

FIVE FEET OF DEATH

JACK STORM

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Joe Stanley left his stalled coupe and walked along the muddy road through the rain-swept night. Wind-driven water beat against his raincoat and spattered his face. He hunched his lanky body and muttered his opinion of any man who would call a private detective out on a night like this.

The Hamer Snake Farm should be along here somewhere. Johnathan Hamer had said over the telephone that the place was two miles from the highway on the old Waverly Road. Stanley had driven almost two miles on the muddy road through the waning storm before the rain shorted the ignition and stalled his coupe. He would have waited for another car to come along, but he had promised to meet Johnathan Hamer at eight o'clock. It was about eight, now.

Hamer had mentioned a thousand-dollar fee for handling a confidential matter. Stanley could use the thousand very nicely.

Sliding in the mud, he dug a flashlight from his raincoat pocket. The light showed slanting rain, the muddy road and drenched trees beyond the drainage ditch on either side. He swore and turned the flashlight beam down, pointing it toward his feet.

Mud had balled about his shoes until each weighed pounds. The shoulders of his coat were wet beneath the raincoat. His trousers were soaked to the knees and his brown felt hat was a soggy wreck. He was disgusted and angry, but he kept thinking about that thousand-dollar fee.

Skidding, he made another fifty steps, then searched the sides of the road with the flashlight beam. A pleased grunt escaped him and some of the anger went out of his brown eyes.

The light showed two red brick pillars a short distance ahead and to the left. The pillars flanked a pair of half-open iron gates. A driveway crossed an earthen fill in the drainage ditch, went in between the brick pillars and disappeared in the dark bulk of trees and shrubbery beyond the gates.

Moving faster, Stanley headed for the gates, the flashlight beam jerking around as he skidded in the mud. He made a few steps and the swinging light swept the driveway fill from left to right. He saw the figure of a man lying on the wet earth along the right edge of the driveway.

He stopped walking, his lanky body stiffening. Steadying the light, he held it on the man on the ground. The man did not move. Raindrops spattering against him made silvery splashes in the light.

Stanley swallowed. He went on and stopped about ten feet from the man on the ground. He licked at the rain on his lips, and his eyes swiveled.

A tall iron fence with a spiked top stretched out into the wet darkness on his right, following the ditch bank. To his left, the fence followed the ditch for about twenty feet, then angled back into the drenched woods. There was a small enameled sign fastened to the brick pillar to the right of the gates. The sign read:

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HAMER SNAKE FARM

Stanley's cheeks were rigid and his eyes were hard and bright as he crossed the fill and looked down at the man on the ground.

The man appeared to be about forty years old, short and stout. He was lying on his back. He was wearing a shower coat, a wet tan suit and muddy shoes. A soaked tan felt hat was on the ground near his head. His stocky body was twisted. The eyes were wide and staring, almost bulging from their sockets. Stanley decided the eyes were blue, but he wasn't sure because of the blood. The blood seemed to have come from the edges of the eyelids, which still bled a little, sluggishly, though there were no marks of wounds on them.

The man's hair was long and tow-colored and swept straight back from his forehead in a pompadour. His small, full-lipped mouth was open, the tongue showing, dark and swollen. His whole face was puffy and bloated, and there was a discolored spot on his chin. The spot looked like a bruise.

Virtually forcing himself to move, Stanley squatted beside the man and touched the right side of his throat, feeling for a pulse which he did not expect to find. He was right. There was no pulse, but the flesh was warm to his touch. The man had not been dead long, certainly not much over fifteen minutes. Stanley had no idea who the dead man was, but he intended to find out, right away.

Gingerly, he slid a long-fingered hand under the raincoat, feeling for the breast pocket of the man's suit. He touched the edges of letters and drew them out into the glow of his flashlight. There were three of the letters and all addressed to Johnathan Hamer, Hamer Snake Farm,

Damp brown hair seemed to lift under Stanley's soaked hat. Moisture that wasn't all rain beaded out on his lean, tense features. He had met his client dead. Fleeting, Stanley thought of the thousand-dollar fee then his mind was filled with other thoughts.

There were two tiny marks on the left side of Johnathan Hamer's throat, beneath the ear. The marks were two small punctures in the skin, somewhat less than an inch apart. The flesh about them was discolored.

