

# Castle of the Doomed



*When Detective Sergeant Evans tried to solve the mystery of the hangtree harvest, he found himself out on a lethal limb.*

*By*

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**J**EFF EVANS, detective sergeant, brought the car to a sudden stop. There was a big iron gate barring the drive. He looked at his companion, middle-aged Ralph Usher, broker and rich man's general representative.

"Think nothing of it," Usher smiled. "This is only the beginning, sergeant. About three miles beyond this gate, over land owned by Jarvis, is his house. Or castle, you might call it. He's a peculiar duck."

"Heck of a place for a rich man to live—like a hermit," Evans grunted.

"What do we do now—crash the gate?"

Usher shook his head, opened the car door and climbed out. Evans saw a metal box attached to the gate and Usher walked directly up to it, pulled back the door and pressed a small button. Instantly a voice seemed to come directly out of the air.

"Who is it?"

"Ralph Usher, Mr. Jarvis. I'm here with that police detective you asked me to bring so urgently."

"I must be sure," the voice said. "If you really are Ralph Usher, what was the last deal we consummated?"

Usher looked back to Sergeant Evans and spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness to cope with such a situation.

"I sold five thousand shares of Interstate Mining. The figure ran just short of a hundred thousand."

"Good. You may come in, Mr. Usher. I am greatly relieved."

Usher returned to the car and before he climbed in beside Evans, the big iron gate began to open automatically.

"See what we're up against?" Usher shrugged. "He trusts no one. Never did. There's an amplifier hidden in the trees somewhere and a microphone in that box attached to the gate. It opens electrically only when Jarvis is certain he wants to see his visitor. I'll give you odds that we're the first people to get in for a month—the last time I paid him a visit."

"Groceries, supplies and fuel are left outside the gate and Jarvis sends his servants to carry them to the house. Few people have ever seen Jarvis since he retired to this kind of life. And the place he lives in—I wouldn't stay there for a thousand dollars a night."

"Why?" Evans guided the car around a sharp bend.

"Because the house has a history—and what a history. Blood, sudden death and hard luck. I'll wager something happened to frighten Jarvis. That's why he wants a cop."

**E**VANS gave all his attention to driving then. They climbed steadily for a few moments and then the road dipped down into a deep, black valley. In the distance, atop a knoll, he could see the lights of Jarvis' place. Evans shivered. The atmosphere was enough to give even a homicide squad cop the creeps.

The car picked up speed rolling down the steep incline and Evans kept one foot on the brake for quick action. Then,

suddenly, there was a blur directly in front of his windshield. At the same instant the car hit something with the horrible dull thud of an impact between metal and a human body. There was a confusion of arms and legs. Evans braked hard, but he was traveling pretty fast and couldn't stop until he was a hundred yards beyond the spot where he'd hit that man.

He got out and so did Usher. Evans drew a flash, sent its searching ray across the road and Usher suddenly gave a hoarse cry of horror and sprinted back. He reached the corpse first. Evans kept shining his flash around the underbrush.

"He's dead," Usher said slowly. "It's Cavanaugh, the caretaker of the estate. Been here for years and years. What the devil happened, sergeant? I didn't see him along the road."

"Neither did I." Evans knelt and examined the body. The neck was twisted awkwardly and Evans knew why this man had died so quickly. The neck was broken.

"He wasn't walking beside the road," Evans went on. "This man was either thrown in front of the car or he dropped in front of it. I didn't see him until the impact. Usher, it looks as if Jarvis was right in asking for a detective. This is murder."

"Yes." Usher looked around nervously. "You must be right. I've known Cavanaugh for years. He'd never have committed suicide. Say, what about Jarvis? What if something happened to him?"

"Take the dead man's legs," Evans ordered. "Help me move him to the side of the road. Hurry—you might be right about Jarvis."

Two minutes later they were rolling at a fast clip along the winding road. Evans stopped in front of the house. The porch light snapped on and a bent-shouldered, white-haired man came out of the door.

Usher heaved a sigh of relief.

“That’s Jarvis. He’s going to take Cavanaugh’s death hard. Better let me tell him.”

