

Butterflies

By Rose Sidney

From The Pictorial Review

The wind rose in a sharp gust, rattling the insecure windows and sighing forlornly about the corners of the house. The door unlatched itself, swung inward hesitatingly, and hung wavering for a moment on its sagging hinges. A formless cloud of gray fog blew into the warm, steamy room. But whatever ghostly visitant had paused upon the threshold, he had evidently decided not to enter, for the catch snapped shut with a quick, passionate vigor. The echo of the slamming door rang eerily through the house.

Mart Brenner's wife laid down the ladle with which she had been stirring the contents of a pot that was simmering on the big, black stove, and dragging her crippled foot behind her, she hobbled heavily to the door.

As she opened it a new horde of fog-wraiths blew in. The world was a gray, wet blanket. Not a light from the village below pierced the mist, and the lonely army of tall cedars on the black hill back of the house was hidden completely.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Brenner hailed. But her voice fell flat and muffled. Far off on the beach she could dimly hear the long wail of a fog-horn.

The faint throb of hope stilled in her breast. She had not really expected to find any one at the door unless perhaps it should be a stranger who had missed his way at the cross-roads. There had been one earlier in the afternoon when the fog first came. But her husband had been at home then and his surly manner quickly cut short the stranger's attempts at friendliness. This ugly way of Mart's had

isolated them from all village intercourse early in their life on Cedar Hill.

Like a buzzard's nest, their home hung over the village on the unfriendly sides of the bleak slope. Visitors were few and always reluctant, even strangers, for the village told weird tales of Mart Brenner and his kin. The village said that he--and all those who belonged to him as well--were marked for evil and disaster. Disaster had truly written itself throughout their history. His mother was mad, a tragic madness of bloody prophecies and dim fears; his only son a witless creature of eighteen, who for all his height and bulk, spent his days catching butterflies in the woods on the hill, and his nights in laboriously pinning them, wings outspread, upon the bare walls of the house.

The room where the Brenner family lived its queer, taciturn life was tapestried in gold, the glowing tapestry of swarms of outspread yellow butterflies sweeping in gilded tides from the rough floors to the black rafters overhead.

Olga Brenner herself was no less tragic than her family. On her face, written in the acid of pain, was the history of the blows and cruelty that had warped her active body. Owing to her crippled foot, her entire left side sagged hopelessly and her arm swung away, above it, like a branch from a decayed tree. But more saddening than her distorted body was the lonely soul that looked out of her tired faded eyes.

She was essentially a village woman with a profound love of its intimacies and gossip, its fence-corner neighborliness. The horror with which the village regarded her, as the wife of Mart Brenner, was an eating sore. It was greater than the tragedy of her poor, witless son, the hatred of old Mrs. Brenner, and her ever-present fear of Mart. She had never quite given up her unreasoning hope that some day some one might come to the house in one of Mart's long, unexplained absences and sit down and talk with her over a cup of tea. She put

away the feeble hope again as she turned back into the dim room and closed the door behind her.

"Must have been that bit of wind," she meditated. "It plays queer tricks sometimes."

She went to the mantel and lighted the dull lamp. By the flicker she read the face of the clock.

"Tobey's late!" she exclaimed uneasily. Her mind never rested from its fear for Tobey. His childlike mentality made him always the same burden as when she had rocked him hour after hour, a scrawny mite of a baby on her breast.

"It's a fearful night for him to be out!" she muttered.

"Blood! Blood!" said a tragic voice from a dark corner by the stove. Barely visible in the ruddy half-dark of the room a pair of demoniac eyes met hers.

Mrs. Brenner threw her shriveled and wizened mother-in-law an angry and contemptuous glance.

"Be still!" she commanded. "'Pears to me that's all you ever say-- blood!"

The glittering eyes fell away from hers in a sullen obedience. But the tragic voice went on intoning stubbornly, "Blood on his hands! Red! Dripping! I see blood!"

Mrs. Brenner shuddered. "Seems like you could shut up a spell!" she complained.

The old woman's voice trailed into a broken and fitful whispering. Olga's commands were the only laws she knew, and she obeyed them.

Mrs. Brenner went back to the stove. But her eyes kept returning to the clock and thence to the darkening square of window where the fog pressed heavily into the very room.

Out of the gray silence came a shattering sound that sent the ladle crashing out of Mrs. Brenner's nerveless hand and brought a moan from the dozing old woman!

