

CONSOL BOOKS 2/6

# THE KILLER

BURT ARTHUR ●



Only one man dared  
● to stop him ●

# *The Killer*

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BURT ARTHUR

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To David and Clare Deutsch  
with affection

The love problem is part of mankind's heavy  
toll of suffering, and nobody should be  
ashamed that he must pay his tribute...

*C. G. Jung*

Life can only be understood backwards;  
but it must be lived forwards.

*Sören Kierkegaard*

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Penguin Book 2529  
This Side of the Sky

James Barlow was born in 1921 and educated at Leamington Spa, at Stoke-on-Trent, and in North Wales. In 1940 he became a gunnery instructor in the R.A.F. The following year he began to undergo prolonged treatment for tuberculosis and later took to writing technical articles for *Flight* and *Aeroplane*. In 1948 he began to write for *Punch* and in 1956 his first novel, *The Protagonists*, was published. At that time he was working as a rating inspector for Birmingham Corporation. Later he published *One Half of the World* and *The Man with Good Intentions* and, in 1960, his very successful novel, *The Patriots*, which was widely translated. The next year he published *Term of Trial*, which also went into world editions and was the basis of a film in which Sir Laurence Olivier starred. (Both these have appeared in Penguins.) In 1960 he left his post at Birmingham and now devotes all his time to writing.

For *This Side of the Sky* James Barlow visited three bases of the U.S.A.F. and for his eighth novel – which he has just completed – he travelled 30,000 miles to Angola, Mozambique, Portugal, Canada and Manhattan. It is called *One Man in the World* and should prove, he says, that some sacred cows are milkless!

James Barlow, who is married with three children, lives in a village on the Norfolk coast.

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hand, he turned and strode swiftly to the door, opened it, and peered out.

"It's raining," he announced.

"I figured it'd be sooner or later," Shorty said, "because it was misting when I came in. See anything?"

"Nope," Hadley replied. "It's blacker'n pitch out."

Wilks, barefooted, padded around the table and joined him in the open doorway.

"Sounded to me like it mighta come from the direction of the house," Shorty said, peering out into the gloomy darkness.

"You can't prove it by me," Hadley said. "I didn't notice where it might've come from. All I know is I heard it."

"Y'think maybe we oughta do something about it?"

"Like what for instance?"

Wilks shrugged.

"Like goin' up to the house and lookin' around and seein' that everything's all right."

Joe Hadley considered the suggestion briefly, then he shook his head.

"You don't think we oughta' huh?"

"No," Hadley said. "It's late and chances are ol' Cal's turned in. All we'd have to do'd be to wake him up. He wouldn't give us a chance to tell him what we heard. He'd start hollerin' and —"

"I know," Shorty said. "He'd holler his head off and there'd be no shuttin' him up."

"So we'd better forget about it."

"Yeah, maybe we'd better."

"It probably wasn't anything anyway."

"We'll, I ain't so sure about that, but like you said . . ."

They backed inside and Hadley closed the door. Wilks went back to his bunk, and Hadley, returning to the table resuming his seat, glanced over at Drews. Ben was blanketed again, his face to the wall as before, and apparently asleep. Shorty pointed to Drews, grinned and shook his head, climbed into his bunk, pulled up his blanket around him, and rolled over on his side.

In the morning when the three punchers emerged from the bunkhouse the rain had stopped, although the sky was still a bit greyish and leaden-looking. The grass was wet and glistening.

"Must've rained all night," Drews remarked.

"It was raining when I turned in," Hadley told him. "That was about twelve o'clock, maybe a little after."

"Ground's soggy. Like it got a good soaking."

"It's clearing off though," Hadley said, raising his gaze skyward. "Gonna be a nice day."

"Hope the old man's got breakfast started," Shorty Wilks said, hitching up his belt. "I'm sure hungry."

"When aren't you?" Hadley asked, nudging Drews.

"After I've eaten," Shorty retorted.

Drews laughed and Shorty grinned.

"I c'n give you fellers as good as you give me any time," he said. "Maybe better."

"Sure, Shorty," Drews said and patted him on the back. "Only at night when I wanna go to sleep and you start yappin' away, I could murder you. I wonder sometimes why I don't. Must be I'm too tired to do 'nything 'cept sleep when it gets past my bedtime."

"Huh," Wilks said but that was all.

With Shorty leading the way, Drews a step or two behind him, and Hadley almost at Drews's elbow, they trooped past the barn and the empty corral and headed for the Daggett ranch house. Presently, and in single file, their boots crunching gravel, they were going up the narrow path that flanked the house and led around it to the rear. Suddenly Shorty stopped, so suddenly in fact that his companions crowded into him.

"S'matter?" Joe Hadley wanted to know. "What'd you stop for?"