Jarvis shook hands with Evans, a limp, fishy grasp of fingers that made Evans shiver. Then Usher told the old man, as gently as possible, about the death of his caretaker.

The effect on Jarvis was strange. Instead of showing sorrow, his eyes grew wide in terror and he began to tremble. With a quick, suspicious look around the darkness, he signaled them to follow him inside. They sat down in a massive living room which might have easily been turned into a skating rink.

“I’m afraid,” Jarvis explained. “I’m afraid to remain in this damned house and I’m afraid to leave. Don’t ask me why—about leaving I mean—but I’ll tell you why I no longer want to live here.”

“Go on,” Evans said. “When you’re through, I’ll call headquarters and have them send down for Cavanaugh.”

“I have no phone,” Jarvis put in quickly. “Never had one, but we’ll arrange to send somebody. About this house—I’ve lived here more than ten years now. Nothing ever happened and then, a week ago, one of the ancient books in the library—they came with the house—fell from its shelf. Naturally, I looked at it, and it contained a complete history of this house. It’s a place of horrors, gentlemen. I don’t believe in curses nor the supernatural, but something hangs over this house and it is ready to strike at me any moment. Wait—I’ll show you.”

**J**ARVIS got up and left the room for a few seconds. Usher rotated a finger alongside his temple to indicate that he thought Jarvis’ wheels revolved in the wrong direction. Then Jarvis came back with a musty, dog-eared volume. Its pages

were yellow with age and if handled roughly, cracked like thin ice. Jarvis carefully opened the book and pointed.

“There is a concise history of the place. A digest of what the rest of the book contains. I’ve wondered why certain trees, more than a hundred years old, carried ancient, weather-beaten wooden signs with a man’s name barely discernible on them. I did know that those names were duplicated on tombstones in a private graveyard a mile behind the house, but I never did get the connection between the two. Now—I know.”

Evans read the handwriting swiftly. He whistled and beckoned to Usher. “Have a look. Four different people were murdered on this estate, years ago. In each case they were hung from one of the trees. Seems that the occupants were peculiar people. Two were executed because they were suspected of witchcraft. One was proven a murderer and died on a gallows tree on this estate. The fourth was just found hanging and nobody ever did find out who killed him or why.”

Usher licked his lips. “I think I’ll go back to the city,” he said. “Suppose I notify the police, eh, sergeant?”

“You’ll remain here,” Jarvis snapped. “If you don’t, you’ve seen the last bit of business from me, Usher. The detective will be busy trying to find out who killed Cavanaugh and I want someone I can trust to stand beside me every moment. About Cavanaugh—you suggested perhaps it was suicide. Nonsense! Cavanaugh was going to be retired at the first of the year. I promised to pay him a pension. He was murdered—murdered, I tell you, and I’m going to be next.”

“Wait a minute,” Evans interjected. “Mr. Jarvis, just why are you so certain you’re slated for murder? Why are you so afraid?”

Jarvis got up and headed for the front

door. "Follow—I'll show you. And stay close."

He led the way across the porch, down the steps and into the estate proper. There was a winding path which he followed for ten minutes and then he pointed to a tree. Evans' flashlight centered on a small piece of wood, bearing letters that were hardly readable.

JONATHAN GREER HUNG HERE 1840

Jarvis went to another tree and another until he'd covered four of them. Each bore a similar sign. Then, almost triumphantly, he led them to still another tree. The sign nailed to it was fresh, bright and clear. Evans read it and gulped.

PAUL JARVIS HUNG HERE 1941

"See?" Jarvis grabbed Evans' arm tightly, like a frightened child. "That's why I'm afraid. Someone intends to hang me from that tree."

"Look," Evans said, "I'm convinced there's plenty of trouble brewing around here. Who lives with you, Jarvis? How many servants?"

"Three. No—two now, because Cavanugh is dead. There's Dodson, he's my butler and all around helper. Then there's the cook—a Swiss named Hausworth who has been with me for five years. Dodson is like a friend. He's served me for almost a quarter of a century. Neither of them can be suspected of plotting against my life."

"Okay," Evans grunted, "but there must be a reason. Have you any enemies?"

"None that would want to murder me." Jarvis shuddered. "I'm sure of that. I—we'd better go back to the house. I don't like the darkness and that—that piece of wood bearing my name. I can't stand looking at it."

