vegetation, were without foliage. The things were short, pointed bristles as tough as thorns. But they were flexible, too, and couldn't have pierced the tires. Hair.

"Hurry up," he called to Loren.

"Keep your shirt on," said Loren in a muffled voice, prowling under the rear seat for the tools.

From the river on the right came a mad sound, like the snort of a huge animal, and they turned their heads in that direction. The ground quivered, trembling like flesh. Andy did not consider the smell of the morass unpleasant, but now and then he breathed a rank, musky animal odor that he didn't like. The sound they had heard might have been a section of undercut bank falling into the rising water. There wasn't much time.

The whine in the air was caused by multitudinous mosquitoes. The naked ground was mulatto in color, with maculations of sooty red composed of mosquitoes swollen with blood to bursting and too heavy to fly. Besides the thin, irritating singing of the insects there was another type of sound that was sinister. It was a steady suckling that sounded rapid and eager, coming from many mouths whose wet lips were opening and closing in the darkness all around. Where light from the car touched the smooth ground, holes like pores formed and vanished with raindrop randomness, as though pockets of air were popping to the surface through mud.

The landscape was eerie enough; honest fear made Andy feel cold as he received the impression of rhythmic pulsation in the ground underfoot. At first he thought it was the beat of his own heart, but it was so heavy that he wondered what was wrong with himself. Scarcely breathing, he discovered that the sluggish, spaced pounding did not coincide with his own pulse-rate. He swallowed, and called to Hamilton, "Hey!"

Hamilton said, "There's nothing here but a grease-gun. There aren't any tools."

"My word," said Andy, remembering. His father's chauffeur had borrowed the tools for a job on the other car. They didn't even have a jack.

The night turned more oppressive than ever; the air was stagnant, and the sky with its pale frost of stars was imprisoning, as though they were people being smothered.

Carol shifted across the seat under the wheel and stuck her knees out. She stepped to the ground and asked, "How far is it to the parkway?"

"Better than a half mile."

"I'm walking," she announced, and started off.

"Carol, wait! Come back here!" Andy ordered.

"I said I'm walking!" she called back ill-temperedly. "I'm not going to sit here all night."

She walked into the headlight beams with an athletic, masculine stride. She wore her hair low on her neck, and at each step the curls bounced impudently. It she followed the road to the bluff she would be all right, but she didn't. Staggering unexpectedly, she lost her shoes. She stooped to get them, straightened up without them and screamed, and fell headlong when she took the next step. Still in the light, she scrambled to her feet; she had good long legs and could run, and when she vanished in the darkness to the left, her cries sounded as though she were insane with fear.

Hamilton jumped from the car to chase after Andy, who yelled back, "Stay in the car; turn the spotlight on!"

Andy came to a halt, grunting, as the powerful light came on, swung to find him. He was waving his arms grotesquely and contorting his body as though trying to maintain the most precarious balance.

"What's the matter?" Hamilton shouted anxiously.

"Stuck!"

"Need any help?"

"Stay in the car!"

Andy jerked with all his might, but big and powerful as he was he couldn't budge. It was obvious that what held him was not quicksand; his feet were on top of the ground.

The irrepressible Hamilton said: "We'd better get a sample of that stuff and have it patented. It sure is powerful glue! Hey?"

Andy crouched and performed an act which would have been normal for a lunatic in a bughouse. He raised his fist high and sledged the ground with all his might. They heard the meaty smack of it in the car.

Simultaneously he was running with queer, leaping strides, and the spotlight probed the darkness ahead of him. The beam of white light glanced past and then held Carol's huddled body. There were few eminences of any sort in the meadows. The chief one was the knoll on which the haunted cabin stood; with the luck of the damned, Carol had sprinted blindly into a lone outcrop of shale a little more than knee-high, and been brought down headlong on it.

Andy made it with a jump and glanced behind briefly, breathing hard. He dropped to hands and knees beside Carol, and was so sickened that he had to turn his face away for an instant. She lay prone, cheek against the rock, with open eyes that stared unseeingly. Her body writhed and twitched uncontrollably; too weak with pain to rise, she abandoned herself to bloodcurdling, convulsive crying, the more hideous because it sounded like tired laughter.

"What happened?" Hamilton bawled down into the basin from the car.

"The soles of her feet are gone," Andy reported in a perfectly steady voice.

