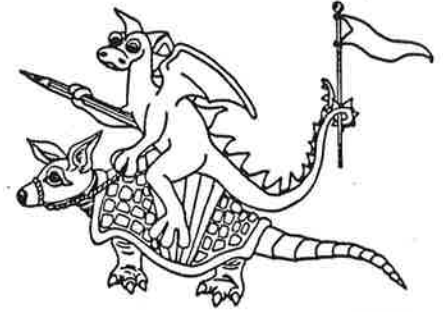


Edge of Darkness



Out to White Whence

written by Ann Leonhart

Dressed in white robes he reclined against the cushions while two scantily clad beauties kept him cool by waving palm leaves over his body. A third lovely was sitting at his side, popping large, succulent concords into his mouth, one at a time. Motioning with his hand he'd had enough, he reached up and pulled the brunette to him. Her ruby red lips were inviting, and he excitedly accepted their invitation. His hands slid over her body as his lips continued to devour hers. Reaching behind her, he loosened the small top she was almost wearing, and waiting in eager anticipation for the garment to be free and the two treasures hidden there to be revealed. It was worth the wait. Torturously slow, his lips traveled down the alabaster throat, and when he came closer to his destination, his heart started to pound wildly. As he opened his mouth to receive his reward, she--

"M c C o r m i c k ! ! "

"Wha...?" the confused 'Roman' murmured, hitting his head as he jumped out of bed. For a few seconds, Mark "Skid" McCormick was disoriented, his body in the present, his mind still with the beautiful brunette he'd been sharing the dream with. Reaching for the clock by his bed, he tried to see where the hands were pointing. At first, he couldn't make out the time, but when he closed his eyes and reopened them, he could see clearly. Stumbling over to the open window, he looked down to the figure below. "Are you crazy?! Do you know what time it is?"

"Of course, I do. It's five a. m. We've got a lot of work to do, and you *know* Sarah will never forgive us if this place isn't in tip-top shape before we leave."

"Great," he muttered with a yawn. "Not only do I have to go along with his silly fishing trip, I have to lose sleep as well." Louder, he yelled down, "Judge, you're a donkey, you know that? I didn't get to bed last night until one!"

The judge ignored him. "First you've got to trim the hedge, then mow the grass, take out the garbage..."

McCormick mimicked the older man. "...mow the grass, take out the garbage... What are *you* going to be doing, Hardcastle?" he retorted sarcastically. *He would have to wake me up when I was having such a great time in Rome.*

"I'm going to go over the list to be sure we have everything," the judge returned. "We'll need a lot of equipment for a trip like this. Boy, I'm really looking forward to getting out on that lake! You're gonna love it, McCormick! Now, hurry up! I want to get started as early as possible!"

"Well, Judge," McCormick smiled wickedly. "We *may* get started a week from now...if I really work *fast*, that is!"

"Cut the wisecracks. We're going, and that's final!"

He smiled to himself as he got up to get dressed. *Can't let him know I'm looking forward to this trip as much as he is. That would spoil all my fun. God, we both need this time away from everything, especially the judge. That trip to his home town really got to him, though he'd never admit it. He's not left this place since we returned, what's it been...two weeks? Guess Judge Martin noticed something was bothering Hardcastle, too. Why else would he have insisted on our using his cabin for the week? Can't get over how different he's been since he accepted the invitation. More like the old Hardcase. Gotta admit, I need this time to unwind as much as the judge does. Never thought anything could hurt so much! God, don't let me ever have to feel that kind of pain again.*

McCormick laid his head back against the seat of the truck trying to catch a few winks. It seemed to him they'd never get there, but after a short time, the judge brought the truck to a stop. Groggily, he opened his eyes and asked sleepily, "We there?"

"Almost. We have to leave the truck here and hike the rest of the way."

"What?!" he yelped, suddenly wide awake. "You never said anything about hiking! This was supposed to be a simple fishing trip!" He felt a sudden inexplicable surge of panic and forced the uncomfortable feeling away.

"What'd you expect, McCormick? This is the mountains. Besides, it's only two miles. The walk'll do you good." Hardcastle got out and took a deep breath. "Ahh, smell that good, clean air! Good for the old cardiovascular system."

McCormick scowled. *I'm not interested in my cardiovascular system. It's the rest of my body that worries me!* "Two miles!" he exclaimed, slamming the door after he got out. Motioning to the forest around them, he continued, more afraid than angry, "Through *this*! You've really slipped a cog this time, Hardcastle!"

The judge, however, refused to be discouraged. "Quit complaining and grab your gear. I wanna get settled and do some fishing before nightfall. Now, let's go."

McCormick angrily grabbed his belongings and waited for the judge to lead the way. *Going fishing is one thing, but this is ridiculous! I'm a city boy for God's sake, not Davey Crockett!* McCormick shuddered as the memory of a prior trip to the mountains crossed his mind.

They'd traveled about twenty minutes when McCormick asked worriedly, "Judge, you sure you know where you're going? Haven't we passed this tree before?" He shivered and tried to pretend it was just a cool breeze that

had caused the reaction. Finally, he had to admit that wasn't the reason. *Hell, I'm not afraid in a car going a hundred and fifty miles per hour around a track! Why does this have me spooked?*

"Relax, McCormick," the man ahead replied, not looking back. "I can read these woods like the back of my hand."

"Have you read your hand lately?" he asked sarcastically as he continued to follow the judge, ashamed to let his partner know the real reason behind his question.

They continued trudging their way through the dense forest, trying to dodge the small brush and branches that kept appearing in front of them. Suddenly a branch the judge had brushed aside lashed back and hit McCormick across the chest. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath. Louder he inquired, "Couldn't Judge Martin have built a cabin closer to civilization? Even Smoky the Bear would have trouble finding this place!"

The judge continued to clear the way ahead. "The fact that it *is* way out here away from civilization is what makes it so special. No one to bother you...just you and Mother Nature!"

