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THE PLUNDERER

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THE PLUNDERER

I

Roger Payne had come to a decision. He waited until the office door had closed behind the departing stenographer, then swung his long legs recklessly upon his flat-top desk and shouted across the room at his partner:

"Jim Tibbetts!"

Tibbetts frowned. He was footing a column of cost figures and the blast from his young partner nearly made him lose count.

Payne grinned. He liked his partner. Had he not done so he would never have allowed himself to be dragged into business—Tibbetts & Payne, Manufacturers' Agents. Two years of it. Two years from the day on a Western irrigation dam when Payne had installed the cement machine that Tibbetts was selling. Two years—to Payne—of prison. And now his moment of decision had arrived.

Roger Payne was out of place. He did not fit the furniture. There was a look of permanence to the dark tan upon his face which labeled it not the surface sunburn which may be collected during a two weeks' vacation or gradually acquired by spending Saturday afternoon and Sunday on the golf links. It was a tan that suggested leather, and which comes as much from frostbite as sunburn, and from the whip of frozen snowflakes as the heated winds of summer.

Beneath the tan the face was too lean and hard to be in sympathy with the high polish of flat-top desks.

His body also was lean and hard. Even the proper cut of a carefully tailored business suit could not conceal a certain bunchiness about the shoulders which had nothing at all in common with office efficiency. The shoulders were

outrageously broad, the barrel of his chest was scandalously deep, the hands distressingly large and brown, considered in intimate association with filing systems and adding machines. And the keen blue eyes, sometimes gazing with a far-away, unbusiness-like look out into the grimy, roaring cañon called Wabash Avenue, sometimes twinkling with unbusinesslike mischief, inevitably completed the exposure of Roger Payne.

He did not belong there, and he knew it. Hence it was that he suddenly jerked his long legs from the desk, sat up and said swiftly:

"Jim Tibbetts, I want you to buy me out!"

Tibbetts blinked. He was bald, plump, spectacled and kindly.

"Eh? What say? Dang it, Rog, you made me lose count!"

He began all over to foot the column of cost figures. He footed from bottom to top, checked the result by footing from top to bottom, erased his light penciled figures and rewrote them in ink, laid the sheet to one side and folded his hands in resignation.

"I knew it was coming, Rog. I've seen the signs for weeks past. You've been ramping round like a man in prison. Dang it, Rog, I'm sorry."

"Jim," said Roger, "this is no business for me to be in."

"It's a good business, Roger," protested Tibbetts mildly. "There's nothing wrong with it. We've been running only two years. Look what we've done. Look at our prospects. We're pretty well off already. We'll be rich pretty soon. Why? Because Roger Payne comes pretty near being a genius with machinery and Jim Tibbetts can beat most fellows selling. It's too good to spoil, Roger."

"Two years," repeated Payne slowly. "Jim, it seems like a lifetime to me, and it doesn't seem real. The other did—bridgebuilding, irrigation, timber cruising. That was living."

"That was bumming, and you know it!" protested Tibbetts. "That was kid stuff; it was your way of sowing your wild oats. How much money did you have when it was over? How much have you got now, after only two years of business? It was time-wasting, that's what it was, and you know it."

"It was outdoors," said Payne.

They were silent for a while.

"Roger," said Tibbetts sorrowfully, "are you beginning to turn dreamer?"

"No," said Payne emphatically, "I'm waking up. I'm like a man who's been asleep for the last two years. I'm just coming out of it. I'm wide awake; and that's why I've come to see that this game and I don't belong together. You said you'd noticed me ramping round like a man in prison. That's right! Can you guess why? Well, just because of what I tell you; I've come to myself, Jim, and I've got to get out."

"Why? Why have you got to get out?"

Roger Payne shook a hard brown fist at the gray-stone walls of the other side of the clanging street.

"That's why, Jim. It's a prison—to me. Easy enough if you fit in it.
I don't. So I'm going to get out; and it's got to be now."

"But why, in the name of Sam, now? You're getting old, I'll admit. Let's see, how long ago is it since I gave you that scarfpin for your twenty-seventh birthday? Twenty-seven! Come out of it, Rog. Fifty-seven is the proper age to begin dreaming about quitting business."

"I know it. That's why I'm going to do it now, before the game gets me. It gets everybody who stays in it. It would even get me. Then at fifty-seven, as you say, I might quit and go outdoors and begin to live—too late. Jim, did you ever see a more pitiful spectacle than a natural-born outdoor man who's kept his nose on a desk for thirty years and then realized his lifelong dream? Neither have I. He thinks he's going to get out and start living then, but what he does is to begin to die—from the shoulders up. No, sir!" The young man sprang to his feet, flinging the swivel chair away with a kick. "I'm not going to be trapped. I'd rather hike back to-morrow to that irrigation job out West and boss Hunkies for Higgins than sit cooped up here day after day and get rich."

"You—crazy young fool!" said Tibbetts affectionately.

"All right, Jim. Crazy, if you please. But that is what's going to happen; you're

going to buy me out, or get another partner, and I"—he filled his great lungs with air—"I'm going to get outdoors."

"What're you going to do? I'll bet you don't know. Have you got any plans?"

"Yes, I'm going to get out of the city the day after I wind things up here."

"Where you going?"

"Back home to Jordan City and look the old town over, first of all."

"Jordan City! Why—why you aren't a retired farmer."

Payne laughed. "Not going to settle there, Jim."

"Oh, and after you've looked it over, what then?"

"I'll make my plans there. I don't know what it will be. But whatever it is, it will be something that won't bring me back to town."

James Tibbetts looked long and hopefully at the browned face of his young partner; but at what he saw there his hopes vanished.

"You're set on this, I see, Rog," he said sorrowfully.

"Cheer up, Jim!" responded Payne.

"I'll give you a deal that will help you get rich a lot quicker than if I stayed with you."

Tibbetts shook his head and was silent a long time. "Well, if you're bound to sell, you won't go out of here exactly busted—after two years with me," he said at last. "Rog! Do you mean it? We're going to part?"

"It would be plain hell for me to stick, Jim."

Tibbetts grasped the extended hard brown hand in his own soft white fingers. After a while he managed to stammer:

"I see. This just had to come!"

II

On the fat rolling lands about Jordan City pedigreed kine graze by the hundreds, corn grows high and thick and silos are to be seen in every barnyard. And in Jordan City bank accounts are large and permanent.

It is an old town, as age goes in the Mississippi Valley. Maple trees with huge, solid trunks and immense branches line its older streets. The streets themselves, save for the strip of asphalt where the state highway sweeps through the town, are largely paved with hard red bricks. In the older streets in the residence sections the sidewalks are of the same material, and in many places soft green moss grows undisturbed upon these hard red paths. Back from the little-used sidewalks of these sections, surrounded by hedges of Osage orange or box elder, stand old staid houses in good paint and repair. Rich retired owners of the fat acres of Jordan County live in most of them and own ponderous eight-cylinder cars.

There is a new section of the town, too, where the architecture runs to bungalow styles, where the installment collectors from the phonograph houses are regularly seen, and where papa gets out in front and twirls the crank when the family car goes out for its airing. No important line of demarcation separates the old staid section of town from the new and brighter one. Major Trimble, President of the Jordan Bank & Trust Company, accepts deposits from both sections with strict impartiality; the spire of the Methodist Episcopal Church is the Sunday lodestone to folk on both sides of town, as well as for much of the country round. They talk mainly of farms, of cattle and of the weather on the streets of Jordan; and the young folk largely go off to Chicago to make their way in the world.

Into this farm-ringed islet of tranquillity, where faith in one's fellowman, and hoarded money, are in abundance, about the time that Roger Payne was beginning to know that his place was not in the city, the afternoon train from the

east deposited a large, dignified personage of robust, well-nourished, ministerial manner and apparel, who bore comfortably upon his well-padded shoulders the name, Isaiah Granger.

Isaiah Granger! The name alone would have been an open sesame to the important circle which made possible the prosperity of Major Tumble's bank and the First M. E. Church. But Mr. Granger had other things to recommend him. He came, quoth the *Jordan Record*—whose editor's notes Major Trimble held—to make his home in that most beautiful of towns, Jordan City. He was an old friend of Major Tumble's. Mr. Granger was "well fixed"—Major Trimble gave his word for that.

Hence Mr. Granger was met at the station by Major Trimble, driven in the Major's ponderous car to his home and there introduced to Mrs. Trimble—strange that being so old a friend of the Major's he should not have met Mrs. Trimble before—and then in the seclusion of the Major's library he had shucked his coat, as it were, and said:

"Well, what's the prospects for a killing? Got any of 'em lined up?"

"First," retorted Major Trimble, stroking his knife-edged nose, "let me see your credentials from Senator Fairclothe."

The visitor smiled and passed over the requested credentials. Major Trimble inspected them as an astute banker should.

"All right," he said, and waited.

Mr. Granger passed over a bank draft.

"All right," repeated the banker, "and ten percent on all sales made here or through connections from here."

"Ten per cent," agreed Granger, "and no responsibility to be attached to you."

"I'll take care of that," snapped Trimble, "Now, Granger, I think you ought to do some real business here."

And Granger did.

Long before Roger Payne had sold his share in his business, Isaiah Granger was leading the choir in the First M. E. Church and Mrs. Granger, a lady of girth and charm, was President of the Jordan Beautiful Society. Their position in Jordan was solid and assured. Long before Roger finally escaped from the large city, Isaiah Granger, and therefore Jordan, had been most significantly honored.

Granger had been appointed by United States Senator Lafayette Fairclothe, in a letter written on Senate stationery, as district manager for that great organization, The Prairie Highlands Association, Senator Fairclothe, President, Washington, D. C.—which, under the encouragement of the Government, was bestowing a boon on a land-hungry nation of developing the fabulously rich prairie lands of the Western Everglades, Florida. Long before the afternoon when Roger swung boyishly off the train at Jordan, Isaiah Granger's fellow townsmen, led by Major Trimble, had become insistent in their demands that he give them first chance at that land right there in Jordan—a demand which Granger had admitted to be entirely just.

It was Major Trimble, as an old family friend, who hinted to Roger about the snap that Brother Granger was letting his fellow citizens in on in Florida land. It was Senator Fairclothe's direct, sincere replies to Roger's letters of inquiry that convinced him. There is magic in the words "United States Senator." But after all, it was the spirit of adventure, the love of outdoors, the instinct of the pioneer, which prompted him to buy a 1000-acre block of "prairie highland," at the headwaters of the Chokohatchee River. It was necessary to buy at once, for Trimble was after that tract for himself. Having made the purchase Payne sent a wire to the Far West asking one Higgins, engineer, if he were open for a job. And then Roger Payne turned his eager eyes toward sunny Southern Florida.

III

A flaring ray of purple sun came flashing over the sea to Gumbo Key, a warning of the brazen subtropical dawn that was to come. It pierced a vista in the jungle of coco palms on the narrow key, colored purple the white side of the Paradise Gardens Colony excursion boat Swastika, which lay at the tiny wharf on the key's western shore, and splashed without warning into an open porthole well aft.

Roger Payne awoke with a start. It was his first experience with the shock of a Southern Florida dawn. Dawns of many sorts he had seen—the ghastly ashy, clanging dawns of cities, the gray, creeping dawns of Northern winter, the bluish dawns of the Western mountains—but a dawn which came flaring up from the sea like a clap of thunder was a novelty.

He lay for a moment, stretching his buoyant body on the shelflike berth, his soles firmly against one wall, his head touching another, and wondered how a man could sleep in that bunk who was over six feet one. The Swastika had come from the railroad terminus at Flora City during the night, laden with small land buyers bound up the Chokohatchee River for the Paradise Gardens Colony, and had laid up at Gumbo Key at the mouth of the river to wait for daylight. Payne had secured passage upon it, bound for his prairie land beyond the head waters of the Chokohatchee. As he realized that dawn was coming and that soon he would see his land, he tumbled from his berth with something of the eagerness of a boy on the first day of the long vacation.

"Come on, Hig; daylight's coming."

Higgins, the other man in the room, stirred grudgingly. He was young in years but old in the ways of men, hardened by many hard jobs in rough corners of the world, and broad of body and round and red of head.

"Like the sunrise, do you?" grumbled Higgins. "Go ahead; soak your soul in it.

My soul don't need soaking, so lemme sleep. Or, here; mebbe you're out early for a glimpse at the young lady who kept to her room all last evening?"

"I scarcely noticed her."

"You're right; you didn't. That's why I been wondering if there ain't something wrong with you. Tall, slim, carried herself like a princess, and dressed——"

"Go back to sleep, Hig, you're still dreaming."

"A dream is right—but in the flesh—and you never noticed her!"

"I'm down here on business; haven't time for anything else. I'm going out and see what the country is like."

"Go ahead. By the purple shadows I can tell you that in a few minutes 'twill be sunrise, and all gaudier than a campmeeter's picture of heaven. So I'll just roll over and tear off ten winks more."

Out on the narrow wharf Payne caught his foot on the painter of a rowboat moored near the Swastika's stern, and found the soft blue haze of the subtropical night still undisturbed save for the first ray of dawn.

The tree growth on the key was jungle-like in density. A path had been cut through to the eastern shore. It was almost a tunnel, for the fronds of the coco palms and the branches of the red-trunked gumbo limbo, and of live oak formed an arch overhead, from which hung long, listless streamers of Spanish moss. The red rays touched the hanging tips of the moss, as if the streamers had been dipped in vermilion, and it tinted softly the palm fronds, wet with the night's dew.

Payne walked down the path to the east shore of the key, and suddenly he seemed to behold a world being born anew. Dawn was coming with a rush. The soft velvety blackness of night in the heavens was giving way to a faint purple. Up from the mystic spaces of the east rays of deep purple, of burnt umber, vermilion, scarlet and flame were leaping into the sky. Black dots began to appear on the horizon, keys and trees silhouetted against the rising light. A huge heron flapped grotesquely up from the top of a mangrove bush as the sun struck it; a flamingo flapped by, matching its dainty pink with the sun's best tints; a dolphin's fin broke the dark purple water near shore.

Then the eastern horizon became a flare of flame and fire, and the sea grew rosy. Beyond its brim a great conflagration seemed to be raging, throwing its flames of gold, of red and of uncountable tints high into the sky. Higher it rose, its rays more insistent; and then, as with a clashing of brazen cymbals, the full-blown dawn was upon the world.

Payne now saw that the light had revealed two yachts moored to a short pier which ran out from the eastern shore. One, a splendid sixty-foot cruiser of the luxurious type seen in Florida waters during the tourist season, lay at the end of the pier ready to sail. From bow to stern she was immaculate white with shiny brown trimmings, and on her bow the sun revealed in small gilt letters the name Egret.

The second boat was a low, dirty forty-footer—the Cormorant—the boat to which the Swastika's passengers were to transfer for the trip up the river.

A Japanese steward, in spick and span whites, came down the Egret's shiny gangway, entered the path leading to the Swastika's dock, and in a few minutes came hurrying back to his boat carrying a handbag.

The sun now had splashed boldly upon the languid wet fronds of the palms, upon the trunks of trees and the hanging moss. It lighted up the tunnellike vista, painting rosy the shell path underfoot and revealing the Swastika beyond. In the morning stillness Payne heard light, swift steps creaking crisply upon the crushed shells of the path. Then, from his place in the shadows beneath a palm, he saw the girl. She came to the open space before the sea, whistling softly to herself an irrepressible, tuneless matin song of youth, and thus she walked unexpectingly into the full power of the relentless dawn. For a moment she halted, blinking, astounded.

"Ah!"

Her exclamation was a cry of the joy of youth. She stood facing the coming day, and the sea and sun; and a puff of morning breeze flung behind her a vagrant strand of golden hair.

She was quite tall, and upon her young figure, long of waist and lithe, yet well-rounded, the thin white dress of the subtropics was but a filament, a feminine accessory to the virgin beauty and the message of her budding womanhood.

Payne heard a soft, heavy step at his back and saw that Higgins, too, had answered the call of dawn.

The girl stood entranced by the spectacle before her. She placed her hands upon her bosom and stood with uplifted visage, like a young goddess of the dawn. She stretched her arms passionately out over the sea and said quite loudly and fervently:

"I love you, I love you!"

In the shadow of the palm Payne and Higgins began to retreat guiltily.

"No use your sticking round, Payne," whispered the engineer. "You're too late; she's took. You heard what she said."

"Sh-h!"

"I love you," repeated the girl with the same ecstatic tone and pose.
"Ah! How I love you!"

From the arch over the path there dropped with a swish and crash the ten-foot branch of a coco palm, falling without warning or apparent reason, as the overripe branches of coco palms do fall. The girl whirled round; and Payne was shocked and chilled to the marrow by the sight of her as she faced toward them.

Beautiful she was, her face as beautiful as her vibrant young body, but for the moment she was like a thing at bay. Fear shown in her eyes, not the passing fear of a sudden alarm, but a deep-seated, wearing fear suddenly awakened. Her face was a deadly white. For an instant it seemed to Roger that the depths of her soul were revealed, and at the mystery and dread in her eyes he took a step forward. He did not speak. Her expression baffled him. He stood irresolute for the moment, and in that moment she recovered her poise. She drew herself upright slowly, the red came flowing back into the cream of her cheeks, and she relaxed, leaning her weight upon one foot. As she looked at Roger, and from him to the weather-beaten Higgins and back to Roger, her eyes grew easy with assurance.

She began to smile.

"Didn't know there were tigers or other dangerous beasts on this island, miss," chuckled Higgins. "Say the word and we'll clean 'em out for you."

Neither the girl nor Payne appeared to hear. Payne looked at her without attempting to speak; he had tried to smile and carry the thing off easily, but as their eyes met his lips remained half parted without uttering a word. He looked at her in utter helplessness, caught for the moment, at least, in the grip of a force greater than himself. The girl shot Higgins a smile of understanding and friendliness, but as her eyes came back to Roger's the smile vanished by degrees; and upon her visage for the while was the same look of awesome seriousness as was upon the young man's.

"Mebbe they're gorillas, miss," chuckled Higgins.

She turned, reluctant yet relieved at the release from the tension, and looked at him speculatively.

"Why did you say that?" she asked.

"Gorillas, miss? Pshaw! Don't be afraid; I juggle them for morning exercise. Eh? What?" he continued, as he realized that her expression was not one of jesting. "By the great smoked fish—excuse me for cussin', miss—if it wasn't ridiculous I'd say I'd hit it!"

"Do you know anything about this place?" she asked quietly.

"Not a thing, miss."

"Or about the people round here?"

"No."

"It was strange," she said, "your saying 'tiger' and 'gorilla' just then. It was what I would have said—if I could have spoken."

"I am sorry, very sorry we alarmed you," said Roger. "We didn't want to intrude."

"Oh, I am glad you were here," she cried. "You don't know how glad I was to turn round and see you two instead of——"

"Instead of tigers and gorillas?" laughed Roger. "Oh! I beg your pardon!" he cried in swift contrition at the look which the words brought back to her eyes. "I wouldn't for the world—but, surely—it's impossible; there are no dangerous wild

animals on this pretty little key."

"No," she said slowly, looking away from him. "No, there are not any dangerous —wild beasts on this key. It—it was just a morning nightmare." She laughed, looking up. "Perhaps I wasn't thoroughly awake yet." But she shuddered, and swiftly made pretense she was shaking herself. "There; I'm awake now. There are no dangerous wild animals here. There are only—people. It—it was just—just moonshine."

"Do they make a little of it round here, miss?" Higgins winked eagerly and with such energy that his ears and hat moved.

"Oh, Higgins!" groaned Roger; but the girl threw back her head and laughed with relief and gratitude for the chance of merriment until the virgin morning seemed filled with song. Higgins' hair-trigger laughter rumbled deep accompaniment; and, as always, the engineer's merriment forced itself upon Roger, and he joined in, while the silver of the girl's tones pealed above both, tinkling in the sun-kissed palms above, rolling out over the purple water, out to the mooring of the immaculate Egret.

"We were on the Swastika, and rose early," explained Roger.

"You're land buyers?"

"Yes, I've invested in a big tract way up the river."

"You're going up to-day?"

"Yes."

"Then—are you going right back after seeing your land—like the others?"

"I plan to develop that land—if it is anything like what it was represented."

Her manner changed. She grew thoughtful.

"Whom did you buy your land from—if it isn't too impertinent?"

"From Senator Fairclothe's company."

"From Senator——! Why, that's——" she stopped.

"Tell me, please; how was that land represented?"

"Prairie land. Soil reports and surveys were furnished. I discounted them fifty per cent, and still thought it a good investment."

"Did the fact that—Senator Fairclothe recommended the land influence you?"

"Why, certainly. He's a United States Senator."

She turned swiftly toward the Egret, but not swiftly enough to hide the flush that rushed to her cheeks.

"I hope—I do hope you are not disappointed," she said.

Her laughter of a moment before, penetrating to the cabin of the Egret, had brought a tall, thin woman, the sun glinting on the diamond pendants in her ears, out from a stateroom forward.

"Ah, my dear Annette!"

"Aunty! You awake so early?"

"The climate has made me young. Come aboard, dear. We sail at once."

The girl hesitated. Her tone was indefinable as she asked: "Is—Mr. Garman——?"

"He's up at his place, and his boat is at our disposal. Come, dear; come inside. The mornings are damp in spite of their gorgeous beauty."

The girl looked back at Payne from the door of the stateroom. One glance. He tried in vain to fathom it. Then she disappeared.

A few minutes later the Egret's softly purring engines were edging her away from the pier, when:

"Cormorant, ahoy!" called a man from her engine room.

"Hey?" responded a gruff voice from a shack on shore.

"Got that extra drum of gasoline there?"

"Yep."

"Bring it up on the Cormorant when you come."

"Aw-right."

The Egret was well away from shore now. Her sharp white bow cleaved the blue water of the way with slow, irresistible power. Her speed increased. In a few minutes twin waves of blue were curling away from her cutwater as, smoothly and swiftly, she raced across the bay and out of sight round the first bend of the wide mouthed Chokohatchee River.

Roger Payne stood looking up the river long after the boat was out of sight. He was in a daze; but he was very glad that he, too, was going up the river.

IV

Aboard the broad-beamed Swastika life was beginning to stir. The odors of cooking food from her galley spread briskly upon the virgin morning air. Shoes clattered upon the deck; a chatter of voices developed. The score or more of land-seekers aboard were awake and preparing early for the great day upon which they should behold their promised land.

Up with the earliest of them, rosy, clean shaved, soberly and richly dressed and ministerial in dignity, was Granger, the agent, the expert leader of this confiding flock.

Fate had created Granger for a fisher of men; greed had sent him into the South Florida land business. His bland self-possession, his impressive physique, his confidence-winning voice and bearing constituted a profitable stock in trade. In the slang of his craft—shall we say "graft"?—he "played the church game strong." Under the sway of his hypnotic personality God-fearing, bank-fearing old couples brought forth hidden wealth to place in his dexterous hands; school-teachers wrecked their savings to invest with Granger. And Granger turned the receipts over to the great masters of his company, minus his large commission. Granger was only one tentacle of the company, one machine for extracting money from naïve, land-hungry citizens. The powerful, cunning men—or man—behind it had many machines.

Senator Lafayette Fairclothe was the most expensive of these machines. It had cost much money and political trading to get his name on the Company's literature, but it was worth more.

"The future in this country belongs to the producer; I recommend this investment to my fellow citizens. Lafayette Fairclothe, United States Senator."

It was worth millions. For this was in the heyday of the Florida land boom; and the Paradise Gardens Colony, a branch of the Prairie Highlands Association, was

one of the organizations that made history in Florida—a history that stank to high heaven, and even to Washington, to accomplish which, experience has taught us, requires a stench of vast and penetrating proportions indeed.

Granger had gathered his flock from afar, none nearer than a thousand miles away from Florida's subtropics.

It was a varied throng which gathered in the Swastika's saloon for an early breakfast. They were earnest, serious, land seekers, not tourists. In the main they were goodly folks worn by a monotony of life; men who had worked and women who had saved through long, gray years, buoyed up by the hope of a comfortable haven in old age to compensate them for a lifetime on the treadmill. Some of them were farmers, some small-towners, two or three were from cities; and the spell of dreams, and of Granger, was upon them all. They were dazzled, dazed. On their native heaths, perhaps as shrewd as any, here they were pleased, hopeful children in a master's hands. Ponce de León's Fountain of Youth, a plot of land in perpetual sun, where crops grow without work or worry, big land profits, easy money, something for nothing—the lure is as innate and potent as the eternal lure of gold!

At breakfast the rumor began to spread somehow that something had happened, and the trip up the river to the colony would have to be delayed a few hours. Then it was rumored that the delay would be a day, two days; it was dangerous to go upstream; it was impossible. It was doubtful if the trip could be made for a long time.

Granger was very busy and concerned, flying about the boat, off it and on again; his brow wrinkled, his lips compressed with determination.

"Anything gone wrong, Mr. Granger?"

"Nothing to speak of, brother. I'll get it straightened out. Do not worry, brother."

"Ain't worryin' 'tall, long's you're in charge, Mr. Granger."

The women on board began to feel sorry for Mr. Granger, the way he was rushing and worrying about for them.

"Yes, Granger's all right. He'll do the best any one can by us."

More and more Granger rushed; more and more his countenance became marked with the lines of deep concern. He was heard the length of the boat in protest to some news imparted by the captain.

"But I tell you we must go up to-day, Captain Sayles. Do you think I will disappoint these good friends of mine? I have a reputation to sustain; I have never broken my word in my life; and I've promised to pilot these good friends to our Colony to-day."

"Can't be done, Mr. Granger. Dangerous. Don't want to wreck and drown your people, do you?" The captain raised his voice. "The government inspectors have closed the river for a week."

The news spread over the Swastika. But Granger was not one to give in even to such a diction. He rushed about some more. One of the women thought she saw him enter his stateroom for a moment of prayer. All of no avail. Even Granger had to submit; and in the end, with apparent reluctance, he assembled his flock in the saloon.

"Folks—neighbors—good friends all, I am sorry." Mr. Granger cast a glance about him which was like a benediction in spite of his doleful words. "We have come to our promised land too soon; we cannot go up the river and inspect our glorious properties for another week. The river is closed by government orders. The colossal improvements by which the Paradise Gardens Colony is transforming the wilderness into a veritable paradise for us all have interfered slightly with our program.

"Only a few miles up the river the Colony is constructing an enormous bridge to carry the rail which is pushing swiftly on its way toward the Colony and which, as we all know, will increase the value of our properties by such leaps and bounds that each and all of us shall reap a harvest of wealth. We who are in on the ground floor will sell at our own price when the rush comes; where we invested hundreds we will sell for thousands. The construction of this great bridge entails enormous engineering feats and for the present the river is blocked. Entirely blocked. Blocked so that not even a Seminole Indian could pole his picturesque dugout from here to the magnificently fertile lands of the Colony.

"We had no way of knowing this would happen. Nevertheless, the Colony will

transfer its members free of charge back to Flora City; and one week from to-day we will resume our trip up the beautiful Chokohatchee to the Paradise Colony. Let us not grieve too much, good friends, over the slight delay. 'What doth it profit a man if he gain the world and lose his soul.' A week at beautiful, tropical Flora City! A week in which to feast our souls on the enchantment of Southern Florida! Friends, I think we may congratulate ourselves; and we start back in fifteen minutes."

"The grub's so damn bad at that Flora Hotel," snapped a weazened old man. "I'm poisoned yet by some of that beef I et. Tougher'n hell it was."

"*Mister* Perkins, *sir*! I must ask you to refrain from the use of profanity. The spirit of the Colony, of its members——"

"Well, I should say so!" said Mrs. Perkins. "Swearin' and rarin' round after all Mr. Granger's done for us! I declare I'm 'shamed to take you along, Tom Perkins."

"Have you no soul or eyes for the higher things, Mr. Perkins?" inquired a large, black-clad lady reprovingly. "With all this beauty about us, and the inspirin' scenery, I should think——"

"Well, that's all right, Mrs. Caine, what you think," interrupted Mrs. Perkins sharply. "You do your thinking for your husband and I'll do the thinking for mine; and I guess if you do that you won't have to fill in your time meddling with others."

"Well! Well, I never——"

"Ladies!" murmured Granger. "Let us not allow this little inconvenience which we have experienced to disturb our equanimity."

"Let's have that agin," growled a fat gentleman. "You say we can't get up the river, hey? Well, what's the matter with driving up?"

"The magnificent oiled highway which is going to bring thousands of visitors to our Colony has not quite been built down to the mouth of the river here."

"All right. We'll walk up to where she begins. Ain't no cripples aboard, far's I can see."

"The one bad piece of land in the district unfortunately lies between the mouth of the river. It is a small swamp—only a small one—then the fair uplands of our Colony begin. But until the road is built across it the river is the only means of travel inland and that, as I sorrowfully tell you, is blocked. Come; let us forget our business, our future wealth, for the time being and revel in the subtropical joys at Flora City. The land will remain. Each day sees an increase in its value. Good friends, we're getting ready to sail. All aboard for beautiful Flora City."

"Slick enough!" chuckled Higgins, where he and Payne were standing in the background. "I'll say he does it well. Now let's step up there and tell him how many kinds of a liar he is."

"Hold on," muttered Roger. "I'm here to get some business done; I'm here to get up the river and see that land."

"Sure."

"This boat isn't going up, there's no question of that; calling him a liar wouldn't send the boat upstream."

"Not an inch."

"And it would warn them that we were onto the fact that boats can go up, and that we intend to go."

"Oh, you intend to go, do you? How, for instance?"

"That tub, the Cormorant, is going up. I don't know when, but that's where she's bound. I'm going on her."

Higgins made no reply.

"You don't want to tackle it, I see."

"No, you don't see anything of the sort," retorted Higgins. "I'm going with you all right; I've made up my mind to that. I was just trying to figure how we are going to work it. You're right; if we tell 'em we're staying here, the Cormorant won't go up. There's something slick going on round here so we've got to be slickers ourselves. We've got to sneak on 'em."

"Sneak? What for? I've got a right to go up and look at the land I've paid money on."

"Sure, so has that flock of suckers on the boat; but you don't see them going, do you?"

"I wonder if the whole crowd demanded to be taken up——?"

"Pooh! They're sheep and Granger's got them hypnotized. You say one word against the Colony and you'd be an outcast among 'em. No; we've got to let them go."

Roger agreed.

"And we've got to pretend to go along to Flora City," he added. "I don't like to sneak. It goes against my grain; but business is business. Come on, Higgins. Next trip in a week, Mr. Granger? Good enough. We're going to our stateroom and catch up some sleep. Wake us at peril of your life."

He led the way swiftly to the stateroom, grasped his bag and Higgins', locked the door and hurried aft out of sight of the people gathered forward.

"Come on," he whispered throwing a leg over the railing.

Higgins, peering after him, saw the young man untying the rowboat which was fastened to the dock beneath the Swastika's stern.

"You certainly see a lot of things and work fast, when you get a-going," whispered the engineer as he let himself down into the boat. "Now where to?"

"Just round that bunch of mangroves and out of sight of the Swastika's decks. Grab that oar and paddle. Easy—but work fast!"

A minute or two of swift anxious paddling and they had whisked the boat down the shore, round the mangrove promontory into the seclusion of a tiny bay. And then:

"Hell!" said Higgins.

V

A clean-cut, solidly built man in a suit of greasy overalls was standing on the shore of the bay, looking steadily up at the reddened sky. Payne followed the direction of the man's gaze. Up against the multi-hued red of the morning was a gently undulating streak of dazzlingly snowy white. Roger had often seen white of the purest sort in the untracked snows of northern forests, but never a white so pure, so soft, so warm as this. And then he saw by the undulations of the streak that it was a flock of long, graceful birds moving in single file from west to east. Shimmering in the brassy dawn sun, they rode like dream birds upon a vermilion sea, their slow movements so graceful, so rhythmic as seemingly to represent no effort, as if the birds merely floated along, their beauty and grace the ultimate expression of the spirit of the scene. They flew with their delicate necks bent back upon their bodies, as swans afloat upon still water, their long legs held motionless and straight behind; yet they moved rapidly, moved steadily and to a definite goal some place eastward up the river.

"Beautiful! A dream worth the trip alone!"

To Roger's amazement the man in overalls started at the words with something like alarm in his expression; but as his shrewd blue eyes took them in they showed relief.

"What are they?" asked Roger.

The man's expression took upon itself a mask of disinterest, almost sullenness.

"What you talking about?"

"Those birds up there?"

"Didn't see any birds. Looking to see if it would rain."

"Well, look now. What are they?"

The man refused to look.

"Donno. Donno anything about birds."

Payne looked at him closely and was puzzled. The man's obvious appearance of intelligence rendered such a reply unnatural.

The stranger returned the scrutiny, appraising the pair with a lazy air of indifference, which did not quite conceal his shrewdness.

"What you-all doing here? Fishing?"

"Hiding."

"Come on the Swastika?"

"Yes."

"She's sailing."

"Yes; that's why we're hiding. We're not going back on her." Roger's eyes had not left the man's. Each had appraised the other and given a favorable verdict. "We're going up the river. I've got some land I've got to look at up there."

"How d'you figure to go?"

"On the Cormorant; we know she's going up. We're going on her—by force, if necessary."

"I'm engineer on the Cormorant."

"Well, your clothes'll 'bout fit me. Maybe she's going to have a new engineer."

They laughed together.

"Buddy," said Higgins suddenly, "you don't belong down here, do you?"

The engineer did not reply.

