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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BLACK CAESAR'S CLAN ***

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED, MOST GRATEFULLY

TO MY FRIEND
JOHN E. PICKETT
EDITOR OF
"THE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN"

FOREWORD

A wiggling, brainless, slimy atom began it. He and trillions of his kind. He was the Coral Worm ("Anthozoa," if you prefer).

He and his tribe lived and died on the sea-bottom, successive generations piling higher on the skeletons and lifework--or the life-loafing, for they were lazy atoms--of those that went before. At last the coral reef crawled upward until in uncharted waters it was tall enough to smash a wooden ship-keel.

Then, above the surface of the waves it nosed its way, grayish white, whalebacked. From a hundred miles distant floated a cigar-shaped mangrove-bud, bobbing vertically, through the ocean, until it chanced to touch the new-risen coral reef. The mangrove, alone of all trees, will sprout and grow in salt water. The mangrove's trunk, alone of all trunks, is impervious to the corrosive action of the sea.

At once the bud set to work. It drove an anchor-root into the reef, then other roots and still others. It shot up to the height of a foot or two, and thence sent thick red-brown roots straight downward into the coral again.

And so on, until it had formed a tangled root-fence for many yards alongshore. After which, its work being done, the mangrove proceeded to grow upward into a big and glossy-leaved shade-tree, making buds for further fences.

Meanwhile, every particle of floating seaweed, every dead fish or animal, all vegetation, etc., which chanced to wash into that fence-tangle, stayed there. It is easier for matter, as well as for man, to get entangled in mangrove roots than to get out again.

The sun and the rain did their work on this decaying stuff. Thus, soil was formed, atop the coral and in the hollows scooped out of its surface by wind or tide.

Presently, a coconut, hurled from its stem in the Bahamas or in Cuba, by a hurricane, set its palmleaf sail-sprout and was gale-driven across the intervening seas, floating ashore on the new-risen land. There it sprouted. Birds, winds, waves,

brought germs of other trees. The subtropical island was complete.

Island, key, reef--reef, key, island--with the intervening gaps of azure-emerald water, bridged, bit by bit, by the coral,--to-day a sea-surface, to-morrow a gray-white reef, next day a mangrove hedge, and the next an expanse of spectacular verdure and glistening gray-white sand.

So Florida was born.

So, at least, its southern portion was born, and is still in daily process of birth. And, according to Agassiz and many another, the entire Peninsula may have arisen in this fashion, from the green-blue sea.

Dredge and shovel are laboring hard to guide or check the endless undersea coral growth before bay and channel and lagoon shall all be dry land. The wormlike, lazy, fast-multiplying Anthozoa is fighting passively but with terrific power, to set at naught all man's might and wit.

In time, coral sand-spit and mangrove swamp were cleared for a wonderland playground, of divine climate whither winter tourists throng by the hundred thousand. In time, too, these sand-spits and swamps and older formations of the sunny peninsula furnished homes and sources of livelihood or of wealth to many thousands more, people, these, to whom Florida is a Career, not a Resort.

As in every land which has grown swiftly and along different lines from the rest of the country, there still are mystery and romance and thrills to be found lurking among the keys and back of the mangrove-swamps and along the mystic reaches of sunset shoreline.

With awkward and inexpert touch, my story seeks to set forth some of these.

Understand, please, that this book is rank melodrama. It has scant literary quality. It is not planned to edify. Its only mission is to entertain you and,--if you belong to the action-loving majority, to give you an occasional thrill.

Perhaps you will like it. Perhaps you will not. But I do not think you will go to sleep over it. There are worse recommendations than that for any book.

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE.

"Sunnybank,"
Pompton Lakes,
New Jersey.

BLACK CAESAR'S CLAN

CHAPTER I

THE HIDDEN PATH

Overhead sang the steady trade wind, tempering the golden sunshine's heat. To eastward, under an incredibly blue sky, stretched the more incredibly multi-hued waters of Biscayne Bay, the snow-white wonder-city of Miami dreaming on its shores.

Dividing the residence and business part of the city from the giant hotels, Flagler Avenue split the mass of buildings, from back-country to bay. To its westward side spread the shaded expanse of Royal Palm Park, with its deep-shaded short lane of Australian pines, its rustling palm trees, its white church and its frond-flecked vistas of grass.

Here, scarce a quarter-century ago, a sandspit had broiled beneath an untempered sun. Shadeless, grassless, it had been an abomination of desolation and a rallying-place for mosquitoes. Then had come the hand of man. First, the Royal Palm Hotel had sprung into stately existence, out of nothingness. Then other caravansaries. Palm and pine and vivid lawn-grass had followed. The mosquitoes had fled far back to the mangrove swamps. And a rarely beautiful White City had sprung up.

It was Sunday morning. From the park's bandstand, William J. Bryan was preaching to his open-air Sunday School class of tourists, two thousand strong. Around the bandstand the audience stood or sat in rapt interest.

The Australian-pine lane, to the rear, was lined with all manner of automobiles, from limousine to battered flivver. The cars' occupants listened as best they could--through the whirr of sea-planes and the soft hum of Sabbath traffic and the dry slither of a myriad grating palm-fronds in the trade-wind's wake--to the preacher's words.

The space of shaded grass, between lane and hotel-grounds and bandstand, was starred by white-clad children, and by men who sprawled drowsily upon the springy turf, their straw hats tilted above their eyes. The time was mid-February. The thermometers on the Royal Palm veranda registered seventy-three. No rain had fallen in weeks to mar the

weather's perfection.

"Scientists are spending \$5,000,000 to send an expedition into Africa in search of the 'missing-link!'" the orator was thundering. "It would be better for them to spend all or part of that money, in seeking closer connection with their Heavenly Father, than with the Brutes!"

A buzz of approval swept the listeners. That same buzz came irritatingly to the ears of a none-too-sprucely dressed young man who lay, with eyes shut, under the shifting shade of a giant palm, a hundred yards away. He had not caught the phrase which inspired the applause--thanks to the confusion of street sounds and the multiple dry rattle of the palm-fronds and the whirring passage of a sea-plane which circled above park and bay. But the buzz aroused him.

He had not been asleep. Prone on his back, hat pulled over his upper face, he had been lying motionless there, for the best part of an hour. Now, stretching, he got to his feet in leisurely fashion, brushed perfunctorily at his rumpled clothes, and turned his steps toward the double line of plummy Australian pines which bordered the lane between hotel grounds and avenue.

Only once did he hesitate in his slouching progress. That was when he chanced to come alongside one of the cars, in the long rank, drawn up in the shade. The machine's front seat was occupied by a giant of a man, all in white silk, a man of middle age, blonde and bearded, a man who, but for his modern costume, might well have posed as a Norse Viking.

The splendid breadth of shoulder and depth of chest caught the wanderer's glance and won his grudging approval. Thence, his elaborately careless gaze shifted to the car's rear seat where sat a girl. He noted she was small and dainty and tanned and dressed in white sport-clothes. Also, that one of her arms was passed around the shoulder of a big young gold-and-white collie dog,--a dog that fidgeted uneasily and paid scant heed to the restraining hand and caressing voice of his mistress.

As the shabby man paused momentarily to scan the car's three occupants, the girl happened to look toward him. Her look was brief and impersonal. Yet, for the merest instant, her eyes met his. And their glances held each other with a momentary intentness. Then the girl turned again toward the restless dog, seeking to quiet him. And the man passed on.

Moving with aimless slowness--one is not long in Southern Florida without acquiring a leisurely gait the lounge left the park and strolled up Thirteenth Avenue, towards the bridge which spans the Miami River and forms a link between the more thickly settled part of the town and its southerly suburbs.

As he crossed the bridge, a car passed him, moving rapidly eastward, and leaving a choky trail of dust. He had bare time to see it was driven by the Norse giant, and that the girl had moved to the front seat beside the driver. The collie (fastened by a cord running through his collar from one side of the tonneau to the other) lay fidgetingly on the rear seat.

For miles the man plodded on, under the wind-tempered sunshine. Passing Brickell Avenue and then the last of the city, he continued,--now on the road, now going cross-country,--until he came out on a patch of broken beach, with a background of jungle-like forest.

The sun had gone beyond the meridian mark during his ramble southward, and the afternoon was hurrying by. For the way was long, though he had tramped steadily.

As he reached the bit of sandy foreshore, he paused for the first time since stopping to survey the car. An unpainted rowboat was drawn up on the beach. Half way between it and the tangle of woodland behind, was a man clad only in undershirt and dirty duck trousers. He was yanking along by the scruff of the neck a protesting and evidently angry collie.

The man was big and rugged. Weather and sea had bronzed him to the hue of an Arab. Apparently, he had sighted the dog, and had run his boat ashore to capture the stray animal. He handled his prize none too gently, and his management was calling forth all the collie's resentment. But as the man had had the wit to seize the dog by the scruff of the neck and to keep himself out of the reach of the luckless creature's vainly snapping jaws, these protests went for nothing.

Within thirty feet of the boat, the dog braced himself for a new effort to tear free. The man, in anger, planted a vigorous kick against the collie's furry side. As his foot was bare, the kick lost much of its potential power to injure. Yet it had the effect of rousing to sudden indignation the dusty youth who had stopped on his tramp from Miami to watch the scene.

"Whose dog is that?" he demanded, striding forward, from the shade, and approaching the struggling pair.

"Who the blue blazes are you?" countered the barefoot man, his eyes running contemptuously over the shabby and slight-built figure.

"My name is Brice," said the other. "Gavin Brice. Not that it matters. And now, perhaps you'll answer my question. Whose dog is that?"

"Mine," returned the barefoot man, renewing his effort to drag the collie toward the boat.

"If he's yours," said Brice, pleasantly, "stop hauling him along and let him loose. He'll follow you, without all that hustling. A good collie will always follow, his master, anywhere."

"When I'm honin' for your jabber," retorted the other, "I'll come a-askin' for it."

He drew back his foot once more, for a kick. But, with a lazy competence, Brice moved forward and gave him a light push, sidewise, on the shoulder. There was science and a rare knowledge of leverage in the mild gesture. When a man is kicking, he is on only one foot. And, the right sort of oblique push will not only throw him off his balance, but in such a direction that his second foot cannot come to earth in position to help him restore that balance.

Under the skillfully gentle impact of Brice's shove, the man let go of the snarling collie and hopped insanely for a second or so, with arms outflung. Then he sat down ungracefully on the sand.

Scarce had he touched ground when he was up.

But the moment had sufficed for the collie to go free. Instead of running off, the dog moved over to Brice, thrust his cool muzzle into the man's hand, and, with wagging tail, looked up lovingly at him.

A collie has brains beyond most dogs. And this collie recognized that the pleasant-voiced, indolent-looking stranger had just rescued him from a captor who had been treating him abominably. Wherefore, in gratitude and dawning adoration, he came to pay his respects.

Brice patted the silken head so confidently upraised to him. He knew dogs. Especially, he knew collies. And he was hot with indignation at the needlessly brutal treatment just accorded this splendid beast.

But he had scant time for emotions of any kind. The beach comber had regained his feet, and in the same motion had lost his self-control. Head lowered, fists swinging, he came charging down upon the stripling who had the audacity to upset him.

Brice did not await his onset. Slipping lithely to one side he avoided the bull-rush, all the time talking in the same pleasantly modulated drawl.

"I saw this dog, earlier in the day," said he, "in a car, with some people. They drove this way. The dog must have chewed his cord and then jumped or fallen out, and strayed here. You saw him, from the water, and tried to steal him. Next to a vivisectionist, the filthiest man God ever made is the man who kicks a dog. It's lucky--"

He got no further. Twice, during his short speech, he had had to twist, with amazing speed, out of the way of profanity-accompanied rushes. Now, pressed too close for comfort, he halted, ducked a violent left swing, and ran from under the flailing right arm of his assailant.

Then, darting back for fully twenty-five feet, he cried out, gayly:

"I won't buy him from you. But I'll fight you for him, if you like."

As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a battered and old-fashioned gold watch. Laying it on the sand, he went on:

"How does this strike you as a sporting offer? Winner to take both dog and watch? How about it?"

The other had halted in an incipient charge to take note of the odd proposition. He blinked at the flash of the watch's battered gold case in the sunshine. For the first time, he seemed a trifle irresolute. This eel-like antagonist, with such eccentric ideas as to sport, was something outside the beach-comber's experience. Puzzled, he stood scowling.

"How about it?" queried Brice. "I hope you'll refuse. I'd rather be kicked, any day, than have to fight. But--well, I wouldn't rather see a good dog kicked. Still, if you're content with what you've got, we'll call it a day. I'll take the dog and be moving on."

The barefoot man's bewilderment was once more merging into wrath, at the amused superiority in Brice's words and demeanor. He glowered appraisingly at the intruder. He saw Brice was a half-head shorter than himself and at least thirty pounds lighter. Nor did Brice's figure betray any special muscular development. Apparently, there could be but one outcome to such a battle.

The man's fists clenched, afresh. His big muscles tightened. Brice saw the menace and spoke again.

"It's only fair to warn you," said he, gently, "that I shall thrash you worse than ever you've been thrashed before in all your down-at-heel life. When I was a boy, I saw George Siler

beat up five men who tackled him. Siler wasn't a big man. But he had made a life-study of leverage. And it served him better than if he'd toted a machine gun. I studied under him. And then, a bit, under a jui-jutsu man. You'll have less chance against me than that poor collie had against you. I only mention it as a friendly warning. Best let things rest as they are. Come, puppy!" he chirped to the highly interested dog. "Let's be on our way. Perhaps we can find the people who lost you. That's what I've been wanting to do, all day, you know," he added, in a lower voice, speaking confidentially to the dog, and beginning to stroll off toward the woods.

But the barefoot man would not have it so. Now, he understood. This sissyfied chap, with the high and-mighty airs, was bluffing. That was what he was doing. Bluffing! Did he think for a minute he could get away with it, and with the dog?

A swirl of red fury swept to the beach comber's brain. Wordless, face distorted, he flung himself at the elusive Brice.

So sudden was his spring that it threatened to take its victim unaware. Brice's back was turned to the aggressor, and he was already on his way toward the woods.

Yet, with but a fraction of an inch to spare, he turned to face the oncoming human whirlwind. This time he did not dart back from the rush. Perhaps he did not care to. Perhaps there was not time.

Instead, with the speed of light, he stepped in, ducking the hammer-fist and plying both hands with bewildering quickness and skill, in a shower of half-arm blows at the beach comber's heart and wind. His strength was wiry and carefully developed, but it was no match for his foe's. Yet the hail of body-punches was delivered with all the effect that science and a perfect knowledge of anatomy could compass.

The beach comber grunted and writhed in sharp discomfort. Then, he did the one thing possible, by way of reprisal. Before Brice could dodge out of his close-quarters position, the other clasped him tight in his bulgingly powerful arms, gripping the lighter man to his chest in a hug which had the gruesome force of a boa-constrictor's, and increasing the pressure with all his weight and mighty strength.

There was no space for maneuvering or for wriggling free. Clear from the ground Brice's feet were swung. The breath was squeezed out of him. His elastic strength was cramped and made useless. His lungs seemed bursting. The pressure on his

ribs was unbearable. Like many a better man he was paying the price for a single instant of overconfidence.

One arm was caught against his side. The other was impeded and robbed of all efficient hitting power, being pinioned athwart his breast. And steadily the awful pressure was increased. There was no apparent limit to the beach comber's powers of constriction. The blood beat into Brice's eyes. His tongue began to protrude from a swollen throat.

Then, all at once, he ceased to struggle, and lay limp and moveless in the conqueror's grasp. Perceiving which, the beach comber relaxed the pressure, to let his conquered enemy slide, broken, to the ground.

This, to his blank amaze, Gavin Brice neglected to do. The old ruse of apparent collapse had served its turn, for perhaps the millionth time. The beach-comber was aware of a lightning-quick tensing of the slumped muscles. Belatedly, he knew what had happened, and he renewed his vise-grip. But he was too late. Eel-like, Gavin had slithered out of the imprisoning arms. And, as these arms came together once more, in the bear-hug, Brice shot over a burning left-hander to the beach-comber's unguarded jaw. Up flew the big arms in belated parry, but not soon enough to block a deliberately-aimed right swing, which Brice drove whizzing into the jaw's point.

The brace of blows rocked the giant, so that he reeled drunkenly under their dynamic force. The average man must have been floored and even knocked senseless by such well-directed smashes to so vital a spot. But the beach-comber merely staggered back, seeking instinctively to guard his battered face, and to regain his balance.

In at the reeling foe tore Gavin Brice, showering him with systematic punches to every vulnerable spot above the belt line. It was merciless punishment, and it was delivered with rare deftness.

Yet, the iron-bodied man on whom it was inflicted merely grunted again and, under the avalanche of blows, managed to regain his balance and plunge back to the assault. A born fighter, he was now obsessed with but one idea, namely, to destroy this smaller and faster opponent who was hurting him so outrageously. As far as the beach comber was concerned: it was a murder-battle now, with no question of mercy asked or given.

The collie had been viewing this astounding scene in eager interest. Never before, in his short life, had he seen two humans fight. And, even now, he was not at all certain that it was a fight and not some intensely thrilling game. Thus had he watched two boys wrestle and box, in his own puppyhood.

And, for venturing to jump into that jolly fracas, he had been scolded and sent back to his kennel.

Yet, there was something about this clash, between the giant who had mistreated him and the softer-voiced man who had rescued him, which spoke of mad excitement, and which stirred the collie's own excitable temperament to the very depths. Dancingly, he pattered around the fighters, tulip ears cocked, deep-set eyes aglow, his fanfare of barks echoing far back through the silent woods.

The beach comber, rallying from the dual jaw-bombardment, bored back at his foe, taking the heaviest and most scientific punishment, in a raging attempt to gather Brice once more into the trap of his terrible arms. But Gavin kept just out of reach, moving with an almost insolent carelessness, and ever flashing some painful blow to face or to body as he retreated.

Then, as the other charged, Gavin sidestepped with perfect ease, and, when the beach-comber wheeled clumsily to face him, threw one foot forward and at the same time pushed the larger man's shoulder violently with his open palm. It was a repetition of the "leverage theory" Gavin had so recently been expounding to his antagonist. It caught the lunging giant at precisely the right non-balance angle, as he was turning about. And, for the second time, the beach-comber sat down on the trampled sand, with unexpected suddenness and force.

Gavin Brice laughed aloud, with boyish mischief, and stood back, waiting for the cursing madman to scramble to his feet again. But, as the beach comber leaped up--and before he could get fairly balanced on his legs--another foot-and-palm maneuver sent him sprawling.

This time the puffing and foaming and insanely-badgered man did not try at once to rise. Instead, his hand whipped back to his thigh.

"My clumsy friend," Brice was saying, pleasantly, "I'm afraid you'll never win that watch. Shall we call it a day and quit? Or--"

He broke off with an exclamation of genuine wrath. For, with astonishing swiftness, the big hand had flown to the hip of the ragged trousers, had plucked a short-bladed fishing knife from its sheath, and had hurled it, dexterously, with the strength of a catapult, straight at his smiling adversary's throat.

The sub-tropic beach comber and the picaroon acquire nasty tricks with knives, and have an uncanny skill at their use.

Brice twisted to one side, with a sharp suddenness that all

but threw his back out of joint. The knife whizzed through the still air like a great hornet. The breath of its passage fanned Gavin's averted face, as he wrenched his head out of its path.

The collie had watched the supposed gambols of the two men with keen, but impersonal, interest. But here at last was something he could understand. Instinct teaches practically every dog the sinister nature of a thrown object. The man on the ground had hurled something at the man whom the collie had begun to love. That meant warfare. To the canine mind it could mean nothing else.

And, ruff a-bristle and teeth bared, the dog flew at the beach comber. The latter had followed his throw by leaping to his feet. But, as he rose, the collie was at him. For an instant, the furry whirlwind was snarling murderously at his throat, and the man was beating convulsively at this unexpected new enemy.

Then, almost before the collie could slash to the bone one of the hairy big hands that thrust him backward, Gavin Brice had reached the spot in a single bound, had shoved the dog to one side and was at the man.

"Clear out, puppy!" he shouted, imperatively. "This is my meat! When people get to slinging knives, there's no more sense in handling them with gloves!"

The debonaire laziness was gone from Brice's voice and manner. His face was dead-white. His eyes were blazing. His mouth was a mere gash in the grim face. Even as he spoke, he had thrust the snarling collie away, and was at the beach-comber.

No longer was it a question of boxing or of half-jesting horseplay. The use of the knife had put this fight on a new plane. And, like a wild beast, Gavin Brice was attacking his big foe. But, unlike a wild beast, he kept his head, as he charged.

Disregarding the menace of the huge arms, he came to grips, without striking a single blow. Around him the beach-comber flung his constricting grasp. But this time the grip was worthless.

For, Brice's left shoulder jutted out in such manner as to keep the arms from getting their former hold around the body itself, and Brice's right elbow held off the grip on the other side. At the same time the top of Brice's head buried itself under the beachcomber's chin, forcing the giant's jaw upward and backward. Then, safe inside his opponent's guard, he abandoned his effort to stave off the giant's hold, and passed his own arms about the other's waist, his hands meeting under

the small of the larger man's back.

The beach comber tried now to use his freed arms to gain the grip that had once been so effective. But his clasp could close only over the slope of Brice's back and could find no purchase.

While the man was groping for the right hold, Gavin threw all his own power into a single move. Tightening his underhold, and drawing in on the small of the giant's back, he raised himself on his toes, and pressed the top of his head, with all his might, against the bottom of the beach-comber's chin.

The trick was not new. But it was fearsomely effective. It was, as Gavin had explained, all a question of leverage. The giant's waist was drawn forward, His chin, simultaneously, was shoved backward. Such a dual cross pressure was due, eventually, to mean one of two things:--either the snapping of the spine or else the breaking of the neck. Unless the grip could be broken, there was no earthly help for its victim.

The beach comber, in agony of straining spine and throat, thrashed wildly to free himself. He strove to batter the tenacious little man to senselessness. But he could hit nothing but the sloping back, or aim clumsily cramped hooks for the top and sides of Gavin's protected head.

Meantime, the pressure was increasing, with a coldly scientific precision. Human nature could not endure it. In his extremity, the beach comber attempted the same ruse that had been so successful for Brice. He slumped, in pseudo-helplessness. The only result was to enable Gavin to tighten his hold, unopposed by the tensing of the enemy's wall of muscles.

"I'm through!" bellowed the tortured giant, stranglingly, his entire huge body one horror of agony. "Nuff! I'm--"

He got no further. For, the unspeakable anguish mounted to his brain. And he swooned.

Gavin Brice let the great body slide inert to the sand. He stood, flushed and panting a little, looking down at the hulk he had so nearly annihilated. Then, as the beach comber's limbs began to twitch and his eyelids to quiver, Brice turned away.

"Come along, puppy," he bade the wildly excited collie. "He isn't dead. Another couple of seconds and his neck or his back must have gone. I'm glad he fainted first. A killing isn't a nice thing to remember on wakeful nights, the killing of even a cur like that. Come on, before he wakes up. I'm going somewhere. And it's a stroke of golden luck that I've got you to take with me, by way of welcome."

He had picked up and pocketed his watch. Now, lifting the knife, he glanced shudderingly at its ugly curved blade. Then he tossed it far out into the water. After which, he chirped again to the gladly following collie and made off down the beach, toward a loop of mangrove swamp that swelled out into the water a quarter-mile farther on.

The dog gamboled gayly about him, as they walked, and tried to entice him into a romp. Prancing invitingly toward Brice, the collie would then flee from him in simulated terror. Next, crouching in front of him, the dog would snatch up a mouthful of sand, growl, and make pattering gestures with his white forefeet at Gavin's dusty shoes.

Failing to lure his new master into a frolic, the dog fell sober and paced majestically alongside him, once or twice earning an absent-minded pat on the head by thrusting his muzzle into the cup of the walker's hand.

As they neared the loop of the swamp, the collie looked back, and growled softly, under his breath. Gavin followed the direction of the dog's gaze. He saw the beach comber sit up, and then, with much pain and difficulty, get swayingly to his feet.

"Don't worry, old chap," Gavin said to the growling collie. "He's had all he can carry, for one day. He's not going to follow us. By this time, he'll begin to realize, too, that his face is battered pretty much to a pulp, and that some of my body-smashes are flowering into bruises. I pity him when he wakes up to-morrow. He'll be too stiff to move an inch, without grunting. His pluck and his nerve are no match for his strength Here we are!" he broke off, beginning to skirt the hither edge of the swamp. "Unless all my dope is wrong, it ought to be somewhere close to this."

He walked more slowly, his keen eyes busily probing the impenetrable face of the swamp. He was practically at the very end of the beach. In front, the mangroves ran out into the water, and in an unbroken line they extended far back to landward.

The shining dark leaves made a thick screen, shutting from view the interior of the swamp. The reddish roots formed an equally impenetrable fence, two feet high, all along the edge. It would have been easier to walk through a hedge of bayonets than to invade that barrier.

"Where mangroves grow, puppy," exhorted Brice, "there is water. Salt water, at that. The water runs in far, here. You can see that, by the depth of this mangrove forest. At first glance, it looks like an impasse, doesn't it? And yet

it isn't. Because--"

He broke off, in his ruminative talk. The collie, bored perhaps, by standing still so long, had at first turned seaward. But, as a wavelet washed against his white forefeet, he drew back, annoyed, and began aimlessly to skirt the swamp, to landward. Before he had traveled twenty yards, he vanished.

For a second or so, Gavin Brice stared stupidly at the phenomenon of the jungle-like wall of mangroves that had swallowed a seventy-pound dog. Then his brow cleared, and a glint of eagerness came into his eye. Almost running, he hurried to the spot where the dog had vanished. Then he halted, and called softly:

"Come, puppy! Here!"

In immediate obedience to his call, the dog reappeared, at the swamp's edge, wagging his plummy tail, glad to be summoned. Before the collie could stir, Brice was at his side, taking sharp note of the direction from which the dog had just stepped out of the mangroves.

In front, the wall of leaves and branches still hung, seemingly impenetrable. The chief difference between this spot and any on either side, was that the mangrove boughs had apparently been trained to hang so low that the roots were invisible.

Tentatively, Brice drew aside an armful of branches, just above the waiting dog. And, as though he had pulled back a curtain, he found himself facing a well-defined path, cut through the tangled thicket of root and trunk and bough--a path that wound out of sight in the dark recesses of the swamps.

Roots had been cleared away and patches of water filled with them and with earth. Here and there a plank bridge spanned a gap of deeper water. Altogether--so far as Brice could judge in the fading light--the path was an excellent bit of rustic engineering. And it was hidden as cunningly from casual eyes as ever was a hermit thrush's nest.

Some one had been at much pains and at more expense, to lay out and develop that secret trail. For it is no easy or cheap task to build a sure path through such a swamp. From a distance, forests of mangrove seemed to be massed on rising ground, and to group themselves about the sides and the crests of knolls. As a matter of fact, the presence of a mangrove forest is a sign of the very lowest ground, ground covered for the most part by salt tidewater. The lowest pine barren is higher than the loftiest mangrove wilderness.

Gavin Brice's aspect of lassitude dropped from him like an outworn garment. For hours--except during his brief encounter with the beach comber--he had been steadily on the move, and had covered a good bit of ground. Yet, any one, seeing him as he traversed the miles from the Royal Palm Park at Miami, would have supposed from his gait that he was on some aimless ramble. Now, alert, quick-stepping, eager, he made his swift way along the windings of the secret path.

Light as were his steps, they creaked lamentably at times on the boards of a bridge-span. More than once, he heard slitherings, in the water and marsh to either side, as some serpent or other slimy swamp-dweller wriggled away, at his passing. The collie trotted gravely along, just in front of him, pausing once in a while, as if to make certain the man was following.

The silence and gloom and sinister solemnity of the place had had a dampening effect on the dog's gay spirits. The backward glances at his self-chosen master were for reassuring himself, rather than for guidance. Surroundings have quicker and stronger effect on collies than on almost any other kind of dog. And these surroundings, very evidently, were not to the collie's taste. Several times, when the path's width permitted, he dropped back to Gavin's side, to receive a word of friendly encouragement or a pat on the head.

Outside of the grove's shadows the sun was sinking. Not with the glowing deliberation of sunsets in northern latitudes, but with almost indecent haste. In the dense shade of the forest, twilight had fallen. But the path still lay clear. And Brice's footsteps quickened, as in a race with darkness.

Then, at a twist of the path, the way suddenly grew lighter. And at another turn, twilight brightened into clearness. A hundred feet ahead was a thin interlacing of moonflower vines, compact enough, no doubt, to prevent a view of the path to any one standing in the stronger light beyond the grove, but making distinct to Brice a grassy clearing beyond.

Upon this clearing, the brief bright afterglow was shining, for the trim grass and shrubs of an upwardsloping lawn were clearly visible. For some minutes the water and the swamp underfoot had given place to firmer ground, and the character of the trees themselves had changed. Evidently, the trail had its ending at that screen of vineleaves draped between two giant gumbo-limbo trees at the lawn's verge.

Thirty feet from the vines, Brice slackened his steps. His lithe body was vibrant with cautious watchfulness. But, the

collie was not inclined to caution. He hailed with evident relief the sight of open spaces and of light after the gloomy trail's windings. And he broke into a canter.

Fearing to call aloud, Brice chirped and hissed softly at the careering dog. The collie, at sound of the recall, hesitated, then began to trot back toward Gavin. But, glancing wistfully toward the light, as he started to obey the summons, his eye encountered something which swept away all his dawning impulse of obedience.

Athwart the bright end of the path, sprang a furry gray creature, supple, fluffy, indescribably formless and immense in that deceptive half-light.

Brice peered at the animal in astonishment, seeking to classify it in his mind. But the collie needed no effort of that sort. At first sight and scent, he knew well to what tribe the furry gray newcomer belonged. And, with a trumpet-bark of joyous challenge, he dashed at it.

The creature fluffed itself to double its former size. Then, spitting and yowling, it ran up the nearer of the two gumbo-limbo trees. The dog reached the foot of the tree a fraction of a second too late to seize the fox-like tail of his prey. And he circled wildly, barking at the top of his lungs and making futile little running leaps up the shining trunk of the tree.

As well hope for secrecy after the firing of a cannon as after such a fanfare of barking! Gavin Brice ran forward to grasp the rackets collie. As he did so, he was vaguely aware that a slender and white-clad form was crossing the lawn, at a run, toward the tree.

At the path-end, he and the figure came face to face. Though the other's back was to the fading light, Gavin knew her for the girl he had seen in the Australian pine lane, at Miami, that day.

"Pardon me," he began, trying in vain to make himself audible through the collie's frantic barking. "I found your dog, and I have brought him back to you. We--"

The glib explanation died, in his amazement-contracting throat. For, at his first word, the girl had checked her run and had stood for an instant, gazing wideeyed at him. Then, clapping one little hand to her side, she produced from somewhere a flash of metal.

And Gavin Brice found himself blinking stupidly into the muzzle of a small revolver, held, unwaveringly, not three feet from his face. Behind the gun were a pair of steady gray eyes

and a face whose dainty outlines were just now set in a mask of icy grimness.

"That isn't a bluff," ran his involuntary thoughts, as he read the eyes behind the ridiculously tiny weapon. "She really means to shoot!"

CHAPTER II

THE MAN IN THE DARK

For several seconds the two stood thus, the man dumfounded, moveless, gaping, the girl as grimly resolute as Fate itself, the little revolver steady, its muzzle unwaveringly menacing Brice's face. The collie continued to gyrate, thunderously around the tree.

"I don't want to shoot you," said the girl presently, and, through her voice's persistent sternness, Gavin fancied he could read a thrill of very feminine concern. "I don't want to shoot you. If I can help it. You will put your hands up."

Meekly, Brice obeyed.

"Now," she resumed, "you will turn around, and go back the way you came. And you will go as fast as you can travel. I shall follow you to the second turning. Then I shall fire into the air. That will bring--one or more of the men. And they will see you don't turn back. I'm--I'm giving you that much chance to get away. Because I--I don't want--"

She hesitated. The grimness had begun to seep out of her sweet voice. The revolver-muzzle wobbled, ever so little.

"I'm sorry," began Brice. "But--"

"I don't care to hear any explanations," she cut him short, sternly. "Your coming along that path could mean only one thing. You will do as I say.--You will turn about and make what use you can of the start I'm offering you. Now--"

"I'm sorry," repeated Brice, more determinedly, and trying hard to keep his twitching face straight. "But I can't do what you ask. It was hard enough coming along that path, while the light lasted. If I were to go back over it in the dark, I'd break my neck on a million mangrove roots. If it's just the same to you, I'll take my chances with the pistol. It'll be an easier death, and in pleasanter company. So, if you really must shoot then blaze away!"

He lowered his upraised arms, folding them melodramatically on his breast, while he sought, through the gloom, to note the effect of his solemnly uttered speech. The effect was far different and less sensational than he had expected. At the first sound of his voice that was audible above the collie's barks, the girl lowered the revolver and leaned forward to get a clearer view of his face, beneath the shadow of the vine-leaves.

"I--I thought--" she stammered, and added lamely "I thought you were--were--were some one else." She paused, then she went on with some slight return of her earlier sternness "Just the same, your coming here by that path..."

"There is no magic about it," he assured her, "and very little mystery. I was taking a stroll along the shore, when I happened upon that mass of dynamite and fur and springs, yonder. (In his rare moments of calm, he is a collie,--the best type of show collie, at that.) He ran ahead of me, through the tangle of mangrove boughs. I followed, and found a path. He seemed anxious to explore the path, and I kept on following him, until--"

The girl seemed for the first time aware of the dog's noisy presence.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, looking at the rackety and leaping collie in much surprise. "I thought it was the stable dog that had treed Simon Cameron! I didn't notice. He-- Why!" she cried, "that's Bobby Burns! We lost him, on the way here from the station! My brother has gone back to Miami to offer a reward for him. He came from the North, this morning. We drove into town to get him. On the way out, he must have fallen from the back seat. We didn't miss him till we-- How did you happen to find him?"

"He was on the beach, back yonder," explained Brice. "He seemed to adopt me, and..."

"Haven't I met you, somewhere?" she broke in, studying his dim-seen face more intently and at closer range.

"No," he made answer. "But you've seen me. At least I saw you. You, and a big man with a gold beard and a white silk suit, and this collie, were in a car, listening to Bryan's sermon, this morning. I recognized the collie, as soon as I saw him again. And I guessed what must have happened. I guessed, too, that he was a new dog, and that he hadn't learned the way home, yet. It's lucky I was able to bring him to you. Or, rather, that he was able to bring himself to you."

"And to think I rewarded you for all your trouble, by

threatening to shoot you!" she said, in sharp contrition.

"Oh, please don't feel sorry for that!" he begged. "It wasn't really as deadly as you made it seem. That is an old style revolver, you see, vintage of 1880 or thereabouts, I should say. Not a self-cocker. And, you'll notice it isn't cocked. So, even if you had stuck to your lethal threat and had pulled the trigger ever so hard, I'd still be more or less alive. You'll excuse me for mentioning it," he ended in apology, noting her crestfallen air. "Any novice in the art of slaying might have done the same thing. Shooting people is an accomplishment that improves with practice."

Coldly, she turned away, and crossed to where the collie was beginning to weary of his fruitless efforts to climb the shinily smooth bark of the giant gumbo-limbo. Catching him by the collar, she said:

"Bobby! Bobby Burns! Stop that silly barking! Stop it at once! And leave poor little Simon Cameron alone! Aren't you ashamed?"

Now, Bobby was not in the least ashamed--except for his failure to reach his elusive prey. But, like many highbred and highstrung collies, he did not fancy having his collar seized by a stranger. He did not resent the act with snarls and a show of teeth, as in the case of the beach comber. But he stiffened to offended dignity, and, with a sudden jerk, freed himself from the little detaining hand.

Then, loftily, he stalked across to Gavin and thrust his muzzle once more into the man's cupped palm. As clearly as by a dictionary-ful of words, he had rebuked her familiarity and had shown to whom he felt he owed sole allegiance.