Stanley replaced the letters, his mouth pulled into a hard grim line, and a muscle started jumping in his throat.

The marks on Johnathan Hamer's neck had been made by small, close-spaced fangs. Johnathan Hamer had apparently been bitten by a poisonous snake.

Nerves taut, Stanley straightened quickly as he thought of the snake being near the body. The moving beam of his flashlight struck something in the mud near Hamer's hat, something that glittered. Warily, he picked the thing from the mud.

Raking some of the mud away with his fingers, Stanley held the thing in the flashlight beam. Beating rain washed more of the mud away, and he saw that it was a lady's gold powder compact. In the center of the cover was an enamel flower-bordered medallion, its smooth gold surface engraved with the name:

ALMA

Scowling thoughtfully, Stanley dropped the compact into his raincoat pocket and swung the flashlight over the surface of the driveway.

The light showed a few tracks that seemed to have been made by men's shoes. The rain was rapidly beating them into nothingness. There didn't appear to be any marks of a woman's shoes anywhere on the driveway fill.

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Stanley grunted. His scowl deepened.

Covering the dead man's face with the soaked tan felt hat, he turned and went through the iron gates into the Hamer grounds. His left hand was tense, ready to whip the flashlight in any direction. His right hand held the heavy automatic that had been holstered under his left arm. His finger was on the trigger of the weapon and the safety was off.

If the snake that had bitten Johnathan Hamer to death was near, Joe Stanley intended to get in the first lick. He didn't like snakes.

Walking carefully, he watched the surface of the driveway, and kept well away from the shrub-bery border on either side. There were tracks of a man's shoes in the mud of the drive, but the rain had all but washed them away. They were headed away from the gates, as far as Stanley could tell.

Rain spattering his face, he followed the curving driveway deeper into the Hamer grounds. Water dribbled in a crystal curtain from the warped brim of his hat. Raindrops rustled in the thick shrubbery on either side of the drive.

The dark hulk of the house loomed ahead as he turned another curve in the drive. There was a ragged flanking of shrubbery and trees about the house. Three front windows on the lower floor were lighted, the glow spilling out onto the front porch. The second floor and the rest of the windows on the first floor were dark.

Leaving the driveway for a narrow earthen walk that cut through a lawn, Stanley headed for the house. As he followed the walk, he saw that there were no footprints on its wet surface.

He reached the house, and, scraping the worst of the mud from his shoes on the brick steps, went up to the tiled front porch. He holstered his gun and punched the doorbell with a stiff finger.

After a few moments, the door was opened by a short, stout man. The man appeared to be about forty years old and his long tow-colored hair was swept back from his forehead in a pompadour. The eyes were blue and slightly bulging.

Stanley b}inked.

The man in the doorway was a startling double of the corpse which sprawled in the rain near the entrance gates.

"You're Johnathan Hamer's brother?" Stanley made it more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, I am Ralph Hamer, Johnathan's brother." The man spoke precisely. His eyes took in Stanley's muddy shoes, dripping raincoat and soggy hat. "You wished to speak to Johnathan?"

"Not now," Joe Stanley said grimly and stepped into the brightly lighted hallway.

Ralph Hamer moved back, out of his way, frowning a little.

"May I ask who " he started.

"Joe Stanley, private detective. Johnathan Hamer called me to come out here at eight o'clock tonight. My car drowned out, and I walked the last mile or two." Stanley looked about the hallway, frowning, thinking of just how he was going to tell Ralph Hamer that his brother was dead.

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Ahead and slightly to his right, a broad, carpeted stairway rose to the second floor of the house. To his left, an archway opened into a large living room. There was a field-stone fireplace at the end of the room; and some sort of savage shield beneath two spears, tented in an inverted V, hung on the wall above it.

A dark-haired man of about thirty-five and a slender young woman of about twenty sat on a leather lounge near the fireplace. The overhead lights made the young woman's blond hair shimmer. A slim, tall man in dark clothing stood beside the lounge. The three were talking and seemingly paid no attention to Ralph Hamer and Stanley.

"Johnathan isn't in the house at the moment, Mr. Stanley." Ralph Hamer smiled and made a little gesture with a pudgy right hand. "He went out to see about our snakes the storm, you know. Johnathan and I raise poisonous snakes for their venom."

Stanley nodded.