"I see you don't. And we ain't crackers either."

"I see that. Where is your land?"

"At the head of the river. Prairie land."

"What? In Garman's—— Who did you do business with?"

"The Prairie Highlands outfit—Senator Fairclothe is its president. Do you run up there?"

"No. It's bad enough to get up to what they call the Colony; never been there myself," said the stranger, "but you're beyond that. We don't go there ourselves."

"How far up do you go?"

"To what's on the maps as the Colony. Get there at about noon."

"My land is Sections 16 and 17."

"That prairie tract is beyond the headwaters. Do you know this country—anything about the people, and so on?"

"All I know is that I've got some money invested in some land up the river and I'm going up to have a look at it."

The stranger had made up his mind. He looked round to make sure he was not observed or overheard.

"There's a little cabin on the foredeck of the Cormorant," he said.
"It isn't used nowadays. Nobody on board. Move fast."

He wheeled and was gone.

Payne and Higgins slipped swiftly through the jungle to the farther side of the key where the Cormorant lay moored. A rush into the water and they were on the starboard side of the boat and hidden from the shore. In another moment they were over the low rail onto the deck and crawling into the lower cabin and forward beneath the wheelhouse.

"Whew!" Higgins sniffed at the strange odor that greeted them. "What is it—

arsenic?"

"Shut the door. Good! Things are working fine."

"It's a darn funny way to go looking at land."

"But it's a way, and that's what we're after."

"Smells like a morgue in here."

"Ssh!"

With his eyes at a crack in the door Roger saw the crew coming aboard. The engineer was in the lead; behind him came the captain, a tall man of vicious appearance, and a half-naked mulatto deckhand.

"Hard eggs, those two; that engineer doesn't belong in their company."

"Nope; he doesn't belong here at all," whispered Higgins. "He tries to look the part and doesn't quite make it. Wonder what his game is?"

"There goes the Swastika."

A sharp whistle announced the departure of the larger boat. Presently there came floating over the water, over the key, the quaint, plaintive sound of untrained voices enthusiastically raised in song. Roger smiled grimly as he pressed his ear to the crack and caught the faint words:

"Shall we gather at the river?
The beautiful, the beautiful river——"

Granger's voice was distinguished above the rest; he was on the job; he was leading his shorn flock back from the gates of Paradise to the tune of a hymn. At Flora City, Granger, being through with this flock, would quit it; and ere its members, obstructed time after time in their efforts to reach the Colony, would disperse, Granger, in a new field, would be laying his snares for fresh victims.

In a few minutes the hull of the Cormorant began to throb with the drive of her powerful engines. With no word of command she slid silently away from her

mooring to the deep channel and began to drive her way upstream at a speed that caused Roger and Higgins to look at one another. The captain was in the wheelhouse above their heads, the mulatto lounged on the deck near the cabin door; so they did not even dare to whisper, but each knew the question the other would ask: Why such terrific speed in a dirty craft like the Cormorant?

Through his precarious peekhole Payne caught glimpses of the water and land that the Cormorant was leaving behind her. At first there was little to see save blue water, for the mouth of the Chokohatchee was more an estuary of the sea than a river. Far away on either side were the low-growing tangled growths of mangrove which represented the river's banks near the sea, and toward these banks, from both sides of the wake, water birds could be seen winging their way, frightened from their feeding ground by the Cormorant's rush. Great, clumsy pelicans rose painfully and flew with surprising speed, once they were in the air; small blue herons went shoreward in uncountable flocks, flying high into the morning sun. Close to the water, ducks of many kinds clove the air with business-like intent and speed.

The water itself seemed alive with an abundance of life. The black back of a porpoise showed above the surface; far away the sun glinted on the silver scales of a leaping tarpon. The red sides of a mangrove snapper were seen as it tried in vain to escape the jaws of a steel-gray barracuda, and a moment later half of the slim barracuda flew into the air as the jaws of a shark, catching it in full flight, snapped it in two.

The course of the Cormorant was shifted slightly, and by the muddy color of the water Payne knew they were entering the river proper. The stream here was perhaps two hundred yards across and over the stern, to port and starboard, the banks were plainly visible. The land was low, so low that it seemed but a little higher than the water level, but it bore an amazingly abundant growth. The river seemed to flow through a channel cut in the dense, solid vegetation. Great cypress trees towered up from the water, enormously thick at the roots and rapidly dwindling above. Between their rough trunks cypress scrub, sturdy cabbage palms, mangrove, custard apple and other varieties of tropical trees found space to grow; and between the trunks of the smaller trees was a tangle of palmetto, saw grass, jungle vine, Virginia creeper and the beautiful moon vine and its dainty flowers. Blue, yellow and red flowers peeped from the tangle. Air plants bearing in their hearts scarlet orchids clung to the trunks of hoary live oak, and the Spanish moss, fragile, listless, drooping, hung like delicate drapery over

all.

The stream grew narrower and the turtles upon the shore became visible. A water turkey, though the boat was past, fell clumsily off its perch into the water and after frantic efforts flopped away. Alligators lay here and there along the banks; and a wild hog plowed about in the matted water-hyacinths, unconcernedly seeking food, not alarmed by the alligators or the boat or by the fierce brown Mexican buzzards—the killing variety—which contemplated him from the dead cypress branches above.

VI

For two hours the Cormorant drove upstream without missing a stroke of her engines. Then the speed was diminished. Through the crack in the door Payne caught glimpses which showed that the stream had narrowed suddenly and began to wind. In another hour the captain shouted back an order. The engineer's head popped up from the engine pit near the stern, his expression indicating that the order had taken him by surprise.

"What'd you say, cap? Stop at Mangrove Point?"

"Yep. Boss' orders."

The engineer disappeared in the pit and the boat began to slow down as its course was altered to bring it in shore. Presently leaves brushed against its side and the craft came to a dead stop.

The mangrove branches on the bank were pushed aside, revealing a creek, and a long Seminole dugout, bearing two rough-looking men, slipped like a snake out of the jungle and up to the Cormorant's bow. The two men vaulted easily over the low rail onto the deck.

"Where is he?" asked the hideously scarred leader. "The boss said we should take him to Palm Island and leave him tied."

"My way would be to knock 'im in the head an' sink him in an alligator hole," grumbled the captain. "He's hard as nails; he'll be hard to get tied."

"You're too lazy to live. Call 'im out; we want to be going."

The speaker and his companion took up a position on the port rail; the captain and the mulatto lounged to starboard.

"Oh, Davis," called the captain, drawing a revolver. "Give us a hand here, will you?"

Davis emerged from the engine room, wiping his hands on a wisp of waste, saw by the eyes of the four men that he was trapped, and looked steadily at the captain.

"What's the idea, cap?"

"Stick up them hands!"

"What is it, I say?"

"Guess you know. You wanted to get into the swamp with us, did you, you damn snooper? Well, you're going in there—to stay."

The scarred man thrust forward a noosed rope.

"Put your hands in that, you damn snooper."

"Put 'em in," growled the captain, "or I'll shoot your ears off."

Davis made a pretense of obeying, caught the rope holder about the middle and rushed him at the captain. So swift and skillful was his move that ere the lethargic captain could move he found himself pinned against the rail. With one hand Davis flung his human shield aside while the other leaped up and caught the captain's gun hand. His disengaged hand slipped inside his shirt; and then two men leaped like wolves upon his back.

"He's got a gun on him! Look out!"

The mulatto's thick arm was about Davis' throat, dragging him back, yet he managed to give the captain's wrist a sharp twist which flung the revolver high in the air to drop with a splash into the river ere he fell in a tangle with his assailants to the deck.

"Look out! He's strong's a bear! He's got a gun! Kick his head, somebody! Kick his head!"

In their little coop forward, from which they saw it all, Payne looked at Higgins.

Higgins returned the look.

"He's a white man against four."

"Come on, Hig!"

With a kick Payne sent the door flying and crawled out on deck.

The captain saw him and sprang for an ax. Roger caught him in a leap, flung him aside and threw the ax overboard.

Higgins kicked, struck and pulled at the pile on Davis and saved him from being kicked unconscious or killed, and suddenly found himself on the deck with the pile on top of him. Payne came to his rescue. A few seconds of rough work and they were up on their feet, fighting furiously.

"Look! He's getting away!" The captain pointed at Davis who, in the mêlée, had leaped overboard and was in the canoe pushing his way into the jungle.

"Quitting?" demanded Payne.

"Got to. Explain later."

The mangrove branches closed behind him and he was gone. Roger turned to face the captain, who was furious.

"How'd you get on this boat?"

"Crawled on."

"Who be ye?"

"Land buyers."

"Get off this boat."

"Go to hell."

A long curved knife appeared in the captain's hand; and the crew behind him smiled in horrible anticipation. He came crouching sideways toward Payne, the knife held point forward ready for the spring and upward thrust, which, with the

body weight behind it, would drive the long blade through a possible arm guard and deep into the abdomen. Roger's back was against the rail and he could not retreat. He heard Higgins ask a question, but he did not turn his head. His thumbs hooked easily in his belt, his eyes held steadily on the captain's, he waited, his body apparently frozen with fright. In reality he was seething with purpose and ready to function at the right moment, his eyes betraying no vestige of his intentions. Suddenly his left foot shot out and upward with incredible swiftness. The captain's knife hand flew up to save itself, and ere it came down Roger, moving forward with the kick, had swung his right fist like a thunderbolt to its mark beneath the captain's heart.

The thud of the blow was followed by a moment of complete silence, of complete inaction. The crew behind the captain stood still, staring and frozen with consternation. The captain stood slightly stooped over, his knees bent, mouth open, gasping for air, his eyes popping. Slowly, brutishly he began to wilt and topple forward. He was almost bent double before he fell; and with the thud of his body upon the deck, one of the crew groaned: "Killed by a fist blow, by God!"

"Killed nothing," retorted Higgins. "He's just got the wind belted out of him good and plenty. But somebody will get killed sure 'nough if you bad men try any more knife tricks."

"You damn fool!" muttered the scarred man to his companion. "You left that rifle in the canoe."

"They's only two of 'em; let's get 'em."

At that instant the captain moaned painfully.

"Anybody else want the same dose?" asked Higgins.

He and Payne stood poised on the balls of their feet, their fists swinging, ready to hurl themselves forward to meet the expected rush. The captain moaned again. The rush did not materialize.

"That's right," said Roger. "We've got no quarrel with you fellows."

"Who are you?"

"I told you—land buyers."

"What'd you butt in for?"

"Four on one, and you were kicking at him at that."

"Any business of yours?"

"We made it so. The next move is up to you."

"Licker!" groaned the captain. "Gimme drink—I'm dying."

One of the men made a movement toward his left hip pocket, but halted guiltily.

"Ain't got no licker."

"Go ahead; give him some!" chuckled Higgins. "We aren't revenue men."

The man finally produced a bottle of colorless stuff, a stiff drink of which brought the captain to his knees. A second drink and he was able to rise to his feet.

"Moonshine, by the great smoked fish!" laughed Higgins. "Two snorts of it and the dead walk!"

The captain leaned weakly against the rail.

"Where'm I hit?"

"Just above the belt."

"Bleedin' much?"

"No."

"Who—who shot me?"

"You're not shot at all, captain," interposed Payne. "You looked so wicked with that knife, I just happened to tap you in a vital spot, that's all."

"Wal—I ain't shot, sure 'nough!" exclaimed the relieved captain after inspecting

his mid-section. "What'd he hit me with, boys?"

Roger held up his hard brown fist.

"Sorry to do it, friend, but a man with a knife makes me see red."

The scarred man spoke up: "If you're sheriff's men, and if you think we're going back with you——"

"I've told you we're just ordinary land buyers, going up to look at a tract beyond the river."

"Know that snooper, Davis?"

"No, we took his part because you fellows were jumping him."

"Know anything about him—what his business is?"

"No; and don't care. The only business I'm interested in just now is getting up the river."

"You can't go on this boat."

"So we were told down at the Key."

The captain consulted with the other three men.

"You got to get off here. We're going up to—to where you can't go. We'll send an Indian down here to paddle you back to Gumbo Key. Get off the boat!"

"Easy!" Roger was rapidly losing patience. "Don't try it again."

"Get off this boat, I'm telling you."

Higgins nudged Roger.

"I've got old Betsy under my arm," he suggested.

"Then line 'em up and hold 'em here," exploded the young man. "Let's quit fooling. I'll start the engine. You make one of them take the wheel. They can't keep me from seeing that land now."

Old Betsy, large and ancient, black and rusty, but extremely reliable, came out of Higgins' arm holster with a jerk.

"Shove 'em high!" he commanded. "It's a hold up. Captain, you get up there and take that wheel and steer honest and true upstream for the Colony. The rest of you get up in front where I can watch you. No tricks. Fooling's over."

"This is piracy, of course," called Roger from the engine pit as he filled a priming cup, "and you'll have a good case against us—if you take it into court. But from what I've seen and heard I don't think you'll monkey with the courts—don't think you like the word. So when we get to where you're going I'll give you boys five dollars apiece and call it square. What do you say?"

The captain looked round with the sickness of deadly fear in his eyes.

"Don't make us go up there like this," he begged hoarsely. "For God's sake, don't do that!"

VII

Payne paused with a hand on the flywheel.

The dread in the captain's eyes was obviously genuine.

"Don't make us take you up there, mister," he repeated. "You wouldn't if you knew."

"Knew what?"

"We can't bring any one up there."

"You aren't bringing any one; you're being brought."

"It'll be hard luck for you, too, mister, if you run up there."

Higgins shouldered angrily forward.

"Keep that kind of pap talk behind your teeth. Trouble with you fellows is you've been used to handling suckers. You sort of get it that we're different, don't you?"

"I'm telling you," persisted the captain; "'twon't be any luck for you to run up there, and it'll be hell for us."

"Get up there and take that wheel!" roared Higgins. "Steer her right and true to the end of the strip and you won't get into any trouble. Try to ground her or any tricks, and you won't have to go 'up there' to catch hell."

"Hold on, Hig." Payne had sensed the desperation rising in the four men and he was averse to violence if it could be avoided. He was new in that country and he expected to settle there and develop his land. For a long time to come, until the contemplated railroad line came down from the north to his property, he knew

the Chokohatchee River must be his means of communication with the outer world. The four men on the boat were natives of the section. He had not yet been able to fathom just what nature of men they were or what their business was, but he suspected the latter to be something illegal, and despite the poor showing they had made in the fight on the boat it was apparent that there was in them at least a tinge of the desperado. The swamps of Southern Florida, he knew, were favorite hiding places for scores of bad men. These men probably spent a good deal of time on the river which he must use, and therefore he had no wish to make them his deadly enemies.

"Don't take that wheel, cap!" said one of the men suddenly. "And keep your trap closed."

The scarred man turned and stared sullenly into the barrel of Higgins' revolver.

"Go ahead and shoot. That's the only way I'll go up there."

"Don't want to go alive, eh?"

"Ain't—allowed—to go—at all."

"Hold on, Hig," repeated Roger. "Don't be unreasonable."

"Unreasonable, hell! We're on our way, aren't we? Going to let 'em stop us?"

"We've got no quarrel with these men. We'll use a little reason."

"Go ahead, you're the boss." Higgins retired to the starboard rail, but he did not sheath Old Betsy.

"Can you tell me the reason you are afraid to go on?" asked Roger.

"Ain't afraid to go there. It's you that stops us."

"Why can't you take us there?"

"Got orders not to."

"From whom?"

A sullen silence followed the question.

"Anybody connected with the Land Company?"

"Save your wind," growled the scarred man. "We ain't telling."

Roger debated a moment and decided that he had indulged in enough irregularity and violence for one day.

"Now, talking as man to man, how much would it hurt you to take us up there?"

The captain's bleak face cracked in a slight smile of despair and hopelessness that left no need for words as an answer.

"Well, what is it?" blurted Higgins. "Can't you tell us what you're afraid of?"

"You look like a pretty stiff man, mister," said the scarred man after appraising Higgins, "but I'll bet if you was in our boots you wouldn't do different'n us."

"Can you beat it?" gasped Higgins. "They don't look like Sunday-school kids either."

Roger, running his eyes over the hard faces, smiled at the comparison.

"How far is it up to this terrible place from here, captain?"

"It's four miles from this point."

"By air line or river?"

"River."

"How's the walking?"

A look of relief in his hard eyes betrayed the hope that the question aroused in the captain.

"Fair—I won't say good, but fair. Right here she's swampy. A mile up the high banks start, and there's sort of a trail right into the place."

"All right. You'll run us up to the high banks. We'll get off and walk the rest of the way. You'll lay up at the banks for half an hour after we've started."

"What for?"

"I guess you're all right, but I play safe. I don't know anything about what you're afraid of up there, but I don't want you to get in ahead of us and accidentally break the news of our coming."

"Good!" cried Higgins admiringly. "And Old Betsy here, she'll throw a slug clean through that wheelhouse wall, captain, in case you should get impatient and try to run by."

The captain looked inquiringly at the scarred man, who nodded sullenly.

"All right."

"We'll be hitting back into the swamp," said the scarred one. "Come on, Pedro."

"No, you'll stay until we get to the high banks."

"What fer?"

"Davis did us a favor this morning, and I want to give him a chance for a fair start. If you would tell me his business——"

"Ain't telling anything."

"All right. Take the wheel, captain. We're off."

The Cormorant backed out of the thicket of mangrove branches which held her against the point, straightened out and started upstream.

"A little explanation and maybe we could be friends," suggested Payne.

"We're much obliged——" began the captain, and the scarred man interrupted with:

"But we ain't explainin'."

"Cheer up, boys!" laughed Higgins. "We're doing you a favor, you know."

"Know you are."

"So you might tip us off about why it's going to be hard luck for us to hit this place we're bound for."

There was no reply. The captain sullenly kept the boat's nose in the deep channel, but beyond this the gang was apparently no more responsive to words than the alligators which lay sunning themselves at the water's edge. The river now grew narrower, its waters grew clearer, changing from a yellow to a faint indigo.

"Getting into a limestone formation," called Higgins over his shoulder. "But I don't see anything that looks like land yet. This stuff ought to be sold by the gallon instead of the acre."

Soon, however, a change began to appear in the landscape. The mangroves gave way to banks of solid land. A few scattering pines, tall, straight, thin and branchless save for their crowns, reared their tops high above the tropical growths.

"There's land there," said Roger. "Where there are pines there's honest ground beneath, even if it's only sand. It's good to see them."

"You're right. I begin to feel at home again. That thick stuff is pretty, but give me some real trees."

The sand area, and with it the pines, gave way to a stretch of muck and saw grass, the saw grass to a jungle of elderberry trees so thick the light barely filtered in. Blackbirds by thousands, large and plump and glistening, swarmed about in the jungle; and on the thicker branches the loathsome buzzards sat waiting, waiting.

Payne carefully inspected the shore before leaving the boat when the landing was made at the high banks.

"Step ashore, Higgins, and see if there's a trail."

"Sort of a one-hog path, I guess. It looks all right."

"All right." Roger gathered their bags from the stinking hole forward and followed.

"Now," he said, turning to the men on the boat, "we don't want to leave you with any hard feelings. We'll pay for our ride. Will ten dollars be about right?"

He plucked two five-dollar bills off a roll and handed one each to the scarred man and the captain.

"Hey!" called the latter. "You won't say anything about being on this boat to anybody?"

"Not if it will be a favor not to. I'm not particularly proud of sneaking a ride."

"We won't say anything if you don't."

"I thought you wouldn't. Now you just lay up here for half an hour and don't try to pass us. Business is business and I'm playing safe. So long."

There was no reply. The crew on the boat watched silently as the pair marched out of sight.

VIII

"Nice boys, those fellows," said Higgins after a while. "I wonder where they cut throats for a living? Can you make 'em out?"

Roger shook his head.

"I've heard there were a lot of bad men hiding out down here, and, strange, but I never believed it. Apparently it's true; and it seems we've stepped right into the midst of them."

"They called Davis a 'snooper.'"

"Well, I'm not worrying about Davis. From what I saw of him he's quite able to take care of himself."

"I'll say he is. You too. You've come pretty near making pals of the fellows we were fighting a little while ago."

"That was business. I don't want a whole lot of enemies strung out along the river between me and civilization."

"Well, it looks as if the captain was honest about the trail at least," said Higgins, leaping over a pool of quivering mud. "It's fair, but not good."

A cotton-mouth water snake, short, thick as a man's arm and indescribably loathsome, wriggled on top of the mud as Roger prepared to leap.

"Whoa, boy!" cried Higgins, glancing back. "Stand still while I get a club." He broke off a thick branch from a custard apple tree.

"My God! what wood!" he exclaimed in disgust. "It's light as paper."

However, he managed to creep up behind the snake and slash off at a blow the foul, flat head that reared itself above the slime.

"And I suppose this swamp is full of those things."

"Probably. But my land isn't in the swamp, remember; it's beyond the head of the river."

"There's some real ground ahead; I can see the tops of some pines."

Half an hour later they entered a stretch of open country. A few spindly pines grew near the river. To the north and west, as far as the eye could reach, was a prairie, covered with a sparse growth of grass. Small circular islands of palmetto scrub dotted the monotonous scene and at rare intervals a clump of somber cypress told of the presence of water. In a nearby bunch of palmetto a pair of horns were visible; and a herd of wild cattle, incredibly thin and fleet, leaped with a snort into the open, stared an instant at the intruders and sprang out of sight with the speed of deer. A covey of small, brown quail broke close at hand and sailed away, skimming the top of the grass. Fox squirrels were to be seen through the hanging moss on the cypress trees. A great whooping crane waded into view and flapped away in clumsy fashion. A flock of teal duck, flying swift and true as an arrow, came winging their way to the river. At the water hole where the crane had been feeding the yellow eyes of a wildcat, cheated of its prey, shone for a flash and withdrew. By use of his field glasses Payne saw a mother turkey, low-crouched and stepping softly, leading her brood to shelter in the scrub. Farther away the glasses picked out the antlers and head of a small deer, peering above the brush.

Higgins had kicked a hole in the ground with professional interest.

"Sand! No good."

"Right. Come on."

The river frontage of the prairie was a scant mile. Its eastern boundary consisted of a growth of custard apple. The small spreading trees, fifteen feet at the topmost branches, were literally hidden beneath a covering of the delicate moon vine. The vine wreathed itself about the trunks and branches. It covered the tops, it stretched over open spaces like closely woven tapestry; draped itself over everything, its small green leaves and tiny pink-white flowers inextricably

matted together with the tree growth and making of the whole a delicate bloom.

A broad riding path had been cut through the tangle along the river out to the open prairie. From the entrance a glimpse was had of a magic interior. The sunlight struck fiercely down through the interstices in the all-pervading moon vine, piercing the jungle shade with a myriad of hard points of light. The path wound in and out, its course easy to follow by the shaft of light in the gloom.

Inside, the atmosphere was that of a great conservatory. A dozen tropical growths mingled their odors into an indefinable whole; and the effect was akin to that of a subtle exotic drug, lulling the senses, filling the whole being with a languor, a relaxation, a pleasant enervation which it seemed well not to throw off. Outside on the prairie the sun burned harshly; within, the scented shadows shielded away the sun and wrapped round one a drugged warmth all its own. The path and the open spaces beneath the stubby trees permitted sufficient circulation of air so the effect was not stifling; but no winds swept through there; the perfumes lay heavily in the air, old and potent, and breathing a mystic, sensuous lure.

Payne bent forward, peering into the mystic recesses of the growth, susceptible to its magic thrall in spite of his hardheadedness. Higgins, the engineer, kicked deeply into the black dirt of the bridle path.

"Muck. Good enough. If your stuff's like this you're a rich man."

"Don't you notice anything else about this place?"

"What do you mean?" Higgins, less sensitive than his employer, required more time to feel the jungle's spell.

"It seems to me like the air is perfumed with poison somehow; and the poison is very easy to take."

"It's the lotus effect," said Higgins presently. "I know it. I got a taste of it down in Yucatan once. It makes you want to sit down against the roots of a tree and have a woman bring you drinks. It's bad medicine when you've got work to do. I feel it now. The old lotus effect. *Poco tiempo*! Man, we're nearer the tropics than the maps show."

"There's somebody coming."

It was a young negress crossing the path round a turn. Swaying indolently she went her way, with drooping eyes and listless steps, seeing no one, lost in the mysterious dreams which brought a sensuous smile to her heavy lips. She vanished down a footpath leading from the roadway to a cabin, which could be discerned a short distance in the trees. A bull-like male voice of her race greeted her with lazy laughter from the cabin, and with soft, sensuous laughter of elation and relief she replied. Then the woods were silent once more, save for the omnipresent twitter of the birds.

Tiny trails deviated from the bridle path at intervals, weaving their way out of sight into the drugged depths of the plantations. Flaming red cardinals flew to and fro before the intruders, and a small green parrakeet clung upside down to a moon vine and whistled as they went past.

Roger, who was in the lead, stopped abruptly. Down one of the bypaths a strutting peacock had caught his eyes. A glimpse of water showed beyond the gaudy tail of the bird, and a few steps toward it revealed a circular bathing pool in the heart of the thicket. Large mats of colored straw, thick rugs and cushions, all brilliantly hued, lay scattered about on the pink-tinted concrete edges of the pool. A wicker *chaise longue* stood beneath a striped canopy of silk under a shelter of moon vine; other lounging chairs were scattered about. The water of the pool flowed, fresh and clear, from the wine skin of a bronze bacchante, hideously squat and fat and green with age, which with drunken eyes in a back-thrown head leered mysteriously down upon the water. And the atmosphere of the place was akin to that of a heavily scented boudoir.

Higgins was examining the daintily colored concrete with professional interest.

"That's darn fine work. See how those mosaics and tiles are set in. That's Italian work; we don't finish stuff as well as that in this country. Yes, sir; some rich gazaboo has spent a barrel of money bringing Dago workmen down here to make him a little swimming hole in the jungle."

"It fits in with the whole scheme—the jungle, flowers, birds and scents, doesn't it?"

"A sultan could wish for nothing better."

"Come on."

Though the air was heavy out in the bridle path, it compared to the shut-in pool like a breath from out-of-doors. Payne led the way hurriedly. The path curved slightly in the direction of the river. The light of a large opening appeared ahead, and presently they came abruptly upon a clearing. A large low building, Moorish in architecture and tinted like the concrete of the pool, dominated the scene. Beyond glistened the blue water of the tiny lake which was the headwaters of the Chokohatchee River. At a canopied boat landing lay moored a gleaming white yacht—the Egret.

IX

"This," said Payne, "is where the Paradise Gardens Colony should be by all maps and reports."

"But it isn't," said Higgins. "It's where some gazaboo with a pot of money and a taste for oriental effects camps out. I'm wondering if there is such a thing as that much advertised colony."

"I'm going to find out."

"Look out! There comes a ferocious animal to chew you up!"

A white poodle of tiny size with a bark like a piping bird came bobbing out of the house.

"Here, Nero!" called Higgins.

And then the dark slender woman who had been on the Egret stepped out from behind a palm.

"Flossy!" she said with a stamp of the foot, which twinkled the pendants in her ears. "She won't bite you."

"I was worrying," said Roger.

"Ramos!" called the woman. "There are some strange men here. Come, Flossy."

Payne found himself facing a tall dark man, with a hook nose, rings in his ears and a stringy mustache. The man placed himself full in the path leading to the little lake, and lazily, insolently studied the intruding pair.

"You wish to see some one?" he drawled.

"You, greaser!" blurted Higgins in anger. "Hanged if I've seen such a sassy half-breed since I left Mexico."

The man's lazy-lidded eyes narrowed to a slit. He came forward.

"Unless you are known you had better go elsewhere," he murmured.

"Really?" said Payne.

"Don't bother to be polite to him," growled Higgins. "Can't you see he's a greaser? Get out of the way, *hombre*; we want to talk to some one with brains."

Payne caught the engineer by the shoulder and held him back.

"We just want directions for getting up to the headwaters," he said.

"I still repeat: unless you are known, you had better go elsewhere."

"That's what we want to do. We're going up to the headwaters. This place happens to be on our way."

"You are not known here?"

"No."

"Then go back." The Mexican pointed toward the path whence they had come.

"Go back where you came from—and quickly."

"No," said Payne slowly, "that doesn't suit our program. We're going that way." He pointed across the clearing toward the blue water of the lake.

"Call your boss, greaser," snapped Higgins. "Let's talk to him." He raised his voice to a shrieking falsetto. "Help, help!"

Payne looked toward the boat landing instinctively.

The girl of the dawn on Gumbo Key was coming toward them, laughing; and the trees and the vine flowers and the sun all seemed to laugh with her.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she said. "And the red-haired man, too!"

"Auburn!" protested Higgins, baring his fiery poll. "The best barbers of the West have told me it's auburn."

Ramos bowed deferentially.

"You know these men, miss?"

The girl and Payne looked at one another a long while. At last she turned resolutely to Ramos.

"Yes; I know them."

"My orders——"

"That's all right, Ramos, I know them."

"Perhaps you will tell me who they are?"

"Perhaps."

"Ah! Yes. Perhaps. Mrs. Livingstone called me. She did not know these men."

"I do. And I scarcely know you at all, Ramos. What are you; what is your job round here?"

"Caretaker, miss. Especially—when Mr. Garman is away."

"Annette!" It was the older woman again.

"Aunty," the girl whirling about resolutely, "I want to know a lot of things; why is there said to be a colony here when there is only Mr. Garman's winter home? Why is there all this mystery round here? Why does Ramos prowl round like a watchdog?"

"Come in the house, dear. Leave Ramos to deal with the strangers."

"Why don't you answer me, aunty?"

"You foolish child!"

"I'm not a child." The red was burning in the girl's creamy cheeks.
"I won't be treated as a child. I want to know."

"Please, Annette, do not discuss your affairs before strangers."

"Strangers! Why, aunty, it's you who are strange to me. I can't understand you. It's all strange. My father letting me come here alone before he comes—he's strange, too, lately."

"I suppose Mr. Garman is strange to you too?"

A flush spread over the girl's face and she appeared to shrink and wilt; and in the swift glance she cast at Payne there seemed an appeal for help.

Payne spoke swiftly.

"We are truly sorry to intrude. We blundered in here on our way to the head of the river. If we can get directions we will be on our way at once."

The girl looked from her aunt to Ramos and then to Payne, and her chin went up.

"Come," she said, and led the way to the boathouse on the lake shore.
"Oh, Willy Tiger!"

As mild and stoical a Seminole Indian as ever belied his surname responded to her call. He smiled at the sight of her, an appalling feat for a Seminole; and the smile confessed he was her abject slave.

"Willy, you will do a favor for me, won't you? I want you to take these two friends of mine up to the head of the river, wherever that is. My friends. For me, Willy."

The Seminole silently disappeared and returned paddling a long dugout into which he tossed his rifle and a bundle containing his camping outfit.

"My name's Roger Payne," said Roger, preparing to follow Higgins into the boat.
"I am under obligations, Miss——"

She did not respond to his suggestive pause.

"I don't think I'll tell you my name—now," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps—after you've seen the land you purchased from Senator Fairclothe. Perhaps—not. Good-by."

Roger looked at Ramos, watching them from a distance, and replied:

"So long."

X

Higgins sat facing the silent Seminole, who swiftly paddled the long dugout out of the little lake before the house and into a sluggish creek running into it from the northeast. The Indian wore the mauve-tinted, gaudily embroidered dress shirt of his tribe, but as a concession to civilization he had donned a pair of overalls so much too large for him that the belt was high round his strapping chest.

"What name did she call you by, Willy?" asked the engineer.

"Me Willy Tiger."

"Tiger doesn't fit you, Willy."

Higgins dipped his hand overboard and sprinkled water on the Indian's head.

"I hereby christen you Willy High Pockets. And may they never be empty."

An awful contortion took place upon the Seminole's mahogany features.
He was trying to grin.

"You give good Seminole why-o-me," he said, ceasing his paddling to rub his stomach. "Willy Tiger——"

"High Pockets!"

"Willy High Pock' sick. Why-o-me make strong."

"So that's how they miscall hooch down in this country," ruminated Higgins.
"No, Willy; we don't pack any liquor. Shall I give him a piece of plug?"

"Suit yourself—if you've got any."

"Got any? Never go into an Indian country without it."

Higgins produced from his bag a slab of plug tobacco which made Willy's mouth water.

"Willy," said Payne suddenly, "who is Mr. Garman?"

"Donno."

"Put your tobacco away, Higgins."

"Garman big boss," said the Indian swiftly. "*Esoka-bonus-che*-tobacco. You give."

"Boss of what?"

Without taking his eyes from the plug Willy's right arm described an eloquent arc embracing the earth, the water, the sky, about them.

"Big boss—all country! Good tobacco. Strong——"

"Boss of the whole country, eh? What business is he in?"

"Donno."

"Where is he now?"

"Donno."

"What makes him boss of this country?"

"Donno."

"And there you are," laughed Higgins. "Willy looks different from a regular Indian; but they're all alike. He loosened up to get this piece of plug; now he 'dunno' anything."

"Donno," repeated Willy monotonously.

As the dugout scraped and stuck on the bottom the Indian doffed his overalls and displayed the full gorgeousness of the Seminole dress shirt. Payne wondered how in the souls of these swamp dwellers there had developed a taste for a hue as delicate as the pink of the flamingo. Bands of red, yellow, scarlet, mauve and

black were embroidered upon the cloth, and upon the shoulders were scarlet tufts resembling epaulets. Willy stepped overboard, barefooted and nude save for his rolled up shirt, and began to shove. A three-foot water moccasin lay coiled on a mud bank in his path and the Indian's bare foot flung it aside as one might kick away a stick. Presently he paused, deep in liquid mud to his thighs, his feet working on something below.

