BEHIND THE STUMPS

RUSSELL KIRK

Wood engravings by Luther Roberts

Mr. Russell Kirk is an American, usually resident in Michigan (of which he is a native), but at present studying and writing at St. Andrews. He is a professor in the Department of the History of Civilization at Michigan State College. While working in Scotland on a history of conservative thought in Britain and America from the time of Edmund Burke to the present day, he also finds time to write short stories and essays and to visit haunted houses. He has already seen a Scottish ghost—the apparition of the Pends. He sent us this powerful witch story set in primitive rural America, because in his opinion tales of mystery and the supernatural are not appreciated in his native country. Is this dislike of ghost stories created by the fear of death?

"And Satan stood up against Israel, and
provoked David to number Israel."

POTAWATTOMIE COUNTY, shorn of its protecting forest seventy years ago, has sprawled ever since like Samson undone by Delilah, naked, impotent, grudgingly servile. Potatoes and beans grow amid the fields of rotted stumps, and half the inhabited houses still are log cabins thrown up by the lumbermen who followed the trappers into this land. In Potawattomie there has been no money worth mentioning since the timber was cut; but here and there people cling to the strangling farms, makeshift in the crumbling villages. An elusive beauty drifts over this country—sprinkled with little lakes, stretches of second-growth woods and cedar swamps, gravelly upland ridges that are gnawed by every rain, now that their cover is gone. As if a curse had been pronounced upon these folk and their houses and their crops in reprisal for their ravishing of nature, everything in Potawattomie is melting away.

Of the people who stick obstinately to this stump-country, some are grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the men who swept off the forest; others are flotsam cast upon these sandy miles from the torrent of modern life, thrown out of the eddy upon the far bank to lie ignored and inert. Worn farmers of a conservative cast of mind, pinched, tenacious, inured to monotony, fond of the bottle on Saturday nights; eccentrics of several sorts; with a silent half-breed crew of negro-and-Indian, and negro-and-white, dispersed in cabins and sun-stricken tar-paper shanties along the back roads, remote from the county seat and the lesser hamlets that serve the languid commerce of Potawattomie—these are the Potawattomie people. Decent roads are few, the normally ubiquitous radio prohibitively costly, even the hand of government almost nerveless in this poverty of soil and spirit.

Yet not wholly palsied, the grip of the State, for all that. Tax-assessments necessarily are moderate in Potawattomie, but there are highways to be kept up, poaching of deer and trout to be kept down, old-age assistance to be doled out. There is a sheriff, intimate with the local tone, at the county seat; there is a judge of probate, also a local man; and the county supervisors are farmers and tradesmen without inclination to alter the nature of things in squalidly complacent Potawattomie. So far, government is a shadow. But now and then the State administration and the Federal administration gingerly poke about in the mud and flotsam of the stump-land.

A special rural census had to be compiled. Down in the capital, a plan had been drawn up, a plan that concerned commodity price-levels and potential crop-yields and tabulated nutritive-values. Acres of corn were to be counted, and pigs and people. Enumerators went out to every spreading wheat-farm, to every five-acre tomato patch; and Potawattomie County could not be omitted.

Always against the Government, Potawattomie; against the administration that ordained this special census most vehemently. This new survey, Potawattomie declared, meant more blank forms, more trips to the county seat, higher taxation, an intolerable prying into every man's household—which last none resent more than do the decently poor. The Regional Office of the Special Census began to encounter difficulties in compiling accurate tabulations for Potawattomie. Doors were shut in the faces of official enumerators, despite threats of warrants and writs; the evasive response was common, violent reaction not inconceivable. Particularly unsatisfactory reports were received from the district about Bear City, a decayed town of two hundred inhabitants. Despite his pressing need for the stipend attached to the office, the temporary agent there resigned in distress at a growing unpopularity with his neighbours; a woman who took the place was ignored by half the farmers she endeavoured to interview. The Regional Office determined to send out a Special Interviewer, and sent Cribben to Bear City. They let him have a car, and a stack of forms, and rather a stiff letter of introduction to the postmaster in that town, and off he drove northward.

Cribben took his revolver with him: he was that sort of man. Once he had been a bank-messenger, and

he was wont to tell his associates, "The other messengers carried their guns at the bottom of their briefcases, so there'd be no chance of having to pull them if there was a stick-up. But I kept my ·38 handy, really handy. I was ready to have it out with the boys."