"Yes, I know. Your brother "

"The venom we extract from the snakes here," Ralph Hamer cut in, talking rapidly, nervously, "is used to compound an antivenom in a laboratory upstate. We haven't the facilities for making the antivenom here. We are experimenting now with coral snakes, trying to produce a venom comparable to that of the cobra. They are very similar, you know. The venom is neurotoxic and is used in the treatment of chronic arthritis, cancer, angina pectoris and other troubles. The venom of the rattlesnake, moccasin and the fer-de-lance, on the other hand, is hemotoxic. It practically turns the blood to water. The fer-de-lance venom sometimes causes bleeding about the eyelids and "

Joe Stanley stiffened. Johnathan Hamer's eyelids had been bleeding.

"You have a fer-de-lance here?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, yes." Ralph Hamer nodded vigorously. His pudgy fingers laced nervously. "We have one fer-de-lance here, along with a number of rattlesnakes, copperheads, and coral snakes. The fer-de-lance is a South American "

"Could the fer-de-lance get out of its cage, or whatever you keep it in ?" Joe Stanley's eyes were gleaming.

"No, You need have no fear of that." Ralph Hamer smiled tolerantly. "All of our snakes are kept in scientifically designed enclosures, some distance back of the house. There are small, domed, concrete shelters in the enclosures. The single fer-de-lance is kept in a small enclosure of its own. We hope to obtain others eventually. The fer-de-lance is active at night, being more or less nocturnal, and it does not attempt to climb very much.

"Would one strike a person in the throat?" Stanley asked that softly. His mind was churning.

"Oh, no. It would be impossible unless the victim were lying down, or the fer-de-lance were upon an elevation. The fer-de-lance seldom strikes as high as the knee. In fact, most of the Western Hemisphere snakes strike low. For that reason, the importation of the mongoose to eradicate poisonous snakes in Central and South America was a failure. The mongoose, you know, handles the cobra very easily, but the cobra erects a portion of its body and strikes high. The mongoose "

Ralph Hamer stopped talking as the two men in the living room left the young woman on the lounge and came into the hall.

"You have any idea why your brother wanted me to come here tonight?" Stanley asked quickly, before the two men came close.

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"I'm sorry. I don't." Ralph Hamer frowned and turned as the two men came nearer. "Davis, this is Mr. Stanley, a private detective. Davis, Mr. Stanley, is Johnathan's secretary." Hamer nodded toward the tall man, whom Stanley estimated to be about thirty.

Hamer moved his head toward the older, heavier man.

"William Cathcutt, Mr. Stanley. William is my sister's fiance. Alma is in the living room. She and William plan to marry " Ralph Hamer stopped, confused. "I...perhaps I'd better call Johnathan." He moved as though to leave the hall.

"Wait a minute!" Stanley's voice was pitched to reach the three men only. "Something has happened. Johnathan Hamer is down by the entrance gates. He seems to have been bitten by a fer-de-lance. His eyelids had been bleeding."

Stanley watched the three men before him. They stared at him.

Davis' thin face was very pale in the hall light. His slim figure was twitching nervously,

Husky, broad-shouldered Cathcutt stood motionless. His dark eyes met Stanley's steadily.

Ralph Hamer's mouth was slightly open. He seemed stunned as he stared at Stanley.

The detective's eyes flicked to the blond young woman in the living room, His right hand went instinctively to the gold compact bulging slightly in his raincoat pocket. The compact undoubtedly belonged to Alma Hamer; yet he had found the thing near the body of her dead brother. The compact could have been lost many hours ago, but

Joe Stanley's teeth came together with an audible click. The gleam in his eyes became brighter.

"And I have reasons to believe," he added grimly, "that Johnathan Hamer's death was no accident!"

"It...it's impossible. None of the snakes could have escaped. Nothing could have happened to Johnathan. I...I don't understand." Ralph Hamer's eyes seemed to bulge even more.

Cathcutt stood rigidly, his dark eyes probing Stanley. Davis' tall figure stirred nervously and he made a low, whimpering sound. His thin features were paler and his eyes held terror.

"I don't believe I understand either, Stanley." Cathcutt's voice was deep and steady. "Do you mean that Johnathan was murdered by a snake bite?"