It was a scream, a long, piercing scream, so intense, so agonized that it went echoing about the room as tho a disembodied spirit were shrieking under the rafters! It was a scream of terror, an innocent, a heart-broken scream!

"Tobey!" cried Mrs. Brenner, her face rigid.

The old woman began to pick at her ragged skirt, mumbling "Blood! Blood on his hands! I see it!"

"That was on the hill," said Mrs. Brenner slowly, steadying her voice.

She put her calloused hand against her lips and stood listening with agonized intentness. But now the heavy, foggy silence had fallen again. At intervals came the long, faint wail of the fog-horn. There was no other sound. Even the old woman in the shadowy corner had ceased her mouthing.

Mrs. Brenner stood motionless, with her hand against her trembling lips, her head bent forward for four of the dull intervals between the siren-call.

Then there came the sound of steps stumbling around the house. Mrs. Brenner, with her painful hobble, reached the door before the steps paused there, and threw it open.

The feeble light fell on the round, vacant face of her son, his inevitable pasteboard box, grim with much handling, clutched close to his big breast, and in it the soft beating and thudding of imprisoned wings.

Mrs. Brenner's voice was scarcely more than a whisper, "Tobey!" but it rose shrilly as she cried, "Where you been? What was that scream?"

Tobey stumbled past her headlong into the house, muttering, "I'm cold!"

She shut the door and followed him to the stove, where he stood shaking himself and beating at his damp clothes with clumsy fingers.

"What was that scream?" she asked him tensely. She knotted her rough fingers as she waited for his answer.

"I dunno," he grunted sullenly. His thick lower lip shoved itself forward, baby-fashion.

"Where you been?" she persisted.

As he did not answer she coaxed him, "Aw, come on, Tobey. Tell ma. Where you been?"

"I been catching butterflies," he answered. "I got a big one this time," with an air of triumph.

"Where was you when you heard the scream?" she asked him cunningly.

He gave a slow shake of his head. "I dunno," he answered in his dull voice.

A big shiver shook him. His teeth chattered and he crouched down on his knees before the open oven-door.

"I'm cold," he complained. Mrs. Brenner came close to him and laid her hand on his wet, matted hair. "Tobey's a bad boy," she scolded. "You mustn't go out in the wet like this. Your hair's soaked."

She got down stiffly on her lame knees. "Sit down," she ordered, "and I'll take off your shoes. They're as wet as a dish-rag."

"They're full of water, too," Tobey grumbled as he sprawled on the floor, sticking one big, awkward foot into her lap. "The water in there makes me cold."

"You spoil all your pa's shoes that away," said Mrs. Brenner, her head bent over her task. "He told you not to go round in the wet with 'em any more. He'll give you a lashing if he comes in and sees your shoes. I'll have to try and get 'em dry before he comes home. Anyways," with a breath of deep relief, "I'm glad it ain't that red clay from the hill. That never comes off."

The boy paid no attention to her. He was investigating the contents of his box, poking a fat, dirty forefinger around among its fluttering contents. There was a flash of yellow wings, and with a crow of triumph the boy shut the lid.

"The big one's just more than flapping," he chuckled. "I had an awful hard time to catch him. I had to run and run. Look at him, Ma," the boy urged. She shook her head.

"I ain't got the time," she said, almost roughly. "I got to get these shoes off'n you afore your father gets home, Tobey, or you'll get a awful hiding. Like as not you'll get it anyways, if he's mad. Better get into bed."

"Naw!" Tobey protested. "I seen pa already. I want my supper out here! I don't want to go to bed!"

Mrs. Brenner paused. "Where was pa?" she asked.

But Tobey's stretch of coherent thinking was past. "I dunno!" he muttered.

Mrs. Brenner sighed. She pulled off the sticky shoes and rose stiffly.

"Go get in bed," she said.

"Aw, Ma, I want to stay up with my butterflies," the boy pleaded. Two big tears rolled down his fat cheeks. In his queer, clouded world he had learned one certain fact. He could almost always move his mother with tears.

But this time she was firm. "Do as I told you!" she ordered him. "Mebbe if you're in bed your father won't be thinking about you. And I'll try to dry these shoes afore he thinks about them." She took the grimy box from his resisting fingers, and, holding it in one hand, pulled him to his feet and pushed him off to his bedroom.

When she had closed the door on his wail she returned and laid the box on the shelf. Then she hurried to gather up the shoes. Something on her hand as she put it out for the sodden shoes caught her eye and she straightened, holding her hand up where the feeble light from the shelf caught it.