Loren waited a moment and then asked blandly, "What did you say? I didn't get you, pal."

Andy swallowed, took a breath and repeated with the same restraint of emotion, "The soles of her feet are gone."

No doubt the same thing would have happened to him if his shoes had been jerked off like hers. The ground had seized his feet and held them as though they were incased in concrete, like the familiar nightmare of being pursued and the dreamer finding himself rooted fast and at the continuous mercy of something dreadful and unknown. Here was the embodiment of the unimaginable shape in the nightmare, overspreading Still Road and blocking it in a gigantic patch of spongy horror. The rubbery ground was in motion, acrawl, alive, in continuous rippling movement of a monstrous animal shape slowly awakening.

Watching, Andy could pick out here and there the pulsating purplish ridges that were veins. Ripples passed over the thing's skin in running shadows, in a shouldering movement, like a mindless shape shrugging under the torment of those beds of mosquitoes. Over the naked undulations winked greenish-blue motes of phosphorescence which he had thought were fireflies. But the buds of cold light appeared to be attached to the muscular ground-shape with filaments of light when he saw them close by, and the thought occurred to him that they might be eyes.

He had taken off his jacket, and was tearing his shirt into strips for bandages.

There was no logic in the way disaster worked, but it seemed particularly wrong that the four of them were so unpleasantly trapped. Because they mattered so much. They were top-drawer people and very, very important. There was Andy McCarron with the resplendent sedan which his father had given him for a graduation present a few weeks ago. Fat and bald though he would be after a few years in his father's bank, he was an impressive young customer now. He didn't give a damn about football, but went in because it would have been a shame for a man his build not to; he had emerged without broken nose, missing teeth or torn ears. He could speak unto whom he pleased, and pick his girls, and he had taken the best.

There was Loren Hamilton, compactly built and brainy. He wore glasses and looked innocuous, but he had a temper. His dad owned a chain of newspapers about which Loren had a few practical ideas already. His girl was Ruth Calvert. She was a stately, voluptuous blonde, and if she didn't marry Loren she would make a terrifically imposing hostess if she married a senator. Carol Poore was phenomenal in being staggeringly wealthy in her own right and breath-takingly beautiful besides. She belonged to Andy for keeps, and when they got around to it they would get married.

Four of them, all of them very much sought after, caught like rats in a trap.

There were Carol's feet. The flesh was stripped away, exposing tendons and bone, and she wouldn't walk with that arrogant, athletic carriage any more. The palms of both her hands were bloody but not so seriously injured as her feet, and her forearms looked scorched to the elbow.

"Carol," he said.

Her shuddering continued, and her plaintive broken crying. Great as the pain was, she was unable to faint.

"Heigh-ho!" bawled Loren from the road.

"What?" asked Andy.

"Water!" said Loren succinctly.

Andy rose. The roadway formed a shallow basin, the rock being on a level with the road. Standing, Andy could see that the sheet of leaden water had climbed to the meadows and was crawling in. When it reached a dip in the road ahead it would pour into the basin first.

"Play the light around," said Andy.

Loren complied, sending the bright beam over the repulsive, nightmare shape imprisoning them. In the basin the animal's stench was chokingly strong.

It was possible to get an idea of the creature's size, as the light picked out the fringing raw green of marsh grass. A tremor ran through it like a gigantic leech extending itself; water had reached it again, and it flinched ponderously. So it

didn't like water very much. The car stood approximately in the middle of the rubbery patch; it was just as far ahead to safe ground as it was to return. The thing weighed tons; if its very size kept it from moving fast over the ground, it was capable, with devilish swiftness, of seizing and devouring anything passing over its rank hide.

The beam of light swung back to the rock, and Loren called down waveringly as though shaking with laughter, "Watch it, pal! Watch it!"

Andy didn't have to be told. The thing had located them; a lip had formed and lifted above the surrounding mass; it was investigating the rock like a tongue, lapping and tapping with clumsy, wormlike curiosity. Perhaps it was the smell of blood, soaking through the bandages on Carol's feet. He drew her knees up out of immediate reach, and she cooed with pain, shaking.

The tongue reached the edge of the rock and crept toward them; the tip of it blindly tapped its way forward, for all the world like the head of a worm. Andy raised his foot and brought his heel down with smashing violence. The tongue of flesh was jerked away with such sudden power that he was thrown to his knees. At the base of the rock the thing puddled with hurt.