"I'm afraid that's it, the way things look now." Stanley was scowling. His mind was churning. "That being the case, thce. Alma is in the living room. She and William plan to marry—" Ralph Hamer stopped, confused. "I...perhaps I'd better call Johnathan." He moved as though to leave the hall.

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"I don't believe I understand either, Stanley." Cathcutt's voice was deep and steady. "Do you mean that Johnathan was murdered by a snake bite?"

"I'm afraid that's it, the way things look now." Stanley was scowling. His mind was churning. "That being the case, the police will have to take over. If you will show me the telephone—"

"The telephone was put out of order by the storm," Cathcutt said. "Alma—Miss Hamer—tried to use it just after the storm came."

"All right, I'll take over until we can get the sheriff here. Johnathan Hamer was my client. Have all of you been in the house for the last hour or two?"

He directed the question at Cathcutt, but Ralph Hamer answered. Hamer spoke as though reciting, without expression.

"No. All of us have been in and out. I have been out several times. I seldom remain still more than a few minutes anywhere. Johnathan has been out for a long time, over an hour. William has been upstairs in his room almost all afternoon and evening. He came down just a few minutes before you arrived and went out on the porch. Davis went out to check storm damage not long before you came. Alma went out to see about her saddle horse just after the worst of the storm. If Johnathan was murdered, any one of us—"

"Take it easy, Ralph." Cathcutt stepped closer to Hamer, frowning. "This is pretty much of a shock to all of us, but—"

"I am going to Johnathan!" Ralph Hamer said flatly.

Moving as though dazed, he walked past Stanley toward the front door. He reached the door, and, without speaking or turning, he went out into the night. Davis whimpered again as the door clicked shut. Cathcutt moved as though to follow Hamer.

"Let him go," Stanley said sharply.

Cathcutt shrugged, stopped.

"Get to a telephone somewhere, Cathcutt," the detective ordered brusquely, "and call the sheriff's office. Give my name and tell them to get a couple of men up here as fast as they can. Any objections?"

"None at all." Cathcutt's broad shoulders lifted again. "I'll have Sam, the cook, take Alma's horse and go to the Chambers'. They're about two miles away by bridle path through the woods, and it's almost five by the road. That should be quicker than sending a car. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Davis whimpered again. He was standing beside Stanley, his thin figure jerking badly.

"I'd like to have a look at the fer-de-lance enclosure before Cathcutt gets back, Davis." Stanley touched the tall secretary's shoulder; he felt him shaking.

Davis' white face twitched.

"Is anything wrong?"

The low, hesitant voice pulled Stanley around. Alma Hamer had left the living room and was standing in the archway. Rouge made islands of color against the pallor of her skin. Her blue eyes were very bright with fear.

"Miss Alma, some of the snakes have escaped!" Terror blurred Davis' shrill words. "They've killed Mr. Johnathan ! They—"

"It would be best for you to go to your room, Miss Hamer," Stanley said gently. "We will do everything that we can, of course." His mouth straightened as he touched the bulk of the gold compact in his raincoat pocket, the compact engraved with the name Alma.

"Do that, Alma! Hurry!" Davis chattered shrilly. "Keep your door shut! The snakes might get into the house! They—"

Alma Hamer started crying suddenly. She turned and ran blindly up the stairway toward the second floor, her

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light blue skirt flying about slim silken legs. Stanley heard her heels in the upper hall. A door closed.

"Come on, Davis "

Almost savagely. Stanley caught the secretary's arm and all but dragged him out on the porch. The rain had stopped. They left the porch and followed a narrow earthen pathway leading around the side of the house. Stanley's flashlight beam washed the pathway before them. His right hand was buried in his raincoat pocket, gripping the butt of the automatic which he had taken from its shoulder holster. If the fer-de-lance that had bitten Johnathan Hamer was loose in the Hamer grounds—

"How long have you been with the Hamer's?" he growled at the tall secretary beside him.

"T—Two years." Davis gulped loudly. "Shortly after Mr. Johnathan started the snake farm. He and Mr. Ralph thought it would prove profitable, but it hasn't. It has cost much more than it will ever make. But that doesn't—didn't—worry Mr. Johnathan. He could afford anything he enjoyed, and he did enjoy working with snakes."