"I've cut myself," she said aloud. "There's blood on my hand. It must 'a' been on those lacings of Tobey's."

The old woman in the corner roused. "Blood!" she screeched. "Olga! Blood on his hands!"

Mrs. Brenner jumped. "You old screech-owl!" she cried. She wiped her hand quickly on her dirty apron, and held it up again to see the cut. But there was no cut on her hand! Where had that blood come from? From Tobey's shoes?

And who was it that had screamed on the hill? She felt herself enwrapped in a mist of puzzling doubts.

She snatched up the shoes, searching them with agonized eyes. But the wet and pulpy mass had no stain. Only the wet sands and the slimy water-weeds of the beach clung to them.

Then where had the blood come from? It was at this instant that she became conscious of shouts on the hillside. She limped to the door and held it open a crack. Very faintly she could see the bobbing lights of torches. A voice carried down to her.

"Here's where I found his hat. That's why I turned off back of these trees. And right there I found his body!"

"Are you sure he's dead?" quavered another voice.

"Stone-dead!"

Olga Brenner shut the door. But she did not leave it immediately. She stood leaning against it, clutching the wet shoes, her staring eyes glazing.

Tobey was strong. He had flown into childish rages sometimes and had hurt her with his undisciplined strength. Where was Mart? Tobey had seen him. Perhaps they had fought. Her mind refused to go further. But little subtle undercurrents pressed in on her. Tobey hated and feared his father. And Mart was always enraged at the sight of his half-witted son. What had happened? And yet no matter what had

occurred, Tobey had not been on the hill. His shoes bore mute testimony to that. And the scream had been on the slope. She frowned.

Her body more bent than ever, she hobbled slowly over to the stove and laid the shoes on the big shelf above it, spreading them out to the rising heat. She had barely arranged them when there was again the sound of approaching footsteps. These feet, however, did not stumble. They were heavy and certain. Mrs. Brenner snatched at the shoes, gathered them up, and turned to run. But one of the lacings caught on a nail on the shelf. She jerked desperately at the nail, and the jerking loosened her hold of both the shoes. With a clatter they fell at her feet.

In that moment Mart Brenner stood in the doorway. Poverty, avarice, and evil passions had minted Mart Brenner like a devil's coin. His shaggy head lowered in his powerful shoulders. His long arms, ape-like, hung almost to his knees. Behind him the fog pressed in, and his rough, bristly hair was beaded with diamonds of moisture.

"Well?" he snapped. A sardonic smile twisted his face. "Caught you, didn't I?"

He strode forward. His wife shrank back, but even in her shivering terror she noticed, as one notices small details in a time of peril, that his shoes were caked with red mud and that his every step left a wet track on the floor.

"He didn't do 'em no harm," she babbled. "They're just wet. Please, Mart, they ain't harmed a mite. Just wet. That's all. Tobey went on the beach with 'em. It won't take but a little spell to dry 'em."

Her husband stooped and snatched up the shoes. She shrank into herself, waiting the inevitable torrent of his passion and the probable blow. Instead, as he stood up he was smiling. Bewildered, she stared at him in a dull silence.

"No harm done," he said, almost amiably. Shaking with relief, she stretched out her hand.

"I'll dry 'em," she said. "Give me your shoes and I'll get the mud off."

Her husband shook his head. He was still smiling.

"Don't need to dry 'em. I'll put 'em away," he replied, and, still tracking his wet mud, he went into Tobey's room.

Her fear flowed into another channel. She dreaded her husband in his black rages, but she feared him more now in his unusual amiability. Perhaps he would strike Tobey when he saw him. She strained her ears to listen.

A long silence followed his exit. But there was no outcry from Tobey, no muttering nor blows. After a few moments, moving quickly, her husband came out. She raised her heavy eyes to stare at him. He stopped and looked intently at his own muddy tracks.

"I'll get a rag and wipe up the mud right off."

As she started toward the nail where the rag hung, her husband put out a long arm and detained her. "Leave it be," he said. He smiled again.

She noticed, then, that he had removed his muddy shoes and wore the wet ones. He had fully laced them, and she had almost a compassionate moment as she thought how wet and cold his feet must be.

"You can put your feet in the oven, Mart, to dry 'em."