"I'm going to drive down in there," Loren said, "and pick you up."

"Can't be done," Andy warned flatly. "We'll never get out if you do."

"Then what are your plans, chief?" Loren asked. Chantingly he called, "Thirsty, dry, have a drink! Water come!"

Not far beyond the car, water ran into a hollow with a stealthy, soupy gurgling.

In the back seat, Ruth Calvert was drinking steadily from a flat quart flask, and was doing quite well at the task of diminishing its contents. All at once she broke and announced, "I can't stand it any more! Andy! Do something about her! Make her stop that damn bawling if you have to s-strangle her!"

"You just keep on minding that bottle!" Loren warned.

He called to Andy, "Step on it, Laddie! Time's nearly up!"

Andy couldn't bear Carol's tortured crying any more himself. He knelt and raised her to a sitting position. She flopped, jerking uncontrollably and uttering wailing, stuttering cries through clenched white teeth. He got her head in the right position, made sure that her jaws were closed so that she wouldn't clip her tongue off, and brought his fist up with a sharp wallop to the point of her jaw. Her crying stopped, and he stretched her gently on the rock.

Over the bluffs across the river the sky was graying and dissolving the stars.

"Step on it, laddie!" Loren cried. His voice was staccato and high with fear. The animal was heaving laboriously, trying to escape from the water that would drown the four of them. When the water reached the road, infiltrating under the monster holding them, the winding ridge called Still Road would be gone in muck.

"Get going!" Andy said. "We can't get back to you."

"Make a stab at it, pal. The damned road's going!"

In the back seat Ruth kept still; she had passed out cold. A shudder ran through the mulatto-skinned monster underfoot, and a thick tongue of it swelled up over the rock. Andy stamped furiously, and it withdrew. The suckling sound of its mouths was like heavy raindrops falling, and its Gargantuan heartbeat was more rapid. Loren started the car.

"Get going!" Andy raged. "Maybe we can swim for it!"

"No!" No, for if the monster kept above the water, there wouldn't be any chance to swim. Once that octopus-tough shape fastened on them—

"Throw me the gun!" Andy said with sudden excitement.

"Didn't know we had one, pal," Loren replied.

"In the pocket right beside you." It was an automatic with a clip holding nine bullets. He had a permit for it, had been keeping it handy ever since the time his father had received a batch of threatening letters. He cautioned, "Make it a damned good pitch!"

Loren appeared on the running board and balanced the heavy gun experimentally. He got footing in the channel between fender and the motor, and rested one knee on top of the hood, and cocked his arm. Too light for most athletics at the university, he had done some better than average pitching for the baseball team.

"Watch it now!" he said sharply, and repeated, "Now!"

It couldn't be watched. The dark metal gleamed as it left his hand, but its flight in the darkness over the path cut by the spotlight couldn't be followed. Standing on the rock with broad shoulders hunched, Andy suddenly leaped. He got his fingers on the gun but couldn't hold it, and it fell to the surface below the rock. Loren groaned.

Andy promptly jumped down, landing squarely on both feet, and snatched up the automatic. His feet had already disappeared up to the ankles. With the calm alertness of an Indian spearing fish, he fired directly downward between his feet. The shot banged, and came roaring back in a roll of echoes from the bluff to the left. The ground bucked. Andy lurched off balance, got back to the rock with a wild jump.

The place he had left was in tumbling motion, coming to quivering rigidity around the bullet hole, then going soft and sloppy. The floundering appearance of the puddle of tough dark hide reminded him of the blundering, flopping panic of a decapitated chicken. But the shot was effective only in the immediate area. Firing at the thing was about as deadly in general results as pumping away at a mammoth with an air gun.

"O. K.?" Loren yelled.

"O. K." The side of his right shoe was stripped off, a patch of sock was gone, and the skin of his foot tingled excruciatingly as from a rash of mosquito bites. The skin was sucked. The whole marking was a blood-blister of burst capillaries, and oozed with dozens and dozens of tiny ruby beads.

"Come on, pal!" Loren chanted, and his high-pitched voice rang with desperation. "Come on! Come on!"

