

TRIAL BY WATER

HULBERT FOOTNER

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BOOKS BY HULBERT FOOTNER

Novels

NEW RIVERS OF THE NORTH
THE SUBSTITUTE MILLIONAIRE
THE OWL TAXI
ANTENNAE
THE DOCTOR WHO HELD HANDS

A Play

SHIRLEY KAYE

TRIAL BY WATER

By
HULBERT FOOTNER



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TRIAL BY WATER

CHAPTER I

ON THE LIMITED

WHEN MONTY DIXON and Hal Green started off to go hunting in Louisiana their entourage filled more than half the lowers in a sleeping-car of the New Orleans limited. It included the superintendent of the Dixon estate in the Adirondacks, who was to direct the expedition, one of the Green family physicians, Monty's secretary, a cook, two expert hunters and canoeists from the Adirondacks, and a couple of hand-picked special writers from the Press. This was not all the party. The rest were waiting at New Orleans aboard the luxurious shallow-draft yacht *Idlewylde*.

It was not Monty and Hal who had organised this army. They had merely expressed a wish to go hunting, and the thing had come about apparently of itself. That is the advantage of being very rich. Or the disadvantage. It's all in the point of view. Ever since they had been babies Monty and Hal had only to express a wish for something to have it showered upon them in such superabundance that, well, they never seemed to want it any more. However, it was the only life they knew, and up to now they had never thought of kicking.

As a matter of fact, they had been too busy to attend to the preparations for the journey. There was a round of farewell visits to pay which had taken them careering over seven states in their cars. Their fathers had more important things on their hands, and the job of organising the expedition had therefore fallen to their mothers. Mrs. Dixon and Mrs. Green promptly got together on it. Both being energetic ladies who loved to manage things and had plenty of spare time, they had done it up brown.

Monty and Hal accepted the arrangements with a philosophical grin. It had long been agreed between them that mothers were like that. Never having been on a hunting trip, they supposed that this was the way it ought to be done. However, in one respect Monty put up a thundering kick.

"How come?" he said, glancing over a list of the personnel that his mother had handed him. "A valet for me? For the love Mike, mater!"

"Why shouldn't you have a valet?" asked Mrs. Dixon.

"Why should I?" countered Monty. "In America it isn't done."

"You're wrong!" said Mrs. Dixon. "I have discovered an agency that supplies nothing but valets."

“Well, young men don’t sport ’em,” grumbled Monty.

“All the young aristocrats on the continent have them,” retorted his mother, “and your father says we are much more important people now than they are. America leads the world!”

“That may be, but they don’t take them hunting.”

“They do!” cried his mother triumphantly. “The man I engaged for you accompanied the Count de Rochechouart to East Africa. That’s why I took him.”

“What’s Russia’s war to me?” said Monty, “or whatever his frog-eating name is.”

“You needn’t be rude,” said Mrs. Dixon.

“Argument is useless!” cried Monty, waving his hands. “I prefer to shave myself. And as for clothes on a hunting trip, you don’t wear any.”

“Monty!”

“I mean none that a valet has to look after.”

Mrs. Dixon began to play with her handkerchief—an exquisite scrap of lace that had once belonged to Marie Antoinette. “After all the trouble I have taken to arrange everything for you—” she began. The handkerchief was her last argument, and its appearance was generally the signal for all males to surrender, but on this occasion Monty, feeling that the old man was silently backing him up, stood firm.

“No valets,” he said, and walked out of the room.

A somewhat similar scene took place in the Green household, and so the valets were left behind.

Monty and Hal led crowded lives. There were so many places to go to between Havana and Bar Harbour on one side of the ocean, and between Santander and Nice on the other, that it kept them on the jump. Then, too, there were certain potent attractions in New York that could not be neglected too long, and they were continually rushing back. They had so many friends they were dated up weeks, months in advance. Life was full of difficult decisions; would it be more fun to attend Chad Darnall’s bachelor dinner in Memphis or to take in the big party Kitty Chaytor was throwing at Old Westbury to celebrate her divorce from Bill? And so on. It may be asked how two such busy men had found time for a hunting trip. Well, the idea would never have occurred to them had it not been introduced from the outside.