While the girl was still staring in rueful indignation at this snub from her dog, Brice found time and thought to stare with still greater intentness up the tree, at a bunch of bristling fur which occupied the first crotch and which glared wrathfully down at the collie.

He made out the contour and bashed-in profile of a huge Persian cat, silver-gray of hue, dense of coat, green of eye.

"So that's Simon Cameron?" he queried. "What a beauty! And what a quaintly Oriental name you've chosen for him!"

"He is named," said the girl, still icily, "for a statesman my parents admired. My brother says our Persian's hair is just the same color as Simon Cameron's used to be. That's why we named him that. You'll notice the cat has the beautifullest silvery gray hair--"

"Prematurely gray, I'm sure," put in Brice, civilly.

She looked at him, in doubt. But his face was grave. And she turned to the task of coaxing the indignant Simon Cameron from his tree-refuge.

"Simon Cameron always walks around the grounds with me, at sunset," she explained, in intervals of cajoling the grumpy mass of fluff to descend. "And he ran ahead of me, to-day, to the edge of the path. That must have been when Bobby caught sight of him..."

"Come, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!" she coaxed. "Do be a good little cat, and come down. See, the dog can't get at you, now. He's being held. Come!"

The allurements of his mistress's voice produced no stirring effect on the temperamental Simon Cameron. Beyond leaving the crotch and edging mincingly downward, a yard or so, the Persian refused to obey the crooning summons. Plastered flat against the tree trunk, some nine feet above the ground, he miaowed dolefully.

"Hold Bobby's collar," suggested Brice, "and I think I can get the prematurely grizzled catling to earth."

The girl came over to where man and dog stood, and took Bobby Burns by the collar. Brice crossed to the tree and looked upward at the yowling Simon Cameron.

"Hello, you good little cat!" he hailed, cooingly. "Cats always like to be called 'good,' you know. All of us are flattered when we're praised for something we aren't. A dog doesn't care much about being called 'good.' Because he knows he is. But a cat..."

As he talked, Gavin scratched gratingly on the tree trunk, and gazed up in ostentatious admiration at the coy Simon Cameron. The Persian, like all his kind, was foolishly open to admiration. Brice's look, his crooning voice, his entertaining fashion of scratching the tree for the cat's amusement all these proved a genuine lure. Down the tree started Simon Cameron, moving backward, and halting coquettishly at every few inches.

Gavin reached up and lifted the fluffy creature from the trunk, cradling him in expert manner in the crook of one arm. Simon Cameron forgot his fear and purred loudly, rubbing his snub-nose face against his captor's sleeve.

"Don't feel too much flattered," adjured the girl. "He's like that, with all strangers. As soon as he has known most people a day or two, he'll have nothing to do with them."

"I know," assented Gavin. "That's a trick of Persian cats. They have an inordinate interest in every one except the people they know. Their idea of heaven is to be admired by a million strangers at a time. If I'd had any tobacco-reek on me, Simon Cameron wouldn't have let me hold him as long as this. Persian's hate tobacco."

He set the soothed animal down on the lawn, where, after one scornful look at the tugging and helpless dog, Simon Cameron proceeded to rub his arched back against the man's legs, thus transferring a goodly number of fluffy gray hairs to Brice's shabby trousers. Tiring of this, he minced off, affectedly, toward the distant house that stood at the landward end of the sloping lawn.

As he set the cat down, Brice had stepped out of the shadows of the grove, into the open. And now, not only his face, but his whole body was clearly visible in the dying daylight. The girl's eyes ran appraisingly over the worn clothes and the cracking and dusty shoes. Brice felt, rather than saw, her appraisal. And he knew she was contrasting his costume with his voice and his clean-shaven face. She broke the moment of embarrassed silence by saying "You must be tired after your long tramp, from Miami. Were you walking for fun and exercise, or are you bound for any especial place?" He knew she was fencing, that his clothes made her wonder if she ought not to offer him some cash payment for finding her dog,--a reward she would never have dreamed of offering on the strength of his manner and voice. Also, it seemed, she was seeking some way of closing the interview without dismissing him or walking away. And he answered with perfect simplicity:

"No, I wasn't walking for exercise or fun. There are better and easier ways of acquiring fun than by plodding for hours in the hot sunshine. And of getting exercise, too. I was on my way to Homestead or to some farming place along the line, where I might pick up a job."

"Oh!"

"Yes. I could probably have gotten a place as dishwasher or even as a 'bus' or porter, in one of the big Miami hotels," he pursued, "or a billet with one of the dredging gangs in the harbor. But somehow I'd rather do farm work of some sort. It seems less of a slump, when a chap is down on his luck, than to go in for scrubbing or for section-gang hustling. There are farms and citrus groves, all along here, just back of the bay. And I'm looking for one of them where I can get a decent day's work to do and a decent day's wages for doing it."

He spoke with an almost overdone earnestness. The girl was

watching him, attentively, a furrow between her straight brows. Somehow, her level look made him uncomfortable. He continued, with a shade less assurance:

"I was brought up on a farm, though I haven't been on one since I was eighteen. I might have been better off if I'd stayed there. Anyhow, when a man's prospects of starving are growing brighter every day, a farm-job is about the pleasantest sort of work he can find."

"Starving!" she repeated, in something like contempt. "If you had been in this region a little longer--say, long enough to pronounce the name, 'Miami' as it's pronounced down here, instead of calling it 'Me-ah-mee,' as you did--if you'd been here longer, you'd know that nobody need starve in Florida. Nobody who is willing to work. There's the fishing, and the construction gangs, and the groves, and the farms, and a million other ways of making a living. The weather lets you sleep outdoors, if you have to. The..."

"I've done it," he chimed in. "Slept outdoors, I mean. Last night, for instance. I slept very snugly indeed, under a Traveler Tree in the gardens of the Royal Palm Hotel. There was a dance at the hotel. I went to sleep, under the stars, to the lullaby of a corking good orchestra. The only drawback was that a spooning couple who were engineering a 'petting party,' almost sat down on my head, there in the darkness. Not that I'd have minded being a settee for them. But they might have told one of the watchmen about my being there. And I'd have had to hunt other sleeping quarters."

She did not abate that look of quizzical appraisal. And again Gavin Brice began to feel uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

"You have an orange grove, back yonder, haven't you?" he asked, abruptly, nodding toward a landward stretch of ground shut off from the lawn by a thickset hedge of oleander.

"How did you know?" she demanded in suspicion. "By this light you couldn't possibly see--"

"Oddly enough," he said, in the pleasant drawling voice she was learning to like in spite of her better judgment, "oddly enough, I was born with a serviceable pair of nostrils. There is a scent of orange blossoms hanging fairly strong in the air. It doesn't come from the mangrove swamp behind me or from the highroad in front of your house or from the big garden patch to the south of the lawn. So I made a Sherlock Holmes guess that it must be over there to northward, and pretty close. Besides, that's the only direction the Trade Winds could bring the scent from."

Again, she was aware of a certain glibness in his tone,--a

glibness that annoyed her and at the same time piqued her curiosity.

"Yes," she said, none too cordially. "Our orange groves are there. Why do you ask?"

"Only," he replied, "because where there are large citrus groves on one side of a house and fairly big vegetable gardens on the other, it means the need for a good bit of labor. And that may mean a chance for a job. Or it may not. You'll pardon my suggesting it.

"My brother needs no more labor," she replied. "At least, I am quite certain he doesn't. In fact, he has more men working here now than he actually needs. I--I've heard him say so. Of course, I'll be glad to ask him, when he comes back from town. And if you'd care to leave your address--"

"Gladly," said Brice. "Any letter addressed to me, as 'Gavin Brice, in care of Traveler Tree, rear gardens of Royal Palm Hotel,' will reach me. Unless, of course, the night watchmen chance to root me out. In that case, I'll leave word with them where mail may be forwarded. In the meantime, it's getting pretty dark, and I don't know this part of Dade County as well as I'd like to. So I'll be starting on. If you don't mind, I'll cross your lawn, and take the main road. It's easier going, at night than by way of the mangrove swamp and the beach. Good night, Miss--"

"Wait!" she interposed, worry creeping into her sweet voice. "I--I can't let you go like this. Do you really mean you have to sleep out of doors and that you have no money? I don't want to be impertinent, but--"

"'Nobody need starve in Florida,'" he quoted, gravely. "'Nobody who is willing to work. The weather lets you sleep outdoors.' (In which, the weather chimes harmoniously with my pocketbook.) And, as I am extremely 'willing to work,' it follows that I can't possibly starve. But I thank you for feeling concerned about me. It's a long day since a woman has bothered her head whether I live or die. Good night, again, Miss--"

A second time, she ignored his hint that she tell him her name. Too much worried over his light words and the real need they seemed to cover, to heed the subtler intent, she said, a little tremulously:

"I--I don't understand you, at all. Not that it is any business of mine, of course. But I hate to think that any one is in need of food or shelter. Your voice and your face and the way you talk--they don't fit in with the rest of you. Such men as yourself don't drift, penniless, through Lower

Florida, looking for day-laborer jobs. I can't understand--"

"Every one who speaks decent English and yet is down-and-out," he said, quietly, "isn't necessarily a tramp or a fugitive from justice. And he doesn't need to be a man of mystery, either. Suppose, let's say, a clerk in New York has been too ill, for a long time, to work. Suppose illness has eaten all his savings, and that he doesn't care to borrow, when he knows he may never be able to pay. Suppose his doctor tells him he must go South, to get braced up, and to avoid a New York February and March. Suppose the patient has only about money enough to get here, and relies on finding something to do to keep him in food and lodging. Well--there's nothing mysterious or especially discreditable in that, is there? ... The dew is beginning to fall. And I'm keeping you out here in the damp. Good night, Miss--Miss--"

"Standish," she supplied, but speaking absently, her mind still perturbed at his plight. "My name is Standish. Claire Standish."

"Mine is Gavin Brice," he said. "Good night. Keep hold of Bobby Burns's collar, till I'm well on my way. He may try to follow me. Good-by, old chap," he added, bending down and taking the collie's silken head affectionately between his hands. "You're a good dog, and a good pal. But put the soft pedal on the temperamental stuff, when you're near Simon Cameron. That's the best recipe for avoiding a scratched nose. By the way, Miss Standish, don't encourage him to roam around in the palmetto scrub, on your outings with him. The rattlesnakes have gotten many a good dog, in Florida. He--"

"Mr. Brice!" she broke in. "If I offend you, I can't help it. Won't you please let me--let me lend you enough money to keep you going, till you get a good job? Please do! Of course, you can pay me, as soon as--"

"I have not found such faith,--no, not in Israel!" quoted Brice, a new note in his voice which somehow stirred the embarrassed girl's heart. "You have only my bare word that I'm not a panhandler or a crook. And yet you believe in me enough to--"

"You will let me?" she urged, eagerly. "Say you will! Say it."

"I'll make cleaner use of your faith," he returned, "by asking you to say a good word for me to your brother, if ever I come back here looking for a job. No, no!" he broke off, fiercely, before she could answer. "I don't mean that. You must do nothing of the kind. Forget I asked it."

With which amazing outburst, he turned on his heel, ran across

the lawn, leaped the low privet hedge which divided it from the coral road, and made off at a swinging pace in the direction of Coconut Grove and Miami.

"What a fool--and what a cur--a man can make of himself," he muttered disgustedly as he strode along, without daring to look back at the wondering little white-clad figure, watching him out of sight around the bend, "when he gets to talking with a woman--a woman with--with eyes like hers! They--why, they make me feel as if I was in church! What sort of bungling novice am I, anyhow, for work like this?"

With a grunt of self-contempt, he drove his hands deep into the pockets of his shabby trousers and quickened his pace. His fingers closed mechanically around a roll of bills, of very respectable size, in the depths of his right-hand pocket. The gesture caused a litter of small change to give forth a muffled jingle. A sense of shame crept over the man, at the contact.

"She wanted to lend me money!" he muttered, half-aloud. "Money! Not give it to me, as a beggar, but to lend it to me.... Her nose has the funniest little tilt to it! And she can't be an inch over five feet tall! ... I'm a wall-eyed idiot!"

He stood aside to let two cars pass him, one going in either direction. The lamps of the car from the west, traveling east, showed him for a moment the occupant of the car that was moving westward. The brief ray shone upon a pair of shoulders as wide as a steam radiator. They were clad in loose-fitting white silk. Above them a thick golden beard caught the ray of shifting light. Then, both cars had passed on, and Brice was resuming his trudge.

"Milo Standish!" he mused, looking back at the car as it vanished in a cloudlet of white coral-dust. "Milo Standish! ... As big as two elephants 'The bigger they are, the harder they fall.'"

The road curved, from the Standish estate, in almost a "C" formation, before straightening out, a mile to the north, into the main highway. Gavin Brice had just reached the end of the "C" when there was a scurrying sound behind him, in a grapefruit grove to his right. Something light and agile scrambled over the low coral-block wall, and flung itself rapturously on him.

It was Bobby Burns.

The collie had suffered himself to be led indoors by the girl whom he had never seen until that morning, and for whom, thus far, he had formed no affection. But his wistful, deepset

dark eyes had followed Gavin Brice's receding form. He could not believe this dear new friend meant to desert him. As Brice did not stop, nor even look back, the collie waxed doubtful. And he tugged to be free. Claire spoke gently to him, a slight quiver in her own voice, her dark eyes, like his, fixed upon the dwindling dark speck on the dusky white road.

"No, Bobby!" she said, under her breath, as she petted the restless head. "He won't come back. Let's forget all about it. We both behaved foolishly, you and I, Bobby. And he --well, let's just call him eccentric, and not think about him any more."

She drew the reluctant collie into the house, and closed the door. But, a few minutes later, when her back chanced to be turned, and when a maid came into the room leaving the door ajar, Bobby slipped out.

In another five seconds he was in the road, casting about for Brice's trail. Finding it, he set off, at a hard gallop, nostrils close to the ground. Having once been hit and bruised, in puppyhood, by a motor car, the dog had a wholesome respect for such rapid and ill-smelling vehicles. Thus, as he saw the lights and heard the engine-purr of one of them, coming toward him, down the road, he dodged back into the wayside hedge until it passed. Which is the reason Milo Standish failed to see the dog he had been hunting for.

A little later, Brice's scent became so distinct that the collie could abandon his nose-to-the-ground tactics and strike across country, by dead-reckoning, guided not only by his nose but by the sound of Gavin's steps. Then, in an access of delight, he burst upon the plodding man.

"Why, Bobby!" exclaimed Brice, touched by the dog's rapture in having found him again. "Why, Bobby Burns! What on earth made you follow me? Don't you know I'm not your master? Don't you, Bobby?"

He was petting the frisking collie as he talked. But now he faced about.

"I've got to take you back to her, old man!" he informed the highly interested dog. "You belong to her. And she'll worry about you. I'll just take you into the dooryard or to the front lawn or whatever it is, and tie you there, so some one will find you. I don't want to get my plans all messed up by another talk with her, to-night. It's a mean trick to play on you, after you've taken all the trouble to follow me. But you're hers. After this rotten business is all over, maybe I'll try to buy you. It's worth ninety per cent of your value to have had you pick me out for your master. Any man with

cash enough can be a dog's owner, Bobby. But all the cash in the world won't make him the dog's master without the dog's own consent. Ever stop to think of that, Bobby?"

As he talked, half incoherently, to the delighted collie, Gavin was retracing his way over the mile or so he had just traversed. He grudged the extra steps. For the day had been long and full of exercise. And he was more than comfortably tired. But he kept on, wondering vexedly at the little throb of eagerness in his heart as Claire Standish's home at last bulked dimly into view around the last curve of the byroad.

Bobby Burns trotted happily beside him, reveling in the man's occasional rambling words, as is the flattering way collies have when they are talked to, familiarly, by the human they love. And so the two neared the house, their padding footsteps noiseless in the soft white dust of the road.

There were lights in several windows. One strong ray was cast full across the side lawn, penetrating almost as far as the beginning of the forest at the rear. Toward this vivid beam, Gavin bent his steps, fumbling in his pocket as he went, for something with which to tie Bobby to the nearest tree.

As he moved forward and left the road for the closecropped grass of the lawn, he saw a dim white shadow advancing obliquely in his direction. And, for an instant, his heartbeats quickened, ever so slightly. Then, he was disgusted with his own fatuousness. For the white form was double the size of Claire Standish. And he knew this was her brother, crossing from the garage to a door of the house.

The big man swung along with the easy gait of perfect physical strength. And as the window, whence flowed the light-ray, was alongside the door he intended to enter, his journey toward the house lay in the direct path of the ray.

Brice, in the darkness, just inside the gateway, stood moveless and waited for him to traverse the hundred feet or so that remained between him and the veranda. The collie fidgeted, at sight of the man in white, and began to growl, inquiringly, far down in his throat.

Gavin patted Bobby Burns reassuringly on the head, to quiet him. He was of no mind to introduce himself at the Standish home, a second time, as the returner of a runaway dog. Wherefore, he sought to remain unseen, and to wait with what patience he could until the householder should have gone indoors.

Apparently, on reaching home, Standish had driven the car to the garage and had pottered around there for some minutes before starting for the house. He was carrying something

loosely in one hand, and he did not seem in any hurry.

"My friend," said Gavin, soundlessly, "if a girl like Claire Standish was waiting for me, beyond, that shaft of light, I'd make the trip in something better than no time at all. But then--she's not my sister, thank the good Lord!"

He grinned at his own silly thoughts concerning the girl he had talked to for so brief a time. Yet he found himself looking at her elder brother with a certain reluctant friendliness, on her account.

Suddenly, the grin was wiped from his face, and he was tense from head to foot.

Standish, on his way homeward, was strolling past a clump of dwarf shrubbery. And, idly watching him, Gavin could have sworn that one end of the shrubbery moved.

Then, he was no longer in doubt. The bit of darkness detached itself from the rest of the shrubbery, as Milo lounged past, and it sprang, catlike, at the unsuspecting man's back.

Into the path of light it leaped. In the same atom of time, Gavin Brice shouted aloud in sharp warning, and dashed forward, the collie at his side.

But he was fifty feet away. And his shout served only to make Standish halt, staring about him.

It was then that the creature from the shrubbery made his spring. He struck venomously at Standish, from behind. And Gavin could see, in the striking hand, a glitter of steel.

Standish--warned perhaps by sound, perhaps by instinct--wheeled half-way around. Thus the knifeblow missed its mark between his shoulder-blades. Not the blade, but the fist which gripped it, smote full on Standish's shoulder. The deflected point merely shore the white coat from neck to waist.

There was no scope to strike again. And the assailant contented himself with passing his free arm garrottingly around Standish's neck, from behind, and leaping upward, bringing his knees into the small of the victim's back.

Here evidently was no amateur slayer. For, even as the knife-thrust missed its mark, he had resorted to the second ruse, and before Standish could turn around far enough to avert it.

Down went the big man, under the strangle-hold and knee-purchase. With a crash that knocked the breath out of him and dazed him, he landed on his back, his head smiting the sward with a resounding

thwack.

His adversary, once more, wasted not a jot of time. As Standish struck ground, the man was upon him, knife again aloft, poised above the helpless Milo's throat.

And it was then that Gavin Brice's flying feet brought him to the scene.

As he ran he had heard a door open. And he knew his warning shout had reached the ears of some one in the house,--perhaps of Claire. But he had no time nor thought for anything, just then, except the stark need of reaching Milo Standish before the knife could strike.

He launched himself, after the fashion of a football tackle, straight for the descending arm. And, for a few seconds all three men rolled and wallowed and fought in a jumble of flying arms and legs and heads.

Brice had been lucky enough or dextrous enough to catch the knife-wielder's wrist and to wrench it far to one side, as it whizzed downward. With his other hand he had groped for the slayer's throat.

Then, he found himself attacked with a maniac fury by the man whose murderous purpose he had thwarted. Still gripping the knife-wrist, he was sore put to it to fend off an avalanche of blows from the other arm and of kicks from both of the assailant's deftly plied feet.

Nor was his task made the easier by the fact that Milo Standish had recovered from the momentary daze, and was slugging impartially at both the men who rolled and tossed on top of him.

This, for a short but excessively busy space of moments. Then, wriggling free of Milo's impeding and struggling bulk, Brice gained the throat-hold he sought. Still holding to the ground the wrist of the knifehand, he dug his supple fingers deep into the man's throat, disregarding such blows and kicks as he could not ward off.

There was science in his ferocious onslaught. And his skilled fingers had found the windpipe and the carotid artery as well. With such force as Brice was able to exert, the other's breath was shut off, while he was all but paralyzed by the digging pressure into his carotid.

Such a grip is well understood by Japanese athletes, though its possibilities and method are unknown to the average Occidental. Rightly applied, it is irresistible. Carried to its conclusion, it spells sudden and agonizing death to its

victim.

And Gavin Brice was carrying it to the conclusion, with all the sinew and science of his trained arms.

The knifer's strength was gorilla-like. But that strength, at every second, was rendered more and more futile. The man must have realized it. For, all at once, he ceased his battery of kicks and blows, and struggled frantically to tear free.

Each plunging motion merely intensified the pain and power of the relentless throat-grip that pinioned him. And, strangling and panic-struck, he became wilder in his fruitless efforts to wrench loose. Then, deprived of breath and with his nerve-centers shaken, he lost the power to strive.

It was the time for which Gavin had waited. With perfect ease, now, he twisted the knife from the failing grasp, and, with his left hand, he reinforced the throat-grip of his right. As he did so, he got his legs under him and arose, dragging upward with him the all but senseless body of his garroted foe.

It had been a pretty bit of work, from the start, and one upon which his monkey-faced Japanese jui-jitsu instructor would have lavished a grunt of approval.

He had conquered an armed and muscular enemy by his knowledge of anatomy and by applying the simple grip he had learned. And now, the heaving half-dead murderer was at his mercy.

Gavin swung the feebly twitching body out, more fully into the streak of light from the house, noting, subconsciously that the light ray was twice as broad as before, by reason of the door's standing open.

But, before he could concentrate his gaze on the man he held, he saw several million other things. And all the several million were multi-hued stars and bursting bombs.

The entire universe seemed to have exploded and to have chosen the inside of his brain as the site for such annoying pyrotechnics. Dully he was aware that his hands were loosening their death-grip and that his arms were falling to his sides. Also, that his knees had turned to hot tallow and were crumbling, under him.

None of these amazing phenomena struck him as at all interesting. Indeed, nothing struck him as worth noting. Not even the display of myriad shooting stars. It all seemed quite natural, and it all lasted for the merest breath of time.

Through the universe of varicolored lights and explosions, he was aware of a woman's cry. And, somehow, this pierced the mist of his senses, and found its way to his heart. But only for an instant.

Then, instead of tumbling to earth, he felt himself sinking down, uncountable miles, through a cool darkness. The dark was comforting, after all that bothersome display of lights.

And, while he was still falling, he drifted into a dead sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE MOCKING BIRD

After centuries of unconsciousness, Gavin Brice began to return, bit by bit, to his senses.

The first thing he knew was that the myriad shooting stars in his head had changed somehow into a myriad shooting pains. He was in torment. And he was deathly sick.

His trained brain forced itself to a semblance of sanity, and he found himself piecing together vaguely the things that had happened to him. He could remember seeing Milo Standish strolling toward the veranda in the shaft of light from the window, then the black figure which detached itself from the shrubbery and sprang on the unheeding man, and his own attempt to turn aside the arm that wielded the knife.

But everything else was a blank.

Meanwhile, the countless shooting pains were merging into one intolerable ache. Brice had no desire to stir or even to open his eyes. The very thought of motion was abhorrent. The mere effort at thinking was painful. So he lay still.

Presently, he was aware of something that touched his head. And he wondered why the touch did not add to his hurt, but was soothing. Even a finger's weight might have been expected to jar his battered skull.

But there was no jar to this touch. Rather was it cooling and of infinite comfort. And now he realized that it had been continuing for some time.

Again he roused his rebellious brain to action, and knew at last what the soothing touch must be. Some one was bathing his forehead with cool water. Some one with a lightly

magnetic touch. Some one whose fingers held healing in their soft tips.

And, just above him, he could hear quick, light breathing, breathing that was almost a sob. His unseen nurse was taking her job not only seriously but compassionately. That was evident. It did not jibe with Gavin's slight experience with trained nurses. Wherefore, it puzzled him.

But, perplexity seemed to hurt his brain as much as did the effort to piece together the shattered fragments of memory. So he forbore to follow that train of thought. And, again, he strove to banish mentality and to sink back into the merciful senselessness from which youth and an iron-and-whalebone constitution were fighting to rouse him.

But, do what he would to prevent it, consciousness was creeping more and more in upon him. For, now, he could not only follow the motions of the wondrously gentle hand on his forehead, but he could tell that his head was not on the ground. Instead, it was resting on something warm, and it was elevated some inches above the grass. He recalled a war-chromo of a wounded soldier whose head rested on the knee of a Red Cross nurse,--a nurse who sat on the furrowed earth of a five-color battlefield, where all real life army regulations forbade her to set foot.

Was he that soldier? Was he still in the hell of the Flanders trenches? He had thought the war was over, and that he was back in America,--in America and on his way South on some odd and perilous business whose nature he could not now recall.

Another few seconds of mental wandering, and he was himself again, his mind functioning more and more clearly. With returning strength of brain came curiosity. Where was he? How did he chance to be lying here, his head in some sobbing woman's lap? It didn't make sense!

With instinctive caution, he parted his eyelids, ever so slightly, and sought to peer upward through his thick lashes. The effort was painful, but less so than he had feared. Already, through natural buoyancy or else by reason of the unseen nurse's ministrations, the throbbing ache was becoming almost bearable.

At first, his dazed eyes could make out nothing. Then he could see, through his lashes, the velvety dark blue of the night sky and the big white Southern stars shining through a soft cloud. Inconsequentially, his vagrant mind recalled that, below Miami, the Southern Cross is smudgily visible on the horizon, somewhere around two in the morning. And he wondered if he could descry it, if that luminous cloud were not in the way.

Then, he knew it was not a cloud which shimmered between his eyes and the stars. It was a woman's filmy hair.

And the woman was bending down above him, as he lay with his head on her knee. She was bending down, sobbing softly to herself, and bathing his aching head with water from a bowl at her side.

He was minded to rouse himself and speak, or at least to get a less elusive look at her shadowed face, when running footsteps sounded from somewhere. And again by instinct, Brice shut his eyes and lay motionless.

The footsteps were coming nearer. They were springy and rhythmic, the footsteps of a powerful man.

Then came a panting voice out of the darkness

"Oh, there you are!" it exclaimed. "He got away. Got away, clean. I reached the head of the path, not ten feet behind him. But, in there, it's so black I couldn't see anything ahead of me. And I had no light, worse luck! So he--"

A deep-throated growl interrupted him,--a growl so fierce and menacing that Gavin once more halfparted his eyes, in sudden curiosity.

From beside his feet, Bobby Burns was rising. The collie had crouched there, evidently, with some idea of guarding Brice from further harm. He did not seem to have resented the woman's ministrations. But he was of no mind to let this man come any closer to his stricken idol.

Brice was sore tempted to reach out his hand and give the collie a reassuring pat and to thank him for the loyal guard he had been keeping. Now, through the mists of memory, he recalled snarls and the bruising contact of a furry body, during the battle he so dimly remembered, and that once his foe had cried, out, as though at the impact of rending teeth.

Yes, Bobby Burns, presumably, had learned a lesson since his interested but impersonal surveillance of Gavin's bout with the beach comber, earlier in the afternoon. He had begun to learn that when grown men come to a clinch, it is not mere play.

And Brice wanted to praise the gallant young dog for coming to his help. But, as before, instinct and professional experience bade him continue to "play dead."

"What's that?" he heard the man demand, in surprise, as Bobby snarled again and stood threateningly between him and the

prostrate Brice.

The woman answered. And at the first sound of her voice, full memory rushed back on Gavin in a flood. He knew where he was, and who was holding, his head on her knee. The knowledge thrilled him, unaccountably. With mighty effort he held to his, pose of inert senselessness.

"That's Bobby Burns," he heard Claire saying in reply to her brother's first question. "He's guarding Mr. Brice. When I ran out here with the water and the cloths, I found him standing above him. But--oh, Milo--"

"Brice?" snapped Milo Standish, glowering on the fallen man his sister was brooding over. "Brice? Who's Brice? D'you mean that chap? Lucky I got him, even if the other one did give me the slip! Let me take a look at him. If I hadn't happened to be bringing the monkey-wrench from the garage to fix that shelf-bolt in the study, I'd never have been able to get even one of them. I yanked free of them, while they were trying to down me, and I let this one have it with the wrench. Before I could land on the other--"

"Milo!" she broke in, after several vain attempts to still his vainglorious recital. "Milo! You've injured--maybe you've killed--the man who saved you from being stabbed to death! Yet you--"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, bewildered. "These two men set on me in the dark, as I was coming from--"

"This man, here--Mr. Brice--" she flamed, "has saved you from being killed. Oh, go and telephone for a doctor! Quickly! And send one of the maids out here with my smelling salts. He--"

"Thanks!" returned her brother, making no move to obey. "But when I phone, it'll be to the police. Not to a doctor. I don't know what notion you may have gotten of this fracas. But--"

"Oh, we're wasting such precious time!" she cried. "Listen! I heard a shout. I was on my way to the veranda to see what was detaining you. For I had heard your car come in, quite a while before that. I opened the door. And I was just in time to see some man spring on you, with a knife in his hand. Then Mr. Brice came running from the gateway, just as the man threw you down and lifted his knife to stab you. Mr. Brice dragged him away from you and throttled him, and knocked the knife out of his hand. I could see it ever so plainly. For it was all in that big patch of light. Just like a scene on a stage. Then, Mr. Brice got to his feet, and swung the man to one side, by the throat. And as he did, you jumped up, too, and

hit him on the head with that miserable wrench. As he fell, I could see the other man stagger off toward the path. He was so weak, at first, he could hardly move. I cried out to you, but you were so busy glaring down at the man who had saved your life that you didn't think to start after the other one till he had gotten strength enough to escape from you. Then I went for water to--"

"Good Lord!" groaned Standish, agape. "You're--you're sure--dead sure you're right?"

"Sure?" she echoed, indignantly. "Of course I'm sure. I--"

"Hold that measly dog's collar," he broke in. "So! I don't care to be bitten. I've had my share of knockabout stuff, for one day."

Stooping, he picked up Brice as easily as though Gavin had been a baby, and with rough tenderness carried him toward the house.

"There are a lot of things, about all this, that I don't understand," he continued, irritably, as Claire and the still growling but tight-held Bobby followed him to the veranda. "For instance, how that dog happens to be here and trying to protect a total stranger. For, Bobby only got to Miami, from New Jersey, by this morning's train. He can't possibly know this man. That's one thing. Another is, how this--Brice, did you say his name is?--happened to be Johnny-on-the-spot when the other chap tried to knife me. And how you happen to know him by name. He's dressed more like a day-laborer than like any one you'd be likely to meet But all that can wait. The thing now is to find how badly he's hurt."

They had reached the veranda, and Standish carried his burden through an open doorway, which was blocked by a knot of excitedly inquisitive servants. A sharp word from Standish sent them whisperingly back to the kitchen regions. Milo laid Brice down on a wicker couch in the broad, flagged hallway, and ran his fingers over the bruised head.

Gavin could hear Claire, in a nearby room, telephoning.

"Hold on, there!" called Standish, as his sister gave the operator a number. "Wait! As well as I can tell, at a glance, there doesn't seem to be any fracture. He's just knocked out. That's all. A mild concussion of the brain, I should think. Don't call a doctor, unless it turns out to be more serious. It's bad enough for the servants to be all stirred up like this, and to blab--as they're certain to--without letting a doctor in on it, too. The less talk we cause, the better."

Reluctantly, Claire came away from the telephone and approached the couch.

"You're sure?" she asked, in doubt.

"I've had some experience with this sort of thing, on the other side," he answered. "The man will come to himself in another few minutes. I've loosened his collar and belt and shoelaces. He--"

"Have you any idea who could have tried to kill you?" she asked, shuddering.

"Yes!" he made sullen answer. "And so have you. Let it go at that."

"You--you think it was one of--?"

"Hush!" he ordered, uneasily. "This fellow may not be quite as unconscious as he looks. Sometimes, people get their hearing back, before they open their eyes. Come into the library, a minute. I want to speak to you. Oh, don't look like that, about leaving him alone! He'll be all right, I tell you! His pulse is coming back, strong. Come in here."

He laid one big arm on her slight shoulder and led her, half-forcibly, into the adjoining room. Thence, Gavin could hear the rumble of his deep voice. But he could catch no word the man said, though once he heard Claire speak in vehement excitement, and could hear Milo's harsh interruption and his command that she lower her voice.

Presently, the two came back into the hall. As Standish neared the couch, Gavin Brice opened his eyes, with considerable effort, and blinked dazedly up at the gigantic figure in the torn and muddy white silk suit.

Then Brice's blinking gaze drifted to Claire, as she stood, pale and big-eyed, above him. He essayed a feeble smile of recognition, and let his glance wander in well-acted amazement about the high-veiled hallway.

"Feeling better?" queried Milo. "Here, drink this."

Gavin essayed to speak. His pose was not wholly assumed. For his head still swam and was intolerably painful.

He sipped at the brandy which Standish held to his sagging lips. And, glancing toward Claire, he smiled, a somewhat wavery and wan smile.

"Don't try to say anything!" she begged. "Wait till you are

feeling better."

"I'm I'm all right," he assured her, albeit rather shakily, his voice seeming to come from a distance. "I got a rap over the head. And it put me out, for a while. But--I'm collecting the pieces. I'll be as good as--as new, in a few minutes."

The fragments of dialogue between brother and sister had supplemented his returning memory. Mentally, he was himself again, keen, secretive, alert, every bit of him warily on guard. But he cursed the fact that Standish had drawn Claire into the library, out of earshot, when he spoke of the man who had attacked him.

Then, with a queer revulsion of feeling, he cursed himself for an eavesdropper, and was ashamed of having listened at all. For the first time, he began to hate the errand that had brought him to Florida.

Bobby Burns caused a mild diversion, as Brice's voice trailed away. At Gavin's first word, the collie sprang from his self-appointed guard-post at the foot of the couch, and came dancing up to the convalescent man, thrusting his cold nose rapturously against Brice's face, trying to lick his cheek, whimpering in joy at his idol's recovery.

With much effort Gavin managed to stroke the wrigglingly active head, and to say a reassuring word to his worshiper. Then, glancing again at Claire, he explained:

"I'd done about a mile toward Miami when he overtook me. There was no use in trying to send him home. So I brought him. Just as we got to the gate, here--"

"I know," intervened Claire, eager to spare him the effort of speech. "I saw. It was splendid of you, Mr. Brice! My brother and I are in your debt for more than we can ever hope to pay."

"Nonsense!" he protested. "I made a botch of the whole thing. I ought--"

"No," denied Milo. "It was I who made a botch of it. I owe you not only my life but an apology. It was my blow, not the other man's, that knocked you out. I misunderstood, and--"

"That's all right!" declared Gavin. "In the dim light it's a miracle we didn't all of us slug the wrong men. I--"

He stopped. Claire had been working over something on a table behind him. Now she came forward with a cold compress for his abraded scalp. Skillfully, she applied it, her dainty fingers

wondrously deft.

"Red Cross?" asked Brice, as she worked.

"Just a six-month nursing course, during the war," she said, modestly, adding: "I didn't get across."

"I'm sorry," said Gavin. "I mean, for the poor chaps who might have profited by such clever bandaging Yes, that's a very dull and heavy compliment. I know it. But--there's a lot of gratitude behind it. You've made this throbbing old head of mine feel ever so much better, Miss Standish."

Milo was looking bewilderedly from one to the other, as if trying to understand how this ill-clad man chanced to be on such terms of acquaintanceship with his fastidious little sister. Claire read his look of inquiry, and said:

"Mr. Brice found Bobby Burns, this afternoon, and brought him home to me. It was nice of him, wasn't it? For it took him ever so far out of his way."

Gavin noted that she made no mention of his having come to the Standish home by way of the hidden path. It seemed to him that she gave him a glance of covert appeal, as though beseeching him not to mention it. He nodded, ever so slightly, and took up the narrative, as she paused for words.