Close on her words she heard the sound of footsteps and a sharp knock followed on the sagging door. Mart Brenner sat down on a

chair close to the stove and lifted one foot into the oven. "See who's there!" he ordered.

She opened the door and peered out. A group of men stood on the step, the faint light of the room picking out face after face that she recognized--Sheriff Munn; Jim Barker, who kept the grocery in the village; Cottrell Hampstead, who lived in the next house below them; young Dick Roamer, Munn's deputy; and several strangers.

"Well?" she asked ungraciously.

"We want to see Brenner!" one of them said.

She stepped back. "Come in," she told them. They came in, pulling off their caps, and stood huddled in a group in the center of the room.

Her husband reluctantly stood up.

"Evening!" he said, with his unusual smile. "Bad out, ain't it?"

"Yep!" Munn replied. "Heavy fog. We're soaked."

Olga Brenner's pitiful instinct of hospitality rose in her breast.

"I got some hot soup on the stove. Set a spell and I'll dish you some," she urged.

The men looked at each other in some uncertainty. After a moment Munn said, "All right, if it ain't too much bother, Mrs. Brenner."

"Not a bit," she cried eagerly. She bustled about, searching her meager stock of chinaware for uncracked bowls.

"Set down?" suggested Mart.

Munn sat down with a sigh, and his companions followed his example. Mart resumed his position before the stove, lifting one foot into the capacious black maw of the oven.

"Must 'a' got your feet wet, Brenner?" the sheriff said with heavy jocularly.

Brenner nodded, "You bet I did," he replied. "Been down on the beach all afternoon."

"Didn't happen to hear any unusual noise down there, did you?" Munn spoke with his eyes on Mrs. Brenner, at her task of ladling out the thick soup. She paused as though transfixed, her ladle poised in the air.

Munn's eyes dropped from her face to the floor. There they became fixed on the tracks of red clay.

"No, nothin' but the sea. It must be rough outside to-night, for the bay was whinin' like a sick cat," said Mart calmly.

"Didn't hear a scream, or nothing like that, I suppose?" Munn persisted.

"Couldn't hear a thing but the water. Why?"

"Oh--nothing," said Munn.

Mrs. Brenner finished pouring out the soup and set the bowls on the table.

Chairs clattered, and soon the men were eating. Mart finished his soup before the others and sat back smacking his lips. As Munn finished the last spoonful in his bowl he pulled out a wicked-looking black pipe, crammed it full of tobacco and lighted it.

Blowing out a big blue breath of the pleasant smoke, he inquired, "Been any strangers around to-day?"

Mart scratched his head. "Yeah. A man come by early this afternoon. He was aiming to climb the hill. I told him he'd better wait till the sun come out. I don't know whether he did or not."

"See anybody later--say about half an hour ago?"

Mart shook his head. "No. I come up from the beach and I didn't pass nobody."

The sheriff pulled on his pipe for a moment. "That boy of yours still catching butterflies?" he asked presently.

Mart scowled. He swung out a long arm toward the walls with their floods of butterflies. But he did not answer.

"Uh-huh!" said Munn, following the gesture with his quiet eyes. He puffed several times before he spoke again.

"What time did you come in, Brenner, from the beach?"

Mrs. Brenner closed her hands tightly, the interlaced fingers locking themselves.

"Oh, about forty minutes ago, I guess it was. Wasn't it, Olga?" Mart said carelessly.

"Yes." Her voice was a breath.

"Was your boy out to-day?"

Mart looked at his wife. "I dunno."

Munn's glance came to the wife.

"Yes."

"How long ago did he come in?"

"About an hour ago." Her voice was flat and lifeless.

"And where had he been?" Munn's tone was gentle but insistent.

Her terrified glance sought Mart's face. "He'd been on the beach!" she said in a defiant tone.

Mart continued to look at her, but there was no expression in his face. He still wore his peculiar affable smile.

"Where did these tracks come from, on the floor?"

Swift horror fastened itself on Mrs. Brenner.

"What's that to you?" she flared.

She heard her husband's hypocritical and soothing tones, "Now, now, Olga! That ain't the way to talk to these gentlemen. Tell them who made these tracks."

"You did!" she cried. All about her she could feel the smoothness of a falling trap.

Mart smiled still more broadly.

"Look here, Olga, don't get so warm over it. You're nervous now. Tell the gentlemen who made those tracks."

She turned to Munn desperately. "What do you want to know for?" she asked him.

The sharpness of her voice roused old Mrs. Brenner, drowsing in her corner.