Tall, forty, stiff as a stick, this Cribben—walking with chin up, chest out, joints rigid, in a sort of nervous defiance of humanity. He looked insufferable. He was insufferable. Next to a jocular man, an insufferable man is best suited for the responsibilities that are a Special Interviewer's. Close-clipped black hair set off a strong head, well proportioned; but the mouth was petulant, the eyes were ignorantly challenging, the chin was set in lines of pomposity. In conversation, Cribben had a way of sucking in his cheeks with an affectation of whimsical deliberation; for Cribben had long told himself that he was admirably funny when he chose to be, especially with women. His wife had divorced him years before —in Reno, since (somewhat to her bewilderment) she had been able to think of no precise grounds which would admit of obtaining her divorce in their own state. He lived chastely, honestly, soberly, completely solitary. He laughed dutifully at other men's jokes; he would go out of his way to write a friendly letter of recommendation; but somehow no one ever looked him up or asked him out. A failure in everything, Cribben—ex-engineer, ex-chief clerk, ex-artillery captain, ex-foundry partner. He told himself he had been completely reliable in every little particular, which was true; and he told himself he had failed because of his immaculate honesty in a mob of rogues, which was false. He had failed because he was precise.

"Corporal, about the morning report: I see you used eraser to clean up this ink-blot, instead of correction fluid. Watch that, Corporal. We'll use correction fluid. Understand?" This is the sort of thing the precise Cribben would say—if with a smile, then the wrong kind of smile; and he would compliment himself upon his urbanity. He did not spare himself; no man ever was more methodical, more painstaking. Reliable in every little particular, yes; but so devoted to these particulars that generalities went to pot. Subordinates resigned and read the "help wanted" columns rather than submit to another week of such accuracy; superiors found him hopelessly behind in his work, austerely plodding through tidy inconsequentialities. Cribben was, truly, quite intolerable. He knew the mass of mankind to be consistently inaccurate and usually dishonest. Quite right, of course. Sensible men nod and shrug; Cribben nagged. His foundry went to pieces because he fretted about missing wrenches and screwdrivers. He thought his workmen stole them. They did steal them, undeniably; but Cribben never would admit that moderate pilferage is an item of fixed overhead. There would have been something noble in Cribben's pertinacity had he loved precision for the sake of truth. But he regarded truth only as an attribute of precision.

So down to that sink of broken men, governmental service, spun Cribben in the vortex of professional failure. Having arrived at the abyss, which in this instance was a temporary junior clerkship, Cribben commenced to rise again in a small

way. The assistant chief of the Regional Office discerned in this humourless precision the very incarnation of the second-best type of public functionary, and set him to compelling the reluctant to complete interminable forms. So far as advancement could be accorded him in this capacity, it was: he became a Senior Investigator, with every increase of salary authorized by statute. To entrust him with supervisory duties proved inadvisable; but within his sphere, Cribben was incomparable. It was Cribben's apotheosis. Never had he liked work so well, and only a passion to reorganize the Regional Office upon a more precise model shadowed his contentment. The majesty of Government at his back, the hauteur of a censor in his mien as he queried the subject of a survey or interrogated the petitioner for a grant—a man like Cribben never dreamed of more than this. For Cribben was wholly without imagination.

And Cribben drove north to Bear City.

False-fronted drygoods shops and grocery stores and saloons, built lavishly of second-grade pine when pine was cheap and apparently inexhaustible, are strung along a wide gravelled road: this is Bear City. They are like discoloured teeth in an old man's mouth, these buildings, for they stand between great gaps where casual flames have had their way with abandoned structures. One of these shops, with the usual high old-fashioned window-panes and siding painted a watery white, is also the post office. On Saturday afternoons in little towns like this, post offices generally close. But on this Saturday afternoon, in Bear City—so Cribben noted as he parked his automobile—not only the drygoods half of the shop, but the post office too was open for business. This was tidy and efficient, reflected Cribben, striding through the door. It predisposed him to amicability.

"Afternoon," said Cribben to the postmaster. "I'm J. K. Cribben, from the Regional Office. Read this, please." He presented his letter of introduction.

Mr. Matt Heddle, postmaster, Bear City, was behind the wrought-iron grill of the old post-office counter, a relic of earlier days and more southerly towns; and his shy wife Jessie was opposite, at the grocery counter. They were not lacking in a dignity that comes from honourable posts long held in small places. Mr. Heddle, with his crown of thick white hair and his august slouch, his good black suit, and his deep slow voice, made a rural postmaster to be proud of.

"Why, I wish you luck, Mr. Cribben," said Matt Heddle with concern, reading the letter of introduction. Mr. Heddle wanted to be postmaster for the rest of his life. "I'll do anything I can. I'm sorry about all the fuss the other census-men had."

"Their own damned fault," said Cribben, largely. "Don't give a grouch a chance to make a fuss—that's my way. Take none of their lip. I've handled people quite a while. Shoot out your questions, stare 'em down. I won't have much trouble here."