"*Alpate*," he said. "'Gator."

A commotion followed in the mud; a dark knob appeared above water. There was a thrashing and upheaval and the Indian threw a half-grown alligator upon the bank and dispatched it with a blow from his camp ax.

A few rods farther on the canoe was over the shallows and floating easily in a flooded jungle of saw grass which stretched away as far as the eye could reach.

"What's this?" demanded Payne.

"*Oko* make river end."

"What?"

"*Oko*—lake. River end here. We there."

Payne drew out his maps and studied them.

"Where's Deer Hammock?"

"*Echu* Hammock there." The Indian pointed to a cluster of palmettos that reared its tops above the saw grass to the north.

"Go there."

They shoved their way through the grass; and as he contemplated the drowned land all round Payne grew warm and then cold with anger. Mile after mile to the east, north and south the watery waste stretched. Here and there a hammock bearing a few trees stood out, like tiny islands in a vast sea. Save for this there was only the uninhabited desolation of the water and grass; and the brilliant sky above.

There was no word spoken as they pushed toward the hammock. Higgins had noted the change on Payne's countenance and saw it was no time for careless words. Payne drove his pole into the bottom and drew it out for inspection.

"Limestone bottom; a thin scum of muck on top of it; and water."

The saw grass grew thicker. Only a water trail worn by dugouts permitted them to go through. Higgins probed the bottom.

"About six inches of muck here," he reported, "and a foot of water on it."

The water grew shallow on both sides of the channel and the grass more dense. The Indian rose to his toes and peered above the grass tops as they neared the hammock.

"*Echu*!" he said presently, reaching for his rifle. "Deer *ojus* on hammock."

Silently the dugout crept toward the high ground, the Indian parting the saw grass to peer ahead. They were fifty yards from it when Willy began to fire and at the third shot a tiny buck leaped up and crashed down in the palmetto scrub, where it had fancied itself concealed.

It was near the end of the day now and the phenomena of the tropical sunset served to add to the desolation of the scene. Tiny clouds rode in the sky, multicolored from the sun, for all the world as if painted upon the blue above. The west was livid with scarlet and orange flame, and on the hammock the tops of the trees were rosy in the sunset.

Higgins and Payne set to work to dress the deer while Willy proceeded to build a Seminole camp. On the highest ground of the hammock he dug a fire hole, and radiating from it like spokes from the hub of a wheel he dug three small ditches. With his ax he swiftly constructed three sleeping benches of branches, building them close to the central fire hole. Then he built his main fire of short logs in the fire hole. In each of the little ditches he threw long logs, their ends in the fire.

Payne and Higgins watched him, expertly appreciative of his novel woodcraft.

"It was a shame to take this country away from his kind," said Higgins. "They know how to live in it—and like it."

Payne nodded. He was looking back over the watery waste through which they had come.

"You got your tract located?" asked Higgins.

Payne pointed out over the saw grass waving above the drowned land on the southern side of the hammock.

"That's it."

XI

"We'll look her over in the morning."

Higgins lay stretched comfortably upon his sleeping bench, and between puffs of a campfire pipe, strove to be consoling. On another bench Willy High Pockets, having gorged himself beyond human capacity on boiled venison, lay staring at the camp fire, open-eyed but in a stupor of complete contentment. Payne occupied the third bench. He lay flat on his back, staring upward through the palmetto branches at the soft stars which were appearing in the magic purple velvet of the Southern night.

In the center, the large fire hole was filled with red, smoldering embers. Radiating from it flames licked along the logs in the three shallow ditches which trisected the camp site, and as the central fire burned down the ends of the long logs were pushed into it and new fuel supplied. The heat from the fires spread along the ground beneath the slightly raised sleeping benches, smothering or drying up such dampness as might otherwise rise from the earth after sunset. Distributed as the heat was, it formed a barrier which shut out miasmatic fogs from creeping over the high ground from the swamp. It was the Seminole system by which these Indians had survived in their unhealthy environment.

"She may not look so bad when we go over her carefully," added Higgins.

"Thanks," said Payne. "Optimism is good medicine to sleep on. I'm stung, of course. The Prairie Highlands Company sold this stuff to me as virgin prairie sod ready for the plow. I discounted that by fifty per cent, considering the low price. I knew enough about this land to know, in spite of lying maps, faked soil reports and photographs, that there would be some water here. I hired you because I was prepared for a drainage proposition. But I didn't think they were crooked and nervy enough to sell me a lake—that senator writing letters on his official stationery."

"Maybe you've got on the wrong tract?"

"You know better; you went over the maps yourself. No; they've got the crust to show this hammock in their photographs; I recognized it at once. They showed it with fat, black grassland stretching away on every side of it. They've got photographs of a town that should be located here, and of roads and ditches and farms. Their crop exhibit—crops from Prairie Highlands—is a wonder: Corn, sugar cane, potatoes, grass. Fifty per cent I discounted it; one hundred per cent would have been right."

"They got soil experts to write reports on it," growled Higgins. "Or at least, to sign them. Those are pretty big names on your papers, men with big reputations. How could they do it?"

"They haven't been in here," said Payne bitterly. "The thing is beginning to get a little clear. Nobody's been in here who wasn't wanted. It's simple to keep them out, with the river the only trail to come in by; so they've built up a fiction about the district, and nobody's been here to check up on it—until now."

"Wonder how they got those soil men to put their names on the reports?"

"Senator Fairclothe, I suppose. You can get men from Washington who can't be got any other way. What I'm wondering about is who's big enough to get him."

"What!"

"Did you ever know of a politician with a big name who was ever anything but a figurehead in a deal of this sort?"

"I guess you're right."

"It's the name and the reputation and the man's official standing that's valuable. Senator Fairclothe may be crooked—I don't say he is; but he isn't a fool politically, at least. No man gets a stranglehold on his state and an inside standing in Washington and keeps it year after year as he has done without being some shrewd as a politician. It's a one-hundred-to-one bet that he's never seen this lake that his company is selling as farms. He might be willing to do something as crooked as that, but he wouldn't be so foolish. Understand?

"It would be taking too big a risk. He'd be afraid that his political opponents

would get next. If they did, they'd get some swindled buyer to start action against him, just before an election. My guess is that Fairclothe doesn't know a thing about what this tract is. He's been got by somebody, as the soil experts were got; and I'm wondering who it is that's big enough to get him. It must be somebody pretty big; but whoever it is, that's the gang or the man I'm going to talk business with."

"Make 'em cough up your money, eh? They'll probably do it—to keep your mouth shut."

"They can't keep my mouth shut now."

"Nor mine. It's too rotten, too—rotten."

"You're right, Hig. And I don't know whether I want to just take my money back and clear out—even if they'd offer it to me."

"Well"—Higgins' chuckle came forth sleepily—"it might be made something of at that.—Alligators? No. Fish? No. There's the water buffalo. That's never been tried down here. Hah! I see a fortune in it. 'Buy a wonderful Water Buffalo Ranch and Get Rich Quick. He Lives on Water. Have We Got Lots of it? Ask Us!'—How does that hit you for advertising matter?—Form a stock corporation; get a picture of a Philippine buffalo; and sell stock for all the money a sucker's got. Of course there aren't any water buffalos here; but neither is there any land; and that doesn't keep them from selling it just the same."

"There is land here—under the water."

"Yes. Pretty good, too—under the water."

"Water can be drained off."

"Sure. But—well, we'll look her over in the morning, Payne. Hey, Willy High Pockets! Touch up that fire a little."

But Willy High Pockets was snoring. Higgins rolled out, replenished the fire and soon followed the Indian's example.

Payne did not go to sleep for a long time. It was not the sensuously whispering night with its mistlike darkness and near-by stars that kept him awake. Nor was

it the splash of an otter, of minks and the sounds of other animals of the darkness. The deep eyes of the girl of the morning were the lights that he saw as he lay staring up at the palmetto tops; and what sent his blood racing too swiftly for sleep was the memory of her flushed face and tossing hair as she had defied her aunt and Ramos in order to help two men whom she had seen for only a few minutes before.

Payne had roamed much and had never had any thought or feelings for a new country save as a scene for his activity, for achievement. He had never loved. As he lay on his rude couch under the open sky and realized how mistaken was his investment he wondered why he did not feel unduly depressed or disturbed. He had made a poor business deal, and good business sense dictated that he should try to get out of it with as little loss as possible and get into something new. The spirit of business adventure in him, which constantly urged him to seek new fields for his ventures, had led him to make mistakes ere this.

He had never wasted time upon his errors, either in deploring them or in deceiving himself that he could turn them to advantage, but had promptly put them behind him, credited something to experience, and started anew upon the road of achievement. This was what he should do now. Better to lose his investment than waste his time upon a doubtful if not hopeless proposition. But when he recalled the unanswered questions which the girl had directed at her aunt, he knew that in this instance he was not going to do anything of the sort. Having accepted this as a fact he closed his eyes to the soft, intimate stars above the palmettos and went to sleep.

In the morning, when the water and grass were still vivid with the reflection of the multi-colored dawn, Payne and Higgins were out in Willy High Pockets' canoe, cruising the thousand acres Payne had bought. The piece lay mainly to the southwest of Deer Hammock.

"That hammock is the northeast corner post of the Prairie Highlands Company's land," said Payne, studying his map. "I got the corner thousand in a square chunk. Do you see a pine wood, Higgins?"

"There's something down there, straight west of the hammock that might be it."

Payne swept a westward line with his glasses and nodded. "Looks like it. A pine island, I suppose. Now the southern line runs to a growth of cypress, two of

immense size. I can pick them out too. We'll go down the south line first."

Halfway toward the cypress trees the dugout grounded hopelessly, and they left it and waded through six inches of water the remainder of the distance.

"They're honest about their marks at least," said Payne when they had reached the trees. "But they didn't say anything about the cypress being in an unholy swamp."

"Holy smoked fish, what a country!" muttered Higgins as he peered into the dark recesses of the densely wooded swamp. "What a place to hide out in if a fellow wanted to drop out of the world. Say, I guess this is the same swamp our friend Davis went paddling into yesterday. Well, she lies lower than your lake, notice that?"

"So it does. I thought I had the lowest land in the world, but this swamp's got mine beat."

"A ditch in the swamp running into the river might drain your piece some. Have to be some dig, but you could afford to do it on a thousand-acre proposition. It's something to figure on."

Payne made no reply but led the way to the dugout and headed across the water for the bunch of pines marking his northwestern corner.

"There isn't as much water on it as I thought," he said as the canoe stuck again as they approached the pines.

"No; it's only the middle that's really drowned. Wonder what the bottom's like."

Higgins thrust his paddle tentatively into the bottom. "Well, I'll be damned!" The blade of the paddle had slipped easily into the ground. Higgins pushed on the handle, pushed the paddle three feet into soil, withdrew it and held it up for inspection. "Muck! Three foot of black muck, and I wasn't near touching bottom!"

Together they began to probe, and everywhere with the same result. The muck underneath the water ran from three to five feet in depth, and was as black as peat.

The water grew shallower as they went westward and presently gave way to dry land covered with a growth of saw grass through which they literally had to push their way. The saw grass ended abruptly, and the last hundred yards to the pines they walked on high and dry land. The pines were on the eastern edge of the great prairie which they had glimpsed on their walk up the river.

As they paddled back to the hammock for the breakfast which they had left the Seminole to prepare Payne studied the land to the northward with keen interest. A heavier growth than saw grass covered this land. On closer inspection it proved to be a jungle of elderberry, the growth so dense that a man could barely squeeze through. The land here was higher and dry, and black muck of the same depth as on the drowned land to the south. Payne paddled back to Deer Hammock in silence. Just as they were about to land he drove his paddle into the bottom with a gesture of finality.

"Well, Higgins?"

"Yes, sir! That high ground to the north is a watershed and it all drains off onto your land. That's what drowns it."

"Right. And I drain into that river."

"Yep. You can drain your piece all right. But it'll cost like sin; and that high elderberry ground up there will always be shedding water onto it."

"So all I need is to get hold of that piece up there."

"Hah! So that's what you were thinking about? Who owns it?"

"Not this crooked Prairie Company. It's owned by the Southern Cypress Company. They own so much land they probably don't know what they've got over here. We'll get breakfast and hustle back to a wire some place. I'll think it over. I may buy that piece. Then we'll have something to do business with."

"Well, you'd better hurry or your breakfast will be gone," spoke a voice from the hammock. "Willy Tiger had it all ready when we arrived."

Payne stepped from the canoe and strode toward the two men who were seated at the camp fire. One of them rose and he recognized the dark face of Ramos. Then he saw Willy Tiger's crumpled body lying like a sack of grain across one of the

sleeping benches.

Payne looked at the man who had spoken, who remained seated. He looked at him steadily for a long while. Then he said: "My name is Payne. I guess you're Mr. Garman."

XII

"You're right."

The seated man was nibbling a piece of venison on a broiling stick and did not look up.

"I'm Garman."

He finished the venison, wiped his drooping, fawn-colored mustache with a silk handkerchief, displaying as he did so the two large diamonds upon his fingers; and through his heavy, yellow eyebrows he looked up lazily.

As he sat squatted there by the fire Garman's figure gave an impression of squatness and of grossness in proportions and flesh. The closely cropped head was of a size sufficient to dominate the huge body, and by the harsh salients of the jaws, the great forehead and the flat back head, gave evidence that but for its pink-fleshed rotundity the head might have appeared nearly square. The backs of the hands which drew the silk handkerchief delicately across the thick red lips beneath the drooping mustache were covered to the fingernails with a fell of thick yellow hair; only the fat white palms were bare, like the insides of a gorilla's paws.

"Payne, eh?" said Garman with a flash of white teeth showing through the mustache. "Pretty fair-sized boy. About my size when I was eighteen."

Higgins was turning Willy over on his back.

"My God! Look at him!" he cried, pointing to the Indian's swollen face with its protruding tongue and popeyes. "They've choked the poor devil to death! You cheap, dirty greaser!" he roared, turning upon his aversion, Ramos. "There was a good boy, that Indian; and if you've done him dirt I'll beat your greasy head off with your left leg!"

"Hold on, Hig!" Payne held his engineer back. "There's no sign of a hand on his throat."

"But look at his face! Can't you tell by that?"

Roger bent over the Indian and felt for a heartbeat.

"He's alive!"

"Is he?" laughed Garman. "That's important perhaps—to Willy."

"Get some water, Hig. That's the stuff; souse him. Ah! Didn't he breathe?"

"Tried to. Can't you pull his tongue down a little so he can git air?"

"Get some more water! He's breathing!"

"Hi, Willy!" cried Higgins, tilting the water against the distorted mouth. "Come to, old boy; come to!"

A few drops of the cooling stuff trickled into the Indian's throat, stirring the spark of life that was beginning to glow again in him. A tremor convulsed his chest as the lungs sucked spasmodically at the tiny stream of air entering the swollen throat. A gurgle, a deep sigh, and Willy's unconscious body was taking in the life-giving air in short gulps.

"By the great smoked fish, he'll make a live of it!" jubilated Higgins. "And the man who did it—don't care who he is—is one son of a she-skunk, net."

Garman, after his morsel of broiled venison, was lighting a large, brown cigar, moving the match round and round the tip to make sure it burned evenly. He drew in a long breath and, opening his mouth, allowed the fat smoke to ooze up through his mustache, into his wide-open nostrils, over his half-closed eyes.

"Willy Tiger is subject to fits—of a suffocating nature," he said. "He suffers from a too sensitive conscience. The fits come upon him when he has made a mistake and gets caught at it."

"He was choked!" said Payne bluntly. "He was suffocated in some damnable fashion that left no mark, and he would have been dead in another five minutes."

Garman nodded through another cloud of smoke.

"Five minutes! Sooner, perhaps. I thought he was dead. He is going to die in one of those fits some day, that's sure—if he lives to make more mistakes."

The Indian began to heave and pant as the force of reviving life wracked his body. Moans escaped from his lips, moans of agony, as if unconsciously he was protesting against the painful return to consciousness. And Garman smoked, artistically and with luxurious enjoyment, his attention concentrated upon his cigar, while Ramos watched the writhing Indian with a sneering smile to betray his enjoyment of the spectacle.

Presently Willy lay still, his breathing became easier and he opened his eyes. Higgins, the volatile, leaped back and swore at the indefinable horror in those eyes. Payne tightened his lips and laid an assuring hand on Willy's shoulder. A spasm of terror passed over the Indian's features as memory returned. He sprang to his feet, looking wildly round and saw Garman. Then he cowered, shrinking together as if striving to sink into the ground, to return to unconsciousness, terrified by some overwhelming, incomprehensible horror.

Garman continued his attention to his cigar. The heavy smoke lay in swaying clouds above his head. To judge by his expression Willy Tiger did not exist, save as an incident of the past. Through the curtain of smoke which oozed upward through his mustache at regular intervals, his eyes gleamed alert, interested, concentrated upon a problem compared to which Willy was only an infinitesimal insect.

Payne understood. Garman had dealt—possibly through Ramos—with Willy. Now his mind had turned to the problem of dealing with Payne and Higgins. His manner indicated complete confidence in his ability to settle the problem as he saw fit, betraying how completely he felt himself the master.

Payne controlled his own irritation at the other's attitude of superiority and sat down. Apparently unconscious of Garman's presence on the other side of the fire he sampled a strip of broiled venison, found it good and began to eat. Higgins presently followed his example. Save for the presence of Willy Tiger with the unspeakable horror in his eyes it might have been amicable hunting party at breakfast.

"I like that," said Garman finally. "Cool hand, Payne. You make yourself right to

home."

"Why shouldn't I?" Roger waved his hand to the southward. "I own it."

"Yes; but you're in a hole just at present. How do you expect to get out of here?"

Payne finished his piece of venison and wiped his fingers.

"Garman," said he, "who are you? What are you? What are you butting in for?"

Garman's smoking paused for a moment and his fat, rosy countenance was suffused with a darker red.

"That was a bad break, Payne. I don't like it."

"I didn't think you would. I see you don't like the idea of my being here at all."

"That's right."

"In fact, you don't like the idea of anybody's coming up here and seeing this country, and you've taken quite elaborate precautions against anybody's doing so. I'll make a guess that there'll be trouble for somebody if you ever find out how we got in."

"Don't you trouble about that, Payne; you worry about how you're going to get out."

Payne paid no attention to this veiled threat, and continued:

"Also, I'll make a guess that you're one of the real big men in the Prairie Highlands Land Company, which sold me a lot of water for farm land."

Garman smiled.

"Well, it's this way, Mr. Garman; I've been stung and stung badly. That's all right; it's all in the game. I'm going to play the game out. There's pretty fair farm land under that water out there. I'm going to draw the water off."

Garman resumed his smoking. Suddenly he rose, an agile, powerful figure, graceful in spite of his huge bulk.

"It's a hard job you're tackling, Payne."

"But I'm tackling it."

"I see you are."

Garman turned to Willy and spoke swiftly in Seminole. Like a whipped schoolboy hurrying to obey an order, the Indian grasped his rifle, sprang into the dugout and in a flash was poling away from the hammocks as if his life depended upon it. Higgins sprang to the water's edge, but a word from Payne stopped him. When Willy's escape with the dugout was assured Ramos disappeared for a moment and returned leading two saddle horses which had been hidden in the brush of the hammock. Garman threw his huge body into the saddle with an easy spring and rode away toward the sand prairie.

"When you get tired of trying to find the way out," he called back, "come down to my camp and talk business."

XIII

"Why didn't you let me catch the Indian?" demanded Higgins when the riders were gone. "A man without a canoe here is almost as badly off as a man afoot in Death Valley."

"I realize that," agreed Roger. "But Garman had made up his mind that we weren't going to have that canoe."

"I had almost made up my mind we were going to have it."

"I saw that; that's why I stopped you."

"Well! After what happened on the river boat I didn't expect you to stop so easy."

"Those men on the boat were quite different from Garman. I knew they would take a bluff, or I'd never have let you pull your gun. If you had done the same here there would have been shooting or else you'd have had to put your gun away and back down. It's one thing to pull a gun on a bunch of river rats, and another on a man like Garman. I don't want any shooting round here."

"Neither do I."

"Then never make a gun move with Garman round. You can't beat a man like him with a gun."

"No, I'll say he's a real he-devil."

"I'm here on a business proposition. It's a question of brains, not guns, in a fight with Garman."

"And he's got a few of them too."

"Decidedly. Therefore, no rough work."

Higgins laughed skeptically.

"No rough work, eh? How about little Willy High Pockets? I've seen a few men here and there who've been manhandled, but I've never seen on with the fear of the devil driven into him as hard as Willy. What in the name of black hell could they have done to the poor buck?"

Payne shook his head.

"I give it up. Sorry, too, because I was responsible for his getting mixed up with us."

"Not entirely so."

Higgins refrained from mentioning the girl's connection with the matter, and Payne was grateful for his delicacy. Garman, of course, had learned that it was the girl of the Egret who had bidden Willy Tiger guide the two to their destination. How greatly this had angered Garman was apparent by the fashion in which he had visited punishment—whatever it had been—on the inoffensive Seminole. What was Garman to the girl?

"Poor Willy was the goat," said Higgins. "But go back a little: Garman seems to me to be the big boss of this district. Is that the way you figure it out?"

"Certainly."

"There's a whole lot of hard-boiled eggs round here, and they're scared fightless about some one, and he's it. A man doesn't get that sort of a grip without rough work, and he's not pleased with your proposition here; and I don't see him changing his method much in dealing with you."

"Perhaps not. It's going to be hard for him to find an excuse though. I'm here on a business proposition, as I say, and business is going to be supreme on the job, and rough work a mere incident—if at all."

"Fair enough. What's your first move?"

"To find a way out of this country without troubling friend Garman."

"Sure. The dugout was the first answer. You let that go without winking an eyelid. That means you'd already figured out a second answer. What is it?"

Payne spread out his maps and consulted them carefully.

"Garman felt he had us sewed up tight because the average man who gets down here isn't a woodsman."

"Except that fellow, Davis, I haven't seen one who looked like it since we got here," agreed Higgins.

"Yep." Payne was drawing out a new large-scale survey map. "I don't think one of the old-time timber cruisers up North would call it too big a job to get out of here. There's water almost all the way over to the east coast—the maps agree on that—so that's no good. To the south is that cypress swamp. West we've got that sand prairie. Must be some trap there. But another thing the maps all agree on is that the old trading post of Legrue, which is the end of the railroad's survey line, is about forty-five miles north of this hammock."

"Sure. And look at what's between 'em—on the map there."

"The Devil's Playground."

"That's one of the spots down here nobody's been through."

"Well, Hig, I suspect you and I are going to be the first to try to do it. I know the descriptions read tough: great crevices in limestone formation filled with impassable liquid mud. We'll try it, though; we've got to."

Without a word Higgins began to cut up more venison, and Payne rebuilt the fire. After a substantial meal they roasted and packed two small bundles of meat for carrying and were ready for the start. Payne carefully searched the country about with his glasses and, assured that no skulking watchers were in sight, they waded out from the hammock and plunged into the elderberry jungle to the north.

From the first they had literally to break their way forward. The elder trees grew from ten to twelve feet in height and so close together that to squeeze between them was impossible. Payne went ahead at first, walking sidewise, throwing his shoulder against the brittle stems and crashing a path through. Higgins soon

stepped to the fore and did likewise. At the end of an hour, when they had covered a scant mile, they paused.

They were now in the heart of the elder growth, hidden from all the rest of the world and isolated from anything that might have promised relief. In the branches innumerable large, glossy blackbirds kept up a maddening chatter, and higher above, up in the hot sky, the omnipresent buzzards floated lazily, awaiting sight of possible carrion prey. Animals began to appear almost underfoot, coons and rabbits, disturbed for the first time in their fastness. Water holes appeared rarely, and the water in them was unfit for drinking. Despite the shade it was stiflingly hot.

Higgins began to pant. He was broader and stockier than Payne and less favorably built for wedging his weight through the growth. Neither spoke a word. At the pauses they consulted compasses, laid out the trail straight north and drove on. Payne's breath also soon was coming in sharp pants; and the leg muscles of both began to weaken with the treacherous going. Grimly they held to their pace, waiting the release of fresh reservoirs of energy, the coming of the athlete's "second wind," to relieve them.

When it came they had need for it, for the jungle growth now was thicker. Heavy creepers and vines had appeared among the elder bushes, their phenomenal growth often matted thickly together as high as a man's waist. Bushes which formerly had given way at the thrust of a shoulder now hung toughly, suspended by the inextricable grip of the vines. Along the ground the matted creepers caught and clung tenaciously to ankles. The carpet of them hid with fair leaves and blossoms treacherous water holes into which the travelers plunged at times foot deep. In one such a plunge Payne's boots sent squirming a nest of slimy water moccasins. A moment later he slipped and all but fell on the hard slippery back of a hidden turtle.

A gleam of light in the solid growth ahead promised an open space for a rest and breathing spell. With a silent agreement they plunged straight for it. As they wedged their way into sight a flock of black buzzards rose lazily from something upon the ground, their wings barely lifting their gorged bodies, their foul red heads reeking with the putrid feast they were so loath to leave.

Higgins voiced his disgust in one swift curse, but Payne bored silently on in a wide circuit round the stench.

A broken trail in the jungle soon told the story. The tracks of a single steer were discernible, pointing toward the opening, and there were no tracks returning. The animal, lost in the thicket had fought its way out till, in the open space, its strength gone, it had collapsed.

Payne stopped at the animal's tracks.

"That steer came in from the west. It couldn't have come very far through this jam, so probably that cattle prairie isn't very far out that way. We could go out there. I suppose some of Garman's men would see us if we did. I don't like to have him know where we're bound for."

Higgins was silent.

"Well?"

The engineer's reply was to crash into the thicket, breaking the way; and Payne followed without more words.

At noon they dropped on a bed of vines which fairly smothered the brush, and ate sparingly of the venison they had brought; cautiously they dipped water from a deep root hole and barely wet their lips.

"Have we made four miles?" asked Higgins.

"Just about—less than a mile an hour. Better start again before we begin to stiffen."

They went on, resigned to a continuance of the morning struggle, unable to see far enough ahead to distinguish the country beyond. One moment they were in the grasp of the jungle, the next they had broken through and stood panting and wide-eyed on the edge of a realized paradise of dreams. It was a tiny lake bordered by a small, grass-grown prairie dotted with small clean clumps of palmetto, pine and cypress. The water of the lakelet was clear blue, and the grass round it waved softly. The palmettos grew in small circles and with the pines and cypress seemed like islands in a gentle sea; and each island held in its center a spring of cold clear water seeping up through a limestone bottom. Long, swaying streamers of Spanish moss hung from the pines; up in the cypress were the mysterious air plants with the scarlet orchids naming in their hearts. And beyond the prairie was a grove of custard apple swathed in the gentle, blooming moon

vine.

"It was black!" said Payne firmly, when they had drunk carefully from the lake.

"What was?"

"That land we just came through."

"Black is right. First-class stuff."

"Worth the fight to find it—if it isn't already sold. Land fit for a man to spend his time and money to put in shape. Come on!"

They crossed the enchanted prairie with scarcely a word for its beauty and plunged into the grove beyond. The custard-apple trees ran to fifteen feet in height and twelve inches in diameter, but between their trunks was plenty of room for passage.

The grove gave way and they were up to their waists in a growth of thick, rank saw grass, its half-inch wide blades with sharp, serrated edges cutting the bare skin of their hands like knives. Far away on the northern horizon, beyond an apparently unbroken sea of grass, rose the ragged forest of a great swamp, its outlines sinister even at that distance.

For the rest of the afternoon they fought their way toward the trees. It was growing dark when they had won through. The ground beyond was lower than the saw-grass land and seemed to be composed of oozy slime. The growth that covered it was tangled and twisted as if thrown together by a mad burst of storms. Dark, sinister and threatening the interior loomed before them; and without needing to consult their maps they spoke as one: "The Devil's Playground!"

As they trod down the grass for a camping spot a streak of white gleamed in the gloomy nightmare of the garden and a flock of white egrets swept gracefully out into the gilding rays of the setting sun. A hundred in number, perhaps, they swerved in dignified fashion and in their ineffably beautiful posture of flying, necks gently bent backward and long legs trailing delicately, flew away to the west. They were beginning to rise for a long flight when a harsh rattle of shots broke the evening quiet. Pop-pop-pop! Repeating shotguns worked at full speed. The flock crumpled and broke and a score of the beautiful birds came crashing down in shapeless, broken lumps. And then, too late to prevent the crime, darkness was upon the scene.

Dawn revealed the interior of the Devil's Playground apparently less forbidding than in the gloaming, and Payne and Higgins plunged to their task as soon as breakfast was over. A hard spit of land ran northwest, from the saw grass and they followed it till it ended abruptly at a narrow gully filled to the brim with liquid mud. Swiftly and skillfully they bridged the space with saplings and branches, a process which they were forced to repeat at intervals throughout the forenoon. Luncheon they ate seated on cypress roots in water up to their knees; and soon after Higgins put a bullet between the yellow eyes of a panther which glared at them from its hiding place. Snakes and alligators were in abundance; for miles there was no sign of other life.

"They named it right," panted Higgins in a pause.

"Yes; come on!"

Now they had come to the "flowerpots" of the Playground, beautiful grass plots interwoven with delicate blooms and ringed about with water lilies. Into the first one Payne went with a splash to his armpits; the grass was only a treacherous skin above a hole of liquid mud, from which Higgins with difficulty drew his employer.

For an hour or more they threaded their way, cautiously between these beautiful traps. Then, they found themselves on the brink of a gully a hundred yards in width; and Payne, driving ahead at full speed, cried out in anguish as he realized how they were stopped.

"Hold on," said Higgins. "That ground on the other side is higher, and it looks to me like a different formation. Yes; it's limestone with sand on top. Cheer up!"

Payne threw a dry branch onto the mud and it sank immediately. Wearily he turned at right angles to the trail and led the way in a search for the end of the gully. For a mile they followed the barrier of mud, then Higgins called a halt. "Look at this formation." He pointed to a slight swell in the level monotony of the swamp. "If that showed in any human country I'd say it was the beginning of a little ridge."

The slight rise ran to the edge of the gully, where it was broken, and appeared again on the farther side of the mud.

"There's just a chance that it runs right through that mud," Higgins was probing into the slime with a broken branch. "Yep. Here it is, about five feet down. Ugh! Pretty little piece of wading, but unless I miss my guess it will be miles before we find another fording place through that mud. Wish Willy High Pockets was here. He's the boy who could show us how."

Payne looked at the span of slime between the banks.

"Do you think we'll be through if we get to the other bank?" he asked.

"Sure. This mess can't last forever. Hold on." Payne had stepped off into the breast-high mud. "What are you going to do?"

"See if this shallow runs all the way across."

"No you don't! Chances are there's a break in it in the middle and then you'd be all out of luck. I'll do the investigating."

"Stay right where you are; I'm boss." Payne was forcing his way out from shore. Halfway across he stopped, panting and exhausted from the task of driving through the clinging mud.

"No break?" called Higgins.

"No; solid so far."

"Then it's solid all the way across." Higgins leaped in and, profiting by the trail broken in the mud, came swiftly up to where Roger stood, took a desperate chance and fairly swam through the mud, and took the lead.

"I'll break trail the rest of the way. Now—both together!"

Pushing, pulling, falling and floundering they thrust on. The mud grew thicker, heavier, and each step in it now was an appalling effort. At last Higgins came to a stop. They were twenty feet from the farther bank and the mud had assumed the consistency of heavy clay.

"Stuck?" gasped Payne.

"No!" Higgins began to dig at the stuff with his hands.

"Cheer up!" he panted. "Get to bank—trouble's over."

They literally dug themselves forward for the rest of the way, the hideousness of their situation relieved only by the bank before their eyes and the hope of high ground held out by it. With the last bit of energy in them they freed themselves from the mud's suction and painfully crawled up the bank.

"Made it!" said Higgins, dropping flat on his face.

Payne raised himself on all fours and looked round through mud-caked eyes. And then he began to laugh in a way that brought Higgins' head up with a start. The high ground of the bank was a strip perhaps ten feet in width. Beyond it as far as they could see was a sea of mud similar to that which they had just wallowed through.

XIV

"We'll rest first, then we'll eat." Payne had instantly recovered control of himself. He let his weary body sink inert upon the ground, his face pillowed upon folded arms. Higgins followed his example. They were not insensible to the gravity of their situation. On the contrary it was their very realization of the ghastly nature of the trap into which they had floundered that prompted them to relax and lie like dead while their bodies recovered from the strain of fighting through the mud of the gully. Not for them the amateurish fault of going into a panic. Their situation was bad. It was very bad. Therefore the pair relaxed after the manner of tired men seeking complete rest, and so successful was Higgins, and so severe the exhaustion of his thick body, that presently he fell asleep.

Roger did not sleep. Neither did he worry. He did not even allow himself to contemplate the dire possibilities of the situation. He did not think; he refused to allow himself to think. He rested. But continuously in his ears there seemed to sound a mocking whisper, as faint as the rustle of wind in the saw grass.

"Devil's Playground, Devil's Playground! How d'you like it?"