It had come from the Bullard twins; débutantes, vintage 1929, the most famous and popular of their year. Monty and Hal, who did everything

together, had lately become engaged to Sylvia and Stella Bullard in that order. Technically speaking, they had chosen their own brides, but in fact these young people had long been in the process of being pushed towards each other as the Bullards grew poorer and the Dixons and Greens heaped up more mountains of dollars.

These things move unseen. They are never spoken of, but they operate none the less resistlessly. The ancient and failing dynasty of Bullard required to be buttressed by fresh sources of wealth and power. Important boards of directors and powerful interests of many sorts were concerned in the matter. What so many people desire seems to happen of itself. It is in the air. Of all this the two young men were profoundly ignorant, the girls perhaps less so. There was an excellent understanding between them and their mother.

At birth Mrs. Bullard had pinned her hopes to the twins, and from earliest childhood they had justified her faith; pert and engaging little girls who had gradually developed into super-sub-debs, and finally into the full-fledged article, adorably pretty and completely hard-boiled. They aimed to outshine all the other girls of their year, and they did.

Having arrived at a marriageable age, it was scarcely necessary to survey the field; there were two outstanding figures and the rest nowhere. Monty Dixon's father had made so many millions out of oil concessions in the southwest, it was said he could not compute his own wealth; while Hal Green's father had risen so high in the automobile industry as to have his name coupled with that of the great Henry himself. And both young men were only sons. Need anything more be said?

It was all so well organised that both affairs clicked on the same night. It began with a roof-garden party at the Bullards' and ended in Chinatown. Afterwards, in Sylvia's boudoir, the twins discussed the matter in their usual unsentimental fashion.

"My honey-boy's really a lamb," remarked Sylvia. "It's too bad to marry him."

"Same here," said Stella. "But they're too rich to play around with."

"Marriage takes all the joy out of love!" sighed Sylvia.

"But yes! It would be fatal to love one's husband."

"Think of being married to the same man all one's life!"

"Where do you get that stuff?" said Stella sharply. "It isn't done."

"Well, twenty years is just as bad. You might as well face it, my dear. We couldn't afford to divorce them until they come into their money, and their fathers are not old men."

“Well, I’m not worried about marriage so much,” returned Stella philosophically. “Husbands can always be managed, and married women really have a very good time. But it’s this disgusting business of being engaged. Other men avoid you like the plague.”

“Well, let’s marry them at once and get it over with,” suggested Sylvia.

“If that only would get it over with! But every time you get married the gang gives you at least a year to yourselves. It’s like Court mourning. Ghastly! And we’ve only had two seasons’ fun. It’s a darn shame! Can’t we manage to get a respite somehow? I must have a few more dances with Tito Tolentino at Gaspard’s. The divine roughneck!”

“Well,” said Sylvia, “now that we’ve put our brand on them why can’t we turn them out to graze for awhile? We might send them on a trip around the world.”

“They started once, and came back,” said Stella dryly. “No, they’d expect us to go with them. Ugh! fancy being cooped up on a ship with a husband! No, think up some place where they couldn’t take us.”

“How about a hunting trip into the wilds somewhere?”

“The very thing! But how could you manage it, darling?”

“Just leave it to me,” said Sylvia. “I’ll plant a little seed so cunningly, that Monty will never guess the hand that dropped it!”

It was as a direct result of this conversation that Monty and Hal now found themselves headed South on the New Orleans limited.

The attitude of the young men towards their engagements was a simple one. Sylvia and Stella were far and away the most desirable girls in the field. Hundreds of men were after them, and thousands more would have given something pretty to have the chance. So Monty and Hal went after them too, and when they captured them, knowing nothing of the secret forces working in their favour, they took it as no more than their own due. They confided to each other that they were crazy about the girls, and they honestly thought they were—but it had not cost them a single pang to start on this trip and leave them behind.