No, he didn't. Whatever Cribben's shortcomings, he was neither coward nor laggard. Only six or seven hours a day he spent in the tourist-room he rented; and by the time six days had passed, he had seen and conquered

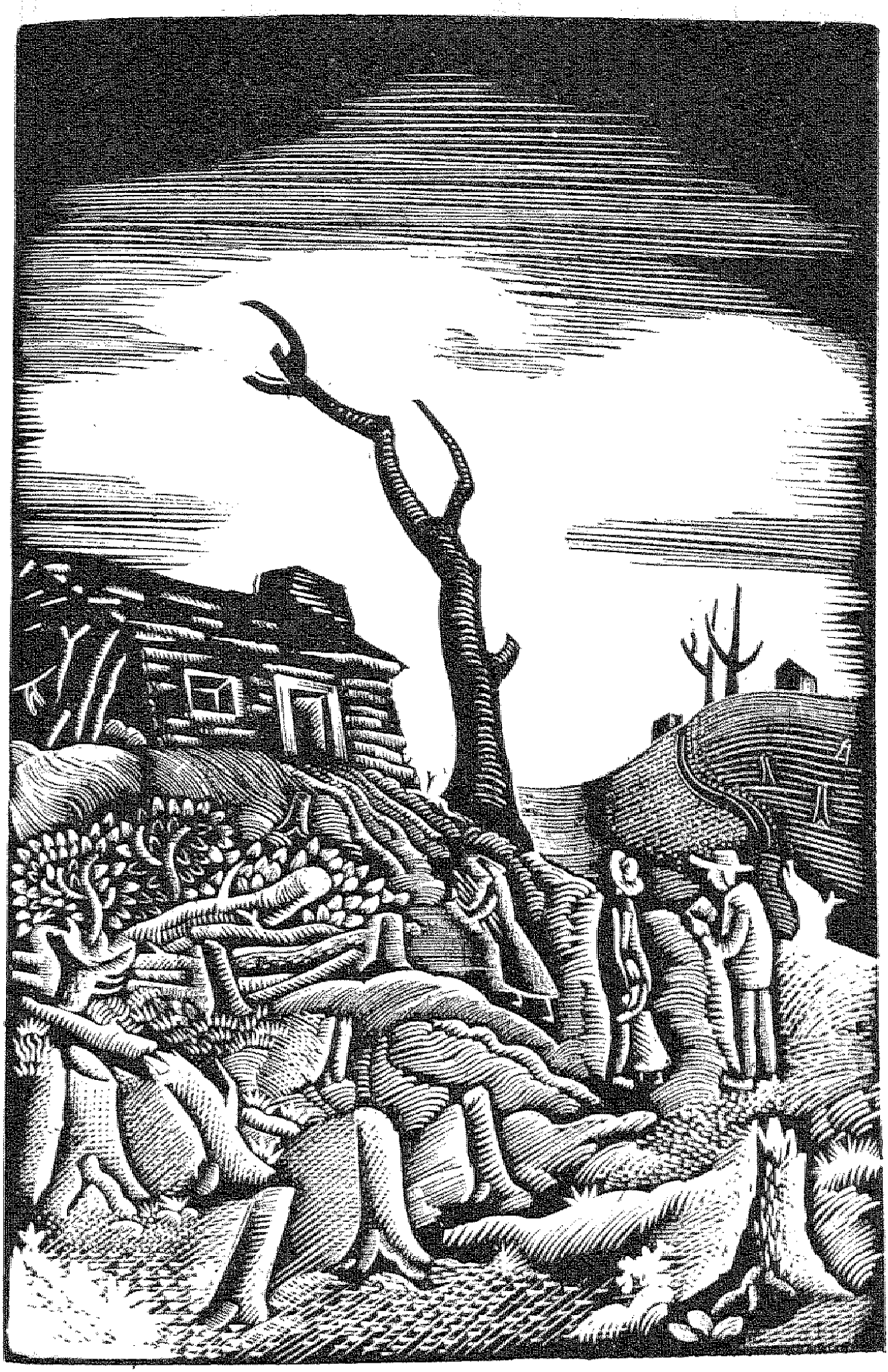
almost all the obdurate farmers around Bear City. Their sheds and their silos, their sheep and their steers, their hired men and their bashful daughters, the rooms in their houses and the privies behind them —all were properly observed and recorded in blank forms and check-sheets. What Cribben could not see with his own eyes he bullied out adequately enough from the uneasy men he cornered and glowered at. He was big, he was gruff, he was pedantically insistent. He was worth what salary the Regional Office paid. He never took "no" for an answer—or "don't know," either. He made himself hated in Bear City more quickly, perhaps, than ever had man before; and he paid his contemners back in a condescending scorn. His success was due in no small part to his comparative restraint; for he seemed to those he confronted to be holding himself precariously in check, on the verge of tumbling into some tremendous passion like a dizzy man teetering on a log across a river. He was cruelly cold, always, never fierce, and yet hanging by a worn rope just above a ferocious hell. What brute would have the callousness, or the temerity, to thrust this man over the brink? It was easier to answer his questions and submit to his prying.