The judge was obviously enjoying himself, and McCormick didn't want to spoil the trip for him, so he clamped down on his feeling of impending doom. He concentrated instead on keeping his eyes on the judge's back and praying they'd be there soon. It seemed to him that the woods were waiting to swallow him up, and although he knew that was ludicrous, he couldn't shake the feeling of helplessness that threatened to overpower him.

After a short period of time that seemed like an eternity to McCormick, the judge finally stopped and pointed to a cabin about twenty feet ahead. "There it is, McCormick."

He breathed a sigh of relief and quickly wiped the cold sweat from his face before the judge could see it. As they approached the log construction, he noticed a line of mallards gracefully gliding along the crystal clear waters of a lake and felt the cool breeze that whistled through the trees surrounding the water's edge.

"Isn't this something, kid?" Hardcastle asked, a peaceful smile plastered on his face.

"Yeah, Judge," he agreed, awed by the beauty that surrounded them. He felt better now that they were in a clearing. "It's beautiful!"

"Clyde bought this land and built this cabin nearly twenty years ago. The family and I used to come up here every year with Clyde and his wife." A far away look appeared in his eyes. "Haven't been back to this place since... Let's get this stuff inside," he finished quickly, moving to the cabin entrance.

McCormick silently followed Hardcastle into the cabin, and once inside, they dumped their gear onto the wooden floor of the quaint structure.

"Clyde said he stockpiled the cabin with canned goods and firewood the last time he was here," Hardcastle said, looking toward the kitchen. "Shouldn't take us long to get everything put away and then we can get out on the lake. There's a canoe out back."

McCormick inspected the cabin as they put their belongings away and checked to be sure they actually had all the food and other supplies they'd need for the week-long stay. As expected, they found they had more than enough for the short time they'd be occupying the cabin. A huge stack of firewood was piled by the fireplace, and a larger stack was stockpiled by the back door.

He found the cabin to be small, but it had a certain charm to it. Everything had been made by hand, including the furniture, and one could easily imagine they had stepped back in time to the pioneer days, except for the modern kitchen and plumbing that had been installed for convenience's sake. A small generator supplied the electricity needed. McCormick found himself relaxing and actually looking forward to spending time in this enchanting place. He forgot his fear of being in the woods and, smiling to himself, looked at Hardcastle, who was busy getting his fishing pole ready. "Tonto ready if you are, Kemo Sabe," he exclaimed. "Lead the way!"

"First, we gotta get the canoe onto the lake," the judge informed him with a smile. "Clyde and I built that canoe years ago. Can't wait to get her out on the water again."

The two men, working together, had little difficulty moving the lightweight boat from its storage shed to the crystal blue waters of the lake. After they rowed it to the middle of the lake and placed their baited hooks into the water, they sat back to enjoy the peaceful surroundings.

"Judge?" McCormick asked heistically, not knowing whether he should approach the subject or not.

"Yeah?"

"Why haven't you come back here before now?"

A strange expression crossed the judge's face, and for a few seconds McCormick thought he wasn't going to answer. He was about to apologize for asking, when the older man finally responded.

"Too many memories, I guess."

McCormick thought that was the only explanation he was going to receive, but Hardcastle surprised him by continuing.

"My wife died up here," he explained, breaking the awkward silence. "It was just too painful for a long time to visit this place."

He didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, Judge. I didn't mean to bring back painful memories for you."

"Don't worry about it, kid. Most of the memories are pleasant. You know, I was afraid of how I'd feel seeing this place again, but Nancy seems closer to me here than anywhere else, except Gull's-Way, of course. After all that's happened lately, it somehow seemed important to see the cabin and lake again. Guess I just needed to know *everything* in my past that I held special hadn't changed." He suddenly cleared his throat. "Now, McCormick, I think you'd better pay more attention to your pole than meddling in my business. You're about to let a fish get away!"

"Hey!" McCormick jumped, startled by the tug on his line. "Get the net before we lose him!" He wrestled with the large bass for several minutes until he had it in position, and Hardcastle lifted the fish from the water with a large net. "Yippee!!" he crowed enthusiastically. "Look at the size of that baby! No canned food for us tonight!"

"Quit yelling, or you'll scare the rest of them away!" Hardcastle chastised. "One fish won't feed us, you know!" He chuckled softly, then continued, "And stop rocking the canoe, or we'll turn over. God, McCormick, the way you're acting, you'd think you'd never caught a fish before!" *

McCormick suddenly found the floor of the boat very interesting. "I haven't," he admitted, barely audible, awkwardly twisting the fishing line with his finger. "Not too many fishin' holes in Jersey," he said louder, trying to cover his embarrassment. *Besides, my father didn't stick around long enough to take me to all the places a father usually takes a son.* He could tell from the expression on the judge's face that the older man regretted his words,

and swallowing his bitterness, grinned. "Guess my file didn't mention that."

Hardcastle returned his grin. "Well, you sure have now, kid! That bass is a prime specimen. What say we catch a few more so he won't get lonely?"

"Whatever you say, Kemo Sabe!" he said, tossing his line back into the water. "Bet ya ten I can catch more than you, Judge."

"You're on, hotshot!" Hardcastle snorted. "That's ten you're gonna lose!"

The two men continued to fish until the sun finally vanished behind the trees. McCormick stuck the ten-dollar bill the judge handed him into his pocket and grabbed one of the oars. "Let's get back, Hardcase, I'm starved!" He couldn't help adding, "Think these five fish I caught will be enough?"

"Ah, shut up, McCormick!" the older man growled. "Beginner's luck, that's all it is!" He grabbed the other oar and fiercely pulled it through the still water. "Wait until tomorrow. *Then* you'll see some *real* fishing!"

McCormick felt a definite draft and reached for the covers to pull up around him, only to find there weren't any. Looking around groggily for the missing blankets, he glanced up into the smiling face of Hardcastle.

"Rise and shine," the judge grinned, holding the absent blankets in his arms. "The fish bite better early in the morning."

"Not again!" he moaned, looking at the clock by his bed. "Five o'clock! Hardcase, what do you have against me, anyway?" he mumbled, pulling the pillow from under his head and covering his face with it, hoping the judge would take the hint and leave. No such luck.