When Monty’s father, upon hearing of the engagement, had taken his son’s hand and assured him that this was the high spot of a man’s life, Monty had simply put it down as heavy father stuff. He could have told the old man of a dozen occasions already in his life that had given him a bigger kick than winning Sylvia.

Monty and Hal were sitting in the drawing-room of the sleeping-car playing rummy in a half-hearted fashion. To them the pace of the limited seemed snail-like, and from time to time they glanced longingly at the sky.

But flying had been forbidden to them since Monty had crashed in the Alleghenies, breaking his leg, and Hal had been lost for three hours after having been forced down in the Okeefeenokey swamp. It was pointed out to them that the heirs to two of the greatest fortunes in America could not afford to take such risks. Nowadays all they could hope for was an occasional twirl in somebody else's plane.

They were a good-looking pair. Monty was a tall fellow with black hair sleek as a raven's wing, mirthful black eyes, an aquiline nose, and lips that turned up obstinately at the corners. According to Hal, he grinned even in his sleep. Hal was a blond, and not so big as his friend. Girls were fond of saying that he had a Greek profile, and he did not object to it. He had a serious, almost a dreamy expression that was deceptive. Most of the devilry evolved by the pair was credited to Monty, because he looked the part, but a good half of it originated with Hal.

Considering everything, their devilry was harmless enough. Like other young men, they were out to get as much fun as possible, and their opportunities were greater than most. They did not realise it themselves, but they moved surrounded by a kind of golden aura that caused most women to smile warmly on them, and nearly all men to agree with everything they said. Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that they had rather a distorted view of the world. But they enjoyed themselves.

They had enjoyed themselves so well at Harvard that after three years the authorities tactfully suggested that, as neither they nor the University were profiting by their stay at Cambridge, it might be just as well, etc., etc. After that they were sent on a trip around the world in a floating university, but, after having got as far as Algiers, they came home averring that it was a bunch of dead ones.

Monty then went into his father's office. That is to say, he drove up every morning in an enormous Isotta-Fraschini, and hung around for awhile making himself agreeable. Everybody was nice to the boss's son, and passed him along as quickly as possible. Monty had never been fired, but after a while he just got out of the way of going down to the office, and nobody missed him. While Monty was "in business" Hal took up architecture. It gave him something to talk about, but he never seemed to be able to find time to attend the classes.

They finally dropped the cards in complete boredom, and stared through the windows at the bare, brown cotton-fields of Mississippi or whatever state it was. They were off their beat, and their notions of geography were consequently hazy. However, they had marked St. Louis, where they changed cars.

“Gee! this is slow!” said Monty.

“Oh, well, we’ll be there in the morning,” said Hal philosophically. “Thank God, I can always sleep!”

“And after we get there?” asked Monty, scowling, and drumming on the window-pane.

“What’s biting you?” said Hal, with a look of surprise.

“This hunting trip don’t look so good to me as it did.”

“It was your own idea!”

“If it was, it don’t resemble its dad,” said Monty sorely. “I feel as if I’d been shouldered into it. I can’t see you and I sitting on deck with our guns across our knees waiting for game. If this is slow, that would be stagnation! Good God! if I have nobody to talk to but you for two months I’ll be a fit candidate for the psychopathic ward.”

“Is that so?” said Hal, grinning. “How about me?”

“We ought to have taken warning from the chorus of glad hosannas that was raised at home over this trip,” grumbled Monty. “Anything that the families approve of is bound to be slow.”

“Oh, they just want to keep us out of mischief.”

“Yeah, and a nice pair of saps we were to fall for it.”

“You proposed it yourself.”

“I can’t think how I ever came to do it,” said Monty. “What the hell do I care about hunting?”

“Well, let’s chuck it then,” said Hal calmly. “We’re free, white, and twenty-one.”

“We can’t do that. It would raise too much of a stink.”

“We’ve come through many a stink before this unharmed.”