"Blood!" she cried suddenly. "Blood on his hands!"

In the silence that followed, the eyes of the men turned curiously toward the old woman and then sought each other with speculative stares. Mrs. Brenner, tortured by those long significant glances, said roughly, "That's Mart's mother. She ain't right! What are you bothering us for?"

Dick Roamer put out a hand to plead for her, and tapped Munn on the arm. There was something touching in her frightened old face.

"A man--a stranger was killed upon the hill," Munn told her.

"What's that got to do with us?" she countered.

"Not a thing, Mrs. Brenner, probably, but I've just to make sure where every man in the village was this afternoon."

Mrs. Brenner's lids flickered. She felt the questioning intentness of Sheriff Munn's eyes on her stolid face and she felt that he did not miss the tremor of her eyes.

"Where was your son this afternoon?"

She smiled defiance. "I told you, on the beach."

"Whose room is that?" Munn's forefinger pointed to Tobey's closed door.

"That's Tobey's room," said his mother.

"The mud tracks go into that room. Did he make those tracks, Mrs. Brenner?"

"No! Oh, no! No!" she cried desperately. "Mart made those when he came in. He went into Tobey's room!"

"How about it, Brenner?"

Mart smiled with an indulgent air. "Heard what she said, didn't you?"

"Is it true?"

Mart smiled more broadly. "Olga'll take my hair off if I don't agree with her," he said.

"Let's see your shoes, Brenner?"

Without hesitation Mart lifted one heavy boot and then the other for Munn's inspection. The other silent men leaned forward to examine them.

"Nothing but pieces of seaweed," said Cottrell Hampstead.

Munn eyed them. Then he turned to look at the floor.

"Those are about the size of your tracks, Brenner. But they were made in red clay. How do you account for that?"

"Tobey wears my shoes," said Brenner.

Mrs. Brenner gasped. She advanced to Munn.

"What you asking all these questions for?" she pleaded.

Munn did not answer her. After a moment he asked, "Did you hear a scream this afternoon?"

"Yes," she answered.

"How long after the screaming did your son come in?"

She hesitated. What was the best answer to make? Bewildered, she tried to decide. "Ten minutes or so," she said.

"Just so," agreed Munn. "Brenner, when did you come in?"

A trace of Mart's sullenness rose in his face. "I told you that once," he said.

"I mean how long after Tobey?"

"I dunno," said Mart.

"How long, Mrs. Brenner?"

She hesitated again. She scented a trap. "Oh, 'bout ten to fifteen minutes, I guess," she said.

Suddenly she burst out passionately, "What you hounding us for? We don't know nothing about the man on the hill. You ain't after the rest of the folks in the village like you are after us. Why you doing it? We ain't done nothing."

Munn made a slight gesture to Roamer, who rose and went to the door, and opened it. He reached out into the darkness. Then he turned. He was holding something in his hand, but Mrs. Brenner could not see what it was.

"You chop your wood with a short, heavy ax, don't you, Brenner?"
said Munn.

Brenner nodded.

"It's marked with your name, isn't it?"

Brenner nodded again.

"Is this the ax?"

Mrs. Brenner gave a short, sharp scream. Red and clotted, ever the
handle marked with bloody spots, the ax was theirs.

Brenner started to his feet. "God!" he yelled, "that's where that ax
went! Tobey took it!" More calmly he proceeded. "This afternoon
before I went down on the beach I thought I'd chop some wood on the
hill. But the ax was gone. So after I'd looked sharp for it and couldn't
find it, I gave it up."

"Tobey didn't do it!" Mrs. Brenner cried thinly. "He's as harmless as a
baby! He didn't do it! He didn't do it!"

"How about those clay tracks, Mrs. Brenner? There is red clay on the
hill where the man was killed. There is red clay on your floor." Munn
spoke kindly.

"Mart tracked in that clay. He changed shoes with Tobey. I tell you
that's the truth." She was past caring for any harm that might befall
her.

Brenner smiled with a wide tolerance. "It's likely, ain't it, that I'd
change into shoes as wet as these?"

"Those tracks are Mart's!" Olga reiterated hysterically.

"They lead into your son's room, Mrs. Brenner. And we find your ax not far from your door, just where the path starts for the hill." Munn's eyes were grave.

The old woman in the corner began to whimper, "Blood and trouble! Blood and trouble all my days! Red on his hands! Dripping! Olga! Blood!"