"I saw Miss Standish and yourself, at Miami, this morning," said he, "and the collie, here, on the back seat of your car. Then, this afternoon, as I was walking out in this direction, I saw the dog again. I recognized him, and I guessed he had strayed. So he and I made friends. And as we were strolling along together, we met Miss Standish. At least, I met her. Bobby met a prematurely gray Persian cat, with the dreamy Bagdad name of 'Simon Cameron.' By the time the dog and cat could be sorted out from each other--"

"Oh, I see!" laughed Milo. "And I don't envy you the job of sorting them. It was mighty kind of you to--"

He broke off and added, with a tinge of anxiety:

"You say you happened to be walking near here. Are you a neighbor of ours?"

"Not yet," answered Gavin, with almost exaggerated simplicity.

"But I was hoping to be. You see I was out looking for a job in this neighborhood."

"A job?" repeated Milo, then, suspiciously: "Why in this neighborhood, rather than any other? You say you were at Miami--"

"Because this chanced to be the neighborhood I was wandering in," replied Gavin. "As I explained to Miss Standish, I'd rather do some kind of outdoor work. Preferably farm work. That's why I left Miami. There seemed to be lots of farms and groves, hereabouts."

"Yet you were on your way back toward Miami, when Bobby overtook you? Rather a long walk, for--"

"A long walk," gravely agreed Brice. "But safer sleeping quarters when one gets there. Up North, one can take a chance, and sleep in the open, almost anywhere except on a yellow-jacket's nest. Down here, I've heard, rattlesnakes are apt to stray in upon one's slumbers. Out in the country, at least. There aren't any rattlesnakes in the Royal Palm's gardens. Besides, there's music, and there's the fragrance of night jasmine. Altogether, it's worth the difference of ten or twelve miles of tramping."

"You're staying at the Royal Palm, then?"

"Near it," corrected Brice. "To be exact, in the darkest corner of its big gardens. The turf is soft and springy. The solitude is perfect, too--unless some nightwatchman gets too vigilant."

He spoke lightly, even airily, through his pain and weakness. But, as before, his every faculty was on guard. A born and trained expert in reading human nature, he felt this giant somehow suspected him and was trying to trap him in an inaccuracy. Wherefore, he fenced, verbally, calmly confident he could outpoint his clumsier antagonist.

"You don't look like the kind of man who need sleep out of doors," replied Standish, speaking slowly, as one who chooses his every word with care, and with his cold blue eyes unobtrusively scanning Gavin's battered face. "That's the bedroom for bums. You aren't a bum. Even if your manner, and the way you fought out yonder, didn't prove that. A bum doesn't walk all this way and back, on a hot day, unless for a handout. And you--"

"But a handout is just what I asked for," Gavin caught him up. "When I brought Bobby Burns back I traded on the trifling little service by asking Miss Standish if I could get a job here. It was impertinent of me, I know. And I was sorry as soon as I'd done it. But she told me, in effect, that you were 'firing, not hiring.' So I--"

"Why did you want a job with me?" insisted Standish. "Rather than with any of a dozen farmers or country house people along here?"

And, this time, any fool could have read the stark suspicion in his tone and in the hard blue eyes.

"For several reasons," said Brice, coolly. "In the first place, I had brought home your dog. In the second, I had taken a fancy to him, as he had to me, and it would be pleasant working at a place where I could be with such a chum. In the third place, Miss Standish was kind enough to say pretty much the same things about me that you've just said. She knew I wasn't a tramp, who might be expected to decamp with the lawn-mower or the spoons. Another landowner might not have been so complimentary, when I applied for work and had no references. In the fourth, you seem to have a larger and more pretentious place here than most of your near neighbors. I--I can't think of any better reasons, just now."

"H'm!" mused Standish, frowning down on the recumbent man, and then looking across in perplexity at Claire.

What he read in the girl's eyes seemed to shame him, just a little. For, as he turned back to Gavin, there was an apologetic aspect on his bearded face. Brice decided to force the playing. Before his host could speak or Claire could interfere, he rose to a sitting position, with some effort and more pain, and, clutching the head of the couch, lurched to his feet.

"No, no!" called Claire, running forward to support him as he swayed a bit. "Don't try to stand! Lie down again! You're as white as a ghost."

But Gavin drew courteously away from her supporting arm and faced Milo.

"I can only thank you," said he, "for patching me up so well. I'm a lot better, now. And I've a long way to go. So, I'll be starting. Thanks, again, both of you. I'm sorry to have put you to so much bother." He reeled, cleverly, caught at the couch-head again, and took an uncertain step toward the door. But now, not only Claire but her brother barred his way.

"Don't be an idiot!" stormed Milo. "Why, man, you couldn't walk a hundred yards, with that groggy head on your shoulders! You're all beaten up. You'll be lucky if you're on your feet in another three days. What sort of cur do you think I am, to let you go like this, after all you've done for me, to-night? You'll stay with us till to-morrow, anyhow. And then, if you still insist on going back to Miami, I'll take you there in the car. But you're not going a step from here, to-night. I--"

Gavin strove to mutter a word of disclaimer, to take another wavering stride toward the front door. But his knees gave away under him. He swayed forward, and must have fallen, had not Milo Standish caught him.

"Here," Milo bade his sister, as he laid the limp body back on the couch. "Go and tell the maids to get the gray room ready as quickly as possible. I'll carry him up there. It was rotten of me to go on catechizing him, like that, and letting him see he was unwelcome. But for him, I'd be--"

"Yes," answered Claire, over her shoulder, as she hurried on her errand. "It was 'rotten.' And more than that. I kept trying to signal you to stop. You'll you'll give him work, here, won't you, please?"

"We'll talk about that, afterward," he said, ungraciously. "I suppose it's the only thing a white man can do, after the chap risked his life for me, to-night. But I'd rather give him ten times his wages--money to get out and keep out."

"Thanks, neighbor!" said Brice, to himself, from the depths of his stage-faint. "I've no doubt you would. But the cards are running the other way."

Again, his eyes apparently shut, he watched through slitted lids the progress of Claire, as she passed out of the hall, toward the kitchen quarters. She was leading the reluctant Bobby Burns away, by the collar. Standish was just behind her, and had his back turned to Gavin. But he glanced at him, suddenly, over his shoulder, and then strode swiftly forward to close the door which Claire had left open behind her on her way to the kitchen wing of the house.

Something in the big man's action aroused in Brice the mystic sixth sense he had been at much pains to develop--a sense which often enabled him to guess instinctively at an opponent's next probable move. As Milo took his first step toward the open door, Brice went into action.

Both hands slipped into his pockets, and out again. As he withdrew them, one hand held his battered but patently solid gold watch. The other gripped his roll of bills and as much of his small change as he had been able to scoop up in one rapid grab.

On the stand at the head of the couch reposed a fat tobacco jar and pipes. The jar was more than half full. Into it, Gavin Brice dumped his valuables, and with a clawing motion, scraped a handful of loose tobacco over them. Then he returned to his former inertly supine posture.

The whole maneuver had not occupied three seconds. And, by

the time Standish had the door closed and had started back toward the couch, the watch and money were safe-hidden. At that, there had been little enough time to spare. It had been a matter of touch-and-go. Nothing but the odd look he had read in Milo's face as Standish had glanced at him over his shoulder, would have led Brice to take such a chance. But, all at once, it had seemed a matter of stark necessity.

The narrow escape from detection set his strained nerves to twitching. He muttered to himself:

"Come along then, you man-mountain! You wanted to get your sister out of the way, so you could go through my clothes and see if I was lying about being flat broke and if I had any incriminating papers on me. Come along, and search! If I hadn't brains enough to fool a chucklehead, like you, I'd go out of the business and take in back-stairs to clean!"

Milo was approaching the couch, moving with a stealthy lightness, unusual in so large a man. Leaning over the supposedly unconscious Gavin, he ran his fingers deftly through Brice's several pockets. In only two was he lucky to find anything.

From a trousers pocket he exhumed seventy-eight cents. From the inner pocket of the coat he extracted a card, postmarked "New York City," and addressed to "Gavin Brice, General Delivery, Miami, Florida." The postcard was inscribed, in a scrawling hand:

"Good time and good luck and good health to you, from us all. Jack O'G."

Gavin knew well the contents of the card, having written it and mailed it to himself on the eve of his departure from the North. It was as mild and noncommittal a form of identification as he could well have chosen.

Standish read the banal message on the soiled card, then restored cash and postal to their respective pockets. After which he stood frowning down in puzzled conjecture on the moveless Gavin.

"Well, old chap!" soliloquized Brice. "If that evidence doesn't back up all I said about myself, nothing will. But, for the Lord's sake, don't help yourself to a pipeful of tobacco, till I have time to plant the loot deeper in the jar!"

He heard the light footfalls of women, upstairs, where Claire, in person, seemed to be superintending the arrangement of his room. At the sound, a twinge of compunction swept Brice. But, at memory of her brother's stealthy ransacking of an

unconscious guest's clothes, the feeling passed, leaving only a warm battlethrill.

Drowsily, he opened his eyes, and stared with blank wonder up at Milo. Then, shamefacedly, he mumbled:

"I--I hope I wasn't baby enough to--to keel over, Mr. Standish?"

"That's all right," answered Milo. "It was my fault. I was a boor. And, very rightly, you decided you didn't care to stay any longer under my roof. But your strength wasn't up to your spirit. So you fainted. I want to apologize for speaking as I did. I'm mighty grateful to you, for your service to me, this evening. And my sister and I want you to stay on here, for the present. When you're feeling more like yourself, we'll have a chat about that job. I think we can fix it, all right. Nothing big, of course. Nothing really worth your while. But it may serve as a stopgap, till you get a chance to look around you."

"If nothing better turns up," suggested Brice, with a weak effort at lightness, "you might hire me as a bodyguard."

"As a--a what?" snapped Milo, in sharp suspicion, the geniality wiped from face and voice with ludicrous suddenness. "A--?"

"As a bodyguard," repeated Gavin, not seeming to note the change in his host. "If you're in the habit of being set upon, often, as you were, this evening you'll be better off with a good husky chap to act as--"

"Oh, that?" scoffed Milo, in ponderous contempt. "That was just some panhandler, who thought he might knock me over, from behind, and get my watch and wallet. The same thing isn't likely to happen again in a century. Florida is the most law-abiding State in the Union. And Dade County is perhaps the most law-abiding part of Florida. One would need a bodyguard in New York City, more than here. There have been a lot of holdups there."

Gavin did not reply. His silence seemed to annoy Milo who burst forth again, this time with a tinge of open amusement in his contempt:

"Besides--even if there were assassins lurking behind every bunch of palmetto scrub, in the county--do you honestly think a man of your size could do very much toward protecting me? I'm not bragging. But I'm counted one of the strongest men in--"

"To-night," said Brice, drily, "I managed to be of some slight

use. Pardon my mentioning it. If I hadn't been there, you'd be carrying eight inches of cold steel, between your shoulders. And--pardon me, again--if you'd had the sense to stay out of the squabble a second or so longer, the man who tackled you would be either in jail or in the morgue, by this time. I'm not oversized. But neither is a stick of dynamite. An automatic pistol isn't anywhere as big as an old-fashioned blunderbuss. But it can outshoot and outkill the blunderbuss, with very little bother. Think it over. And, while you're thinking, stop to think, also, that a 'panhandler' doesn't do his work with a knife. He doesn't try to stab a man to death, for the sake of the few dollars the victim may happen to have in his pockets. That sort of thing calls for pluck and iron nerves and physical strength. If a panhandler had those, he wouldn't be a panhandler. Any more than that chap, to-night, was a panhandler. My idea of acting as a bodyguard for you isn't bad. Think it over. You seem to need one."

"Why do you say that?" demanded Milo, in one of his recurrent flashes of suspicion.

"Because," said Gavin, "we're living in the twentieth century and in real life, not in the dark ages and in a dime novel. Nowadays, a man doesn't risk capital punishment, lightly, for the fun of springing on a total stranger, in the dark, with a razor-edge knife. Mr. Standish, no man does a thing like that to a stranger, or without some mighty motive. It is no business of mine to ask that motive or to horn in on your private affairs. And I don't care to. But, from your looks, you're no fool. You know, as well as I do, that that was no panhandler or even a highwayman. It was an enemy whose motive for wanting to murder you, silently and surely, was strong enough to make him willing to risk death or capture. Now, when you say you don't need a bodyguard--Well, it's your own business, of course. Let it go at that, if you like."

Long and silently Milo Standish looked down at the nonchalant invalid. Above, the sounds of women's steps and an occasional snatch of a sentence could be heard. At last, Milo spoke.

"You are right," said he, very slowly, and as if measuring his every word. "You are right. There are one or two men who would like to get this land and this house and--and other possessions of mine. There is no reason for going into particulars that wouldn't interest you. Take my word. Those reasons are potent. I have reason to suspect that the assault on me, this evening, is concerned with their general plan to get rid of me. Perhaps--perhaps you're right, about my need of a bodyguard. Though it's a humiliating thing for a grown man--especially a man of my size and strength--to confess. We'll talk it over, tomorrow, if you are well enough."

Brice nodded, absently, as if wearied with the exertion of

their talk. His eyes had left Milo's, and had concentrated on the man's big and hairy hands. As Milo spoke of the supposititious criminals who desired his possessions enough to do murder for them, his fists clenched, tightly. And to Brice's memory came a wise old adage:

"When you think a man is lying to you, don't watch his face. Any poker-player can make his face a mask. Watch his hands. Ten to one, if he is lying, he'll clench them."

Brice noted the tightening of the heavy fists. And he was convinced. Yet, he told himself, in disgust, that even a child of six would scarce have needed such confirmation that the clumsily blurted tale was a lie.

He nodded again, as Milo looked at him with a shade of anxiety.

The momentary silence was broken by footsteps on the stairs. Claire was descending. Brice gathered his feet under him and sat upright. It was easier, now, to do this, and his head had recovered its feeling of normality, though it still ached ferociously.

At the same instant, through the open doorway, from across the lawn in the direction of the secret path, came the quaveringly sweet trill of a mocking bird's song. Despite himself, Gavin's glance turned toward the doorway.

"That's just a mocker," Milo explained, loudly, his face reddening as he looked in perturbation at his guest. "Sweet, isn't he? They often sing, off and on, for an hour or two after dark."

"I know they do," said Gavin (though he did not say it aloud). "But in Florida, the very earliest mocking bird doesn't sing till around the first of March. And this isn't quite the middle of February. There's not a mocking bird on the Peninsula that is singing, yet. The very dulcet whistler, out yonder, ought to make a closer study of ornithology. He--"

Brice's unspoken thought was shattered. For, unnoticed by him, Milo Standish had drawn forth, with tender care, an exquisitely carved and colored meerschaum pipe from a case on the smoking-stand, and was picking up the fat tobacco jar.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER FROM NOWHERE

For a moment, Brice stared agape and helplessly flustered, as Standish proceeded to thrust his meerschaum's rich-hued bowl into the tobacco jar. Then, apparently galvanized into action by the approach of Claire from the stairway, he stepped rapidly forward to meet her.

As though his shaky powers were not equal to the task he reeled, lurched with all his might against the unprepared Standish and, to regain his balance, took two plunging steps forward.

He had struck Milo at such an angle as to rap the latter's right elbow with a numbing force that sent the pipe flying half way across the hall. The tobacco jar must have gone too, had not one of Gavin's outflung hands caught it in mid-air, as a quarterback might catch a football.

Unable to recover balance and to check his own momentum. Brice scrambled awkwardly forward. One stamping heel landed full on the fallen meerschaum, flattening and crumbling the beautiful pipe into a smear of shapeless clay-fragments.

At the sight. Milo Standish swore loudly and came charging forward in a belated hope of saving his beloved pipe from destruction. The purchase of that meerschaum had been a joy to Milo. Its coloring had been a long and careful process. And now, this bungler had smashed it into nothingness!

Down on hands and knees went the big man, fumbling at the fragments. Claire, knowing how her brother valued the pipe, ran to his side in eager sympathy.

Gavin Brice came to a sliding standstill against a heavy hall-table. On this he leaned heavily for a moment or so above the tobacco jar he had so luckily salvaged from the wreckage. His back to the preoccupied couple he flashed his sensitive fingers into the jar, collecting and thrusting into his pockets the watch and the thick roll of bills and as much of the small change as his fast-groping fingertips could locate.

By the time Milo looked up in impotent wrath from his inspection of the ruined meerschaum. Gavin had turned toward him and was babbling a torrent of apology for his own awkwardness. Milo was glumly silent as the contrite words beat about his ears. But Claire, shamed by her brother's ungraciousness, spoke up courteously to relieve the visitor's dire embarrassment.

"Please don't be unhappy about it. Mr. Brice," she begged. "It was just an accident. It couldn't be helped. I'm sure my brother--"

"But--" stammered Gavin.

"Oh, it's all right!" grumbled Milo, scooping up the handful of crushed meerschaum. "Let it go at that. I--"

Again, the mocking bird notes fluted forth through the early evening silences, the melody coming as before from the direction of the grove's hidden path. Milo stopped short in his sulky speech. Brother and sister exchanged a swift glance. Then Standish got to his feet and approached Gavin.

"Here we've kept you up and around when you're still too weak to move without help!" he said in very badly done geniality. "Take my arm and I'll help you upstairs. Your room's all ready for you. If you'd rather I can carry you. How about it?"

But a perverse imp of mischief entered Gavin Brice's aching head.

"I'm all right now," he protested. "I feel fifty per cent better. I'd much rather stay down here with you and Miss Standish for a while, if you don't mind. My nerves are a bit jumpy from that crack over the skull, and I'd like them to quiet down before I go to bed."

Again, he was aware of that look of covert anxiety, between sister and brother. Claire's big eyes strayed involuntarily toward the front door. And her lips parted for some word of urgency. But before she could speak, Milo laughed loudly and caught Gavin by the arm.

"You've got pluck, Brice!" he cried admiringly. "You're ashamed to give up and go to bed. But you're going just the same. You're going to get a good night's rest. I don't intend to have you fall sick. From that tap I gave you with the wrench. Come on! I'll bring you some fresh dressings for your head by the time you're undressed."

As he talked he passed one huge arm around Gavin and carried, rather than led, him to the stairway.

"Good night, Mr. Brice," called Claire from near the doorway. "I do hope your head will be ever so much better in the morning. If you want anything in the night, there's a call-bell I've put beside your bed."

Once more a dizzy weakness seemed to have overcome Gavin. For after a single attempt at resistance, he swayed and hung heavy on Standish's supporting arm. He made shift to mumble a dazed good night to Claire. Then he suffered Milo to support

him up the stairs and along the wide upper hall to the open doorway of a bedroom.

Even at the threshold he seemed too uncertain of his footing to cross the soft-lit room alone. And Milo supported him to the bed. Gavin slumped heavily upon the side of it, his aching head in his hands. Then, as if with much effort, he lay down, burying his face in the pillow.

Milo had been watching him with growing impatience to be gone. Now he said cheerily:

"That's all right, old chap! Lie still for a while. I'll be up in a few minutes to help you undress."

Standish was hurrying from the room and closing the door behind him. even as he spoke. With the last word the door shut and Gavin could hear the big man's footsteps hastening along the upper hall toward the stair-head.

Brice gave him a bare thirty seconds' start. Then, rising with strange energy for so dazed and broken an invalid, he left the room and followed him toward the head of the stairs. His light footfall was soundless on the matting as he went.

He reached the top of the stairs just as Milo arrived at the bottom. Claire was standing in the veranda doorway shading her eyes and peering out into the darkness. But at sound of her brother's advancing tread she turned and ran back to him, meeting him as he reached the bottom of the stair and clasping both hands anxiously about his big forearm.

She seemed about to break out in excited. even frightened speech, when chancing to raise her eyes. she saw Gavin Brice calmly descending from the hall above. At sight of him her eyes dilated. Milo had begun to speak. She put one hand warningly across her brother's bearded mouth. At the same moment Gavin, halting midway on the stairs, said with deprecatory meekness:

"You didn't tell me what time to be ready for breakfast. I'd hate to be late and--"

He got no further. Nor did he seek to. His ears had been straining to make certain of the ever approaching sound of footsteps across the lawn. Now an impatient tread echoed on the veranda, and a man's figure blocked the doorway.

The newcomer was slender, graceful, with the form of an athletic boy rather than of a mature man. He was pallid and black eyed. His face had a classic beauty which, on second glance, was marred by an almost snakelike aspect of the small black eyes and a sinister smile which seemed to hover

eternally around the thin lips. His whole bearing suggested something serpentine in its grace and a smoothly half-jesting deadliness.

So much the first glimpse told Brice as he stood thereon the stairs and surveyed the doorway. The second look showed him the man was clad in a strikingly ornate yachting costume. Gavin's mind, ever taught to dissect trifles, noted that in spite of his yachtsman-garb the stranger's face was untanned, and that his long slender hands with their supersensitive fingers were as white and well-cared-for as a woman's.

Yachting, in Florida waters at any time of year, means either a thick coat of tan or an exaggerated sunburn. This yachtsman had neither.

Scarce taller than a lad of fifteen, yet his slender figure was sinuous in its every line, and its grace betokened much wiry strength. His face was that of a man in the early thirties,--all but his eyes. They looked as old as the Sphinx's.

He stood for an instant peering into the room, trying to focus his night-accustomed eyes to the light. Evidently the first objects he saw clearly were Milo and Claire standing with their backs to him as they stared upward in blank dismay at the guest they had thought safely disposed of for the night.

"Well?" queried the man at the door, and at sound of his silken, bantering voice, brother and sister spun about in surprise, to face him.

"Well?" he repeated, and now there was a touch of cold rebuke in the silken tones. "Is this the way you keep a lookout for the signals? I might very well have walked in on a convention of half of Dade County, for all the guard that was kept. I compliment--"

And now he broke off short in his sneering reproof, as his eyes chanced upon Gavin half way down the stairs.

For a second or more no one spoke or moved. Claire and her brother had an absurdly shamefaced appearance of two bad children caught in mischief by a stern and much feared teacher. Into the black depths of the stranger's eyes flickered a sudden glint like that of a striking rattlesnake's. But at once his face was a slightly-smiling mask once more. And Gavin was left doubting whether or not he had really seen that momentary gleam of murder behind the smiling eyes. It was Claire who first recovered herself.

"Good evening, Rodney," she said, with a graciousness which all-but hid her evident nerve strain. "You stole in on us so

suddenly you startled me. Mr. Brice, this is Mr. Rodney Hade."

As Gavin bowed civilly and as Hade returned the salutation with his eternal smile. Milo Standish came sufficiently out of his own shock of astonishment to follow his sister's mode of greeting the new visitor. With the same forced joviality he had used in coercing Brice to go to bed, he sauntered over to the smiling Hade, exclaiming:

"Why, hello, old man! Where did you blow in from? You must have come across from your house on foot. I didn't hear the car I want you to know Brice here. I was tackled by a holdup man outside yonder a while ago. And he'd have gotten me too, if Brice hadn't sailed into him. In the scrimmage I made a fool of myself as usual, and slugged the wrong man with a monkey wrench. Poor Brice's reward for saving my life. was a broken head. He's staying the night with us. He--"

The big man had spoken glibly, but with a nervousness which, more and more, cropped out through his noisy joviality. Now, under the coldly unwavering smile of Hade's snakelike eyes, he stammered, and his booming voice trailed away to a mumble. Again, Claire sought to mend the rickety situation. But now Gavin Brice forestalled her. Passing one hand over his bandaged forehead, he said:

"If you'll forgive me having butted in. again. I'll go up to my room. I'm pretty shaky, you see. I just wanted to know what time breakfast is to be, and if I can borrow one of your brother's razors in the morning."

"Breakfast is at seven o'clock," answered Claire. "That's a barbarously early hour, I suppose for a New Yorker like you. But down here from six to ten is the glorious part of the day. Besides, we're farmers you know. Don't bother to try to wake so early, please. I'll have your breakfast sent up to you. Good night."

"I'll look in on you before I go to bed," called Milo. after him as he started up the stairs for the second time. "And I'll see that shaving things are left in your bathroom. Good night."

Hade said nothing, but continued to pierce the unbidden guest with those gimlet-like smiling black eyes of his. His face was expressionless. Gavin returned to the upper hall and walked with needless heaviness toward the room assigned to him. Reaching its door he opened and then shut it loudly, himself remaining in the hallway. Scarce had the door slammed when he heard. from below Rodney Hade's voice raised in the sharp question:

"What does this mean? You've dared to--?"

"What the blazes else could I do?" blustered Milo--though under the bluster ran a thread of placating timidity. "He saved my life, didn't he? I was tackled by--"

"For one thing," suggested Hade. "you could have hit a little harder with the wrench. If a blow is worth hitting at all it's worth hitting to kill. You have the strength of an elephant, and the nerve of a sheep."

"Rodney!" protested Claire, indignantly. "He--"

"I've seen his face. somewhere," went on Hade unheeding. "I could swear to that. I can't place it. yet. But I shall. Meantime get rid of him. And now I'll hear about this attack on you Come out on the veranda. This hall reeks of iodine and liniment and all such stuff. It smells like a hospital ward. Come outside."

Despite the unvarying sweet smoothness of his diction. he spoke as if giving orders to a servant. But apparently neither of the two Standishes resented his dictation. For Brice could hear them follow Hade out of the house. And from the veranda presently came the booming murmur of Standish's voice in a recital of some kind.

Gavin reopened his bedroom door and entered. Shutting the door softly behind him, he made a brief mental inventory of the room, then undressed and got into bed. Ten minutes later Miles Standish came into the room. carrying fresh dressings and a bottle of lotion. Gavin roused himself from a half-doze and was duly grateful for the dexterous applying of the new bandages to his bruised scalp.

"You work like a surgeon," he told Milo.

"Thanks," returned Standish drily, making no other comment on the praise.

His task accomplished Standish bade his guest a curt good night and left the room. A minute later Gavin got up and stole to the door to verify a faint sound he fancied he had heard. And he found he had been correct in his guess. For the door was locked from the outside.

Brice crept to the windows. The room was in darkness, and, unseen, he could look out on the darkness of the night. As he looked a faint reddish spot of fire appeared in the gloom, just at the beginning of the lawn. Some one, cigar in mouth, was evidently keeping a watch on his room's windows. Gavin smiled to himself, and went back to bed.

"Door locked, windows guarded," he reflected, amusedly. "I owe that to Mr. Hade's orders. Seen me before, has he? I'll bet my year's income he'll never remember where or when or how. At that he's clever even to think he's seen me. It looks as if I had let myself in for a wakeful time down here, doesn't it? But I'm getting the tangled ends all in my hands,--as fast as I had any right to hope. That rap on the skull was a godsend. He can't refuse me a job after my fight for him. No one could. I--oh, if it wasn't for the girl this would be great! What can a girl, with eyes like hers, be doing in a crowd like this?"

"I'd--I'd have been willing to swear she was--was--one of the women whom God made. And now--! Still, if a woman lets herself in for this kind of thing she can't avoid paying the bill. Only--if I can save her without-- Oh, I'm turning into a mushy fool in my old age! ... And she sobbed when she thought I was killed! ... I've got to get a real night's rest if I want to have my wits about me to-morrow."

He stretched himself out luxuriously in the cool bed, and in less than five minutes he was sleeping as sweetly and as deeply as a child. Long experience in the European trenches and elsewhere had taught him the rare gift of slumbering at will, a gift which had done much toward keeping his nerves and his faculties in perfect condition. For sleep is the keynote to more than mankind realizes.

The sun had risen when Gavin Brice awoke. Apart from stiffness and a very sore head his inured system was little the worse for the evening's misadventures. A cold shower and a rubdown and a shave in the adjoining bathroom. cleared away the last mists from his brain.

He dressed quickly, glanced at his watch and saw the hour was not quite seven. Then he faced his bedroom door and hesitated.

"If he's a born idiot," he mused. "it's still locked. If he isn't it's unlocked and the key has been taken away. I've made noise enough while I was dressing."

He turned the knob. The door opened readily. The key was gone. In the hallway outside the room and staring up at him from widely shallow green eyes. sat Simon Cameron, the big Persian cat.

"That's a Persian all over. Simon my friend," said Brice, stooping down to scratch the cat's furry head in greeting. "A Persian will sit for hours in front of any door that's got a stranger behind it. And he'll show more flattering affection for a stranger than for any one he's known all his life."

Isn't that true. Simon?"

By way of response. the big cat rubbed himself luxuriously against the man's shins, purring loudly. Then, at a single lithe spring he was on Gavin's shoulder, making queer little whistling noises and rubbing his head lovingly against Brice's cheek. Gavin made his way downstairs the cat still clinging to his shoulder, fanning his face with a swishing gray foxlike tail, digging curved claws back and forth into the cloth of his shabby coat, and purring like a distant railroad train.

Only when they reached the lower hallway did the cat jump from his shoulder and with a flying leap land on the top of a nearby bookcase. There, luxuriously, Simon Cameron stretched himself out in a shaft of sunlight, and prepared for a nap.

Brice went on to the veranda. On the lawn, scarce fifty feet away, Claire was gathering flowers for the breakfast table. Very sweet and dainty was she in the flood of morning sunshine, her white dress and her burnished hair giving back waves of radiance from the sun's strong beams.

At her side walked Bobby Burns. But, on first sound of Brice's step on the porch, the collie looked up and saw him. With a joyous bark of welcome Bobby came dashing across the lawn and up the steps. Leaping and gamboling around Gavin. he set the echoes ringing with a series of trumpet-barks. The man paused to pet his adorer and to say a word of friendliness, then ran down the steps toward Claire who was advancing to meet him. Her arms were full of scarlet and golden blossoms.

"Are you better?" she called, noting the bandage on his head had been replaced by a neat strip of plaster. "I hoped you'd sleep longer. Bobby Burns ran up to your room and scratched at the door as soon as I let him into the house this morning. But I made him come away again. Are--"

"He left a worthy substitute welcoming-committee there, in the shape of Simon Cameron," said Gavin. "Simon was overwhelmingly cordial to me, for a Persian I'm all right again, thanks," he added. "I had a grand night's rest. It was fine to sleep in a real bed again. I hope I'm not late for breakfast?"

A shade of embarrassment flitted over her eyes, and she made answer:

"My brother had to go into Miami on--on business. So he had breakfast early. He'll hardly be back before noon he says. So you and I will have to breakfast without him. I hope you don't mind?"

As there seemed no adequate reply to this useless question. the man contented himself with following her wordlessly into the cool house. She seemed to bring light and youth and happiness indoors with her, and the armful of flowers she carried filled the dim hallway with perfume.

Breakfast was a simple meal and soon eaten. Brice brought to it only a moderate appetite, and was annoyed to find his thoughts centering themselves about the slender white-clad girl across the table from him. rather than upon his food or even upon his plan of campaign. He replied in monosyllables to her pleasant table-talk, and when his eye chanced to meet hers he had an odd feeling of guilt.

She was so pretty, so little, so young, so adorably friendly and innocent in her every look and word! Something very like a heartache began to manifest itself in Gavin Brice's supposedly immune breast. And this annoyed him more than ever. He told himself solemnly that this girl was none of the wonderful things she seemed to be, and that he was an idiot for feeling as he did.

To shake free from his unwonted reverie he asked abruptly, as the meal ended:

"Would you mind telling me why you drew a revolver on me last evening? You don't seem the kind of girl to adopt Wild West tactics and to carry a pistol around with you here in peaceful Florida. I don't want to seem inquisitive, of course, but ?"

"And I don't want to seem secretive," she replied. nervously. "All I can tell you is that my brother has--has enemies (as you know from the attack on him) and that he doesn't think it is safe for me to go around the grounds alone, late in the day, unarmed. So he gave me that old pistol of his, and asked me to carry it. That was why he sent North for Bobby Burns-- as a guard for me and for the place here. When I saw you appearing out of the swamp I--I took you for some one else. I'm sorry."

"I'm not," he made answer. "I--"

"You must have a charming idea of our hospitality," she went on with a nervous little laugh. "First I threaten to shoot you. Then my brother stuns you. And both times when you are doing us a service."

"Please!" he laughed. "And if it comes to that. what must you people think of a down-at-heel Yankee who descends on you and cadges for a job after he's been told there's no work here for him?"

"Oh, but there is!" she insisted. "Milo told me so. this morning. And you're to stay here till he comes back and can talk things over with you. Would you care to walk around the farm and the groves with me? Or would the sun be bad for your head?"

"It would be just the thing my head needs most," he declared. "Besides, I've heard so much of these wonderful Florida farms. I'm mighty anxious to inspect one of them. We can start whenever you're ready."

Ten minutes later they had left the lawn behind them, and had passed through the hedge into the first of the chain of citrus groves. In front of them stretched some fifteen acres of grapefruit trees.

"This is the worst soil we have," lectured Claire. evidently keenly interested in the theme of agriculture and glad of an attentive listener. "It is more coral rock than anything else. That is why Milo planted it in grapefruit. Grapefruit will grow where almost nothing else will, you know. Why, last year wasn't by any means a banner season. But he made \$16,000 in gross profits off this one grapefruit orchard alone. Of course that was gross and not net. But it--"

"Is there so much difference between the two?" he asked innocently. "Down here, I mean. Up North, we have an idea that all you Floridians need do is to stick a switch into the rich soil, and let it grow. We picture you as loafing around in dreamy idleness till it's time to gather your fruit and to sell it at egregious prices to us poor Northerners."

"It's a lovely picture," she retorted. "And it's exactly upside down, like most Northern ideas of Florida. When it comes to picking the fruit and shipping it North--that's the one time we can loaf. For we don't pick it or ship it. That's done for us on contract. It's our lazy time. But every other step is a fight. For instance, there's the woolly white fly and there's the rust mite and there's the purple scale. and there are a million other pests just as bad. And we have to battle with them. all the time. And when we spray with the pumping engine. the sand is certain to get into the engine and ruin it. And when we--"

"I had no notion that--"

"No Northerners have," she said, warming to her theme. "I wish I could set some of them to scrubbing orange-trunks with soap-and-water and spraying acre after acre, as we do, in a wild race to keep up with the pests, knowing all the time that some careless grove owner next door may let the rust mite or the black fly get the better of his grove and let it drift over

into ours. Then there's always the chance that a grove may get so infected that the government will order it destroyed, --wiped out I've been talking just about the citrus fruits, the grapefruit and the tangeloes and oranges and all that. Pretty much the same thing applies to all our crops down here. We've as many blights and pests and weather-troubles as you have in the North. And now and then, even in Dade County, we get a frost that does more damage than a forest fire."

As she talked they passed out of the grapefruit grove, and came to a plantation of orange trees.

"These are the joy of Milo's heart," she said with real pride, waving her little hand toward the well-ranked lines of blossoming and bearing young trees. "Last year he cleared up from this five-acre plot alone more than--"

"Excuse me," put in Gavin. "I don't mean to be rude. But since he's made such a fine grove of it and takes such pride in its looks. why doesn't he send a man or two out here with a hoe, and get rid of that tangle of weeds? It covers the ground of the whole grove, and it grows rankly under every tree. If you'll pardon me for saying so. it gives the place an awfully unkempt look. If--"

Her gay laugh broke in on his somewhat hesitant criticism.

"Say that to any Floridian," she mocked, "and he'll save you the trouble of looking for work by getting you admitted to the nearest asylum. Why Milo fosters those weeds and fertilizes them and even warns the men not to trample them in walking here. If you should begin your work for Milo by hoeing out any of these weeds he'd have to buy weed-seeds and sow them all over again. He--"

"Then there's a market for this sort of stuff?" he asked, stooping to inspect with interest a spray of smelly ragweed. "I didn't know--"

"No," she corrected. "But the market for our oranges would slump without them. Here in the subtropics the big problem is water for moistening the soil. Very few of us irrigate. We have plenty of water as a rule. But we also have more than a plenty of sun. The sun sucks up the water and leaves the soil parched. In a grove like this the roots of the orange trees would suffer from it. These weeds shelter the roots from the sun, and they help keep the moisture in the ground. They are worth everything to us. Of course, in some of the fields we mulch to keep the ground damp. Milo bought a whole carload of Australian pine needles. last month at Miami. They make a splendid mulch. Wild hay is good. too. So is straw. But the pine needles are cheapest and easiest to get. The rain soaks down through them into the ground. And they keep the

sun from drawing it back again. Besides, they keep down weeds in fields where we don't want weeds. See!" she ended, pointing to a new grove they were approaching.