“But this trip has been written up in the papers too much. They’d never stop razzing us if we turned back before we started.”

After a moment’s thought Hal said: “Well, if we’ve got to go through with it let’s jazz it up a bit.”

“How?” asked Monty, with a gleam in his dark eye.

“Oh, we can stick around New Orleans for a while until we get acquainted. Then we can get up a party to go.”

They exchanged a slow and meaningful grin. “The idea has possibilities,” said Monty. “We’ll do that.”

However, destiny had other plans.

CHAPTER II

BUCK BIDLONG

IN the dining-car an hour later the two friends felt somewhat better. A hungry man cannot be bored when his dinner is spread before him. Everybody in the train seemed to have learned who they were, and all were watching them, openly or covertly as the case might be. Monty and Hal had long been accustomed to this, and affected to despise it—but they were only human.

“It would be a treat if we could eat our dinner once without being gawked at,” said Monty.

“Yeah,” said Hal. “One would think we were a pair of freaks in the circus.”

Just the same, if nobody had looked at them they would have wondered what was the matter.

They were at a table that was set for four. They would have been glad enough of somebody to talk to, but as newcomers entered the car, the steward always steered them respectfully past this table, that the rich men’s privacy might not be intruded upon. However, at a moment when the steward happened to be looking elsewhere, a tall, rugged old man coolly took one of the vacant places without waiting to be shown it. The steward looked pained, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Technically, this is a free country.

The old man surveyed the two young ones quizzically from under projecting white eyebrows; his eyes were extraordinarily blue and piercing. “How air ye?” he said affably.

“How are you?” returned Monty and Hal. They exchanged a look meaning: We ought to get a little fun out of this bird. “Going to the races?” asked Monty.

“No,” said the old man, without suspecting he was being drawn. “I’m on my way home to Sassafras Bayou.”

Monty and Hal wirelessly to each other: This is good!

The old fellow applied himself to the business of getting his dinner. He poked the corner of his napkin inside his collar with two sinewy fingers and studied the menu. This, however, meant nothing to him, for he presently cast it aside and ordered in a voice audible throughout the car:

“The biggest steak you got. Cooked rare.”

The distressed steward deferentially suggested that at this hour there was bound to be some delay in cooking a special order, and if a slice off the rib would do as well . . .

“All right,” agreed the old man in his booming voice, “but I want it red. And thick. None of yo’ papeh slices. Like that, see?” He measured a good inch between thumb and forefinger. “With aplenty ’taters on the side.”

“Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. Served immediately, sir.” The steward hastened away.

“Yes, suh. Cer’n’y, suh. Kiss yo’ foot, suh,” mimicked the old man. He laughed heartily and winked at the young men alongside. “These tony waiters gives me a pain, you know where. Tony or no, they’re on’y grease-hoppers.” He seemed to like the sound of the word, and repeated it several times: “Grease-hoppers!”

This was a new specimen to Monty and Hal, and they regarded him indulgently. It would make a good story to tell when they got back to New York.

“I’m Buck Bidlong of Sassafras Bayou,” announced the old man. “I’m seventy-six years old, and I’ve knocked around all ovah!”

Monty introduced himself and Hal. The rough old fellow was not at all impressed. “Yeah, I heard about yo’ pappies,” he said coolly. “They got more money than the law allows, h’ain’t they?”

This took a little wind out of Monty and Hal; however, the old fellow seemed wishful to be friendly, and the feeling passed.

“I moved down to No’the’n Weesia from the Ozarks coupla year back,” Buck went on; “because it’s about the loneliest place there is left. I cleared me a li’l piece in the swamp where I can set and enjoy the warm winters when I begin to git real old. I just been visiting my daughter up in New York City. She’s married to a feller who made a coupla million out of co’n-stalk paper, and they’ve riz in the world. Sho, riz about twenty-five stories,” he added, with a twinkle.