"Light burnin' in the kitchen," Wilks answered.

"In Cal Daggett's kitchen in the daytime?" Hadley said in shocked tones. "G'wan! You're seein' things! Cal ain't the kind to waste things, specially things like kerosene that costs money. Must be the sun shinin' on the windowpane."

"What sun?" Shorty demanded.

Hadley grinned sheepishly.

"The one that's tryin' to come out," he said.

"I know a light when I see one," Wilks said firmly.

The window was just a single stride ahead of them and Shorty moved up to it and peered in.

"Look!" he said excitedly and pointed inside the house.

Hadley and Drews bounded forward and joined him at the window, Hadley on one side of him and Drews on the other. The pane was dirty, smudged where wind-blown dust had coated it and streaked where the rain had beaten against it and furrowed the dust. There was no curtain over the window; nothing but a partly drawn-down, threadbare shade that had once been white and was now brownish. Their eyes followed

Shorty's finger. He was pointing to a fat, wobbly-based lamp that stood squarely in the middle of the kitchen table. It cast off a circle of yellowish light on the table while thin threads of light seeped through the cracks in the glazed shade and pin-pointed the ceiling. But then there was something else within range of their gaze. At the table, with his head bowed on his chest, his back turned to the window and his thick-wristed hands hanging limply at his side, sat a bulky man.

"The son-uva-gun!" Hadley breathed. "Took himself a nap in his chair and wound up sleepin' through the whole blamed night right where he was!"

Drews grunted.

"He's gonna have a nice crick in his neck when he wakes up," he said.

"Yeah," Hadley added. "And he'll be as mean an' ornery as all get-out on account of it."

"That's the one o' the privileges of bein' a boss," Drews observed.

They moved away from the window and tramped on, around the house to the back door. Wilks, a step ahead of his mates, opened it and went inside. Hadley and Drews trooped in after him.

"Hey, Boss!" Shorty said, stopping just inside the kitchen. "What d'you say? How 'bout wakin' up, huh, so's we can have some breakfast?"

Hadley and Drews had halted behind Shorty. There was no response from the head-bowed man at the table.

"He sure does a job o' sleepin'," Wilks said, low-toned, out of the corner of his mouth and over his shoulder to Hadley.

"Don't he?"

But then Daggett seemed to stir just the barest bit, and suddenly he sagged sideways, and before they could catch him, he toppled out of his chair and crashed heavily on the floor on his shoulder and slumped over on his face. They were at his side as he struck. Hadley and Drews bent over him and gently eased him over on his broad back while Wilks darted around him to the other side and knelt down. One look told them that Cal Daggett hadn't been sleeping. His shirt front was a mass of dried, sticky blood; when they unbuttoned his outer shirt and then his undershirt, they found a gaping, black-rimmed bullet hole in his chest. Shorty gulped and swallowed hard and stared at it with wide eyes.

"Holy cow!" he said in awed tones.

Hadley raised his head.

"He's dead all right," he announced. "Dead as he'll ever be."

"Been dead quite a while, too," Drews added, "judgin' by the way the blood on him has dried up."

When Hadley climbed to his feet, Drews and Wilks got up too.

"Hey," Shorty said excitedly. "That shot we heard last night!"

"Yeah," Hadley said thoughtfully.

"That must've been when Cal got plugged!"

There was no response from Hadley.

"When you said you didn't think it was anything!" Shorty added.

Hadley gave him a hard look, but he held his tongue.

"That was around eleven, wasn't it?" Drews asked, turning to Hadley.

The latter, a little grim-faced now, added.

"A little before," he said, and added with a shrug: "Or maybe a little after. I don't remember for sure which it was."

"Who d'you suppose did it?" Shorty asked.

Drews shook his head.

"Y'got me," he said.

"I wouldn't know the answer to that one," Hadley said.

Wilks did not offer an opinion of his own. He moved away from his companions and sauntered around the room, peering under the table and under the chair in which Daggett had been sitting and looking under the other chairs in the room.

"What are you lookin' for?" Drews asked after watching him wonderingly for a moment or two.

"For a gun," Shorty told him. "I don't see any so it don't look to me like Cal shot himself. Somebody else musta done it."

"Never mind lookin' for anything or tryin' to figure out who did it," Hadley said crisply. "We'd better get Sam Baker out here an' in a hurry, too, an' let him do the lookin' and the figurin'."

"That's right," Drews said, nodding. "Baker's the law. We'd better leave things to him."

"It's all right with me," Wilks said. His face was a little flushed. "I ain't tryin' to horn in on him."

They stood around the sprawled-out figure on the floor for a long minute, staring down at it as though fascinated by it, then Shorty's head jerked up and the other two men looked at him.