Over the rutted trails of Potawattomie County in muddy spring he drove his official automobile, finding out every shack and hut, every Indian squatter, and every forlorn old couple back in the cedar thickets, every widow who boasted a cow and a chicken-run. They were numbered, all numbered. The birds were thick this spring in Potawattomie, and some of the lilacs came out early, but Cribben never looked at them, for they were not to be enumerated. He was not an imaginative man. Six days of this, and he had done the job except for the Barrens. Of all Potawattomie, Bear City district was the toughest morsel for the Special Census; and the Barrens were the hard kernel of Bear City's hinterland.

Who lives in the Barrens, that sterile and gullied and scrub-veiled upland? Why, it's hard to say. A half-dozen scrawny families, perhaps more—folk seldom seen, less seldom heard, even in Bear City. They have no money for the dissipations of a town, the Barrens people—none of them, at least, except the Gholsons; and no one ever knew a Gholson to take out a dollar for anything but a sack of sugar or a few yards of cloth or a bottle of rot-gut whisky. The Gholsons must have money, as money goes in Potawattomie; but what they get, they keep.

Cribben came into the post office on Saturday afternoon, a week after his arrival in town, self-satisfied and muddy; Matt Heddle was there, and Love the garage-man with him—Love already lively from morning libations. "Started on the Barrens this morning, Heddle," Cribben said, ponderously. "Easy as falling off a log. Covered the Robinson place, and Hendry's. Eight kids at the Robinsons', dirty as worms." He looked at his map. "To-morrow, now, I start with this place called Barrens Mill. Not much of a road into it. It's right on Owens Creek. What d'you know about Barrens Mill, Heddle?" He pointed at the spot on his map, his heavy forefinger stiff.

Mr. Matt Heddle was a good-natured old chap, but he did not like Cribben. Potawattomie people said



that Mr. Heddle was well read, which in Potawattomie County means that a man has three reprints of Marie Corelli's novels and two of Hall Caine's; but they were not far wrong in Heddle's case. He had not read many books, but he had read them often, in such leisure as he had found in a hard life. He owned a set of Scott, and was your friend for ever if you knew *Rob Roy* and *The Bride of Lammermoor.* These past two years as postmaster had made him comparatively affluent, with time enough to spend many evenings reading. The appetite for knowledge clutched at him as it sometimes does at pathetic men past their prime; and his devotion to the old novelists, combining with some natural penetration, made him rather shrewd. His good nature was unquenchable; so he looked at grim Cribben, and thought he read in that intolerant face a waste of loneliness and doubt that Cribben never could admit to himself, from terror of the desolation.

He looked at Cribben, yes, and told him: "Let it go, Mr. Cribben. They're an ignorant bunch, the Gholsons; they own Barrens Mill. Let it go. It'll be knee-deep in mud up there, this week. Look up the acreage in the county office and let it go at that. You've done all the work anybody could ask."

"You don't let things go in the Regional Office," said Cribben, with becoming austerity. "I've already looked in the county book: five hundred and twenty acres, the Gholsons own. But I want to know *what* Gholson."

Matt Heddle started to speak, paused, looked at Cribben with speculation, and said, "It's Will Gholson that pays the taxes."

Love, who had been leaning against the iron counter, a wise grin on his face, gave a whisky chuckle and remarked, abruptly: "She was a witch and a bitch, a bitch and a witch. Ha! Goin' to put *her* in the census?"

"Dave Love, this isn't the Elite; it's the post office." Mr. Heddle said it with courtesy. "Let's keep it decent in here."

"Yes, Will Gholson pays the taxes," Cribben nodded, "but the land's not in his name. The tax-roll reads 'Mrs. Gholson'—just that. No Christian name. How do you people choose your county clerk?"

"Mrs. Gholson, old Bitch Gholson, old Witch Gholson," chanted Love. "You goin' to put *her* in the census? She's dead as a dodo."

"Will Gholson's mother, maybe, or his grandmother—that's who's meant," Heddle murmured. "Nobody really knows the Gholsons. They aren't folks you get to know. They're an ignorant bunch, good to keep clear of. She was old, old. I saw her laid out. Some of us went up there for the funeral—only time we ever saw the inside of the house. It was only decent to go up."

"Decent, hell!" said Love. "We was scared not to go, that's the truth of it. Nobody with any brains rubs the Gholsons the wrong way."

"Scared?" Cribben demanded of Love.

"God, yes, man. She was a damned witch, and the whole family's queer. Old Mrs. Gholson have a Christian name? Hell, whoever heard of a witch with a Christian name?"

"You start your drinking too early in the day," said Cribben. Love snorted, grinned, and fiddled with the post-office pen. "What kind of a county clerk do you have, Heddle,

that doesn't take a dead woman's name off the books?"

"Why, I suppose maybe the Gholsons wanted it left on," Heddle answered, placatingly. "And there was talk. Nobody wants to fuss with the Gholsons. Sleeping dogs, Mr. Cribben."

"If you really want to know," growled Love, patronizingly, "she cursed the cows, for one thing. The cows of people she didn't care for, and neighbours that were too close. The Gholsons don't like close neighbours."