Gavin noted that here the orange tree rows were alternated with rows of strawberry plants.

"That was an idea of Milo's, too," she explained. "It's 'intercrop' farming. And he's done splendidly with it so far. He thinks the eel-worm doesn't get at the berry plants as readily here as in the open, but he's not sure of that yet. He's had to plant cowpeas on one plot to get rid of it."

"The experiment of intercropping orange trees with strawberries isn't new," said Brice thoughtlessly. "When the plants are as thick as he's got them here. it's liable to harm the trees in the course of time. Two rows, at most, are all you ought to plant between the tree-ranks. And that mulch over there is a regular Happy Home for crickets. If Standish isn't careful--"

The girl was staring up at him in astonishment. And Gavin was aware for the first time that he had been thinking aloud.

"You see," he expounded. smiling vaingloriously down at her. "I amused myself at the Miami library Saturday by browsing over a sheaf of Government plant reports. And those two solid facts stuck in my memory. Now. won't I be an invaluable aide to your brother if I can remember everything else as easily?"

Still puzzled she continued to look up at him.

"It's queer that a man who has just come down here should remember such a technical thing," said she. "And yesterday you warned me against letting Bobby Burns wander in the palmetto scrub, for fear of rattlesnakes. I--"

"That deep mystery is also easy to solve," he said. "In the smoker on the way South several men were telling how they had lost valuable hunting dogs. hereabouts from rattlesnakes. I like Bobby Burns. So I passed along the warning. What are those queer trees?" he asked shifting the dangerous subject. "I mean the ones that look like a mixture of horse-chestnut and--"

"Avocadoes," she answered, interest in the task of farm guide making her forget her momentary bewilderment at his scraps of local knowledge. "They're one of our best crops. Sometimes a single avocado will sell in open market here for as much as forty cents. There's money in them, nearly always. Good money. And the spoiled ones are great for the pigs. Then the Northern market for them--"

"Avocadoes?" he repeated curiously. "There! Now you see how much I know about Florida. From this distance, their fruits look to me exactly like alligator pears or--"

Again, her laugh interrupted him.

"If only you'd happened to look in one or two more government reports at the library," she teased. "you'd know that an avocado and an alligator pear are the same thing."

"Anyhow," he boasted, picking up a gold-red fruit at the edge of a smaller grove they were passing. "anyhow, I know what this is, without being told. I've seen them a hundred times in the New York markets. This is a tangerine."

"In that statement," she made judicial reply. "you've made only two mistakes. You're improving. In the first place, that isn't a tangerine, though it looks like one--or would if it were half as large. That's a king orange. In the second place, you've hardly ever seen them in any New York market. They don't transport as well as some other varieties. And very few of them go North. Northerners don't know them. And they miss a lot. For the king is the most delicious orange in the world. And it's the trickiest and hardest for us to raise. See, the skin comes off it as easily as off of a tangerine, and it breaks apart in the same way. The rust mite has gotten at this one. See that russet patch on one side of it? You'll often see it on oranges that go North. Sometimes they're russet all over. That means the rust mite has dried the oil in the skin and made the skin thinner and more brittle. It doesn't seem to injure the taste. But it--"

"There's a grand tree over toward the road," he said, his attention wandering. "It must be nearly a century old. It has the most magnificent sweep of foliage I've seen since I left the North. What is it?"

"That?" she queried. "Oh, that's another of Milo's prides. It's an Egyptian fig. 'Ficus Something or other.' Isn't it beautiful? But it isn't a century old. It isn't more than fifteen years old. It grows tremendously fast. Milo has been trying to interest the authorities in Miami in planting lines of them for shade trees and having them in the city parks. There's nothing more beautiful. And nothing, except the Australian pine, grows faster There's another of Milo's delights," she continued, pointing to the left. "It's ever so old. The natives around here call it 'The Ghost Tree.'"

They had been moving in a wide circle through the groves. Now, approaching the house from the other side, they came out

on a grassy little space on the far edge of the lawn. In the center of the space stood a giant live-oak towering as high as a royal palm, and with mighty boughs stretching out in vast symmetry on every side. It was a true forest monarch. And like many another monarch. it was only a ghost of its earlier grandeur.

For from every outflung limb and from every tiniest twig hung plumes and festoons and stalactites of gray moss. For perhaps a hundred years the moss had been growing thus on the giant oak, first in little bunches and trailers that were scarce noticeable and which affected the forest monarch's appearance and health not at all.

Then year by year the moss had grown and had taken toll of the bark and sap. At last it had killed the tree on which it fed. And its own source of life being withdrawn itself had died.

So, now the gaunt tree with its symmetrical spread of branches stood lifeless. And its tons of low-hanging festooned moss was as void of life as was the tree they had killed. Tinder-dry it hung there, a beauteous, tragic, spectacle, towering high above the surrounding flatness of landscape, visible for miles by land and by sea.

Fifty yards beyond a high interlaced hedge of vines bordered the clearing. Toward this Gavin bent his idle steps, wondering vaguely how such a lofty and impenetrable wall of vine was supported from the far side.

Claire had stopped to call off Bobby Burns who had discovered a highly dramatic toad-hole on the edge of the lawn and who was digging enthusiastically at it with both flying fore-feet, casting up a cloud of dirt and cutting into the sward's neat border. Thus she was not aware of Brice's diversion.

Gavin approached the twenty-foot high vine-wall, and thrust his hand in through the thick tangle of leaves. His sensitive fingers touched the surface of a paling. Running his hand along. he found that the entire vine palisade was, apparently, backed by a twenty-foot stockade of solid boards. If there were a gate, it was hidden from view. It was then that Claire, looking up from luring Bobby Burns away from the toad-hole, saw whither Gavin had strayed.

"Oh," she called. hurrying toward him. "That's the enclosure Milo made years ago for his experiments in evolving the 'perfect orange' he is so daft about. He's always afraid some other grower may take advantage of his experiments. So he keeps that little grove walled in. He's never even let me go in there. So--"

A deafening salvo of barks from Bobby Burns broke in on her

recital. The collie had caught sight of Simon Cameron mincing along the lawn, and he gave rapturous and rackety chase. Claire ran after them crying out to the dog to desist. And Gavin took advantage of the brief instant when her back was turned to him.

His fingers in slipping along the wall had encountered a rotting spot at the juncture of two palings. Pushing sharply against this he forced a fragment of the decayed wood inward. Then, quickly, he shoved aside the tangle of vines and applied one eye to the tiny aperture.

"A secret orange-grove. eh?" he gasped. under his breath.
"Good Lord! Was she lying to me or did she actually believe him when he lied to her?"

CHAPTER V

TRAPS AND TRAPPER

To south and to southeast, the green-blue transparent sea. Within sight of the land, the purple-blue Gulf Stream,--a mystic warm river a half mile deep, thousands of miles long, traveling ever at a speed of eighty miles a day through the depth of the ocean, as distinct and as unswerving from its chosen course as though it flowed through land instead of through shifting water.

Studded in the milk-tepid nearer waters, innumerable coral islets and keys and ridges. Then the coral-built tongue of land running north without so much as a respectably large hillock to break its flatness. Along the coast the tawny beaches, the mangrove-swamps, the rich farms, the groves, the towns, the villages, the estates, snow-white Miami, the nation's southernmost big city.

Back of this foreshore, countless miles of waving grass, rooted in water, and with a stray clump of low trees, dotted here and there, the Everglades, a vast marsh that runs north to the inland sea known as Lake Okeechobee. Then the solid sandy ground of the main State.

Along the foreshore, and running inland, miles of sand-barren scattered with gaunt pines and floored with harsh palmetto-scrub. Strewed here and there through this sandy expanse lovely oases, locally known as "hammocks", usually in hollows, and consisting of several acres of rich soil where tropic and sub-tropic trees grow as luxuriantly as in a jungle, where undergrowth and vine run riot, where orchid and

airplant and wondrous-hued flowers blaze through the green gloom of interlaced foliage.

This, roughly, is a bird's-eye glimpse of the southeastern stretch of Florida, a region of glory and glow and fortunes and mystery. (Which is perhaps a momentary digression from our story, but will serve for all that to fix its setting more vividly in the eyes of the mind.)

When Milo Standish came back from Miami that noon he professed much loud-voiced joy at seeing his guest so well recovered from the night's mishaps. At lunch he suggested:

"I am running across to Roustabout Key this afternoon. in the launch. It's an island I bought a few years ago. I keep a handful of men there to work a grapefruit grove and a mango orchard and some other stuff I've planted. I go over to it every week or so. Would you care to come along?"

He spoke with elaborate carelessness, and looked anywhere except at his guest. Gavin, not appearing to note the concealed nervousness of his host's voice and manner, gave eager consent. And at two o'clock they set forth.

They drove in Milo's car a half-mile or more to southwestward along the road which fronted the house. Then turning into a sand byway which ran crookedly at right angles to it and which skirted the southern end of the mangrove-swamp, they headed for the sea. Another half-mile brought them to a handkerchief-sized beach, much like that on the other side of the swamp. where Gavin had found the hidden path. Here, on mangrove-wood piles, was a short pier with a boathouse at its far end.

"I keep my launch and my fishing-boats in there," explained Milo. as he climbed out of the car. "If it wasn't for that pesky swamp. I could have had this pier directly back of my house, and saved a lot of distance."

"Why not cut a road through the swamp?" suggested Brice, following him along the pier.

Again Standish gave vent to that great laugh of his--a laugh outwardly jovial, but as hollow as a shell.

"Young man," said he. "if ever you try to cut your way through an East Coast mangrove-swamp you'll find out just how silly that question is. A swamp like that might as well be a quick-sand, for all the chance a mortal has of traveling through it."

Gavin made no reply. Again, he was visualizing the cleverly

engineered path from the beach-edge to Milo's lawn. And he recalled Claire's unspoken plea that he say nothing to Standish about his chance discovery of it. He remembered, too, the night-song of the mocking bird from the direction of that path, and the advent of Rodney Hade from it.

Milo had unlocked the boat-house, and was at work over a fifteen-foot steel motorboat which was slung on chains above the water. A winch and well-constructed pulleys-and-chains made simple the labor of launching it in so quiet a sea.

Out they fared into the gleaming sunlit waters of the bay. Far to eastward gleamed the white city of Miami, and nearer, across the bay from it the emerald stretch of key with Cape Florida and the old Spanish Light on its southern point and the exquisite "golden house" of Mashta shining midway down its shoreline. Miles to eastward gleamed the gray viaduct, the grain elevator outlines of the Flamingo rising yellow above a fire-blue sea.

"I used to hear great stories about this region years ago," volunteered Brice as the launch danced over the transparent water past Ragged Keys and bore southward. "I heard them from a chap who used to winter hereabouts. It was he who first interested me in Florida. He says these keys and inlets and changing channels used to be the haunts of Spanish Main pirates."

"They were," said Milo. "The pirates knew these waters. The average merchant skipper didn't. They'd build signal flares on the keys to lure ships onto the rocks, and then loot them. At least that was the everyday (or everynight) amusement of their less venturesome members and their women and children. The more adventurous used to overhaul vessels skirting the coast to and from Cuba and Central America. They'd sally out from their hiding-places among the keys and lie in wait for the merchant-ships. If the prey was weak enough they'd board and ransack her and make her crew walk the plank,--(that's how Aaron Burr's beautiful daughter is supposed to have died on her way North, you know,)--and if the ship showed fight or seemed too tough a handful the pirates hit on a surer way of capture. They'd turn tail and run. The merchant ship would give chase, for there were fat rewards out for the capture of the sea rovers, you know. The pirates would head for some strip of water that seemed perfectly navigable. The ship would follow, and would pile up on a sunken reef that the pirates had just steered around."

"Clever work!"

"They were a thrifty and shrewd crowd those old-time black-flags. After they were wiped out the wreckers still reaped their fine harvest by signaling ships onto reefs at

night. Their descendants live down among some of the keys still. We call them 'conchs,' around here. They're an illiterate, uncivilized, furtive, eccentric lot. And they pick up some sort of living off wrecked ships and off what cargo washes ashore from the wrecks. A missionary went down there and tried to convert them. He found the 'conch' children already had religion enough to pray every night. 'Lord, send a wreck!' The conchs gather a lot of plunder every year. They--"

"Do they sell it or claim salvage on it. or--?"

"Not they. That would call for too much brain and education and for mixing with civilization. They wear it, or put it to any crazy use they can think of. For instance fifty sewing-machines were in the cargo of a tramp steamer bound from Charleston to Brazil one winter. She ran ashore a few miles south of here. The conchs got busy with the plunder. The cargo was a veritable godsend to them. They used the sewing machines as anchors for their boats. Another time a box of shoes washed ashore. They were left-hand shoes. all of them. The right-hand box must have landed somewhere else. And a hundred conchs blossomed forth with brand new shoes. They could wear the left shoe. of course, with no special bother. And they slit down the vamp of the shoe they put on the right foot, so their toes could stick out and not be cramped. A good many people think they still lure ships ashore by flares. But the lighthouse service has pretty well put a stop to that."

"This chap I was speaking about,--the fellow who told me so much about this region," said Gavin. "told me there is supposed to be pirate gold buried in more than one of these keys."

"Rot!" snorted Milo with needless vehemence. "All poppycock! Look at it sanely for a minute, and you'll see that all the yarns of pirate gold-including Captain Kidd's--are rank idiocy. In the first place. the pirates never seized any such fabulous sums of money as they were credited with. The bullion ships always went under heavy man-o'-war escort. When pirates looted some fairly rich merchant ship there were dozens of men to divide the plunder among. And they sailed to the nearest safe port to blow it all on an orgy. Of course, once in a blue moon they buried or hid the valuables they got from one ship while they went after another. And if they chanced to sink or be captured and hanged during such a raid the treasure remained hidden. If they survived, they blew it. That's the one off-chance of there ever being any buried pirate treasure. And there would be precious little of it. at that. A few hundred dollars worth at most. No, Brice. this everlasting legend of buried treasure is fine in a sea-yarn. But in real life it's buncombe."

"But this same man told me there were stories of bullion ships and even more modern vessels carrying a money cargo that sank in these waters, during storms or from running into reefs," pursued Brice, with no great show of interest, as he leaned far overside for a second glimpse at a school of five-foot baracuda which lay basking on the snowy surface of the sand two fathoms below the boat. "That, at least, sounds probable. doesn't it?"

"No," snapped Milo flushing angrily and his brow creasing, "it doesn't. These water are traversed every year by thousands of craft of all sizes. The water is crystal clear. Any wrecked ship could be seen at the bottom. Why, everybody has seen the hull of that old tramp steamer a few miles above here. It's in deep water, at that. What chance--?"

"Yet there are hundreds of such stories afloat," persisted Brice. "And there are more yarns of buried treasure among the keys than there are keys. For instance didn't old Caesar, the negro pirate, hang out here. somewhere?"

Milo laughed again, this time with a maddening tolerance.

"Oh, Caesar?" said he. "To be sure. He's as much a legend of these keys as Lafitte is of New Orleans. He was an escaped slave, who scraped together a dozen fellow-ruffians, black and white and yellow--mostly yellow--about a century ago, and stole a long boat or a broken-down sloop, and started in at the trade of pirate. He didn't last long. And there's no proof he ever had any special success. But he's the sea-hero of the conchs. They've named a key and a so-called creek after him, and in my father's time there used to be an old iron ring in a boulder known as 'Caesar's Rock.' The ring was probably put there by oystermen. But the conchs insisted Caesar used to tie up there. Then there's the 'Pirates' Punchbowl,' off Coconut Grove. Caesar is supposed to have dug that. He--"

An enormous sailfish--dazzlingly metallic blue and silver--broke from the calm water just ahead, and whirled high in air, smiting the bay again with a splash that sounded like a gunshot.

"That fellow must have been close to seven feet long," commented Milo as the two men watched the churned water where the fish had struck. "He's the kind you see when you aren't trolling. He's after a school of ballyhoos or mossbunkers There's Roustabout Key just ahead," he finished as their launch rounded an outcrop of rock and came in view of a mile-long wooded island a bare thousand yards off the weather bow.

A mangrove fringe covered the shoreline, two thirds of the way around the key. At the eastern end was a strip of snowy beach backed by an irregular line of coconut palms, and with a very respectable dock in the foreground. From the pier a wooden path led upward through the scattering double row of palms to a corrugated iron hut, with smaller huts and outbuildings half seen through the foliage-vistas beyond.

"I've some fairly good mango trees back yonder," said Standish as he brought the launch alongside the dock's wabby float, "and grapefruit that is paying big dividends at last. The mangoes won't be ripe till June, of course. But they're sold already, to the last half-bushel of them."

"'Futures,' eh?" suggested Gavin,

"'Futures,'" assented Milo. "And 'futures' in farming. are just about as certain as in Wall Street. There's a mighty gamble to this farm-game."

"How long have--?" began Gavin, then stopped short and stared.

One or two negro laborers had drifted down toward the dock, as the boat warped in at the float. Now, from the corrugated iron hut appeared a white man, who, at sight of the boat, broke into a limping run and was in time to catch the line which Milo flung at him.

The man was sparsely and sketchily clad. At first, his tanned face seemed to be of several different colors and to have been modeled by some bungling caricaturist. Yet, despite this eccentricity of aspect, something about the obsequiously hurrying man struck Brice as familiar. And, all at once, he recognized him.

This was the big beach comber with whom Gavin had fought barely twenty-four hours earlier. The man bore bruises and swellings a-plenty on his rugged features, where Brice's whalebone blows had crashed. And they had distorted his face almost past recognition. He moved, too, with manifest discomfort, as if all his huge body were as sore as his visage.

"Hello, Roke!!" hailed Milo genially, then in amaze. "what in thunder have you been doing to yourself? Been trying to stop the East Coast Flyer? Or did you just get into an argument with one of the channel dredges?"

"Fell," said Roke. succinctly, jerking his thumb back toward the corrugated iron hut. "Climbed my roof to mend a leak. Fell. My face hit every bump. Then I landed on a pile of coconuts. I'm sore all over. I--"

He gurgled, mouthingly, as his swollen eyes chanced to light on Gavin Brice. who was just following Milo from the launch to the float. And his discolored and unshaven jaw went slack.

"Oh, Brice," said Standish carelessly. "This is my foreman here, Perry Roke. As a rule he looks like other people, except that he's bigger, just now his cravings for falling off corrugated roofs have done things to his face. Shake hands with him. If you like the job I'm going to offer you he and you will be side-partners over here."

Gavin faced his recent adversary, grinning pleasantly up at the battered and scowling face, and noting that the knife sheath at Roke's hip was still empty.

"Hello!" he said civilly, offering his hand.

Roke gulped again, went purple, and, with sudden furious vehemence, grabbed at the proffered hand, enfolding it in his own monstrous grip in an industrious attempt to smash its every bone.

But reading the intent with perfect ease. Brice shifted his own hand ever so little and with nimbly practised fingers eluded the crushing clasp, at the same time slipping his thumb over the heel of Roke's clutching right hand and letting his three middle fingers meet at the exact center of that hand's back. Then, tightening his hold, he gave an almost imperceptible twist. It was one of the first and the simplest of the tricks his jiu-jitsu instructor had taught him. And, as ever with an opponent not prepared for it, the grip served.

To the heedlessly watching Standish he seemed merely to be accepting the invitation to shake hands with Roke. But the next instant, under the apparently harmless contact, Roke's big body veered sharply to one side. from the hips upward, and a bellow of raging pain broke from his puffed lips.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Brice in quick contrition: "You must have hurt your hand when you fell off that roof. I'm sorry if I made it worse."

Nursing his wrenched wrist. Roke glowered hideously at the smiling Gavin. Brice could feel no compunction for his own behavior. For he remembered the hurled knife and the brutal kicking of the dog. Yet he repented him of the hand-twisting trick. For if he and Roke were expected to work together as Milo had said, he had certainly made a most unfortunate beginning to their acquaintanceship, and just now he had added new and painful aggravation to his earlier offense.

Milo was surveying the sufferer with no great pity, as Roke

bent over his hurt wrist.

"Too bad!" commented Standish. "I suppose that will put a crimp in your violin-playing for a while."

Turning to Gavin who looked in new surprise at the giant on hearing of this unexpected accomplishment. Milo explained:

"I hired Roke to run this key for me and keep the conchs and the coons at work. But I've got a pretty straight tip that, as soon as my back is turned, he cuts indoors and spends most of his day whanging at that disreputable old violin of his. And when Rodney Hade comes over here. I can't get a lick of work out of Roke, for love or money. Hade is one of the best amateur violinists in America, and he's daft on playing. He drops in here. every now and then--he has an interest with me in the groves--and as soon as he catches sight of Roke's violin. he starts playing it. That means no more work out of Roke till Hade chooses to stop. He just stands, with his mouth wide open, hypnotized. Can't drag him away for a second. Hey. Roke?"

Roke had ceased nursing his wrist and had listened with sheepish amusement to his employer's guying. But at this question, he made answer:

"I'm here now."

He jerked the thumb of his uninjured hand toward a spic-and-span launch which lay moored between two sodden scows, and then nodded in the direction of the corrugated iron hut among the trees.

Listening--though the wind set the wrong way for it--Brice could hear faintly the strains of a violin. played ever so softly and with a golden wealth of sweetness. Even at that distance, by listening closely, he could make out a phrase or so of Dvorak's "Hiawatha" music from the "New World Symphony." Milo's loud laugh broke in on his audition and on the suddenly rapt look upon Roke's bruised face.

"Come along!" said Standish, leading the way toward the house.

"Music's a fine thing, I'm told. But it doesn't spray a grapefruit orchard or keep the scale off of mango trees. Come up to the house. I want to show you over the island and have a chat with you about the job I have in mind."

As Milo strode on the two others fell in step behind him.

Brice lowered his voice and said to the sulking Roke:

"That collie belongs to Mr. Standish. I did you a good turn it seems by keeping you from stealing him. You'd have been in a worse fix than you are now, if Mr. Standish had come over here to-day and found him on the island."

Roke did not deign to reply, but moved a little farther from the speaker.

"At this rate," said Brice pleasantly. "you and I are likely to have a jolly time together, out here. I can' imagine a merrier chum for a desert island visit. I only hope I won't neglect my work chatting with you all day."

Roke eyed him obliquely as he plodded on, and his battered lip-corner lifted a little in what looked like a beast snarl. But he said nothing.

Then they were at the shallow porch of the hut and Milo Standish had thrown open its iron door letting out a gush of golden melody from the violin. At his hail. the music ceased. And Rodney Hade, fiddle in hand, appeared in the doorway.

"You're late," said the violinist, speaking to Milo with that ever-smiling suavity which Gavin recalled from the night before, and ignoring Gavin entirely "You've kept me waiting."

Despite the smooth voice and the eternal smile there was an undernote of rebuke in the words, as of a teacher who reproves a child for tardiness. And, meekly, Standish replied:

"I'm sorry. I was detained at Miami. And lunch was late. I got here as soon as I could. I--"

With an impatient little wave of one white hand. Hade checked his excuses and dismissed the subject. In the same moment his snakelike black eyes fixed themselves on Brice whom he seemed to notice for the first time. The eyes were smiling. But he granted the guest no further form of salutation, as he asked abruptly:

"Where have I seen you before?"

"You saw me last night," returned Gavin. still wondering at this man's dictatorial attitude toward the aggressive Milo Standish and at Milo's almost cringing acceptance of it. "I was at the Standishes. I was just starting for bed when you dropped in. Miss Standish introduced--"

"I'm not speaking about last night," curtly interrupted Hade, though his voice was as soft as ever and his masklike face was set in its everlasting smile. "I mean, where did I run across you before last night?"

"Well. Mr. Bones," answered Gavin with flippant insolence, "Dat am de question propounded. Where did you-all run acrost me befo' las' night?"

Milo and Roke stirred convulsively, as if scandalized that any one should dare speak with such impudence to Hade. Rodney himself all but lost the eternal smile from his thin lips: and his voice was less suave than usual as he said:

"I don't care for impertinence, especially from employees. You will bear that in mind. Now you will answer my question. Where did I see you?"

"If you can't remember," countered Gavin. "you can hardly expect me to. I live in New York. I have lived there or thereabouts for a number of years. I was overseas--stationed at Bordeaux and then at Brest--for a few months in 1918. As a boy I lived on my father's farm in northern New York State, near Manlius. That's the best answer I can give you. If it will make you recall where you've seen me--all right. If not I'm afraid I can't help you out. In any case what does it matter? I don't claim to be anybody especial. I have no references. Mr. Standish knows that. If he's willing to give me some sort of job in spite of such drawbacks. it seems to be entirely his affair."

"The job I had--have--in mind for you," spoke up Milo. at a glance from Hade, "is on this key, here. I need an extra man in the main storehouse to oversee the roustabouts there. At this season Roke is too busy outdoors to keep the right kind of eye on them. The pay won't be large to start with. But if you make good at it. I may have something better to offer you on the mainland. Or I may not. In any case. I understand this is only a stopgap for you, and that you are down here for your health. If you are interested in the idea, well and good. If not--"

He paused and glanced at Hade as if for prompting. Throughout his harangue Standish had given Brice the impression of a man who recites a lesson taught him by another. Now Hade took up the tale.

"I think," said he smilingly--his momentary impatience gone --"I think, before answering--in fact before coming down to terms and other details--you might perhaps care to stroll around the island a little, and get an idea of it for yourself. It may be you won't care to stay here. It may be you will like it very much. Mr. Standish and I have some routine business to talk over with Roke. Suppose you take a walk over the place? Roke, assign one of the men to go with him and show him around."

With instant obedience. Roke started for the door. Indeed, he had almost reached it before Hade ceased speaking. Gavin raised his brows at this swift anticipation of orders. And into his mind came an odd thought.

"You seemed surprised to see me this afternoon," said he as he followed Roke to the porch and closed the door behind them. "Yet Mr. Hade had told you I was coming here. He had told you, and he had told you to have some one ready to show me over the island."

As he spoke Gavin indicated with a nod a man who was trotting across the sandy clearing toward them.

"Didn't know it was you!" grunted Roke. too surprised by the direct assertion to fence. "Said some feller would come with Mr. Standish. He--. How'd you know he told me?" he demanded in sudden angry bewilderment.

"There!" exclaimed Gavin admiringly. "I knew we'd chat along as lovingly as two turtle-doves when once we'd get really started. You're quite a talker when you want to be, Rokie my lad! If only you didn't speak as if you were trying to save words on a telegram. Here's the chap you'd ordered to be cruising in the offing as my escort, eh?" as the barefoot roustabout reached the porch. "All right. Good-by."

Leaving the grumbling and muttering Roke scowling after him. Brice stepped out onto the sand to meet the newcomer. The roustabout apparently belonged to the conch tribe of which Milo had spoken. Thin. undersized. swarthy. with features that showed a trace of negro and perhaps of Indian blood as well, he had a furtive manner and seemed to cringe away from the Northerner as they set off across the clearing. toward the distant huts and still more distant orchards.

He was bareheaded and stoop-shouldered. Beyond a ragged pair of drill trousers--indescribably dirty--his only garment was a still dirtier and raggeder undershirt. His naked feet flapped awkwardly, like a turtle's. He was not a pretty or prepossessing sight.

Across the clearing he pattered, head down, still cringing away from the visitor. As the two entered the shadows of the nearest grove Gavin Brice glanced quickly around him on all sides. The conch did the same. Then the two moved on with the same distance between them as before.

And as they went Gavin spoke. He spoke in a low tone. not moving his lips or looking directly toward the other man.

"Good boy. Davy!" he said, approvingly. "How did you get the job of taking me around? I was afraid I'd have to look for you."

"Two other men were picked out to do it sir," said the conch

without slackening his pace or turning his head. "One after the other. One was a nigger. One was a conch. Both of 'em got sick. I paid 'em to. And I paid the nigger an extra five to tell Roke I'd be the best man to steer you. He said he'd been on jobs with me before. He and the conch are malingering in the sick shed. Ipecac. I gave it to 'em."

"Good!" repeated Gavin. "Mighty good. Now what's the idea?"

"You're to be kept over here, sir," said the conch. "I don't know why. Roke told me you're a chum of Hade's, and that Hade's doing it to have a bit of fun with you. So I'm to lead you around awhile, showing you the plant and such. Then I'm to take you to the second storage hut and tell you we've got a new kind of avocado stored in there, and let you go in ahead of me, and I'm to slam the spring-lock door on you."

"Hm! That all, Davy?"

"Yes, sir. Except of course that it's a lie. Hade don't play jokes or have fun with any one. If he's trying to keep you locked up here a while it's most likely a sign he don't want you on the mainland for some reason. Maybe that sounds foolish. But it's all the head or tail I can make out of it, sir."

"It doesn't 'sound foolish,'" contradicted Brice. "As it happens it's just what he wants to do. I don't know just why. But I mean to find out. He wants me away from a house over there. A house I had a lot of trouble in getting a foothold in. It's taken me the best part of a month. And now I don't mean to spend another month in getting back there."

"No, sir," said Davy, respectfully, still plodding on. in front with head and shoulders bent. "No, sir. Of course. But--if you'll let me ask, sir--does Hade know? Does he suspicion you? If that's why he's framed this then Roustabout Key is no place for you. No more is Dade County. He--"

"No," returned Gavin. smiling at the real terror that had crept into the other's tone. "He doesn't know. And I'm sure he doesn't suspect. But he has a notion he's seen me somewhere. And he's a man who doesn't take chances. Besides he wants me away from the Standish house. He wants every outsider away from it. And I knew this would be the likeliest place for him to maroon me. That's why I sent you word I'm a bit wobbly in my beliefs about the Standishes,--one of them anyhow. Now, where's this storehouse prison of mine?"

"Over there, sir, to the right. But--"

"Take me over there. And walk slowly. I've some things to say to you on the way, and I want you to get them straight in

your memory."

"Yes, sir," answered the conch, shifting his course. so as to bring his steps in a roundabout way toward the squat storeroom. "And before you begin there's an extra key to the room under the second packing box to the right. I made it from Roke's own key when I made duplicates of all the keys here. I put it there this morning. In case you should want to get out, you can say you found it lying on the floor there. I rusted all the keys I made so they look old. He'll likely think it's an extra key that was lost somewhere in there."

"Thanks," said Gavin. "You're a good boy. And you've got sense. Now listen:--"

Talking swiftly and earnestly. he followed Davy toward the square little iron building, the conch outwardly making no sign that he heard. For, not many yards away, a handful of conchs and negroes were at work on a half-completed shed.

Davy came to the store-room door, and opened it. Then, turning to Brice he said aloud in the wretched dialect of his class:

"Funny avocado fruits all pile up in yon. Mighty funny. Make yo' laugh. Want to go see? Look!"

He swung wide the iron door and pointed to the almost totally dark interior.

"Funny to see in yon," he said invitingly. "Never see any like 'em befo'. I strike light for you. Arter you, my boss."

One or two men working on the nearby shed had stopped their labor and were glancing covertly toward them.

"Oh, all right!" agreed Brice. his uninterested voice carrying well though it was not noticeably raised. "It seems a stuffy sort of hole. But I'll take a look at it if you like. Where's that light you're going to strike? It--"

As he spoke he sauntered into the storeroom. His lazy speech was cut short by the clangorous slamming of the iron door behind him. Conscientiously he pounded on the iron and yelled wrathful commands to Davy to open. Then when he thought he had made noise enough to add verity to his role and to free the conch from any onlooker's suspicion he desisted.

Groping his way through the dimness to the nearest box. he sat down, philosophically, to wait.

"Well," he mused sniffing in no approval at all at the musty air of the place and peering up at the single eight-inch

barred window that served more for ventilation than for light. "Well, here we are. And here, presumably, we stay till Standish and Hade go back to the mainland. Then I'm to be let out by Roke, with many apologies for Davy's mistake. There'll be no way of getting back. The boats will be hidden or padlocked. And here I'll stay, with Roke for a chum. till whatever is going on at Standish's house is safely finished with. It's a pretty program. If I can get away to-night without Roke's finding it out till morning--"

His eyes were beginning to accustom themselves to the room. Its corners and farther reaches and most of its floor were still invisible. But, by straining his gaze, he could just make out the shapes of a crate or two and several packing boxes close to the wall. The central space was clear. In spite of the stuffiness. there was a damp chill to the gloomy place, by contrast to the vivid sunlight and the sweep of the trade-winds. outside.

Gavin stretched himself out at full length on the long box, and prepared to take a nap. First he reached toward the next box--the one under which Davy had told him the key was hidden--and moved it an inch or so to make certain it was not full enough to cause him any especial effort in case he should not be released until next day and should have need of the key. Then he shut his eyes, and let himself drift toward slumber.

It was perhaps two hours later when he was roused from a light doze by hearing something strike the concrete floor of his prison. not six feet from his head. The thing had fallen with a slithering, uneven sound, such as might be made by the dropping of a short length of rope.

Brice sat up. He noted that the room was no longer light enough to see across. And he glanced in the direction of the window. Its narrow space was blocked by something. And as he looked he heard a second object slither to the floor.

"Some one's dropping things down here through that ventilator," he conjectured.

And at the same moment a third fall sounded, followed almost at once by a fourth. Then, for a second, the window space was clear, only to be blocked again as the person outside returned to his post. And in quick succession three more objects were sent slithering down to the floor. After which the window was cleared once more, and Brice could hear receding steps.

But he gave no heed to the steps. For as the last of the unseen things had been slid through the aperture. another sound had focused all his attention, and had sent queer little quivers up his spine.

The sound had been a long-drawn hiss.

And Gavin Brice understood. Now he knew why the softly falling bodies had slithered so oddly down the short distance between window and floor. And he read aright the slippery crawling little noises that had been assailing his ears.

The unseen man outside had thrust through the ventilator not less than seven or eight snakes, carried thither, presumably, in bags.

Crouching on his long box Gavin peered about him. Faintly against the dense gray of the shadowy floor. he could see thick ropelike forms twisting sinuously to and fro, as if exploring their new quarters or seeking exit. More than once. as these chanced to cross one another's path, that same long-drawn hiss quavered out into the dark silences.

And now Brice's nostrils were assailed by a sickening smell as of crushed cucumbers. And at the odor his fists tightened in new fear. For no serpents give off that peculiar odor. except members of the pit-viper family.

"They're not rattlesnakes," he told himself. "For a scared or angry rattler would have this room vibrating with his whirr. We're too far south for copperheads. The--the only other pit-viper I ever heard of in Florida is the--cotton-mouth moccasin!"

At the realization he was aware of a wave of physical terror that swept him like a breath of ice.

Without restoratives at hand the moccasin's bite is certain death. The plan had been well thought out. At the very first step the frantic prisoner might reasonably be relied on to encounter one or more of the crawling horrors. The box on which he crouched was barely eighteen inches high. The next box--under which rested the key--was several feet away. The door was still farther off.

Truly Standish and Hade appeared to have hit on an excellent plan for getting rid of the man they wanted out of the way! It would be so easy for Roke to explain to possible inquirers that Brice had chanced to tread on a poisonous snake in his wanderings about the key!

The slightest motion might well be enough to stir to active hostility the swarm of serpents already angered by their sudden dumping into this clammy den.

Weaponless, helpless, the trapped man crouched there and waited,

CHAPTER VI

IN THE DAY OF BATTLE

As Gavin Brice sat with feet drawn up under him, listening to the gruesome slither of the moccasins along the concrete floor just below he was gripped for a minute by irresistible terror. It was all so simple--so complete! And he had been calmly self-confident of his ability to command the situation, to play these people's own game and to beat them at it. Grinning and open-eyed he had marched into the trap. He had been glad to let Hade and Standish think him safely out of their way, and had planned so confidently to return by stealth to the mainland that night and to Milo's house!

And now they had had absolutely no difficulty in caging him, and in arranging that he should be put forever out of their way. The most stringent inquiry--should any such be made--could only show that he had been bitten once or more by a deadly snake. Any post-mortem would bear out the statement.

