



# The Tattling Thing

By FLORENCE M. PETTEE

**R**AINHAM sat at his desk staring moodily at a letter which his private secretary had just delivered. He knew the writing. It was unmistakable. He ripped it open and read:

DEAR SIR:

The interest on your mortgage is now overdue. Unless the money is forthcoming immediately, I shall be forced to foreclose.

Very truly,

JOHN CRANHOUSE.

Rainham slowly placed the letter on the desk-blotter. He bit at his thin lips. For the money could not be forthcoming. He had exhausted all his resources. That would mean that the home of his ancestors with its broad, pleasant acres must follow the downward course of everything else. He knitted his brow in a futile attempt to see a way out. Yet he knew there was none. His credit was void—his resources nil.

He picked up the letter again. Its curt lines bit into his brain like corroding acid. That was like Cranhouse—damned leech, blood-sucker! Here he knew that he could

hope for no leniency. And Cranhouse had long wanted Broadlawns.

Darker and darker grew Rainham's face.

At this moment the dapper secretary re-entered.

"About these letters, sir—" he began.

Carston was above all things observing. He saw the black fury which covered Rainham's face. He noted the open letter which he had just before delivered. He was familiar with the chirography of Cranhouse. There had been other epistles, all of a similar character—demanding overdue money in peremptory terms. Financial clouds had been slowly, but surely, gathering for the last few months. But previously Rainham had in some way weathered the impending storm. Could he no longer stave it off?

Carston coughed apologetically. "About these letters, sir?" he began again.

Rainham glared at him with bloodshot eyes. He banged a fist on the desk.

"To hell with the letters! Can't you see I'm busy! Don't interrupt me again until I ring. Do you hear?"

Carston bowed and withdrew without comment.

The room seemed unbearably warm. Its atmosphere carried an aura of impending disaster which Rainham's tightly strung nerves quickly sensed. Some malignant influence seemed to be hovering about him. And it had come with that damned letter. Furiously Rainham tore the communication to bits, stuffed it into the ash-receiver, and touched a match to the pieces. Breathing heavily he saw the shreds darken, crumble, and then turn to ashes—dead ashes. What a pity that their writer couldn't follow them! The usurious money-shark!

Rainham stepped to the coat-rack, taking his cap and coat. He was consumed with a fever to get away from the room with its dead, heavy air and its deader ashes. Perhaps a brisk walk down in his woods edging Dead Men's Curve would put new blood into him along with more sanguine thoughts.

As Rainham hastily opened the door and entered the corridor, Carston was just emerging from his room. He would have bowed without saying anything. But the sight of him brought Rainham to an abrupt halt.

With the burning of the inflammatory letter some of his red anger had abated. The impending disaster was not quite so imminent. A shade of shame seized Rainham. He had been rude to Carston, who was a good enough fellow, a punctilious machine.

In his usual voice Rainham said confidentially, "Oh, Carston, I seem to be a bit off color. Going down in my woods for a stroll and a bit of air. I'll be back at—" He jerked out his watch. "Stopped," he muttered. "That's funny. Must have forgotten to wind it. What time is it?"

Carston quickly produced his time-piece. He stated the exact hour.

"Is your watch right?" inquired Rainham, for he was punctilious about such things.

"Yes, sir. I just called up Western Union and set it not fifteen minutes ago."

"Good," commented Rainham. "When I come back I'll go over those letters with you."

"Very well," answered Carston evenly, and went about his tasks.

Rainham left the house by the rear door. He went to the garage and brought out his roadster. He drove to the woods which lay some two miles from the house. He guided his car into a thickly wooded trail swerving off from the main line of travel. One hundred and twenty-five yards further along on the pike yawning Dead Men's Curve. As Rainham slammed the door of the roadster he thought of the lives the curve had claimed. For it was notorious for miles about. Well, such a death wasn't so bad! Swift, certain, without the stigma of financial ruin.

Thoughtfully he strolled among the rustling trees. It was late afternoon and the weather was mild and balmlike. It laved his ragged nerves. Yet every step he took only drove home more poignantly the realization that Broadlawns would shortly pass from him into the hands of another. The thought of this and Cranhouse gradually became unbearable. Resolutely he tried to thrust these biting ideas out of his mind.