Hardcastle pulled the pillow away and laid it against the blankets he still held. "Get up, McCormick...unless you want to admit I'm a better fisherman than you, that is," he challenged. "A *true* fisherman goes after the fish when they're biting."

McCormick knew he was being 'baited', but he wasn't about to let Hardcastle 'hook' him. "That's funny," he retaliated. "Fish must not have got the message a great fisherman was on the lake last night."

Hardcastle did not rise to his 'bait', but instead tossed the pillow and blankets at him, aiming for his head, then turned to leave the room.

McCormick groaned, "All right, I'm coming. Just give me time to get my pants on." He half fell out of the bed in his effort to get up. "I thought vacations were supposed to be restful?" he mumbled under his breath. "Guess they forgot to tell the judge that bit of information." Tucking his shirt into his jeans as he walked, he followed his cranky partner to the kitchen.

Hardcastle handed him a cup of coffee. "Here, this'll wake ya up. Made it extra strong. You can have the first cup."

McCormick tilted the cup upward and took a swallow, his face twisting in disapproval as the brew assaulted his taste buds. "Good God, Judge! How much did you put in that pot?"

"I told ya I made it strong," Hardcastle reminded him.

"*Strong?! This tastes more like mud than coffee!*"

"Ah, McCormick, you're just mad 'cause I woke you up. Let me have that cup!"

"Be my guest," he invited, handing over the hot container, and settled back in his chair waiting for the reaction he knew would come.

The coffee came out of Hardcastle's mouth faster than it had gone in. "Gads!" the surprised man shouted, getting up to pour the remainder of the foul liquid down the drain. When the task had been completed, he sheepishly returned to the table and, without looking at McCormick, took a seat. "Guess I did put a little too much coffee in the pot. Never was any good judgin' things like that."

"No kidding!" McCormick retorted, exaggerating the words. He found it impossible to keep the smirk off his face. "Why don't I make the coffee from now on?"

"Okay, wise guy!" Hardcastle returned, his embarrassment replaced by anger. "You get the job. While you're at it, make breakfast, too. I'll go get our gear ready so we can get started right after we eat."

McCormick smiled as he watched the crusty old man he was learning to care so much about walk out the door. *If anyone had ever told me I'd feel so close to that cantankerous old goat the first day I arrived at Gull's-Way, I'd have told them they were crazy. God, I'll never forget how surprised I was when I learned he had a son. Wonder how long it would've taken him to tell me if Cadallic hadn't let the cat out of the bag? Said I wasn't a substitute, but sometimes I wonder how true that really is. Hell, what if it is true? He's the closest thing to a father I've ever had. Funny, when he first told me about the special arrangement he had in store for me that day in his chambers, I thought he was crazy! I didn't want to live with the hardnosed judge who'd sent me to prison. Now look at me! My old cell mates wouldn't believe I'm actually enjoying being with old Hardcase. Hell, he's the best thing that ever happened to me. Wonder if he knows I feel this way? It would embarrass him to death if I told him, but I really care for him a lot. A sudden noise startled him, and he turned around to find himself nose to nose with a stern-faced judge.*

"McCormick, are you gonna fix breakfast or stand around all day lolly-gaggin'?"

"Sorry, your honor," he responded, then added somewhat sarcastically, continuing in the spirit of the game they played, "I'm not very good at cooking when I'm half-asleep! *Someone* woke me up at five a. m. Didn't get a good look at him, but he kinda reminded me of a donkey. You wouldn't have any idea who it was, would you, Judge?"

"Ah, shut up, kid, and get started. I'm half starved, and I can't show a certain wise mouth up at fishing on an empty stomach."

"Like ya did last night, Judge? Can't wait!" McCormick grinned, then set about preparing scrambled eggs and toast.

The two men fished most of the day, both catching their fair share, but with Hardcastle, true to his word, besting McCormick this go-around. Although they were having a marvelous time, eventually hunger won out, and they reluctantly headed back to the cabin to feast on the day's catch.

Hardcastle wiped his mouth and leaned back in his chair. "Ah, this is the life!"

"Yeah, I gotta agree, Judge, I'm glad you dragged me up here," McCormick commented, leaning back in his chair, imitating Hardcastle's mannerism. "All we need now is some straw to pick our teeth, and we'd have everything."

The older man let the comment slide, feeling himself relaxing for the first time since their trip to Clarence. Things were finally falling into proper

perspective again. He looked over at McCormick and smiled slightly at the disheveled condition of his young friend. Neither of them had taken the time to shave, but the ex-racedriver's face, with its darker beard, revealed that fact more distinctly than his. The ex-con's clothes were also in a miserable state, wrinkled by the long hours in the cramped canoe and spotted randomly with blood from cleaning the fish they'd caught earlier. For a brief second, his mind traveled back to another time...another young man.

"Judge?"

He started. "Yeah. Let's get this mess cleaned up."

McCormick gave him an intent look, then said, "Sure, Judge, whatever you say."

The two men worked together and in a short time had cleared away the last piece of evidence that they'd just eaten a huge meal. The next few hours were spent leisurely sitting outside the cabin, the tranquil atmosphere of their surroundings a balm as their meal settled. Neither spoke for some time, but finally McCormick asked, "Judge, what were you thinking about awhile ago?"

The judge was quiet for a few minutes as he stared off into space. Without looking at his companion, he answered softly, "My son." He fell silent again, and the younger man waited patiently for him to continue.

"Tommy used to come up here with me and Nancy. Never saw a kid who liked to fish like that boy did. He loved it here as much as I did." He smiled, then continued, "I remember the day he caught 'Old Sam'. You remember me telling you about that old bass that slipped through everyone's fingers?"

He nodded.

"The boy was so excited, kept talking about having him mounted; then after all that, he threw it back into the lake. Said it belonged to the lake and not on someone's wall for people to gawk at."

McCormick grinned. "Sounds like he took after his old man."

"Yeah, uh, a little, I guess," Hardcastle sputtered, somewhat flustered. "But he looked just like his mother." He paused for a second, lost in thought. *Never been this open with the kid before. Must be the atmosphere up here...or maybe I'm feeling...* "She was a beautiful woman, Mark. Wish you could've known them both."

