

# Speaks the Nightbird: Judgment of the Witch Volume I (Evil Unveiled)

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In the Carolinas of 1699, after sentencing Rachel Howarth to death by burning, Matthew, the young clerk of magistrate Isaac Woodward, embarks on his own investigation into Rachel's claims and discovers that he must conquer a powerful and evil force to free Fount Royal from a terrifying menace and exonerate a virtuous woman, in the second part of a two-part novel. Reprint.

Robert McCammon is the New York Times bestselling author of thirteen novels, including *Swan Song*, *Stinger*, *The Wolf's Hour*, *Gone South*, *Mystery Walk*, *Usher's Passing*, and the award-winning *Boy's Life*, all available from Pocket Books. There are more than four million copies of his books in print. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife and daughter.

### Chapter One

Matthew could hear the tempestuous sound of the sea. Breakers were hitting islands or exposed sandbars some distance away from the swamp that he was now negotiating with great difficulty. Ahead of him and almost at the limit of his perception was the midnight traveller -- a dark, moving blotch within further darkness -- who would have been totally lost to him had it not been for the faint orange moonlight, and even that meager illumination was jealously guarded by the streams of moving clouds.

The man had come this way before, that was a certainty. And more than once. His pace was swift and sure-footed, even without benefit of a lantern. Matthew was up to the task of following through the waist-high grasses and across the muck that pulled at his shoes, but it was a tough and laborious journey.

They had left Fount Royal far behind. Matthew estimated the distance at least a quarter mile from the watchman's tower, which had been easily circumvented by cutting through the pinewoods. If the watchman had been awake -- and this Matthew seriously doubted -- he'd been looking out to sea. Who would expect anyone in their right mind to venture out into this morass in the dead of night?

The midnight traveller had a definite purpose, one that gave speed to his step. Matthew heard something rustle off in the grass to his right; it sounded large and quite sinister, therefore he found a little extra speed himself. He discovered in the next moment, however, that his worst enemy was the swamp itself, as he walked into a shallow pond that closed about his knees and almost sent him sprawling. The mud at the pond's bottom seized his shoes and it was only with extreme tenacity that Matthew worked his way to freedom. Once out of the water he realized he could no longer detect his quarry's movement. He scanned from right to left and back again, but the darkness had truly dropped its curtain.

Still, he knew the man must be going in this general direction. He started off again, more mindful of where he was stepping. The swamp was indeed a treacherous place. The midnight traveller must surely have come out here many times to be able to navigate these dangers. Indeed, Matthew thought the man may have made a map of his route and consigned it to memory.

After three or four minutes, Matthew was yet unable to spy any movement in the darkness. He glanced back and saw that his course had taken him around a headland. A black line

of pines and swamp oaks stood between his current position and the watchman's tower, which was probably the greater part of a mile behind. Beyond him was only more swamp. He debated whether to turn back or forge on. Everything out here was only greater and lesser shades of dark, so what was the point? He did continue on a few paces, though, and again paused to scan the horizon. Mosquitoes hummed about his ears, hungry for blood. Frogs croaked in the rushes. Of another human, however, there was not a sign.

What was there to bring a person out here? This was wild desolation, hardly a civilized soul standing between his footprints and the city of Charles Town. So what did the midnight traveller seek to accomplish?

Matthew looked up at the banners of stars. The sky was so huge and the horizon so wide that it was fearsome. The sea, too, was a dark continent. Standing on this coast with the unknown world at his back, he felt more than a little distress, as if his equilibrium and very place on earth were challenged by such immensity. He understood at that moment the need for men to build towns and cities and surround them with walls -- not only to keep out the threat of Indians and wild beasts, but to maintain the illusion of control in a world that was too large to be tamed.

His contemplation was suddenly broken. Out at sea, two lights blinked in quick succession.

Matthew had been about to turn his face toward Fount Royal again, but now he stood motionless. A few seconds went by. Then, once again, the two lights blinked.

What followed next gave his heart a jolt. Not fifty yards from where Matthew was standing, a lighted lantern appeared and was uplifted. The lantern swung back and forth, and then disappeared -- concealed, Matthew suspected, by the midnight traveller's cloak. The man must have either crouched down to strike a match and flame the candle, or done it within the cloak's folds. Whatever and however, a signal had been answered.