"What are you giving me?" Cribben went menacingly red at the idea of being made the butt of a joke; it was the one thing his humourless valour feared.

"You don't have to believe it, man, but the cows went dry, all the same. And sometimes they died. And if that wasn't enough, the Gholsons moved the fences, and the boundary-markers. They took over. They got land now that used to be five farms."

Mrs. Heddle had been listening, and now she came across the shop and said in her shy voice, "They did move the posts, Mr. Cribben—the Gholsons. And the neighbours didn't move them back. They were frightened silly."

"It'll take more than a sick cow to scare me, Mrs. Heddle," Cribben told her, the flush fading from his cheeks. "You people don't have any system up here. What's wrong with your schools, that people swallow this stuff? How do you hire your teachers?"

"Barrens Mill is a place to put a chill into a preacher, Mr. Cribben," said Matt Heddle, meditatively. "There's a look to it. . . . The mill itself is gone, but the big old house is there, seedy now, and the rest of the buildings. John Wendover, the lumberman, built it when this country was opened up, but the Gholsons bought it after the timber went. Some people say the Gholsons came from Ohio. I don't know. There's stories. . . . Nobody knows the Gholsons. They've another farm down the creek. There's five Gholson men now, and I don't know how many women, but they don't mix down here. Will Gholson does the talking for them, and he talks as much as a clam."

"He'll talk to me," the complacent Cribben said.

A curious sensation of pity came over Mr. Heddle. He leaned across the counter and put his hand on Cribben's. This was an act few ever had done, and Cribben, startled, stepped back. "Now, listen, Mr. Cribben, friend. You're a man with spunk, and you know your business; but I'm old, and I've been hereabouts a long time. There are people that don't fit in anywhere, Mr. Cribben. Did you ever think about that? I mean, they won't live by your ways and mine. Some of them are too good, and some are too bad. Everybody's getting pretty much alike—nearly everybody—in this age, and the ones that don't fit in are scarcer; but they're still around. Some are queer, very queer. We can't just count them like so many three-cent stamps. We can't change them, not soon. But they're shy, most of them; let them alone, and they're likely to crawl into holes, out of the sun. Let them be; they don't matter, if you don't stir them up. The Gholsons are like that."

"They come under the law, same as anybody else," Cribben said huffily.

"Oh, the law was made for you

and me and the folks we know—not for them, any more than it was made for snakes, Mr. Cribben. So long as they let the law alone, don't meddle, don't meddle. They don't matter any more than a wasps' nest at the back of the orchard, if you don't poke them." Old Heddle was very earnest.

"A witch of a bitch and a bitch of a witch," chanted Love, mordantly. "Oh, Lord, how she hexed 'em!"

"Why, there's Will Gholson now, coming out of the Elite," whispered Mrs. Heddle from the window. A greasy, burly man with tremendous eyebrows that had tufted points walked from the bar with a bottle in both hip-pockets. He was neither bearded nor shaven, and he was filthy. He turned towards a wagon hitched close by the post office.

"Handsome specimen," observed Cribben, fretting under all this admonition, the defiance in his lonely nature coming to a boil. "We'll have a talk." He strode into the street, Matt Heddle anxiously behind him and Love sauntering in the rear. Gholson, sensing them, swung round from the horse whose harness he had been tightening. He was a rough customer, unquestionably; but that roused Cribben's spirit.

"Will Gholson," called out Cribben in his artillery-captain voice, "I've got a few questions to ask you."

A stare; and then Gholson spat into the road. His words were laboured, a heavy blur of speech, like a man wrestling with a tongue distasteful to him. "You the counter?"

"That's right," Cribben answered. "Who owns your farm, Gholson?"

Another stare, longer, and a kind of slow, dismal grimace. "Go to hell," said Gholson. "Leave us alone."

Something about this earth-stained, sweat-reeking figure, skulking on the frontier of humanity, sent a stir of revulsion through Cribben; and the consciousness of his inward shrinking set fire to his conceit, and he shot out one powerful arm and caught Gholson by the front of his disintegrating overalls. "By God, Gholson, I'm coming out to your place to-morrow; and I'm going through it; I'll have a warrant; and I'll do my duty; so watch out. I hear you've got a queer place at Barrens Mill, Gholson. Look out I don't get it condemned for you." Cribben was white, white with fury, and shouting like a sailor, and shaking in his emotion. Even the dull lump of Gholson's face lost its apathy before this rage, and he stood quiescent in the official's grasp.

"Mr. Cribben, friend," Heddle was saying. Cribben remembered where he was, and what; he let go of Gholson's clothes; but he put his drawn face into Gholson's and repeated, "To-morrow. I'll be out to-morrow."

"To-morrow's Sunday," was all Gholson answered.

"I'll be there to-morrow."

"Sunday's no day for it," said Gholson, almost plaintively. It was as if Cribben had stabbed through this hulk of flesh and rasped upon a moral sensibility.