"You fellers wanna stay put here while I go to town and bring Sam back with me?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, Shorty," Hadley said quickly. "Go get him, like a good feller. We'll be right here or maybe out front when you get back."

Shorty wheeled and went striding out of the house, the door swinging and latching behind him. They heard his quick, gravel-crunching step shortly, then as he went down the path it began to fade out. There was a brief silence, perhaps a minute or two long, then they heard the hollow thump of hoofs on the planked flooring of the barn. They heard hoofbeats again when Shorty rode out, but this time they were firmer, for the footing was more solid despite the sogginess of the ground. There was a flurry when he loped away, and presently he was gone and an imposed silence hung over the place. Drews turned away from the dead man and sauntered across the room to a chair that stood rigidly and not particularly inviting against the far wall and sat down in it.

"Funny, y'know, Ben?" Hadley said in a musing tone and Drews looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Thinkin' about this," Hadley said, indicating Daggett's body with a nod. "Remember what Shorty said last night when he came into the bunkhouse?"

Drews thought a moment.

"Something about how dark it was outside," he said shortly.

"I mean before that."

"Before?" Drews repeated. He thought again.

"Didn't he say something about it bein' a perfect night for a murder?" Hadley asked with a half-smile.

Drews looked startled.

"Come to think of it, he did say somethin' like that," he admitted, but then he looked hard at Hadley. "Wait a minute now, Joe. You're forgettin' something. Y'know?"

"Y'mean that he couldn't have killed Cal any more'n you or I could've because the three of us were together in the bunkhouse when that shot was fired?"

"Uh-huh," Drews said.

Hadley smiled.

"I didn't mention it because I think he did this," he said. "It wasn't that at all. What d'you suppose made the little squirt come out with a remark like that?"

Drews couldn't advance an explanation for it so he simply shrugged.

"He wanted to know if I didn't think we oughta come up here an' see that everything was all right," Hadley went on.

He shook his head and added wryly : "I talked him out of it."

"I know. I heard you."

"Now I'm sorry I did. It would've been too late to do anything for Cal then, bein' that he'd already been plugged then, still . . ."

"Still, you think if you'da come up here with Shorty you mighta been able to get a look at the one who killed Cal," Drews concluded. "That it?"

Hadley nodded wordlessly.

"I dunno," Drews said thoughtfully. "Maybe you might've and maybe you mightn't've. I wouldn't know. Chances are, though, that by the time you fellers got up here, bein' that Shorty wasn't dressed and that you'd have had to wait till he put on his pants and boots and maybe his slicker, too, on account o' the rain, there wouldn't've been anybody around here anyway. Whoever killed Cal wasn't waitin' around for somebody to come along and grab him, y'know."

"N-o, I know that."

"He musta lit outta here after the shooting like a herd o' stampedin' steers."

"Yeah, I guess he musta," Hadley admitted. "Still, I'da felt a lot better about it if I'da -"

There was a sudden, echoing beat of hoofs, and Hadley stopped abruptly. Drews and he looked at each other wonderingly.

"Y'don't think that's Shorty comin' back already, do you?" Drews asked.

"He couldn't've made it to town an' back this quick," Hadley responded.

When he hitched up his pants, wheeled around the dead man, and started for the back door, Drews arose and came forward and followed him out of the house. They halted when they came to the head of the path. The beat of approaching hoofs swelled.

"Sounds like tow horses comin'," Hadley said after a moment's listening.

He led the way down the path. Mechanically they glanced at the uncovered kitchen window as they came abreast of it. Yellow lamplight was glinting on the dirty pane. They were about midway between the house and the barn when two horsemen, topping the upgrade from the road to town, some fifty feet beyond the bunkhouse, came into view. Drews peered hard at them. His grunt indicated that he recognized one of them.

"There's Shorty, all right," he announced, nodding in Wilks's direction after concentrating his gaze upon him.

There was no response from Hadley.

"Who's that with him?"

"Looks like the sheriff," Hadley replied.

"H'm! I wonder how come?"

"Shorty musta run into him an' came right back here with him."

"Oh!"

Apparently the oncoming horsemen had already spied them striding towards the barn, for they converged on it too. They came up to it in a flurry of hoofs and slid to a dust-raising stop in front of it. Hadley and Drews shielded their eyes from the dust with upraised hands as it boiled up and billowed about. But after a moment it settled. The man with Wilks was a lean, tanned individual who wore a somewhat tarnished silver star pinned to his vest. He gave Hadley and Drews a nod and climbed down from his horse. Shorty swung down too.

"I ran into Sam headed this way," he explained.

"That's what I figured," Hadley said. He turned to Baker.

"Shorty tell you about Cal, Sam?"

The sheriff nodded.

"I think you're gonna have yourself quite a time catchin' up with the killer," Hadley continued. "If he left 'ny tracks, the rain washed them away."