Strength returned to his young body with the invincible resiliency of youth. He felt the strain ease in his tired limbs, felt the arteries resume their easy functioning and settled himself for more of a rest. At last he stretched himself slowly, luxuriously upon the ground, as an athlete, rejoicing in the strength of his body, might stretch himself before entering a terrific contest. Slowly he rolled over upon his back and opened his eyes. Above his head long streamers of delicate Spanish moss waved indolently from the branches of a cypress tree. It was an old tree and dead, and the moss seemed nothing more cheerful than a living shroud. A cardinal bird flickered its vivid body in and out of the moss with a startling effect; and halfway up on the trunk of the cypress a mocking touch in the somber scene, a blood-red orchid brazenly flaunted its proud beauty. And then, far above the tallest gray, sharp spire of the dead tree, high up in the warm

blue heavens, appeared a single speck of black.

It floated there in a circle with no apparent effort, a black speck floating in a sea of sun-warmed blue. Its circle, in fact, was a leisurely downward spiral, and soon it appeared as a great, black buzzard, lazily drifting down from the heavens above. Down, down, down it came, its wings motionless, its gradual descent the movement of a creature gifted with infinite patience. Above the tree top it folded back its outspread wings, set its claws and dropped. It settled upon the sharp, gray spike at the top of the dead cypress and sat there, motionless as a thing of wood—waiting, waiting, waiting.

Other specks appeared against the blue of the sky. These specks did not move in a circle but came flapping grotesquely toward a central point. The scout of the buzzard flock had made his reconnoissance and by settling had signaled back his message. Nine other buzzards followed him and took up their patient watch upon the highest branches of the tall tree. Like black-shrouded, red-hooded ghouls they took their watch—waiting, waiting, waiting. A tenth bird fell like a bolt out of the sky and found itself a perch in a tree apart from the others. It was a small brown Mexican buzzard, the daring hawklike breed which does not wait till its prey is entirely dead.

Roger's movements had gradually awakened Higgins and the latter also rolled on his back and followed Payne's upward stare at the waiting buzzards.

"Pretty things, eh, Hig?"

"Sweet, I'd call 'em. Good waiters too. 'Take all the time you want, boys,' they're saying! 'We'll be here when you are all through.' How in the devil do they get next to things so quick?"

"Well, I suppose the signs of animal life in this neck of the woods aren't very plentiful. The sight of us must have been quite a treat to those birds."

"Sure. Look how confident they are. They've had experience with animals foolish enough to straggle off in here. They look like they're going to sleep. 'Boys,' they're saying, 'we'll take a little nap now. But don't worry; you won't lose us; we'll be with you to the end and then some!'"

The small Mexican buzzard, less patient than the larger scavenger birds, flopped halfway down from his branch, swooped over the two recumbent figures and

swung upward to a new perch.

"Take your time, old boy!" said Higgins. "You don't eat just yet."

"We do!" Payne raised his legs high in the air and leaped to his feet without touching hands or body on the ground. Higgins essayed the same athletic feat and came down with a crash on his haunches.

"No, I haven't got the spring in me that he has," he addressed the buzzards, "but don't you get too hopeful. I'll last a long time; thick men always do."

"We'll warm up some of our venison, Hig," said Payne as he gathered dry sticks for a fire. "Our next move is to stoke ourselves to the bursting point. Then we'll rest some more while our internal machinery converts the venison into rich, red pep; and then we'll be ready to take a look round."

As Higgins warmed the strips of broiled venison over the fire he cast a glance now and then at the buzzards.

"Huh! I don't like that," he growled as he saw the birds unmoved by the odor of broiling meat.

"Don't like what?" asked Payne.

"Those birds have got first-class smellers," replied Higgins, "and they're getting the tempting odor of this frying meat right now. Do you see it excite them? Not a bit. And let me tell you those are mighty wise old birds. They must feel awful confident of landing us since the smell of a few chunks of meat don't interest them at all. Did you see any animal signs while you were getting the wood?"

"Eat!" said Payne sharply.

"Which means you didn't. I thought so. Not even an alligator. No wonder those buzzards were glad to see us."

In spite of, or rather because of, the seriousness of their situation they consumed an extraordinary amount of venison; then, stuffed to repletion, stretched themselves out upon the warm earth as if they had not a worry in the world. After the drowsiness of the heavy meal had passed they sat up and looked round leisurely.

So far as they could see the narrow strip which comprised the bank of the mud gulley they had crossed was the only solid land in sight, and because of the trees and palmetto scrub they could not tell how far this ran in either direction. Behind them was the river of mud through which they had wallowed. Before them lay the apparently limitless expanse of the same formation, dotted sparsely with clumps of grass and flowers and at rare intervals with tiny mangrove islands. No signs of animal life were apparent. Even the birds were absent. There were only the buzzards overhead—waiting, waiting, waiting.

"See any water while you were hunting wood?" yawned Higgins. "I need about a gallon to top off that meat."

"Yes; come on; there's a little water hole down here."

Payne led the way down the bank to a slight hollow where water had seeped up through the mud.

"Go easy on it," he advised as Higgins kneeled by the pool. "It doesn't look extra good to me."

"It's wet anyhow," said Higgins and scooped a double handful to his lips.

He spat instantly.

"What's the matter?"

Higgins again sampled the blackish water.

"Taste it," he said.

Payne obeyed. He looked at Higgins. Then they both stood up, shaking the water from their fingers.

"Salt!"

"Yes."

Higgins took out his pipe and slowly began to fill it. Payne looked round.

"Hig, that means we've got to hustle and find a way out in a hurry. In this heat

we can't go long without water. I suspect it's all salt round here. I remember I've read of salt water between the Everglades and the sea. You take the bank downstream and see what you find. I'll go upstream. We'll meet here in an hour."

They parted at once. But Payne was back at the camp fire in an hour and Higgins was there ahead of him.

"What did you, Hig?"

"I found a mangrove swamp that a bobcat couldn't get through. Did you have any luck?"

Payne shook his head.

"This high ground ends less than a mile up there. And then there's nothing but mud—not a thing but mud. Was there water round the mangroves?"

"Yes. Salt. Salter than salt herring."

"Do you want to turn back, Hig?" asked Payne suddenly.

"You're going to try to get through?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm with you to the finish; and that's settled."

Payne pointed out over the mud which lay between them and their destination.

"That's the way we're going. First of all we'll see if the thing can be waded."

He stepped carefully off into the oozy slime and allowed himself to sink. He sank to his shoulders without finding any bottom.

"Nothing doing there," he said when Higgins had pulled him back to safety. "Come on."

He led the way up the bank to where the high land gave way to the treacherous mud. Higgins essayed attempts in various directions, but each time found the mud of unwadable depths and was dragged back to solid ground by his employer's long arms.

"We'll try the mangrove swamp," said Payne.

Higgins' description of the swamps as one "that a bobcat couldn't get through" was not an exaggeration. Countless mangrove trees, each with its horde of branches curving weirdly downward and rooted beneath the black water which covered the earth, formed a nightmarish obstacle through which it would have been folly for any one to attempt to force a way. Between the interwoven tops of the trees the sun found rare openings through which its rays struck bolts of light, revealing by contrast the infernolike gloom of the swamp's interior. In these rare blobs of light upon the brackish water moving objects were discernible, the fin of a fish, swimming over a shallow, the snout of a crocodile—proof that the water was salt—and the inevitable squirming of snakes, small and large.

"Nothing doing here either."

"No," agreed Payne. "I'll have to go up high and have a look around."

Retracing the way to the large dead tree upon which the buzzards still roosted patiently, he removed his shoes and stockings and looked up at the gray, tapering trunk.

"Up you go!" cried Higgins, bending his broad shoulders. Roger leaped upon them, leaped again, caught a hold on the tree and began the precarious climb upward. It was now near the end of the day and the time he reached the first spikelike branch which gave him an opportunity to rest, the sun was preparing its pyrotechnics of Florida eventide.

Roger threw a leg over the branch and unslung his glasses. He was above the tops of the other trees on the bank, and mud, water and mangrove swamp lay well below. A patch of white far to the eastward in the swamp had caught his attention even before he raised the glasses to his eyes. Through the powerful lenses the phenomenon seemed at first to be composed of snow-white flowers growing upon the mangrove tops, but presently he saw that the patch was moving. Out of the sun-shot sky a cloud of tiny specks, white as the driven snow, were fluttering downward and settling upon the dark tops of the trees. Fascinated he watched the spectacle until the white patch had doubled in area and only a scatter of specks continued to add their mite to the countless number which had preceded them.

"Egrets!" he cried aloud. "Millions of them. What a sight!"

He was looking at one of the rarest sights beheld by men, a great egret rookery with its countless beautiful birds settling upon their nests for the night. He was about to turn his glasses elsewhere when an interruption seemed to take place in the snow-white patch. A cloud of gray smoke belched explosively up through its center. Another and another followed swiftly until six of the blasts had occurred. The dense mass of birds rose in fluttering flight and flew wildly up into the sky where the setting sun turned their spotless white to pink and gold. Only there remained upon the dark tops of the mangroves six small, ragged patches of white, the limp bodies of scores of the beautiful birds in each, where the strange smoke blasts had wrought their deadly work.

"What's the good word; found a way out?" called Higgins from below.

"Not yet." Payne dismissed the tragedy he had witnessed and moved his glasses in a slow arc to the north and east.

"Look for running water," shouted Higgins. "That's our bet."

"I know." Roger was scanning the mud field to the northward.

"There must be high ground some place beyond," continued the engineer. "And if there is, there'll be a creek running into that mud. That would mean fresh water."

"I see something that looks like high ground, all right," said Payne, studying a smudge of blue against the northern horizon. "But I don't see anything like running water."

"It's got to be there," maintained Higgins. "In this soft mud it may be underground and you'd never see it."

Payne held his precarious perch, scrutinizing the treacherous ground which they must cross if they were to continue their journey, until the sun, like a blazing red wafer, had slipped down behind the mangrove swamp in the west and darkness had come to the earth below. The darkness spread and crept upward to where he sat, and as he prepared to descend Payne glanced up toward the last rosy gleams on the topmost branches of the tall, dead tree. The buzzards, which had flown away at his appearance, had returned and the sun was gilding their black bodies and their foul red heads, as patiently, confidently, they sat waiting.

"Higgins," said Payne, when he reached the ground, "there seems to be a chain of islands running across that mud. I picked out a string of them. The first one is out there about a hundred yards away, and I believe that's about the average distance between them. If we can dope out some scheme for getting across a hundred yards of that mush at a time I believe we can make it. That mud doesn't run on forever; I'm sure I saw solid ground with timber on it to the north."

"How far away?"

"It's impossible even to guess at the distance in that light. I'll go up in the morning and have another look."

"Do the islands look solid?"

"There's brush on them; that's all I could see."

"My God, I'm thirsty," said Higgins irrelevantly.

"I have been so for the last two hours," responded Payne.

"And you saw no water out there?"

"No."

"Then we'd better not eat any more of that venison. Meat makes a man thirsty. A hundred yards, you guess, between the islands. Well, I can dope out a rig to beat that game. There's branches and saplings enough here, and creepers, and vines for ropes."

"Snowshoes!" cried Roger, grasping the idea.

"The same principle. Only we won't wear 'em. We'll each make us a pair of mats about four feet square. Big enough to support us. I've crossed rotten ice on 'em lots of times. Stand on one and toss the other ahead of you, step ahead, reach back, pick up the one you left, and toss that ahead. That's easy. But I'm worrying about your not seeing fresh water, Payne. This will be slow, hard work. In the heat to-morrow we'll thirst like souls in purgatory. And we don't know how far that mud reaches or what we'll be up against when we get across."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to try to cross it in the morning."

"Of course. So am I. Now let's build a bright camp fire so I can see to do a bit of fancy Indian basket work."

XV

The sunburst of dawn woke them from a night of restless sleep. Roger sat up sleepily blinking against the garish rays of the rising sun, and conscious of an indefinite sense of discomfort. Sleepily he stumbled to his feet, seeking a drink of water, and then, fully awakened, he understood. His tongue was hot and dry and his swollen throat was crying for a drink of the brackish water which he must not touch.

"Hell!" said Higgins hoarsely as he awoke and felt his throat. "It's getting us quick. This heat just boils the moisture out of you. Do your eyes hurt yet?"

"No."

"Mine do. I ate more of that meat than you did."

They found a sweet-bay bush near by and chewed the fragrant leaves for the moisture that was in them.

"I'll climb that tree and have another look round," said Roger.

"All right. While you're there I'll try out the mats I made last night."

They looked together up toward the top of the dead cypress, and Higgins swore. The buzzards were still waiting.

Roger climbed to the branch which offered a perch high up on the tree trunk and once more searched the landscape for a sign of fresh water or a solid path through the mud. The scene below him now resembled nothing so much as a painter's palette streaked and splashed with all the bright primary colors and all their possible hues, shades and variations.

The black mud field was livid with a coating of most somber purple shot with

angry streaks of carmine and orange. On the foliage of the tiny islands which dotted the expanse the sun was rosy. To the westward the matted mass of the mangrove swamp seemed to be sheathed with a liquid coat of gold. The mists of morning were rising above the swamp and upon it the dawn played its full palette of colors with delicate rainbow effect. Above the mists the sky was flushed and hectic; and in the east the garishness of the sunburst was like the clang of a brazen gong.

Payne moved his glasses inch by inch upward, scanning minutely the treacherous ground over which they were soon to venture. Had there been running water within sight the searching sun must have revealed it. He saw none, nor did he catch any signs that indicated a watercourse.

The mud and the tiny islands stretched northward to the blue streak on the horizon, which might be timber highland or only mist.

"It works!" called Higgins from below.

By the time Payne had descended from his perch the engineer was out on the mud, demonstrating the efficiency of the mats of thin saplings and creepers which he had woven the evening before. While standing upon one mat, which supported his weight and prevented him sinking into the mud, he tossed a second one ahead, stepped upon it, drew the first mat after him, and repeated the process. It was slow work, for the mud clung to the mats, necessitating a heavy tug to free them, but it was sure—so long as a man's strength remained. Payne followed tediously in Higgins' trail and presently by virtue of greater length of leg and arm, had caught up with him. They reached the first island at the same time and found it no island at all, but a clump of mangrove trees inextricably woven together above a salt-water hole in the mud.

They went on their tedious way without a pause, without a word. The next island was the same, and the next and next. Still they crept steadily on, buoyed and spurred by the hope that the island just ahead would prove different. It was in the middle of the forenoon before they permitted this hope to die. Each island, they now knew, was only a hole of salt water with mangrove trees growing in it. And the islands ran on and on into the distance.

The sun now was rising to the height of its power and its burning rays beat mercilessly down upon the parched pair. Seeking a moment's relief from its heat

they thrust themselves into a clump of mangroves and rested. Neither spoke. They had but one thought: "Water!" and each feared to utter it because of the effect upon his companion. As they leaned against the rootlike branches of the mangroves dark shadows moved above them. They looked up. The buzzards were leisurely following their progress.

Through the rest of the day they plunged ahead, the rest halts becoming more and more frequent, and with no break in the monotony of mud and islands. As evening approached they stopped and prepared for the night. Higgins now was all but a wreck. His weight was beginning to tell upon him and his thirst had become torture. With his knife Payne cut armfuls of branches from the nearest island and piled them high upon the mats for a sleeping place.

Higgins climbed to his improvised couch ere daylight had gone from the sky and at once fell asleep. As he slept he babbled. He ordered bell boys to bring him ice water, commanded Mexican water carriers to pass him a canteen; and muttered fretfully that they brought him empty vessels. Payne did not sleep. The evening passed; and the soft Florida moon rode low in the blue mist of the warm night. The moon disappeared; and through it all he lay awake, vibrant with a fear which he dared not own, and which made him yearn for the return of daylight. Higgins rose reluctantly next morning.

"I can't do it," he muttered at first. "I've got to have water."

Payne slapped him full in the face.

"Wake up! Talk like a man!"

The blood of anger flushed Higgins' face; he blinked and, wide awake, understood.

"Oh! All right. Come on."

"Give me your gun," said Payne sharply.

"What? Oh, hell! I'm not that bad."

"Not yet; but we'll play safe. Hand it over."

XVI

With the revolver in his possession Payne started the day's march at Higgins' side. Soon his caution was justified. At an island Higgins stopped and stared drunkenly at the salt water gleaming among the mangrove roots.

"Steady, Hig," warned Payne.

"What?"

"It's salt, you know."

"Oh, yes. 'At's so."

They crept on.

"Don't care if it is salt; I'm going to have some water," said Higgins suddenly. "Look at those damn buzzards back there. They know it's salt. Gimme Old Betsy, Payne, and I'll knock one of 'em down, and then we'll——"

"Higgins!"

"What?" Higgins shook his head. "What have I been saying?"

"Nothing. Come on."

"I guess it's got me, Payne," said the engineer as they rested at noon. "The fever is in my head too. I'm seeing ice and snow and things like that."

"Come on; keep moving."

Payne could barely talk, but he drove himself and his companion relentlessly. He no longer troubled to look ahead in hope of beholding a change in the land. The weary futile task of placing one mat before the other occupied him entirely. And

suddenly he found himself pushing head foremost into a hedgelike thicket of brush and stopped weakly.

"One of those damn islands," mumbled Higgins. "Got to go round it."

"To the right; come one," whispered Payne. He did not trouble to look up.

"Awful big island."

"Yes."

"*Awful* big."

Payne halted. He looked up. He rubbed his eyes.

"Hig," he whispered, "look at it."

Drunkenly Higgins put out his hands toward the sharp-pointed leaves.

"I'm gone, Payne. I see palmetto scrub."

"Hig—it—isn't an—island!"

Higgins sat down on a mat and covered his face with his hands.

"I thought I could stick with you, Payne, but I'm no good," he panted. "Head's gone all to pieces. I hear a creek clucking away, and all——"

"Do you hear it too?"

"What! You gone, too, Payne?"

"In there?" cried Payne, pointing into the scrub. "Do you hear water running? My God! Hig, there's solid land, there's——" He hurled himself into the midst of the swordlike points of the scrub. Higgins, made suddenly sane by his companion's apparent madness, stumbled after, pleading, cajoling. Neither realized what happened during the next seconds. Their first realization of the truth came as they grappled at the brink of a rivulet, Payne striving to drink, Higgins pleading with him to remember it was salt. The struggle sobered them. Higgins let go.

"Do you see it, too, Payne? Do you see a creek?"

Payne's reply was to scoop up a handful of water and carry it to his lips.

"Yes, I see a creek," he replied. Higgins followed his example. He splashed his head in the clear, cool water, running clean and fresh through a limestone channel from its source in the Everglades. Payne did likewise. Then each drank a sparing sip of the precious stuff and sat down to sip carefully and at intervals until the torture of thirst had left them.

"The buzzards?" cried Payne, looking in vain for the grisly watchers.

Higgins grinned.

"They're awful wise birds, those fellows. They've turned back."

They remained by the creek until they were rested, forded it and went on.

The ground now was hard and dry. They found themselves in a sparse pine forest where walking was easy. By nightfall they were out on an open prairie, and at midnight they came to the trading post at Legrue.

The trader blinked as he responded to their knocks. In response to Payne's request for information as to the nearest telegraph office he stared stupidly.

"Where in the name of alligators you been wadin', boys?"

"Devil's Playground."

The trader winked.

"All right, boys, I ain't askin' no questions. If you say Devil's Playground, all right." He winked again. "I ain't no snooper. Come in."

"How far to the nearest telegraph office?" repeated Payne.

"Why, that's twenty miles, up to Citrus Grove, where the railroad ends.
You can make it easy to-morrow."

"Good walking?"

"Just like this all the way."

"Higgins, you stay here and rest."

And Higgins growled in response: "Come on!"

In the middle of the afternoon of the next day the operator at Citrus Grove spent five minutes in waking Payne. He had been paid five dollars to perform the feat when a reply should arrive to the long telegraph Roger had sent to his lawyer, when at dawn he and Higgins had stumbled into the station. The reply was quite satisfactory:

"Deal closed with Southern Cypress Company. Thirty dollars an acre. Company reliable, progressive. Glad to have live development man take hold. Their title clear. Will see to transfer at once. Wait at Citrus Grove for surveyor who leaves at once. Garman unknown to them. Will look him up."

Payne turned over on his side and went to sleep, the yellow bit of paper clenched tightly in his fist.

XVII

A week later Payne stood alone on the little Flower Prairie searching the flooded lands to the eastward and wondering why Higgins did not come. The week had been a successful one. A surveyor and a representative of the Cypress Company had arrived promptly, had smiled skeptically at first when told of the trip through the Devil's Playground, and when convinced had looked upon Payne and Higgins with the admiration of experts for masters. Higgins had remained at Citrus Grove to organize ox-team transport for the material and labor which had been ordered, and Payne had started southward at once. A sure, plodding ox team had carried him in a wide circuit through the flooded lands east of Devil's Playground to Deer Hammock. Signs on the hammock told that it had been visited several times during their absence. Payne found tracks of a size which he judged must be Garman's.

The thousand acres which Payne had purchased from the Cypress Company was found to run northward far enough to include the fairyland of Flower Prairie. The eastern line was where the elderberry jungle and Everglade water met and on the west the line was well out on the sand prairie.

"That's where you may have some trouble, Mr. Payne," said the surveyor. "Florida is a free-range state, and the cattle men have run cattle here so long they feel like kings."

"Is Garman in with them too?"

"Nobody knows much about Garman," was the reply, the same reply that Roger had received often during the week. "But they'll run cattle in on you from there if you don't fence. And if you do fence—well, there have been some ugly fence wars down here."

"I'll fence at once," said Payne. "It's the only businesslike thing to do."

The surveyor had completed his task and gone. Roger was alone. He had pitched camp by one of the clear, cool springs in the heart of the Flower Prairie. A camp fire was smoldering before the tent; the smoke had attracted attention. Payne heard the pounding of hoofs coming toward him through the tall grass, and soon Ramos swung into sight and checked his horse sharply.

"Well?" said Payne. And then the girl of the Egret came riding up beside Ramos.

Payne said, "Well!" again, but the word had another meaning.

"Well!" said she.

Then they both laughed, and she rode up close and dropped off her horse. She was attired in a soft white waist and white riding breeches, but there was about her none of the tomboy so easily suggested by such togs. In spite of the masculinity of her attire the long, supple lines of her body were exquisitely feminine. And she was as relieved at the sight of him as he was glad to behold her.

"I knew you hadn't gone away," said she, after a short silence.

"Who said I had gone away?"

"They all said so."

"Garman?"

A blush suffused the clear skin of her cheeks; and as she looked away a sensation of dread crept round Roger's heart.

"Never mind," he said. "Never mind who said it; I'm still here; and
I'm going to remain."

"You found your land?"

"Yes."

"It was not as represented, was it?" she asked slowly.

"Oh, that!" he said carelessly. "That's all a matter of salesmanship. An honest,

enthusiastic salesman will boost his goods to the skies because that's the way they look to him. A farmer with a bunch of hill and rocks as his property will swear he's got the finest farm in the country because he's enthusiastic about it. This is wild land here—a wild, wild land proposition. It may look bad now as a business deal, but another year and there'll be a difference."

"Then you don't feel you've been cheated?" she said, relief and hopefulness in her tone.

"No! No matter what happens, I don't feel I've been cheated."

"Is that true?"

He looked at her steadfastly and replied: "It is."

"Where is your land?"

"Right here." He waved his hand at the Flower Prairie, at the elderberry jungle.

"Here?" she cried, leaning forward eagerly. "Do you mean it? Really?"

"Right here," he repeated, kicking the ground vigorously.

"Oh, I'm glad!" she murmured. "I'm so glad!"

"Why?"

"I was afraid—maybe my suspicions aren't true after all." She was silent for a moment. "But I can't leave—I can't leave now!"

"Wait!" he cried, leaping toward her, but with one spring the horse was out of reach and galloping away. Payne watched till she was out of sight, but she did not look back.

XVIII

Higgins and the first ox wagon of his train arrived soon afterward, and in the morning he led the six negro laborers he had brought in an attack with heavy machetes upon the elderberry jungle. The big knives, wielded by the powerful blacks, cut through the-soft wood at a single stroke. The brush was then piled and burned, and the land was ready for the tractor and breaking plow which were coming in pieces from Citrus Grove via ox team.

Payne watched the work for a while, then turned his attention to the fencing job out on the prairie. There was a mile of north-and-south fence to be built, and he set at once to work digging post holes well on the inside of his line.

He had worked two hours when he saw a horseman loping easily toward him from the west. The horseman was apparently a cow-puncher. He was tall, dark and hard-featured. He pulled up abruptly on the fence line and sat looking down, insolently refusing to acknowledge Payne's greeting. At last he said: "What you think you doing?"

"Well," replied Roger, "I'm sort of under the impression that I'm building a line fence."

"You can't fence here."

Roger paused in the act of driving his digger into the ground and looked carefully at his visitor, who, sitting his big buckskin with easy assurance, looked steadily back. For several seconds they appraised one another. Roger grew warm with the anger natural to a man who has been faced on his own land; the stranger was insolent with the bearing of a man who feels himself master in his own country and is face to face with a stranger. Still keeping his eyes on the man Roger drove the digger into the soil, twisted it round and pulled up a core of dirt. He continued doing this until the hole was dug, then pacing deliberately forward he came on a straight line to the stranger's horse. He touched the animal sharply

with the digger.

"Up a step, boy."

"Who! Whoa —— you!" The rider checked his mount's startled leap by jerking back on the reins with a viciousness that threw the animal's open mouth straight up in the air.

"What you mean —— you?"

"Easy, easy," cautioned Roger. "Don't go to cursing. That's mighty poor business."

"Business! What do you mean by prodding my nag that way?"

"He was standing right where the next hole is going," replied Roger, driving the digger into the ground. "Sorry, but you were in my way. Now I'm a busy man, Mister Whoever-you-are, and I haven't any time to waste arguing or quarreling with you. I don't know who you are or why you've intruded on me like this, but I do know that you're on my land and that you've been extremely insulting; and if you've no other business with me than to tell me what I can't do, I bid you good-day."

The rider apparently paid not the slightest attention to Roger's words. He sat crouched in the saddle in the attitude of a man controlling himself until the propitious moment for a sudden leap.

"In your way?" he said.

"Yes—as you see."

"And you think you come here to move folks when they're in your way?"

"Usually a man has sense enough to move when he's in the way of another man's land."

"You come down here to teach us sense too?"

Roger made no reply, but continued with his digging.

"I said you can't fence here." The man's voice was thick with anger, and Roger, sensing what was coming, though he continued with his work, his back turned to the rider, leaned forward upon the balls of his feet, alert and ready for any emergency.

"You can't fence here!" snarled the rider. "That's what I come over to see about. I heard talk about your planning to run a fence, but I didn't think you'd be foolish enough to try it, so I came over to see. And I'm warning you to stop. This is cattle country and free range. You quit right where you are with your fence and you'll save yourself money and us the trouble of cutting it down."

"It's against the law to cut fences," suggested Payne.

"Law! We're the law here; you're an outsider; and I'm laying down the law to you now. You cut out that fence business and don't try to change things round here and we may go easy on you. If you don't folks will wonder what's become of you. Understand English? Now I've given you my message. And now—you're in my way and it's time for you to move!"

Like a flash the big buckskin leaped forward at the cruel dig of the spurs, and like a flash Roger turned toward the thudding hoofs, swinging the post-hole digger in a swift arc. The shovels caught the horse a terrible blow full on the nose and with a scream it reared high in the air, its forehoofs waving almost above Roger's head.

"Down on him, Duke, down on him!" bellowed the rider, striving to swing the brute forward, but as Roger leaped to drag him from the saddle he swerved his mount and galloped out of reach. Curses streamed from his lips as he checked the steed and swung him round, curses for the horse and for the man on foot. His quirt rose and fell, lashing the horse into a frenzy as he galloped in a circle round Roger.

"You're in my way, you hear?" he cried. "It's your turn to move."

Each turn brought his course nearer his intended victim; and each moment wrought horse and rider up to a greater fury.

"Move, you sucker, move!"

Roger stood his ground, turning to follow the whirling horse, waiting for the

moment when the rider would swing the beast straight at him.

"Jump, sucker, jump! or I'll ride you into the ground."

Roger jumped as the horse came thundering at him, easily carrying himself out of danger from the animal's hoofs as well as from the heavy quirt which the rider swung at him.

"Pretty nimble, eh? You sucker, you're going under the hoofs if it takes all day!"

Roger looked round. They were alone on the bare prairie, out of sight and hearing of any possible assistance. Higgins would grow curious at lunch time if Roger failed to appear and possibly come out to search for him, but previous to that there was no hope that any one would know the grim game that was being played out there in the desolate waste.

Three hundred yards away lay an island of palmetto shrubs with a few pines sprinkled among them. If he could reach that without being ridden down he could equalize somewhat the advantage which a mounted man holds over a man afoot in the open country, but he calculated the danger of turning his back to the maddened horse and rider and gave it up. A sense of outrage, deeper than his anger, began to grow in him as he considered the spectacle of being forced to hop about like a harlequin, at the mercy of a stranger, and on his own land. The instinct of the landowner with his two feet planted upon his own soil welled up in him, and he whisked up the long-handed digger and took a stand to defend himself.

His attitude was that of a man defying the other to ride him down, and the rider, accepting the challenge with a yell, drove at him like a Fury. Roger saw the outstretched nostrils, the bared teeth and pounding hoofs hurtling at him and realized the folly of his impulse. As the steed came upon him he leaped suddenly to one side and struck furiously at the figure in the saddle. He missed his aim, but the horse, with his nose still throbbing from the blow from the steel, swerved widely, and Roger's quick eyes saw that which gave him hope.

"Come on, you cur!" he shouted. "Try it again."

A volley of sneers, defiance, threats, rolled from his lips as he backed slowly over to where he had been at work. All the facility of his invention and all his vocabulary were called upon to drive the rider frantic with rage and to forbid his

powers of observation the opportunity to function. The rider saw no danger, failed to notice the little mound of dirt near which Roger was standing, considered nothing but the act of driving full speed at the man who taunted him. Twice he rode at his agile enemy, twice Roger struck at the horse to make him swerve; and at the third charge the animal's foreleg went into the posthole round which Roger had maneuvered, and the rider shot like a sprawling puppet from the saddle onto the ground. He was up in an instant, bewildered but unharmed, and as his eyes ranged from the struggling horse to Roger, the latter said grimly: "Now we'll talk business."

A curse hissed from the other's stiff, open lips, and insane with rage, head down, he threw himself forward. Roger met the rush with a straight left, which cut through an eyebrow like a knife, and went home with a crack on a high cheek bone; but no blow could stop the rush of rage and in another moment the man was on him, grappling for a hold. The fight for the nonce became a scuffle. The stranger fought as Roger had never seen a white man fight before; his hard brown fingers were fixed rigidly like iron claws with which he struck and clutched spasmodically for a grip on the flesh of face or neck.

"I'll claw the face off you, you sucker! I'll leave you blind for the vultures to pick."

"Fight like a white man!" cried Roger, throwing him off. "Close your fists and hit, or, by the eternal, I'll beat you to a pulp."

He caught the wrists of the frenziedly clawing hands as they chopped at him again and in an instant was forced to let go, as his assailant kicked with vicious cunning at his groin. Roger drew a great breath, filling his lungs to their utmost capacity, then, venting his loathing rage in a rumbling bellow, he dove in regardless. Straight against the ironlike claws he drove, reckless in the grasp of the anger that had exploded within him at the unfair trick. Up and back he beat the clutching hands, and drove his right fist to the lower ribs with a force that made the victim gasp. Again he struck, bringing his fist from behind him in an irresistible arc to its mark. Again and again he struck the cattleman's hardened body and then, sensing his opponent's wilting, he drove in, both arms working like pistons, literally beating his man flat to the ground.

Roger stepped back. The tough-bodied fellow on the ground, though overwhelmed by the relentless shower of blows, was not unconscious and not

whipped. He lay panting and helpless for the moment, his eyes held fearfully on Roger's boots.

"You hound!" gasped the young man as he understood. "Do you think I'd kick you when you're down. Get up, get up! You've got only half of what's coming to you."

"Can't get up," said the prostrate man sullenly, after a pause. "Hip's broke, or something."

"You lie! Get up, you liar!"

"All right." The cattleman slumped helplessly together. "Go ahead; stomp on me. I can't get up."

Roger stood looking down at him irresolutely. In the fury of combat he had been ready, even eager, to wreak any possible damage to his opponent by fighting. Now with his blood growing cooler and no antagonist before him it was a different matter, and the Anglo-Saxon instinct to succor a fallen and helpless foe began to assert itself.

"You're a lying hound," he said furiously, to hide his intentions.
"Your hip is as sound as mine. Get up."

"All right; stomp on me; go ahead; I can't move."

"Where do you pretend you're hurt?"

"It's here." The man's right hand was fumbling in the side pocket of his overalls. "Broke or paralyzed or something! Oh! oh! Mister, you won the fight. Oh! Going to leave me here for the buzzards, I s'pose?"

"What do you take me for?" Roger bent over his victim. "Turn over so
I can see where your hand is."

"Oh, oh! Straighten my leg out, for Gawd's sake." Roger bent to do so, his eyes for the moment leaving the other's face. "Easy; easy, now. There, you sucker; take that!"

As one might leap back from a reptile's fangs, so Roger leaped at the burning

sensation and the thud of a blow on his back. The cattleman, too, came to his feet with a spring that betrayed his shaming [Transcriber's note: shamming?]; and at sight of the glistening thing in the man's hand Roger understood. It was a long-bladed clasp knife with a button catch. While the man was groaning and pretending to feel for his broken bones he had opened the knife in his pocket; and when Roger had bent over the man had stabbed him in the back.