"I'd have liked that very much, Judge," he said softly, then fell silent. A few moments passed, then he added, "Maybe if I'd had a family like yours, things would've been different for me."

Hardcastle heard something in McCormick's voice, but he couldn't tell if it was bitterness or jealousy. Glancing over at his young friend, he saw the turmoil written on his face. Reaching over, he placed a comforting hand on the ex-con's arm. "Good parents don't always insure you'll turn out right, Mark. I knew 'Punky's' and 'Stinky's' parents; no finer people ever lived, but look how they turned out!" he ended bitterly.

"They hurt you a lot, didn't they, Milt?" McCormick asked quietly.

"Yeah, kid, they did," Hardcastle admitted. "Before this happened, I would've trusted any of those guys with my life, but that's behind me now. Just remember, it's what you are *now* that counts, and I think you're gonna be okay...someday!"

"Someday!" he repeated in mock anger. The tense moment was past, and the continuing game in full swing. "Why you old donkey, what's wrong with me?"

"Don't have all day, McCormick, or I'd tell you. Now, how about us gettin' some fishin' in?"

McCormick opened his mouth to speak but never finished the gesture. He sighed, and at last he said, "Well, okay, but I'm *not* getting back into that canoe. My rear feels like it's starting to grow to the seat!"

"All right," the judge agreed. "My backside's a little sore, too. There's a much smaller lake about half a mile from here. Fish aren't as big, but they used to bite good. We'll get our stuff together and hike over."

"Hike?" McCormick repeated, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat.

"Well, if you know of some other way to get there, I'm listening!" Hardcastle came back sarcastically.

He shot the judge a nasty look but didn't comment. Instead, he got up, pushed the chair savagely against the cabin wall and headed for the door. "Let's get started," he retorted.

What the hell? Hardcastle stared after the younger man, puzzled by his strange behavior, then followed him into the cabin. Although McCormick made a gallant effort to hide it, the judge could see he was really spooked and immediately regretted his earlier words. "Hey, we can fish on the bank here, if you like," he said.

"No way!" McCormick said, louder than necessary, grabbing his equipment and a jacket and heading for the door. "Let's go!"

The judge quickly followed suit and caught up with his friend outside. "Hey, Mark, slow down! You don't know which direction to go, remember?" *What's the matter, kid?*

"Oh. Yeah." The younger man stopped, his face turning red. "Sorry."

Guess you're not ready to talk, huh? Okay, I'll let it ride for awhile. "Here." Hardcastle tossed him a small canvas bag. "Carry that."

"What is it?" the ex-con asked, catching it awkwardly.

"First aid kit. I carried it in, so you carry it now. I never go out in the woods without it," Hardcastle informed him, then quickly continued when he saw a glint of fear creep into the younger man's face. "Just a precaution," he assured. "I've had this thing for twenty years and never had to use it once." He cast a worried glance at McCormick. *Don't like the way Mark's acting. Hadn't noticed it before, but the kid's really scared.* It worried him, but it was evident McCormick intended to go through with the trip. *If I insist we stay, he's gonna be angry, and I'll never get to the bottom of this. Better let him handle it his own way.*

The judge walked slowly as he made his way through the dense forest, making certain he didn't get too far ahead of his companion. They'd been traveling about ten minutes when a sudden rustling of brush disrupted the stillness around them. Glancing in the direction of the sound, he saw a large buck dart away from them. "Just a deer," he stated, turning to look at the man following him, and did a double take. McCormick stood rigidly in the path, his face stark white, eyes vacant. Hardcastle dropped his equipment and rushed back to him. "McCormick, you okay?" He felt a knot of fear in his stomach when his friend didn't answer. Grabbing the young man by both shoulders, he shook him firmly. "Mark!"

Life finally returned to the vacant eyes, but the ex-con's body started to tremble uncontrollably.

Hardcastle frowned. *This type of fear isn't normal!* Gently leading the still trembling man to a fallen tree, he made the frightened man sit down. "Take it easy, kid. It was only a deer." *I've gotta find out what's behind all this!*

McCormick looked up at him and tried to speak, but he was shaking so badly he couldn't get the words out.

Hardcastle sat down beside the young man and placed an arm around his shoulders. "Just take a deep breath."

His breath coming in short, quick gasps, McCormick did as he was told.

"That's it, now another," Hardcastle instructed gently. He waited until the shoulders beneath his arm had stopped quivering. "Better?" he asked, concerned.

Face averted, McCormick nodded, mumbling, "Thanks."

The judge didn't say anything, choosing instead to let McCormick make the first move. He waited patiently for the silent man to regain control.

After a few minutes, McCormick looked up at him and whispered, "Sorry. Don't know what got into me. Real *brave* partner you have, Judge!" he added in a bitter tone, his face reddening.

Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "Yeah, I *do* have a brave partner...no question about it. I've seen you face things when a lot of guys would've turned tail and run. Mark, everyone's afraid of something. You don't have anything to be ashamed of."

"Sure," McCormick returned, sounding unconvinced, then snapped, "How many guys you know are scared out of their wits by a deer, for God's sake!" He pushed himself up and turned his back on the judge.

"McCormick, sit down!" Hardcastle ordered in his best judicial voice. The look he received was defiant, but he was obeyed. "Now," he continued in a softer tone, "talk! Something set this off, and I want to know what!"

The ex-con looked down at the ground, nervously shuffling the leaves on the ground by his foot. "I don't know, Judge. I guess it could've had something to do with the camping trip my father took me on when I was about three." He added in a bitter tone, "You know, that's the only time I remember him ever doing anything with me."

"Did something happen to frighten you?" Hardcastle coaxed.

"I...I don't really remember what happened. All I know is I somehow got separated from my dad. Mom told me later they spent nearly eight hours looking for me that night, and I had nightmares about it for months afterward."

"Do you remember *anything* that happened during that time?" he persisted. *Come on, kid. Get it out in the open.*

"No, not really. I remember vague images, but nothing specific. Like I said, I was only three at the time."