It was known to every one that many of the keys--even several miles from the mainland--are infested by rattlesnakes and by other serpents, though how such snakes ever got to the islands is as much of a mystery to the naturalist world as is the presence of raccoons and squirrels on the same keys. It is simply one of the hundred unsolvable mysteries and puzzles of the subtropic region.

In his jiu-jitsu instructions Brice had learned a rule which he had carried into good effect in other walks of life. Namely to seem to play one's opponent's game and to be fooled by it, and then, taking the conquering adversary by surprise, to strike. Thus he had fallen in with Standish's suggestion that he come to the island, though he had thought himself fairly sure as to the reason for the request. Thus, too, he had let himself be lured into this storeroom, still smugly confident that he held the whip hand of the situation.

And as a result he was looking into the ghastly eyes of death.

Like an engine that "races," his fertile brain was unduly active in this moment of stark horror, and it ran uselessly. Into his over-excited mind flashed pictures of a thousand bits of the past--one of them. by reason of recent association far more vivid than the rest.

He saw himself with four other A.E.F. officers, standing in a

dim corner of a high-ceiled old room in a ruined chateau in Flanders. In the room's center was a table. Around this were grouped a double line of uniformed Americans--a court-martial. In came two provosts' men leading between them a prisoner, a man in uniform and wearing the insignia of a United States army major--the cleverest spy it was said in all the Wilhehnstrasse's pay, a genius who had grown rich at his filthy trade of selling out his country's secrets. and who had been caught at last by merest chance.

The prisoner had glanced smilingly about the half-lit room as he came in. For the barest fraction of a second his gaze had flickered over Gavin Brice and the three other officers who stood there in the shadow. Then, with that same easy, confident smile on his masklike, pallid face, the spy had turned his glittering black eyes on the officers at the courtmartial table.

"Gentlemen," he had said amusedly. "you need not go through the farce of trying me. I am guilty. I say this with no bravado and with no fear. Because the bullet has never been molded and the rope has never been plaited that can kill me. And the cell is not yet made that can hold me."

He had said it smilingly, and in a velvet suave voice. Yes, and he had made good his boast. For--condemned to die at daylight--he had escaped from his ill-constructed prison room in the chateau a little before dawn and had gotten clean away after killing one of his guards.

"He never set eyes on me except for that instant, there in the shadows," Brice found himself reflecting for the hundredth time. "And there were all the others with me. Yet last night he recalled my face. It's lucky he didn't recall where he'd seen it. Or--perhaps he did."

With a start. he came out of his half-hypnotic daze--a daze which had endured but a few seconds. And once more his rallying will-power and senses made him acutely alive to the hideous peril in which he crouched.

Then--in one of the odd revulsions which flash across men at unnaturally high tension--his daze and his terror merged all at once into a blaze of wholesome rage. Nor was his rage directed against Rodney Hade, but against Milo Standish, the man whose life he had saved not twenty hours earlier, and who had repaid that mighty service now by helping to arrange his murder.

At the thought Brice grew hot with fury. He longed to stand face to face with the blackguard who had rewarded a life-gift in such vile fashion. He yearned to tell Standish in fiery words how unspeakable had been the action, and then foot to

foot, fist to fist, to take out of the giant's hide some tithe of the revenge due for such black ingratitude.

The ferocious impulse set steady his quivering nerves. No longer did his brain race uselessly. Again it was alert, resourceful, keen.

Standish! Yes, and no doubt Standish's sister too! The girl whose eyes had made him feel as if he were on holy ground--the girl whom he had been so irritatingly unable to get out of his mind!

With an angry shake of the head Gavin dismissed Claire from his thoughts. And his newborn hate concentrated on her brother who had betrayed to death his rescuer. Obsessed with the fierce craving to stand face to face with the blonde-bearded giant he banished his lethargy of hopelessness and cast about for means of escape. out of this seemingly inescapable snare.

First, the key must be found. Then the door must be reached and opened. In the way of both enterprises writhed a half dozen or more deadly snakes. And to the problem of winning past them alive and getting to his enemy. Gavin Brice bent his trained faculties.

The box whereon he sat was covered with loose boards nailed down only at one end, a long strip of thin iron or copper binding the one unopened edge. So much his groping fingers told him. Moving to one corner of the box top he pushed aside a board and plunged his hand into the interior. It was as he had hoped. According to custom when the box had been emptied the jute and shredded paper stuffing of its contents had been thrust back into it for future use.

Feverishly, Gavin began to pull forth great handfuls of paper and of excelsior. These he piled onto the box top. Then, exerting all his skilled strength, he tugged at the narrow iron strip which bound, lengthwise, one side of the box.

This task was by no means easy, for the nails were long. And the iron's sharp edges cut cruelly into the tugging fingers. But, inch by inch, he tore it free. And at the end of three minutes he was strengthening and testing a willowy five-foot strip of metal. Laying this across his knees and fishing up another double handful of the packing paper and jute he groped in his pockets with bleeding fingertips for a match.

He found but one. Holding it tenderly he scraped its surface against his nail--a trick he had picked up in the army. The sulphur snapped and ignited, the wooden sliver burning freely in that windless air.

Giving it a good start, he touched the point of flame to the piled jute and paper in front of him. It caught in an instant. Still holding the lighted match, he repeated this ticklish process time after time, tossing handfuls of the blazing stuff down onto the floor at his side.

In two minutes more he had a gayly-flaming pile of inflammable material burning high there. Its gleam lightened every inch of the gloomy room. It brought out into hideous clearness the writhing dark bodies of the crawling moccasins, even to the patches of white at their lips which gave them their sinister name of "cottonmouths." Fat and short and horrible to look upon, they were, as they slithered and twisted here and there along the bright-lit floor or coiled and hissed at sight of the flame and of the fast plying hand and arm of the captive just above them.

But Brice had scant eyes or heed for them. Now that his blaze was started past danger of easy extinction. he plunged both hands again into the box. And now. two handfuls at a time. he began to cast forth more and more of the stuffing.

With careful aim he threw it. Presently there was a wide line of jute and paper extending from the main blaze across to the next box. Then another began to pile up in an opposite direction, toward the door. The fire ran greedily along these two lines of fuel.

Meantime the room was no longer so clearly lighted as at first. For the smoke billowed up to the low roof, and in thick waves poured out through the small ventilator. Such of it as could not find this means of outlet doubled back floorward, filling the room with chokingly thick fumes which wellnigh blinded and strangled the man and blotted out all details of shape and direction.

But already Gavin Brice had slipped to the floor, his thin-shod feet planted in the midst of the blaze, whose flames and sparks licked eagerly at his ankles and legs.

Following the trail of fire which led to the box. Gavin strode through the very center of this blazing path, heedless of the burns. Well did he know the snakes would shrink away from actual contact with the fire. And he preferred surface burns to a fatal bite in ankle or foot.

As he reached the box its corners had already caught fire from the licking flames below. Heaving up the burning receptacle. Brice looked under it. There lay the rusty key, just visible through the lurid smoke glare. But not ten inches away from the far side of it coiled a moccasin, head poised threateningly as the box grazed it under Gavin's sharp heave.

Stooping, Brice snatched up a great bunch of the flaming paper and flung it on the serpent's shining coils. In practically the same gesture he reached with lightning quickness for the key.

By a few inches he had missed his hurried aim for the moccasin. He had intended the handful of fire to land on the floor just in front of it, thus causing it to shrink back. Instead the burning particles had fallen stinging among its coils.

The snake twisted its arrow-shaped head as if to see what had befallen it. Then catching sight of Brice's swooping hand it struck.

But the glance backward and the incredibly quick withdrawal of the man's hand combined to form the infinitesimal space which separated Gavin from agonizing death. The snake's striking head missed the fast-retreating fingers by less than a hair's breadth. The fangs met on the wards of the rusty key Brice had caught up in his fingertips. The force of the stroke knocked the key clatteringly to the floor.

Stepping back. Brice flung a second and better aimed handful of the dwindling fire in front of the re-coiling reptile. It drew back hissing. And as it did so. Gavin regained the fallen key.

Wheeling about choking and strangling from the smoke, his streamingly smarting eyes barely able to discern the fiery trail he had laid. Brice ran through the midst of the red line of embers to the door. Reaching it he held the key in one hand while the sensitive fingers of the other sought the keyhole.

After what seemed a century he found it, and applied and turned the key in the stiff lock. With a fierce shove he pushed open the door. Then as he was about to bound forth into the glory of the sunset, he started back convulsively.

One moccasin had evidently sought outer air. With this in view it had stretched itself along the crack of light at the foot of the door. Now as the door flew wide the snake coiled itself to strike at the man who had all but stepped on it.

Down whizzed the narrow strip of iron Gavin had wrenched from the box as a possible weapon. And, though the impact cut Brice's fingers afresh, the snake lay twisting wildly and harmlessly with a cloven spine.

Over the writhing body sprang Gavin Brice and out into the sandy open, filling his smoke-tortured lungs with the fresh sunset air and blinking away the smoke-damp from his stinging

eyes.

It was then he beheld running toward him three men. Far in the van was Roke--his attention no doubt having been caught by the smoke pouring through the ventilator. The two others were an undersized conch and a towering Bahama negro. All three carried clubs, and a pistol glittered in Roke's left hand.

Ten feet from the reeling Gavin. Roke opened fire. But, as he did not halt when he pulled trigger, his shot went wild. Before he could shoot again or bring his club into action. Brice was upon him. Gavin smote once and once only with the willowy metal strip. But he struck with all the dazzling speed of a trained saber fencer.

The iron strip caught Roke across the eyes, smartingly and with a force which blinded him for the moment and sent him staggering back in keen pain. The iron strip doubled uselessly under the might of the blow, and Gavin dropped it and ran.

At top speed he set off toward the dock. The conch and the negro were between him and the pier, and from various directions other men were running. But only the Bahaman and the little conch barred his actual line of progress. Both leaped at him at the same time, as he came dashing down on them.

The conch was a yard or so in front of the negro. And now the fugitive saw the Bahaman's supposed cudgel was an iron crowbar which he wielded as easily as a wand. The negro leaped and at the same time struck. But, by some queer chance, the conch, a yard ahead of him, lost his own footing in the shifty sand just then and tumbled headlong.

He fell directly in the Bahaman's path. The negro stumbled over him and plunged earthward, the iron bar flying harmless from his grasp.

"Good little Davy!" apostrophized Brice, as he hurdled the sprawling bodies and made for the dock.

The way was clear, and he ran at a pace which would not have disgraced a college sprinter. Once, glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the Bahaman trying blasphemously to disentangle his legs from those of the prostrate and wriggling Davy. He saw, too, Roke pawing at his cut face with both hairy hands, and heard him bellowing confused orders which nobody seemed to understand.

Arrived at the dock Gavin saw that Standish's launch was gone. So, too, was the gaudy little motorboat wherein Rodney Hade had come to the key. Two battered and paintless motor-scows

remained, and one or two disreputable rowboats.

It was the work of only a few seconds for Brice to cut loose the moorings of all these craft and to thrust them far out into the blue water, where wind and tide could be trusted to bear them steadily farther and farther from shore.

Into the last of the boats--the speedier-seeming of the two launches--Gavin sprang as he shoved it free from the float. And, before the nearest of the island men could reach shore, he had the motor purring. Satisfied that the tide had caught the rest of the fleet and that the stiff tradewind was doing even more to send the derelict boats out of reach from shore or from possible swimmers he turned the head of his unwieldy launch toward the mainland, pointing it northeastward and making ready to wind his course through the straits which laced the various islets lying between him and his destination.

"They'll have a sweet time getting off that key tonight," he mused in grim satisfaction. "And, unless they can hail some passing boat, they're due to stay there till Hade or Standish makes another trip out Standish!"

At the name he went hot with wrath. Now that he had achieved the task of winning free from his prison and from his jailors his mind swung back to the man he had rescued and who had sought his death. Anger at the black infamy burned fiercely in Brice's soul. His whole brain and body ached for redress, for physical wild-beast punishment of the ingrate. The impulse dulled his every other faculty. It made him oblivious to the infinitely more important work he had laid out for himself.

No man can be forever normal when anger takes the reins. And, for the time, Gavin Brice was deaf and blind to every motive or caution, and centered his entire faculties on the yearning to punish Milo Standish. He had fought like a tiger and had risked his own life to save Standish from the unknown assailant's knife thrust. Milo, in gross stupidity, had struck him senseless. And now, coldbloodedly, he had helped to plan for him the most terrible form of death by torture to which even an Apache could have stooped. Small wonder that righteous indignation flared high within the fugitive!

Straight into the fading glory of the sunset. Brice was steering his wallowing and leaky launch. The boat was evidently constructed and used for the transporting of fruit from the key to the mainland. She was slow and of deep draught. But she was cutting down the distance now between Gavin and the shore.

He planned to beach her on the strip of sand at the bottom of the mangrove swamp, and to make his way to the Standish house through the hidden path whose existence Milo had that day

poohpooed. He trusted to luck and to justice to enable him to find the man he sought when once he should reach the house.

His only drawback was the fear lest he encounter Claire as well. In his present wrathful frame of mind he had no wish to see or speak with her, and he hoped that she might not mar by her presence his encounter with her brother.

Between two keys wallowed his chugging boat and into a stretch of clear water beyond. Then, skirting a low-lying reef, Gavin headed direct toward the distant patch of yellowish beach which was his objective.

The sun's upper edge was sinking below the flat skyline. Mauve shadows swept over the aquamarine expanse of rippling water. The horizon was dyed a blood-red which was merging into ashes of roses. On golden Mashta played the last level rays of the dying sun, caressing the wondrous edifice as though they loved it. The subtropical night was rushing down upon the smiling world, and, as ever, it was descending without the long sweet interval of twilight that northern lands know.

Gavin put the tub to top speed as the last visible obstacle was left behind. Clear water lay between him and the beach. And he was impatient to step on land. Under the fresh impetus the rolling craft panted and wheezed and made her way through the ripples at a really creditable pace.

As the shadows thickened Brice half-rose in his seat to get a better glimpse of a little motorboat which had just sprung into view from around the mangrove-covered headland that cut off the view of Standish's mainland dock. The boat apparently had put off from that pier. and was making rapid speed out into the bay almost directly toward him. He could descry a figure sitting in the steersman's seat. But by that ebbing light. he could discern only its blurred outline.

Before Gavin could resume his seat he was flung forward upon his face in the bottom of his scow. The jar of the tumble knocked him breathless. And as he scrambled up on hands and knees he saw what had happened.

Foolish is the boatman who runs at full speed in some of the southwestern reaches of Biscayne Bay--especially at dusk --without up-to-date chart or a perfect knowledge of the bay's tricky soundings. For the coral worm is tireless, and the making of new reefs is without end.

The fast-driven launch had run, bow-on, into a tooth of coral barely ten inches under the surface of the smooth water. And, what with her impetus and the half-rotted condition of her hull, she struck with such force as to rip a hole in her forward quarter, wide enough to stick a derby hat through.

In rushed the water, filling her in an incredibly short time. Settling by the head under the weight of this inpouring flood she toppled off the tooth of reef and slid free. Then with a wallowing dignity she proceeded to sink.

The iron sheathing on her keel and hull had not been strong enough in its rusted state to resist the hammerblow of the reef. But it was heavy enough, together with her big metal steering apparatus, to counterbalance any buoyant qualities left in the wooden frame.

And, down she went, waddling like a fat and ponderous hen, into a twenty-foot nest of water.

Gavin had wasted no time in the impossible feat of baling her or of plugging her unpluggable leak. As she went swayingly toward the bottom of the bay he slipped clear of her and struck out through the tepid water.

The mangrove swamp's beach was a bare half-mile away. And the man knew he could swim the intervening space, with ease. Yet the tedious delay of it all irked him and fanned to a blind fury his rage against Milo. Moreover, now, he could not hope to reach the hidden path before real darkness should set in. And he did not relish the idea of traversing its blind mazes without a glimmer of daylight to guide him.

Yet he struck out, stubbornly, doggedly. As he passed the tooth of coral that had wrecked his scow the reef gave him a painful farewell scrape on one kicking knee. He swam on fuming at this latest annoyance.

Then to his ears came the steady purr of a motorboat. It was close to him and coming closer.

"Boat ahoy!" he sang out treading water and raising himself as high as possible to peer about him through the dusk.

"Boat ahoy!" he called again, shouting to be heard above the motor's hum. "Man overboard! Ten dollars if you'll carry me to the mainland!"

And now he could see against the paler hue of the sky, the dark outlines of the boat's prow. It was bearing down on him. Above the bow's edge he could make out the vague silhouette of a head and upper body.

Then into his memory flashed something which the shock of his upsetting had completely banished. He recalled the motorboat which had darted, arrow-like, out from around the southern edge of the mangrove swamp, and which he had been watching when his scow went to pieces on the reef.

If this were the same boat--if its steersman chanced to be Milo Standish crossing to the key to learn if his murderplot had yet culminated--so much the better! Man to man, there between sea and sky in the gathering gloom, they could settle the account once and for all.

Perhaps Standish had recognized him. Perhaps he merely took him for some capsized fisherman. In either event. a swimming man is the most utterly defenseless of all creatures against attack from land or from boat. And Gavin was not minded to let Standish finish his work with boat-hook or with oar. If he and his foe were to meet it should be on even terms.

The boat had switched off power and was coming to a standstill. Gavin dived. He swam clean under the craft, lengthwise, coming up at its stern and farthest from that indistinct figure in the prow.

As he rose to the surface he caught with both hands the narrow overhang of the stern, and with a mighty heave he hoisted himself hip-high out of the water.

Thence it was the work of a bare two seconds for him to swing himself over the stern and to land on all fours in the bottom of the boat. The narrow craft careened dangerously under such treatment. But she righted herself, and by the time he had fairly landed upon the cleated bottom. Brice was on his feet and making for the prow. He was ready now for any emergency and could meet his adversary on equal terms.

"Mr. Brice!" called the boat's other occupant, springing up, her sweet voice trembling and almost tearful. "Oh, thank God you're safe! I was so frightened!"

"Miss Standish!" sputtered Gavin, aghast. "Miss Standish!"

For a moment they stood staring at each other through the darkness, wordless, breathing hard. Their quick breath and the trickling of fifty runnels of water from Gavin's drenched clothes into the bottom of the once-tidy boat alone broke the tense stillness of sky and bay. Then:

"You're safe? You're not harmed?" panted the girl.

And the words brought back with a rush to Gavin Brice all he had been through.

"Yes," he made harsh answer trying to steady his rage-choked voice. "I am safe. I am not harmed. Apart from a few fire-blisters on my ankles and the charring of my clothes and the barking of one knee against a bit of submerged coral and the cutting of my fingers rather badly and a few more minor

mischances--I'm quite safe and none the worse for the Standish family's charming hospitality. And, by the way, may I suggest that it might have been better for your brother or the gentle-hearted Mr. Hade to run across to the key to get news of my fate, instead of sending a girl on such an errand? It's no business of mine. of course. And I don't presume to criticize two such noble heroes. But surely they ought not have sent you. If their kindly plan had worked out according to schedule. I should not have been a pretty sight for a woman to look at. by this time. I--"

"I--I don't understand half of the things you're saying!" she cried, shrinking from his taunting tone as from a fist-blow. "They don't make any sense to me. But I do see why you're so angry. And I don't blame you. It was horrible! Horrible! It--"

"It was all that," he agreed drily, breaking in on her quivering speech and steeling himself against its pitiful appeal. "All that. And then some. And it's generous of you not to blame me for being just the very tiniest least bit riled by it. That helps. I was afraid my peevishness might displease you. My temper isn't what it should be. If it were I should be apologizing to you for getting your nice boat all sloppy like this."

"Please!" she begged. "Please! Won't you please try not to-to think too hardly of my brother? And won't you please acquit me of knowing anything of it? I didn't know. Honestly. Mr Brice. I didn't. When Milo came back home without you he told me you had decided to stay on at Roustabout Key to help Roke, till the new foreman could come from Homestead."

"Quite so," assented Gavin, his voice as jarring as a file's. "I did. And he decided that I shouldn't change my mind. He--"

"It wasn't till half an hour ago," she hurried on. miserably. "that I knew. I was coming down stairs. Milo and Rodney Hade were in the music-room together. I didn't mean to overhear. But oh, I'm so glad I did!"

"I'm glad it could make you so happy," he said. "The pleasure is all yours."

"All I caught was just this:" she went on. "Rodney was saying: 'Nonsense! Roke will have let him out before now. And there are worse places to spend a hot afternoon in than locked snugly in a cool storeroom.'"

"Are there?" interpolated Brice. "I'd hate to test that."

"All in a flash. I understood," she continued, her sweet voice struggling gallantly against tears. "I knew Rodney didn't want us to have any guests or to have any outsiders at all at our house. He was fearfully displeased with us last night for having you there. It was all we could do to persuade him that the man who had saved Milo's life couldn't be turned out of doors or left to look elsewhere for work. It was only when Milo promised to give you work at the key that he stopped arguing and being so imperative about it. And when I heard him speak just now about your being locked in a store room there. I knew he had done it to prevent your coming back here for a while."

"Your reasoning was most unfeminine in its correctness," approved Gavin, still forcing himself to resist the piteous pleading in her voice.

He could see her flinch under the harshness of his tone as she added:

"And all at once I realized what it must mean to you and what you must think of us--after all you'd done for Milo. And I knew how a beast like Roke would be likely to treat you when he knew my brother and Rodney had left you there at the mercy of his companionship. There was no use talking to them. It might be hours before I could convince them and make them go or send for you. And I couldn't bear to have you kept there all that time. So I slipped out of the house and ran to the landing. Just as I got out into the bay. I saw you coming through that strait back there. I recognized the fruit launch. And I knew it must be you. For nobody from the key would have run at such speed toward that clump of reefs. You capsized. before I could get to you, and--"

She shuddered, and ceased to speak. For another moment or two there was silence between them. Gavin Brice's mind was busy with all she said. He was dissecting and analyzing her every anxious word. He was bringing to bear on the matter not only his trained powers of logic but his knowledge of human nature.

And all at once he knew this trembling girl was in no way guilty of the crime attempted against him. He knew, too, from the speech of Hade's which she had just repeated. that Standish presumably had had no part in the attempted murder, but that that detail had been devised by Hade for Roke to put into execution. Nor. evidently had Davy been let into the secret by Roke.

In a few seconds Brice had revised his ideas as to the afternoon's adventures, and had come to a sudden decision. Speaking with careful forethought and with a definite object in view, he said:

"Miss Standish. I do not ask pardon for the way I spoke to you just now. And when you've heard why you won't blame me. I want to tell you just what happened to me today from the time I set foot on Roustabout Key. until I boarded this boat of yours. When you realize that I thought your brother and probably yourself were involved in it to the full you'll understand, perhaps, why I didn't greet you with overmuch cordiality. Will you listen?"

She nodded her head, wordless, not trusting her voice to speak further. And she sank back into the seat she had quitted. Brice seated himself on the thwart near her, and began to speak, while the boat, its power still shut off bobbed lazily on a lazier sea.

Tersely, yet omitting no detail except that of his talk with Davy, he told of the afternoon's events. She heard, wide-eyed and breathing fast. But she made no interruption, except when he came to the episode of the moccasins she cried aloud in horror, and caught unconsciously his lacerated hand between her own warm palms.

The clasp of her fingers, unintentional as it was. sent a strange thrill through the man, and, for an instant, he wavered in his recital. But he forced himself to continue. And after a few seconds the girl seemed to realize what she was doing. For she withdrew her hands swiftly, and clasped them together in her lap.

As he neared the end of his brief story she raised her hands again. But they did not seek his. Instead she covered her horrified eyes with them, and she shook all over.

When he had finished he could see she was fighting for self-control. Then, in a flood, the power of speech came back to her.

"Oh!" she gasped. her flower-face white and drawn, in the faint light. "Oh, it can't be. It can't! There must be a hideous mistake somewhere!"

"There is," he agreed. with a momentary return to his former manner. "There was one mistake. I made it, by escaping. Otherwise the plan was flawless. Luckily. a key had been left on the floor. And luckily. I got hold of it. Luckily, too, I had a match with me. And. if there are sharks as near land as this, luckily you happened to meet me as I was swimming for shore. As to mistakes--. Have you a flashlight?"

From her pocket she drew a small electric torch she had had the foresight to pick up from the hall table as she ran out.

Gavin took it and turned its rays on his wet ankles. His shoes and trouser-legs still showed clear signs of the scorching they had received. And his palms were cut and abraded.

"If I had wanted to make up a story," said he. "I could have devised one that didn't call for such painful stage-setting."

"Oh, don't!" she begged. "Don't speak so flippantly of it! How can you? And don't think for one instant that I doubted your word. I didn't. But it didn't seem possible that such a thing--Mr. Brice!" she broke off earnestly. "You mustn't--you can't--think that Milo knew anything of this! I mean about the--the snakes and all. He is enough to blame--he has shamed our hospitality and every trace of gratitude enough--by letting you be locked in there at all and by consenting to have you marooned on the key. I'm not trying to excuse him for that. There's no excuse. And without proof I wouldn't have believed it of him. But at least you must believe he had no part in--in the other--"

"I do believe it," said Gavin. gently. touched to the heart by her grief and shame. "At first. I was certain he had connived at it. But what you overheard proves he didn't."

"Thank you," she said simply.

This time it was his hand that sought hers. And, even as she, he was unconscious of the action.

"You mustn't let this distress you so," he soothed. noting her effort to fight back the tears. "It all came out safely enough. But--I think I've paid to-day for my right to ask such a question--how does it happen that you and your brother--you, especially--can have sunk to such straits that you take orders meekly from a murderer like Rodney Hade, and that you let him dictate what guests you shall or shan't receive?"

She shivered all over.

"I--I have no right to tell you," she murmured. "It isn't my secret. I have no right to say there is any secret. But there is! And it is making my life a torture! If only you knew--if only there were some one I could turn to for help or even for advice! But I'm all alone. except for Milo. And lately he's changed so! I--"

She broke down all at once in her valiant attempt at calmness. And burying her face in her hands again she burst into a tempest of weeping. Gavin Brice, a lump in his own throat, drew her to him. And she clung to his soaked coat lapels hiding her head on his drenched breast.

There was nothing of love or of sex in the action. She was simply a heartbroken child seeking refuge in the strength of some one older and stronger than she. Gavin realized it, and he held her to him and comforted her as though she had been his little sister.

Presently the passion of convulsive weeping passed, leaving her broken and exhausted. Gavin knew the girl's powers of mental resistance were no longer strong enough to overcome her need for a comforter to whom she could unburden her soul of its miserable perplexities.

She had drawn back from his embrace but she still sat close to him, her hands in his, pathetically eager for his sympathy and aid. The psychological moment had come and Gavin Brice knew it. Loathing himself for the role he must play and vowing solemnly to his own heart that she should never be allowed to suffer for any revelation she might make, he said with a gentle insistence, "Tell me."

CHAPTER VII

SECRETS

There was a short silence. Brice looked anxiously through the gathering darkness at the dimly seen face so near to his own. He could not guess, for the life of him, whether the girl was silent because she refused to tell him what he sought so eagerly to know, or whether she was still fighting to control her voice.

As he sat gazing down at her, there was something so tiny, so fragile, so helplessly trustful about her, that it went straight to the man's heart. He had played and schemed and risked life itself for this crucial hour, for this hour when he should have swept aside the girl's possible suspicions and enlisted her complete sympathy for himself and could make her trust him and feel keen remorse for the treatment he had received.

Yes--he had achieved all this. And he had done infinitely more. He had awakened in her heart a sense of loneliness and of need for some one in whom she might confide.

He had done all this, had Gavin Brice. And, though he was not a vain man, yet he knew he had done it cleverly. But, somehow--even as he waited to see if the hour for full confidences were indeed ripe--he was not able to feel the thrill

of exultation which should belong to the winner of a hard-fought duel. Instead, to his amazement, he was aware of a growing sense of shame, of disgust at having used such weapons against any woman, --especially against this girl whose whiteness of soul and of purpose he could no longer doubt.

Then, through the silence and above the soft lap-lap-lap of water against the idly drifting boat's side, Claire drew a deep breath. She threw back her drooping shoulders and sat up, facing the man. And in the dusk, Gavin could see the flash of resolve in her great eyes.

"Yes!" she said, impulsively. "Yes. I'll tell you. If it is wrong for me to tell, then let it be wrong. I'm sick of mystery and secrets and signals and suspense, and--oh, I'm sick of it all! And it's--it's splendid of you to want to help me, after what has happened to you through meeting me! It's your right to know."

She paused for breath. And again Gavin wondered at his own inability to feel a single throb of gladness at having come so triumphantly to the end of this particular road. Glumly, he stared down at the vibrant little figure beside him.

"There is some of it I don't know, myself," she began. "And lately I've found myself wondering if all I really know is true, or whether they have been deceiving me about some of it. I have no right to feel that way, I suppose, about my own brother. But he's so horribly under Rodney Hade's influence, and--"

Again, she paused, seeming to realize she was wandering from the point. And she made a fresh start.

"It all began as an adventure, a sort of game, more than in earnest," she said. "At least, looking back, that's the way it seems to me now. As a wonderfully exciting game. You see, everything down here was so thrillingly exciting and interesting to me, even then."

"I see."

"If you don't mind," she added, "I think I can make you understand it all the better, if you'll let me go back to the beginning. I'll make it as short as I can."

"Yes."

"I had been brought up in New York, except when we were in Europe or when I was away at school. My father and mother never let me see or know anything of real life. Dad was old, even as far back as I can remember. Mother was his second wife. Milo's mother was his first wife, and she died ever so

long ago. Milo is twenty years older than I am. Milo came down here on a cruise, when he got out of college. And he fell in love with this part of the country. He persuaded Dad to buy him a farm here, and he has spent fifteen years in building it up to what it is now. He and my mother didn't didn't get on awfully well together. So Milo spent about all his time down here, and I hardly ever saw him. Then Dad and Mother died, within a day of each other, during the flu epidemic. And Milo came on, for the funeral, of course, and to wind up the estate. Then he wanted me to come down here and live with him. He said he was lonely. And I was still lonelier.

"I came here. And I've been here ever since. It is a part of the world that throws a charm around every one who stays long enough under its spell. And I grew to loving it as much as Milo did. We had a beautiful life here, he and I and the cordial, lovable people who became our friends. It was last spring that Rodney Hade came to see us. Milo had known him, slightly, down here, years ago. He came back here--nobody knows from where, and rented a house, the other side of Coconut Grove, and brought his yacht down to Miami Harbor. Almost right away, he seemed to gain the queerest influence over Milo. It was almost like hypnotism. And yet, I don't altogether wonder. He has an odd sort of fascination about him. Even when he is discussing his snakes."

"His snakes?"

"He has three rooms in his house fitted up as a reptile zoo. He collects them from everywhere. He says--and he seems to believe it--that they won't hurt him and that he can handle them as safely as if they were kittens. Just like that man they used to have in the post office up at Orlando, who used to sit with his arms full of rattlesnakes and moccasins, and pet them."

"Yes," said Gavin, absentmindedly, as he struggled against an almost overmastering impulse which was gripping him. "I remember. But at last one of his pets killed him. He--"

"How did you know?" she asked, surprised. "How in the world should a newcomer from the North know about--"

"Oh, I read it in a Florida dispatch to one of the New York papers," he said, impatient at his own blunder. "And it was such a strange story it stuck in my memory. It--"

"Well," resumed Claire, "I think I've made you understand the simple and natural things that led up to it all. And now, I'll tell you everything, at least everything I know about it. It's--it's a gruesome sort of story, and--and I've grown to hate it all so!" She quivered. Then, squaring her young

shoulders again, she continued:

"I don't ask you to believe what I'm going to tell you. But it's all true. It began this way:

"One night, six months ago, as Milo and I were sitting on the veranda, we heard a scream--a hideous sound it was--from the mangrove swamp. And a queer creature in drippy white came crawling out of--"

"Wait!"

Brice's monosyllable smashed into the current of her scarce-started narrative with the jarring suddenness of a pistol shot. She stared up at him in amaze. For, seen through the starlight, his face was working strangely. And his voice was vibrant with some mighty emotion.

"Wait!" he repeated. "You shan't go on. You shan't tell me the rest. I'm a fool. For I'm throwing away the best chance that could have come to me. I'm throwing it away with my eyes open, and because I'm a fool."

"I--I don't understand," she faltered, bewildered.

"No," he said roughly. "You don't understand. That's just why I can't let you go on. And, because I'm a fool, I can't play out this hand, where every card is mine. I'll despise myself, always, for this, I suppose. And it's a certainty that I'll be despised. It means an end to a career I found tremendously interesting. I didn't need the money it brought. But I--"

"What in the world are you talking about?" she demanded, drawing a little away from him. "I--"

"Listen," he interrupted. "A lot of men, in my line and in others, have come a cropper in their careers, because of some woman. But I'm the first to come such a cropper on account of a woman with a white soul and the eyes of a child--a woman I scarcely know, and who has no interest in me. But, to-night, I shall telegraph my resignation. Some saner man can take charge. There are enough of our men massed in this vicinity to choose from. I'm going to get out of Florida and leave the game to play itself to an end, without me. I'm an idiot to do it. But I'd be worse than an idiot to let you trust me and let you tell me things that would wreck your half-brother and bring sorrow and shame to you. I'm through! And I can't even be sorry."

"Mr. Brice," she said, gently, "I'm afraid your terrible experiences, this afternoon and last evening, have unsettled your mind, a little. Just sit still there, and rest. I am

going to run the boat to shore and--"

"You're right," he laughed, ruefully, as he made way for her to start the engine. "My experiences have 'unsettled' my mind. And now that I've spoiled my own game, I'll tell you the rest--as much of it as I have a right to. It doesn't matter, any longer. Hade knows--or at least suspects. That's why he tried to get me killed. In this century, people don't try to have others killed, just for fun. There's got to be a powerful motive behind it. Such a motive as made a man last evening try to knife your half-brother. Such a motive as induced Hade to get me out of the way. He knows. Or he suspects. And that means the crisis must come, almost at once. The net will close. Whether or not it catches him in it."

The boat was started and had gotten slowly under way. During its long idleness it had been borne some distance to southwestward by tide and breeze. Her work done, Claire turned again to Gavin.

"Don't try to talk," she begged--as she had begged him on the night before. "Just sit back and rest."

"Even now, you don't get an inkling of it," he murmured mured. "That shows how little they've taken you into their confidence. They warned you against any one who might find the hidden path, and they even armed you for such an emergency. Yet they never told you the Law might possibly be crouching to spring on the Standish place, quite as ferociously as those other people who are in the secret and who want to rob Standish and Hade of the loot! And, by the way," he went on, pettishly, still smarting under his own renunciation, "tell Hade with my compliments that if he had lived as long in Southern Florida as I have, he'd know mocking birds don't sing here in mid-February, and he'd devise some other signal to use when he comes ashore by way of that path and wants to know if the coast is clear."

And now, forgetful of the shadowy course wherewith she was guiding the boat toward the distant dock--forgetful of everything--she dropped her hand from the steering wheel and turned about, in crass astonishment, to gaze at him.

"What--what do you mean?" she queried. "You know about the signal?--You--?"

"I know far too little about any of the whole crooked business!" he retorted, still enraged at his own quixotic resolve. "That's what I was sent here to clean up, after a dozen others failed. That's what I was put in charge of this district for. That's what I could have found out--or seventy per cent of it--if I'd had the sense not to stop you when you started to tell me, just now."

"Mr. Brice," she said, utterly confused, "I don't understand you at all. At first I was afraid that blow on the head, and then this afternoon's terrible experiences, had turned your wits. But you don't talk like a man who is delirious or sick. And there are things you couldn't possibly know--that signal, for instance--if you were what you seemed to be. You made me think you were a stranger in Florida,--that you were down here, penniless and out of work. Yet now you speak about some mysterious 'job' that you are giving up. It's all such a tangle! I can't understand."