Presently he entered a magnificent plot of evergreens. The pine needles stretched out a pungent, velvety carpet. The trees swayed lazily. From a tall pine near by a bird warbled. But the sound of its song chilled Rainham. There was a melancholy, minor note in the melody which somehow took him back to that evil-smelling room—to the papers he had burned.

As he paced along soundlessly he suddenly stopped. Before him in a little opening by a gurgling brook, a man was bent over with a can. His back was turned toward Rainham. And just beyond the intruder was Rainham's sign warning every one against trespassing under penalty of the law. There were many duplicates of the sign. Yet here was the impudent fellow almost squatting beneath it and flagrantly ignoring it!

Rainham was sadly out of tune with everything. On a normal day he would have shrugged his shoulders and passed along, only mildly aroused by the occurrence. But to-day the trespasser was like a red flag to his ugly frame of mind.

He stepped noiselessly forward. "Well!" he rapped out.

At the sound of the harsh word the man faced about quickly.

Rainham stepped back a pace. For before him stood Cranhouse, the very man who had inflamed his volatile nature to the exploding point and had threatened to take his last dollar.

Cranhouse stared at him insolently, even sneeringly.

Infuriated by his expression Rainham roared, "Don't you see that sign—'No Trespassing'—in my woods—"

"Your woods!" sneered Cranhouse.

All the rancor, the blind fury and the hate which was pent up in Rainham's excitable nature now broke loose. Drawing in his breath with a hissing sharpness, he leaped at the man facing him. His fist shot out. It took Cranhouse squarely on the jaw. He went down like a slain bullock, striking his head on a half-projecting root. The tin pail rattled raucously, vaguely reminding Rainham of that sinister minor note he had just heard in the bird's low carol. The water splashed upon his ankles and chilled him to the very heart.

Cranhouse still remained motionless where he had fallen. Rainham's boiling anger cooled. Fear crept in from the interstices of the woods. It bore down upon him—overwhelmingly oppressed him.

He stooped over and touched the prostrate Cranhouse's wrist. It was pulseless. He tried again. With the same result.

The man was dead.

Horror now descended upon Rainham. Cranhouse dead, and he his murderer! The death would, moreover, appear premeditated, done in cold blood. The motive would not be far to seek. It was the debt he could not pay. Perspiration beaded his brow. He shivered, backed away, and planned to flee before it was too late. They must not find him here.

Then he paused sharply in his flight toward his hidden car. He heard the shrill honk-honk of an auto approaching Dead Men's Curve from the south. He was grateful for the falling darkness. It hid him and the havoc he had wrought in his hasty anger. Blindly he strove to think.

The intense stillness of the woods calmed him slightly. He kept his back toward the body of the dead man.

Then a plan began to fall into shape in his mind—a way out. Cranhouse's death must not appear suspicious. It must be made to bear all the earmarks of an accident.

Shutting his teeth he forced himself to make a minute examination of the body. Once he jumped, almost unnerved by the dry crackle of a twig. Yet his shivering glance over his shoulder showed him nothing. Again he turned his attention to the still figure, examining it with frenzied care. Then his breath wheezed sharply in relief. For the body of Cranhouse seemed quite unmarked. Concussion of the brain probably.

Carefully he replaced the prone figure with its head against the root. Hurriedly he examined the pine-strewn area in the vicinity. There was nothing there to whisper of violent death. Cranhouse might even have been seized with a paralytic stroke, with some insidious heart malady, and fallen heavily, striking his head against the deadly tree-extremity.

With a final glance behind him Rainham stole by another path toward his concealed car. Half way to his destination he stopped abruptly. The tin can which Cranhouse had been filling now dominated his mind. In a flash he understood its meaning. Funny how the thing had escaped him before. Cranhouse had come in his car, of course. He was getting water for the radiator. The machine might even now be parked by the roadside. In an hour full darkness would descend. The car would be a menace in the road, would demand investigation. The woods would be searched for the missing owner. Cranhouse's body would then be discovered.

Rainham now became desperately anxious to see the car. He crept to the edge of the thick-growing underbrush by the roadside, and walked along some paces. Finally his straining eyes discerned the powerful black roadster parked off the road under the heavy shadows of overhanging trees and bushes. It was even now hardly visible to the motorist exerting every nerve

to ascend or descend the treacherous Dead Men's Curve in safety.