"McCormick, the forest can be terribly frightening to a small child, especially when he's all alone."

"Yeah, but I'm not a child any more. I'm a man...or at least I used to think I was." He stared at the ground again, his expression pensive.

"Kid, stop tearing yourself apart! We can't control what we're afraid of. Hell, everyone's afraid of something. With me, it's confined places. I feel as if I can't breathe if I'm in a small, cramped area."

"But I bet you don't completely freeze when it happens, like I did!" he retorted, running his hand through his hair. "Jesus! I didn't know I'd react that way, Judge. I know there's nothing to be afraid of, but when I heard that deer behind me, something snapped. I was more frightened that I can ever remember!"

Hardcastle patted him gently on the back. "When I was dumped in

that lake back in Clarence, I thought I was a goner. I was scared out of my mind for a few seconds and couldn't move. Mark, spending the night in the forest can scare a grown man to death, let alone a small kid," he reasoned, trying to comfort the man at his side. "All the sounds of the woods are magnified at night, and it can be a very traumatic and terrifying experience. The sound the deer made probably triggered something that happened to you that night that scared you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," McCormick agreed, glancing at him. "Sorry, Judge."

"Hell, you don't have anything to be sorry about, kid. Coulda happened to anyone, but you shoulda *told* me how nervous being in the forest was making you. We didn't have to come out here, ya know; we coulda stayed near the cabin."

"I didn't want to spoil the trip for you. Besides, I knew I had to somehow make the hike back to the truck; thought the shorter hike might help me overcome the fear. Guess that was a mistake."

"Well, we'll worry about that later. Right now, we have to get outta here. You wanna head back to the cabin?"

McCormick shook his head. "We've come this far, might as well go the rest of the way. After all this, reaching that lake is suddenly very important to me."

Understanding, Hardcastle slapped his partner on the back as he raised himself to a standing position. "That's the stuff," he praised. "Just remember, I'm right in front of you. If the pressure starts getting to you again, just sing out. *Understand?*"

McCormick looked at the kindhearted man whose back was now to him and smiled. "Thanks, Judge." *Every time I think I've finally got Hardcastle figured out, he does something unpredictable.*

He followed as the judge resumed his former role of guide, once again leading them down the congested path. The fear was still present but not with the same fierce control it had previously held over him, and McCormick was determined to master it. Fixing his eyes upon the man in front of him and not his surroundings, he tried to imagine he was some place else.

"Ya doing okay, McCormick?" the leader of the two-man expedition asked, looking back. Before he could answer, Hardcastle stumbled, yelling out in pain, and fell to the ground, clawing at his right leg.

"Judge!" he yelled, rushing up to the stricken man.

"Damn rattler got me!" the older man managed, then shivered uncontrollably as severe pain overtook him.

Nervously, McCormick looked around for the snake, but it had obviously already left the scene. Quickly kneeling beside the fallen man, he ordered gently, "Move your hands. I've got to get a look at it." When Hardcastle did so, he pushed the jeans leg up until the spot the snake had struck was visible. The leg was already swelling, the skin around the wound turning an ugly shade of purple. He reached for the first aid kit. "Judge, you're going to have to help me. I've never done this before," he admitted, frightened for his friend.

The injured man looked up at him with glassy eyes. "Ugh...God, it hurts like hell! G-got to keep the poison from going higher. Tie off the wound."

McCormick didn't have time to respond to the statement. Diving into the canvas bag, he pulled out a large rubber hose and a pair of scissors.

With shaking hands, he rapidly cut the jeans leg and positioned the hose several inches above the injury, twisting it several times until he was certain it was tight enough without the circulation being cut off entirely. He'd seen enough old westerns to know how to do that much. "Okay, it's tied off. How do I make the cuts?" he asked, knowing the next step was vital but dreading having to be the one to do it.

"Cut, uh, vertically...a quarter inch deep, half inch long," Hardcastle panted, then fell back against the ground moaning.

McCormick quickly found a package of razor blades in the bag and some matches. Holding a match under one of the blades, he sterilized one side of it and, with trembling hands, made the cuts as the judge had instructed. Then, placing his mouth to the wound, he drew out as much of the poison as he could and spat it out onto the ground, repeating this action until he was convinced he'd gotten out as much venom as possible. Exhausted, he sat back on his heels and took a deep breath, glancing at the judge's face as he did so. Hardcastle's face was beaded with sweat and had an alarming ghostly look to it.

"How ya doing, Judge?" he asked shakily.

Hardcastle looked up at him, but McCormick was certain he couldn't see him.

"Been better," the retired judge confessed. "You know, you didn't have to do that yourself--there's a suction device in the bag."

"Now you tell me!" he complained, grinning.

Hardcastle started to reply but moaned again instead.

"Just hang on, Judge. I'll get you outta here." *One thing's certain; Hardcastle's not going to walk out. Gotta find some way to get him back to the cabin. After looking around frantically for a few minutes, he sighed. Looks like there's only one way outta this.* "Judge," he began softly, trying to sound confident, "I'm going back to the cabin and get something to drag you out of here with."

"N-no, I can make it," the weakened man protested, trying to raise up on his arms but falling back in pain. "Can't let you go alone," he added, reaching his arms upward for McCormick to help him up.

"No way! You're in no condition to walk." *God, he's the one hurt, and he's worried about me!* "Judge, if that poison gets to your heart, it could kill you! I'll be fine!" With that, he turned and started running in the direction of the cabin.

"McCormick!" the judge shouted, but he just kept running.

He knocked the obstacles in his path out of the way as he raced back to the cabin. Thinking of Hardcastle, alone in the surroundings that frightened him so badly, forced all fear for his own safety to the back of his mind.

Out of breath, he finally reached his destination and, dashing into the dwelling, searched frantically for something with which to bring the judge back to safety. He found exactly what he needed in a small closet beside the fireplace. Gathering the tarp up, he retrieved some rope he'd found earlier and darted out the back door. He added the oars from the canoe to his collection and, within a few minutes, was swiftly making the return trip.