Brice tried to ignore the pitiful pleading--the childlike tremor in her sweet voice. But it cut to the soul of him. And he replied, brusquely:

"I let you think I was a dead-broke work-hunter. I did that, because I needed to get into your brother's house, to make certain of things which we suspected but couldn't quite prove. I am the ninth man, in the past two months, to try to get in there. And I'm the second to succeed. The first couldn't find out anything of use. He could only confirm some of our ideas. That's the sort of a man he is. A fine subordinate, but with no genius for anything else except to obey orders. I was the only one of the nine, with brains, who could win any foothold there. And now I'm throwing away all I gained, because one girl happens to be too much of a child (or of a saint) for me to lie to! I've reason to be proud of myself, haven't I?"

"Who are you?" she asked, dully bewildered under his fierce tirade of self-contempt. "Who are you? What are you?"

"I'm Gavin Brice," he said. "As I told you. But I'm also a United States Secret Service official--which I didn't tell you."

"No!" she stammered, shrinking back. "Oh, no!"

He continued, briskly:

"Your brother, and your snake-loving friend Rodney Hade, are working a pretty trick on Uncle Sam. And the Federal Government has been trying to block it for the past few months. There are plenty of us down here, just now. But, up to lately, nothing's been accomplished. That's why they sent me. They knew I'd had plenty of experience in this region."

"Here? In Florida? But--"

"I spent all my vacations at my grandfather's place, below Coconut Grove, when I was in school and in college and for a while afterward, and I know this coast and the keys as well as

any outsider can,--even if I was silly enough to let my scow run into a reef to-night, that wasn't here in my day. They sent me to take charge of the job and to straighten out its mixups and to try to win where the others had bungled. I was doing it, too,--and it would have been a big feather in my cap, at Washington, when my good sense went to pieces on a reef named Claire Standish,--a reef I hadn't counted on, any more than I counted on the reef that stove in my scow, an hour ago."

She strove to speak. The words died in her parched throat. Brice went on:

"I've always bragged that I'm woman-proof. I'm not. No man is. I hadn't met the right woman. That was all. If you'd been of the vampire type or the ordinary kind, I could have gone on with it, without turning a hair. If you'd been mixed up in any of the criminal part of it at all--as I and all of us supposed you must be--I'd have had no scruples about using any information I could get from you. But--well, tonight, out here, all at once I understood what I'd been denying to myself ever since I met you. And I couldn't go on with it. You'll be certain to suffer from it, in any case. But I'm strong enough at the Department to persuade them you're innocent. I--"

"Do you mean," she stammered, incredulously, finding hesitant words at last, "Do you mean you're a--a spy? That you came to our house--that you ate our bread--with the idea of learning secrets that might injure us? That you--? Oh!" she burst forth in swift revulsion, "I didn't know any one could be so --so vile! I--"

"Wait!" he commanded, sharply, wincing nevertheless under the sick scorn in her voice and words. "You have no right to say that. I am not a spy. Or if I am, then every police officer and every detective and every cross-examining lawyer is a spy! I am an official in the United States Secret Service. I, and others like me, try to guard the welfare of our country and to expose or thwart persons who are that country's enemies or who are working to injure its interests. If that is being a spy, then I'm content to be one. I--"

"If you are driven to such despicable work by poverty," she said, unconsciously seeking excuse for him, "if it is the only trade you know--then I suppose you can't help--"

"No," he said, unwilling to let her gain even this false impression. "My grandfather, who brought me up--who owned the place I spoke of, near Coconut Grove--left me enough to live on in pretty fair comfort. I could have been an idler if I chose. I didn't choose. I wanted work. And I wanted adventure. That was why I went into the Secret Service. I

stayed in it till I went overseas, and I came back to it after the war. I wasn't driven into it by poverty. It's an honorable profession. There are hundreds of honorable men in it. You probably know some of them. They are in all walks of life, from Fifth Avenue to the slums. They are working patriotically for the welfare of the land they love, and they are working for pitifully small reward. It is not like the Secret Service of Germany or of oldtime Russia. It upholds Democracy, not Tyranny. And I'm proud to be a member of it. At least, I was. Now, there is nothing left to me but to resign. It--"

"You haven't even the excuse of poverty!" she exclaimed, confusedly. "And you have not even the grace to feel ashamed for--for your black ingratitude in tricking us into giving you shelter and--"

"I think I paid my bill for that, to some slight extent," was his dry rejoinder. "But for my 'trickery,' your half-brother would be dead, by now. As for 'ingratitude,' how about the trick he served me, today? Even if he didn't know Hade had smuggled across a bagful of his pet moccasins to Roke, yet he let me be trapped into that--"

"It's only in the Devil's Ledger, that two wrongs make a right!" she flamed. "I grant my brother treated you abominably. But his excuse was that your presence might ruin his great ambition in life. Your only excuse for doing what you have done is the--the foul instinct of the man-hunt. The--"

"The criminal-hunt," he corrected her, trying not to writhe under her hot contempt. "The enemy-to-man hunt, if you like. Your half-brother--"

"My brother is not a criminal!" she cried, furiously. "You have no right to say so. He has committed no crime. He has broken no law."

Again he looked down, searchingly, into her angry little face, as it confronted him so fiercely in the starlight. And he knew she was sincere.

"Miss Standish," he said, slowly. "You believe you are telling the truth. Your half-brother understood you too well to let you know what he was really up to. He and Hade concocted some story--I don't know what--to explain to you the odd things going on in and around your home. You are innocent. And you are ignorant. It cuts me like a knife to have to open your eyes to all this. But, in a very few days, at most, you are bound to know."

"If you think I'll believe a word against my brother--especially

from a self-confessed spy--"

"No?" said Gavin. "And you're just as sure of Rodney Hade's noble uprightness as of your brother's?"

"I'm not defending Rodney Hade," said Claire. "He is nothing to me, one way or the other. He--"

"Pardon me," interposed Brice. "He is a great deal to you. You hate him and you are in mortal fear of him."

"If you spied that out, too--"

"I did," he admitted. "I did it, in the half-minute I saw you and him together, last evening. I saw a look in your eyes--I heard a tone in your voice--as you turned to introduce me to him--that told me all I needed to know. And, incidentally, it made me want to smash him. Apart from that--well, the Department knows a good deal about Rodney Hade. And it suspects a great deal more. It knows, among minor things, that he schemed to make Milo Standish plunge so heavily on certain worthless stocks that Standish went broke and in desperation raised a check of Hade's (and did it rather badly, as Hade had foreseen he would, when he set the trap)--in order to cover his margins. It--"

"No!" she cried, in wrathful refusal to believe. "That is not true. It can't be true! It is a--"

"Hade holds a mortgage on everything Standish owns," resumed Brice, "and he has held that raised check over him as a prison-menace. He--"

"Stop!" demanded Claire, ablaze with righteous indignation. "If you have such charges to make against my brother, are you too much of a coward to come to his house with me, now, and make them to his face? Are you?"

"No," he said, without a trace of unwillingness or of bravado. "I am not. I'll go there, with you, gladly. In the meantime--"

"In the meantime," she caught him up, "please don't speak to me. And please sit in the other end of the boat, if you don't mind. The air will be easier to breathe if--"

"Certainly," he assented, making his way to the far end of the launch, while she seized the neglected steering wheel again. "And I am sorrier than I can say, that I have had to tell you all this. If it were not that you must know it, soon, anyway, I'd have bitten my tongue out, sooner than make you so unhappy. Please believe that, won't you?"

There was an earnest depth of contrition in his voice that checked the icy retort she had been about to make. And, emboldened by her silence, he went on:

"Hade needed your brother and the use of your brother's house and land. He needed them, imperatively, for the scheme he was trying to swing That was why he got Standish into his power, in the first place. That was why he forced or wheedled him into this partnership. The Standish house was built, in its original form, more than a hundred years ago. In the days when Dade County and all this end of Florida were in hourly dread of Seminole raids from the Everglade country, and where every settler's house must be not only his castle, but--"

"I'm sorry to have to remind you," she broke in, freezingly, "that I asked you not to speak to me. Surely you can have at least that much chivalry,--when I am helpless to get out of hearing from you. You say you are willing to confront my brother with, this--this--ridiculous charge. Very well. Till then, I hope you won't--"

"All right," he said, gloomily. "And I don't blame you. I'm a bungler, when it comes to saying things to women. I don't know so very much about them. I've read that no man really understands women. And certainly I don't. By the way, the boat's run opposite that spit of beach at the bottom of your mangrove swamp. If you're in a hurry, you can land there, and we can go to the house by way of the hidden path. It will cut off a mile or so. You have a flashlight. So--"

He let his voice trail away, frozen to silence by the rigidly hostile little figure outlined at the other end of the boat by the tumble of phosphorus in their wake.

Claire roused herself, from a gloomy reverie, enough to shift the course of the craft and to head it for the dim-seen sandspit that was backed by the ebony darkness of the mangrove swamp.

Neither of them spoke again, until, with a swishing sound and a soft grate of the light-draught boat, the keel clove its way into the offshore sand and the craft came to coughing halt twenty feet from land.

Claire roused herself, from a gloomy reverie in which she had fallen. Subconsciously, she had accepted the man's suggestion that they take the short cut. And she had steered thither, forgetful that there was no dock and no suitable landing place for even so light a boat anywhere along the patch of sandy foreshore.

Now, fast aground, she saw her absent-minded error. And she jumped to her feet, vainly reversing the engine in an effort

to back free of the sand wherein the prow had wedged itself so tightly. But Gavin Brice had already taken charge of the situation.

Stepping overside into the shallow water, he picked up the astounded and vainly protesting girl, bodily, holding her close to him with one arm, while, with his free hand he caught the painter and dragged the boat behind him into water too low for it to float off until the change of tide.

It was the work of a bare ten seconds, from the time he stepped into the shallows until he had brought Claire to the dry sand of the beach.

"Set me down!" she was demanding sternly, for the third time, as she struggled with futile repugnance to slip from his gently firm grip. "I--"

"Certainly," acquiesced Gavin, lowering her to the sand, and steadying her for an instant, until her feet could find their balance. "Only please don't glare at me as though I had struck you. I didn't think you'd want to get those little white shoes of yours all wet. So I took the liberty of carrying you. My own shoes, and all the rest of me, are drenched beyond cure anyhow. So another bit of immersion didn't do me any harm."

He spoke in a careless, matter-of-fact manner, and as he talked he was leading the way up the short beach, toward the northernmost edge of the mangrove swamp. Claire could not well take further offence at a service which apparently had been rendered to her out of the merest common politeness. So, after another icy look at his unconscious back, she followed wordlessly in Brice's wake.

Now that he was on dry land again and on his way to the house where, at the very least, a stormy scene might be expected, the man's spirits seemed to rise, almost boyishly. The blood was running again through his veins. The cool night air was drying his soaked clothes. The prospect of possible adventure stirred him.

Blithely he sought the shoreward entrance to the hidden path, by the mental notes he had made of its exact whereabouts when Bobby Burns had happened upon its secret. And, in another half-minute he had drawn aside the screen of growing boughs and was standing aside for Claire to enter the path.

"You see," he explained, impersonally, "this path is a very nice little mystery. But, like most mysteries, it is quite simple, when once you know your way in and out of it. I knew where it was when I was a kid, but I couldn't remember the spot where it came out here. Back yonder, a bit to northward,

I came upon Roke, yesterday. I gather he had been visiting your house or Hade's, by way of the hidden path, and was on his way back to his boat, to return to Roustabout Key, when he happened upon Bobby Burns--and then on me. He must have wondered where I vanished to. For he couldn't have seen me enter the path. Maybe he mentioned that to Hade, too, this afternoon. If Hade thought I knew the path, he'd think I knew a good deal more By the way," he added, to the ostentatiously unlistening Claire, "that's the second time you've stumbled. And both times, you were too far ahead for me to catch you. This is the best part of the path, too--the straightest and the least dark part. If we stumble here, we'll tumble, farther on, unless you use that flashlight of yours. May I trouble you to--?"

"I forgot," she said stiffly, as she drew the torch from her pocket and pressed its button.

The dense black of the swamp was split by the light's white sword, and softer beams from its sharp radiance illumined the pitch-dark gloom for a few yards to either side of the tortuous path. The shadows of the man and the woman were cast in monstrous grotesquely floating shapes behind them as they moved forward.

"This is a cheery rambling-place," commented Gavin. "I wonder if you know its history? I mean, of course, before Standish had it recut and jacked up and bridged, and all that? This path dates back to the house's first owners--in the Seminole days I was telling you about. They made it as a quick getaway, to the water, in case a war-party of Seminoles should drop in on them from the Everglades. I came through here, once--oh, it must be twenty years ago--I was a school-kid, at the time. An old Seminole chief, with the picturesque Indian name of Aleck, showed it to me. His dad once cut off a party of refugees, somewhere along here, on their way to the sea, and deleted them. Several of the modern Seminoles knew the path, he said. But almost no white men Get that queer odor, and that flapping sound over to the left? That was a 'gator. And he seems to be fairly big and alive, from the racket he made. Lucky we're on the path and not in the undergrowth or the water!"

He talked on, as though not in the least concerned as to whether or not she might hear or heed. And, awed by the gruesome stillness and gloom of the place, Claire had not the heart to bid him be silent. Any sound was better, she told herself, than the dead noiselessness of the surrounding forest.

"That's the tenth mosquito I've missed," cheerily resumed Brice, slapping futilely at his own cheek. "In the old days, they used to infest Miami. Now they're driven back into the

swamps. But they seem just as industrious as ever, and every bit as hungry. It must be grand to have such an appetite."

As Claire disregarded this flippancy, he fell silent for a space, and together they moved on, through the thick of the swamp. Then:

"There's something I've been trying to figure out," he recommenced, speaking more to himself than to Claire. "There must be some sort of sense to all the signaling Hade does when he comes out of this swamp, onto your lawn. If it was only that he doesn't want casual visitors to know he has come that way, he could just as well go around by the road to the south of the swamp, and come openly to the house, by the front. And, if things are to be moved to or from the house, they could go by road, at night, as well as through here. There must be something more to it all. And, I have an idea I know what it is That enclosed space, with the high palings and the vines all over it, to the north of your house, I think you said that was a little walled orchard where Standish is experimenting on some 'ideal' orange, and that he is so jealous of the secret process that he won't even let you set foot in it. The funny part of it is:--"

He stopped short. Claire had been walking a few yards in advance, and they had come out on the widest part of the trail, about midway through the woods. To one side of the beaten path was a tiny clearing. This clearing was strewn thick with a tangle of fallen undergrowth, scarce two feet high at most.

And they reached it, the girl gave a little cry of fright and stepped back, her hands reaching blindly toward Gavin, as if for support or comfort. The gesture caused her to drop the flashlight. Its button was "set forward," so it did not go out as it fell. Instead, it rolled in a semi-circle, casting its ray momentarily in a wide irregular arc as it revolved. Then it came to a stop, against an outcrop of coral, with a force that put its sensitive bulb permanently out of business.

But, during that brief circular roll of the light, Gavin Brice caught the most fleeting glimpse of the sight that had caused Claire to cry out and shrink back against him.

He had seen, for the merest fraction of a second, the upper half of a man's body--thickset and hairy,--upright, on a level with the ground, as though it had been cut in two and the legless trunk set up there.

By the time Brice's eyes could focus fairly upon this very impossible sight, the half-body had begun to recede rapidly into the earth, like that of an anglework which a robin pulls

halfway out of the lawn and then loses its grip on.

In practically the same instant, the rolling ray of light moved past the amazing spectacle, and less than a second later bumped against the fragment of coral--the bump which smashed its bulb and left the two wanderers in total darkness for the remainder of their strange pilgrimage.

Claire, momentarily unstrung, caught Gavin by the arm and clung to him. He could feel the shudder of her slender body as it pressed to his side for protection.

"What--what was it?" she whispered, tremblingly. "What was it? Did I really see it? It it couldn't be! It looked--it looked like a--a body that had been cut in half--and--and--"

"It's all right," he whispered, reassuringly, passing his arm unchidden about her slight waist. "Don't be frightened, dear! It wasn't a man cut in half. It was the upper half of a man who was wiggling down into a tunnel hidden by that smother of underbrush And here I was just wondering why people should bother to come all the way through this path, instead of skirting the woods! Answers furnished while you wait!"

Before he spoke, however, he had strained his ears to listen. And the quick receding and then cessation of the sound of the scrambling body in the tunnel had told him the seen half and the unseen half of the intruder had alike vanished beyond earshot, far under ground.

"But what--?" began the frightened girl.

Then she realized for the first time that she was holding fast to the man whom she had forbidden to speak to her. And she relinquished her tight clasp on his arm.

"Stand where you are, a minute," he directed. "He's gone. There's no danger. He was as afraid of us as you were of him. He ducked, like a mud-turtle, as soon as he saw we weren't the people he expected. Stay here, please. And face this way. That's the direction we were going in, and we don't want to get turned around. I've got to crawl about on all fours for a while, in the merry quest of the flashlight. I know just about where it stopped."

She could hear him groping amid the looser undergrowth. Then he got to his feet.

"Here it is," he reported. "But it wasn't worth hunting for. The bulb's gone bad. We'll have to walk the rest of the way by faith. Would you mind, very much, taking my arm? The path's wide enough for that, from here on. It needn't imply that you've condoned anything I said to you, out yonder in the

boat, you know. But it may save you from a stumble. I'm fairly sure-footed. And I'm used to this sort of travel."

Meekly, she obeyed, wondering at her own queer sense of peace under the protection of this man whom she told herself she detested. The wiry strength of the arm, around which her white fingers closed so confidently, thrilled her. Against her will, she all at once lost her sense of repulsion and the wrath she had been storing against him. Nor, by her very best efforts, could she revive her righteous displeasure.

"Mr. Brice," she said, timidly, as he guided her with a swiftly steady step through the dense blackness, "perhaps I had no right to speak as I did. If I did you an injustice--"

"Don't!" he bade her, cutting short her halting apology. "You mustn't be sorry for anything. And I'd have bitten out my tongue sooner than tell you the things I had to, if it weren't that you'd have heard them, soon enough, in an even less palatable form. Only--won't you please try not to feel quite as much toward me as I felt toward those snakes of Hade's, this afternoon? You have a right to, of course. But well, it makes me sorry I ever escaped from there."

The sincerity, the boyish contrition in his voice, touched her, unaccountably. And, on impulse, she spoke.

"I asked you to say those things about Milo, to his face," she began, hesitantly. "I did that, because I was angry, because I didn't believe a word of them, and because I wanted to see you punished for slandering my brother. I--I still don't believe a single word of them. But I believe you told them to me in good faith, and that you were misinformed by the Federal agents who cooked up the absurd story. And--and I don't want to see you punished, Mr. Brice," she faltered, unconsciously tightening her clasp on his arm. "Milo is terribly strong. And his temper is so quick! He might nearly kill you. Take me as far as the end of the path, and then go across the lawn to the road, instead of coming in. Please do!"

"That is sweet of you," said Gavin, after a moment's pause, wherein his desire to laugh struggled with a far deeper and more potent emotion. "But, if it's just the same to you, I'd rather--"

"But he is double your size," she protested, "and he is as strong as Samson. Why, Roke, over at the Key, is said to be the only man who ever outwrestled him! And Roke has the strength of a gorilla."

Gavin Brice smiled grimly to himself in the darkness, as he recalled his own test of prowess with Roke.

"I don't think he'll hurt me overmuch," said he. "I thank you, just the same. It makes me very happy to know you aren't--"

"Mr. Brice!" she cried, in desperation. "Unless you promise me not to do as I dared you to--I shall not let you go a step farther with me. I--"

"I'm afraid you'll have to let me take you the rest of the way, Miss Standish," he said, a sterner note in his voice quelling her protest and setting her to wondering. "If you like, we can postpone my talk with Standish about the check-raising. But--if you care anything for him, you'd best let me go to him as fast as we can travel."

"Why? Is--?"

"Unless I read wrongly what we saw, back yonder in the clearing," he said, cryptically, "your brother is in sore need of every friend he can muster. I had only a glimpse of our subterranean half-man. But there was a gash across his eyebrow, and a mass of bruises on his throat. If I'm not mistaken, I put them there. That was the man who tried to knife Standish last evening. And, unless I've misread the riddle of that tunnel, we'll be lucky to get there in time. There's trouble ahead. All sorts of trouble."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SIEGE

"Trouble?" repeated Claire, questioningly. "You mean--?"

"I mean I've pieced it out, partly from reports and partly from my own deductions and from the sight of that man, back there," said Brice. "I may be wrong in all or in part of it. But I don't think I am. I figure that that chap we saw half under ground, is one of a clique or gang that is after something which Standish and Hade have--or that these fellows think Hade and Standish have. I figure they think your brother has wronged them in some way and that they are even more keen after him than after Hade. That, or else they think if they could put him out of the way, they could get the thing they are after. That or both reasons."

"I learned that Standish has hired special police to patrol the main road, after dark, under plea that he's afraid tramps might trespass on his groves. But he didn't dare hire them to patrol his grounds for fear of what they might chance to stumble

on. And, naturally, he couldn't have them or any one patrol the hidden path. That's the reason he armed you and told you to look out for any one coming that way. That's why you held me up, when I came through here, yesterday. These must be people you know by sight. For you told me you took me for some one else. This chap, back yonder, knows the hidden path. And now it seems he knows the tunnel, too. If I'm right in thinking that tunnel leads to the secret orchard enclosure, back of your house, then I fancy Standish may be visited during the next half hour. And, unless I'm mistaken, I heard more than one set of bare feet scurrying down that tunnel just now. Our friend with the bashed-in face was apparently the last of several men to slip into the tunnel, and we happened along as he was doing it. If he recognized you and saw you had a man as an escort, he must know we're bound for your house. And he and the rest are likely to hurry to get there ahead of us. That's why I've been walking you off your feet, in spite of the darkness, ever since we left him."

"I--I only saw him for the tiniest part of a second," said Claire, glancing nervously through the darkness behind her. "And yet I'm almost sure he was a Caesar. He--"

"A Caesar?" queried Gavin, in real perplexity.

"That's the name the Floridian fishermen give to the family who live on Caesar's Estuary," she explained, almost impatiently. "The inlet that runs up into the mangroves, south of Caesar's Rock and Caesar's Creek. Caesar was an oldtime pirate, you know. These people claim to be descended from him, and they claim squatter's rights on a tract of marsh-and-mangrove land down there. They call themselves all one family, but it is more like a clan, Black Caesar's clan. They have intermarried and others have joined them. It's a sort of community. They're really little better than conchs, though they fight any one who calls them conchs."

"But what--?"

"Oh, Milo and Rodney Hade leased some land from the government, down there. And that started the trouble."

Brice whistled, softly.

"I see," said he. "I gather there had been rumors of treasure, among the Caesars--there always are, along the coast, here--and the Caesars hadn't the wit to find the stuff. They wouldn't have. But they guarded the place and always hoped to trip over the treasure some day. Regarded it as their own, and all that. 'Proprietary rights' theory, passed on from fathers to sons. Then Standish and Hade leased the land, having gotten a better hint as to where the treasure was. And that got the Caesars riled. Then the Caesars get an

inking that Standish and Hade have actually located the treasure and are sneaking it to Standish's house, bit by bit. And then they go still-hunting for the despoilers and for their ancestral hoard."

"Why!" cried Claire, astounded. "That's the very thing you stopped me from telling you! If you knew, all the time--"

"I didn't," denied Brice. "What you said, just now, about the Caesars, gave me the clew. The rest was simple enough to any one who knew of the treasure's existence. There's one thing, though, that puzzles me--a thing that's none of my business, of course. I can understand how Standish could have told you he and Hade had stumbled onto a hatful of treasure, down there, somewhere, among the bayous and mangrove-choked inlets. And I can understand how the idea of treasure hunting must have stirred you. But what I can't understand is this:--When Standish found the Caesars were gunning for him, why in blue blazes did he content himself with telling you of it? Why didn't he send you away, out of any possible danger? Why didn't he insist on your running into Miami, to the Royal Palm or some lesser hotel, till the rumpus was all over? Even if he didn't think the government knew anything about the deal, he knew the Caesars did. And--"

"He wanted me to go to Miami," she said. "He even wanted me to go North. But I wouldn't. I was tremendously thrilled over it all. It was as exciting as a melodrama. And I insisted on staying in the thick of it. I--I still don't see what concern it is of the United States Government," she went on, rebelliously, "if two men find, on their own leased land, a cache of the plunder stolen more than a hundred years ago by the pirate, Caesar. It is treasure trove. And it seems to me they had a perfect right--"

"Have you seen any of this treasure?" interposed Brice.

"No," she admitted. "Once or twice, bags of it have been brought into the house, very late at night. But Milo explained to me it had to be taken away again, right off, for fear of fire or thieves or--"

"And you don't know where it was taken to?"

"No. Except that Rodney has been shipping it North. But they promised me that as soon--"

"I see!" he answered, as a stumble over a root cut short her words and made her cling to him more tightly. "You are an ideal sister. You'd be an ideal wife for a scoundrel. You would be a godsend to any one with phoney stock to sell. Your credulity is perfect. And your feminine curiosity is under

lots better control than most women's. I suppose they told you this so-called treasure is in the form of ingots and nuggets and pieces-of-eight and jewels-so-rich-and-rare, and all the rest of the bag of tricks borrowed from Stevenson's 'Treasure Island'? They would!"

She showed her disrelish for his flippant tone, by removing her hand from his arm. But at once the faint hiss of a snake as it glided into the swamp from somewhere just in front of them made her clutch his wet sleeve afresh. His hints as to the nature of the treasure had roused her inquisitiveness to a keen point. Yet, remembering what he had said about her praiseworthy dearth of feminine curiosity, she approached the subject in a roundabout way.

"If it isn't gold bars and jewels and old Spanish coins, and so forth," said she, seeking to copy his bantering tone, "then I suppose it is illicit whiskey? It would be a sickening anticlimax to find they were liquor-smugglers."

"No," Brice reassured her, "neither Standish nor Hade is a bootlegger--nor anything so petty. That's too small game for them. Though, in some parts of southern Florida, bootleggers are so thick that they have to wear red buttons in their lapels, to keep from trying to sell liquor to each other. No, the treasure is considerably bigger than booze or any other form of smuggling. It--Hello!" he broke off. "There's your lawn, right ahead of us. I can see patches of starlight through that elaborate vine-screen draped so cleverly over the head of the path. Now, listen, Miss Standish. I am going to the house. But first I am going to see you to the main road. That road's patrolled, and it's safe from the gentle Caesars. I want you to go there and then make your way to the nearest neighbor's. If there is any mixup, we'll want you as far out of it as possible."

As he spoke, he held aside the curtain of vines, for her to step out onto the starlit lawn. A salvo of barking sounded from the veranda, and Bobby Burns, who had been lying disconsolately on the steps, came bounding across the lawn, in rapture, at scent and step of the man he had chosen as his god.

"Good!" muttered Brice, stooping to pat the frantically delighted collie. "If he was drowsing there, it's a sign no intruders have tried to get into the house yet. He's been here a day. And that's long enough for a dog like Bobby to learn the step and the scent of the people who have a right here and to resent any one who doesn't belong. Now, what's the shortest way to the main road?"

"The shortest way to the house," called the girl, over her shoulder, "is the way I'm going now."

"But, Miss Standish!" he protested. "Please--"

She did not answer. As he had bent to pat the collie, she had broken into a run, and now she was half way across the lawn, on her way to the lighted veranda. Vexed at her disobedience in not taking his advice and absenting herself from impending trouble, Gavin Brice followed. Bobby Burns gamboled along at his side, leaping high in the air in an effort to lick Brice's face, setting the night astir with a fanfare of joyous barking, imperiling Gavin's every step with his whisking body, and in short conducting himself as does the average high-strung collie whose master breaks into a run.

The noise brought a man out of the hallway onto the veranda, to see the cause of the racket. He was tall, massive, clad in snowy white, and with a golden beard that shone in the lamplight. Milo Standish, as he stood thus, under the glow of the veranda lights, was splendid target for any skulking marksman. Claire seemed to divine this. For, before her astonished brother could speak, she called to him:

"Go indoors! Quickly, please!"

Bewildered at the odd command, yet impressed with its stark earnestness, Milo took a wondering step backward, toward the open doorway. Then, at sight of the running man, just behind his sister, he paused. Claire's lips were parted, to repeat her strange order, as she came up the porch steps, but Gavin, following her, called reassuringly:

"Don't worry, Miss Standish. They don't use guns. They're knifere. The conchs have a holy horror of firearms. Besides, a shot might bring the road patrol. He's perfectly safe."

As Gavin followed her up the steps and the full light of the lamps fell on his face, Milo Standish stared stupidly at him, in blank dismay. Then, over his bearded face, came a look of sharp annoyance.

"It's all right, Mr. Standish," said Gavin, reading his thoughts as readily as spoken words. "Don't be sore at Roke. He didn't let me get away. He did his best to keep me. And my coming back isn't as unlucky for you as it seems. If the snakes had gotten me, there's a Secret Service chap over there who would have had an interesting report to make. And you'd have joined Hade and Roke in a murder trial. So, you see, things might be worse."

He spoke in his wonted lazily pleasant drawl, and with no trace of excitement. Yet he was studying the big man in front of him, with covert closeness. And the wholly uncomprehending aspect of Milo's face, at mention of the snakes and the

possible murder charge, completed Brice's faith in Standish's innocence of the trick's worst features.

Claire had seized her brother's hand and was drawing the dumfounded Milo after her into the hallway. And as she went she burst forth vehemently into the story of Brice's afternoon adventures. Her words fairly fell over one another, in her indignant eagerness. Yet she spoke wellnigh as concisely as had Gavin when he had recounted the tale to her.

Standish's face, as she spoke, was foolishly vacant. Then, a lurid blaze began to flicker behind his ice-blue eyes, and a brickish color surged into his face. Wheeling on Gavin, he cried, his voice choked and hoarse:

"If this crazy yarn is true, Brice, I swear to God I had no knowledge or part in it! And if it's true, the man who did it shall--"

"That can wait," put in Brice, incisively. "I only let her waste time by telling it, to see how it would hit you and if you were the sort who is worth saving. You are. The Caesar crowd has found where the tunnel-opening is,--the masked opening, back in the path. And the last of them is on his way here, underground. The tunnel comes out, I suppose, in that high-fenced enclosure behind the house, the enclosure with the vines all over it and the queer little old coral kiosk in the center, with the rusty iron door. The kiosk that had three bulging canvas bags piled alongside its entrance, this morning,--probably the night's haul from the Caesar's Estuary cache, waiting for Hade to get a chance to run it North. Well, a bunch of the Caesars are either in that enclosure by now, or forcing a way out through the rusty old'rattletrap door of the kiosk. They--"

"The Caesars?" babbled Standish. "What what 'kiosk' are you talking about?--I--That's a plantation for--"

"Shut up!" interrupted Brice, annoyed by the pitiful attempt to cling to a revealed secret. "The time for bluffing is past, man! The whole game is up. You'll be lucky to escape a prison term, even if you get out of to-night's mess. That's what I'm here for. Barricade the house, first of all. I noticed you have iron shutters on the windows, and that they're new. You must have been looking for something like this to happen, some day."

As he spoke, Brice had been moving swiftly from one window to another, of the rooms opening out from the hallway, shutting and barring the metal blinds. Claire, following his example, had run from window to window, aiding him in his self-appointed task of barricading the ground floor. Milo

alone stood inert and dazed, gaping dully at the two busy toilers. Then, dazedly, he stumbled to the front door and pushed it shut, fumbling with its bolts. As in a drunken dream he mumbled:

"Three canvas bags, piled--?"

"Yes," answered Brice busily, as he clamped shut a long French window leading out onto the veranda, and at the same time tried to keep Bobby Burns from getting too much in his way.

"Three of them. I gather that Hade had taken them up to the path in his yacht's gaudy little motorboat and carried them to the tunnel. I suppose you have some sort of runway or hand car or something in the tunnel to make the transportation easier than lugging the stuff along the whole length of stumbly path, besides being safer from view. I suppose, too, he had taken the stuff there and then came ahead, with his mocking-bird signal, for you to go through the tunnel with him from the kiosk, and bring them to the enclosure. Probably that's why I was locked into my room. So I couldn't spy on the job. The bags are still there, aren't they? He couldn't move them, except under cover of darkness. He'll come for them to-night He'll be too late."

Working, as he cast the fragmentary sentences over his shoulder, Gavin nevertheless glanced often enough at Standish's face to make certain from its foolishly dismayed expression that each of his conjectures was correct. Now, finishing his task, he demanded:

"Your servants? Are they all right? Can you trust them? Your house servants, I mean."

"Y--yes," stammered Milo, still battling with the idea of bluffing this calmly authoritative man. "Yes. They're all right. But where you got the idea--"

"How many of them are there? The servants, I mean."

"Four," spoke up Claire, returning from her finished work, and pausing on her way to do like duty for the upstairs windows.

"Two men and two women."

"Please go out to the kitchen and see everything is all right, there," said Brice. "Lock and bar everything. Tell your two women servants they can get out, if they want to. They'll be no use here and they may get hysterical, as they did last night when we had that scrimmage outside. The men-servants may be useful. Send them here."

Before she could obey, the dining room curtains were parted, and a black-clad little Jap butler sidled into the hallway, his jaw adroop, his beady eyes astare with terror, his hands

washing each other with invisible soap-and-water.

"Sato!" exclaimed Claire.

The Jap paid no heed.

"Prease!" he chattered between castanet teeth. "Prease, I hear. I scare. I no fightman. I go, prease! I s-s-s-s, I--"

Sato's scant knowledge of English seemed to forsake him, under the stress of his terror. And he broke into a monkeylike mouthing in his native Japanese. Milo took a step toward him. Sato screeched like a stuck pig and crouched to the ground.

"Wait!" suggested Brice, going toward the abject creature.

"Let me handle him. I know a bit of his language. Miss Standish, please go on with closing the rest of the house. Here, you!" he continued, addressing the Jap. "Here!"

Standing above the quivering Jap, he harangued him in halting yet vehement Japanese, gesticulating and--after the manner of people speaking a tongue unfamiliar to them--talking at the top of his voice. But his oration had no stimulating effect on the poor Sato. Scarce waiting for Brice to finish speaking, the butler broke again into that monkey-like chatter of appeal and fright. Gavin silenced him with a threatening gesture, and renewed his own harangue. But, after perhaps a minute of it, he saw the uselessness of trying to put manhood or pluck into the groveling little Oriental. And he lost his own temper.

"Here!" he growled, to Standish. "Open the front door. Open it good and wide. So!"

Picking up the quaking and chattering Sato by the collar, he half shoved and half flung him across the hallway, and, with a final heave, tossed him bodily down the veranda steps. Then, closing the door, and checking Bobby Burns's eager yearnings to charge out after his beloved deity's victim, Brice exclaimed:

"There! That's one thing well done. We're better off without a coward like that. He'd be getting under our feet all the time, or else opening the doors to the Caesars, with the idea of currying favor with them. Where did you ever pick up such an arrant little poltroon? Most Japs are plucky enough."

"Hade lent him to us," said Milo, evidently impressed by Brice's athletic demonstration against the little Oriental.

"Sato worked for him, after Hade's regular butler fell ill. He--"

"H'm!" mused Brice. "A hanger-on of Hade's, eh? That may explain it. Sato's cowardice may have been a bit of rather

clever acting. He saw no use in risking his neck for you people when his master wasn't here. It was no part of his spy work to--"

"Spy work?" echoed Standish, in real astonishment. "What?"

"Let it go at that," snapped Brice, adding as Claire reentered the room, followed by the lanky house-man, "All secure in the kitchen quarters, Miss Standish? Good! Please send this man to close the upstairs shutters, too. Not that there's any danger that the Caesars will try to climb, before they find they can't get in on this floor. The sight of the barred shutters will probably scare them off, anyway. They're likely to be more hungry for a surprise rush, than for a siege with resistance thrown in. If--"

He ceased speaking, his attention caught by a sight which, to the others, carried no significance, whatever.

Simon Cameron, the insolently lazy Persian cat, had been awakened from a nap in a rose-basket on the top of one of the hall bookcases. The tramping of feet, the scrambling ejection of the Jap butler, the clanging shut of many metal blinds--all these had interfered with the calm peacefulness of Simon Cameron's slumbers.