"I'll be there," repeated Cribben, with grim triumph.

Gholson got deliberately into his wagon, took up the reins, and paused as if collecting his wits for a weighty effort. "Don't, Mister." It was a grunt. "A man that—a man that fusses on Sunday—well, he deserves what he gets." And Gholson drove off.

"What's up, Mr. Cribben?" asked Heddle, startled; for Cribben had slipped down upon the bench outside

the post office and was sucking in air, convulsively. "Here, a nip!" said Love, in concern, and thrust a bottle at him. Cribben took a gulp of whisky, sighed and relaxed. He drew an envelope out of a pocket and swallowed a capsule.

"Heart?" asked the solicitous Heddle.

"Yes," Cribben answered, as humbly as was in him. "It never was dandy. I'm not supposed to get riled."

"With that heart, you don't want to go up to Barrens Mill—no, you don't," said the postmaster, very gravely.

"She's a witch, Cribben." Love was leaning over him. "Hear me, eh? I say, she *is* a witch."

"Quiet down, Love," the postmaster told him. "Or if you do go to the Barrens, Mr. Cribben, you'll take a couple of the sheriff's men with you."

Cribben had quite intended to ask for the deputies; but he'd be damned now if he wouldn't go alone. "I'm driving to the judge for a search-warrant," he answered, his chin up. "That's all I'll take."

Heddle walked with him to the boarding-house where Cribben kept his automobile. He said nothing all the way; but when Cribben had got behind the wheel, he leaned in the window, his big, smooth, friendly old face intent: "There's a lot of old-fashioned prejudice in Potawattomie, Mr. Cribben. But you know, most men run their lives on prejudice. We've got to; we're not smart enough to do anything else. There's sure to be something behind a prejudice. I don't know about the Gholsons, but there's fact behind prejudice. Some things have to be let alone."

But here Cribben rolled up his window and shook his head and started the motor and rolled off.

After all, there was no more he could have said, Matt Heddle reflected. Cribben would go to Barrens Mill, probably count everything in sight, and bullyrag Will Gholson, and come back puffed up like a turkey. Vague notions. . . . He almost wished someone would put the fear of hell-fire into the Special Interviewer. But this was only an old-fashioned backwater, and Cribben was a new-fashioned man.

On Sunday morning, Cribben drove alone up the road towards the Barrens. In his pockets were a set of forms, and a warrant in case of need; Cribben left his gun at home, thinking the devil of a temper within him a greater hazard than any he was apt to encounter from the Gholsons. Past abandoned cabins and frame houses with their roofs fallen in, past a sluggish stream clogged with ancient logs, past mile on mile of straggling second-growth, Cribben drove. It was empty country, not one-third as populous as it had been fifty years before, and he passed no one at this hour. Here in the region of the Barrens, fence-wire was unknown: enormous stumps, uprooted from the fields and dragged to the roadside, are crowded one against another to keep the cows out, their truncated roots pointing towards the clear sky. Most symbolic of the stump-country, jagged and dead, these fences; but Cribben had no time for myth. By ten o'clock he was nursing his car over the remnant of a corduroy road which twists through Long Swamp; the stagnant water was a foot deep upon it, this spring. But he went through without mishap, only to find himself a little later

snared in the wet ground between two treacherous sandhills. There was no traction for his rear wheels; maddened, he made them spin until he had sunk his car to the axle; and then, calming, he got out and went forward on foot. Love's Garage could pull the automobile out later; he would have to walk back into town, or find a telephone somewhere, when he was through with this business. He had promised to be at Barrens Mill that morning, and he would be there. He was within a mile of the farm.