“They live in one them Gollamighty towers on Park avenue. I didn’t dast look out of the window for gittin’ giddy. Wanted me to come live with them, my daughter did, but, in the words of the old song: ‘No! No! No! Not for Joe!’ Say, I was as much out of place as a houn’ dawg in the parlour. After three day of it I was like to loss my manhood. Sho!” he concluded, “them fellers in New York City they don’t live like men. They’s like these new mechanical dolls that goes through the same motions until they run down.”

At this point the old man's dinner was put before him. He speared the great slab of meat and held it up. "I 'low there's one thing you got to hand the city folks," he said, admiring it, "and that's for their red meat. Ah cain't git nothin' like that on Sassafras Bayou." He then attacked it with gusto.

Monty signalled to Hal: Swell table manners!

Swell! returned Hal.

Yet they could not keep from glancing at the rough and common old fellow out of the corners of their eyes. There was something that you might call magnificent in his aspect. Seventy-six years old, he had said, yet he was still as straight and almost as well-knit as a youth. Everybody in the car looked at him with respect. With his hawk's nose and piercing glance, he was one you would not soon forget. He must have been every inch of six foot three. His skin was tanned to a mahogany colour that made a bold contrast with his blue eyes and thick thatch of white. He gave the young men a secret and uneasy feeling that they would never make old bones like this. And what a lad *he* must have been!

So expeditious was his knife and fork work that his plate was clean in no time. He mopped up the last drop of gravy with his bread, and made elaborate play with a toothpick behind his raised hand. He waved away the menu card that a waiter held under his nose. "No fal-lals," he said in his great voice. "Bring me some ten-cent seegars."

When the box was opened on the table he politely invited the young men to partake before he would help himself. They declined with apologies, indicating their cigarettes.

"No offense," said Buck calmly, "if you like them lung perforators better."

Monty and Hal laughed, and stored away the term in their minds for future use.

They left the car together. Passing through the vestibule, Monty whispered to Hal: "He's a grand guy. Let's ask him into our room and put him through his tricks."

"Sure," said Hal, "he's better than a vaudeville act."

Buck Bidlong was agreeable to the suggestion. "Darn nifty little cuddie," he remarked, glancing around the drawing-room. "Reckon since it's yo' own room they can't stop you smoking in here."

"Go ahead!" said Monty.

Monty and Hal lighted cigarettes, and Buck started one of the "seegars" and blew great clouds of smoke with manifest satisfaction. The young men

applied themselves to the agreeable pastime of kidding the old fellow, without reflecting that he might be better at it than themselves. The conversation resolved itself into a sort of kidding match.

“So you’ve just been up to New York,” said Monty. “I guess you saw some surprising things up there.”

“Surprising sure enough,” returned Buck dryly. “What surprised me the most was how men could be content to live out their lives without setting foot to the earth, or sniffing of it.”

“Oh, we’ve done away with all that,” said Monty.

“Yeah,” said Buck. “My daughter tells me the hardest thing to get in New York is a box of earth for the cat. Cats have got sense,” he added, “though I don’t cotton to the critters myself.”

Monty felt that he was getting a little better than he gave.

Buck changed the subject. He glanced at the gun-cases in the luggage-rack. “Goin’ huntin’, air ye?” he asked agreeably.

“Yes,” said Monty carelessly. “My partner and I are going to pot ’gators down in the bayous. And anything else that comes our way.”

“Sho,” said Buck sympathetically—but there was a wicked twinkle in his eye. “I see you got quite a arsenal yonder. Mind if I look at ’em? Bein’ a hunter like yo’self, I’m keen on guns.”

“Sure!” said Monty, handing down one of the leather cases. “This is my Marvin Wilder express rifle. It’s the latest model, with special gold inlay. It cost five hundred dollars.”

“God help the alligators!” murmured Buck.

“I suppose you don’t see many guns like that down in Louisiana,” said Monty.

“I have never seen such a gun,” said Buck dryly. “How does it go together?”

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t had time to look at it yet,” said Monty. “We have a gun expert in our party. I’ll have to ask him.”