Davis voice jumped a note. There was a hint of hysteria in his shrill tones,

"Snakes! I hate them! If I could find another job, I wouldn't—" He stopped, abruptly. "I...I'm overwrought. I just don't like snakes, and having them around me all the time—"

Davis drew a shuddery breath. They passed a low, glass hothouse.

"Mr. Johnathan's orchid house." Davis explained shakily. "He enjoyed puttering around with orchids. The snake enclosures are a short distance ahead. behind the shrubbery."

"How about Cathcutt," Stanley broke in. "Has he known Alma Hamer long? What does he do? When do they plan to get married?"

"Mr. Cathcutt met Miss Alma at a resort in Florida last winter. I understand that he's some sort of an engineer. Miss Alma had invited him here once before for a few days. He's been here three weeks. now. I think he and Miss Alma plan to get married sometime this fall, perhaps sooner." Davis stopped walking.

"Who extracts the venom from the snakes here?" Stanley asked quickly.

"Mr. Ralph and Mr. Johnathan." Davis shuddered. "Mr. Johnathan practically forced me to watch them most of the time and keep records of the type and amount of the venom extracted. They used an implement somewhat like a forked stick to pin the snake's head down, then caught its head in their hand and pressed its fangs over the edge of a glass vessel," Davis gulped again. "Mr. Cathcutt has helped them once or twice, with the rattlesnakes, but Mr. Johnathan didn't like him at all."

Stanley moved on alone the pathway. Davis followed, reluctantly.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Stanley, I...I'll wait here," the secretary stammered. "I can't go any closer to the snakes. I...I just can't. The fer-de-lance enclosure is the small one, nearest the house. I...I—Oh, look! The fer-de-lance!"

Davis stopped moving, his tall body freezing rigid, one long arm lifted, the finger pointing toward something on the pathway.

Stanley centered the thing in his light, and cold sweat started crawling down his back. He could feel his stomach muscles snap taut.

The thing was a snake about five feet long. It was lying on the pathway, the spear-shaped head toward them. It looked something like the pictures Stanley had seen of rattlesnakes. But there was a black stripe running from the eyes to the neck.

Davis shrilled a whimpering cry, then turned and ran back toward the Hamer house. Short brown hair lifted on Stanley's neck as he realized that he was left alone, but that feeling left him quickly. Holding the light trained on the snake, he slipped the gun from his pocket.

Stanley watched it for a moment, holding it in the light, but the snake remained motionless. Quickly, the detective stripped a small branch from a nearby shrub and tossed it toward the snake. The branch hit the reptile's head and rolled to one side, but still the snake did not move.

Slowly, Stanley moved forward, his gun ready. A quick snatch and he had the broken branch of shrubbery. With it, he prodded the snake, and grunted when it moved only with the prodding. Rolling it over on its back with the branch, he eased closer, then realized that the snake was dead. He couldn't see any wound on the reptile.

Thrusting the dead snake to the side of the pathway with the branch, he straightened. Brown brows were touching in a scowl over his hard, bright eyes.

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Moving quickly, he went on along the pathway, until he saw low white walls ahead. There were three of the low-walled, circular enclosures. The nearest was about twenty feet wide. The others in the darkness beyond were larger. Stanley went to the nearest enclosure and examined it in the glow of his flashlight.

About forty inches high, the circular walls were perpendicular on the outside and curved inward from the top on the inside, making it impossible for a snake to crawl out. There was a small, domed shelter in the center of the enclosure and two narrow white walks led from opposite sides of the shelter to the walls. The rest of the space inside was covered with grass.

Stanley swept the flashlight over the grass and moved until he could shine the light through the opening in the domed shelter. The floor was bare, and there was no snake inside the circular enclosure. There was, however, a seven-foot rod lying on the grass near the shelter. One end of the rod was fitted with a broad, shallow fork.

Frowning thoughtfully, Stanley went back to the dead snake beside the pathway and stood looking at it for a full minute. He whistled softly and shook his head, wonderingly. Then, moving quickly, he transferred the gold compact to his suit coat pocket, holstered his gun, and slid out of his raincoat. The crackling garment had hardly dropped before he was sprinting along the pathway toward the house.

Reaching the house, he turned into the driveway and ran toward the entrance gates. Fifty feet from the last abrupt turn in the drive, he slowed to a cautious walk. Moving nearer, he heard voices. Screened by overhanging shrubbery, he glanced around the turn. He saw Ralph Hamer's tan-suited figure. William Cathcutt, Alma Hamer's fiancée, was standing by Ralph. Cathcutt had a flashlight.