Wherefore, the cat had awakened, had stretched all four shapeless paws out to their full length in luxurious flexing, and had then arisen majestically to his feet and had stretched again, arching his fluffy back to an incredible height. After which, the cat had dropped lightly to the floor, five feet below his resting place, and had started across the hall in a mincing progress toward some spot where his cherished nap could be pursued without so much disturbance from noisy humans.

All this, Brice had seen without taking any more note of it than had the two others. But now, his gaze fixed itself on the animal.

Simon Cameron's flowingly mincing progress had brought him to the dining room doorway. As he was about to pass through, under the curtains, he halted, sniffed the air with much daintiness, then turned to the left and halted again beside a door which flanked the dining room end of the wide hall.

For an instant Simon Cameron stood in front of this. Then, winding his plumed tail around his hips, he sat down, directly in front of the door, and viewed the portal interestedly, as though he expected a mouse to emerge from it.

It was this seemingly simple action which had so suddenly diverted Gavin from what he had been saying. He knew the ways

of Persian cats, even as he knew the ways of collies. And both forms of knowledge had more than once been of some slight use to him.

Facing Milo and Claire, he signed to them not to speak. Then, making sure the house-man had gone upstairs, he walked up to Claire and whispered, pointing over his shoulder at the door which Simon Cameron was guarding:

"Where does that door lead to?"

The girl almost laughed at the earnestness of his question, following, as it did, upon his urgent signal for silence.

"Why," she answered, amusedly, "it doesn't lead anywhere. It's the door of a clothes closet. We keep our gardening suits and our raincoats and such things in there. Why do you ask?"

By way of reply, Gavin crossed the hall in two silent strides, his muscles tensed and his head lowered. Seizing the knob, he flung the closet door wide open, wellnigh sweeping the indignant Simon Cameron off his furry feet.

At first glance, the closet's interior revealed only a more or less orderly array of hanging raincoats and aprons and overalls. Then, all three of the onlooking humans focused their eyes upon a pair of splayed and grimy bare feet which protruded beneath a somewhat bulging raincoat of Milo's.

Brice thrust his arm in, between this coat and a gardening apron, and jerked forth a silently squirming youth, perhaps eighteen years old, swarthy and undersized.

"Well!" exclaimed Gavin, holding his writhing prize at arm's length, "Simon Cameron must have a depraved taste in playmates, if he tries to choose this one! A regular beach combing conch! Probably a clay-eater, at that."

He spoke the words with seeming carelessness, but really with deliberate intent. For the glum silence of a conch is a hard thing for any outsider to break down. He recalled what Claire had said of the Caesars' fierce distaste for the word "conch." Also, throughout the South, "clay-eater," has ever been a fighting word.

Brice had not gauged his insults in vain. Instantly, the captive's head twisted, like that of a pinioned pit terrier, in a frenzied effort to drive his teeth into the hand or arm of his captor. Failing this, he spluttered into rapid-fire speech.

"Ah'm not a conch!" he rasped, his voice sounding as rusty as

an unused hinge. "Ah'm a Caesar, yo' dirty Yank! Tuhn me loose, yo'! Ah ain't hurt nuthin'."

"How did you get in here?" bellowed Milo, advancing threateningly on the youth, and swinging aloft one of his hamlike fists.

The intruder stiffened into silence and stolid rigidity. Unflinchingly, he eyed the oncoming giant. Brice motioned Standish back.

"No use," said he. "I know the breed. They've been kicked and beaten and hammered about, till a licking has no terrors for them. This sweet soul will stay in the silences, till--"

Again, he broke off speaking. And again on account of Simon Cameron. The cat, recovering from the indignity of being brushed from in front of the opening door, had returned to his former post of watching, and now stood, tail erect and back arched, staring up at the prisoner out of huge round green eyes. The sight of a stranger had its wonted lure for the Persian.

The lad's impotently roving glance fell upon Simon Cameron. And into his sullen face leaped stark terror. At sight of it, Gavin Brice hit on a new idea for wringing speech from the captive.

He knew that the grossly ignorant wreckers and fisherfolk of the keys had never set eyes on such an object as this, nor had so much as heard of Persian cats' existence. The few cats they had seen were of course of the alley-variety, lean and of short and mangy coat. Simon Cameron's halo of wide-fluffing silver-gray fur gave him the appearance of being double his real size. His plumed cheeks and tasseled ears and dished profile and, above all, the weirdly staring green eyes--all combined to present a truly frightful appearance to a youth so unsophisticated as this and to any one as superstitious and as fearful of all unknown things as were the conchs in general.

"Standish," said Brice, "just take my place for a minute as holder of this conch's very ragged shirt collar. So! Now then:"

He stepped back, and picked up Simon Cameron in his arms. The cat did not resent the familiarity, Gavin still being enough of a stranger in the house to be of interest to the Persian. But the round green eyes still remained fixed with unwinking intensity upon the newer and thus more interesting arrival. Which is the way of a Persian cat.

Brice held Simon Cameron gingerly, almost respectfully, standing so the huge eyes were able to gaze unimpeded at the gaping and shaking boy. Then, speaking very slowly, in a deep

and reverent voice, he intoned:

"Devil, look mighty close at that conch, yonder. Watch him, so's you'll always remember him! Put the voodoo on him, Devil. Haunt him waking, haunt him sleeping. Haunt him eating, haunt him drinking. Haunt him standing and sitting, haunt him lying and kneeling. Rot his bones and his flesh and--"

A howl of panic terror from the youth interrupted the solemn incantation. The prisoner slumped to his knees in Standish's grasp, weeping and jabbering for mercy. Brice saw the time was ripe for speech and that the captive's stolid nerve was gone. Turning on him, he said, sternly:

"If you'll speak up and answer us, truthfully, I'll make this ha'nt take off the curse. But if you lie, in one word, he'll know it and he'll tell me, and--and then I'll turn him loose on you. It's your one chance. Want it?"

The youth fairly gabbled his eagerness to assent.

"Good!" said Brice, still holding Simon Cameron, lest the supposed devil spoil everything by rubbing against the prisoner's legs and purring. "First of all:--how did you get in here?"

The boy gulped. Gavin bent his own head toward the cat and seemed about to resume his incantation. With a galvanic jump, the youth made answer:

"Came by the path. Watched till the dawg run out in the road to bark at suthin'. This man," with a jerk of his head toward his captor, "this man went to the road after him. I cut across the grass, yonder, and got in. They come back. I hid me in there."

"H'm! Why didn't you come by way of the tunnel, like the other Caesars?"

"Pop tol me not to. Sent me ahead. Said mebbe they moughtn't git in here if the doors was locked early. Tol' me to hide me in the house an' let 'em in, late, ef they-all couldn't git in no earlier, or ef they couldn't cotch one of the two cusses outside the house."

"Good strategy!" approved Brice. "That explains why they haven't rushed us, Standish. They came here in force, and most likely (if they've gotten out of the enclosure, yet) they've surrounded the house, waiting for you or Hade to come in or go out. If that doesn't work, they plan to wait till you're asleep, and then get in, by this gallant youngster's help, and cut your throat at their leisure and loot the house and take a good leisurely hunt for the treasure. It calls for

more sense than I thought they had How did they find the tunnel?" he continued, to the prisoner.

"They been a-huntin' fer it, nigh onto one-half of a year," sulkily returned the boy. "Pop done found it, yest'dy. Stepped into it, he did, a walkin' past."

"The rumor of that tunnel has been hereabout for over a century," explained Brice, to the Standishes. "Just as the treasure-rumors have. I heard of it when I was a kid. The Caesars must have heard it, a thousand times. But, till this game started, there was no impetus to look for it, of course. The tunnel is supposed to have been dug just after that Seminole warparty cut off the refugees in the path. By the way, Miss Standish, I didn't mention it while we were still there, but the mangrove-swamp is supposed to be haunted by the ghosts of those killed settlers."

Brother and sister glanced at each other, almost in guilt, as it seemed to the observing Brice. And Claire said, shortly:

"I know. Every one around here has heard it. Some of the negroes and even some of the more ignorant crackers declare they have heard screams from the swamp on dark nights and that white figures have been seen flitting--"

"So?" queried Brice. "Back in the boat, you were starting to tell me how you sat on the veranda, one night, and heard a cry in the swamp and then saw a white figure emerge from the path. Yes? I have a notion that that white figure was responsible for the cry, and that your brother and Rodney Hade were responsible for both. Wasn't that a trick to scare off any chance onlookers, when some of the treasure was to be brought here?"

"Yes," admitted Claire, shamefacedly, and she added: "Milo hadn't told me anything about it. And Rodney thought I was at a dance at the Royal Palm Hotel, that evening. I had expected to go, but I had a headache. When the cry and the white form frightened me so, Milo had to tell me what they both meant. That was how I found out, first, that they--"

"Claire!" cried Standish in alarmed rebuke.

"It's all right, Standish," said Gavin. "I know all about it. A good deal more than she does. And none of it from her, either. We'll come to that, later. Now for the prisoner."

Turning to the glumly scowling youth, he resumed:

"How many of them are there in this merry little midnight murder party?"

"I dunno," grunted the boy.

"Devil, is that true?" gravely asked Gavin, bending again toward Simon Cameron.

"Six!" babbled the lad, eagerly. "Pop and--"

"Never mind giving me a census of them," said Brice. "It wouldn't do me any good. I've left my copies of 'Who's Who' and Burke's Peerage at home. And they figured Mr. Standish and Mr. Hade would both be here, to-night?"

"Most nights t'other one comes," said the boy. "I laid out yonder and heern him, one night. Whistles like he's a mocking-bird, when he gits nigh here. I told Pop an' them about that. They--"

"By the way," asked Gavin, "when your Pop came back from finding the tunnel, last night, was he in pretty bad shape? Hey? Was he?"

"He were," responded the captive, after another scared look at Simon Cameron. "He done fell into the tunnel, arter he step down it. An' he bust hisself up, suthin' fierce, round the haid an' the th'roat. He--"

"I see," agreed Brice.

Then, to Standish:

"I think we've got about all out of the charming child that we can expect to. Suppose we throw him out?"

"Throw him out?" echoed Milo, incredulously. "Do you mean, set him free? Why, man he'd--"

"That's exactly what I mean," said Gavin. "I agree with Caesar--Julius Caesar, not the pirate. Caesar used to say that it was a mistake to hold prisoners. They must be fed and guarded and they can do incalculable mischief. We've turned this prisoner inside out. We've learned from him that six men are lurking somewhere outside, on the chance that you or Rodney Hade may come out or come in, so that they can cut you both off, comfortably, out there in the dark, and carry on their treasure-hunt here. Failing that, they plan to get in here, when you're asleep. All this lad can tell them is that you are on your guard, and that there are enough of us to hold the house against any possible rush. He can also tell them," pursued Gavin, dropping back into his slowly solemn diction, "about this devil--this ha'nt--that serves us, and of the curse--the voodoo--he can put on them all if they try to harm us. We'll let him go. He was sent on by the path because he

went some time ahead of the rest, and he didn't know the secret of the tunnel. In fact, none of them could have known just where it ended here. But they'll know by now. He can join them, if they're picketing the house. And he can tell them what he knows."

Strolling over to the front door, he unbarred it and opened it wide, standing fearlessly in its lighted threshold.

"Pass him along to me," he bade Standish. "Or, you can let him go. He won't miss the way out."

"But," argued Milo, stubbornly retaining his grip on the ragged shirt collar, "I don't agree with you. I'm going to keep him here and lock him up, till--"

He got no further. The sight of the open door leading to freedom was too much for the youth's stolidity. Twisting suddenly, he drove his yellow teeth deep into the fleshy part of Standish's hand. And, profiting by the momentary slackening of Milo's grasp, he made one wildly scrambling dive across the hall, vaulting over the excited Bobby Burns (and losing a handful of his disreputable trousers to the dog's jaws in the process) and volleying over the threshold with the speed of an express train.

While Standish nursed his sorely-bitten hand, Brice watched the lad's lightning progress across the lawn.

Then, still standing in the open doorway, he called back, laughingly to the two others: "Part of my well-built scheme has gone to smash. He didn't stop to look for any of his clansmen. Not even the redoubtable Pop. He just beat it for the hidden path, without hitting the ground more than about once, on the way. And he dived into the path like a rabbit. He'll never stop till he reaches the beach. And then the chances are he'll swim straight out to sea without even waiting to find where the Caesars' boats are cached Best get some hot water and iodine and wash out that bite, Standish. Don't look so worried, Miss Standish! I'm in no danger, standing here. In the first place, I doubt if they'll have the nerve to rush the house at all,--certainly not yet, if they didn't recognize our fast-running friend. In the second, they're after Hade and your brother. And in this bright light they can't possibly mistake me for either of them. Hello!" he broke off. "There went one of them, just then, across that patch of light, down yonder. And, unless my eyes are going back on me, there's another of them creeping along toward the head of the path. They must have seen--or thought they saw--some one dash down there, even if it was too dark for them to recognize him. And they are trying to get some line on who he is The moon is coming up. That won't help them, to any great extent."

He turned back into the room, partly shutting the door behind him. But he did not finish the process of closing it.

For--sweet, faint, yet distinct to them all--the soaring notes of a mocking-bird's song swelled out on the quiet of the night.

"Rodney Hade!" gasped Standish. "It's his first signal. He gives it when he's a hundred yards from the end. Good Lord! And he's going to walk straight into that ambush! It's--it's sure death for him!"

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGURE IN WHITE

For a moment none of the three spoke. Standish and his sister stared at each other in dumb horror. Then Milo took an uncertain step toward the door. Brice made no move to check him, but stood looking quietly on, with the detached expression of a man who watches an interesting stage drama.

Just within the threshold, Standish paused, irresolute, his features working. And Gavin Brice, as before, read his emotions as though they were writ in large letters. He knew Milo was not only a giant in size and in strength, but that in ordinary circumstances or at bay he was valiant enough. But it is one thing to meet casual peril, and quite another to fare forth in the dark among six savage men, all of whom are waiting avidly for the chance to murder.

A braver warrior than Milo Standish might well have hesitated to face sure death in such a form, for the mere sake of saving a man whom he feared and hated, and whose existence threatened his own good name and liberty.

Wherefore, just within the shelter of the open door, the giant paused and hung back, fighting for the nerve to go forth on his fatal errand of heroism. Gavin, studying him, saw with vivid clearness the weakness of character which had made this man the dupe and victim of Hade, and which had rendered him helpless against the wiles of a master-mind.

But if Standish hesitated, Claire did not. After one look of scornful pity at her wavering half-brother, she moved swiftly past him to the threshold. There was no hint of hesitation in her free step as she ran to the rescue of the man who had ruined Milo's career. And both onlookers knew she would brave

any and all the dire perils of the lurking marauders, in order to warn back the unconsciously oncoming Hade.

As she sped through the doorway, Brice came to himself, with a start. Springing forward, he caught the flying little figure and swung it from the ground. Disregarding Claire's violent struggles, he bore her back into the house, shutting and locking the door behind her and standing with his back to it.

"You can't go, Miss Standish!" he said, in stern command, as if rebuking some fractious child. "Your little finger is worth more than that blackguard's whole body. Besides," he added, grimly, "mocking birds, that sing nearly three weeks ahead of schedule, must be prepared to pay the bill."

She was struggling with the door. Then, realizing that she could not open it, she ran to the nearest window which looked out on the lawn and the path-head. Tugging at the sash she flung it open, and next fell to work at the shutter-bars. As she threw wide the shutters, and put one knee on the sill, Milo Standish caught her by the shoulder. Roughly drawing her back into the room, he said:

"Brice is right. It's not your place to go. It would be suicide. Useless suicide, at that. I'd go, myself. But--but--"

"They that take up the sword shall perish by the sword," quoted Gavin, tersely. "The man who sets traps must expect to step into a trap some day. And those Caesars will be more merciful assassins than the moccasin snakes would have been He's taking plenty of time, to cover that last hundred yards. Perhaps he met the conch boy, running back, and had sense enough to take alarm."

"Not he," denied Standish. "That fool boy was so scared, he'd plunge into the brush or the water, the second he heard Rodney's step. Those conchs can keep as mum as Seminoles. He'd never let Rodney see him or hear him. He--"

Standish did not finish his sentence. Into his slow-moving brain, an idea dawned. Leaning far out of the window and shouting at the top of his enormous lungs, he bawled through the night:

"Hade! Back, man! Go back! They'll kill you!"

The bull-like bellow might have been heard for half a mile. And, as it ceased, a muffled snarling, like a dog's, came from the edge of the forest, where waited the silent men whose knives were drawn for the killing.

And, in the same instant, from the head of the path, drifted the fluting notes of a mocking bird.

Disregarding or failing to catch the meaning of the thickly-bellowed warning, Rodney Hade was advancing nonchalantly upon his fate. The three in the hallway crowded into the window-opening, tense, wordless, mesmerized, peering aghast toward the screen of vines which veiled the end of the path.

The full moon, which Brice had glimpsed as it was rising, a minute or so before, now breasted the low tops of the orange trees across the highroad and sent a level shaft of light athwart the lawn. Its clear beams played vividly on the dark forest, revealing the screen of vines at the head of the path, and revealing also three crouching dark figures, close to the ground, at the very edge of the lawn, not six feet from the path head.

And, almost instantly, with a third repetition of the mocking bird call, the vine screen was swept aside. Out into the moonshine sauntered a slight figure, all in white, yachting cap on head, lighted cigarette in hand.

The man came out from the black vine-screen, and, for a second, stood there, as if glancing carelessly about him. Milo Standish shouted again, at the top of his lungs. And this time, Claire's voice, like a silver bugle, rang out with his in that cry of warning.

But, before the dual shout was fairly launched, three dark bodies had sprung forward and hurled themselves on the unsuspecting victim. There was a tragically brief struggle. Then, all four were on the ground, the vainly-battling white body underneath. And there was a gruesome sound as of angry beasts worrying their meat.

Carried out of his own dread, by the spectacle, Milo Standish vaulted over the sill and out onto the veranda. But there he came to a halt. For there was no further need for him to throw away his own life in the belated effort at rescue.

The three black figures had regained their feet. And, on the trampled lawn-edge in front of them lay a huddle of white, with darker stains splashed here and there on it. The body lay in an impossible posture--a posture which Nature neither intends nor permits. It told its own dreadful story, to the most uninitiated of the three onlookers at the window.

With dragging feet, Milo Standish turned back, and reentered the house, as he had gone out of it.

"I am a coward!" he said, heavily. "I could have saved him. Or we could have fought, back to back, till we were killed. It would have been a white man's way of dying. I am a coward!"

He sank down in a chair and buried his bearded face in his hands. No one contradicted him or made any effort at comfort. Claire, deathly pale, still crouched forward, staring blindly at the moveless white figure at the head of the path.

"Peace to his soul!" said Brice, in a hushed voice, adding under his breath: "If he had one!"

Then, laying his hand gently on Claire's arm, he drew her away from the window and shut the blinds on the sight which had so horrified them.

"Go and lie down, Miss Standish," he bade her. "This has been an awful thing for you or any other woman to look on. Take a double dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia, and tell one of the maids to bring you some black coffee Do as I say, please!" he urged, as she looked mutely at him and made no move to obey. "You may need your strength and your nerve. And--try to think of anything but what you've just seen. Remember, he was an outlaw, a murderer, the man who wrecked your brother's honorable life, a thorough-paced blackguard, a man who merits no one's pity. More than that, he was one of Germany's cleverest spies, during the war. His life was forfeit, then, for the injury he did his country. I am not heartless in speaking this way of a man who is dead. I do it, so that you may not feel the horror of his killing as you would if a decent man had died, like that. Now go, please."

Tenderly, he led her to the foot of the stairs. The house man was just returning from the locking of the upstairs shutters. To him Brice gave the order for coffee to be taken to her room and for one of the maids to attend her there.

As she passed dazedly up the stairs, Gavin stood over the broken giant who still sat inert and huddled in his chair, face in hands.

"Buck up!" said Brice, impatiently. "If you can grieve for a man who made you his slave and--"

"Grieve for him?" repeated Standish, raising his haggard face. "Grieve for him? I thank God he's dead. I hated him as I never hated any one else or thought I could hate any one! I hated him as we hate the man in whose power we are and who uses us as helpless pawns in his dirty game. I'd have killed him long ago, if I had had the nerve, and if he hadn't made me believe he had a charmed life. His death means freedom to me--glorious freedom! It's for my own foul cowardice that I'm

grieving. The cowardice that held me here while a man's life might have been saved by me. That's going to haunt me as long as I live."

"Bosh!" scoffed Gavin. "You'll get over it. Self-forgiveness is the easiest blessing to acquire. You're better of it, already, or you couldn't talk so glibly about it. Now, about this treasure-business: You know, of course, that you'll have to drop it,--that you'll have to give up every cent of it to the Government? If you can't find the cache, up North, where Hade used to send it when he lugged it away from here, it is likely to go a bit hard with you. I'm going to do all I can to get you clear. Not for your own sake, but for your sister's. But you'll have to 'come through, clean,' if I'm to help you. Now, if you've got anything to say--"

He paused, invitingly. Milo gaped at him, the big bearded face working convulsively. Nerves wrenched, easily dominated by a stronger nature, the giant was struggling in vain to resume his pose of not understanding Brice's allusions. Presently, with a sigh, that was more like a grunt of hopelessness, he thrust his fingers into an inner pocket of his waistcoat, and drew forth a somewhat tarnished silver dollar. This he held toward Gavin, in his wide palm.

Brice took the coin from him and inspected it with considerable interest. In spite of the tarnish and the ancient die and date, its edges were as sharp and its surface as unworn as though it had been minted that very year. Clearly, this dollar had jingled in no casual pockets, along with other coins, nor had it been sweated or marred by any sort of use.

"Do you know what that is?" asked Milo.

"Yes," said Brice. "It is a United States silver dollar, dated '1804."

"Do you know its value?" pursued Milo. "But of course you don't. You probably think it is worth its weight in silver and nothing more."

"It is, and it isn't," returned Gavin. "If I were to take this dollar, to-night, to the right groups of numismatists, they would pay me anywhere from \$3,000 to \$7,000 for it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Standish, in visible surprise. "You know something about numismatics, then?"

"Just a little," modestly admitted Brice. "In my work, one has to have a smattering of it. For instance--if I remember rightly--there are only three of these 1804 silver dollars generally known to be in existence. That is why collectors

are ready to pay a fortune for authentic specimens of them, in good condition. Yes, a smattering of numismatics may come in handy, at times. So does sailor lore. It did, for instance, with a chap I used to know. He had read up, on this special dollar. He was dead-broke. He was passing the Gloucester waterfront, one day, and saw a dockful of rotting old schooners that were being sold at auction for firewood and for such bits of their metal as weren't rusted to pieces. He read the catalog. Then he telegraphed to me to wire him a loan of one hundred dollars. For the catalog gave the date of one schooner's building as 1804. He knew it used to be a hard-and-fast custom of ship-builders to put a silver dollar under the mainmast of every vessel they built, a dollar of that particular year. He bought the schooner for \$70. He spent ten dollars in hiring men to rip out her mast. Under it was an 1804 dollar. He sold it for \$3,600."

"Since you know so much about the 1804 dollar," went on Milo, catechizingly, "perhaps you know why it is so rare? Or perhaps you didn't add a study of American history to your numismatics?"

"The commonly accepted story goes," said Brice, taking no heed of the sneer, "that practically the whole issue of 1804 dollars went toward the payment of the Louisiana Purchase money, when Uncle Sam paid Napoleon Bonaparte's government a trifle less than \$15,000,000 (or under four cents an acre) for the richest part of the whole United States. Payment was made in half a dozen different forms,--in settlement of anti-French claims and in installment notes, and so forth. But something between a million and two million dollars of it is said to have been paid in silver."

"Are you a schoolmaster, Mr. Brice?" queried Milo, who seemed unable to avoid sneering in futile fashion at the man who was dominating his wavering willpower.

"No, Mr. Standish," coolly replied the other. "I am Gavin Brice, of the United States Secret Service."

Standish's bearded jaw dropped. He glanced furtively about him, like a trapped rat. Gavin continued, authoritatively:

"You've nothing to fear from me, as long as you play straight. And I'm here to see that you shall. Two hours ago, I was for renouncing my life-work and throwing over my job. Never mind why. I've changed my mind, now. I'm in this thing to the finish. With Hade out of the game, I can see my way through."

"But--"

"Now I'll finish the yarn you were so gradually leading up to with those schoolboy questions of yours. French statesmen

claimed, last year, that something over a million dollars of the Louisiana purchase money was never paid to France. That was money, in the form of silver dollars, which went by sea. In skirting the Florida coast--probably on the way from some mint or treasury in the South--one or more of the treasure ships parted from their man-o'-war escorts in a hurricane, and went aground on the southeastern Florida reefs. The black pirate, Caesar, and his cutthroats did the rest.

"This was no petty haul, such as Caesar was accustomed to, and it seems to have taken his breath away. He and his crew carried it into Caesar's Estuary--not Caesar's Creek--an inlet, among the mangrove swamps. They took it there by night, and sank it in shallow water, under the bank. There they planned to have it until it might be safe to divide it and to scatter to Europe or to some place where they could live in safety and in splendor. Only a small picked crew of Caesar's knew the hiding place. And, by some odd coincidence, every man of them died of prussic acid poisoning, at a booze-feast that Caesar invited them to, at his shack down on Caesar's creek, a month later. Then, almost at once afterward, as you've probably heard, Caesar himself had the bad luck to die with extreme suddenness.

"The secret was lost. Dozens of pirates and of wreckers --ancestors of the conchs--knew about the treasure. But none of them could find it.

"There was a rumor that Caesar had written instructions about it, on the flyleaf of a jeweled prayer book that was part of some ship's loot. But his heirs sold or hocked the prayer-book, at St. Augustine or Kingston or Havana, before this story reached them. None of them could have read it, anyhow. Then, last year, Rodney Hade happened upon that book, (with the jewels all pried out of the cover, long ago), in a negro cabin on Shirley Street, at Nassau, after hunting for it, off and on, for years. The Government had been hunting for it, too, but he got to it a week ahead of us. That was how we found who had it. And that is why we decided to watch him Do you want me to keep on prattling about these things, to convince you I'm what I say I am? Or have you had enough?

"For instance, do you want me to tell you how Hade wound his web around a blundering fool whose help and whose hidden path and tunnel and caches he needed, in order to make sure of the treasure? Or is it enough for me to say the dollars belong to the United States Government, and that Uncle Sam means to have them back?"

Standish still gaped at him, with fallen jaw and bulging eyes. Gavin went on:

"Knowing Hade's record and his cleverness as I do, I can guess how he was going to swing the hoard when he finished transporting all of it to safety. Probably, he'd clear up a good many thousand dollars by selling the coins, one at a time, secretly, to collectors who would think he was selling them the only 1804 dollar outside the three already known to be in existence. When that market was glutted, he was due to melt down the rest of the dollars into bar silver. Silver is high just now, you know. Worth almost double what once it was. The loot ought to have been much the biggest thing in his speckled career. How much of it he was intending to pass along to you, is another question. By the way--the three canvas bags he left out by the kiosk ought to do much toward whetting the Caesars' appetite for the rest. It may even key them up to rushing the house before morning."

"We'll be ready for them!" spoke up Standish, harshly, as though glad to have a prospect of restoring his broken self-respect by such a clash.

"Quite so," agreed Gavin, smiling at the man's new ardor for battle. "It would be a pleasant little brush--if it weren't for your sister. Miss Standish has seen about enough of that sort of thing for one night. If she weren't a thoroughbred, with the nerves of a thoroughbred and the pluck as well, she'd be a wreck, from what has happened already. More of it might be seriously bad for her."

Standish glowered. Then he lifted his bulky body from the low chair and crossed the hall to the telephone. Taking the receiver from the hook, he said sulkily to Brice:

"Maybe you're right. I have a couple of night watchmen patrolling the road, above and below. I'll phone to the agency to send me half a dozen more, to clear the grounds. I'd phone the police about it, but I don't like--"

"Don't like to lock the stable door after the horse is stolen?" suggested Brice. "Man, get it into that thick skull of yours that the time for secrecy is past! Your game is up. Hade is dead. Your one chance is to play out the rest of this hand with your cards on the table. The Government knows you are only the dupe. It will let you off, if the money is--"

"What in blue blazes is the matter with Central?" growled Milo, whanging the receiver-hook up and down in vexation. "Is she dead?"

Gavin went over to him and took the receiver out of his hand. Listening for a moment, he made answer:

"I don't believe Central is dead. But I know this phone is. Our Caesar friends seem to be more sophisticated than I

thought. They've cut the wires, from outside."

"H'm!" grunted Milo. "That means we've got to play a lone hand. Well, I'm not sorry. I--"

"Not necessarily," contradicted Gavin. "I'd rather have relied on the local watchmen, of course. But their absence needn't bother us, overmuch."

"What do you mean?"

Before Gavin could answer, a stifled cry from the hallway above brought both men to attention. It was followed by a sound of lightly running feet. And Claire Standish appeared at the stair-top. She was deathly pale, and her dark eyes were dilated with terror.

Gavin ran up the steps to meet her. For she swayed perilously as she made her way down toward the men.

"What is it?" demanded Milo, excitedly. "What's happened?"

Claire struggled visibly to regain her composure. Then, speaking with forced calmness, she said:

"I've just seen a ghost! Rodney Hade's ghost!"

The two looked at her in dumb incomprehension. Then, without a word, Milo wheeled and strode to the window from which they had watched the tragedy. Opening the shutter, he peered out into the moonlight.

"Hade's still lying where he fell," he reported, tersely.

"They haven't even bothered to move him. You were dreaming. If--"

"I wasn't asleep," she denied, a trace of color beginning to creep back into her blanched cheeks. "I had just lain down. I heard--or thought I heard--a sound on the veranda roof. I peeped out through the grill of the shutter. There, on the roof, not ten feet away from me, stood Rodney Hade. He was dressed in rags. But I recognized him. I saw his face, as clearly as I see yours. He--"

"One of the Caesars," suggested Brice. "They found the lower windows barred and they sent some one up, to see if there was any ingress by an upper window. The porch is easy to climb, with all those vines. So is the whole house, for that matter. He--"

"It was Rodney Hade!" she insisted, shuddering. "I saw his face with the moonlight on it--"

"And with a few unbecoming scratches on it, too, from the underbrush and from those porch vines," chimed in a suave voice from the top of the stairs. "Milo, next time you bar your house, I suggest you don't forget and leave the cupola window open. If it was easy for me to climb up there from the veranda roof, it would be just as easy for any of our friends out yonder."

Down the stairs--slowly, nonchalantly,--l lounged Rodney Hade.

His classic mask of a face was marred by one or two scratches and by a smudge of dirt. But it was as calm and as eternally smiling as ever. In place of his wontedly correct, if garish, form of dress, he was clad in ragged calico shirt and soiled drill trousers whose lower portions were in ribbons. All of which formed a ludicrous contrast to his white buckskin yachting shoes and his corded white silk socks.

Claire and the two men stood staring up at him in utter incredulity. Bobby Burns broke the spell by bounding snarlingly toward the unkempt intruder.

Brice absentmindedly caught the dog's collar as Bobby streaked past him on his punitive errand.

"Hade!" croaked Standish, his throat sanded with horror.

"Hade! I--we--we saw you--murdered!"

Hade laughed pleasantly.

"Perhaps the wish was father to the thought?" he hinted, with an indulgent twinkle in his perpetual smile. "I hate mysteries. Here's an end to this one I was on my way along the path, when a young fellow came whirling around a bend and collided with me. The impact knocked him off his feet. I collared him. He didn't want to talk. But," the smile twisting upward at one corner of the mouth in a look which did not add to the beauty of the ascetic face, "I used persuasion. And I found what was going on here. I stripped off my outer clothes, and made him put them on. Then I put my yachting cap on him and pulled it low over his eyes. And I bandaged his mouth with my handkerchief, to gag him. Then I walked him along, ahead of me. I gave the signal. And I stuck my cigarette in his hand and shoved him through the screen of vines. They finished him, poor fool! I had no outer clothes of my own. So I went back and put on his. Then I slipped through that chuckle-headed aggregation out there and--here I am."

As he finished speaking, he turned his icy smile upon Gavin Brice.

"Roke signaled a fruit boat, Mr. Brice," said he, "and came over to where my yacht was lying, to tell me you had gotten

loose. That was why I came here, tonight. He seems to think you know more than a man should know and yet stay alive. And, as a rule, he is apt to be right. He--"

"Miss Standish," interposed Gavin, "would you mind very much, going into some other room? This isn't a pleasant scene for you."

"Stay where you are, for a minute, Claire!" commanded Milo, shaking off a lethargy of wonder which had settled upon him, at sight of his supposedly dead tyrant. "I want you to hear what I've got to say. And I want you to endorse it. I've had a half hour of freedom. And it's meant too much to me, to let me go back into the hell I've lived through, this past few months."

He wheeled about on the newcomer and addressed him, speaking loudly and rapidly in a voice hoarse with rage:

"Hade, I'm through! Get that? I'm through! You can foreclose on my home here, and you can get me sent to prison for that check I was insane enough to raise when I had no way out of the hole. But I'm through. It isn't worth it. Nothing is worth having to cringe and cheat for. I'm through cringing to you. And I'm through cheating the United States Government. You weren't content with making me do that. You tried, to-day, to make me a murderer--to make me your partner in the death of the man who had saved my life. When I found that out--when I learned what you could stoop to and could drag me to,--I swore to myself to cut free from you, for all time. Now, go ahead and do your dirtiest to me and to mine. What I said, goes. And it goes for my sister, too. Doesn't it, dear girl?"

For answer, Claire caught her brother's big hand in both of hers, and raised it to her lips. A light of happiness transfigured her face. Milo pulled away his hand, bashfully, his eyes misting at her wordless praise for his belatedly manly action.

"Good!" he approved, passing his arm about her and drawing her close to him. "I played the cur once, this evening. It's good to know I've had enough pluck to do this one white thing, to help make up for it."

He faced Gavin, head thrown back, giant shoulders squared, eyes alight.

"Mr. Brice," he said, clearly. "Through you, I surrender to the United States Government. I'll make a signed confession, any time you want it. I'm your prisoner."

Gavin shook his head.

"The confession will be of great service, later," said he, "and, as state's evidence, it will clear you from any danger of punishment. But you're not my prisoner. Thanks to your promise of a confession. I have a prisoner, here. But it is not you."

"No?" suavely queried Hade, whose everlasting smile had not changed and whose black eyes remained as serene as ever, through the declaration of rebellion on the part of his satellite. "If Standish is not your prisoner, he'll be the State of Florida's prisoner, by this time to-morrow, when I have lodged his raised check with the District Attorney. Think that over, Standish, my dear friend. Seven years for forgery is not a joyous thing, even in a Florida prison. Here, in the community where your family's name has been honored, it will come extra hard. And on Claire, here, too. Mightn't it be better to think that over, a minute or so, before announcing your virtuous intent? Mightn't--"

"Don't listen to him, Milo!" cried the girl, seizing Standish's hand again in an agony of appeal, and smiling encouragingly up into his sweating and irresolute face. "We'll go through any disgrace, together. You and I. And after it's all over, I'll give up my whole life to making you happy, and helping you to get on your feet again."

"There'll be no need for that, Miss Standish," said Brice. "Of course, Hade can foreclose his mortgage on your half-brother's property and call in Standish's notes,--if he's in a position to do it, which I don't think he will be. But, as for the raised check, why, he's threatening Standish with an empty gun. Hade, if ever you get home again, look in the compartment of your strongbox where you put the red-sealed envelope with Standish's check in it. The envelope is still there. So are the seals. The check is not. You can verify that, for yourself, later, perhaps. In the meantime, take my word for it."

A cry of delight from Claire--a groan from Standish that carried with it a world of supreme relief--broke in upon Gavin's recital. Paying no heed to either of his hosts, Brice walked across to the unmovedly smiling Hade, and placed one hand on the latter's shoulder.

"Mr. Hade," said he, quietly, "I am an officer of the Federal Secret Service. I place you under arrest, on charges of--"

With a hissing sound, like a striking snake's, Rodney Hade shook off the detaining hand. In the same motion, he leaped backward, drawing from his torn pocket an automatic pistol.

Brice, unarmed, stood for an instant looking into the squat

little weapon's black muzzle, and at the gleaming black eyes in the ever-smiling white face behind it.