The man was grinning in bestial fashion, his teeth bared, his eyes alight with devilish expectancy, waiting for his victim to fall. He was gloating; he feasted his eyes upon Roger's fresh young face, his bright eyes, and waited for the flesh to begin to fade and grow greenish white; for the eyes to fill with a slow astonishment and to grow dim as a light that is turned out, and for the great young body to come crashing stupidly to the ground. He made no move to strike again; he was too intensely interested in anticipation of the sight he thought to gloat over. The delectable spectacle did not seem to come. The victim's fresh color did not fade; his bright eyes did not grow dim.

"Missed," said Roger quietly, withdrawing his wet hand from its exploration. "Hit a rib. Now, cur, do your damnedest!"

He walked forward toward the outpointed knife, walked straight-limbed and head up, his shoulders squared, his jaw set in fashion that indicated how completely caution had been flung aside.

But the man was watching the blue eyes and he was of the breed that cannot fight fair. He quailed before the Northern relentlessness, bred of kinship with the relentless Northern ice, that showed in those blue eyes. He could not fathom what was in the look that chilled him; his breed never could; but one thing he understood: He had met his master.

He gave ground a foot, the knife still held out before him. He gave a yard. He wilted, became panic-stricken, turned and fled to his horse and galloped away. Well out of reach he turned and waved his blade in a dramatic threat. Then he disappeared behind an islet of palmetto scrub.

XIX

Payne stalked back to where Higgins and his negroes were slashing into the elderberry brush.

"Call 'em off," he said abruptly. "We're going to build a fence.
They've served their first notice; I'm going to shoot one back at them."

"Shoot is right," said Higgins, picking up one of the 30-30 carbines which had been a part of his first load. Payne had armed himself similarly. "When you get ready you'll probably give me a hint of what's happened."

As they led the crew over to the western line and started them at work on the post holes Payne related the story of the fight.

"I went on the fence job alone because I wanted to reason with them if they came to stop me," he said. "I thought they could be made to understand that a new day has dawned down here. Apparently I was mistaken. There'll be no more attempt at friendliness on my part."

"Free-range cattlemen!" said Higgins. "The same all over the world! A fence makes them see red. Barb wire is to 'em like a new steel trap to a wolf. Wonder if it was one of Garman's men?"

"I don't know whether Garman's activities include cattle. What difference does it make? Our job is to put this fence up. The next move is up to them."

"Here comes their first move!" said Higgins presently.

Payne turned swiftly. The engineer's keen eyes had picked out three small specks bobbing up and down out on the prairie and even at the distance he knew them for easily riding horsemen.

"It didn't take him long to tell his friends," said Payne. "Hig, you go down to the other side of the boys. My guess is that they'll try to terrorize our labor. If they drive this bunch off the news will spread. Negroes won't come to work down here where they hear any white men are out against them. If they're like the first pup they'll try to ride the boys down."

"Yep; that's a favorite method."

"Kill the horse under the first man who tries it, if he's down your way. If he's up here I'll do it. Then stop. Stop absolutely. No words. I talked too much to that other hound. Just wait for their next move."

"Well—I've heard they carry guns down here, Payne, and use them well, too, sometimes," said Higgins questioningly.

"Well," replied Payne dryly, "I don't think I'll try to tell you what to do in that case."

The three riders were still far away and their approach was a slow, leisurely canter. They made no apparent effort to hurry their mounts, nor did they maintain a straight course. At times they were lost from view hidden behind the islets of palmetto scrub, or in one of the rare clumps of pine or cypress with which the prairie was dotted.

"Looks like they're getting a little chilled below the ankles," called Higgins. "Do they think we're such damn fools they can fool us by coming slow?"

The riders disappeared behind one of the small thick clumps of old cypress trees draped with great curtains of Spanish moss, which mark the presence of a water hole on the Florida prairie. When they emerged their course was altered toward the northward.

"Looks like they're turning back."

"No."

The three horses suddenly broke into a gallop. Payne reached for his field glasses, but before he could bring them to bear the cavalcade had disappeared behind a cluster of cabbage palms on a small hammock probably five hundred yards away.

The negroes stopped work suddenly, eyeing their masters for instructions, but ready to run the next instant if the instructions were not forthcoming.

"Lie down! Right where you are." Payne's orders seemed to drop the blacks in their tracks. Relieved at having a white man think for them they stretched their great bodies in the grass, their eyes not on the menace of the hammock, but upon Payne. Payne and Higgins remained standing, their carbines lying across their left arms.

"If they can hit anything at that distance they've got to be pretty good shots, Hig."

"I'll say they have. Got to have pretty good tools, too; and most of the rifles I've seen round here are the old forty-fours."

"If they are Garman's men they'll have up-to-date rifles all right."

"Sure. The best money can buy." Higgins shrewdly estimated the range to the palms. "Say, Payne, if they've got Springfields or something as good, and can use them, we're making a fool play standing here."

"Lie down, there."

"Down hell! What I mean is we ought to get closer to 'em so we'd have an even break with these little 30-30s."

"Then we'd be off our land. They've got to come to us."

"I see. What in the devil are they waiting for? Put your glasses on those palms and see what you can see."

"Can't see a thing," reported Payne after a careful scrutiny of the hammock. "The palms shut out the sun and hide them."

"They knew what they were doing when they went there, didn't they?" said Higgins. "Nice, dark hiding place where they can lay safe and have their targets out in the sun. You can do what you please, Payne, but the first shot out of there I start for the hammock. There's a big bunch of palmetto scrub south of it. I'll get in there and give 'em hell-for-breakfast."

Payne was holding his glasses upon the palms. He had gotten the perfect focus now and saw that a broad wagon trail led through the middle of the hammock. Out of this opening presently came the three riders, riding abreast at a walk. Payne started. A hot flush of embarrassment flooded his face.

"Higgins; for heaven's sake, put down your gun. Put it down quick, I say! Hide it. Get up and go to work, men. Hustle. It's all right. Get a-going!"

He hid his rifle hurriedly, picked up a digger and set to work, grimly ignoring Higgins' frantic demands for an explanation. He was working furiously and the crew was following his example, when the three riders, who were Garman, Mrs. Livingstone and the girl, came cantering up to the fence line.

It was a different Garman than had faced Roger across the camp fire on Deer Hammock; and it was a different girl than had ridden away from Flower Prairie. Only Mrs. Livingstone seemed to be as Roger recalled her, cold, affected; arrogant, and extremely conscious of the importance of her position as chaperon.

Garman for the nonce was the courtier, the artistic idler, the dilettante in the art of luxurious living; and Payne, conscious of his dirt-smudged overalls, envied him the elegance with which he played the rôle. That Garman was interested in the crudities of business seemed an improbability; that he was connected with things dark and hidden, a thought to ridicule. His purpose in life just then was that of the luxurious idler, to escort two ladies of his class for a leisurely ride, to serve them gracefully as their chevalier. And yet, beneath the silken coat of manners the tiger force of him was evident. From where he stood Payne could feel the hypnotic power of the man's mere presence.

As he looked at the girl he saw that she too had felt it—saw that it was Garman's nearness that wrought the change in her. She seemed under an influence which subdued yet excited her as might some subtle drug. Her normally calm, frank eyes were heavy and mysterious with a drowsy languor. Her tall, vibrant figure likewise seemed to droop drowsily, the budding lines of her body tremulous with young life and womanhood. Her hands hung languidly upon the saddle horn. Only her rich young lips were firm and straight, as if her mind and will power were fighting resolutely against the desire to yield to the subtle influence which was steeping her through and through.

"Are you fencing off Flower Prairie—that garden of dreams come true?" she said

with a careless laugh.

"Yes," said Payne, "but I'm going to put a gate in there."

"Kind of him, isn't it?" said Mrs. Livingstone, turning to Garman with the empty, affected laugh of her kind. "Shall we be permitted to continue our rides to Flower Prairie? Are persons permitted to place such obstructions in such places?"

Garman smoothed his tawny mustache, playfully bowing to her, as if loathe to interrupt with a reply.

Payne was breathing hard.

"Yes; they are," he said hoarsely, and checked himself.

"Ye-es," purred Garman. "If they own the land."

Payne turned on him.

"Where's Willy Tiger?" he snapped out. "What did you do to him?"

"Come, Annette," said Mrs. Livingstone. "It is too warm to stand still. We will ride back slowly."

"Aunty——" began the girl, and then, as Garman moved his horse toward her, she bowed her head and pulled her mount away from Garman's. "Very well, aunty," she said nervously, and there was relief in her bearing as she drew away from Garman.

This time, as she cantered away she looked back. And in her eyes was a look of appeal, and a promise that she would come again.

XX

"How about Willy High Pockets—or Tiger?" demanded Higgins the instant the ladies were out of hearing.

"Payne," said Garman, instantly dropping his air of affectation and becoming the business man, "you've made a mistake in picking a chief assistant with red hair. Damn it, man, don't you know it's a sign of hot-headedness. Keep 'em down—foremen, crew handlers, perhaps; but as executives, never!"

The veins were swelling in Higgins' thick neck and his face rivaled his fiery poll in redness. He came toward Garman with quick, eager steps.

"Hey, Hig!" laughed Payne. "Are you going to prove that he's right?"

"I came to see you about that Indian, Payne," said Garman, dismissing Higgins emphatically. "Not that I'm interested personally. Others are. Didn't he come back to you?"

"No."

"You haven't seen him since?"

"No."

"All right; neither have I. He's gone back to his people probably; Indians come and go. Now that will be all about Willy Tiger," he said in a tone of finality.

"Payne, if you're going to stay here we'd better talk like business men. I'm a business man."

"I try to be."

"Sure. No sense wasting any energy fighting. You're going to develop your tract here?"

"Going to try to; yes."

Garman studied him with new intentness for a moment.

"And yet you look like you had business sense, too."

Payne made no reply.

"You know what a poor business proposition you've got, of course," continued Garman. "Even assuming that things are as you think they are?"

"What things?"

Garman smiled slightly, a slow, amused smile.

"Payne, if I told you that I'm afraid you'd pull up stakes and get out *pronto*."

Payne laughed.

"That would leave you broken-hearted, wouldn't it, Garman?"

"No-o-o," said Garman; "but it would—well it would deprive me of your company. I'm a sociable animal, Payne. I crave company; I like to have all sorts of people about me. Take Ramos, for instance; did you ever see a more supercilious, sneaky, disagreeable specimen of the half-breed Mexican? Neither have I. You, I suppose, wouldn't have him 'round you."

"Not if I was able to kick him away."

"Exactly; and thereby you would be depriving yourself of most excellent entertainment, besides the services of a most useful servant."

"I haven't got any dirty work to be done, Garman."

Garman smoked deliberately for several seconds.

"Payne, once and for all, let this be understood between us: when I have any dirty work to be done I do it myself, with these two hands. Understand? Now,

Ramos fancies himself in the supposed position of bravo. Very amusing, I assure you——"

"I don't care about Ramos and your whims, Garman," Payne interrupted.

"Of course not. Why should you? But I'd be bored to death down here if I didn't have people to play with——"

"Rot! You aren't the playing kind."

"My dear fellow," said Garman with a deep chuckle, "if I didn't have lives to play with—other people's lives—I'd die of boredom. You're young," he continued with a sudden touch of bitterness. "You're still able to draw upon the old illusions to maintain your interest in life. Ambition, work, achievement, success—Love! You're inexperienced enough to pursue the old will-o'-the-wisps that Nature has planted in man's instincts to keep him living till her purpose is served. Pah! Payne, I've tried them all, won them all, and that—" he blew out a great cloud of smoke—"that is more real and satisfying than all of them put together."

"Have your liver examined," advised Payne; "that's probably what's the matter with you."

Garman's Gargantuan burst of laughter rocked him in the saddle.

"Good boy! We'll have a lot of fun before we're through with one another. But what a materialist you are for a young fellow, Payne! What will you be at fifty if now you reduce psychological manifestations to a common physical cause? Why, man, you ought to be walking with your head in the clouds, dreaming of the one woman, the Perfect Mate, and Love, which are to make your life complete. All young fools of your age do it; why not you?"

"And so you play with other people's lives, do you?" said Payne, paying no attention to the other's raillery. "And is that what you're thinking of doing with mine?"

Garman tilted back his head and smiled through a smoke cloud. "Yes," he said softly; "unless you run away."

"Huh!"

"No, you aren't the running kind. That's what makes you interesting. That's what will make you good fun. What could be more interesting than seeing a young man like yourself want something so badly that he'd give his life for it and then suddenly place the desired object far, far beyond his reach. To watch his expression when he discovers that he's lost. To see the change from hope to despair take place in his eyes, to watch the illusions go, and the bitter truth about life take possession of him. What will he do, say and look when he discovers that the oyster of life is a hollow, empty, fraudulent shell?"

"You're raving, Garman!"

"Do you accept the challenge?"

"To the limit."

"Good boy! I knew you wouldn't disappoint me. The girl would have been worth while, but adding you, Payne, you glimpsing a dream of a fool's paradise, will be glorious!"

"You talk like a damn fool," said Payne bluntly.

Garman nodded, and with the nod his strange mood passed and he was the business man again.

"All right. That's all of that for the present. Now, what are you up against? What are your biggest problems?"

"Thanks, but I am not placing myself entirely in your hands, Garman."

"That's right; play safe. But I'm talking business now. You're tackling a hard job here. What can I do to help?"

"There's only one thing I want you to do, Garman; that's to keep your hands off this job, and to keep your men from interfering with me and my men and the job, or anything connected with it."

"That's settled. Anything else?"

"That's all. It will save trouble for both of us if you'll do that."

Garman dismissed the matter as settled with a nod, and gathered up his reins.

"Doing anything next Sunday afternoon?"

Payne thought for a moment.

"Yes; next Sunday I'll be going down the river to Gumbo Key. The ditching outfit that I've hired is due to arrive at the Key on Saturday night. I promised to meet it and see it up the river. We'll start up river Monday morning. I'll be on that dredger all the way up, Garman.

"Don't waste your time. There'll be no interference. In fact, if she needs help you can borrow the old Cormorant for a tugboat."

"No, thanks. They do their own towing."

"All right. But there's no sense of your going down there and wasting your whole Sunday on Gumbo Key. I suppose you'd do that; prejudice against breaking the Sabbath and all that? I thought so; it goes with the illusions. But there's no need for it this time—and I've been specially ordered to invite you down to my little place for Sunday afternoon. If you knew who issued the order you'd come, I know. It will be sort of an affair to welcome you to our midst. Better come, Payne; besides somebody you want to meet properly, there'll be a certain man there you ought to meet. Sunday afternoon."

"Will Mrs. Livingstone be there?"

"Pooh! Pay no attention to that. She'll be tamed by Sunday. Come about two. In the evening if you wish I'll have the Cormorant run you down the river to Gumbo Key." He paused and with a flicker of a smile added the words which he knew would evoke but one reply: "Of course if you fear it's a trap——"

"At two Sunday afternoon?" said Roger.

"Right." Garman wheeled his horse and loped away without another word.

XXI

Payne was not greatly concerned one way or another with Garman's apparent change of heart toward his enterprise. He had no intention of asking or receiving favors. All he asked was that Garman keep his hands off.

The rest of the week saw the line fence completed and a good slice of the elderberry jungle cleared away and burned. Besides this, Higgins and Payne cruised the drowned land and ran the lines where the ditches were to be dug when the ditcher should arrive. Two main ditches, running in a V from the head of the Chokohatchee, Higgins' figures showed, would drain the surface water off the thousand acres of lake which had been sold to Payne as prairie land.

In the soft mud the big ditching machine would eat its way forward at the rate of half a mile a day—a week should suffice to put the main ditches through. As soon as the surface water was off, Higgins planned for a system of short lateral ditches running at intervals into the two branches of the V. Thus every portion of the thousand-acre tract would be subject to thorough drainage. Following the drainage of the surface water the underground seepage would run off as a matter of course.

Garman apparently was as good as his word. Each morning Payne awoke expecting to find that his fence had been cut during the night, but so far the wire remained unmolested.

"That proves that Garman is boss of the whole country, cattlemen and all," said Payne one morning. "The cowman that I whipped intended to come back."

"If something had not interfered he'd have been back that night with a gang. He was so mad it must have taken something awfully strong to stop him, and that means it was Garman."

"Yes," agreed Higgins; "but I wouldn't exactly look on him as a bosom friend, if

I were you."

"Pooh! I'm not fooled a bit by him. He's simply playing with me—or trying to do it. Well, we'll try to be right here, still doing business, when the game is over."

One morning a negro from the brushing crew came running up to Payne's tent in great excitement.

"Boss, boss! Trouble in the jungle oveh dah. White man driving colored boys away with rifle."

Payne followed the excited man and found that the machetes of the black gang, hacking a space in the heart of the jungle, had exposed an old clearing containing a tumble down shack. A tall, gnarled man with long hair and beard stood before the door of the shack, a Winchester held in his hands in businesslike fashion. Behind him hovered a young woman, who must have been refined and beautiful once, but who now was slatternly, and two children.

Payne called out, "Good morning, neighbor, what seems to be the difficulty?" and started toward the shack.

The man with the rifle did not reply. He merely raised the weapon till the sights were full against Roger's breast. The young man stopped.

"Don't shoot, Cal; please don't shoot!" whimpered the woman. "They're too many for you."

"Shut up!" growled the man. "Git in the house."

"Put down your gun," shouted Payne. "Tell me your trouble. My boys been bothering you?"

"You're a-botherin' me," retorted the cracker. "You cal'late to run me off my place here. Well, I ain't a-going."

Payne looked about the clearing and saw that here, hidden from all the world in the dense elder growth, the squatter had attempted and succeeded in making a primitive sort of home. Fish nets and traps, otter and coon skins, hung on the walls of the shack. In the clearing was a cultivated patch of the Seminole "contie" root, which could be ground into flour, and a scattering of domestic

vegetables. On a few stunted trees were a few dried-up oranges; and on the branches of one of the larger trees was hung a swing fashioned from tough-fibered creepers. On one side of the rude shack a patch of moon vine was being trained along the wall.

"My name is Payne, neighbor," said Roger presently.

The squatter eyed him suspiciously for a long while. At last he dropped the rifle in the hollow of his arm, keeping a ready thumb on the hammer.

"Mine's Blease," he said at last.

Roger regarded the man thoughtfully for a long time. To his surprise he perceived that Blease was not at all of the unfavorable type he had expected to find squatting in such a place. The man's hair was long and ragged, his beard likewise, and he was poorly nourished and clad; but Roger had lived enough in the open to learn how deceptive are external appearances in showing the true character of a man. As he looked at Blease, meeting the other's hard eyes, he sensed the true worth of the man hiding beneath the guise of a shiftless squatter. As for the woman, it was obvious that she was Blease's superior.

"Tell me, Blease," said Payne suddenly, "How long have you been living on this land?"

"'Bout two years," replied the squatter after a long pause.

"You don't pretend you have a title to it?"

Again the pause, then: "No, sir, I don't."

"Have you got a mule?" broke out Roger suddenly.

"A mule? No. Why?"

"How do you expect to do any farming without a mule? Come over to my camp next week when I get some in and I'll try to fix you up." Blease stood looking at him, tugging at his ragged beard, shifting from one foot to the other, gazing hopelessly round for an answer to the miracle. Finally he cleared his throat.

"Some catch there."

"No."

"How do you mean that, Mr. Payne?"

"Just as I say; if we have an extra mule next week we'll let you have it."

"What for?"

"To farm with. You've got to begin to make some money. You can't stay on this land any longer without a title; that isn't business. I could move you, but I don't want to; wouldn't feel right about it. I want to get you to farming right so you can make some money and buy from me the piece of ground you're squatting on. What have you got cleared here—five acres? You ought to have about ten. We'll measure off ten here, and go on with our clearing round you. Now, what do you say?"

"You mean it?"

Payne crossed the clearing and stood before the squatter.

"Do you think I'm fooling you?" he asked.

The squatter shamefacedly put his rifle away.

"My name, suh, is Calhoun Blease," he said in a new manner. "I don't understand this yit, but I do not believe you are foolin' with me, suh."

"If I am, you've still got your rifle," said Payne. "Now, tell me something: Didn't Mr. Garman send you word that my job was not to be molested or hindered?"

At the mention of Garman's name, Blease's thin figure seemed to collapse.

"Garman? Garman don't know we're here, does he? Are—are you a friend of Mr. Garman's, suh?"

"I think," replied Payne, "he is the worst enemy I've got. Do you know him?"

After a long pause Blease said slowly: "I was his caretaker over there once."

"What do you think of him?"

"He is the worst enemy any man can have," muttered the squatter. "He—don't know we're here? Good. Nobody does. He's too smart and hard to be just a man. Garman is—he—he was the devil who made us outcasts like we be—he did it. Hiding our faces from the world, account of him!"

"Do you want to tell me what he did to you?"

Blease glanced at the little shack.

"No, no. I reckon I don't want to tell you. But—Mrs. Blease once was secretary —never mind. Garman and his swimming pool—— No, I ain't telling; I ain't telling!"

XXII

The rest of the day was torture for Payne. Blease had said too much and too little for him to have any peace. He had caught one glimpse of the woman in the shack, and alternately he wished he had not seen her and that the sight of her had been more illuminating.

Blease's wife was no "cracker," no native of those parts, no type which belonged in a squatter's shack in the heart of a jungle. Her presence there seemed to cry out the news of some foul miscarriage of destiny, of a wrong to her life too hideous to imagine. Upon her face—still young—was the tale of a broken soul protesting against the wrong life had dealt it. He drew his hands across his brow to dispel the memory of that look and to try to see Mrs. Blease as she had been before it came. A high type of business secretary. Blease had started to tell and had stopped. Secretary to Garman possibly. Blease had been Garman's caretaker. Payne recalled the swimming pool with its drug-like atmosphere. What had happened there? He felt he would never know, did not wish to know. What might be happening there now?

A river of ice seemed to roll down his spine and little rivulets seemed to trickle out to the last nerve tips of his fingers, chilling him through and through; and he worked through the day dry-throated and breathing hard, conscious that a crisis in his life lay before him. Why should it affect him so? What had he to do with Garman's affairs or the affairs of those with him? The vision of the girl called Annette, as he first saw her in the dawn on Gumbo Key, stood before his eyes, and he knew how false his attempts at disinterest. Life had caught him up in a net with other lives. He thought of Garman, and groaned behind set teeth.

Night came with no surcease to the apprehension in his heart; and as if to mock his mood the scene, after a lurid sunset, was beautiful and kindly beyond compare. A mist of color like powdered silver filled the air. Soft, near-by stars blinked lazily down upon the scene, illumining it without the effect of brilliance.

A half moon hung idly in the mists above the cypress trees, and long, languorous shadows streaked the silvered ground with black. In the dark jungle of elder bushes there opened long vistas of silver light, as unreal as the black tops of the far-away trees. In the unreality of the night the earth itself seemed unreal, all things appeared as shadows swimming in a dream sea of soft radiance.

Payne left his tent and walked out into the marvelous night, unsoothed by its beauty, not caring whither he went. Annette's eyes had promised she would return, and he went toward the sand prairie where he knew she rode sometimes in the cool of the evening. He came abruptly upon the wire of his line fence, and for a moment stood gripping the wires and looking off into the distance, over the sand prairie. He found himself presently by the gate he had cut in the wire as an entrance to Flower Prairie, and stood entranced by the dreamy beauty of the spot. In the center of the park the bowllike sand of a long dried-up water hole seemed overlaid by a thin sheet of silver, and the tiny palms that circled its shores were dark pillars, topped by a crown of silver leaves. The effect of the moon upon the water of the Prairie's tiny spring lake was like magic. In its silver gleam the trees, shrubs and even the flowers upon its bank were reflected vividly, and a fish swimming near the surface lifted the water in a gentle, rolling swell.

Payne looked, and in place of the lake he seemed to behold a swimming pool and to sense an atmosphere that was like a drug. He opened the gate and stepped out on the sand prairie. As in moments of crisis, when unseen, unknown forces take a life in hand, he was for the moment like a man in a dream, unconscious of his movements, incapable of intention. He leaned against the gatepost to think. The soft thud-thud of an unseen horse, walking slowly somewhere out upon the prairie, brought him up with a jerk. He peered into the moonlight in a vain effort to see. Placing his ear to the ground he caught the sound again and after a moment made out that the hoof beats were coming slowly toward his fence.

Payne stepped within his own line and closed the gate.

Presently he flung it open again and stood in the shade of a palmetto, waiting. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not a victim of the night's magic. It was Annette on her pony; she had kept the promise of her eyes. But her appearance gave Roger a shock. Her hair was disheveled. Her hands hung limply upon the saddle pommel and her head was bowed. She rode through the gate, past him to the brink of the tiny lakelet and halted. Then she looked round as if seeking

some one. She looked to where the tent lights gleamed mistily through the canvas of Payne's camp. Then, after a long while, she dismounted and started to lead her mount toward the tents. Payne stepped forward out of the shadows and into her sight.

Neither spoke at first. Surprise had rendered her speechless; and as the silvery moon haze revealed her upturned face Payne was frozen dumb. For the look in her eyes and upon her face was a hint of the look which he had beheld upon the countenance of Mrs. Blease. He recoiled from it at first. Then he bent forward, scanning her mercilessly, and saw with a sense of relief that he was wrong. The face of the girl was the panorama of a struggle. There was fear there, and uncertainty in the eyes; but there was no acknowledgment of defeat. The change in her bearing was appalling to Payne. The gallant bearing of her vibrant young body was gone. She might have been drugged, so submerged was her true self.

"You think it's the moon, don't you?" she said with an uneasy laugh, leaning languidly against the patient pony's neck. "Well, it isn't. It—it's something else—something so different—I don't even understand what it is. I don't even know if there is anything. Yet there must be; it affects me so. I'm afraid—and yet I'm not. I—I rather like it, too. That's why I'm afraid; I like it so well. It seems so—soothing."

"Miss——" began Roger and paused, puzzled at what to call her.

Her response was a languid chuckle.

"My name? How formal! Does it seem natural to be formal here? It doesn't to me. And it doesn't seem pleasant; it jars so. That's why the other thing, whatever it is, seems so inviting and inevitable. So natural. No formality. No straining. Nothing but—that."

"What is—'that'?" asked Payne.

"I don't know," she responded in wide-eyed wonderment. "Really, I don't. It isn't anything tangible. It's over there some place," she nodded languidly across the prairie. "It—frightened me to-night. I ran away—but I didn't escape it."

"It's Garman!" blurted Payne hoarsely.

"Oh, don't!" She cowered against the pony. "Please—please don't!

Oh, if you don't wish to be cruel——"

"Miss Annette!"

The utterance of her name seemed to bring back a sense of her true self. She straightened herself slowly to her full height, and her poise of assurance seemed to come back to its own.

"It must sound terribly silly to you," she said quietly. "I wonder if the Florida moon affects every one that way."

"You said it wasn't the moon."

"No," she said seriously, "it isn't." She paused, stroking the pony's neck thoughtfully. "Do you know, I actually was so frightened at nothing that I ran away this evening."

"You were going over there?" He pointed toward the vague lights showing through the tents of his camp.

"Why—yes. It isn't the most thickly populated part of the world about here, isn't it? White people aren't so plentiful here. At least I knew there were white men at those tents—that funny red-haired man and yourself. You see it was the only place about here where I knew I could find anybody who—what shall I say? Why, who doesn't belong in this weird atmosphere——It was uncanny over at our place this evening. At sunset the water in the swimming pool didn't seem to be water at all; it seemed molten gold; and the mosaic round it seemed to be made up of whitened bones, and back of that was the fringe of palms hiding the jungle. It suddenly seemed to me that the palms were there for that purpose, and that the jungle needed to be hidden; and the palms seemed to know it, for their fronds hung drooping, like the hands of weary, worn-out women, tired of concealing whatever it is that's Back There—in the jungle—on Palm Island."

"You don't mind my talking, do you? It's a relief. I couldn't talk to any one over there. The whole place seemed to be suffocating. I had to talk. I'll tell you why; I wanted to go into the jungle and see what it is the palms hide back there at night. Isn't it ludicrous—or ghastly—whichever way you look at it?"

"You aren't alone over there? Mrs. Livingstone is still there, isn't she?"

"Yes, Aunty's still there. I'm safely chaperoned." She laughed with a note of hardness in her young voice. "What a chaperon! If she knew I was here talking to you I believe it would drive her mad. She guards me so closely—when it pleases her to do so."

She laughed bitterly again.

"That's why she brought me down here alone to—that house. I am beginning to understand Aunty. I never knew why she guarded me so carefully before. My mother died before I could remember. Aunty brought me up. She's my father's sister. She brought me up well, for her purpose. I've been in schools all my life it seems until last winter. Then she brought me out, in Washington. Since then—Society. You see, we haven't got money. People think we have, but we haven't. So I've been on display, set up by Aunty in one of society's shop windows, like goods in the Boardwalk booths at Atlantic City. Do you mind my rambling?"

"Go on, please."

"You don't know what such a life means. You're a producer; I've been a doll tricked out for inspection by the men who are rich enough to buy expensive dolls. But we've no money. Society asks about that first of all when—an Aunty is trying to put a doll up for sale:

"'What have you to offer? Honesty? Character? Decency? Oh, well-hm-hm. Is that all? Then stand in the corner there among the obscure ones. Some one will see you in time—if you live long enough. And the next: What have you to offer? Intelligence; thought? No sale; you make us all feel uncomfortable. Virtue? Tut, tut, my dear! Cleverness, charm, facile smartness? The crowd gathers round. Beauty? The crowd grows thicker. Money—wealth—gold by millions? Ah! Come to our arms, you golden one, rotten to the core though you may be—gentleman with a gorilla's tastes; lady with Madonna face, Venus body, viper soul! Come to the throne; we salaam before you—your gold has made you sacred.'

"Oh! The stench of it still is in my nostrils; I still feel thick cold fingers on my bare arms. I once was one of them—serenely satisfied that I was one of the elect of earth, though I had never produced a thing in this world, but only consumed. No right at all to anything and sure I had the right to everything, to consume food, to wear out clothes, to wear out servants. In return I gave—nothing. Not a

thing. But I've waked up. Earth—good, black earth—you are greater than Mrs. Butterfly Croesus and all her brood; because you are real.

"I see it now. My silly pretty face, my woman's body, my graces, seductions, all have been so much bait for Aunty's fishing. Bait! That's what I've been; bait to catch goldfish! And she brought me down here on the greatest fishing trip she's ever attempted."

"But you have a father."

"Yes. You will meet him Sunday. Well, I suppose I've bored you terribly. Thank you for your patience. It was a relief to talk to some one."

But she did not go. The mystery and companionship of the sub-tropical night was upon them with its sensuous caresses. All of Payne's hard-won man-strength seemed to leave him: he felt as weak as a child; and he began to stammer brokenly.

"Anything I can do—if I can help—what you spoke of—Back There in the jungle——?"

"No, no. Nobody can help me with that. It's got to be just myself. I know that now."

She was the more self-controlled. Payne could not speak. All that he wished to say—his strength, his life, at her call in her hour of need—he expressed in a gesture.

"Thank you."

She touched his outstretched hand. Instinctively their fingers locked together, instinctively she swayed toward him.

"Thank you."

He had released her hand. They looked at one another a long time. She smiled a little.

"I must go back."

She touched his sleeve lightly, mounted and looked down at him.

"Can't I help in any way?" he asked.

"No one can help me," she whispered. "No one but my own weak self."

And the look upon her countenance which had appalled him as she passed through the gate was coming back as she rode away.

XXIII

A soft, misty pall of midsummer heat hung over and pervaded the vine-covered forest of wild-apple trees surrounding Garman's house when Payne set out on Sunday afternoon to keep his appointment. As he entered the footpath leading from the prairie toward the house, he was forced to stoop to avoid the curtain of flowering moonvine which hung overhead, and once in the path he felt again the sickening drowsiness of the shut-in air. A mingling of many sweet odors hung about him like a heavy, poisonous drug; and he felt that it was pleasant poison, and walked swiftly on.

In a shaded pergola running out from the house to the jungle he saw Annette, and stopped.

An old man with a white Vandyke beard and pompously out-thrown chest was coming down the path from the house. He strutted as he walked, and stood for a moment framed between two palm trees where the path entered the pergola.

"Little Annette!" he murmured, beaming patronizingly upon the girl. "Happy again. I knew you would be. But I haven't heard you laugh for a long time."

"No," said the girl, looking at him intently, "I haven't laughed since we came here."

"But you are happy now. Yes, yes, quite happy, quite happy. Up early this morning and all round the place like a little lark."

"Because I couldn't sleep. And because—early in the morning—others are not up—and I can be alone."

"No one can—no one can be alone in this world, dear. No one should. The laws of God and man, of Nature, forbid it." His old, self-satisfied eyes took in the long rounded lines of her figure and the virgin freshness of her throat and face

with assuring calculation. "Especially, my dear, is it a crime to attempt to remain alone when nature has so abundantly endowed one for the purpose of—not remaining alone. Also, my dear," he continued, the playfulness gone from his tones as he pointed sternly at the diamond upon the third finger of her left hand, "you will kindly not forget that you wear that."

"Do you think there is any opportunity for me to forget it?" she asked.
"Do you! Think!"

He attempted to face down her steadfast eyes. He failed, and, turning his glance uneasily, he saw Roger Payne.