"Stanley and Davis were gone when I went back to the house, Ralph, so I came down here. I'm mighty sorry about this. I feel as though I too have lost a—brother. I want you to feel that way about me, too. Ralph. Anything that affects Alma. affects me, of course. I want you to look upon me as a brother, Ralph."

Frowning, Stanley watched the two men for another moment or two, then stepped out into the driveway and coughed loudly. Ralph Hamer and Cathcutt watched him as he walked down the driveway to the gates. Beyond the two men, he could see Johnathan Hamer's body.

"Mr. Stanley." Cathcutt said, turning the light on the detective, "where have you and Davis been? You were gone when I—."

"Davis and I have been hunting a snake." Stanley spoke slowly. He was frowning. "We found it."

"The fer-de-lance?" Ralph Hamer asked the question shrilly.

"Right. The fer-de-lance," Stanley told him. "If you and Cathcutt will come up to the house, now, we'll straighten this thing out in a very few minutes, very probably before the police get here. You sent for them. Cathcutt?"

"I sent Sam. He's probably back from the Chambers' by now, and the sheriff's men are on the way. You killed the fer-de-lance?"

"It's dead." Stanley switched on his own flashlight. "Shall we start toward the house?"

"But...but—" Ralph Hamer moved a pudgy hand toward the body of his brother.

"The sheriff's men should be here in a few minutes. We can't move him," Stanley told him gently.

Dazedly, Ralph Hamer started up the driveway toward the house. Cathcutt walked beside him. Stanley followed. None of them spoke.

When they reached the house, Davis and Alma Hamer were in the living room, sitting on the lounge. They rose as Ralph Hamer, Cathcutt and Stanley entered the room. The tall secretary was all but stiff with fear, The young woman was steadier, but she was badly frightened.

"Johnathan Hamer was murdered," Stanley said rapidly. "He was bitten on the throat by a fer-de-lance. That right, Ralph?"

"Yes." Ralph Hamer's voice was almost without expression. "I saw the fang marks and the eyelids. It was a fer-de-lance."

"All right. That point is settled." Stanley watched the four people in the room with him.

Alma Hamer and Davis had dropped back on the lounge. Both watched Stanley. Davis' gaunt figure was twitching. The girl's slender fingers laced nervously in her lap.

Ralph Hamer and William Cathcutt stood with their backs toward the fireplace, their shoulders almost touching. The lounge was to their right. Both watched Stanley fixedly.

"Johnathan Hamer was murdered," Stanley said quickly, "because the fer-de-lance seldom strikes higher than

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the knee yet Johnathan was struck on the throat. The person who used the fer-de-lance to kill Johnathan was smart and nervy." Stanley touched the bulk of the gold compact in his coat pocket with his left hand. His other hand grasped the right lapel of his coat, near the holstered gun under his left arm. "This person deliberately went into the fer-de-lance enclosure and caught the deadly snake with a forked stick. The stick is still in the enclosure. With five feet of squirming death in his hands, the killer didn't have time to fool around with taking that forked stick out of the enclosure. The snake was part of a beautiful murder plan. It would have been a natural for Johnathan Hamer to have been found, dead of snake bite, on his snake farm. But things didn't work out just as the killer planned.

"First, Johnathan Hamer did not leave the house to see about the snakes, as the killer believed. I'm positive that Johnathan left to come to the gates and catch me when I came. He had telephoned me to come at eight o'clock and knew I would arrive somewhere near that time. He wanted to discuss, privately, the confidential matter he wanted me to handle. He offered me a thousand-dollar fee to handle it for him. That was over the telephone, and he didn't explain; but I now know what the confidential matter was."

Stanley paused. The four other persons in the living room were motionless, staring at him. Davis, on the lounge, whimpered sharply, then was silent.

"That confidential matter was one of the reasons for Johnathan's death. We'll come back to that in a moment. The person who killed Johnathan caught the fer-de-lance, intending to kill Johnathan near the snake enclosures. But Johnathan went toward the gates, to wait for me. The killer followed him, holding the fer-de-lance in a comparatively safe head hold. He was afraid to let go of the snake while it was alive and decided to carry out his plans. He merely followed Johnathan to the gates, thrust the snake at him when he came within reach and the fer-de-lance's fangs caught Johnathan in the throat. This done, the killer hit Johnathan on the chin to knock him out and keep him from screaming. He hit with his free fist, holding the snake's neck with the other.