Evans walked beside the old man and he kept one hand on a gun which he'd transferred to his side pocket. Usher brought up the rear. Evans kept spraying the night with his flash and was ready for trouble.

Suddenly Usher stopped and gave a strangled cry. "Sergeant! Mr. Jarvis! Look here! I saw this in the gleam of your flash, Evans."

THEY gathered around another age-old tree. There was a piece of wood nailed to it. Its legend was similar to the one they'd just looked at—except that the name of the victim was different. This one read:

STEPHEN DODSON HUNG HERE 1941

"Dodson—my servant," Jarvis gasped. "Hurry—we've got to see if he's all right. I couldn't let anything happen to Dodson."

They started to run and put about a hundred yards between themselves and the gallows tree. Suddenly all three of them were brought to a halt by a strange swishing sound, a thud and a horrible cracking noise. Evans spun around, his flash stabbing the darkness until it centered on a man's body, dangling from the end of a rope and spinning like a top.

Evans had his gun out as he rushed back to the figure, but he exchanged the gun for a pocket knife and cut the man down less than a minute after he'd been seen. But he was dead, his neck broken just as Cavanugh's had been. His eyes were wide open and staring in the most indescribable horror that Evans had ever seen.

"It's Dodson," Jarvis screamed. "Dodson—he's dead! He was hung from that tree as the sign said he would be. And I'm next. I'm next, I tell you."

Usher stepped close to Evans. "I think

the old boy is right, sergeant. This smacks of something connived in Hades. What'll we do?"

"Watch Jarvis—never let him out of our sight. One of us must be at his side every instant." Evans shot his flash upwards and studied the branches of the great tree. "What I'd like to know is how Dodson was dropped. Nobody up there now and unless we've got a Tarzan present, I don't see how anybody could jump from one tree to another and make good his escape."

"I don't know the answer to that one," Usher grunted, "but I'll swear there was no corpse hanging there when we passed by. Couldn't possibly have been. Sergeant, why not take the cook and Jarvis off this place? Make 'em go to the city tonight—right now."

"Maybe you're on the proper track," Evans agreed. "Yet I doubt Jarvis would leave on such short notice. I wonder why he insists on living in a place like this anyhow? Never sees anyone, never goes anywhere. It's almost as though he's hiding from the whole world. We'll go back to the house now. And remember—never let him out of your sight."

Evans spent half an hour studying the ancient volume. It was dated 1761 and looked its age. Then he stepped over beside Usher and spoke softly.

"I'm going outside. Jarvis' safety is in your hands. If anything happens, start yelling."

Jarvis watched him leave and half arose as if to call the detective back. Hausworth, the cook, was huddled in a big chair. His slight, wispy form was crouched in terror.

Evans hurried to the spot where Dodson lay dead and made a more careful examination of the corpse. He noticed that the dead man's fingernails were almost torn off and that slivers of bark were

forced beneath them as if Dodson had clawed at the tree to save himself from that lethal drop. Evans looked around, stuffed his gun into his belt and then proceeded to climb the tree.

It was tough going, but he made it, and finally straddled a thick branch from which the rope dangled. The bark showed signs where Dodson had clawed at it. Side branches were unusually thick, but some of them were bowed down as if considerable weight had been pressed against them over a period of time. Two of the smaller ones were half broken off.

"**D**ODSON," Evans said half aloud, "was supported by these branches—or his murderer was. But how the devil could the killer have dragged a healthy man like Dodson up here and then tossed him off? And where did the killer go after his deed was committed? We were beneath the tree sixty seconds after it happened."

There was no answer to that so Evans clambered down again. He studied the sign nailed to the tree and shivered. No wonder Jarvis was so scared. Evans himself began to know what terror of the unknown was like.

He went to the other trees, bearing the very old signs. He grasped one and gently worried it loose. His eyes narrowed slightly and he made the rounds of the others. The only one he didn't disturb was that which bore the name of Paul Jarvis.

It was a long hike to the spot where Cavanaugh, the caretaker, lay in death, but Evans walked it. He didn't want to use the car and attract attention Cavanaugh's death was still unexplained, and Evans hated to think he'd run into the man and killed him.