"But the road to the beach begins there too," Mrs. Brenner cried, above the cracked voice, "and Tobey saw his pa before he came home. He said he did. I tell you, Mart was on the hill. He put on Tobey's shoes. Before God I'm telling you the truth."

Dick Roamer spoke hesitatingly, "Mebbe the old woman's right, Munn. Mebbe those tracks are Brenner's."

Mrs. Brenner turned to him in wild gratitude.

"You believe me, don't you?" she cried. The tears dribbled down her face. She saw the balance turning on a hair. A moment more and it might swing back. She turned and hobbled swiftly to the shelf. Proof! More proof! She must bring more proof of Tobey's innocence!

She snatched up his box of butterflies and came back to Munn.

"This is what Tobey was doin' this afternoon!" she cried in triumph. "He was catchin' butterflies! That ain't murder, is it?"

"Nobody catches butterflies in a fog," said Munn.

"Well, Tobey did. Here they are." Mrs. Brenner held out the box. Munn took it from her shaking hand. He looked at it. After a moment he turned it over. His eyes narrowed. Mrs. Brenner turned sick. The room went swimming around before her in a bluish haze. She had

forgotten the blood on her hand that she had wiped off before Mart came home. Suppose the blood had been on the box.

The sheriff opened the box. A bruised butterfly, big, golden, fluttered up out of it. Very quietly the sheriff closed the box, and turned to Mrs. Brenner.

"Call your son," he said.

"What do you want of him? Tobey ain't done nothing. What you tryin' to do to him?"

"There is blood on this box, Mrs. Brenner."

"Mebbe he cut himself." Mrs. Brenner was fighting. Her face was chalky white.

"In the box, Mrs. Brenner, is a gold watch and chain. The man who was killed, Mrs. Brenner, had a piece of gold chain to match this in his buttonhole. The rest of it had been torn off."

Olga made no sound. Her burning eyes turned toward Mart. In them was all of a heart's anguish and despair.

"Tell 'em, Mart! Tell 'em he didn't do it!" she finally pleaded.

Mart's face was inscrutable.

Munn rose. The other men got to their feet.

"Will you get the boy or shall I?" the sheriff said directly to Mrs. Brenner.

With a rush Mrs. Brenner was on her knees before Munn, clutching him about the legs with twining arms. Tears of agony dripped over her seamed face.

"He didn't do it! Don't take him! He's my baby! He never harmed anybody! He's my baby!" Then with a shriek, as Munn unclasped her arms, "Oh, my God! My God!"

Munn helped her to her feet. "Now, now, Mrs. Brenner, don't take on so," he said awkwardly. "There ain't going to be no harm come to your boy. It's to keep him from getting into harm that I'm taking him. The village is a mite worked up over this murder and they might get kind of upset if they thought Tobey was still loose. Better go and get him, Mrs. Brenner."

As she stood unheeding, he went on, "Now, don't be afraid. Nothing'll happen to him. No judge would sentence him like a regular criminal. The most that'll happen will be to put him some safe place where he can't do himself nor no one else any more harm."

But still Mrs. Brenner's set expression did not change.

After a moment she shook off his aiding arm and moved slowly to Tobey's door. She paused there a moment, resting her hand on the latch, her eyes searching the faces of the men in the room. With a gesture of dreary resignation she opened the door and entered, closing it behind her.

Tobey lay in his bed asleep. His rumped hair was still damp from the fog. His mother stroked it softly while her slow tears dropped down on his face with its expression of peaceful childhood.

"Tobey!" she called. Her voice broke in her throat. The tears fell faster.

"Huh?" He sat up, blinking at her.

"Get into your clothes, now! Right away!" she said.

He stared at her tears. A dismal sort of foreboding seemed to seize upon him. His face began to pucker. But he crawled out of his bed and began to dress himself in his awkward fashion, casting wistful and wondering glances in her direction.

She watched him, her heart growing heavier and heavier. There was no one to protect Tobey. She could not make those strangers believe that Mart had changed shoes with Tobey. Neither could she account for the blood-stained box and the watch with its length of broken chain. But if Tobey had been on the beach he had not been on the hill, and if he hadn't been on the hill he couldn't have killed the man they claimed he had killed. Mart had been on the hill. Her head whirled. Some place fate, destiny, something had blundered. She wrung her knotted hands together.