"After Johnathan fell, the killer fled, knowing the venom would finish the job in a few minutes. But he still had five feet of death on his hands, and he was afraid to let go of it while the fer-de-lance was living. It would have struck at him. He throttled the snake as the safest course and dropped it where Davis and I found it. The killer then returned to the house. His plan hadn't worked out just as he wanted it to, but he thought he was safe."

No one moved or made a sound in the living room.

"Johnathan Hamer was killed for money—money and the reason he called me here tonight. The confidential matter he wanted me to handle was an investigation into the character of a certain person. Johnathan Hamer didn't like this man and he wanted to be sure about him before he married Johnathan's sister, Alma. The investigation would have turned up some unpleasant facts in your life, wouldn't it, Cathcutt?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." Cathcutt spoke evenly, coldly. "If you mean to insinuate that I killed—"

"You did, Cathcutt," Stanley cut in sharply. "I can prove it. Johnathan Hamer was wealthy. That meant Alma Hamer would inherit a considerable amount of money if Johnathan was dead. Johnathan did not like you. Davis and others knew about that. Johnathan intended to have you investigated before his sister married you. The investigation would have wrecked your chances of getting Alma Hamer's share of her brother's estate. Killing Johnathan, you realized, would remove a threat to you and make certain that Alma Hamer would inherit the money before you married her.

"You worked out a beautiful murder plan, but bungled it when things didn't happen as you planned. I'll have to give you credit for having plenty of nerve. It took nerve to handle that fer-de-lance."

"You're talking like a crazy fool." Cathcutt's broad-shouldered figure was rigidly erect. His dark eyes were very bright as he stared at Stanley. "You can't prove one word of your insane accusation."

"It's simple." Stanley's right hand flexed a little. "You learned how to handle a snake by watching and helping Ralph and Johnathan Hamer. It took nerve to handle the fer-de-lance, but you did it. Your prints will probably show on the forked stick in the snake pen. And—I have this."

Stanley took the gold compact from his coat pocket with his left hand and held it where the others could see it.

"This compact belongs to Alma Hamer. It has her name engraved on it. I found it in the mud near Johnathan Hamer's body." Stanley returned the compact to his pocket. "Women, Cathcutt, have a habit of giving compacts, lipsticks, handkerchiefs and things like that to their closest men friends to hold for them, they having no pockets. This compact—"

FIVE FEET OF DEATH

"Alma probably lost it some time today," Cathcutt broke in sharply,

"I did not!" Alma Hamer's voice filled with hate. Her eyes held horror as she looked at Cathcutt. "I gave you the compact early this afternoon, and you put it in your pocket." She covered her face with her hands and started sobbing.

"You went to the gates after sending for the sheriff, Cathcutt, to look for this compact. You were afraid you had dropped it down on the driveway fill. You slipped out of the house earlier to kill Johnathan, while you were supposed to be staying in your room. We'll find mud on some of your shoes. We'll probably find a few fer-de-lance scales on some of your clothing. We can prove—"

An incoherent roar burst from Cathcutt's lips. His stocky body spun around and he ran toward the fireplace at the end of the room. Reaching it, he snatched one of the tented spears from its place over the shield.

Stanley flipped the automatic from under his left arm, waited until Cathcutt turned, the spear poised to throw. Then Stanley shot him in the right knee. The slug knocked Cathcutt's right leg from under him; and he fell, screaming with the pain of shattered bone. The spear dropped harmlessly to the floor.

Almost instantly, Stanley heard men's hoarse voices, feet stamping on the Hamer porch, and he knew the men from the sheriff's office had arrived. Ralph Hamer turned, looked at Cathcutt squirming on the floor before the fireplace, then faced Stanley.

"Alma and I are grateful, Mr. Stanley," he said precisely. His full lips were quivering. "Johnathan's commitments are my obligations, The thousand-dollar fee he promised you will be paid."

"Thanks."

Joe Stanley holstered his automatic as the front door opened to admit the men from the sheriff's office.

THE END.