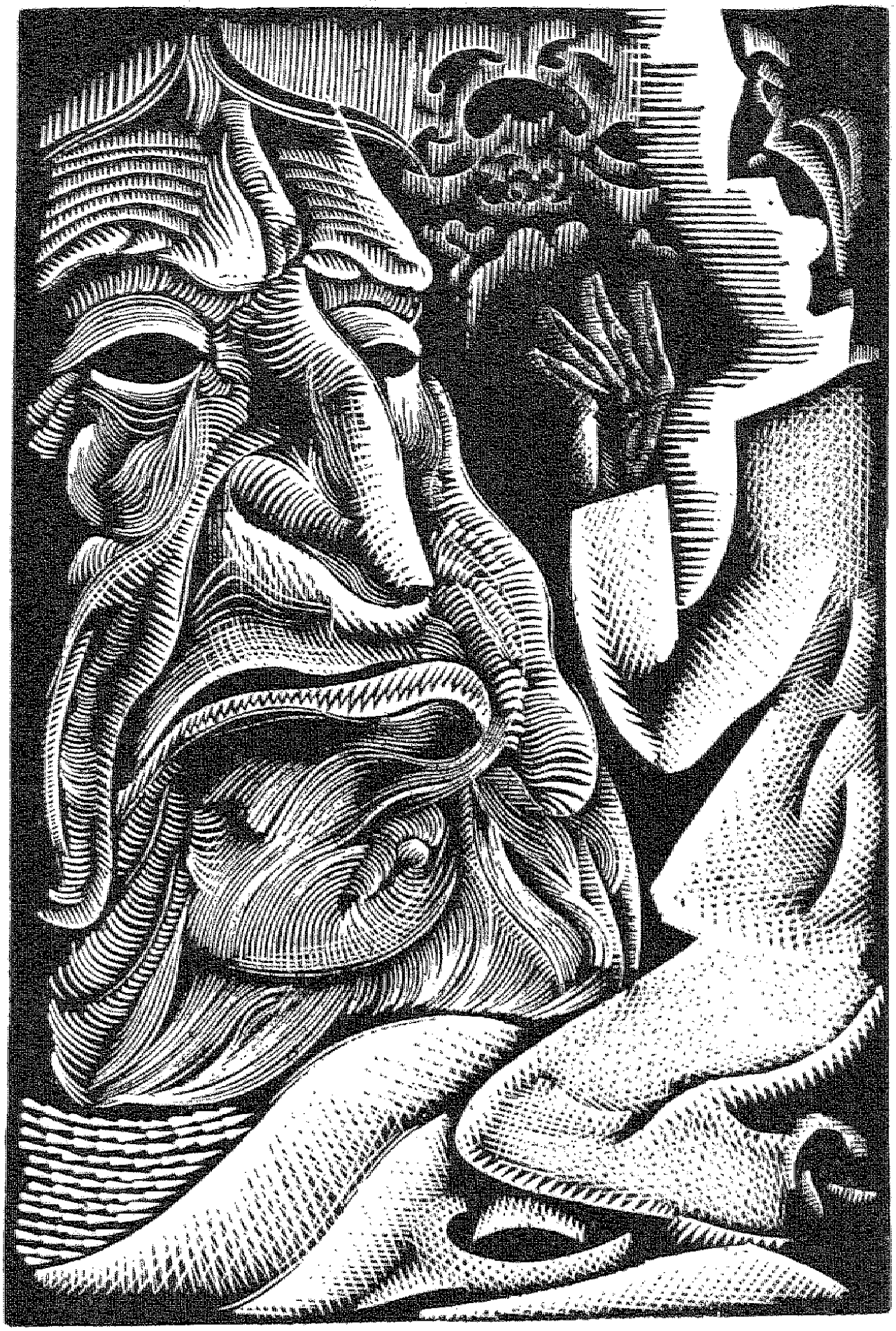
The damp track that once had been a lumber-road could have led him to the Gholsons, albeit circuitously; but he consulted his map, and saw that by walking through a stretch of hardwoods, he could with luck save fifteen minutes' tramping. So up a gradual ascent he went, passing on his right the wreck of a little farmhouse with high gables, not many years deserted. "The Gholsons don't like close neighbours." Oaks and maples and beeches, this wood, with soggy leaves of many autumns underfoot and sponge-mushrooms springing up from them, clammily white. Water from the trees dripped upon him, streaking his short coat. It was a quiet wood, very quiet; the dying vestige of a path led through it.

Terminating upon the crest of a ridge, the path took him to a stump-fence of grand proportions. Beyond was pasture, cleared with a thoroughness exceptional in this country, not one stump left amid the grass; and beyond the pasture, the ground fell away to a swift creek, and then rose again to a sharp knoll, of which the shoulder faced him; and upon the knoll was the house of Barrens Mill, a quarter of a mile distant.

All around the house stretched the Gholsons' fields, the work of years of fanatic labour. What power had driven these dull and sodden men to such feats of agricultural pride? For it was a beautiful farm: every dangerous slope affectionately buttressed and contoured to guard it from the rains, every boulder hauled away to a pile at the end of the stream, every potential weed-patch rooted out. The great square house—always severely simple, now gaunt in its blackened boards from which paint had scaled away long since—surveyed the whole rolling farm. A low wing, doubtless containing kitchen and woodshed, was joined to the northern face of the old building, which seemed indefinably mutilated. Then Cribben realized how the house had been injured: it was nearly blind. Every window above the ground-floor had been neatly boarded up—not merely covered over, but the frames taken out and planks fitted in to fill the apertures. It was as if the house had fallen prisoner to the Gholsons, and sat in bound and blindfolded shame.

All this was comprehended at a glance; a second look disclosed nothing living in all the view—not even a dog, not even a cow. But one of the pallid stumps stirred.

Cribben started. No, not a stump: someone crouching by the stump-fence, leaning upon a broken root, and watching, not him, but the house. It was a girl, barefoot, a few yards away, dressed in printed meal-sacks, fifteen or sixteen years old, and very ugly, her hair a rat's-nest; this was no country where a wild rose might bloom. She had not heard him. For all his ungainly ways, Cribben had spent a good deal of time in the open and could be meticulously quiet. He



came close up to the girl and said, in a tone he meant to be affable, "Well?"