“Sho!” said Buck. He snapped the two parts together expertly, and tossed the weapon to his shoulder. Then he made believe to discover something the matter with it. “Son,” he said, with a grave face, “I’m loath to tell you, but you was cheated when you bought this gun. This ain’t the latest model.”

“Why isn’t it?” demanded Monty.

“H’ain’t got no shock-absorber on the butt.”

“Shock-absorber?”

“Yeah. So it won’t hurt your shoulder when it goes off. All the best guns have ’em.”

Monty perceived that he had bitten. He made the sound of laughing, but did not look as if he enjoyed it.

Hal, coming to his partner’s aid, attempted to bring the talk back to their own ground. “When you were in New York did you see the Woolworth Building?” he asked.

“Yeah, I seen it,” said Buck.

“That tower was built so it would give like a tree when the wind blows,” said Hal. “It’s wonderful to see it sway in a gale.”

“You’re right,” said Buck, without batting an eye. “A squall come up when I was up there, and I was near slung into the street. Had to hang on to the railing like desperation.”

Round two to Buck. Monty felt that it would be safer on the whole to cut out the kidding. “You said you had a little place on the bayous,” he said patronisingly. “Maybe we can stop by on our yacht.”

“That would cert’n’y be a pleasure,” said Buck, “but I reckon you’ll be hunting along the gulf bayous. My place is in No’the’n Weesiana. I go in from Natchez. It’s swamp country. Nice country too, on’y the Chickawa busted through its levee last year, and made a son-of-a-gun of a new river right past my hummock on its way to the gulf. I got too many callers now.”

“Plenty of game round your place?” asked Monty, as one hunter of another.

“Plenty’s no word for it!” said Buck dryly. “I cain’t keep no chickens for the varmints. It’s got so I dassen’t go to the well for water after dark.”

“But what is there?” asked the startled Monty.

“Wa’al,” drawled the old man, “catamount and bear and pumas and—”

“Pumas!” exclaimed Monty. He looked sharply at Buck, but his blue eyes were as innocent as a baby’s. “Those are mountain lions, aren’t they? Nobody ever told me there were pumas in Louisiana.”

“They keep it dark,” said the old man confidentially. “It’s the real estate men. Afraid it would depress land values if it got around. Pumas is the curse of Weesiana. Common as cats in New York City.”

“Oh, well, on the yacht they couldn’t trouble us,” said Monty.

“I dunno,” said Buck. “They can swim like otters. You-all want to be careful and don’t leave no rope hangin’ overboard nights. Them critters can skin up a rope or a anchor-chain like monkeys.”

Monty laughed to show that he knew he was being kidded, but there was a doubt in his eyes. "I'll tell my men," he said. "I don't believe they know about the pumas."

"Prob'ly not," said Buck, with a little cough behind his hand.

Hal made one more attempt to get back at him. "Of course you went to the Palais d'Or when you were in New York?" he said.

"What kind of a door is that?" said Buck. "I opened many a one."

"It means Palace of Gold," said Hal. "It's the swellest night club in New York."

"No, I wasn't there," said Buck.

Hal thought he had him then. "That's too bad," he said. "It's the greatest sight in New York. It would have made a good story to tell the boys back home. Why, the entire place inside is made out of black marble and gold. Black marble floors to dance on and solid gold walls and ceilings. You sit on gold chairs and eat off gold plates. The cover charge is a hundred dollars, but they would have let you in free."

Buck did not bite. Quick as winking he came back: "Sho! that's nothin'! Fifty years ago in 'Frisco they had a golden dance-hall that would leave yours tied to the post. All the dancin' girls was covered with gold-leaf, and nothin' was drunk in the joint but chloride of gold!"

While the young men searched in their minds for an effective comeback, Buck stood up to go. He towered in the little room. His eyes glinted like blue ice. "What you fellers gonna do fo' milk when you sail up the bayous?" he drawled in his innocent disarming voice.

"Milk?" said Monty, who did not perceive his drift. "Oh, I suppose it will be supplied."

"Ain't no cows down there."