"What's this? What's this?"

His eyes ran wildly from Roger to the girl and back again; and as they rested upon Payne they grew dead and gray with hatred, the futile hopeless hatred of an old man for one who is young.

"Who is this man, Annette? How does he come to be here? Answer me at once; answer me, I say!"

The girl looked long at him, looked with clear, calm eyes until the old man's pouter-pigeon effect disappeared.

"My dear! Forgive my vehemence. You see I think only of you. I was afraid ——"

"Yes. What are you afraid of, father?" asked the girl swiftly. "Tell me that. I often wonder."

"Afraid? I?"

"Yes. I sometimes see it in your eyes when you think no one is looking. Have you done something——?"

"Child?"

"Land sales, for instance? If so, I must know. I'm not little Annette any longer. I must know things now."

The old man stroked his white beard nervously. His eyes shifted uneasily toward Payne.

"Oh! pardon my negligence," exclaimed the girl. "This is Mr. Payne, father. He's purchased a lot of land down here. Mr. Payne, this is my father, Senator Fairclothe."

Payne bowed automatically. He was dumbfounded for a moment, but in a flash his self-control had returned.

"We have had some correspondence—business correspondence—Senator," he said.

Senator Fairclothe was watching him with the shifty eyes of a cornered man who stands on guard, ready to parry a blow.

"Have we? I don't recall the name, young man. Lane, Caine?"

"Payne."

"No. No, I don't remember the name."

"You're sure you don't, father?" interposed Miss Fairclothe.

Payne came to the rescue.

"Of course you wouldn't remember my name, Senator. You have too many large affairs to occupy your mind. It was merely about some land down here. I've meant for some time to write you and thank you for influencing me to buy the land down here."

"What!" cried the girl, and stood dumb, staring at Payne, with a hand pressed to her lips.

"Influence you?" snapped Fairclothe testily. "How could I influence you? You are no child. The buyer must protect himself. It is the first rule of business."

"Nevertheless, you did influence me. It was your letters that caused me to decide to buy. And I want to thank you, because otherwise I would not be where I stand at present."

The Senator tugged at his beard, watching Payne narrowly, suspicious of some trick.

"Any letters I may have written to you—which I do not remember doing—were merely a formal part of one phase of my activities. It is gratifying, of course, to hear you express your satisfaction. On the other hand, as I said, the oldest law in business is 'Let the buyer beware,' and it would not have disturbed me in the least, young man, had you appeared with a poppycock song of dissatisfaction with your purchase."

"But I am satisfied," insisted Payne. "Some of the land I bought for $30 an acre will be worth $200 when the ditcher gets in and we drain it. It's rich, black muck, three feet deep in spots. I see profit of $100 an acre within a year."

"Hm," said Senator Fairclothe. "As much as that?"

"That's the minimum."

"You will make a hundred dollars on our land—the land you've purchased, I should say?"

"As soon as I get it drained, yes, sir."

Senator Fairclothe tugged again at his beard. There was a new look in his eyes as he revolved over and over again the words, "one hundred dollars profit per acre." Payne had purchased a thousand acres from his company. A hundred times a thousand meant a hundred thousand dollars.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he said finally. "I hope you will dig your drainage ditches soon?"

"The ditch contractor will come up the river to-morrow. It won't take long after he gets to work."

"I am glad to hear that, too. If I can do anything to assist you in getting your drainage work done, pray command me."

"Just what I told him, Senator," boomed Garman's voice behind them.
"We want to help him get his improvement work done promptly."

Garman stood leaning against the custard-apple tree which had hidden his approach and looked at Payne and Annette as he spoke. So far as his expression was concerned the Senator, whom he addressed, did not exist for him. His lips uttered words for Fairclothe's ears; but his lazy, heavily lidded eyes searched Payne and the girl to the bottom of their souls. Roger returned the look steadily; and by the flickering mockery in Garman's eyes he knew that it was Garman's ring that gleamed on Annette's finger.

XXIV

"I was just thanking Senator Fairclothe for influencing me in the purchase of land down here," said Roger deliberately. "If it hadn't been for him, Garman, I wouldn't be here now."

"If that is so," returned Garman, "we must thank him, too. For we wouldn't be deprived of your company for a lot—would we, Annette?"

"Mr. Payne was speaking of the land he bought," said Annette. "The land with the water on it."

"Yes, dear." Garman's mocking eyes were on Payne as he spoke. "Water galore. But Payne is a worker. Youth, strength, high hopes, ambition! Payne will have that water off in a hurry. We'll be glad to see that done, won't we, Senator?"

"Yes, indeed. Improvement work——"

"Mrs. Livingston was asking for you and Annette, Senator," said Garman.

Payne nearly started at the change in his tone. It was a tone of command, of dismissal, and to Roger's astonishment Annette and her father obeyed. Garman strolled into the pergola and dropped into a chair, a huge, oppressive figure in white silk. Lazily and from beneath the half-closed heavy lids his eyes watched Annette as she walked toward the house. With an air of playful possession he followed the play of her young body in motion, the quick, strong flip of her foot upon the hard sand of the path, the firmness of her limbs, the sway of her rounded torso, the poise of her neck and head. A smile lifted his mustache, revealing the thick red mouth beneath. Indolently he breathed through half-parted lips.

"Payne," he said thickly, "there goes Love. There goes the dream of all young fools. Aren't you dreaming a little yourself, Payne, eh?—I see you are. You have

looked upon the dream in the flesh, and hope has been born in your young, manly bosom. Hope? No; belief. Belief in the realization of ideals. What damn fools all you young cubs are, to be sure!"

"Well," said Roger calmly, "I like that. I like to have a man ask me to be his guest and try to make things pleasant for me by calling me a damn fool."

"If," retorted Garman slowly, "you were the average young cub I'd get to my feet and apologize for speaking sense; but you're fairly well grown. All you need, Payne, is to have the fresh young mask pulled from the face of Life and to see the old hag as she really is. Then you'd be fit for something. Payne, I believe I'm going to do that service for you."

He looked toward the house where Annette was to be seen on the verandah. He smiled as he saw how Roger's eyes followed his.

"Payne, it's those girls with the fair, thin skin that the Southern sun and tropical environment are ruthless with. They've no shield against nature's relentless desire down here, tropical nature's desire for a welter of life. And when they're too young to have developed the hard outer shell of experience, why, their womanhood is just naked to the searching, smirching tropical sun, and they go plumb crazy. Develop dual personalities. Lose their civilization. Want to go into the jungle, and so on. Thin white skin, like thinnest silk, and blue veins full of young red blood showing through. A fine spectacle, Payne; a natural princess among girls writhing in a struggle against the luring muck of the jungle. Ever hear of Palm Island? She's struggling against going there. Well, she'll lose her struggle; has lost it; that's settled. Come on to dinner."

On the verandah he paused sharply, whirling about with the swiftness of a tiger. Ramos, the Mexican, had come galloping out of the jungle, flogging his horse as he came.

"Well?" Garman's attitude, suggested the crouch of a tiger ready to spring.

"*Si*! Yes; it is so!"

"They've got him?"

"Yes. He is on Palm Island, surrounded; not caught."

"A-a-ah!" Garman rubbed his hands together as a growl of triumph rumbled up from his thick red throat. "Have Prince saddled, Ramos. Then ride back and watch so they don't hurt him. I'll follow—I'm called away—on business, Annette. You entertain Mr. Payne."

With a leap he was off the verandah and running for the stables.

Payne met him as he mounted, and caught the horse by the head.

"Garman, who's the man Ramos spoke of?"

"Let go, you fool! The brute's a striker."

Payne dodged the flash of the animal's forehoofs, but caught a bridle rein.

"Who is he, Garman?"

"A fool—trespassing. Just business."

"Not Higgins or any of my men?"

"No, nobody you know. Look out!"

The horse lunged forward. Payne stepped aside. Garman was gone, like a hunter in sight of his quarry.

XXV

The silence that followed was broken by Annette's laughter.

"What very pretty conduct!" she said.

Senator Fairclothe thrust out his chest pompously. Garman being gone he saw himself as the dominant personality present.

"Men of great affairs, my dear Annette, cannot permit attention to the petty details of conduct to disturb their purpose when a crisis presents itself. The truly big man lets his results speak for themselves. Mr. Garman exercises the privileges of the big man that he is. It is a privilege to see such a man meeting and solving a problem."

"Do you know what it is about, father?"

"Not at all. Nor do I concern myself. I know Mr. Garman."

The girl leaned forward and peered in his eyes.

"Do you really, father? Ah! I see you do. You too, then? But how you—a man?"

"Annette," called Mrs. Livingstone, "will you please come in?"

The meal that followed was a ghastly affair. One figure there alone would have served to cast gloom over the table. Senator Fairclothe sat crumpled in his chair, his white Vandyke beard crushed on his breast, looking ridiculously helpless. He had shrunk from his daughter's words. Not until he had drunk much champagne after the meal did he begin to recover. And soon after he strutted out to a shaded chair and fell asleep.

Said Mrs. Livingstone presently:

"Mr. Payne, I understand that Mr. Garman has given orders that the Egret is at your disposal if you wish to go down the river. I believe you had planned such a trip, had you not?"

"Are you going?" asked Annette suddenly.

"Yes. Our ditcher is down there at Gumbo Key. I'll feel safer if I start him up the river myself."

Annette jumped up with a cry of relief.

"Get my sweater coat, Aunty. Get one for yourself. Father! Father, wake up! We're all going for a nice, beautiful, cool ride down the river."

"Annette!" gasped Mrs. Livingstone; but Annette carried all before her like a young spring storm.

Payne had not contemplated a start until near evening, but within half an hour he found himself beside the girl leaning over the port rail of the Egret and watching the water curl away from her gleaming bows as the boat slipped swiftly downstream toward Gumbo Key.

"I was suffocating back there," she explained. "I had to get away. Yes, Aunty; I'll come out of the sun in a minute—Mr. Payne, I want to thank you for the way you lied to my father about being satisfied with your land. Why did you do it?"

He turned to her, intending to laugh the matter away, but as he met her look, his eyes betrayed him.

"Why did you do it?" she whispered.

Payne looked away; and there was no need for him to speak.

"Oh, no!" she whispered. "Oh, no, no, no, no!"

There was a long silence. At last he heard her stifle a sob and looked round. Annette was walking aft toward the cabin with slow, dragging steps.

"My dear Annette!" cried Mrs. Livingstone and Senator Fairclothe together as they saw her face, but she pushed past them and disappeared in the cabin.

"Sir!" began the Senator indignantly. "May I ask you for an explanation?"

"Lafe," interrupted his sister quietly, "will you go and see how Annette is? I fear she stayed too long in the sun."

"I demand a father's right——"

"Yes, yes. Please do as I suggest. I am sure Annette is wanting you."

Alone, Mrs. Livingstone turned and faced Roger. Though she stood as hard and motionless as adamant, the jet pendants in her ears trembled and twinkled. And Payne, as he saw the hard lines about her mouth, lines of fear, struggle, determination, felt sorry for her.

"What did you say to Annette?"

"Not one word," replied Roger.

"What did she say to you?"

"That is a secret."

"Why did she leave you—as she did?"

"That is another secret—and she's the only one who knows it."

For a moment they faced one another silently, then suddenly the woman blazed out:

"How dare you interfere with my plans for her! Besides, let me inform you, it is too late. She is engaged to Mr. Garman."

"She is to marry Garman?" asked Roger slowly.

"Yes."

"Then if it's settled—how can I interfere?"

"You can't. I will not permit it. And if you could, what could you offer her? You've no money, no position, no influence. You're nobody. She is Annette Fairclothe. She is the last hope of the family. I have built our whole future upon

her. There will be no interference with my plans."

"She has a father——"

"Pooh! That doddering ass! Do you think it is he who has enabled us to keep our position in Washington? And now he is going into his dotage, and the big men won't dare to use him much longer. I'm not blind, Mr. Payne; I can see as well as Garman. Let me speak seriously to you: Your presence here spells danger to Annette—serious danger."

"Why?"

"Because, rather than risk failure for my plans, I will not stop at anything in the world."

"Why in the world should you threaten me, Mrs. Livingstone?"

Mrs. Livingstone's lips parted in a terrible smile as she walked away.

"You? Why, I was not thinking of you at all."

Above the Egret a crippled white ibis, with a broken leg impeding its flight, was flying clumsily across the river. Close above it, with deadly intent, sailed a brown hawk. The hawk struck, but in spite of its handicap the ibis swerved in time to escape the deadly talons. Then pursued and pursuer disappeared in the jungle across the river.

At Gumbo Key the black, scowlike hull carrying the ditching machinery, moving slowly in tow of a gasoline tug, was seen making headway across the bay toward the mouth of the river. As the Egret curved gracefully round the Key and came alongside the tug to place Payne aboard, Annette came and stood by his side.

"You're not going back with us?" she asked.

"No. It's better that I shouldn't. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I suppose it is." Her eyes looked out across the bay to the open sea beyond. "Oh! I wish I weren't going back there; I wish I would never see that place again."

"Do you mean that?"

"How can you doubt it!"

The Egret had completed her curve and with throttled engines was creeping smoothly up to the ditching scow's side.

"You don't have to go back," said Payne. "The ditching can wait. I'll have them moor the ditcher here. You can get aboard the tug and I'll have them take you to Key West, to Fort Myers, Tampa—any place you want to go. From there you can go anywhere, as far away as you wish to go."

"Really?" she cried, "Oh, but that poor little tug—the Egret would catch her in a mile."

"If you get on that tug I will see that you go wherever you wish to go."

"Once aboard the lugger and the girl is free!" she quoted. "No, no. You don't understand. It isn't so simple as that. If it was merely a question of getting away, do you think I would be afraid? It's more than that. It's all in myself, all here." She struck her bosom with a white clenched fist. "It is something in myself—it's something I've got to settle all by myself. You must not try to interfere. Win or lose, no one can help me—no one. That is why I must go back—though I am afraid."

The Egret had crept past the length of the ditcher, disdaining to approach its grimy hull with her immaculate sides. She was approaching the squat little tug. Suddenly the girl held out her hand.

"Good-by," she said.

"Good-by?" he stammered, "Surely it isn't good-by?"

The Egret's starboard ladder was gently chaffing the tug's fender.

"It isn't good-by!" he said.

"I am afraid it is." She watched him as he went over the side onto the tug's deck. The Egret, as if freed from a burden, shot sharply forward. Annette leaned far over the rail.

"Good-by," she murmured. "Good-by!"

XXVI

"Mr. Payne, I take it?"

Roger turned to face the speaker, a tall, hawk-nosed man whose sallow, leathery face was set in the lines of the hard worker.

"Yes, I'm Payne. Are you the captain?"

"I'm boss of the ditching outfit, Mr. Payne. White's my name. Was you planning we should lay up at Gumbo Key to-night?"

Roger looked across the bay at the last glimpse of the Egret's white hull as she sped into the mouth of the river. The setting sun glinted on paint and nickel and brasswork. It was fancy, perhaps, but he seemed to make out the figure of Annette still leaning over the starboard rail.

"Yes—I was," he said slowly. The Egret shifted her course slightly, and like the snuffing of a light disappeared round the first bend in the river.

"Well, I dunno," said White. "So far's I'm concerned the quicker I get my outfit up the river the better I'll like it."

"Do you know the river well?"

"Reckon I do."

"Can you run it by night?"

"Shore can—especially as it's going to be broad moonlight."

"All right," said Roger. "Let's go."

All through the night, without halting save for occasional engine trouble, the

little gasoline tug dragged its unwieldly tow up the tree-lined reaches of the Chokohatchee River. The moonlight illumined the waterway as with a million softly shaded lights. The Spanish moss which hung from the live oak and cypress along the bank was transmuted into scintillating draperies of twinkling silver. Upon the flowing water the light lay like an immutable sheen, seemingly a part of the flowing current, an endless stream of molten silver. Fishes, snakes and nocturnal animals broke and rippled the sheen of the water's surface. A huge, sharp fin ripping the silver before the tug's bows told of a tarpon strayed far inland with the tide. An otter's head, round and hard, jutted up, looked round, dove again.

In the magic light and shading, the tubby lines of the little tug were softened and altered; its paint-cracked deck and wheelhouse silvered and mellowed. The twin wire cables stretching back to the tow became two glistening silver ropes. At their ends, cavernous gloomy and grimy despite the moonlight, wallowed the high bulky hull of the ditcher's scow.

To Roger Payne, standing beside White in the little wheelhouse, the mournful chuckle of the Southern nightingale, as it sounded time after time from the cavernous darkness of the jungle shore seemed to strike at him personally with a note of knowing mockery. The weirdness and the elusiveness of the scene seemed the inevitable ending of the strange day. On the rippling water the moonbeams twinkled like silvery fairy sprites at play; and in the junglelike woods on the shores yawned great caverns of darkness, their evil suggestiveness only heightened by the bars of light shooting down through the matted leaves.

Back on the scow a sleepless negro, lying face up to the moonlight, began to croon weirdly.

"What in the devil do you call that?" asked Roger.

White listened, his head to one side.

"Haiti nigger—French patois," was his reply. "There; catch the '*mom'selle*'? Haiti nigger singing."

He reached down and picked up a bolt.

"Haiti negro?" said Roger, puzzled. "How did he get in that gang?"

"Oh, they drift over once in a while." White was measuring the distance to the scow.

The bolt hummed through the air, struck the ditcher's shovels with a clang and splashed into the water.

"Missed!" growled White. "Shut up, you Sam. This ain't no voodoo outfit."

"Voodoo!" Roger laughed mirthlessly. "That would be the finishing touch."

"How come?" said White, puzzled.

"Do you happen to know Mr. Garman, White?"

"I was 'specting you to ask that, Mr. Payne," was the drawled reply. "I got this to say: I know Garman, but that's all. I dig ditches for my living. I dig 'em fast and I dig 'em good; and—and that's all I'm up here for, one way or 'nother."

"Right! and the faster you dig 'em, the better it will suit me."

"Me, too," was the earnest reply.

Roger looked at the man sharply.

"Why? Don't you like the job?"

"The job's all right. I've said I'd dig 'em, and I'll dig 'em fast. But the quicker I get done, and the quicker I get my outfit pointed downstream again, and the quicker I'm out of this river, the better suited I'll be. That's all I'm saying."

Roger laughed grimly.

"You talk like you'd had dealings with Garman before, White?"

"That's all I'm saying," repeated the man. Then suddenly: "What's that?"

A clear shaft of light pierced the moonmist ahead, lighting a broad space in the river from the next bend down to the tug. While they watched in fascination the light came nearer, flashing in their eyes, and behind it resounded the unmistakable hum of the Egret's engines. Compared to the crawling pace of the tug the yacht seemed to leap out of the night straight at them.

"Yo hoo!" yelled White. "Look out! Want to run us down?"

A full-throated laugh rang out from the Egret's bridge as her course was changed slightly and her engines throttled down. On the bridge beside the searchlight Roger saw Garman's huge figure looming.

"Ho, Payne!" came a hail. "Didn't see anything of the —— we're after, did you?"

"Not to recognize by that description," replied Roger.

"A —— by any other name would look the same," laughed Garman. He leaned over the rail, smoking furiously, his eyes alight with the savage joy of the chase. "Yes, and he'd stand just as much chance of getting out alive. I'll get him. He got away from Palm Island into the swamp. Punctured your friend Ramos in doing so." His laugh rolled over the water like the growl of a bear. "In fact, punctured him so successfully that we had to cover Mr. Ramos with three feet of dirt to cheat the buzzards.—White, is that you?"

"Yessir."

"Well, White, you do your best for Mr. Payne. He's in a hurry to get his ditches dug. Do your best for him for he's a particular friend of mine—and of some one else." He laughed again, shouted an order, and the Egret leaped past them and on down the river.

"Ghost boat, ghost boat!" The Haiti black, back on the scow, waking up from his sleep, had stared full in the eye of the Egret's searchlight, and now was staggering round, terror-stricken and dazed.

"Knock him down somebody," called White calmly.

"Ghost boat, ghost boat!"

"Where?"

"Down the—uh! Oh, *ma Dieu*!"

The Egret and her light had disappeared round a bend and the negro was pointing at the empty moonlit river. Hoots of laughter greeted him.

"Guess you got 'em, Sam. No other boat round here."

"*Ma Dieu*! Ah seen him. Yoh gen'men sho' they wasn't no boat?"

"You're raving. No boat at all."

"Oh—Oh——!"

"Shut up!" cried White. "Shut up!"

A moment's silence. Then, from a black corner on the ditcher came the negro's voice, moaning in cutting minor notes a primitive jungle croon of fear and terror. White laughed grimly, making no effort to quiet him. Roger stared up the river and made out a flicker of purple light shooting up from the eastern horizon into the misty heavens.

"Thank God!" he said in relief. "Daylight is coming."

He leaped ashore as the tug ran close to an out-jutting point of high land below Garman's, and cut straight across the prairie toward his camp. The sunburst of dawn was at its gaudiest when he came within sight of the tents and he caught the glint of sun on the bare matchets of the clearing gang as the men prepared for the day's work. Higgins was standing before his tent, smoking and chafing the men.

"Everything all right, Hig?" asked Roger with false calm.

"All right? Sure. Why wouldn't it be?" Higgins took the pipe from his lips and looked closer.

"Hi! What's up? What's happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you don't have to tell me, of course; but—but what in the name of smoked fish makes you look as if you'd been through the Devil's Playground again?"

Higgins breathed hard after Roger had completed the tale of Garman's man hunt.

"That's a damn lie about Ramos!" he said. "If he's dead Garman's gang killed

him—-Garman himself probably—afterwards."

"How do you know?"

"Willy High Pockets has been here."

"What!"

"Yep. I had him hid down in Blease's shack, but he beat it away."

"Then it was that poor Indian Garman was after!"

"Not quite. There was a white man, too. A guy that Willy met out in the swamp some place when he beat it that day after Garman had handled him. It was this white man that Garman was after. Willy was with him. Garman's bunch had 'em trapped on an island down in the swamp, but Willy happened to know an Injun way out and they slipped the noose. Willy came crawling in here last night. He's got a tear from a forty-four along his hip and the white man sent him to us to get it doctored up and keep him hidden. I slipped down to Blease's and fixed it up with them to hide him, but he slipped away to join that white man as soon as we had him sewed up.

"Where is the white man?"

"Still out in the swamp. He steered Willy till they saw the tents and then he beat it back."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know; Willy wasn't telling."

"What does Garman want to get him for?"

"Willy 'donno' that either. He 'donno' anything at all about this guy in the swamp. But he did tell a straight story about the sneak they made; and there wasn't a shot fired on either side, so Ramos wasn't shot then. I'll bank on Willy's word for that."

XXVII

White promptly made good his promise concerning the ditches. Within a week his dredger had eaten its way through sawgrass, water and muck from the headwaters of the Chokohatchee to Deer Key, digging a broad, main drainage canal through the middle of Payne's thousand acres of drowned land. Higgins' calculations proved themselves in practice, and the big ditch soon drew off the bulk of the surface water on the track. The work of cutting the small lateral canals progressed rapidly with the smaller ditching machine. White worked his men in two shifts, and kept his shovels at work day and night. He made no effort to conceal the reason for his haste.

"I took the job, and I'll see it through," said he, "but outside of collecting my money the best part of this job to me will be when I wind it up and get out."

"Still," retorted Higgins, to whom the statement was made, "you don't look exactly like a man troubled with cold feet."

But White would not permit himself to be drawn out.

"I'll be glad when I look back from my tug and see Gumbo Key behind me; that's all I'm saying."

As the work progressed and it became apparent that the muck lands could be sufficiently drained to be available for agricultural purposes, Roger grew puzzled. There had been so far no opposition or interference from Garman. Apparently he had been sincere in his declaration that he wished to see Roger successful in the development of the tract. Garman himself was not seen during the period that the ditcher was at work, but the conduct of his employees made it obvious that they had received orders to assist, not interfere with the draining project. One day the proud Egret stopped to tow a disabled supply boat up the river for White's crew. Another time two of Garman's men came out and took the place of a pair of ditch workers who were ill.

Why was Garman doing it? What was behind his apparent friendliness?

Roger gave up the puzzle. In fact, he had discovered that he was not so vitally interested in his land project as he had thought himself to be. He worked and saw that his men worked, and kept the job up to the program he had outlined. And he tossed at night on his camp cot, his mind tortured with other thoughts.

White completed his job, pocketed his check and chugged away down the river.

Two days after his departure Roger and Higgins were measuring the acreage cleared in the elder brush when one of the blacks said suddenly:

"Wha' dem man do ovah thah, Boss?"

Payne glanced out over the ditched sawgrass land whither the negro was pointing and saw three men carefully picking their way along the spoil banks beside the ditches.

Roger studied the group for a long time, then suddenly he dropped the measuring line and strode toward them.

"Right," growled Higgins, doing likewise. "Those fellows aren't just sightseeing by a darn sight."

Payne studied the men as he approached them. They were dressed in tourist apparel, but their hard faces belied their clothes. Each carried a cane, but the thick hands that held them would have appeared more at home gripping a blackjack or a revolver. The largest of the trio, a hard-faced man with thin lips, studiously placed himself across Roger's path.

"Well," he said, with the snarl of the city tough in his tones, "what can we do for you?"

Roger choked down the rage that lept for mastery in his breast and said calmly:

"You can explain your insolence to begin with."

"Don't come that—don't try to come that on us, kid! You ain't dealing with no crackers now. What do you want, huh?"

The hot blood flush passed from Roger; he felt himself growing comfortably cool; and within he laughed silently.

"No," he said softly, "I can see that you aren't crackers. What jail held you last?"

The stranger swore foully, a string of oaths that reeked with the stench of corner saloons. He pushed his hat far back upon his round head, looked Roger up and down contemptuously, and swore some more.

"Know who you're talking to?" he demanded. "Better get wise, you——"

Again he polluted the air with his foulness.

Roger waited until the stream of filth had ceased.

"Are you going to explain what you're doing here?" he asked.

"Am—I? Am I going to explain? Hell! Are you going to explain, you mean."

"Yes," said Roger, and leaped forward.

Even Higgins whooped in surprise at the swiftness of the spring. Before the stranger could move Roger was close to him. His right fist swung from far behind caught the man full on the solar plexus, literally lifted him off the spoil bank and knocked him into the water of the ditch.

The other two strangers, heavy-jowled toughs, had sprung to meet Payne. One Roger staggered with a left swing on the ear; the other grappled his legs. This man Higgins rewarded with a kick which would have shattered a thinner skull to bits. Then two separate fights raged up and down the spoil bank. Instantly Roger and Higgins realized that they had their hands full. Payne ran into a body punch which made him realize that his opponent was nearly his equal. Higgins was knocked down at once, bounding up like a rubber ball and cheering the man who struck him.

"That was a peach, that one!" he roared, and returned the compliment.
The man rose, knocked Higgins down again and jumped on him.

"Rough and tumble it is!" cried Higgins, and grappled with bear-like arms.

Roger refused to go into a clinch, meeting his antagonist's rushes with straight lefts, and following with futile swings of his right. The tough was too skilled to be caught with a solid blow. Once Roger landed full on the jaw with what he expected to be a knockout and the blow glanced harmlessly, as the man rolled his head back with the trained pugilist's skill. Roger realized that it would be no short fight, and he thought of the man he had knocked into the canal. The fight had raged down the spoil bank, and he glanced around and saw the leader clawing his way up the bank. The pause nearly proved fatal. Roger's opponent leaped in and caught his head in chancery.

"Hand it to him!" screamed the tough to his partner in the ditch.
"Shoot him in the back!"

With a mighty lunge Roger flung himself and his opponent to the ground as a pistol snapped viciously and a steel-jacketed bullet zipped over his head.

"Look out, Hig!" he shouted. "Stay under your man."

"Turn 'im over!" The leader who had crawled upon the spoil bank fired again and missed. "Can't yah turn him up so I can get a crack at 'im?"

Roger felt the tough beneath him exerting all his energy. Slowly, surely he felt himself being turned. Then out from the sawgrass came the roar of a rifle, and a heavy slug whined over the gunman's head.

Bang! Another shot. Then the voice of Blease, the squatter:

"Next shot, I'll hold a foot lower. Throw that gun in the ditch.
Throw it, you——" Bang! "That's right—Now get 'em boys, get 'em!"

Bare feet came drumming down the dirt of the spoil bank. A huge Bahama black was in the lead of his fellows. He leaped like something wild, his machete flashing in the sun. The gunman cried out and tumbled to safety in the ditch. The black men came with a rush. The fight was over. Panting, grinning, their teeth and eyeballs gleaming, the negroes stood aside awaiting orders.

"I'll be darned," said Roger, puzzled. "Boys, how did you ever come here?"

"Dat white man"—a grinning negro pointed to where Blease had fired from the jungle—"he say he shoot us if we don' come."

Higgins had searched the two strangers and taken a revolver from each.

"All right, boys," said Roger. "You can get right back to work. The show's over."

From the opposite sides of the canal Roger and the leader of the trio glared at one another.

"Well," said Payne, "you tried to run a bluff and it didn't work.
What's the idea?"

The man swore again and replied:

"What's the idear, huh? That's what I want to know. You'll get yours for this—coming on people's land and starting a roughhouse."

Roger stared stupidly across the canal at the speaker, incomprehension taking the place of anger. "Oh," he said at last, "it's all a mistake. You got on the wrong tract: this is my land."

"Like —— it is!"

"What?"

"Don't try to come that on us; don't waste your breath. Think we're dummies? This is our land. We bought it last week. And I'm telling you to keep off of it from now on. Oh, I got the right description; a thousand acres west of a line from Deer Key there to the Cypress Swamp. Want to look at the deed? Give you our lawyer's address if you do."

"Who is your lawyer?"

"Big Tom Connors, Washington, D. C. And if it'll make you feel any better—why, he's a law partner of Senator Fairclothe."

"If you think you have really bought this land," said Roger slowly, "you have been cheated."

"Huh! Do we look like easy marks? Listen, boh: you're the fish that got hooked. You bought a bum title. Get that? Didn't know this little piece of dirt was in the courts, eh? Well, it was; and Big Tom got it, and we got it from him. Your title

ain't worth the paper it's written on. Now, you're guilty of tresp——Hold on!"

Roger had thrown his self-control to the winds. He leaped into the canal and wallowed across.

"Get off, my land!" he growled. "Get off!"

The gunman was running for dear life down the spoil bank. On the opposite side his companions were in full flight. Payne did not follow. He stood and watched them, outraged to the marrow. "And keep off, too!" he shouted grimly. "Tell your lawyer, tell your sheriff, tell 'em all, keep off!"

XXVIII

"It's impossible!"

Roger was too stunned to grasp the true significance of the situation at once.

"The Senator's company wouldn't have sold me this land if there was a suit on it."

Then, little by little, the facts began to clarify in his mind. Connors, the lawyer, was Senator Fairclothe's law partner; Fairclothe had been anxious to see the tract drained.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, "Are they that rotten!"

"But you had the title searched before you bought?" said Higgins.

"Of course. Right back to the first Spanish land grant, and there wasn't a flaw in it."

"Then those fellows are stung."

"Pooh! Those cheap toughs. They're nothing but tools. There's probably been a false transfer made to their names, but that's all; they were picked because they were fighters. Well, whoever picked them hasn't got the least suspicion of what he's started."

"Land titles are rotten things," growled Higgins. "Specially when land sharks are juggling them."

"They waited until the ditches were dug," mused Roger. "They didn't know it would make good land. And then they struck! Higgins, I'm going right down to Garman's and have a little talk with Senator Fairclothe."

"Bet you won't find him. Bet he's away selling this tract again to some other sucker."

But Higgins was wrong. Senator Fairclothe had not gone away. As Roger entered Garman's grounds, he saw Garman, the Senator and a man in long black coat and broad-brimmed black hat in conference upon the verandah. At his appearance Garman, lolling in a lawn chair, chuckled lazily; the Senator became as cold and pompous as the statue he hoped some day would commemorate his services to the Republic, and the black-hatted stranger closed his eyes to mere slits.

"Lo, Payne!" drawled Garman. "Come up out of the sun. You look all heated up."

He looked down at Roger, a smile on his lips as he noted the tenseness of the young man's expression.

"Worrying about something, Payne? Ideals been shattered? Ambition, love—Where's Annette, by the way?"

His chuckle rose to rumbling laughter.

Senator Fairclothe caught the black-clad stranger's eye and nodded stiffly. The man rose.

"You are Roger Payne?"

"Sit down!" In one leap Roger was upon the verandah facing the stranger. "Sit down!" he repeated. "My business is with Senator Fairclothe."

"My business——"

"Sit down," said Roger softly, and the stranger sat.

"Senator Fairclothe," continued Payne, "there seems to be a little misunderstanding about the title to the land I bought from you."

"You bought no land from me, young man."

"You are president of the Prairie Highlands Association?"

"I was. I severed that connection some months ago."

"Before you wrote me those letters?"

"No, the day after I wrote you the last letter of our correspondence. I had no connection with the company you mention at the time you made your purchase. I had discovered that the Prairie Highlands Association was not upon a firm basis. Of the land which they sold not a foot was owned by them. Their original title was false and invalid. The company now is defunct."

"I see," said Roger after a pause. "And knowing that your recommendations as a United States Senator would influence people to purchase this land, and knowing the title to be invalid, did you take any steps to warn them?"