The corpse was still there, exactly as they'd left it. Evans searched the pockets and found nothing of interest. Then he looked searchingly at the dead man's

throat. It had a welt completely around it. Evans set his jaw grimly and approached the tree.

Up among its branches he found no sign of a rope, but the bark was burned slightly as though a rope had been there. Evans frowned. Cavanaugh had died just as Dodson had and yet there was no placard on the tree announcing he'd be hung at this spot. Why was his death different from Dodson's, and why had the rope been so carefully removed? What happened to the part which must have been around the dead man's neck?

Evans snapped on his flash to light the way down. Almost simultaneously, a gun cracked and the bullet ripped through leaves around Evans' head. He turned the light off and jerked the gun out of his belt. There were no more shots, but the would-be assassin must have known he'd missed, because if he hadn't Evans would have been sprawled on the ground by now. Once Evans heard underbrush snap, but he had no target to shoot at. The darkness was intense.

Then he carefully raised the flashlight high above his head and propped it into a spot where branch and tree trunk were joined. It stayed there, wedged hard in place. He lowered himself a bit until his feet hit another substantial branch. Then he turned on the flash, ducked down and grabbed at the branch on which he was balanced.

The killer fired straight at the flash. Evans saw the lurid flare of his gun and his own service pistol went into action. But shooting at an elusive target in thick forest growths like this was hardly successful. All it did was send the killer running madly away. Evans dropped to the ground and started in pursuit. He gave up ten minutes later and headed back to the house.

Usher was pacing the living room floor

and he was alone. He hurried up to Evans.

"Something got into the old fool. He insisted I remain here while he went upstairs. Refused to allow me to come with him. Said what he had to do was important, but he wanted no one to see him. He also said something about leaving this place tonight."

"Stay here," Evans said. "I'll find him."

He hurried upstairs and after a ten-minute prowling into almost twenty different rooms, he found one door which was locked.

"Who is it?" a querulous, frightened voice asked.

"Sergeant Evans. Open up, Mr. Jarvis. I've got to see you."

**B**UT Jarvis didn't unlock the door for several minutes and when he backed into the room away from Evans, he was shaking like a leaf. A window across the room was wide open and tree branches were close enough so that anyone could have entered or left the room by that exit.

"I—just wanted to be alone. To—to think," Jarvis explained lamely.

"Tell me," Evans asked, "how long have those signs been nailed to the trees? The old ones, I mean."

"Why for—for ages," Jarvis gasped. "Each one is dated, isn't it?"

"But did you ever notice them before?" Evans insisted.

"No—no, I didn't, but I never wandered around the estate very much until lately. Dodson discovered them first and from then on my life here has been a hell on earth. Officer, I'm going back to the city, to a hotel suite where there are people and talking and lights. I can't stand living here any longer. If I go away, perhaps that curse won't follow me. I'll cheat that gallows tree."

"I think it's a good idea," Evans said.

"We'll talk about it later on. Meantime you can pack your bags if you wish. When will you be ready to go?"

"In about half an hour. I must be alone now. Please, sergeant. I promise to call out if anything happens. I've a decision to make and I can't think unless I'm by myself."

Evans shrugged and walked out. He heard the lock click immediately after the door closed. Usher was at the bottom of the stairs, anxiously waiting.

"He wants to leave," Evans said. "Darned soon too. Says he has packing to do and some brain work as well. Must be left alone. Tell me, Usher, how long after I left the house, did Jarvis go upstairs?"

"Almost immediately and I thought it was rather odd because he'd just said he was afraid to be left alone. The man contradicts himself every time he talks. What do you think of all this, sergeant?"

"I don't know what to think," Evans grunted. "I'm sure though, that we haven't seen the last of murder tonight. Trouble is, there's only you, I, Jarvis and the cook for victims. I don't like the way Jarvis is acting."

"Holy smokes," Usher cried, "you don't think he asked me to bring you up here so he could commit murder and be alibied at the same time? If so, he must have help. How could any of us have dropped Dodson from that tree unless—Sergeant—the cook. Maybe he's in with Jarvis. Maybe Cavanugh and Dodson knew something that meant trouble for Jarvis."