Suddenly the hidden roadster with its proximity to the curve suggested another plan. It might be that in his haste he had overlooked some deadly telltale mark on the lifeless body. It had been difficult to see, and he had been flustered in his examination. And that would point after all to foul play. The body must not be left there to be discovered. Cranhouse must be made to die by quite another agency.

Rainham ran to his own car. With trembling fingers he opened his tool chest and brought out a wrench. He stole back with it through the bushes to Cranhouse's big roadster. He pulled his motor-cap well over his forehead, hunched up his coat-collar. Then in the screening shadows he knelt by the rear wheels. He loosened the nuts on both the brake-drum rods. He tested them. The brakes would not hold, thanks to his clever tampering. He stuffed the wrench in his pocket and raced back in the gathering twilight to the prone body of Cranhouse.

With an effort he raised it and flung it across his shoulder. It sagged limply. Staggering he retraced his steps. Once a curious branch slapped him in the face; again a dangling hand kept tapping him familiarly on the back as it moved with his movements. The weird taps chilled him. Cold sweat poured down his face. But he kept doggedly on.

Arrived back at the bushes by the roadster he stopped to reconnoiter. All was silent. Fortunately the top of the machine was up. And it was too dusky for any unwelcome motorist to distinguish anything suspicious. He opened the door of the roadster and deposited the body of Cranhouse in a sitting posture behind the wheel. Then he started the engine. He was all eyes and ears. Yet no unnerving intrusion interrupted his movements. And Dead Men's Curve was but a hundred yards ahead!

With the door of the roadster open in readiness, Rainham threw the gearshift into first. The car started slowly with his guiding hand on the wheel. The dead man's slumped body interfered but little. Care-

fully he negotiated second and high, holding the wheel steadily. The car shook itself and slowly gathered speed. It was a straight road down that declivity with sheering banks on either side. Dead Men's Curve was now but ninety yards ahead. The odometer began to climb—twenty—twenty-five—thirty. Here Rainham switched on the lights and leaped from the fast-moving car. He landed in a sand gully, quite unhurt.

With his heart pounding like the thundering engine, he saw the great roadster gather momentum on the descent to the sharp curve—forty miles—forty-five—fifty. The tail-light was like a red-eyed laughing fiend behind the death-car. Hypnotically it kept Rainham's bloodshot eyes on it. It was like the presignal of death.

The powerful, racing roadster hit the curve. The deadly chasm yawned there for its next victim. Rainham was now very cool and collected. The word *victim* had restored his equilibrium.

There was an increased roar—an aching void—then a resounding crash.

Silence. Emptiness stared from the darkness at the curve. The red eye and its victim had gone. The evidence would now be complete.

Moved by a sudden impulse Rainham drew out his watch. He looked at the illuminated hands. The crash had sounded at 7.25. He returned the timepiece, gloating on his cleverness. The switching on of the lights had been a masterly touch. He had almost forgotten that artistic item. It would not have done to find that car down in the gulch unlighted. He couldn't be sure that the fearful descent would have shattered the electrical system.

Rainham now dived into the woods and ran toward his own hidden car. He felt cool and collected as though a great burden had been shifted from his shoulders. He returned the wrench to the tool-box and locked it. The turning of the key was like locking a secret door on an ugly chapter in his life.

Yet as he put his foot on the running-board something distressed him. Was some prescience warning him that he had forgotten the eternal, trivial thing which so often

proved the undoing of even the most hardened criminal? He thought with an agony of intentness. *Then he knew.*

He had told Carston that he was going to his woods by Dead Men's Curve for a walk. Carston had recognized Cranhouse's writing on the letter—knew its importance. He had even seen him poring over it, his face black with anger. Mightn't that point an absolute finger of suspicion at him and weaken his carefully arranged accident alibi?

Rainham grew worried. What a fool he had been to mention where he was going to Carston! But how should he know that Cranhouse would be trespassing on the land he had doubtless come to inspect as his own property! Damn him!

Irresolutely Rainham paused. The old fear returned. Yet there must be some way out, some way to dust the ever-vigilant and suspicious eyes of the law.

Then he laughed harshly. For a way had daringly presented itself.