Matthew lowered himself into the protection of the marsh grass, so that just his eyes were above it. He desired a closer view, and began to move quietly and carefully toward where the lantern had been revealed. It came to mind that if he stepped on a venomous reptile in his present posture, its fangs would strike a most valuable area. He got to within thirty feet of the dark-cloaked man and was forced to stop when the cover of the high grass ended. The man was standing on a stretch of hard-packed sand, just a few yards short of the Atlantic's foamy waves. He was waiting, his face aimed toward the ocean and his lantern hidden in the cloak.

Matthew also waited. Presently, after the passage of perhaps ten minutes during which the man paced back and forth but never left his station, Matthew was aware of a shape emerging from the darkness of the sea. Only when it was about to make landfall did Matthew make out an oarboat, painted either black or dark blue. There were three men aboard, all of whom also wore night-hued clothing. Two of the men jumped out into the surf and pulled the oarboat to shore.

Matthew realized the boat must have come from a larger vessel some distance away. His thought was: I have found the Spanish spy.

"Greetin's!" the man who had remained in the oarboat called, his accent as far from being Spanish as Gravesend was from Valencia. He stepped down onto the sand. "How goes it?"

The midnight traveller answered, but his voice was so low Matthew heard only a murmur.

"Seven this trip," the oarboater said. "That oughta do you. Get 'em out!" He had delivered this command to the other two men, who began to unload what appeared to be wooden buckets. "Same place?" he asked the midnight traveller, who answered with a nod. "You're a man of habit, ain't you?"

The midnight traveller raised his lantern from the folds of his cloak and by its yellow glow Matthew saw his face in profile. "A man of good habit," Edward Winston said sternly. "Cease this prattle, bury them, and be done with it!" He dropped the lantern, which had been used to show the other man that he was in no mood for dawdling.

"All right, all right!" The oarboater reached into the bottom of his craft and brought up two shovels, and then he walked up the beach to the edge of the high grass. His path brought him within fifteen feet of Matthew's concealment. He stopped at a thatch of spiny palmettos. "This where you want 'em?"

"It will do," Winston said, following.

"Bring 'em on!" the man ordered his crew. "Hurry it, we ain't got all night!" The buckets, which appeared to be sealed, were carried to the designated place. The oarboater handed the two shovels to the other men, who began to dig into the sand.

"You know where a third shovel is," Winston said. "You might employ it, Mr. Rawlings."

"I ain't no damn Injun!" Rawlings replied tartly. "I'm a chief!"

"I beg to differ. You are an Indian, and your chief is Mr. Danforth. I suggest you earn the coin he's paying you."

"Very little coin, sir! Very little, for this night work!"

"The faster they're buried, the sooner you may go."

"Well, why bury 'em anyway? Who the hell's comin' out here to find 'em?"

"Safe is better than sorry. Just lay one bucket aside and put the others under with no further argument."

Muttering beneath his breath, Rawlings reached carefully into the palmettos and pulled out

a short-handled shovel that had been hidden there. Matthew watched as Rawlings fell to digging at rhythm with his companions. "What of the witch?" he asked Winston as he worked. "When's she gonna hang?"

"Not hang. She'll be burned at the stake. I expect it shall be within the next few days."

"You'll be cooked too then, won't you? You and Danforth both!"

"Just concern yourself with your digging," Winston said tersely. "You needn't put them deep, but make sure they're well covered."

"All right! Work on, my lads! We don't want to tarry long in this Satan's country, do we?"

Winston grunted. "Here or there, it's all Satan's country, isn't it?" He gave the left side of his neck a sound slap, executing some bloodsucking beastie.

It took only a few moments for a hole to be opened, six buckets secreted within it, and the sand shovelled over them. Rawlings was a master at appearing to work hard, with all the necessary facial contortions and exertions of breath, but his shovel might have been a spoon, for all the sand it moved. When the buckets were laid under, Rawlings stepped back, wiped his brow with his forearm, and said, "Well done, well done!" as if he were congratulating himself. He returned the implement to its hiding place amid the palmettos and grinned broadly at Winston, who stood nearby watching in silence. "I expect this'll be the last trip, then!"

"I think we should continue one more month," Winston said.

Rawlings's grin collapsed. "What need will you have of any more, if she's to be burned?"

"I'll make a need. Tell Mr. Danforth I shall be here at the hour."

"As you please, your majesty!" Rawlings gave Winston an exaggerated comical bow and the two other men laughed. "Any other communications to the realm?"

"Our business is concluded," Winston said coldly. He picked up by its wire handle the seventh bucket that had been laid aside, and then he abruptly turned toward Matthew -- who instantly ducked down and pressed himself against the earth -- and began to walk through the grass.