"You might be right," Evans said. "I'm going to find out. Stay here and keep your eyes and ears open. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Evans went out the front door, circled the big house which required fully five minutes and finally stood just below Jarvis' lighted window. Expert at this

method of climbing now, he pulled himself well up into the tree. He was almost opposite the illuminated window when every light in the house winked out.

Half a second later a gun blared from the window and bark flew against Evans' cheek from the bullet. Two more shots were fired and both came dangerously close. Evans grabbed the branch on which he was standing, swung himself down and dropped to the ground. He fell heavily, but was up in a moment and rushing to the front of the place again.

Usher had the door open and was dancing around excitedly. "Shots," he jabbered. "Shooting—yells. Somebody must be killing Jarvis."

"Where is the cook?" Evans barked.

"I don't know. Haven't seen him. Oh, here he comes. At least it's somebody from the back of the house."

**T**HE cook stumbled through the darkness toward them. He was livid with terror in the white ray of Evans' torch. But he swore he knew nothing of what had happened.

"I'm going upstairs," Evans said. "Stay here."

He took about four steps upward and stopped. A groan reached him and then tottering footsteps headed his way. It was Jarvis, so terror-stricken that he could hardly walk. There was a big revolver in his hand and—dangling from around his neck was a short noose. Evans ran up the stairs to help him descend.

Jarvis was aided to a chair. The only light came from Evans' flash and it cast weird shadows all around the huge living room. Jarvis finally found his voice.

"I was—upstairs—in the room. The door was locked. I heard something make a clicking sound, as if the key was being turned from outside. Then, a few moments later, the lights went out. Someone came

into the room and struck me. I fell down. The noose was placed around my neck and pulled tight. I was being strangled.”

Evans took the big gun out of Jarvis’ hand, broke the breech and grunted. No shots had been fired from this weapon.

“I got the gun after—after I was able to get up,” Jarvis explained. “Just as the noose was pulled tight, the murderer suddenly let go and then there was a lot of shooting. That’s all I know. I guess I fainted. Officer, we’re leaving this house at once.”

“You’re right,” Evans agreed. “Get ready as quickly as you can. I’ll see you safely into town and return here with enough men to search the place properly. I’ll go upstairs with you, Jarvis, and I won’t take no for an answer either. Here—my arm.”

“If you promise not to come into the room with me,” Jarvis hedged. “I can’t permit that. But I would like to know you were outside.”

“Okay, but let’s get started. Cook, you go out front and get the car ready. Motor running and all. You might work the switch that opens the main gate, too.”

“How?” the cook quavered. “With our power plant not working?”

“Then we’ll crash through,” Evans said sharply. “Come on, Jarvis.”

He helped the old man up the steps, using his flash sparingly because the battery was none too good. Jarvis went to the same room, the noose which had been around his throat dragging from one hand now. He suddenly seemed to realize what he was holding and dropped it with a grimace of distaste.

The door closed and Jarvis turned the key. Evans knelt outside the door and looked at the lock. There were scratches indicating that someone, armed with a fine pair of pliers, had successfully twisted the key from outside. That seemed to place

Jarvis in the clear. Evans shut off the flash, straightened up. Something exploded against his skull.

Evans slumped to his knees. Another blow sent him sprawling on his face and he lay very still, expecting to feel a noose draped around his throat at any second. He wasn’t unconscious, but his arms and legs felt as though they were separated from the rest of his body.

SOMEONE grasped Evans’ ankles and pulled him gently down the hall, making hardly any noise. He was left there. Evans slowly fought to recover some co-ordination between nerves and muscles. He sat up slowly. His flash and gun were missing, but he didn’t care much about that.

Without making a sound, he pulled himself erect and reeled down the hall toward Jarvis’ room. The door opened unexpectedly and Evans acted with the speed of an attacking panther.

Usher, at the foot of the high staircase, saw Jarvis’ stooped figure coming down. There were two small valises tucked under each arm and he clutched suitcases in both hands too. He stumbled several times in the darkness and as he took the last step to reach the hallway, Usher suddenly gave a forward leap.