Ah, what a scream out of her! She had been watching the blind façade of Barrens Mill house with such a degree of intensity, a kind of cringing smirk on her lips, that Cribben's harsh voice must have come like the words from the burning bush; and she whirled, and shrieked, all sense gone out of her face, until she began to understand it was only a stranger by her. Cribben was not a feeling man, but this extremity of fright touched him with something of compassion, and he took the girl gently by the shoulder, saying, "It's all right. Will you take me down to the house?" He made as if to lead her down the slope.

At that, the tide of fright poured back into her heavy Gholson face, and she fought in his grasp, and swore at him. Cribben—a streak of prudery ran through his character—was badly shocked: it was hysterically vile cursing, nearly inarticulate, but compounded of every ancient rural obscenity. And she was very young. She pulled away and dodged into the wood.

Nothing moved in these broad fields. There was no smoke from the kitchen, no cackle of chickens in the yard. A crow flapped overhead, as much an alien as Cribben himself; nothing more seemed to live about Barrens Mill. Were Will Gholson crazy enough to be peering from one of the windows with a shotgun beside him, Cribben would make a target impossible to miss, and Cribben knew it. But there came no movement behind the blinds, and Cribben went round unscathed to the kitchen door.

A pause and a glance told Cribben that the animals were gone, all of them, down to every cat, every hen. Driven to the lower farm to vex and delay him? And it looked as if every Gholson had gone with them. He knocked at the scarred back door: only echoes within. It was not locked; he had his warrant in his pocket; he entered. If Will Gholson were keeping mum inside, he'd rout him out.

Four low rooms—kitchen, rough parlour, a couple of topsy-turvy bedrooms—this was the wing of the house, showing every sign of a speedy flight. A very heavy panelled door shut off the parlour from the square mass of the older house, and its big key was in the lock. Well, it was worth a try. Cribben unlocked it and looked in: black, frayed blinds drawn down over the windows—and the windows upstairs boarded, of course. He returned to the kitchen, got a kerosene lamp, lit it, and went back to the darkened rooms.

Fourteen-foot ceilings in these cold chambers; and the remnants of Victorian prosperity in mildewed loveseats and peeling gilt mirrors; and dust, dust. A damp place, utterly still. Cribben told his nerves to behave. He went up the fine sweep of the solid stairs, the white plaster of the wall gleaming from his lamp. Dust, dust.

A broad corridor, and three rooms of moderate size, their doors open, a naked bedstead in each; and at the head of the corridor, a door that stuck. The stillness infected Cribben, and he pressed his weight cautiously upon the knob so that the squeak of the hinges was slight when the door yielded. He was in, holding the lamp above his head.

Marble-topped commode, washbowl holding a powder of grime, fan-

tastic oaken wardrobe—and a gigantic Victorian rosewood bed, carven and scrolled, its towering head casting a shadow upon the sheets that covered the mattress. There *were* sheets; and they were humped with the shape of someone snuggled under them. "Come on out," said Cribben, his throat dry. No one spoke, and he ripped the covers back. He had a half-second to look before he dropped the lamp to its ruin.

Old, old—how old? She had been immensely fat, he could tell in that frozen moment, but now the malignant wrinkles hung in horrid empty folds. How evil! And even yet, that drooping lip of command, that projecting jaw; he knew at last from what source had come the power that terraced and tended Barrens Mill. The eyelids were drawn down. For this only was there time before the lamp smashed. Ah, why hadn't they buried her? For she was dead, long dead, many a season dead.

All light gone, Cribben stood rigid, his fingers pressed distractedly against his thighs. To his brain, absurdly, came a forgotten picture out of his childhood, a coloured print in his *King Arthur*: "Launcelot in the Chapel of the Dead Wizard," with the knight lifting the corner of a shroud. The picture dropped away, and he silently told his unmoving self, again and again, "Old Mrs. Gholson, old witch, old bitch," like an incantation. Then he groped for the vanished door, but stumbled upon the wire guard of the broken lamp.

One's equilibrium trickles away in blackness, and Cribben felt his balance going, and knew to his horror that he was falling straight across the bed. He struck the sheets heavily, and paused there in a paralysis of revulsion. Then it came to him that there was no one beneath him.

Revulsion was swallowed in a compelling urgency, and Cribben slid his hands sweepingly along the covers, in desperate hope of a mistake. But no. There was no form in the bed but his. He hunched against the backboard, crouching like a great clumsy dog while he blinked for any filtered drop of light, show him what it would.

He had left the door ajar; and through it wavered the very dimmest of dim glows, the forlorn hope of the bright sun outside. Now that Cribben's eyes had been a little while in the room, he could discern whatever was silhouetted against the doorway —the back of a chair, the edge of the door itself, the knob. And something *moved* into silhouette: imperious nose, pendulous lip, great jaw. So much, before Cribben's heart made its last leaping protest.