"I've never seen a burnin' before!" Rawlings called after him. "Make sure you take it all in, so's you can describe it to me!" Winston didn't respond, but kept on walking. His course, Matthew was relieved to see, took him along a diagonal line perhaps ten or twelve feet to Matthew's west. Then Winston had gone past, holding the lantern low under his cloak to shed some light on where he was stepping. Matthew presumed he would extinguish the candle long before he got within view of the watchman's tower.

"That tight-assed prig! I could lay him out with my little finger!" Rawlings boasted to his companions after Winston had departed.

"You could lay him out with your bloody breath!" one of the others said, and the third man guffawed.

"Right you are, at that! Come on, let's cast off this damned shingle! Thank Christ we've got a fair wind for a change tonight!"

Matthew lifted his head and watched as the men returned to their oarboat. They pushed it off the beach, Rawlings clambered over the side first and then the other men, the oars were taken up -- though not by the big chief -- and the vessel moved out through the lathery surf. It was quickly taken by the darkness.

Matthew knew that if he waited long enough and kept a sharp enough eye he might see some evidence of a larger craft at anchor out there -- possibly the flare of a match lighting a pipe, or a stain of mooncolor on a billowing sail. He did not, however, have the time or the inclination. Suffice it to know that an oarboat was not a vessel suitable for a sea voyage.

He looked in the direction Winston had gone, back toward Fount Royal. Satisfied that he was alone, Matthew got up from his defensive posture and immediately went on the offensive. He found the disturbed area beside the palmettos where the buckets had been buried, and -- two painful palmetto-spike stabs later -- gripped his hand on the concealed shovel.

As Winston had specified, the buckets were not buried very deeply. All Matthew desired was one. The bucket he chose was of common construction, its lid sealed with a coating of dried tar, and of weight Matthew estimated between seven and eight pounds. He used the shovel again to fill the cavity, then returned it to the palmettos and set off for Fount Royal with the bucket in his possession.

The way back was no less difficult than his previous journey. It came to him that he was most likely locked out of Bidwell's mansion and would have to ring the bell to gain entrance; did he wish to let anyone in the household see him with this bucket in hand? Whatever game Winston was up to, Matthew didn't want to tip the man that his table had been overturned. He trusted Mrs. Nettles to a point, but in his opinion the jury was still out on everyone in the damned town. So: what to do with the bucket?

He had an idea, but it would mean trusting one person implicitly. Two persons, if Goode's wife should be counted. He was eager to learn the bucket's contents, and most likely Goode would have an implement to force it open.

With a great degree of thankfulness Matthew put the swamp at his back, negotiated the pinewoods to avoid the watchtower, and shortly thereafter stood before John Goode's door. Upon it he rapped as quietly as he thought possible, though the sound to his ears

was alarmingly loud and must have awakened every slave in the quarters. To his chagrin, he had to knock a second time -- and harder -- before a light blotched the window's covering of stretched oilskin cloth.

The door opened. A candle was pushed out, and above it was Goode's sleepy-eyed face. He'd been prepared to be less than courteous to whoever had come knocking at such an hour, but when he saw first the white skin and then who wore it he put himself together. "Oh...yes suh?"

"I have something that needs looking at." Matthew held up the bucket. "May I enter?"

Of course he was not to be denied. "What is it?" May asked from their pallet of a bed as Goode brought Matthew in and closed the door. "Nothin' that concerns you, woman," he said as he lit a second candle from the first. "Go back to sleep, now." She rolled over, pulling a threadbare covering up to her neck.

Goode put the two candles on the table and Matthew set the bucket down between them. "I followed a certain gentleman out to the swamp just a while ago," Matthew explained. "I won't go into the particulars, but he has more of these buried out there. I want to see what's in it."

Goode ran his fingers around the tar-sealed lid. He picked up the bucket and turned it so its bottom was in the light. There, burnt by a brand into the wood, was the letter K and beneath that the letters CT. "Maker's mark," he said. "From a cooper in Charles Town, 'pears to be." He looked around for a tool and put his hand on a stout knife. Then he began chipping the tar away as Matthew watched in eager anticipation. When enough of the seal had been broken, Goode slid the blade under the lid and worked it up. In another moment the lid came loose, and Goode lifted it off.

Before sight was made of what the bucket concealed, smell gave its testimony. "Whoo!" Goode said, wrinkling his nose. Matthew put the sharp odor as being of a brimstone quality, with ...

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