When he finally got back to his injured friend, all he could do was gasp for air for several seconds. "H-have you outta here in no time," he panted breathlessly. Taking the scissors from the bag once again, he set about fashioning a make-shift travois from the tarp and oars, tying the

material securely to the wooden poles with the rope he'd found.

McCormick kept up a steady stream of senseless conversation as he worked, but his words fell on deaf ears; Hardcastle had slipped into unconsciousness while he had been on his marathon race, but he had been working in such a frenzy, he hadn't even noticed.

When he'd finished his task, he laid the contraption next to the judge's body and, as gently as possible, rolled the larger man onto it. Before he picked up the two oars, he made a quick examination of his patient. Hardcastle seemed to be having trouble breathing, and his skin felt cold and clammy to McCormick's touch. The tourniquet was the last thing he checked, and after deciding it was okay, he picked up the ends of the oars and started the long trek back. "God, Judge," he complained to the unconscious man, "you need to go on a diet!"

Pulling with all his strength, the bed finally started to move. It was rough going pulling the injured man over the narrow path, but he was determined to make it. The forest was closing in on him again, but his fear for the judge overshadowed his personal fear.

"McCormick?" came a quiet voice from behind him.

"Yeah, Judge?" he answered, glancing back as he continued to pull.



"Got a deal for you. You work with me helping to bring some of the scum to justice that got loose on technicalities, and I'll see that ya don't go back to prison. How about it?"

McCormick felt a chill run through him. *God, he's delirious!* "Okay, your honor, it's a deal," he returned, hoping to pacify the judge.

"Good," the injured man uttered, then fell silent for several minutes. "Ya know, McCormick could be a decent kid if given the chance. I want to give him that chance, Sarah. No, it hasn't got a thing to do with the fact he reminds me of Tommy! I just want to help the kid, that's all!"

So, that was partly the reason. McCormick continued to pull against the heavy weight. *It doesn't matter now; he's proved he cares about me as a person many times over since then.*

After what seemed like an eternity, the cabin came into view. Wrestling with the make-shift bed, he managed to get Hardcastle onto the porch and inside. It was getting late, and he knew he'd never be able to get the judge the rest of the way to the truck in the dark. As gently as possible, McCormick lowered the injured man to the floor. *Can't get him on the bed alone. Damn it, Judge, why'd you pick a place so out of the way? If only I could call for help!* He jumped at a light touch on his arm. "Hey, welcome back," he grinned at the man looking up at him. "How ya feeling?"

"Well, I'm not ready to play basketball yet, but I'm doing okay," Hardcastle informed him, pausing a second before continuing, "Listen, McCormick, I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"Hell, Judge, it's not your fault. Besides, if you hadn't been babysittin' me back there, you'da seen that snake. If anyone needs to apologize, it's me." He quickly changed the subject. "Think you can help me get you up on the bed? It's too late to try and get out of here tonight."

"Yeah, I think so," Hardcastle responded, placing an arm around McCormick's shoulders.

"On the count of three," McCormick instructed. "One...two...three!"

With Hardcastle's help, McCormick managed to get the injured man onto the bed. Once there, he helped him to a reclining position.

"Oh, God," Hardcastle stated matter of factly, "I'm gonna be sick."

McCormick rushed to the kitchen and, returning with a large pan, held the older man's head as again and again, his stomach convulsed and emptied into the container. Finally, the weakened man motioned he was finished and laid his head back against the pillow. McCormick left for the bathroom to empty the pan. Upon his return, he noticed beads of sweat on Hardcastle's brow and a strained expression on his face. "This'll help," he said, softly wiping the judge's face with a cool, damp cloth. "Better?" he asked, laying the folded cloth across the other man's forehead.

Hardcastle shut his eyes tightly for a second, then opened them. "Yeah, as long as I don't move. Thanks, kid."

McCormick removed the cloth and placed it in the pan of cool water he'd brought back with him. Squeezing the cloth out, he placed it on the judge's forehead once again, then let his hand wander to the side of his friend's throat to check his pulse. It was a little faster than normal but otherwise seemed normal. The skin beneath his hand, however, was feverish.

"Hey, knock it off, McCormick, I'm fine!" the judge growled, waving McCormick's hand away.

"Sure," he retaliated sarcastically, "you're in *great* shape! Now just

lie still and let me take care of you. *I'm in charge now, so behave!*"

"You're enjoying this!" Hardcastle accused but offered no further resistance. "Since you're determined to play nursemaid, get me something to drink."

"Uh, I don't think you should drink anything," he returned hesitantly. "In all the movies I've seen, they never give the victim anything to drink if he's been sick at his stomach."

"Damn it, McCormick, give me some water! I promise if I die I won't come back and haunt you. Hell, whoever heard of learning nursing techniques from a movie, anyway!"

He refused to give in. "Sorry, Judge, no water. I'm not taking any chances. I'll let you have some crushed ice, though, if you stop yelling."

"Oh, all right. Better than nothin', I suppose," Hardcastle grumbled. "Didn't that movie teach you anything about bedside manners, McCormick? You're a lousy nurse, you know that?"

He just grinned and left to get the ice. When he returned, however, he found his hot-tempered patient had fallen asleep. "Why you old donkey," he said quietly, being careful not to awaken his sleeping patient. Pulling the covers up from the foot of the bed, he gently covered his friend, then pulled up a chair to wait out the long night.

Hardcastle's rising fever had him worried, and periodically, he checked on the judge's condition. *I've done everything I can; why can't I shake the feeling I should be doing more? Hey, you can't do anything till morning; you'd get lost in these woods at night. Hell, admit it, McCormick. You're scared to death to make that trip. Hardcastle could die while you're sitting here trying to muster up the courage to face whatever the hell it is you're afraid of. McCormick reached over to check the judge again and frowned. His temperature's rising, and there's not a thing I can do but wait. Damn it, Hardcase, don't do this to me! I need you!*

The injured man cried out, jarring him back to reality. Hardcastle was burning up, tossing and turning in the throes of a nightmare. "No! Don't go!" he yelled out in his delirium, reaching out and grasping McCormick's arm tightly.