Presently Tobey was dressed. She took him by the hand. Her own hand was shaking, and very cold and clammy. Her knees were weak as she led him toward the door. She could feel them trembling so that every step was an effort. And her hand on the knob had barely strength to turn it. But turn it she did and opened the door.

"Here he is!" she cried chokingly. She freed her hand and laid it on his shoulder.

"Look at him," she moaned. "He couldn't 'a' done it. He's--he's just a boy!"

Sheriff Munn rose. His men rose with him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Brenner," he said. "Terrible sorry. But you can see how it is. Things look pretty black for him."

He paused, looked around, hesitated for a moment. Finally he said, "Well, I guess we'd better be getting along."

Mrs. Brenner's hand closed with convulsive force on Tobey's shoulder.

"Tobey!" she screamed desperately, "where was you this afternoon? All afternoon?"

"On the beach," mumbled Tobey, shrinking into himself.

"Tobey! Tobey! Where'd you get blood on the box?"

He looked around. His cloudy eyes rested on her face helplessly.

"I dunno," he said.

Her teeth were chattering now; she laid her hand on his other shoulder.

"Try to remember, Tobey. Try to remember. Where'd you get the watch, the pretty watch that was in your box?"

He blinked at her.

"The pretty bright thing? Where did you get it?"

His eyes brightened. His lips trembled into a smile.

"I found it some place," he said. Eagerness to please her shone on his face.

"But where? What place?" The tears again made rivulets on her cheeks.

He shook his head. "I dunno."

Mrs. Brenner would not give up.

"You saw your pa this afternoon, Tobey?" she coached him softly.

He nodded.

"Where'd you see him?" she breathed.

He frowned. "I--I saw pa----" he began, straining to pierce the cloud that covered him.

"Blood! Blood!" shrieked old Mrs. Brenner. She half-rose, her head thrust forward on her shriveled neck.

Tobey paused, confused. "I dunno," he said.

"Did he give you the pretty bright thing? And did he give you the ax--" she paused and repeated the word loudly--"the ax to bring home?"

Tobey caught at the word. "The ax?" he cried. "The ax! Ugh! It was all sticky!" He shuddered.

"Did pa give you the ax?"

But the cloud had settled. Tobey shook his head. "I dunno," he repeated his feeble denial.

Munn advanced. "No use, Mrs. Brenner, you see. Tobey, you'll have to come along with us."

Even to Tobey's brain some of the strain in the atmosphere must have penetrated, for he drew back. "Naw," he protested sulkily, "I don't want to."

Dick Roamer stepped to his side. He laid his hand on Tobey's arm. "Come along," he urged.

Mrs. Brenner gave a smothered gasp. Tobey woke to terror. He turned to run. In an instant the men surrounded him. Trapped, he stood still, his head lowered in his shoulders.

"Ma!" he screamed suddenly. "Ma! I don't want to go! Ma!"

He fell on his knees. Heavy childish sobs racked him. Deserted, terrified, he called upon the only friend he knew.

"Ma! Please, Ma!"

Munn lifted him up. Dick Roamer helped him, and between them they drew him to the door, his heart-broken calls and cries piercing every corner of the room.

They whisked him out of Mrs. Brenner's sight as quickly as they could. The other men piled out of the door, blocking the last vision of her son, but his bleating cries came shrilling back on the foggy air.

Mart closed the door. Mrs. Brenner stood where she had been when Tobey had first felt the closing of the trap and had started to run. She looked as though she might have been carved there. Her light breath seemed to do little more than lift her flat chest.

Mart turned from the door. His eyes glittered. He advanced upon her hungrily like a huge cat upon an enchanted mouse.

"So you thought you'd yelp on me, did you?" he snarled, licking his lips. "Thought you'd put me away, didn't you? Get me behind the bars, eh?"

"Blood!" moaned the old woman in the corner. "Blood!"

Mart strode to the table, pulling out from the bosom of his shirt a lumpy package wrapped in his handkerchief. He threw it down on the table. It fell heavily with a sharp ringing of coins.

"But I fooled you this time! Mart wasn't so dull this time, eh?" He turned toward her again.

Between them, disturbed in his resting-place on the table, the big bruised yellow butterfly raised himself on his sweeping wings.

Mart drew back a little. The butterfly flew toward Olga and brushed her face with a velvety softness.

Then Brenner lurched toward her, his face black with fury, his arm upraised. She stood still, looking at him with wide eyes in which a gleam of light showed.

