

Jail Scene, *Night of the Hunter* by Davis Grubb

Ben lay back in the bunk and smiled. Preacher has stopped talking now. Preacher just sits there across the cell from Ben with those black eyes boring into him. Preacher is trying to guess. Not that Ben hasn't told Preacher everything that he told the others at the trial: Warden Stidger, Mister McGlumphey, Judge Stathers, and the jury. Everything, that is, but the one thing they wanted the most to know. Ben won't tell that to anybody. But it is a kind of game: teasing Preacher. Ben tells him the story over and over again and Preacher sits hunched, heeding each word, waiting for the slip that never comes.

Because I was just plumb tired of being poor. That's the large and small of it, Preacher. Just sick to death of drawing that little pay envelope at the hardware store in Moundsville every Friday and then when I'd go over to Mister Smiley's bank on payday he'd open that little drawer with all the green tens and fifties and hundreds in it and every time I'd just fairly choke to think of the things it would buy Willa and them kids of mine.

Greed and Lust!

Yes, Preacher, it was that. But I reckon it was more, too. It wasn't just for me that I wanted it.

You killed two men, Ben!

That's right, Preacher. One day I oiled up that little Smith and Wesson that Mr. Blankensop keeps in his roll-top desk at the hardware store and I went up to Mister Smiley's bank and I pointed that gun at Mister Smiley and the teller Corey South and I said for Corey to hand me over that big stack of hundred-dollar bills. Lord, you never seen such a wad, Preacher!

Ten thousand dollars' worth, Ben Harper!

Then Mister Smiley said I was crazy and Corey South went for his gun in the drawer and with that I shot him and Mister Smiley both and while I was reaching through to get that green stack of hundreds out of Corey's dead fingers Mister Smiley got the gun and lifted up on the floor and shot me through the shoulder. Well, sir, I run and got scared and didn't know which was up or down before long and so I just got in the car and come home.

With the money?

Yep!

And then?

Ben Harper smiles.

Why, they come down the river after me about four that afternoon—Sheriff Wiley Tomlinson and four policemen.

And where was you, Ben?

Why, I was there, Preacher. You see I was done running. I was just standing out back by the smokehouse with them two youngsters of mine—John and that little sweetheart Pearl.

And the money, Ben? What about that? What about that ten thousand dollars?

Ben smiles again, and picks his front teeth with his thumbnail.

Go to hell, Preacher, he says softly....