"A United States Senator, I assure you, young man, has other and more important duties than nursing the petty interests of persons stupid enough to purchase land without seeing it. In fact, it might be considered a duty not to interfere. For the welfare of the country, it is desirable, in fact, that such money as such helpless persons may possess be transferred to the possession of the shrewd energetic men who constitute the vital portion of our population."

"Bravo, bravo!" rumbled Garman, applauding. "Senator, I congratulate you on your logic. Payne, there's the philosophy of our era in a nutshell. Now let us hear how star-eyed youth, inspired by ideals, controverts the wisdom of the togoed sage? Annette, dear!" he roared. "Come out! Come out and have some sport!"

"Miss Annette is not in the house," responded a maid.

"What? She was a minute ago."

"She is not now."

"All right. Too bad; wish you could see her, Payne. She's changed. She's grown up now. Senator, it just occurred to me: Annette is rapidly becoming her father's daughter."

"Well, young man," said Fairclothe complacently. "Have you anything more to say to me?"

"I'm going to keep that land, Garman," said Roger, ignoring the Senator. "Going

to keep it in spite of all your tools, whether they're city gangsters, United States Senators, or"—with a glance at the stranger—"your deputy sheriffs."

"Senator!" cried Garman in mock horror. "He slanders the honor of your sacred office!"

"Better keep a-hold of your tongue, young feller," warned the deputy. "I'm a little interested in this, too."

"Well," said Roger, "I think there is something in this that will interest people bigger than you or I or the state of Florida. I think the United States Government is due to become interested down here."

The suspicion of a smile curved the corners of Garman's mouth. There was a moment of pregnant silence; then Senator Fairclothe said impressively:

"I represent the United States Government, sir."

"Do you really?" laughed Roger bitterly. "Then the poor old United States Government is in a bad way indeed. But I deny your claim, sir; I don't think you represent the United States Government, because the United States Government consists of about a hundred million working people like myself; and all you represent, sir, are the few rich men and the few hundred millions of dollars which constitute the power that put you in the Senate."

"Do I understand, sir, that you mean to impugn the honor of the august body of which I have the honor to be a member?"

"No; I'm a busy man; I haven't any time to waste like that. But there's going to be something said about using the mails to defraud before this is over. That's Federal business."

"Be careful, sir; I am a member of and represent the Federal Government, and I shall take care that nobody casts any aspersions upon its honor or mine."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What? Sir, do you mean to defy——?"

"Consider the aspersions cast. What are you going to do about it?"

"He calls," chuckled Garman; "show your cards."

"I shall——"

"Hm," interrupted Garman, and the Senator obediently hesitated.

"I shall not state here and now what means I shall utilize in meeting, as befits it, this defiance of our sacred Government. Nor shall I continue any communication or intercourse, or any association whatsoever, with the party or parties guilty of such defiance."

"I reckon this young feller has tooted his horn long enough," drawled the deputy sheriff. "Roger Payne, I——"

Roger turned his back deliberately and went down the stairs.

"Here! Come back here!"

Roger was walking across the lawn, bound for the path that led to his camp. He heard the click of a revolver being cocked on the verandah, but he did not look up.

"Oh, put that thing up, you ass!" said Garman disgustedly. "And go back to Flora City and draw your time—Payne, you're a big, bold buck. There's only one bigger in the country; and you and I are going to have a lot of fun before we're many days older."

Payne did not pause to look back or reply. Garman's taunts had driven him close to the point of explosion. The wretched situation in which he found himself in regard to the land he had paid for and drained was a muddle in his mind. Senator Fairclothe's brazen confession was a confusion. The one thing that was clear to his comprehension—as a touch of white-hot steel is clear to its victim—was Garman's assertion that Annette had changed and was becoming her father's daughter. And when he came upon her—rather when she stepped out before him—in the hidden path near the edge of the wild apple trees, Roger saw that Garman had spoken the truth.

She had changed. She had grown older. Her beauty was as great as ever, but it was now the beauty of a sophisticated, disillusioned and hardened woman, rather than that of the buoyant girl he had known. He could not define the change that

had taken place in her, so subtle was it; but as he looked at her he instinctively flung out his hand, a gesture of pleading for something gone, and cried out in youth's agony:

"Annette! Annette!"

And then the miracle happened. At the sight of him, at the heart throb in his tones as he called her name, she seemed to shiver, then to awaken. She seemed to change before his eyes; though it was only he, seeing with the eyes which that moment had given him, who could have been sensible of the change. She seemed to grow and freshen as a parched rose at the touch of life-giving water. Her eyes gleamed with the old, frank look, her cheeks were rosy, and she walked girlishly as she came forward.

"Ah! Goody, goody!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Somebody likes me the other way—the way I want to be!"

"Annette!" he said again, and stretched out his hands and touched hers and held them.

"You—are happy again now, aren't you?" he stammered.

"Don't I look it?"

Her eyes were brimming with soothing tears.

"Happy?"

"Yes—for a minute."

He drew her hands against his breast. He held her so, and she looked up, her wet eyes close to his. He put an arm about his shoulders, and she nestled against his strength with a little sigh of content. And then he drew her closer to him, and they kissed once, instinctively, naturally; and she threw her head back and cried, "Ah, God! No, no!"

"Annette! Annette! What is it?"

"No, no! Let me go—let me go, dear. Please—you must, you must!"

She tore herself out of his relaxed arms and pressed her fists against her eyes to shut out the sight of him.

"Go away!" Her voice was flat and heavy. She turned and crossed her arms against the vine-clad trunk of a wild-apple tree and leaned her head upon them. "Don't come near me. You must not. You won't if you—if you play fair."

"Forgive me!" he said miserably. "I forgot—I didn't think——"

"Don't! Don't apologize—to me."

She waited a moment longer, then turned and faced him. The girlhood was gone from her eyes once more, and her mouth was hardened. She did not meet his eyes, she did not look at him, but stared off into the jungle as she spoke.

"I came out here on purpose to meet you." Her tone was cold and precise. "He—Mr. Garman—told me the truth about those three men last night. It is a lie—about your title being a false one. Your title is the good one. The other title is false. They intend to get possession of the land and entangle it in a lawsuit which will ruin you."

"What does it matter?" he cried pleadingly. "What does that matter?"

There was no response from her. She looked steadily off into the jungle.

"That is just what does matter," she said. "You must not let them get possession of your land."

"I don't intend to. But that——"

"I don't want to see them gobble you up like"—she laughed bitterly—"like they're doing to me."

"No! They haven't done that. They can't. I saw it a moment ago."

"Don't! It hurts. No, they haven't gobbled me up yet, but I don't think they'll delay much longer. They're too strong for me, you see: Aunty, and father, and—him. Aunty trained me for it; poor father cries: he's in his power; and he—it's a terribly strong array against one girl—all alone."

"Not quite alone."

"Yes, quite alone. That's the horror of it. I've told you before; you couldn't understand; but it's myself, only my own soul, that can settle this—it's very strange."

"You can't tell me—what it is?"

"I've told you too much now. But you must take care of yourself. No matter what happens you must take care of yourself."

"I don't know if that's so important," said Roger. "I confess I've lost considerable interest in just myself."

"I've—made you—do that?"

"I want to take care of you."

She smiled a smile too old, too cynical for her youthful lips.

"That was a kind thing to say, but——"

"I love you," said Roger bluntly. "I believe you care a little——"

"Don't, don't, don't!" She turned a face toward him full of pleading. "Do you want to torture me? Can't you see——?" Her voice failed her. She struggled a moment and turned round; holding back tears and smiling by sheer force of will, and held out her hand frankly.

"Good-by!"

"I love you," repeated Roger doggedly.

A low chuckle in the jungle startled them.

"Ah, youth, youth, youth!" Garman's huge face was peering at them from behind a mask of flowering moon vine. "'I love you.' Ho ho! Poor Payne!"

"You cad, Garman; you mucker!" cried Roger.

"Go!" Annette flung herself upon him, seeking to push him away, but he stood

like an oak.

"Eavesdropping! Fine work, Garman."

Garman roared with laughter.

"Do you really love me?" whispered Annette, suddenly, her lips closed to Roger's.

"You know that now."

"No, not yet; but I will soon. If you love me, you'll do what I ask.
Go away. Please, please at once!"

"I can't leave you here, Annette, helpless among all this devilishness."

"I am not helpless. Not if I know you really love me. Can you understand that—it will mean so much to me—it will be the one way you can help me—the only way. Help me to save myself, dear, by showing me I have your love. Go!"

He looked at her. Then he bowed his head and went.

XXIX

"They've jumped us!" Higgins' great neck was swollen with impotent rage as he greeted Roger's return to camp.

"It's my fault, too. Take a good, swift kick at me. I fell down on the job while you were away."

"What has happened?"

Higgins led the way to the edge of the elderberry jungle and pointed out over the drained land. A dozen armed men, outlaws and fugitives of the most vicious kind from Big Cypress Swamp, were scattered systematically over the thousand-acre tract. Two men lay behind the spoil banks at each of the main canal, their heads and rifle barrels showing above the black-earth breastworks. The other men were placed in pairs at strategic points. No one could set foot on the drained land without being seen and subject to fire from two sides.

Through his glasses Payne studied the pair which guarded the end of the main ditch near Deer Key. These were no city toughs who would try to bully rather than fight, but lank-haired, sallow-faced killers from the darkest part of Big Cypress Swamp; men who were desperate because of the crimes they had left behind them, and to whom rifle fire was a familiar argument. By the fashion in which they handled their weapons, Roger saw they were hunters; and the grim way in which they kept watch proved that they had come expecting a fight; to shoot and be shot at; to kill and perhaps be killed.

"That's Garman's work; no one else could get that crowd out of the swamp. How did it happen, Hig?"

"It happened because I'm all bone from the neck up. They used an old trick, and I fell into the trap like a tenderfoot. A few of them came hollering and shooting out of Flower Prairie, stampeding the boys. I figured it to be a raid on the camp,

and I hollered for Blease and we ran for the tents. They played the bluff strong. Steamboat Bill got it through the head while he was running for cover—you remember him, the big, black fellow with earrings. Then they threw some lead into the tents, and Blease and I had quite a time holding 'em off. Blease got one of 'em; saw them carrying him away too dead to skin. Then we heard three quick shots, repeated three times down on the muck lands, and the shooting up here quit *pronto*.

"After a while it got through my thick head what had happened. Blease and I took in on the gallop back toward the ditches, but we were too late. They'd jumped it already, a whole army of 'em, and real hard *hombres*. Shoot?" He held out his perforated sun helmet. "I pushed that up on the stick for an experiment, and the guy that drilled it was two hundred yards away."

"It was my fault," said Payne. "Garman was too smart for me. I played right into his hand by going down there. He knew that's what I'd do, and he had this gang waiting and shot them over here as soon as he saw me coming."

"That isn't all," continued Higgins. "As soon as the boys saw Steamboat Bill run against his bad luck they left the job and ran for the brush like rabbits. Blease says they won't come back; they always make tracks when white men start shooting."

"You mean there's only two of us here now?"

"Three. Old Blease has put on the war paint."

"Three isn't enough."

"Not by a dozen, it isn't. Did you learn what they're trying to do to you?"

"They're trying to beat me out of the land by fixing up a false title. Now they've got possession, and their scheme is to carry me from court to court till I'm busted and tired out."

As he spoke he realized fully what this meant. Garman's wealth and influence and the pomp and honor of Senator Fairclothe's position would be arrayed against him. He had seen and heard enough to appreciate that the vast territory of Southern Florida was in the hands of a set of powerful, fearless plunderers, with Garman the arch plunderer of them all. And it was organized, protected

plundering.

A county sheriff was a petty pawn in the great game. A county judge would be only slightly larger, and so on, up through state legislatures, the governor, congressman, state supreme court judges, and even up and into the sacred precincts of the United States Senate in the person of Senator Fairclothe. How vast was the power of Garman's plunder organization might be estimated by the degree of ignorance in which the land-buying public throughout the country was kept concerning the true situation in the district. Full-page advertisements in Sunday newspapers created a golden dream in the public mind concerning the Western Everglades; not one single news item crept into print revealing the truth. Roger realized that for such a power to crush him in a court test would require merely that the machine created for such purpose be set in motion. He realized also that the vicious nature of the desperados whom Garman had placed upon his drained land and the desperate measures which would be necessary to regain possession of his own.

Yet he found, a little to his own amazement, that he could look upon the theft with entire calmness. The fact was that it did not seem to concern him deeply. His emotions were a throb from the memory of Annette in his arms. He recalled little else of the meeting. She had been in his arms. And now his arms ached for her again with a poignance which made all other things insignificant.

"Well?" said Higgins. "Going to let 'em do it?"

"Do what, Hig?"

"Going to let them drag you into court and beat you because they've got possession of your land?"

"It takes thinking over," mused Roger.

"It takes fighting, that's what it takes," retorted Higgins. "We've got to roust those hard guys out of there before they take root and put up buildings. Some one's got to chase out to Citrus Grove and burn the wires up for about twenty tough fighting men to be delivered at Citrus Grove as quick as the trains will bring 'em. Twenty fighting men, and twenty riot pump-guns, and a dark night, and I'll kick that bunch off the place and have the place back in your own hands by daylight."

Roger laughed sharply.

"What's the matter?" demanded Higgins, "got a better idea?"

"Higgins, if you think Garman has left our back door open you don't half appreciate what the man is. When were the ox teams due?"

"Whew!" Higgins whistled. "That's so; this is the day for 'em to show up. They've been due since daylight."

"And they've never missed their weekly schedule so far. Ox teams are slow, Higgins, but they're darn sure."

"You think Garman's cut us off then?"

"Higgins, if you'd studied Garman half as hard as I have you'd know he wouldn't fail to do just that thing."

At dark Blease came noiselessly to Roger's tent to substantiate this deduction.

He had followed craftily after the party which he and Higgins had driven northward from the camp, and had found them encamped on Coon Hammock, across the ox trail, a scant mile from the camp.

Roger lay on his cot that night calmly appraising his situation. To the south of the camp Garman's henchmen were in possession of his land. To the eastward lay the trackless waters of the Everglades through which only the Seminoles cared to find a way; on the west—the only way out was through Garman's grounds which meant there was no way at all. Northward there was the ox trail, now closed, and the ghastly mud of the Devil's Playground.

Garman's trap was quite complete. Roger wondered when Garman would see fit to bring its jaws together.

But Garman had contemplated and prepared a sport more pleasing to him than this. The trap did not spring; day after day passed, and the situation remained the same. The men on the muck lands guarded against trespass by day or night. The moon was losing its radiance of nights, but sufficient light still prevailed to make an attempt to cross the ditched track plain suicide. In the north the men on Coon Hammock followed the same policy. No attack was made, but neither was there

opportunity for any one to pass unobserved or unharmed.

One of the negroes, weary of hiding in the swamp, tried it and came staggering back to the camp with a bullet hole in his foot. Roger reasoned that Garman's cat-and-mouse tactics were calculated to break his nerve or to provoke a fight which could have only one result. Failing in this the trap had but to be maintained and the inevitable result would be surrender.

On the first night when a slight cloudiness, promised considerable darkness Roger slipped out of his tent trained and primed for the ordeal of a passage through the Devil's Playground to Citrus Grove. He crossed the open space of Flower Prairie while a cloudlet hid the moon. In the uncertain light a course through the jungle was not to be thought of. He looked up, and, encouraged by the gathering clouds, slipped through his fence onto the sand prairie and ran northward.

If he could reach unobserved the timber at the southern end of the Devil's Playground he felt he would be safe. As he ran he prayed for the clouds to hold together until he reached the dark wood. His prayer was answered. He made out a trail running into the timber and plunged into the darkness. The darkness lasted but a little while, however. Roger heard the whinny of horses on the trail ahead. The clouds suddenly parted and the moonlight seemed to light the forest like day. He was in an open space in the forest, and Garman and Mrs. Livingstone and Annette were sitting their horses facing him a few paces away.

"I figured it almost to the minute!" said Garman. "Almost to the minute I figured when you were due to start through the Devil's Playground, Payne."

He laughed shortly at the young man's amazement. "Didn't know I knew about that, eh, Payne? Well, I didn't until you bought that land from the Cypress Company. Then I knew you'd found a new way out and I had it looked up. No go now, Payne; the Devil's Playground is closed for traffic."

Annette was sitting straight and firm in her saddle. She turned on Garman with no fear or faltering in her attitude.

"Is this what you brought me out here for?" she asked, so sharply that Mrs. Livingstone cried out protestingly:

"My dear!"

Garman lowered his head ominously and the taunting smile on his lips turned to a threat as he returned her look. Even by the faint moonlight the sudden leap of anger and the desire to hurt were apparent in his countenance. He controlled himself.

"Yes, dear," he purred dangerously, "it is."

Annette met his gaze fearlessly. "Is there to be any more of the exhibition?"

"Not unless you irritate me, dear. Don't ride away. Gaze upon Payne's young, star-eyed face, my dear. Look upon it well; let it soak into your soul's memory, as it is now. It is your last chance. Next time you see him his face will not be the face of star-eyed youth at all! Preserve the memory, Annette!"

"Have you quite done?" she said.

"I? Certainly, my dear." Garman was nettled at her self-mastery. "Mrs. Livingstone, perhaps Annette has a word or two she wishes to speak to Payne. Shall we ride on and give them a moment alone?"

"I am sure Annette can have nothing to say to this Mr. Payne," replied Mrs. Livingstone quickly.

"Don't you be so sure of that," said Garman curtly. "Youth calls to youth!"

Annette's riding crop fell suddenly upon her mount and she went past Roger on the gallop out onto the prairie.

"Youth calls to youth!" repeated Garman staring after her with angry eyes. "Mrs. Livingstone, don't you remember when you were young; when you had ideals and hopes of realizing them, and you could love, nobly and purely, without thinking of money?—ha, ha, ha! Must you really follow Annette? Really!"

He pulled his horse close to Roger.

"Well, Payne, how do you like my rat pit? Hard to get out of, eh? Don't waste your time trying; I've made sure you're going to stay put."

"I've been thinking," said Roger calmly, "that perhaps the best act of my life would be to pull the gun inside my shirt and shoot you through the head right

here."

"Don't talk nonsense; you can't; you're too civilized. Besides—Hi, there!—Look behind you, Payne."

Roger laughed without turning.

"No, you don't get the drop on me with that old trick, Garman."

"Speak, you back there—what's your name—Harney?"

"Yes, sir," said a muffled voice in the shadows behind Roger. "Ed Harney—Joe Harney's brother. I've got him covered."

"Ho hum!" yawned Garman. "I must follow the ladies. Especially, Annette—magnificent, tender, fiery little Annette!—Damn her! Something has happened; she's bold, defiant! She needs taming. Great sport, woman taming—in the swamp. Good night, Payne. Pleasant dreams!"

A cloud bank floated across the moon, plunging the woods into Stygian darkness. Out on the sand of the prairie the thud, thud, thud of Garman's galloping horse grew fainter and died away. A rift in the clouds revealed the moon for an instant. Roger whirled round, seeking to see the man who had called himself Harney. The clouds closed up again, the woods were black; and a Southern whippoorwill chuckled foolishly. Ahead, on the trail which he must follow to reach the Devil's Playground, Roger heard the footsteps of three men, and knew that Garman had taken all precautions to make good his assertion that the Devil's Playground was closed to traffic.

The anger which was in his heart craved an outlet. He moved toward the hidden men, then paused. They were three to one; in the dark a fight would be folly. Nothing would please Garman better than for him to plunge blindly into a hopeless battle. As Roger thought over the situation his anger rose and clarified. He realized now what a poor figure he had cut face to face with Garman, and he understood why. Garman had dominated him, and made him appear the baffled victim of Garman's superiority. Garman had dominated him, had played with Mrs. Livingstone till she rode away, helpless, outraged. But Annette had outfaced him, and Garman knew it!

"Something has happened!"

Roger recalled Garman's words, and a thrill shot along his spine. Garman did not dominate Annette; he did not hold her helpless by his hypnotic presence as formerly. Something had happened. Roger feared to think what, though hope whispered to him; and he turned back to camp not at all crest-fallen because the secret way through the Devil's Playground was closed. He came into camp with an easy, swinging step, such as no defeated man should display, and Higgins, appraising him as he listened to Roger's brief statement of the case, said:

"Hm. Then you know about it, do you?"

"About what, Hig?"

"About Willie High Pockets!"

"What! Willy been here?"

Higgins' thick brows met in a puzzled frown above his eyes.

"Payne, do you mean to tell me that you go out and find we're shut in like rats in a pit and come back here stepping high, without knowing about our friend Willy?"

"I don't know anything but what I've told you, Hig! Garman has got us shut in. Got us hopelessly cooped up. That's all I know."

"Well, you're a gamer bird than I thought, then. But why so frisky?"

"I figure he's got us about licked," replied Roger, ignoring the question. "We've got one chance in a million. We'll have it out with those birds on the muck land to-night after the moon is down. We may roust 'em. We may not."

"By God!" swore Higgins swiftly. "I'm almost sorry Willy High Pockets showed up. Your idea is the one I've had in mind for days. A fine fight we'd have given them, too. And now that darned Injun cones along and spoils it. We can't try it now."

XXX

"Why not?" demanded Roger.

"Willy High Pockets came crawling into camp on his belly about ten minutes after you'd left. He came with a message from that white side-kick of his he met in the swamp. You can't guess who that guy is."

"Who is he?"

"Davis."

"What! The fellow they tried to get on the Cormorant?"

"Exactly."

"Is he some sort of a detective?"

"I suspect so. Willy ain't much on the tell. He says that man has got Uncle Sam behind him! And this Davis sends us serious word that we're to keep away from Garman's men. Whatever happens we mustn't get into a fight. We've got to stick right in camp and play safe, or we'll spoil two years' work for Uncle Sam. The first dark night—to-morrow night probably—it will be over, whatever it is, and Davis will come here and explain. That's what Willy High Pockets said, and if you'd seen him tell it you'd know it was a darn serious business. By the great smoked fish, Payne, there's a big game being played round here. I feel it in my bones. And I'm sore because I haven't got a finger in the pie."

"What can it be?"

"You got me. But whoever this Davis man is he's got Willy so he isn't afraid of Garman. That means something big."

"We'll give Davis to-night and to-morrow night," said Roger, after pondering the matter a moment. "After that——"

"Hell's delight! And I almost hope that Davis falls down on whatever he's doing."

On the narrow there was no sign to indicate that Davis or any one else was concerned in the affairs of the district. The grim guards on the muck lands held their stations. It was apparent that they had orders not to leave the tract or to seek trouble, but to be ready to shoot and shoot accurately at any one venturing to trespass. Blease scouted northward on the ox-team trail and reported that Coon Hammock was still occupied. Payne himself went through the elderberry and saw grass jungle and through his glasses saw men guarding the approach to the Devil's Playground.

The strain was beginning to tell on all three men in the clearing.
Each hour now seemed a day, each sight of a Garman man was a torture.

"It ain't human," muttered Blease. "I can't stand it."

Higgins lay flat on his back in his tent, staring up at the canvas.

"It had better be a dark night to-night," he said, with a grim smile. Roger silently agreed. And he realized that this was what Garman had foreseen and planned for when he digged the pit—the sense of imprisonment and the desperate attempt to break out, regardless of consequences.

"He's too smart to be just a man, Garman is," droned Blease; but Roger stopped him.

"He's nothing but a man; nothing but a man who likes to hurt. Don't let me hear you say he's anything but that."

To Roger and Higgins the sudden, fierce sunset came as a benison, presaging the coming of the night. There was no thought of food or sleep. Narrowly they watched the sun go angrily down in the west and the night come rolling over the heavens from the east. Clouds appeared, first a few scatterings of fleecy stuff, next solid cloud banks through which the waning moon strove in vain to send its rays.

"It will be a dark one," said Roger.

Higgins on his cot laughed harshly.

"Come through, Davis; to-night or never."

They lay out through the night, waiting, hoping for events, and they waited in vain. The first purple-rayed warning of sunrise in the morning found them in a mood of despair. As the second day came on with no sign of Davis they turned their steps toward the tents.

"I don't wait any longer," said Higgins, loading his rifle. "Soon as good shooting light comes I start doing business."

The others followed his example, and Blease led the way by a tortuous path through the elderberry jungle to a point near Deer Hammock. They crawled forward, ready to cover the pair of guards at the head of the canal. Blease was in the lead. Lying flat on his breast he thrust his rifle barrel out of the jungle, searching for his quarry. Presently he rubbed his eyes.

Roger crept close to him and searched the grass-covered expanse of drained land carefully with his glasses. Then he stood up and stepped out into the open.

The drained land was deserted. Garman's guards were gone.

XXXI

The discovery brought neither relief nor elation to Roger. Amazement smote him dumb for a moment, then came suspicion that this was only another of Garman's traps. He strove to follow the man's psychology to an explanation of this move. Was Garman merely playing with him again, arousing false hopes which would be diabolically crushed?

That seemed the logical reason for the move. What would Garman's next move be?

"Looks like a trick, doesn't it?" said Higgins.

"Yes."

Roger strode down to the head of the main drainage ditch where two of the guards had held watch. The forms where the men had lain in the soft black muck behind the spoil bank were still sharply defined. Their departure must have occurred during the darkest hours of early morning. They had left behind them a flask full of colorless liquid, one whiff of which proved its contents to be moonshine whisky.

"Queer thing," said Blease. "Reckon they must have left in a hurry or they'd never have forgot their licker."

Higgins and Roger preceded cautiously over the tract, making sure that no guards lay hidden in the ditches. The trails left by the departing men were easily followed. They led, not to the river or toward Garman's as might have been expected, but scattered and lost themselves to the southward in the tangle morass of the cypress swamp. Here and there articles had been left behind in what savored of a flight; unopened canned goods, a deer carcass, a frying pan, a rifle and a pair of shoes. Roger studied the tracks leading into the swamp and saw that several of them had been made on the run. It was apparent from all signs that the

guards had fled, driven by fear of something.

"Blease," said Roger suddenly, "you scout up the ox trail and see if they're gone from Coon Hammock, too; and, Higgins, you slip up towards the Devil's Playground and see what you can see."

He went on down the main ditch toward its junction with the headwaters of the Chokohatchee River, keeping a close watch for possible lurking danger beyond his line. Near the mouth of the ditch he found a dugout evidently left behind in the flight of the guards. In the dugout he paddled the rest of the distance down the ditch, hidden from sight by the spoil banks on the canal's sides.

It was broad daylight when suddenly he checked the canoe at the entrance to the river. The plop of a pair of paddles propelling a canoe upstream came from round a bend and Roger lay down flat on the bottom of the dugout, his rifle resting upon the prow. The rifle covered the spot where the canoe must come round the bend. He was on his own land, and he would not allow the guards to regain possession without a fight. He saw the white prow of the canoe shoot out past a tuft of saw-grass on the bend, and laid his eye to the sights. Another stroke of the paddles and the canoe was in full view, and Roger found his front sight bearing upon a button on the silken shirt which stretched taut across Garman's great chest.

A roar like the bellow of an angered bull welled from Garman's throat as he recognized Payne, an inarticulate cry of rage, then a silence. The current carried the canoe back a trifle and with an oath Garman drove it forward with his paddle. In the stern was Senator Fairclothe, dumb and helpless from fear.

Garman struck his paddle in the bottom and held the canoe motionless. His eyes, usually lazy and indifferent, now blazed beneath the fleshy brows with the madness of rage. He glared full in the eyes above the rifle barrel and bellowed:

"Where's Annette! —— you, Payne, give her up!"

Roger's heart leaped at the words. He felt an impulse to jump up and shout; but he kept his cheek to the rifle butt and responded:

"Keep to your own side of those stakes, Garman, or I'll sink your canoe."

"Answer me!" hissed Garman. "Answer me, or by God! the alligators will make

a meal of you!"

"You've got your answer. Keep off and keep out of danger."

"Give her up! Do you hear: give her up or she'll be sorry she ever was born."

Roger pondered a moment for the right answer.

"Nothing doing," he said firmly.

"You admit she's come here then?"

"Keep your hands in sight, Garman," said Roger. "I'm taking no chances—now."

"You hear, Fairclothe?" demanded Garman. "She's run away to this squirt. She's been with him all night. By——! when I get hold of her there won't be any talk of marriage—now."

"You've got to come and get her first, Garman," retorted Roger. If Annette had fled she had undoubtedly gone to get away from Garman. Garman had jumped to the conclusion she had gone to Payne. She had not; and Roger reasoned that in some manner she had gone down the river, whence she would eventually reach civilization. Every hour that he could delay Garman from turning to this surmise would be valuable.

"You've got to come and take her," he repeated. "I won't give her up now."

"You hear him, Fairclothe?" sneered Garman. "What do you think of your daughter now? Nicely brought up, nicely watched, I must say. You poor—fool! You'd better jump in right here and drown yourself. He's had your Annette all night; now he's going to keep her at the point of a rifle. I suppose you intend to make the conventional restitution by marrying her, Payne? By——! I'll spoil that—I'll take her away from you. I'll turn her back to you when I'm tired of her. Then you can marry her, Payne! Give her up. I'll wipe you out, including her, before I'll let her get away like this."

"Come and get her," repeated Roger.

Fairclothe found his voice.

"I demand that you return my daughter, young man."

"I am not holding her against her will. She is free to return to you if she wishes to do so."

"I demand that I be allowed to speak to her."

"I cannot grant that demand."

"You refuse to allow me to communicate with her?"

"If she wishes to communicate with you I won't prevent it."

"You young scoundrel!"

Roger did not reply.

"If you have harmed my little girl, I warn you you will be punished to the utmost."

"You talk like a parrot!" snarled Garman. "Talk sense—if you can."

Fairclothe cleared his throat. "Did my daughter Annette come to you of her own free will?"

Roger hesitated before replying.

"No!" he said defiantly.

"Ah! Garman, Garman, what did I tell you—what did I tell you? I knew Annette never would leave you of her own free will!"

"You —— impudent squirt!" said Garman, "You mean to tell me you—— No, you wouldn't be man enough to steal her. Who brought her to you?"

Again Roger debated.

"If you come and get her as you threaten to do, you may find out."

Garman's rage was ghastly to behold. The flesh of his face seemed to swell in puffs, his nostrils widened, his eyes seemed to recede beneath the fleshy brows.

He held up his great hairy hands, closing and opening them; but enough reason remained in his rage-drunken mind to comprehend the iciness of the blue eyes above the rifle barrel.

"By——! Fairclothe, I believe you did it yourself," he cried, venting his rage on the helpless Senator. "Don't try to talk back. I believe you did it, you and that dried-up, gold-digger of a sister. But by——! if you have you'll be yanked out of the Senate and go to jail, Fairclothe! Don't talk! I'm sick of you."

He jerked his paddle from the bottom and the current gently drew the canoe back downstream. Roger forced a smile of false triumph upon his face. He must not let Garman turn elsewhere to look for Annette.

"Licked, eh, Garman?" he taunted. "I'll go back and tell Annette about it. We'll enjoy it together."

The canoe was drifting down the bend.

"And come in a hurry, Garman, if you intend to get her; because if you wait long you won't find her here."

Garman appeared not to hear; but he swung the canoe round furiously, and paddled out of sight down the river.

Higgins and Blease returned soon afterward, each reporting that the guards to the northward had departed, apparently in the same hurried fashion as those on the muck land. Payne wasted no time in an attempt to puzzle out the reason for it. If Garman had withdrawn the men to lay a new trap, it was obvious that Annette's flight had upset his plans. For the time being at least his mind was too inflamed with rage over her daring in thwarting his will, to admit the consideration of any other problem. He would be too obsessed with thought for gratifying his revengeful lust to trouble about Payne's land.

Roger related briefly the fact of Garman's visit, omitting mention of Annette.

"Then he'll be coming back to clean us up, you think?" asked Higgins hopefully.

"I think so—I've got good reasons for believing so," replied Roger. "He won't come alone, but with a gang big enough to make sure of the job. Blease, this isn't

your scrap at all, and I suspect it's going to be a real one. The ox trail is open and the mules can travel it, so you'd better take a span of them and drive your family out of danger."

Blease deliberated.

"Reckon I won't," he said at last. "Family's safe in there in the elder bush. I'll stay. Mebbe get a chance to even up with Garman."

Roger selected a high spoil bank near the center of the muck land as his post. From there he could see any one who approached from the river or from the cypress swamp. Blease took up a hidden position in the elderberry jungle, from which he could cover the open prairie toward Garman's, and Higgins secreted himself in the palmetto scrub of Flower Prairie. Higgins awaited the expected onslaught merrily; Blease was hopeful of revenge; and Roger, as he lay with his rifle ready, smiled because Annette was out of Garman's power. Wherever she was, he felt she was safe. He pictured her as she had faced Garman fearlessly two nights before—straight, strong, self-reliant—and was confident that her absence was of her own doing, and that whatever the circumstances she was free of the influence of her aunt, of her father, of the drugging magnetism of Garman, and in control of her own destiny.

As the hours dragged by and he broiled beneath the merciless sun with no sign of a move on Garman's part, his confidence waned. Had Garman discovered that Annette was not at Payne's camp? Had he discovered her whereabouts?

Roger recalled the signs of an unpremeditated flight on the part of Garman's guards, and his heart sank. Was it possible that their flight had some connection with Annette's disappearance? They were all desperate men, the most vicious Of criminals, who had fled to safety in the cypress swamps because their savagery unfitted them for existence in a civilized environment. Inflamed by moonshine whiskey they would be capable of anything, even of forgetting for the moment of Garman's dominance of them.