"You devil!" she said, in a little, whispering voice. "You killed that man! You gave Tobey the watch and the ax! You changed shoes with him! You devil! You devil!"

He drew back for a blow. She did not move. Instead she mocked him, trying to smile.

"You whelp!" she taunted him. "Go on and hit me! I ain't running! And if you don't break me to bits I'm going to the sheriff and I'll tell him what you said to me just now. And he'll wonder how you got all that money in your pockets. He knows we're as poor as church-mice. How you going to explain what you got?"

"I ain't going to be such a fool as to keep it on me!" Mart crowed with venomous mirth. "You nor the sheriff nor any one won't find it where I'm going to put it!"

The broken woman leaned forward, baiting him. The strange look of exaltation and sacrifice burned in her faded eyes. "I've got you, Mart!" she jeered. "You're going to swing yet! I'll even up with you for Tobey! You didn't think I could do it, did you? I'll show you! You're trapped, I tell you! And I done it!"

She watched Mart swing around to search the room and the blank window with apprehensive eyes. She sensed his eerie dread of the unseen. He couldn't see any one. He couldn't hear a sound. She saw that he was wet with the cold perspiration of fear. It would enrage him. She counted on that. He turned back to his wife in a white fury. She leaned toward him, inviting his blows as martyrs welcome the torch that will make their pile of fagots a blazing bier.

He struck her. Once. Twice. A rain of blows given in a blind passion that drove her to her knees, but she clung stubbornly, with rigid fingers to the table-edge. Although she was dazed she retained consciousness by a sharp effort of her failing will. She had not yet achieved that for which she was fighting.

The dull thud of the blows, the confusion, the sight of the blood drove the old woman in the corner suddenly upright on her tottering feet. Her rheumy eyes glared affrighted at the sight of the only friend she recognized in all her mad, black world lying there across the table. She stood swaying in a petrified terror for a moment. Then with a thin wail, "He's killing her!" she ran around them and gained the door.

With a mighty effort Olga Brenner lifted her head so that her face, swollen beyond recognition, was turned toward her mother-in-law. Her almost sightless eyes fastened themselves on the old woman.

"Run!" she cried. "Run to the village!"

The mad woman, obedient to that commanding voice, flung open the door and lurched over the threshold and disappeared in the fog. It came to Mart that the woman running through the night with her wail of terror was the greatest danger he would know. Olga Brenner saw his look of sick terror. He started to spring after the mad woman, forgetful of the half-conscious creature on her knees before him.

But as he turned, Olga, moved by the greatness of her passion, forced strength into her maimed body. With a straining leap she sprawled herself before him on the floor. He stumbled, caught for the table, and fell with a heavy crash, striking his head on a near-by chair. Olga raised herself on her shaking arms and looked at him. Minute after minute passed, and yet he lay still. A second long ten minutes ticked itself off on the clock, which Olga could barely see. Then Mart opened his eyes, sat up, and staggered to his feet.

Before full consciousness could come to him again, his wife crawled forward painfully and swiftly coiled herself about his legs. He struggled, still dizzy from his fall, bent over and tore at her twining arms, but the more he pulled the tighter she clung, fastening her misshapen fingers in the lacing of his shoes. He swore! And he became panic-stricken. He began to kick at her, to make lunges toward the distant door. Kicking and fighting, dragging her clinging body with him at every move, that body which drew him back one step for every two forward steps he took, at last he reached the wall. He clutched it, and as his hand slipped along trying to find a more secure hold he touched the cold iron of a long-handled pan hanging there.

With a snarl he snatched it down, raised it over his head, and brought it down upon his wife's back. Her hands opened spasmodically and

fell flat at her sides. Her body rolled over, limp and broken. And a low whimper came from her bleeding lips.

Satisfied, Mart paused to regain his breath. He had no way of knowing how long this unequal fight had been going on. But he was free. The way of escape was open. He laid his hand on the door.

There were voices. He cowered, cast hunted glances at the bloody figure on the floor, bit his knuckles in a frenzy.

As he looked, the eyes opened in his wife's swollen face, eyes aglow with triumph. "You'll swing for it, Mart!" she whispered faintly. "And the money's on the table! Tobey's saved!"

Rough hands were on the door. A flutter of breath like a sigh of relief crossed her lips and her lids dropped as the door burst open to a tide of men.

The big yellow butterfly swung low on his golden wings and came to rest on her narrow, sunken breast.

FOOTNOTE:

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