He jumped into the seat of his car and started the motor. He backed out at a furious pace. He tore home recklessly, congratulating himself on the bold stroke he was cutting. Absolutely safe too. The police couldn't suspect him now. And Dead Men's Curve was at a most isolated spot. There was no other witness to the vanished car and its gruesome burden. It might be hours before anything was discovered—unless he chose to notify the authorities, *when the time was ripe.* Then it would take them at least an hour to make the run from the city. Excellent! He would have them hoodwinked.

At 7.35 Rainham sat down with Carston for dinner. He left the table at eight o'clock without tasting his dessert. He stated that his head still ached and that he would take another spin in the air before attending to the neglected letters.

Shortly he was speeding away again.

Fifteen minutes later he burst into the room where Carston was working. His hair was wild and his hat crammed on the back of his head. He had worked himself up to a convincing fervor.

"My God!" he shouted hoarsely. "Another accident at the curve! Just saw a

car go over! Horrible! I shall never forget that crash!"

Shakily he took down the receiver. He called the police department.

"Another car has gone over Dead Men's Curve," he announced—"All right. What do I know? I was driving above the curve—I saw a man tinkering at the rear wheels—of his car. As I drew nearer he jumped in—and started the engine. Soon he was moving at a furious pace. He approached the curve like the wind. He must be a stranger in these parts—or else something was wrong with his brakes. I held my breath in horror, creeping along the grade in my machine. As he struck the curve his car went over with a fearful crash. Mechanically I pulled out my watch to mark the time. I heard the crash at 8.10. Yes, 8.10. Case for the ambulance, probably, poor fellow! If you want me later for a witness, you can find me at my house. I am Rupert Rainham. Very good."

Limply he hung up the receiver.

Four hours later a short ring on the doorbell pealed through Rainham's house. He had been working late. Carston ushered in a man in uniform and another in plain-clothes. Then he shut the door after the two callers and returned to his work.

As Rainham saw the two he was again oppressed by a mighty fear. Yet he strove to conquer it. Perhaps they only required his formal testimony.

"Mr. Rainham?" inquired the man in uniform.

Rainham nodded.

"Sorry to disturb you. I merely called to get your affidavit about this distressing accident at the curve."

"I have already told the story," suggested Rainham.

"I know. Sorry to seem a nuisance. It is a mere matter of form, you know. Besides, there may be something you wish to change—"

Rainham considered carefully.

"No," he decided finally, "my original statement stands."

Then he repeated his first story with painstaking exactitude. The man in uniform took it down word for word.

"Now, if you will please sign and swear that this is the truth, the whole truth—" he suggested deprecatingly.

"Certainly I swear," glibly answered Rainham.

With an inward sigh of mighty relief, he affixed his signature.

The man in uniform stepped forward sternly.

"Hand over your watch," he demanded. Shaking palpably Rainham complied.

Glancing at the timepiece the officer pocketed it. He placed a hand on Rainham's shoulder.

"Rupert Rainham, I hold you for the murder of John Cranhouse. You have sworn that the car went over the curve at 8.10. Every wound on Cranhouse's body

was found bloodless. That means that he was dead *before* his car leaped the curve. But that isn't all! The clock on the dash of the wrecked car *stopped* at 7.25. The dead man's chauffeur has testified that he set the clock in the dash by Western Union shortly before Mr. Cranhouse left his garage. The dead man was particular about the exact time. I saw your secretary before ringing your bell. He swears that you set your watch by his, late this afternoon. His time was also identical with Western Union. Your watch is still correct. The clock in the death-car did not lie—but *you did*. Why? To conceal your guilty knowledge and to provide yourself with a time alibi if necessary. For you were at the curve at 7.25!"

U      U      U      U

## BUT WHO WILL?

(In metaphor libre)

"THERE is no rose without a thorn"—  
No life without its sorrow;  
Of Hope Despair is often born  
To blast our sweet To-morrow.

Plant where you will the tree of Bliss,  
Its blossoms are a chain;  
The fruit emits a serpent's hiss,  
And your reward is Pain.

Ah, you had joy the other day,  
My overblissful brother;  
The Penalty you did not pay—  
It fell upon another.

Impulsive souls cannot resist  
Debauchery of Mirth  
Who, wantonly, on being kissed,  
To direst Woe gives birth.

Then seek Discretion's equipoise,  
Which balances emotion  
And weirs the stream of rippling Joys  
Before it joins Grief's ocean.

James S. Ryan.