He was not afraid. Many times, before, had he faced leveled guns, and, like many another war-veteran, he had outgrown the normal man's dread of such weapons.

But as he was gathering his strength for a spring at his opponent, trusting that the suddenness and unexpectedness of his onset might shake the other's aim, Rodney Hade took the situation into his own hands.

Not at random had he made that backward leap. Still covering Gavin with his pistol, he flashed one hand behind him and pressed the switch-button which controlled the electric lights in the hallway and the adjoining rooms.

Black darkness filled the place. Brice sprang forward through the dark, to grapple with the man. But Hade was nowhere within reach of Brice's outflung arms. Rodney had slipped, snakelike, to one side, foreseeing just such a move on the part of his foe.

Gavin strained his ears, to note the man's direction. But Milo Standish was thrashing noisily about in an effort to locate and seize the fugitive. And the racket his huge body made in hitting against furniture and in caroming off the walls and doors, filled the hall with din.

Remembering at last the collie's presence in that mass of darkness, Gavin shouted:

"Bobby! Bobby Burns! Take him!"

From somewhere in the gloom, there was a beast-snarl and a scurry of clawed feet on the polished floor. At the same time the front door flew wide.

Silhouetted against the bright moonlight, Brice had a momentary glimpse of Hade, darting out through the doorway, and of a tawny-and-white canine whirlwind flying at the man's throat.

But Brice's shout of command had been a fraction of a second too late. Swiftly as had the collie obeyed, Rodney Hade had already reached and silently unbarred the door, by the time the dog got under way. And, as Bobby Burns sprang, the door slammed shut in his face, leaving the collie growling and tearing at the unyielding panels.

Then it was that Claire found the electric switch, with her groping hands, and pressed the button. The hall and its adjoining rooms were flooded with light, revealing the

redoubtable Bobby Burns hurling himself again and again at the closed door.

Gavin shoved the angry dog aside, and opened the portal. He sprang out, the dog beside him. And as they did so, both of them crashed into a veranda couch which Hade, in escaping, had thrust across the closed doorway in anticipation of just such a move.

Over went the couch, under the double impetus. By catching at the doorway frame, Gavin barely managed to save himself from a nasty fall. The dog disentangled himself from an avalanche of couch cushions and made furiously for the veranda steps.

But Brice summoned him back. He was not minded to let Bobby risk life from knife-cut or from strong, strangling hands, out there in the perilous shadows beyond the lawn. And he knew the futility of following Hade, himself, among merciless men and through labyrinths with whose windings Rodney was far more familiar than was he. So, reluctantly, he turned back into the house. A glance over the moonlit lawn revealed no sign of the fugitive.

"I'm sorry," he said to Standish, as he shut the door behind him and patted the fidgetingly excited Bobby Burns on the head. "I may never have such a good chance at him again. And your promise of a confession was the thing that made me arrest him. Your evidence would have been enough to convict him. And that's the only thing that could have convicted him or made it worth while to arrest him. He's worked too skillfully to give us any other hold on him I was a thick-witted idiot not to think, sooner, of calling to Bobby. I'd stopped him, once, when he went for Hade, and of course he wouldn't attack again, right away, without leave. A dog sees in the dark, ten times as well as any man does. Bobby was the solution. And I forgot to use him till it was too late. With a collie raging at his throat, Hade would have had plenty of trouble in getting away, or even in using his gun. Lord, but I'm a dunce!"

"You're--you're,--splendid!" denied Claire, her eyes soft and shining and her cheeks aglow. "You faced that pistol without one atom of fear. And I could see your muscles tensing for a spring, right at him, before the light went out."

Gavin Brice's heart hammered mightily against his ribs, at her eager praise. The look in her eyes went to his brain. Through his mind throbbed the exultant thought:

"She saw my muscles tense as he aimed at me. That means she was looking at me! Not at him. Not even at the pistol. She couldn't have done that, unless--unless--"

"What's to be done, now?" asked Milo, turning instinctively to Gavin for orders.

The question brought the dazedly joyous man back to his senses. With exaggerated matter-of-factness, he made reply:

"Why, the most sensible thing we can all do just now is to eat dinner. A square meal works wonders in bracing people up. Miss Standish, do you think you can rouse the maids to an effort to get us some sort of food? If not, we can forage for ourselves, in the icebox. What do you think?"

* * * * *

Two hours later--after a sketchy meal served by trembling-handed servants--the trio were seated in the music-room. Over and over, a dozen times, they had reviewed their position, from all angles. And they had come to the conclusion that the sanest thing to do was to wait in comfortable safety behind stoutly shuttered windows until the dawn of day should bring the place's laborers back to work. Daylight, and the prospect of others' presence on the grounds, was certain to disperse the Caesars. And it would be ample time then to go to Miami and to safer quarters, while Gavin should start the hunt after Rodney Hade. The two men had agreed to divide the night into watches.

"One of the torpedo-boat destroyers down yonder, off Miami, can ferret out Hade's yacht and lay it by the heels, in no time," explained Brice. "His house is watched, always, lately. And every port and railroad will be watched, too. The chief reason I want to get hold of him is to find where he has sent the treasure. You have no idea, either of you?"

"No," answered Milo. "He explained to me that he was sending it North, to a place where nobody could possibly find it, and that, as soon as it was all there, he'd begin disposing of it. Then we were to have our settlement, after it was melted down and sold."

"Who works with him? I mean, who helps him bring the stuff here? Who, besides you, I mean?"

"Why, his yacht-crew," said Milo. "They're all picked men of his own. Men he has known for years and has bound to himself in all sorts of ways. He has only eleven of them, for it's a small yacht. But he says he owns the souls of each and every one of the lot. He pays them double wages and gives them a fat bonus on anything he employs them on. They're nearly all of them men who have done time, and--"

"A sweet aggregation for this part of the twentieth century!" commented Gavin. "I wish I'd known about all that," he added, musingly. "I supposed you and one or two men like Roke were

the only--"

"Roke is more devoted to him than any dog could be," said Claire. "He worships him. And, speaking of dogs, I left Bobby Burns in the kitchen, getting his supper. I forgot all about him."

She set down Simon Cameron, who was drowsing in her lap, and got to her feet. As she did so, a light step sounded in the hallway, outside. Gavin jumped up and hurried past her.

He was just in time to see Rodney Hade cross the last yard or so of the hallway, and unlock and open the front door.

The man had evidently entered the house from above, though all the shutters were still barred and the door from the cupola had later been locked. Remembering the flimsy lock on that door, Gavin realized how Hade could have made an entrance.

But why Hade was now stealing to the front door and opening it, was more than his puzzled brain could grasp. All this flashed through Brice's mind, as he caught sight of his enemy, and at the same time he was aware that Hade was no longer clad in rags, but wore a natty white yachting suit.

Before these impressions had had full time to register themselves on Gavin's brain, he was in motion. This time, he was resolved, the prey should not slip through his fingers.

As Brice took the first forward-springing step, Hade finished unfastening the door and flung it wide.

In across the threshold poured a cascade of armed men. Hard-faced and tanned they were, one and all, and dressed as yacht sailors.

Then Gavin Brice knew what had happened, and that his own life was not worth a chipped plate.

CHAPTER X

THE GHOST TREE

Claire Standish had followed Brice to the curtained doorway of the library. She, too, had heard the light step in the hall. Its sound, and the galvanizing effect it had had on Gavin, aroused her sharp interest.

She reached the hallway just in time to see Hade swing open

the door and admit the thronging group of sailors from his yacht.

But not even the sight of Hade, and these ruffians of his, astounded her as did the action of Gavin Brice.

Brice had been close behind Hade as the door swung wide. His incipient rush after his enemy had carried him thus far, when the tables had so suddenly been turned against him and the Standishes.

Now, without pausing in his onward dash, he leaped past Hade and straight among the in-pouring sailors.

Hade had not been aware of Brice's presence in the hall. The sailors' eyes were momentarily dazzled by the brightness of the lights. Thus, they did not take in the fact of the plunging figure, in time to check its flight.

Straight through their unprepared ranks Gavin Brice tore his way. So might a veteran football halfback smash a path through the rushline of a vastly inferior team.

Hade cried out to his men, and drew his pistol. But even as he did so, the momentarily glimpsed Gavin was lost to his view, amid the jostling and jostled sailors.

Past the loosely crowding men, Brice ripped his way, and out onto the veranda which he cleared at a bound. Then, running low, but still at top speed, he sped around the bottom of the porch, past the angle of the house and straight for the far side.

He did not make for the road, but for the enclosure into which he had peeped that morning, and for the thick shade which shut off the moon's light.

Now, he ran with less caution. For, he knew the arrival of so formidable a body of men must have been enough to send the Caesars scattering for cover.

Before he reached the enclosure he veered abruptly to one side, dashing across a patch of moonlit turf, and heading for the giant live oak that stood gauntly in its center.

Under the "Ghost Tree's" enormous shade he came to a stop, glancing back to see if the direction of his headlong flight had been noted. Above him towered the mighty corpse of what had once been an ancestral tree. He remembered how it had stood there, bleakly, under the morning sunlight,--its myriad spreading branches and twigs long since killed by the tons of parasitical gray moss which festooned its every inch of surface with long trailing masses of dead fluff.

Not idly had Brice studied that weird tree and its position. Now, standing beneath its black shade, he drew forth a matchbox he had taken from the smoking table after dinner.

Cautiously striking a match and shielding it in his cupped palms, he applied the bit of fire to the lowest hanging spray of the avalanche of dead gray moss.

A month of bone-dry weather had helped to make his action a success. The moss ignited at first touch of the match. Up along the festoon shot a tongue of red flame. The nearest adjoining branch's burden of moss caught the fiery breath and burst into blaze.

With lightning speed, the fire roared upward, the branches to either side blazing as the outsputtering flames kissed them.

In a little more than a breath, the gigantic tree was a roaring sheet of red-and-gold-fire, a ninety-foot torch which sent its flood of lurid light to the skies above and made the earth for a radius of two hundred yards as bright as day.

Far out to sea that swirling tower of scarlet flame hurled its illumination. For miles on every hand it could be seen. The sound of its crackle and hiss and roar was deafening. The twigs, dry and dead, caught fire from the surrounding blaze of moss, and communicated their flame to the thicker branches and to the tree's towering summit.

And thus the fierce vividness of blazing wood was added to the lighter glare of the inflammable moss.

The spectacle was incredibly beautiful, but still more awesome and terrifying. The crackle and snap of burning wood broke forth on the night air like the purr of fifty machine guns.

But Gavin Brice had not waited to gaze on what was perhaps the most marvelous display of pyrotechnics ever beheld on the Florida coast. At first touch of flame to the first festoon of moss, he had taken to his heels.

Claire Standish gazed in unbelieving horror at the seemingly panic flight of the man who had so strangely dominated her life and her brother's, during these past few hours. He had faced death at Rodney Hade's pistol, he had been lazily calm at the possibility of a rush from the Caesars. He had shown himself fearless, amusedly contemptuous of danger. Yet here he was fleeing for his very life and leaving the Standishes at the mercy of the merciless!

More,--unless she had deceived herself, grossly, Claire had

seen in his eyes the lovelight that all his assumption of indifference had not been able to quench. She had surprised it there, not once but a score of times. And it had thrilled her, unaccountably. Yet, in spite of that, he was deserting her in her moment of direst peril!

Then, through her soul surged the gloriously, divinely, illogical Faith that is the God-given heritage of the woman who loves. And all at once she knew this man had not deserted her, that right blithely he would lay down his life for her. That, somehow or other, he had acted for her good. And a feeling of calm exultation filled her.

Hade stood in the doorway, barking sharp commands to several of his men, calling to them by name. And at each call, they obeyed, like dogs at their master's bidding. They dashed off the veranda, in varying directions, at a lurching run, in belated pursuit of the fleeing Brice.

Then, for the first time, Hade faced about and confronted the unflinching girl and Standish who had lumbered dazedly out of the library and who stood blinking at Claire's side.

Lifting his yachting cap, with exaggerated courtesy, Hade bowed to them. The eternal smile on his face was intensified, as he glanced from one to the other of the pair.

"Well," he said, and his black eyes strayed as if by accident to Claire's face, "our heroic friend seems to have cracked under the strain, eh? Cut and ran, like a rabbit. Frankly, my dear Milo, you'd do better to put your reliance on me. A man who will run away,--with a woman looking on, too--and leaving you both in the lurch, after promising to--"

There was a clatter on the veranda, and Roke's enormous bulk shouldered its way through what was left of the group of sailors, his roustabout costume at ugly variance with their neat attire.

"Did you find him?" demanded Hade, turning at the sound.

"No!" panted Roke, in keen excitement. "But we'd better clear out, Boss! All Dade County's liable to be here in another five minutes. The old Ghost Tree's on fire. Listen! You can hear--"

He finished his staccato speech by lifting his hand for silence. And, in the instant's hush could be heard the distant roar of a million flames.

"He didn't desert us!" cried the girl, in ecstatic triumph. "I knew he didn't! I knew it! He--"

But Hade did not stop to hear her. At a bound he reached the veranda and was on the lawn below, running around the side of the house with his men trailing at his heels.

Out in the open, he halted, staring aghast at the column of fire that soared heavenward and filled the night with lurid brightness. Back to him, one by one, came the four sailors he had sent in pursuit of Gavin. And, for a space, all stood gazing in silence at the awesome spectacle.

Roke broke the spell by tugging at Hade's coat, and urging eagerly:

"Best get out, at the double-quick, Boss! This blaze is due to bring folks a-runnin', an'--!"

"Well?" inquired Hade, impatiently. "What then? They'll find us looking at a burning tree. Is there any law against that? I brought you and the crew ashore, to-night, to help shift some heavy furniture that came from up North last week. On the way, we saw this tree and stopped to look at it. Where's the crime in that? You talk like a--"

"But if the Standishes blab--"

"They won't. That Secret Service sneak has bolted. Without him to put backbone in them, they'll eat out of my hand. Don't worry. They--"

"Here comes some of the folks, now," muttered Roke, as running figures began to appear from three sides. "We'd be safer to--"

His warning ended in a gurgle of dismay.

From three points the twenty-five or thirty new arrivals continued to run forward. But, at a word from some one in front of them, they changed their direction, and wheeled in triple column, almost with the precision of soldiers.

The shift of direction brought them converging, not upon the tree, but upon the group of sailors that stood around Hade. It was this odd change of course which had stricken Roke dumb.

And now he saw these oncomers were not farmhands or white-clad neighbors, and that there were no women among them. They were men in dark clothes, they were stalwart of build and determined of aspect.. There was a certain confident teamwork and air of professionalism about them that did not please Roke at all. Again, he caught at his master's arm. But he was too late.

Out of nothingness, apparently, darted a small figure, directly behind the unsuspecting Hade. It was as though he

had risen from the earth itself.

With lightning swiftness, he attached himself to Rodney's throat and right arm, from behind. Hade gave a convulsive start, and, with his free hand reached back for his pistol. At the same time Roke seized the dwarfish stranger.

Then, two things happened, at once.

Roke wallowed backward, faint with pain and with one leg numb to the thigh, from an adroit smiting of his instep. The little assailant's heel had come down with trained force on this nerve center. And, for the moment, Roke was not only in agony but powerless.

The second thing to happen was a deft twist from the imprisoning arm that was wrapped around Hade's throat from behind. At the pressure, Rodney's groping hand fell away from his pistol pocket, and he himself toppled, powerless, toward the ground, the skilled wrench of the carotid artery and the nerves at the side of the throat paralyzing him with pain.

Roke, rolling impotently on the earth, saw the little fellow swing Hade easily over his shoulder and start for the house. At the same time, he noted through his semi-delirium of agony that the stalwart men had borne down upon the knot of gaping sailors, and, at pistol-muzzle, had disarmed and handcuffed them.

It was all over in less than, fifteen seconds. But not before Roke's beach combing wits could come to the aid of his tortured body. Doubling himself into a muscular ball, he rolled swiftly under the shadow of a sprawling magnolia sapling, crouching among the vine roots which surround it. There, unobserved, he lay, hugging the dark ground as scientifically as any Seminole, and moving not an eyelash.

From that point of vantage, he saw the dark-clothed men line up their sullen prisoners and march them off to the road, where, a furlong below, the fire revealed the dim outlines of several motor cars. Other men, at the direction of the same leader who had commanded the advance, trooped toward the house. And, as this leader passed near the magnolia, Roke knew him for Gavin Brice.

From the edge of the veranda, Claire and Standish had witnessed the odd drama. Wordless, stricken dumb with amazement, they gazed upon the fire-illuminated scene. Then, toiling across the grass toward them came the little man who had overcome Rodney Hade. On his shoulders, as unconcernedly as if he were bearing a light sack, he carried the inert body of his victim. Straight past the staring brother and sister he went, and around the house to the front steps.

Milo started to follow. But Claire pointed toward a clump of men who were coming along not far behind the little burden-bearer. At their head, hurried some one whose figure was silhouetted against the waning tree-glare. And both the watchers recognized him.

Nearing the veranda, Brice spoke a few words to the men with him. They scattered, surrounding the house. Gavin came on alone. Seeing the man and girl above him, he put his hands up to the rail and vaulted lightly over it, landing on the floor beside them.

"Come!" he said, briefly, leading the way around the porch to the front door.

They followed, reaching the hallway just in time to see the little man deposit his burden on the couch. And both of them cried-out in astonishment. For the stripling who had reduced Rodney Hade to numb paralysis was Sato, their own recreant Japanese butler.

At sight of them, he straightened himself up from the couch and bowed. Then, in flawless English,--far different from the pigeon-talk he had always used for their benefit,--he said respectfully, to Gavin:

"I brought him here, as you said, sir. He's coming around, all right. After the pressure is off the carotid, numbness doesn't last more than two minutes."

"Sato!" gasped Claire, unbelieving, while Milo gurgled, wordless. The erstwhile butler turned back to the slowly recovering Hade. Brice laughed at their crass astonishment.

"This is one of the best men in the Service," he explained. "It was he who took a job under Hade and who got hold of that raised check. Hade passed him on to you, to spy for him. He--"

"But," blithered Standish, "I saw him tackle Hade, before all the crew. He was playing with death. Yet, when you tackled him, this evening, he was scared helpless."

"He was 'scared' into coming into the room and asking in Japanese for my orders," rejoined Brice. "I gave the orders, when you thought I was airing my Jap knowledge by bawling him out. I told him to collect the men we'd posted, to phone for others, and to watch for the signal of the burning tree. If the Caesars weren't going to attack in force, I saw no need in filling the house with Secret Service agents. But if they should attack, I knew I could slip out, as far as that tree, without their catching me. When Hade's tea-party arrived,

instead, I gave the signal. It was Sato who got my message across to the key, this morning, too. As for my pitching him out of here, this evening,--well, it was he who taught me all I know of jiu-jitsu. He used to be champion of Nagasaki. If he'd chosen to resist, he could have broken my neck in five seconds. Sato is a wonder at the game."

The Jap grinned expansively at the praise. Then he glanced at Hade and reported:

"He's getting back his powers of motion, sir. He'll be all right in another half-minute."

Rodney Hade sat up, with galvanic suddenness, rubbing his misused throat and darting a swift snakelike glance about him. His eye fell on the three men between him and the door. Then, at each of the two hallway windows, he saw other men posted, on the veranda. And he understood the stark helplessness of his situation. Once more the masklike smile settled on his pallid face.

"Mr. Hade," said Brice, "for the second time this evening, I beg to tell you you are my prisoner. So are your crew. The house is surrounded. Not by Caesars, this time, but by trained Secret Service men. I warn you against trying any charlatan tricks on them. They are apt to be hasty on the trigger, and they have orders to shoot if--"

"My dear Brice," expostulated Hade, a trifle wearily, "if we were playing poker, and you held four aces to my two deuces--would you waste breath in explaining to me that I was hopelessly beaten? I'm no fool. I gather that you've marched my men off to jail. May I ask why you made an exception of me? Why did you bring me back here?"

"Can't you imagine?" asked Brice. "You say you're no fool. Prove it. Prove it by --"

"By telling you where I have cached as much of the silver as we've jettisoned thus far?" supplemented Hade. "Of course, the heroic Standish will show you where the Caesar cache is, down there in the inlet. But I am the only man who knows where the three-quarter million or more dollars already salvaged, are salted down. And you brought me here to argue me into telling? May I ask what inducements you offer?"

"Certainly," said Gavin, without a moment's hesitation.

"Though I wonder you have not guessed them."

"Lighter sentence, naturally," suggested Hade. "But is that all? Surely it's a piker price for Uncle Sam to pay for a gift of nearly a million dollars. Can't you better it?"

"I am not the court," returned Brice, nettled. "But I think I can promise you a fifty per cent reduction in what would be the average sentence for such an offense, and a lighter job in prison than falls to the lot of most Federal criminals."

"Good," approved Hade, adding: "But not good enough. I'm still in the thirties. I'm tougher of constitution than I look. They can't sentence me for more than a span of years. And when my term is up, I can enjoy the little batch of 1804 dollars I've laid by. I think I'll take my chance, unless you care to raise the ante."

Brice glanced around at the men who stood on the veranda. Then he lowered his voice, so as not to be heard by them.

"You are under courtmartial sentence of death as a spy, Mr. Hade," he whispered. "The war is over. That sentence won't be imposed, in full, I imagine, in times of peace. But your war record will earn you an extra sentence that will come close to keeping you in Atlanta Penitentiary for life. I believe I am the only member of the Department who knows that Major Heidenhoff of the Wilhelmstrasse and Rodney Hade are the same man. If I can be persuaded to keep that knowledge from my superiors, in return for full information as to where the 1804 dollars are cached--those you've already taken from the inlet--and if the mortgage papers on this place are destroyed --well--?"

"H'm!" mused Hade, his black eyes brooding and speculative. "H'm! That calls for a bit of rather careful weighing. How much time will you give me to think it over and decide? A week?"

"Just half an hour," retorted Gavin. "My other men, who took your silly band of cutthroats to jail, ought to be back by then. I am waiting here till they report, and no longer. You have half an hour. And I advise you to make sane use of it."

Hade got slowly to his feet. The smile was gone from his lips. His strange black eyes looked indescribably tired and old. There was a sag to his alert figure.

"It's hard to plan a coup like mine," he sighed, "and then to be bilked by a man with not one-tenth my brain. Luck was with you. Blind luck. Don't imagine you've done this by your wits."

As he spoke he shuffled heavily to the adjoining music-room, and let his dreary gaze stray toward its two windows. On the veranda, framed in the newly unshuttered window-space, stood four Secret Service men, grimly on guard.

Hade strode to one window after the other, with the cranky

mien and action of a thwarted child, and slammed the shutters together, barring out the sinister sight of his guards. Gavin did not try to prevent him from this act of boyish spite. The master-mind's reaction, in its hour of brokenness, roused his pity.

From the windows, Hade's gloomy eyes strayed to the piano. On it lay a violin case. He picked it up and took out an age-mellowed violin.

"I think clearer when I play," he said, glumly, to Brice.

"And I've nearly a million dollars' worth of thinking to do in this half hour. Is it forbidden to fiddle? Milo's father paid \$4,000 for this violin. It's a genuine Strad. And it gives me peace and clear vision. May I play, or--?"

"Go ahead, if you want to," vouchsafed Gavin, fancying he read the attempt of a charlatan to remain picturesque to the end.

"Only get your thinking done, and come to a decision before the half hour is up. And, by the way, let me warn you again that those men out there have orders to shoot, if you make a move to escape."

"No use in asking you to play my accompaniments, Claire?" asked Hade, in pathetic attempt at gayety as he walked to the hallway door. "No? I'm sorry. Nobody else ever played them as you do."

He tried to smile. The effort was a failure. He yanked the curtains shut that hung between music room and hall. Then, at a gesture from Gavin, he pulled them halfway open again, and, standing in the doorway, drew his bow across the strings.

Gavin sat down on the long hall couch, a yard outside the music-room door, beside Claire and the still stupefied Milo. The Jap took up his position back of them, alert and tense as a fox terrier. The three Secret Service men in the front doorway stood at attention, yet evidently wondering at the prisoner's queer freak.

From under the deftly wielded bow, the violin wailed forth into stray chords and phrases, wild, unearthly, discordant. Hade, his face bent over the instrument, swayed in time with its undisciplined rhythm.

Then, from dissonance and incoherence, the music merged into Gounod's Ave Maria. And, from swaying, Hade began to walk. To and fro, urged by the melody, his feet strayed. Now he was in full view, between the half-open curtains. Now, he was hidden for an instant, and then he was crossing once more before the opening.

His playing was exquisite. More--it was authoritative,

masterly, soaring. It gripped the hearers' senses and heartstrings. The beauty and dreaminess of the Ave Maria flooded the air with loveliness. Brice listened, enthralled. Down Claire's cheek rolled a teardrop, of whose existence she was not even aware.

The last notes of the melody throbbed away. Brice drew a long breath. Then, at once the violin spoke again. And now it sang forth into the night, in the Schubert Serenade,--gloriously sweet, a surge of passionate tenderness.

Back and forth, under the spell of his own music, wandered Hade. Then he stopped. Gavin leaned forward. He saw that Hade was leaning against the piano, as he played. His head was bowed over the instrument as though in reverence. His black eyes were dreamy and exalted. Gavin sat back on the couch and once more gave himself over to the mystic enthrallment of the music. The Serenade wailed itself into silence with one last hushedly exquisite tone. Brice drew a long breath, as of a man coming out of a trance.

Simon Cameron had jumped into Claire's lap. But, receiving no attention from the music-rapt girl, the cat now dropped to the floor, and started toward the stairs.

At the same time, the violin sounded anew. And Gavin frowned in disappointment. For, no longer was it singing its heart out in the magic of an immortal melody. Instead, it swung into the once-popular strains of "Oh, Promise Me!"

And now it seemed as though Hade were wantonly making fun of his earlier beautiful playing and of the effect he must have known it had had upon his hearers. For he played heavily, monotonously, more like a dance-hall soloist than a master. And, as though his choice of an air were not sharp enough contrast to his other selections, he strummed amateurishly and without a shred of technique or of feeling.

Jarring as was the result upon Brice, it seemed even more so on Simon Cameron. The cat had stopped in his progress toward the stairs, and now stared round-eyed at the music-room doorway, his absurd little nostrils sniffing the air. Then, deliberately, Simon Cameron walked to the doorway and sat down there, his huge furry tail curled around round him, staring with idiotic intentness at the player.

Gavin noted the cat's odd behavior. Simon Cameron was far too familiar with Hade's presence in the house to give Rodney a second glance. Indeed, he had only jumped up into Claire's lap, because the fascinatingly new Secret Service men at the front door smelt strongly of tobacco,--the smell a Persian cat hates above all others. But now, he was gazing in delighted interest at the violinist.

At the sight, a wild conjecture flashed into Gavin's brain. With a sharp order to the Jap, he sprang up and rushed into the music room.

Leaning against the piano, playing the rebellious violin, was --Roke!

Rodney Hade had vanished.

The windows were still shuttered. No other door gave exit from the music room. There were no hangings, except the door-curtains, and there was no furniture behind which a child could hide unseen. Yet Hade was no longer there.

Roke laid aside his violin, at sight of Gavin and the Jap. At the former's exclamation of amaze, two more of the Secret Service men left their post at the front door and ran in. The tramp of their hurrying feet made the guards outside the open windows of the music room fling wide the closed shutters. Clearly, Hade had not escaped past them.

Folding his arms, and grinning impudently at the astounded cordon of faces, Roke drawled:

"I just dropped in to say 'Howdy' to Mr. Standish. Nobody was around. So I made bold to pick up the fiddle and have a little spiel. I ain't done any harm, and there's nothing you-all can hold me on."

For ten seconds nobody answered. Nobody spoke or moved. Then, Gavin Brice's face went crimson with sudden fury at his own outwitting. He recalled the musical afternoon at Roustabout Key which his presence had interrupted, and Roke's fanatical devotion to Hade.

"I begin to understand," he said, his voice muffled in an attempt to subdue his anger. "You and Hade were fond of the violin, eh? And for some reason or other you long ago worked up a series of signals on it, as the mind-reader with the guitar-accompanist used to do in the vaudeville shows. Those discordant phrases he started off with were your signal to come to the rescue. And you came. But how did you come? And how did he go? Both by the same way, of course. But--there isn't even a chimney-piece in the room."

Once more, Roke grinned broadly. "I ain't seen hide nor hair of Mr. Hade, not since this afternoon," said he. "I been spendin' the evenin' over to Landon's. Landon is a tryin' to sell me his farm. Says the soil on it is so rich that he ships carloads of it up North, to use for fertilizer. Says--"

"Sato!" broke in Brice. "Can you make him talk? Miss

Standish, will you please go somewhere else for five minutes?
This is not going to be a pretty sight."

As the girl turned, obediently yet reluctantly, from the room, the Jap, with a smile of perfect bliss on his yellow face, advanced toward Roke.

The big man wheeled, contemptuously, upon him. Sato sprang at him. With a hammerlike fist, Roke smote at the oncoming pigmy. The arm struck, to its full length. But it did not reach its mark, nor return to the striker's side. By a queerly crablike shift of his wiry body, the Jap had eluded the blow, and had fastened upon the arm, above the elbow and at the wrist.

A cross-pull wrench of the Jap's body brought a howl of pain from Roke and sent him floundering helplessly to his knees, while the merest leverage pressure from his conqueror held him there. But the Jap was doing more. The giant's arm was bending backward and sideways at an impossible angle. Nor could its owner make a move to avert the growing unbearable torture. It was one of the simplest, yet one of the most effective and agonizing, holds in all jujutsu.

Thirty seconds of it, and Roke's bull-like endurance went to pieces under the strain. Raucously and blubberingly he screeched for mercy. The Jap continued happily to exert the cross-pull pressure.

"Will you speak up?" queried Brice, sickened at the sight, but steeling himself with the knowledge of the captive's crimes and of the vast amount at stake.

Roke rolled his eyes horribly, grinding his yellowed teeth together to check his own cries. Then, sobbingly, he blurted:

"Yes! Lemme loose!"

"Not till you tell," refused Gavin. "Quick, now!"

"Second panel from left-hand window," moaned the stricken and anguished Roke. "Push beading up and then to right. He's-- he's safe away, by now, anyway," he blubbered, in self-justification of the confession which agony had wrung from him. "All you'll get is the--the--"

And, the pain having eaten into his very brain, he yelled incoherently.

Ten minutes later, Milo Standish sought out his sister, in the upper room whither she had fled, in fear, to escape from the racket of Roke's outcries.

"Listen!" he jabbered boyishly, in utter excitement. "Brice made him tell how Rodney got out! How d'you s'pose? One of the old panels, in the music room, slides back, and there's a flight of stone steps down to a cellar that's right alongside our regular cellar, with only a six inch cement-and-lath wall between. It leads out, to the tunnel. Right at that turn where the old-time shoring is. The shoring hides a little door. And we never dared move the props because we thought it held up the tunnel-roof. It's all part of the old Indian-shelter stunts that this house's builders were so daft about, a hundred years ago. Hade must have blundered on it or studied it out, one of those times when he used to go poking around in the tunnel, all by himself. And--"

"Did Mr. Brice find him?" interposed Claire.

"Not he!" said Milo, less buoyantly. "Rodney had a good ten minutes start of us. And with a start like that, they'll never lay hands on him again. He's got too much cleverness and he knows too many good hiding places. But Brice found the next best thing. You'd never guess! Rodney's secret cache for the treasure was that walled-up cellar. It's half full of canvas bags. Right under our feet, mind you, and we never knew a thing about it. I supposed he was shipping it North in some way. Roke says that Rodney kept it there because, when he got it all, he was going to foreclose and kick us out, and then dispose of it at his leisure. The swine!"

"Oh!"

"The crypt seems to have been a part of our own cellar till it was walled off. It--"

"But how in the world did Roke?"

"He was with the crew. Rodney and he went together to the yacht for them. The Secret Service men didn't get him, in the round-up. He crept as close to the house as he dared. And he heard Rodney sounding the signal alphabet they had worked up, on the violin. He got into the tunnel and so to the cellar, and then sneaked up, and took Rodney's place at fiddling. He seems to have been as willing to sacrifice himself for his master as any dog would have been. Or else he counted on Brice's not having any evidence to hold him on.

"By the way, do you remember that conch, Davy, over at Roustabout Key? Brice says he's a Secret Service man. He and Brice used to fish together, off the keys, when they were boys. Davy volunteered for the war. And Brice made good use of him, over there, and got him into the Secret Service when they came back. It's all so queer--so--!"

"Is Mr. Brice still downstairs?" interrupted Claire, her eyes straying involuntarily toward the door of the room.

"No. He had to go. He left his good-byes for you. His work here is done. And he has to start for Washington on the 2 A.M. train from Miami. By the way, the best part of it all is that he says a fugitive from justice can't bring legal proceedings in a civil court. So Rodney can never foreclose on us or take up those notes of mine. Lord, but that chap, Brice, is a wonder!"

Vital as was the news about the notes and the mortgage, Claire scarce heard it. In, her ears, and through the brain and heart of her, rang drearily the words:

"He had to go. He left his good-byes for you. His work here is done."

His work was done! Yes. But was that to be all? Had the light in his eyes and the vibrant tremor in his voice as he talked with her--had these been part of his "work," too? Was it all to end, like this,--and before it had begun?

To her own surprise and to her brother's greater astonishment, the usually self-contained Claire Standish burst into a tempest of weeping.

"Poor, poor little girl!" soothed Milo. "It's all been too much for you! No one could have stood up under such a strain. I'll tell you what we're going to do: We're going to Miami, for a week or two, and have a jolly time and make you try to forget all this mystery and excitement. We'll go to-morrow morning, if you say so."

The Miami season was at its climax. The half-moon driveway outside the front entrance to the Royal Palm Hotel was crowded thick with waiting motor cars, whose occupants were at the hotel's semi-weekly dance. On the brightlit front veranda men in white and in dinner-clothes and women in every hue of evening dress were passing to and fro. Elderly folk, sitting in deep porch chairs, watched through the long windows the gayly-moving dancers in the ballroom. Out through wide-open doors and windows pulsed the rhythmic music.

Above hung the great white stars in the blue-black Southern skies. The bay stretched glimmering and phosphorescent away from the palm-girt hotel gardens. The trade-winds set the myriad dry palm-fronds to rustling like the downpour of summer rain.

Up the steps from the gardens drifted promenaders and dancers, in groups or in twos and threes. Then, up the stairway moved

a slender, white-clad figure, alone.

Claire Standish had sought to do as her brother had wished, and to forget, in the carefree life of the White City, the happenings she had been through. Dutifully she had come to Miami with him. Dutifully, for the past three days, she had joined him in such gayeties as he had suggested. Dutifully, to-night, she had come with him to this dance. And all the time her heart had been as heavy as lead.

Now, getting rid of her partner on some pretext, she had gone out into the softly illumined gardens to be alone with the yearning and heartache she could not shake off. Then, fearing lest Milo, or some other of the men she knew, might come in search of her and wonder at her desire to mope alone under the stars, she had turned back to the hotel.

As she mounted the last stair to the veranda, a man in dinner clothes stepped forward from one of the porch's great white pillars, and advanced to meet her.

"There's a corner table at the Cafe de la Paix, in Paris," he greeted her, striving to control his voice and to speak lightly, "that every one on earth must pass by, sooner or later. The front veranda of the Royal Palm is like that. Soon or late, everybody crosses it. When I got back this afternoon, I heard you had left home and that you were somewhere in Miami. I couldn't find you. So I came here--and waited."

Claire had halted, at first sound of Gavin Brice's pleasantly slow voice, and she stood facing him, wide-eyed and pale, her breath failing.

"I had to go to Washington to make my report," said he, speaking low and fast. "I came back to you by the first train I could catch. Didn't you know I would?"

"Yes," she breathed, her gaze still lost in his. "Yes. I--I knew."

And now she realized she had known, even while she had told herself she would never see him again.

"Come!" he said, gently, holding out his hand to her.

Unashamed, under the battery of a hundred curious eyes, she clasped the proffered hand. And, together, they turned back toward the sheltering dimness of the gardens.

THE END

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