One hand was upraised and it held a knife. The blade came down in a swishing arc, but Jarvis’ figure moved agilely to one side and the knife missed its mark. Usher gave a curse and tried again. This time strong fingers closed around his wrist, twisted savagely and the knife fell to the floor with a clatter.

Usher raised one leg and kicked. The other man grunted in pain and let go. Usher ran back a few steps, drawing a gun as he did so. He fired at the figure, but missed and then Usher felt a fist crack against his jaw. He fired again, but the gun

was knocked aside and the bullet just plowed into the wall. Usher managed to get the gun raised and smashed it toward the head of his enemy. It connected and the man staggered back. Usher moved like lightning then. His gun prodded the other man's chest. Usher spoke in a cold, murderous voice.

"So I didn't knock you out up there, Evans? Well, you should have pretended I did because now I'm going to blow a hole in you. Tried to trick me, acting like Jarvis, eh? Where is the old skinflint?"

"Upstairs—in his room. I had to knock him out. Usher, you're a rat. You've got me. I know I'm going to die, but I'd be willing to go through that if I could just get my hands around your throat and strangle you, as you killed Cavanugh and Dodson."

Usher laughed. "So you guessed that too, eh? Sure I killed them. You don't know how though."

"Don't I? Both were drugged, propped up in trees so that when they awakened, their movements would send them toppling off with a rope around their necks, Cavanugh recovered consciousness a little too soon and dropped directly in front of my car. I hit him so hard the rope broke. You ran back, removed it from his neck and later on removed the rest of it from the tree branch. That was just before I showed up and you tried to gun me out too."

"You wanted it to look as though Cavanugh had just mysteriously been thrown in front of the car. Otherwise, you were afraid I'd insist on calling in a dozen men and so ruin your plan for scaring Jarvis so badly he'd clear out and take what's in these bags with him. Dodson fell at exactly the right time."

"**T**HAT'S enough talk," Usher snarled. "I'm going to kill you—

dispose of the old man and tell the cook he shot you and then killed himself. Everybody will believe he was crazy. Then I'll take those four bags he packed so thoughtfully. Know what's in them, sergeant?"

"Thousands of dollars in cash," Evans answered quietly. "Money you brought here personally after selling Jarvis' securities. He got burned in the bank run back in 1929 and never trusted banks after that. He kept all the cash here and you wanted it. But Jarvis had the stuff pretty well hidden. He'd have died before he told where it was so you tried to scare him into taking the stuff out of its hiding place."

"You planted that book in the house—you nailed up those supposedly century old signs on the trees. The whole thing was faked, even to the book which was treated with dilute acid to make it look old. But it was written with a steel pen and they weren't invented at the time it was supposed to have been inscribed."

"The century-old signs were fakes too—cleverly done. But they were nailed up with machine-made nails, something else that wasn't in existence at the time those signs were supposed to have been created. Now go ahead and shoot. That's my gun you're holding, isn't it?"

"Yes—and I won't miss." Usher's finger tightened against the trigger. There was a click, but no explosion. Then two hands pinned his arms and forced him back against the wall. Fingers closed around his throat, holding him there, and a big fist was waved in front of his nose.

"You fired the last bullet before," Evans laughed. "I knew how many were left because I had no extra ammunition and had to conserve."

Handcuffs snapped around Usher's wrists. He reeled over and sat down heavily. Evans yelled for the cook and had him fix the lights. They came on ten

minutes later. Jarvis was downstairs by then.

“I’m sorry I had to knock you out, Jarvis,” Evans said. “But I knew what Usher was up to so I wanted to take your place. I had evidence enough on him, but he confessed when he attacked me. Usher was one of the few men who knew you kept money in this house. He was one of the very, very few who ever came to see you. And he had the opportunity of planting that fake book so it looked as though it fell off the shelf and would attract your attention.”

“The ungrateful—murderer,” Jarvis exploded. “I trusted him implicitly.”

“You know, Usher—” Evans faced the killer— “you were so doggone anxious for me to get the impression that horrible things would happen, that you mentioned something about the estate being bloody and evil, that its history was bad. Yet you showed surprise when you saw that faked book. I wondered about you then. Well, let’s take a ride. All of us. We’ll come back later to gather loose ends. That is—” we’ll all come back except Usher.”