There were eight more shots, and it was a long distance back to the car. Andy stooped, got Carol cradled in his arms and with an easy heave slung her over his left shoulder. He jumped down from the rock alongside the bullet hole, from which thick dark liquid was pumping.

As he ran with huge wrenching strides he fired ahead at the rocking swells in the channel of light. His face congested with strain and was shiny with sweat. A straight course back to the car was impossible because the footing was as uncertain as squirming bodies. But when he lurched helplessly aside the spotlight followed him. The succession of shots with the swarming roar of echoes came to an end, and he lumbered up the embankment as though it were an insurmountable height. His eyes bulged as though he were blind, and he made a hilarious growling noise when he breathed.

With a last bound that was nearly a fall, he made the running board and got hold of the top of the open door. He handed Carol in to Loren and dropped heavily into the seat under the wheel. His right shoe was gone and his foot was bleeding. With the slam of the door he slapped the gear lever back and used his left foot on the accelerator. The car had canted far to one side, ready to slip off the road.

The power plant labored as though it were going to stall again, but abruptly the motor raced. The terrific suction which had fastened on the rubber tires could not hold the bare steel rims. Down the stripe of light aimed at the rock shadows flowed, coasting in rippling smoothness, puckering and swelling out smooth, like the motion of dark brown water. All around that rock was quicksand, and he never would have made it back to the car if hadn't been for the foot or more of the creature's thickness overlying the ground.

The spinning rims grabbed, and the two tons of the car jumped ahead to regain the middle elevation of the road. Andy shifted to second gear and planted his wet foot on the accelerator pedal unthinkingly. He kept the pedal down.

With a swipe of his hand he shifted the motor into high gear. The rear wheels found purchase erratically, and the heavy sedan slued, swaying with slow, miraculous escapes from side to side. Around one curve it seemed that mere momentum kept them going rear-end-to. In the dip of the road, the right wheels threw water high over the car and muddied the windshield. Then with a jar they struck hard, pebbly ground, and the sound of the wheel-rims was a grating, grinding business which was so prolonged with the tilt of the car that Loren thought they could not escape turning over.

They were doing less than thirty miles an hour, but the speed advanced when they went up and over the shoulder of the first incline. Over a reach of level, hard ground, they bowled along toward the stiff climb up the bluff to the parkway until they were doing better than fifty. Andy kept the machine under control, but it swayed, and when they hit an obstruction the body banged on the springs and they bounced on the seats, ducking their heads to avoid getting them cracked against the roof.

Andy was trying to get up as much speed as he could to make the steep hill. The motor was thundering.

"How bad is it?" Loren asked, lighting a cigarette at the first try with a great deal of luck. He had an arm tightly snared around the unconscious form of Carol Poore. He glanced over his shoulder at Ruth Calvert in the rear seat. She was down on the seat, slumbering. Her ripe, red lips were parted as though she were going to say "Hello," and get up. But she wouldn't. Not for a little while. Out.

Andy's foot was stuck to the accelerator pedal with blood.

Loren asked, "Pretty bad?"

"Not very," Andy lied. He wished that he were alone so that he could scream with all his might.

They stormed into the road which corkscrewed up along the bluff into the parkway. When they got up there, he would park across the road and commandeer the first car for taking Carol to a hospital. Andy jigsawed as they went up, cutting back and forth across the road in order to reduce the grade. They got stuck, started again, crawling out with sobbing motor.

Down in the Thurston Meadows was the monster; it wouldn't be any use to say anything about it, because it was incredible. It would flounder awhile when the water rose and then it would drown because it couldn't escape. It would get caught and chewed up in the turbines at the dam.

It was dying when they ran into it, starving, and they could hear it floundering gigantically in the water behind them. They didn't look back.

A few hundred feet ahead beyond the outthrust of bluff there was a ravine which had been used as a city dump. Tons of garbage and waste had been dumped into it before the city authorities decided that the river was being polluted. An ordinance stopped the dumping, and truckloads of clean sand buried the dump out of sight. And the monster had had to come down into the Thurston Meadows looking for food.

That would be something to know—what combination of ingredients, of chemicals and ripe food and rotteness, activated by lightning or somehow—how that unspeakable thing was created.

Andy didn't think about it very long. He nursed the heavy car up to the top of the bluff, drove through picnic grounds and reached the parkway.

[The end of *Danger: Quicksand* by Howard Elmer Wandrei]