Roger swore helplessly, and sought relief from his torturing thoughts in physical labor. The direct rays of the subtropical sun had dried and heated the surface of the soft muck land until it radiated heat like a stone pavement. With the butt of his rifle Roger dug deeply beneath the surface until he reached damp, cool earth and, scooping a hollow, stretched out full length to cool his burning body. A

buzzard soared lazily about in the cloudless sky, and his thoughts leaped back to the flight of the desperadoes.

What a fool he had been to feel assured of Annette's safety merely because Garman was unaware of her whereabouts! She rode out in the evening—probably alone. And the rattlesnakes in the swamp were no more dangerous than the gang which Garman had scattered about the district!

He rose, and with glasses to his eyes peered through the dazzling heat waves, hoping against hope to catch some sign that Garman was coming. He gave up hope. Hours had passed. Garman would have been back long ago if he was coming. And he would have come if he had continued to believe that Annette was with Payne.

Garman must have discovered the true circumstances of Annette's disappearance. In no other way was his failure to return to be explained. And Roger had been lying there in the dirt, waiting like a fool, while Garman was taking measures to get her in his power again!

The dugout lay in the big ditch close to its junction with the river; and the river ran down to Garman's house. Roger stepped into the craft and shoved off. He was thrusting the boat out into the current of the river when a faint whip-like crack came to his ears. He shoved back and leaped ashore.

Higgins had fired a shot up on Flower Prairie.

XXXII

Roger lay hugging the ground, his finger on the rifle trigger, peering through the dancing heat waves and straining his ears for the crack of shots in reply. He could not see Flower Prairie from his post, but Blease could; and he knew that the squatter was on the alert, ready to throw in aid of Higgins. He kept his own position because all three had agreed that Garman's gang would attack from several directions. If a single shot answered Higgins the latter could deal with his adversary; if it was a volley Roger and Blease would rush to his assistance.

The tense, breathless seconds passed; they became minutes, but no second shot shattered the sultry silence. Roger relinquished his rifle and picked up his glasses. Again he scanned the muck land and its boundaries without result. Presently he saw Blease emerge from the elderberry jungle. The squatter stood staring toward Flower Prairie where the shot had been fired. Then with a movement of relieved tension he threw his rifle over a shoulder and started to walk easily in the direction toward which he had gazed.

Roger followed him on the run. When he came to the little spring lake in the prairie he saw Blease squatting on his heels calmly regarding Higgins who, at the lakeside, was carefully washing the bloody shoulder of the Seminole, Willy High Pockets.

"Darn it all, Willy, why didn't you sing out, why didn't you sing out?" the engineer chattered in deep self-reproach. "Holy smoked fish! I wouldn't have had this happen for a farm; you know that, Willy. Hold steady; that's the stuff. Hell, Willy, I'll kick myself for the rest of my natural!"

'"Twon't hurt him none; a little bleeding's good in this weather," drawled Blease.

"You shoot *ojus* quick," said the Indian.

"I had to, Willy; I had to," protested Higgins. "Couldn't make you out, and I

couldn't risk any one getting the drop on me."

"Shoot first; look who is by'm by. *Holowaugus*. No good."

"I took him for one of Garman's gang," explained Higgins to Payne. "I couldn't see for the brush."

"Did purty well, consid'ring that," ventured Blease.

"*Esoka—Bonus-che why-o-me*," said Willy.

"What?"

"*Why-o-me*—me want some."

"Is that what you came for?" demanded Roger.

The Indian shook his head.

"*Chobee eestee hotkee* (big white man) send me."

"For whiskey?"

"No. *Chobee eestee hotkee* come soon himself. He say I go here. I come. Him shoot. *Esoka—bonus—chee why-o-me*."

"No. No whiskey," said Roger. "Who is this big white man, Willy?"

"Him come *ojus* soon. *Etalitke*. (Talk much) Friend you. Gimme tobacco."

Later, while Higgins and Roger were sewing up the wound in Willy's shoulder, Blease suddenly uttered a warning whistle.

"Some one coming—walking heavy—through the saw grass."

"No shoot first, look by'm by!" protested Willy. As the intruder broke out of the saw grass into plain sight he said: "Him *chobee eestee hotkee*."

The visitor was bearded and ragged from dwelling in the swamp, but he strode up to the camp with a confident, even aggressive step, such as no true swamp denizen would use; and presently, beneath the beard, the matted hair and ragged

clothes Roger recognized Davis, the man whom they had helped to escape from the Cormorant that first day on the river. Davis' attention was concentrated upon Willy's wound.

"What?" he said hopefully. "Are there still some of them round?"

When the accident had been explained he turned to Roger.

"The United States Government missed by two hours last night the biggest round-up of egret shooters ever made. Garman tried a gang of pugs first, and you cleaned them out. Then he yanked his egret shooters out of the rookery and put them on the job. It was the first time in two years' work that I'd known 'em to be in a bunch. I got fifty government men assembled at Citrus Grove for a round-up; but the crooks down here got word of it somehow and streaked it into the cypress swamp. We've got the rookery, got twenty good men hidden there; they'll never shoot there again; and the rest of the men are after the gang in the cypress swamp. We lost out last night; but I think Garman's egret graft is broken up for good."

"Garman? Is he in that, too?"

Davis smiled.

"Payne, do you know anything round here that Garman isn't in? He's boss of the egret graft down here."

"Have you got evidence of that?"

"I'll say we have. A photograph of him trying out the gas gun he invented on a bunch of nests."

"Then why don't you get him if he's the head of the gang—first of all?"

Davis' lips came together in a bitter line.

"Did you ever hear of a big man—one of the really big ones of the country—being got for anything? No; the other big men, the whole gang of them up in Washington, won't let it be done. They can't afford to, as a matter of self-protection."

"Great Scott! Garman isn't so big that the Government is afraid of him?"

"How much do you know about Garman, Payne?"

"Not much, I admit."

"I'll give you his number: He has among a lot of other things, a home in Washington, an office in Jacksonville and the house here and the Egret. When he is at home in Washington, some of the most powerful statesmen in this great nation regularly infest his house to prove what truly great poker players they are. No statesmen ever lost any money there, for only those whom Garman can use and who will listen to business reason are invited. No statesman accepts a vulgar bribe, but several who attend Garman's stags win heavily and consistently at poker.

"At Jacksonville, in his suite of offices, there is one door without a name on it, and that is Mr. Garman's private office.

"On his boat, the Egret, he has as his guests during the tourist season some of the most prominent people of the country.

"When the season is over, or before it is on, he has no guests down here. That is his vacation time, the time when Garman plays.

"There are more criminal refugees in the wilds of this swamp country than anywhere else in this land. There is no man in Garman's employ, white, black or red, who hasn't got a price on his head somewhere. There are bandits from Cuba, crooks from large cities, negroes escaped from chain gangs, men of unspeakable crimes, the most vicious men of mixed blood ever gathered together since the old pirate days; and these are Garman's playfellows of his vacation time. He is absolutely their boss.

"Why does he do it? Because there's money in it. How? There!" Davis reached into his grub bag and threw on the ground the limp, snow-white corpse of a beautiful egret. "That's one of the side issues. There's money in it. Garman saw the rookeries, and couldn't keep his hands off them. These snow-white birds, feeding young ones in the nest, are worth money. Garman's gang gets a living, food, liquor and immunity out of the slaughter, an average probably of one dollar a bird. Garman gets the rest. And his boat Egret in his harvest time is nothing but a damn slaughter house, the hold packed with the skins of thousands of

murdered birds."

"But I thought the Government had taken steps to stop the slaughter. Aren't there guards about the rookeries?"

"There are. Who do you suppose got them their jobs? Garman—in Washington. How do you suppose they guard? They guard so carefully that nobody can get into the rookeries, not a soul except Garman's gang. Officially the egret shooting is stopped. Actually it is an industry and is in Garman's hands.

"But there are good, progressive men down here—men who really wish to develop the country on a sound, honest basis," said Payne. "Why, don't they get after this rotten business?"

"Few of them know anything about it. Garman has the business monopolized; only a few shooters, those absolutely under his control, and the birds spirited away in the Egret. All done so efficiently that few people believe there is any shooting done. Formerly the egrets were to be counted by millions, they were uncountable. They are good breeders. But since their shooting has been 'stopped' officially there hasn't been any noticeable increase in their numbers, which certainly would have been the case if the shooting actually had been done away with.

"Do you know why Garman wants to bust you? Principally because your settling here and draining and developing that piece of drowned land would be the opening wedge in the settlement of the district. You've shown what can be done with this land. People would come flocking in, farmers, real settlers, not the fugitives nor the crooked real-estate men who so far have had a monopoly down here. The outlaws would have to go. Egret shooting would have stop. Garman couldn't play king here any longer. That's why he's out to bust you, Payne. Keep your eyes skinned. He'll try to smash you in a hurry now."

"You are not going to try to get him then?" asked Roger slowly.

"No use. We'll break up his gang and stop the egret shooting, but Garman——"

Davis shrugged his shoulders.

"Garman is too big!" said Roger. "He will still be cock-o'-the-walk round here. Is

that it?"

"Well, he won't have his gang," replied the detective.

"But he will still be—Garman."

"Well—you know what he is."

Roger nodded.

"He'll want to be boss of the district—— He'll try to hog your land."

"Hog is a good word there," ruminated Roger. But he was not thinking about his land.

The arrival of Davis had in no way affected the situation as Roger had suddenly seen it just before Higgins' shot had attracted his attention.

Garman had discovered that Annette was not at Payne's camp. Otherwise he would have returned to get her. And this discovery meant that he knew of her whereabouts and was taking steps to pursue her, to get her into his power again. Perhaps he had even succeeded in doing so.

Roger slipped away from camp while supper was being prepared, and returned to the dugout which he had left in the big ditch near the river. Precious time had been lost through the arrival of Davis. Garman, for the nonce a jungle beast running wild with the reek of rage and lust about him, had had hours of opportunity to wreak his revenge.

Roger leaped into the dugout and paddled down the river toward Garman's house. The place seemed dead and deserted as he stepped onto the dock, and his heart sank with dismay. The Egret was gone.

XXXIII

In the boathouse a young sailor was loading several huge trunks into a small launch.

"Closing up for the season?" asked Roger as casually as possible.

"I dunno what they're doing," grumbled the man. "Fine trick leaving one man to handle stuff like this."

Roger lent a hand. "What did they do, forget this when they left?" he asked.

"They did not!" grinned the sailor. "Mr. Garman didn't give them time to forget anything. He loaded 'em onto the Egret and shot 'em down the river without giving them time to forget anything."

"He must have been in a hurry to get away?"

Roger's words were calm, but the beat of his heart was shaking his ribs.

"Who? Mr. Garman? He didn't sail. Just Senator Fairclothe and Mrs. Livingstone. 'Get aboard,' he says, and they got. 'Get to hell out of here!' he says to the captain. 'Where to?' says the captain. 'Get!' says Mr. Garman. Talk about a temper! There was blue lightning and an eighty-mile wind round here till they'd sailed."

"Mr. Garman staying behind alone?"

"Alone?" said the sailor with a colossal wink. "Oh, I guess not—not so you could notice it."

And the next moment he found himself picked up, flung against the wall and nailed there by a grip that cut to the bone.

"Talk straight now, boy, if you value whole bones," said Roger. "Is Miss Fairclothe here with Garman?"

"Not here—nobody here but the cook and caretaker."

"Where—then?"

"Dunno."

"Where!"

"Mr. Garman rode away some place after the Egret had sailed."

"Alone?"

"Sure. She wasn't here at all."

Roger went up to the big house. The caretaker, a pudgy little man with the stench of whisky on his breath, was waiting for him.

"Mr. Payne?"

"Yes."

"A note for you, sir. Mr. Garman said he expected, sir, that you would be round."

The note was addressed to Garman in a clear feminine hand, and it read: "Garman: Am at the cottage on Palm Island; come to-night. Annette." At the bottom in a huge masculine scrawl, were three words; "Poor Payne! Garman."

"Palm Island?" repeated Willy High Pockets. "Garman got house on Palm Island. Yes."

"Do you know where it is?" asked Roger.

It was night, and he had called Willy High Pockets away from the camp to ask him the question. The time intervening from the receipt of the note at Garman's and the present had been like a nightmare. He had wandered in the jungle and laughed aloud at himself for a sentimental fool. Garman was right: dreams,

ideals, high hopes were only illusions, only lies, fairy-like mirages to lead a man into the barren desert of experience. The note in his pocket proved it. He read the note over and over again.

"Come to-night, Annette."

His laughter each time he scanned the words was a mirthless expression of despair. Garman was right. Garman had won.

"Willy," he asked, "where is Palm Island?"

"Little lake in woods down there." Willy pointed into the darkness toward the timber line that marked the western boundary of the sand prairie. "Island in lake."

"Is it far?"

"Yes, many mile in woods."

"All right, Willy. Go to bed."

XXXIV

Roger came upon the little lake in the woods just as the dawn was coating its waters with a thick purple. He saw a canoe pulled upon the beach and paddled out to the island. A circle of stately royal palms, their tops gorgeously golden in the sun's first rays, their smooth trunks still black, with the darkness of night, ringed the island round. Within the circle of palms was a luxurious tangle of tropical plants, of flowers, of lazily drooping vines. Payne followed a winding path through the odorous jungle and came to the tiny bungalow hidden in the heart of it all.

"Garman!" he called hoarsely; and by the manner in which his voice echoed in the stillness he knew no living being was about the place.

He entered softly, almost fearing to find the signs he sought. One of Garman's large cigars, lighted and thrown away after a few puffs, lay on the verandah. The place inside was a wreck. Broken furniture, shattered glass, torn curtains and bedding, lay about in aimless disorder, as if some wild animal had run amuck there tearing and trampling to pieces all it touched. Windows and frames had been smashed with terrific blows. There were dents in the floor where it had been beaten furiously with an iron bedpost.

Roger came out and tried to think. What had happened? Had Garman deliriously celebrated his triumph in an orgy of destruction? There was no sign of a struggle. He left the island hurriedly.

The morning sun was high in the heavens when Roger emerged from the woods onto the prairie on his way back to Garman's house. He followed no path. He was running head down, seeing and hearing nothing. He smashed through a clump of palmetto scrubs into an opening of barren white sand, and from another thicket came Garman, a rifle in his hands, plunging toward him, blind and deaf, maddened and purple-faced with rage.

They were almost face to face when they saw one another.

There was no time to think of weapons, no time to think at all. They sprang at one another with a cry that was old when man invented the cleft-stick stone ax. There is a note of joy in that cry as well as that of rage. Roger leaped primitively to grapple and break his enemy with bare hands. Garman tossed his rifle away and came on intent upon the same purpose.

They clinched; and the moment Roger felt those vast soft hands tightening upon him the shock brought back to him a sort of reason. Garman was the stronger. His right hand caught Roger's clenched fist within an inch of his chin, and his gorilla grip held the fist helpless. His huge hand encased Roger's fist as one might hold a baseball; and slowly, surely, gloatingly he bent the arm.

Garman was the stronger. This was the thought which now monopolized Roger's mind. By natural law Garman would be the victor in this primitive struggle; and considering the man and the circumstances, Roger had no illusions as to what this would mean to him. So far as his own entity was concerned the mental picture of himself as Garman's victim did not disturb him greatly; he had lost all that man may hope for in life; no fear came into his heart as he realized how much Garman was his physical superior.

An impulse to throw himself madly upon his opponent regardless of consequences followed the picture; but with a sudden determination he controlled it. A few wild, reckless spasms and he knew the fight would be over. Once those terrible hands, with their fat, suctionlike palms, found a vital hold they would not let go; and Garman was an experienced fighter, and wild fighting would soon present him the opportunity which he would see and seize.

Roger placed himself wholly upon the defensive, and while he skillfully resisted Garman's efforts to end the struggle at once, he fought with himself a struggle for calm reason.

He could not win. That was the basis from which he began to reason. Garman was the stronger man, so much stronger that against him Roger's powerful young body thrust as against the trunk of an immovable tree. For a moment the pair had held motionless, Garman's bulk and might held for the instant by Roger's impetuous rush, but now the Plunderer's strength was telling and he was slowly thrusting his victim back.

As he retreated before the irresistible strength that was dominating him, Roger was winning a battle with himself. All the youth and pride and strength of him were rebelling at even momentary subjection, but his will was swiftly gaining the ascendancy within him. The body cried for a swift and terrible struggle; the mind demanded patience. For though he could not win he would if he could, before he succumbed, hurt Garman so terribly that victory would be too dearly purchased to be enjoyed.

The first clash was over; Garman, contented at having proved himself the stronger, had ceased to thrust against Roger, and in a moment the pair came to a standstill. Roger's left fist was still held helpless in Garman's grip while with his right he fended away the Plunderer's hand at his throat. Garman was not striking; his great left hand like a wide-open claw came forward seeking a throttling grip, while the wild light in his eyes and the ghastly smile on his face showed how sure he was of an easy triumph.

"I've got you, Payne!" he roared. "Let that sink into your soul. I've got you. Out here nobody will come or hear you when you begin to shriek for mercy. Oh, you're going to shriek, all right; don't have any doubt about that. I know how to do it; I'm going to have some fun out of this mess after all. Yes, enough fun to pay for all the damage you've done me. I'm going to play with you, sonny; I'm going to show you tricks you never heard of. I'm going to make you last a long time after you begin to shriek and beg me to kill you, and every minute of it will be to me like a dream come true. Buck me, will you? Then come to me!"

The last words were accompanied by a sudden jerk. Garman's arms licked out viciously and Roger found himself clasped to his enemy's breast. A horror possessed him such as he had never imagined, for Garman's whole body seemed like his hands, soft, clinging, destructive; and Roger put all his strength in the effort and broke free.

He must not let Garman get him like that again, he thought as he fought back. It had cost him too much energy to break the hold. Garman had been a trifle too assured, not realizing fully his opponent's strength; and the next time he would make sure that there was no escape from his gorilla-like arms.

"Come to me, Payne," he repeated softly, reaching for another grip. "I've got you; feed your soul on those words. So young and full of life; but I've got you out here in the swamp where nobody can see or hear. Why, sonny, I doubt if

they'll ever find you, or what's left, after I get through."

Roger, calm again after his sudden effort, watched for an opening and shot his left like a bullet against the huge, gross mouth. Almost in the same second he side-stepped and brought his right in an arc to the mark above Garman's belt and leaped back out of danger. Garman did not stir, and though the blow on the mouth cut it did not efface the sneer on his lips.

"Or what's left after I get through," he repeated. "Let your mind take hold of that, sonny. It won't be pretty to look at, but never mind; you won't be able to see it. All alone, out here in the swamp and the buzzards will be waiting."

He lunged and Roger slipped by his guard, smashed his fist into the mouth again and pivoted to safety.

"The buzzards will be waiting, Payne," continued Garman in his monotone. "Big hungry one, up there in the cypress. But the Mexican Buzzards, the little brown fellows, will come down from the trees first—fierce little Mexican buzzards—not afraid to tackle a thing still living a little and groaning!"

Roger scarcely heard the last words, for Garman was on him like a fury, striking, clawing, cursing.

"Hit me, will you! Try your boxer's tricks on me, eh?" he roared.
"I'll stamp your head into the ground."

The rush carried them back to the fringe of palmetto scrub, and at the touch of sharp leaves on his back Roger leaped to one side and away from the scrub. So swiftly did he move that Garman was unable to turn with him, and Roger flung his arms about the raging enemy's middle and lifted him in the air. Then Garman laughed softly, for his paws dropped upon Roger's wrists, as he threw himself face downward upon the ground. Roger was on top but for a moment he was helpless, his wrists imprisoned beneath Garman's body.

"The Mexican buzzards, sonny; the little fierce fellows. I've got you;
I've got you sure this time."

Roger relaxed in apparent defeat; then bending his supple body like a bow he managed to drive a knee with all his power into the small of Garman's back. The upper part of the huge, gross body came up with a jerk; a cry of mingled pain

and rage escaped Garman; his grip relaxed and Roger tore himself free.

The terrific wrench of the back would have prostrated any normal man, but Garman, rolling swiftly, came to his feet and rushed again with new fury.

The fight raged across the clearing and back again, Garman striving to drive his agile opponent into the brush and entangle him, Roger carefully avoiding this danger which would have enabled Garman to come to grips. Time after time the latter rushed and each time Roger eluded his grasp. When a safe opportunity offered Roger struck and leaped to safety, refusing to permit Garman's taunts to rouse him to reckless fury.

"Run, why don't you, sonny? Turn and beat it. You're fast; you might get away."

Roger did not reply to these efforts to provoke him; he circled just out of reach, watching with icy eyes for the big man's next move. And when it came he was ready to meet it. His mind was clear and cool; one chance he had and one only, —that Garman would tire himself. As the fight went on and it became obvious that Garman, despite his efforts, was as fresh as ever, Roger abandoned this hope; and now he became more calm, more icy-eyed than ever.

It was a fight to death and his only purpose now to die hard and fighting to the last breath. A grim satisfaction, a pride, almost a joy, in the perfect condition of body, of his strength and agility, began to grow in him. The joy of life, the purposes and hopes of a man's existence; the hope of love, all that had been put away; and he had become the stark fighting man, single of idea, barren of hope, but efficient. The intoxication of battle began to creep upon him. From the toes of his light strong feet to the top of his head his body thrilled with the strong man's joy in his own strength; and only his iron will, which had consecrated his strength to the uttermost possible harming of Garman, prevented him from shouting exultantly. Instead he stepped in when the opportunity presented itself and swung his right with all his power to Garman's long, heavy jaw. The blow would have felled any other man like a pole-axed ox, but Garman's head merely rolled back on its thick neck and that was all.

A new gleam of craftiness in Garman's eyes warned Roger to extraordinary alertness, and when the other, pretending to seek a moment's rest, suddenly lashed out a kick for the groin, the young man threw himself away, escaping with a blow on the hip. Anger flamed in him anew, the anger of the fair fighter at

a treacherous trick, and at the sight of the change in him Garman permitted himself a little smile, and Roger again forced himself to grow calm. He retreated, striking, ducking, side-stepping, he circled the clearing. Once his foot slipped on the barrel of Garman's rifle, and he kicked it to one side. As he did so Garman kicked again, at the knee this time; but now Roger was ready, he caught his foot behind the other's heel, heaved up and threw the big man heavily.

"God—you!" bellowed Garman as he sprang up, and the smile was gone from his face.

The fighting now became bestial, brutal, animal-like in its unreasoning fury. Driven wild with humiliation over the heavy throw, Garman lowered his head and charged like a mad bull, butting, striking, kicking. His blows were wild, but their power was irresistible; Roger's guard was beaten down, he tried in vain to escape; and one of the blows went home on his forehead and knocked him into the palmetto scrub. With both feet he kicked viciously at the huge head that was rushing at him; Garman's rush stopped sharply; and Roger was on his feet and out in the open ere his opponent had recovered.

Garman was insane with rage; Roger was icy calm. They had been fighting so long now and so furiously that he knew the end could not be long delayed. He realized how narrowly he had escaped; had his kick missed Garman would have been on top of him. He must not go down again.

His heart was thumping so his ribs shook, and his breath was coming in gulps between parted lips. Garman's lips were smashed beyond all resemblance to a mouth, and the heaving of his great chest told how the pace was telling. His first kick had done the work, however. A numbness was spreading over Roger's right leg. In the heat of combat he had not realized how severe was the kick that had been dealt him, but now the fact came home.

He was slowing up. Well, he would do all the damage he could before the stiffening limb permitted Garman to catch him in that horrible gorilla grip. And then Garman spoke:

"You got the girl you —— young pup, but I've got you."

New strength coursed through Roger's heart. His lightninglike feint drew Garman's guard low; he swung his right in an over-hand blow full upon his opponent's hawk-like nose. Garman's mouth opened wide as he struggled for

breath, and Roger knew the damage he had done. Again he feinted, again he swung—and a bone in his right hand snapped as the fist went home on the top of his enemy's suddenly lowered head.

Garman laughed through the welter of his broken face, and rushed, and Roger's straight left stopped him. Again the left flashed into the battered face, and again. Roger was fighting with the desperation of his last remnants of strength. One hand was useless, his leg was stiffening rapidly, but his left worked havoc with the other's features.

Garman drew back. His eyes gleamed with comprehension and triumph. Maddened and reckless Roger rushed and struck and got away; and then suddenly, in one uncontrollable spasm of rage Garman went wild. His tone became an animal roar of rage, his fighting that of a beast. And as Roger side-stepped and dodged he knew that the end had come. He floundered and stumbled; his right leg was fast becoming useless.

Garman had only to keep on rushing.

Roger slipped on something hard and realized that it was the rifle. As he leaped up and away he saw Garman's eye catch a glint of the weapon. With a terrific effort Roger lunged forward. Too late. Garman had stooped to dig the weapon from the trodden sand. Roger struck with the desperation of life or death behind his blow. His fist landed full on the neck below the ear; Garman grunted bestially and pitched forward on his face. The sight seemed to flood Roger's body with unbounded strength, the strength of hope reborn after despair has held sway. He jerked the rifle from his opponent's hands. Garman was on his hands and knees, sneering grotesquely at Roger's face above the leveled barrel. And suddenly Roger swung the rifle round and threw it out of reach in the palmetto scrub.

"Get up!" he panted hoarsely. "I've got you now."

Garman rose on tottering legs and came on. He could not fight any longer, but he could blaspheme, and the foulest curses rolled from his lips. Finally he uttered Annette's name. Roger set himself and drove his fist to the point of the heavy, fat jaw. And as a marionette falls when its suspending strings are cut, so Garman collapsed and lay a huge, shapeless heap in the reddened sand.

XXXV

Hours later Roger found himself on the bank of the river far below Garman's house. He had wandered wildly, avoiding paths, dodging clearings, holding to dark, shaded jungle-land, like a hurt animal seeking to hide its wounds from the light of day. The joy of victory over Garman glowed steadily in his bosom, yet though he knew that Garman now was a broken man and that he no longer would attempt to play king in the district, he also knew that the fruits of the victory were like ashes upon his tongue. He felt old and defeated, like a man suddenly robbed of his illusions. Garman had been right; he had been dwelling in the Fool's Paradise of Youth, accepting dreams for realities. Now, he had "torn the mask of illusions from the face of Life and seen the old hag as she really is."

Garman's phrases kept ringing in his ears, and with repetition they came to hold a note of mocking triumph.

Garman was whipped, yet he had won. His words remained to cut and torture. In his state of semidelirium Roger began to doubt that he had won over Garman. The doubt became a certainty. Defeat, not victory, was his portion. Garman's was the victory, the victory of bitter knowledge over the vaporish ideals of youth.

Roger stooped to drink from a clear pool at the river's brink and shrank back at the reflection he beheld in the water. A strange, lined face stared up at him. He shut his eyes as he drank, then plunged his head into the pool. Cooled off and cleansed, he again studied his reflection. The traces of dust and combat were washed away, and he saw how little they had to do with the transformation. The change was deeper than the skin, deeper than the flesh. It had bitten into the spirit; and the bitterness and hate in his eyes, the cynical sneer that leered up at him, sprang from the change that had taken place in his soul.

Garman was still winning.

Roger laughed aloud, and at the sound of his voice checked himself abruptly. He

turned away from the pool, cursing it for what it had revealed, and stumbled back into the darkness of the jungle.

In time he came to the spot where he and Garman had fought. His enemy was gone. It was some minutes before Roger realized how this disappointed him. He had returned to tell Garman he was right. He no longer hated Garman. Garman made him see the truth.

Later, as he sat near the spot where his foe had fallen, he saw that others had visited the spot recently. There were a multitude of fresh tracks in the sand about the palmetto scrub. He regarded them indifferently until he saw the deep marks of Higgins' hunting boots. Besides these he saw other men's tracks, including the marks of Willy High Pocket's bare feet. And then he saw that which sent the blood racing to his head.

Clearly outlined in the sand were the marks of a girl's tennis slippers, and he knew they were Annette's.

He searched the sand like a hound now, seeking signs of what had happened. He saw where the tracks had come into the clearing—Higgins, Willy High Pocket and Annette. They had been running. Then he saw how they had scattered, searching the country round, and had returned to the spot where Garman lay. From there they had gone toward the path leading to Garman's house. There were tracks of half a dozen men. Garman's was among them. He had, apparently, been helped to his feet and led away.

As the last rays of the setting sun were gilding the palm tops Roger pushed aside a curtain of moon vine and looked out upon Garman's house and the little lake beyond. To his surprise the Egret lay at the dock, the captain on the bridge, ready to start downstream. Higgins, Davis and Willy High Pockets were standing near the pergola looking toward the house. Presently they turned and walked slowly out of sight and hearing.

Garman came tottering out of the house onto the walk leading to the dock. He was freshly clad and extensively bandaged. Beside him walked Annette, supporting him with the strength of her tall young body. Garman was broken physically, but his spirit remained strong.

Suddenly he halted, painfully freeing his arm from her supporting hand.

"No," he mumbled through his bandages, "I can't let you do that."

"But I want to help you to the boat," she protested. "You're very weak, you know."

Garman tottered, yet he gestured her away. He spoke slowly, each word an effort.

"Might it occur to you that even in my present condition I might be capable of feeling a sense of humiliation at being helped away—by you?"

"I wouldn't want you to feel that," she replied.

"Ha!" he laughed faintly, "The magnanimity of victorious youth toward the conquered. Star-eyed youth has won, and——"

"Oh, please don't take up that old strain, Mr. Garman. You are badly hurt; you must think of getting to a doctor at once."

"Can the leopard change his spots?" he said. "No. He doesn't want to. I was very weak a moment ago. My strength is returning. But I am not. A strong man leaves and forgets the scene of his defeat, and the defeat. You will never see me again. Can you bear up under that?"

"I'm very sorry to hear you say things like that."

Garman swayed like a broken tree, but despite it he smiled sardonically.

"You had hoped I had changed?" His voice was little more than a painful whisper. Swaying drunkenly, almost falling, he drove himself on to speak. "That the leopard's spots had become whiter than snow? My dear Miss Fairclothe, people don't change like that. Behold yourself: even the jungle and sun, even I, couldn't change you. The flesh wavered, but the soul held true. I won't play the hypocrite and say I am glad you were too strong for me. I am not. I wish I could have made you like myself. Now I'm going away and forget you and all this, and the whole affair of civilization. If you feel sorry for me your emotion is wasted. On the whole it will be a relief for me. Business, and so on—I was getting pretty well bored with the whole thing."

He staggered grotesquely toward the dock and halted.

"And don't you worry about Payne. You'll find him. Trust the woman to find the man she's marked for her victim! No, no! Don't grow indignant; I'll change 'victim' to 'mate.' There's really little difference. Payne's all right." A quiver of pain convulsed him. "He's got some brains, too. Not too much, but enough. You two are too perfectly matched for anything to keep you apart, and, having joined one another, too perfectly matched to avoid fighting." He chuckled faintly behind his bandages. "Oh, yes, you'll fight, my dear girl, take my word for that; he's got a will of his own, too. But your fights will be embraces in disguise."

He tottered toward the river and again turned.

"Will you shake hands with me before I go?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she said. "Of course."

Garman chuckled, but turned away without touching her proffered hand.

"I merely wanted to know," he said, and went staggering on his away aboard the Egret. He mumbled an order and an oath to the captain. The Egret slipped swiftly down the river.

Annette watched until the yacht had gone. When she turned round Roger was coming toward her. She cried out, a cry of relief, of happiness, of love.

"Annette!" he whispered, and came close to her.

"Wait, wait!" she said. "There are things to be explained."

"I know." He moved back a step. "I was a brute, too."

"What?"

"Garman——"

"Oh—that! It was terrible, I know, but you were not the aggressor. I mean about the note."

"Do notes—or things like it—matter now?" he asked.

"Yes; they matter very, very much. I wish to explain. I—I went out there to Palm

Island to fight out my fight with myself."

He looked at her radiant young face and said: "You won."

"Yes, that is the wonderful part of it: I didn't know whether I would win when I went there. Garman was so terribly strong. He dominated me, and seemed to control my thoughts and feelings. But—do you remember what you said in the path there the other day—when I asked you to go away—when Garman spied on us?"

"What was it?" he asked.

"Oh! Don't you remember?"

"Let me see—I called Garman a cad."

"Oh, no, no, no! You remember you said—you said——"

He looked in her eyes and understood.

"I said I loved you."

"Yes. That's what saved me. I knew. I felt it here in my heart how you loved me. Roger, I felt it from the moment we met."

"Yes," he said, "I loved you from that moment, Annette."

"And I you, Roger. But it seemed so impossible. I used to think it must be a dream. Aunty, father, Garman and all the selfishness; and then in the midst of it all finding such a love—such a love as girls dream of, Roger. And I was afraid Garman had me in his power. So I went to the island and fought it out. And then I knew it was all right—because all I thought of was you. So I sent him that note. I was a little afraid of him, and I wanted to lure him away, so I could—well, I wanted him away."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you, dear."

"Why?"

"Please don't make me tell. I'm ashamed."

"Very well then."

She turned her flushed face up toward him.

"Do you really want to know?"

"If you wish to tell me."

"I wanted him away—so I could come to you. I hurried straight to your camp. Am I shameless, Roger? Then we hunted for you. Roger——"

"I am not worthy of you," he said, "but I love you."

"Roger?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you think we will really fight?"

They laughed together, the joyous laughter of youth, her head upon his breast and his arms about her.

"Probably," he said.

And they laughed again.

THE END

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