He grabbed the judge's other outstretched hand and held onto it. "Judge, I'm right here. Just relax."

"Please, don't go! Not like the others!"

"I'm not goin' anywhere, I promise!" he soothed, trying to calm the disturbed man. *What's he talking about?*

"Howard...Nancy...they've all left me. You can't! I won't let you leave me again!"

*Howard? Oh, yeah, that's his brother. The judge told me he died several years ago in a traffic accident.** And Nancy, that's the judge's wife! Who does he think I am?*

"Tommy, promise me you won't leave me all alone again!"

"Dear God, he thinks I'm his son!" he murmured in surprise. Holding Hardcastle's hand more tightly, he leaned closer. "I won't leave again, Dad. I'm right here." Much to his relief, the delirious man relaxed against the bed.

"Good. Thanks, son. Knew you'd come back. When the officers came and said you'd been killed, I didn't want to believe them. You're all I have left, Tommy. I love you."

McCormick swallowed hard. "I love you, too," he whispered.

"Stay with me awhile, son," Hardcastle muttered, his voice drifting off.

"I'm right here, Dad," he comforted, patting the judge's hand. "I won't leave you, I promise." Now get some rest. We'll talk later."

He continued to hold his friend's hand even after Hardcastle had fallen into a peaceful slumber. *Tom Hardcastle sure was lucky to have a father like the judge. Wonder if the kid realized that? There's been a lot of pain in your life, Judge, hasn't there? Yeah, a lot of pain, but also a lot of love. Don't know what I did to deserve it, but thanks for sharing part of it with me. Being with you is the closest I've ever come to experiencing a father's love.* Looking at the now peaceful face, he murmured, "God, how I wish you had been my father." Finally, he released the hand he held and lovingly placed it under the covers. Tenderly, he touched the judge's face and was relieved to find the fever had gone down. "Sleep tight, Dad," he whispered, brushing a tear from his eye, then positioned the covers around his patient once again.

He settled back in his chair, a heavy feeling of weariness enveloping him like a blanket. The emotional upheavals he'd encountered earlier that day had left him drained, and although he fought it, he finally fell into a restless sleep.

He was cold and all alone in the middle of a dense forest. "Daddy, where are you?" he yelled, but no one answered. Dark, menacing shadows leapt out at him from the corners of his eyes, and strange sounds had his imagination running wild. He was afraid to move, yet terrified not to. "Daddy, please come get me!" he pleaded, but no one came.

Suddenly, he heard a low, deep growl and, looking up, saw two shining red eyes glaring through the darkness at him. He wanted to run but was frozen to the spot. Helplessly, he stood, rigidly spellbound by those terrifying eyes that seemed to see right through him. Then, someone called his name, and the blood-red eyes ran straight at him. "No!" he screeched, finally regaining his voice. "Daddy, help me! HELP ME!"

"Mark?"

He stared in wide-eyed terror as the pair of glowing orbs approached closer and closer. Raising his arms, he shielded his head from the advancing enemy.

"McCormick! Wake up!"

"W-what?" He blinked, confused. Reality finally returned, and he glanced around, shocked to find himself far across the room pressed into a corner. "Oh, God!" he cried, then covering his face with his hands, slowly slid down the length of the wall until he was resting on the heels of his feet. His heart beat wildly, and he couldn't stop the tremors that possessed his body. Closing his eyes tightly, he tried to eradicate the image of those eyes from his mind. "God, please make it stop!"

"You're all right, now," the judge comforted from his bed. "It was only a dream."

"No! It couldn't have been! It was too real!" Suddenly, he felt very, very cold as if an icy hand had reached out and was squeezing his heart. Dropping his hands from his face, he wrapped his arms around his body in an effort to warm himself. *So cold! But why am I sweating?*

"Mark, everything's okay. Nothing's going to hurt you, I promise!"

"Judge?" he whispered, wanting desperately for the voice he heard to belong to the one person he needed at that moment.

"Yeah, kid, it's me. Think you can talk about it?"

He shook his head.

"McCormick, this isn't going to let go of you until you face it."

Looking at Hardcastle with haunted eyes, he admitted, "D-don't know if I c-can." His body trembled uncontrollably. *Please don't make me!*

"Sure ya can!" the judge said in a confident tone. "Besides, I'm getting tired being over here all alone. Come sit back down."

Hardcastle's words had no effect on him. Instead, he clutched his arms tighter against his chest in a criss-cross position and remained frozen in the corner.

"Mark, there's nothing to be afraid of. Trust me."

"H-help me, J-Judge!"

"Damn it, kid. I'd come to you, but I can't. You've *got* to come to me!"

Something in the judge's voice finally got through to him. Slowly, he moved out of the corner and made his way back to the chair by the judge's bed.

"That's it, son. I knew you could do it," Hardcastle encouraged.

"Just take a deep breath. That's it." He waited a few moments, then asked, "Feel better?"

McCormick nodded mutely.

"Good. Think you can talk now?" Hardcastle coaxed.

"I-I wanted him to come, but he never did," he said in a low voice, tears forming in his eyes.

"Who?"

"M-my dad. I was so a-alone out there, J-Judge, and all I wanted was to have my dad take me in his arms and make the fear go away. B-but he never came!" The tears ran freely down his face, but he made no attempt to wipe them away.

"Mark, he didn't know where you were, remember? You said you got separated, and they hunted for you for hours. Now, tell me what frightened you that night. You remember what it was, don't you?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "The dream was so real! God, it was *so real!*" he repeated.

"Tell me about it. What was real?"

"Eyes," he breathed, once again reliving the terror he'd felt. His heart was pounding wildly, and his hands shook so badly he had to clasp them tightly together to stop their nervous movements.

"It's okay," Hardcastle comforted, then, awkwardly sitting up, reached over and placed his hand over McCormick's. "Go on. What happened?"

He took a long, deep breath, forcing air into his tortured lungs. His chest felt like it was in a vise, but he somehow managed to talk, his words sounding strange to his ears. "I-I was all alone in the forest, c-cold and frightened. Then I heard this growling sound in the brush ahead of me and smelled something really foul!" His voice raised as his fear mounted.