"I'll worry about that when I come to it," Baker said. "Were any o' you fellers in town late last night?"

"In all that rain?" Hadley asked with a smile. "Nope. None of us. We all stayed put here."

"All three o' you?" Baker asked, his eyes shuttling between the three men facing him, the lanky Hadley, the stocky Drews, and the undersized Wilks.

"Yep," Hadley said. "All three of us."

"None o' you went 'nywheres, huh?"

"Nope," Hadley answered calmly. "Ben turned in first, then Shorty an' then me."

"What were you doin' that you hit the shack last?"

Hadley flushed a little.

"Writin' a letter," he replied.

"To his mother," Shorty said with a grin.

"What time was it about?"

"Y'mean when I turned in?" Hadley asked. "O-h, a little after twelve. Why?"

The sheriff ignored Hadley's question.

"What about Cal?" he asked. "Was he home all night, too?"

"Far as we know he was," Hadley told him.

"Y'hear anything outside o' the shot?"

Hadley shook his head.

"Then you wouldn't know if anybody came to see Cal, would you?" Baker asked.

Hadley shook his head again. The sheriff turned and ranged his eyes away to the house.

"Look, Sam," Hadley said, and Baker turned to him again. "Why all the questions about us bein' in town last night an' so on?"

"There were two killings last night," the sheriff said quietly. "Not just one."

Shorty's mouth opened and hung. He stared at Baker with wide eyes.

"Two, huh?" Hadley repeated.

"That's right," the sheriff said, "and I think both killings were tied up together."

Hadley looked at him obliquely.

"Whaddaya mean?" he asked.

Baker hooked his thumbs in his gun belt.

"I mean that one had a lot to do with the other," he answered.

"It still don't make 'ny sense to me," Hadley said. "Who else was killed besides Cal?"

"Ol' Dave Patton."

"No!"

"Whoever killed Dave," the sheriff continued, "gave it to him good. Shot away half his head. Musta stood right over him when he blasted him."

"Cal got it in the chest," Hadley said.

"I know that Cal an' Dave hated each other's guts," Baker went on, disregarding Hadley's remark. "Everybody knew it. If one hadda been killed an' not the other, I'da sworn the one who was left was the one who did it. Now I'm stumped. I'm up a tree because they're both dead. I know they didn't kill themselves. They weren't that kind. And I know damned well they didn't kill each other. If either one o' th'im had ever had that idea in mind, he'da done it long ago. When a man is young, his temper c'n lead him to do most anything. When he's older, time kinda mellows him, and even though he hates somebody else's guts, he don't go out of his way to do anything about it. It was somebody else who did the job on them."

There was no comment from his listeners.

"Hadley, just as a matter o' curiosity, what kind of a man was Cal Daggett to work for?"

The lanky puncher shrugged.

"No worse'n some and no better'n others," he answered.

"That don't tell me much."

"He wasn't the nicest feller in the world," Hadley related. "Livin' alone for most of his life is prob'bly what gave him his sour disposition. He liked to holler a lot, but what the hell?"

"Go on."

Hadley shrugged again.

"That's all," he said. "I've worked for worse an' I've worked for better."

"H'm," Baker said. He shifted his holster to a more comfortable position. "What are you fellers gonna do now?"

"What else is there f'r us to do but go get us new jobs?" Hadley responded.

"Uh-huh," the sheriff said. "I'm goin' up to the house an' have me a look around. Don't any o' you go off anywheres. I might have some more questions to ask."

They followed him with their eyes, watched him trudge up the path and disappear around the back of the house; they were idling in front of the barn when he came stalking down came closer to them, searching his face for some sign that would tell them that he had found something; but his lean, hard, and his expression revealed nothing. He hitched up his pants as he came up to them.

"I'll have Stacy Combs come out here soon's he can in his funeral wagon an' take Cal away," he told them. "You fellers'll hafta give Stacy a hand with Cal, gettin' him into the wagon."

"Sure," Hadley said.

"I'd like you to stay on f'r a couple days an' run the place," Baker continued, "till I know what's gonna be done with it."

Hadley nodded.

"Sure," he said again.

"What about our pay?" Shorty asked.

"You'll get it," the sheriff answered. "You don't hafta worry none about it. The bank's got Cal's dough an' he musta had plenty of it."

He turned and went to his horse and climbed up on the animal's back and settled himself in the saddle.

"So long f'r now," he called over his shoulder as he wheeled and rode away.

There was no response from the three punchers.

"He's got a lousy job," Shorty said as Baker rode down the

incline. "I wouldn't want it."

"Me neither," Hadley said. "'Specially now. Sam's a good man, but I've got an idea it's gonna take more'n him to get the feller who killed Cal an' ol' Dave."