"It's okay. Go ahead."

"All I could make out were these large red eyes staring at me. I-I couldn't move, Judge. I couldn't move!" He swallowed hard and looked at the older man, a child-like vulnerable feeling of fear making it difficult to continue. "Then I was screaming over and over again while this huge animal kept coming closer and closer!" He took another deep, shuddering breath. "All I wanted at that instant was to have my father take me in his arms and comfort me, but he wasn't there. Damn him, he was *never* there when I needed him!" he added bitterly, angrily wiping the tears from his face. "I-it's coming back now...a forest ranger picking me up and covering me with a blanket, carrying me back to the ranger station where my mother and father were waiting for me. Oh, God, why couldn't I remember before now? It just doesn't make any sense!" Running his hands through his hair, he leaned back in the chair and sighed, letting the tension escape. "The ranger's voice must've startled the animal. He probably never even saw it."

"Who knows, kid. The important thing is you *remembered*. The incident in the woods today must've triggered somethin' in your subconscious. How do you feel?"

McCormick took a deep breath, then, looking at his friend, managed a lopsided grin. "Better," he admitted, surprised to discover he actually did. "You know, Judge, I hated my father for not being there, even though he couldn't help it...that time. I remember I wouldn't let him touch me when they brought me to the station. I just clung to my mother and cried." Reaching up, he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"That's a normal reaction, McCormick. You thought he'd deserted you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. You know, now that I know *why* I was so afraid, I think I can handle it. I'm not saying I'll never be afraid again, but at least I don't think I'll react the same way next time."

"Now you're cookin', kid!" Hardcastle praised.

"How're *you* doing, Judge?"

"I'll be great just as soon as we get outta here. I think you and I've had enough of the great outdoors for awhile." He glanced out the window. "Sun's comin' up. What say we head back to civilization?"

"No arguments here," McCormick smiled, then turned serious again. "Thank you, Milt. I couldn't have handled it on my own."

"Ah, I didn't do anything, McCormick," the judge said, his face turning crimson.

"Yes, you did," he insisted, "and I'll never forget it."

"Are you gonna stand there bein' mushy all day, or are you gonna help me onto that fancy bed you rigged up?" the older man grumbled with a smile on his face.

McCormick returned the smile and, after helping the judge onto the makeshift bed, picked up the oars and headed for the door. "I know one thing, Judge," he said when they were on the trail again:

"What's that?"

"When we get home, *you're* going on a diet!"

McCormick poked his head around the corner of the door. "How ya doing, Hardcase?" he asked, smiling at the man lying in the hospital bed.

"Where've you been?" the judge demanded. "Where is it? I'm starved. You talk about prison food being bad, you should try this stuff!"

"Ah, it can't be that bad, Judge. Besides, I'm sure it's very good for you."

"Did you bring it or not?"

"Well...I've been pretty busy doing all the work around the house: mowing the lawn, trimming the--"

"--McCormick!"

"Okay! Settle down!" He grinned, coming into the room and bringing a flat box from behind his back. "It's got everything you wanted: double cheese, sausage..."

"You didn't forget the anchovies, did you?"

"I told ya, it has *everything!* You can't even see the crust it's so loaded down. Boy, being in the hospital sure makes you cranky. Bet the nurses love you!"

"Yeah, well, guess I am getting a little tired of all the fussy attention everyone's giving me. Didn't mean to yell at ya. Want some pizza?"

He shook his head. "Did the warden say when you get sprung from here?"

"Funny, McCormick," Hardcastle returned. "Doc said I can go home tomorrow, so you be here early, *you hear?*"

Snapping to attention, he saluted. "Yes, sir! I hear and obey!"

"All right, all right," Hardcastle relented. "Guess I have been a pain in the butt the last few days, but this place is driving me up the wall. Can't wait to get back home."

"Well, it's only one more night, Judge. You'll be home tomorrow, so just relax and enjoy your pizza."

"Uh...Mark?" The older man toyed with his food.

He knew the judge wanted to say something, but it was obvious he was having trouble getting the words out. "Yeah, your honor?" he responded quietly.

"Well, uh...you saved my life out there, and, uh, I just want to say... ya did a great job, kid."

"You'd have done the same for me, Milt," he returned, feeling warm inside.

"Well, I just want you to know, I'll never forget what you did. By the way, uh, did I say anything crazy while I was out of it?"

Wondered when he'd get around to that. No need to embarrass him by telling him what really happened that night. "No crazier than when you're awake," he grinned. "To tell ya the truth, Hardcase, you kept babbling on about how you couldn't get along without me. Got me right here." He illustrated by pounding his hand against his heart.

Hardcastle threw the empty pizza box at him. "Get outta here, McCormick, and let me get some rest. Remember, be here *early*, and the house had better not be in shambles when I get back!"

"Shambles!" he retorted, feigning anger. "I like that! I work like a dog to get it cleaned up, and that's the thanks I get! Why, you old donkey, I oughta--"

"--Donkey?! You just wait till I get outta this bed, then we'll see who's a donkey."

The game was off and running, and the voices grew louder and louder until a huge nurse entered the room and silenced the shouting men. As McCormick was being none too gently escorted from the room, the judge shouted,

"Seven a. m., McCormick!"

"Okay, Judge. *Eleven* it is. See ya tomorrow!" Starting down the corridor, he grinned. *That oughta do it. Three...two...one...NOW!*

"*M c C o r m i c k!!*"

He smiled to himself as he continued on his way.



(*) written before the episode *Long Ago Girl*

(**) written before the episode *Brother, Can You Spare A Crime*

H&Mc

Three Little Words

by B. L. Barr

*"I'm all right."
How many times
has my life
hung suspended--
In the silence
after the shooting stops;
After the smoke clears
and the dust settles;
Or when the squeal of tires
and grinding gears
has died away,
I stand there.
Afraid to breathe,
Afraid to think,
Until I hear you say it:
"I'm all right, Rick."
And then I can move
and even smile again.
The world can go
again, 'cause
you're all right.*