"Well," said Monty, with a bit of a swagger, "when men go into the wilds they expect to rough it a bit."

"Men?" repeated Buck, with a curious grimace. Monty had fallen directly into his little trap. He spat with unerring aim into the nickel-plated cuspidor. "Meanin' yo'selves maybe?"

Monty felt as if all the ground had suddenly been cut from under him. "I—I don't get you," he stammered.

"Roughing it!" cried Buck, with a scorn that seared like red-hot iron—the fact that he was perfectly good-humoured made it bite deeper—"roughing it! with yo' private yacht, yo' gang of male nursemaids out yonder, yo' gold-plated guns! What the hell would you call livin' soft?"

The two young men stared at the speaker helplessly. Nobody had ever spoken to them like this before. They were good enough fellows, but all their lives they had been living in a fool's paradise, and the old man's blunt words brought the whole thing tumbling around their ears like stage scenery.

"Mebbe you cain't help what you air," Buck went on with his steel-hard grin, "but you don't have to blow about it. That would rile some men. And lemme tell you something: don't go to get fresh with a hard guy again. That's plumb insanity. It's lucky for you I'm a good-natured man. I just led you on to see how far you'd go. In a man's country you might a got killed for less.

"You're all right, you and your partner, but you got to learn your places. I don't give a damn how many millions yo' Pap has corralled. It's a handicap, Bub. You got to stand on your own bottom with us, and show what's in you. Where would you two stand amongst real men? Don't make me laugh. Can you fight? Can you do a day's work? Have you ever done anything useful on God's green earth?

"Lap-dog is your class, Bub. Pretty, perfumed pets to be given a bath regular, and have their silky coats brushed, and fed with dainty bits and kep' from all harm. But mark what I say: even lap-dogs has more sense than to get fresh with sure enough he-dogs that scratch the earth and got burrs in their hair!" Buck spat again with force and precision, and strode out. They heard him whistling between his teeth in the corridor.

Monty and Hal, who had sat pale and quiet under the old man's biting speech, turned red when he had gone, and began to bluster as men will in order to recover their self-respect.

"Old fool! Old fool!" said Monty. "If he had been younger I would have punched his jaw. But he knew he was safe. He knew his age protected him."

"What the hell!" said Hal. "It don't mean a thing. He was just envious. He's a Bolshevik. Everybody envies those that have the stuff. We ought to be accustomed to it by now."

And so on. And so on. They talked big, but they had received wounds that were not to be talked away in a hurry.

CHAPTER III

DISAPPEARANCE

THE limited pounded southward through the night. For hours Monty had lain on his bed staring overhead into the dark. He occupied the lower berth while Hal lay on the sofa. The upper berth had not been pulled down. Monty's thoughts were travelling in a vain circle like a squirrel in a revolving cage, around and around with never an inch of progress, until he could stand it no longer.

"Hal," he said softly.

Instantly came the quiet answer: "Yes?" It appeared that Hal was having no better success with sleep than himself.

"What that old man said——" began Monty.

"Oh, damn his eyes!" cried Hal bitterly. "The silly old fool!"

"Can that," said Monty wearily. "You know there's nothing to it. If you and I can't give each other the straight dope, where the hell can we go for it?"

After a brief pause Hal returned unexpectedly: "You're right. I was just cussing to keep my courage up."

"What he said was true," said Monty savagely. "That's what's eating me. True! True! Oh, God, it drives me wild to think I should have to take it from a stranger!"

Hal made no answer.

"It isn't as if I hadn't had plenty of hunches of my own that I was playing the fool," Monty went on, "but I wouldn't listen. It's so easy to whoop it up and shout down good sense, and there are always plenty of nit-wits around to tell you what a hell of a fellow you are. Oh, God! what a pair of fools we've been!"

"Reckon you're right," said Hal.

"We've never had a show to learn the rights of things," said Monty, "surrounded by servants seven deep since we were born. We've never been taught anything useful; never been allowed to do anything for ourselves."

"Well, it isn't our fault, then," said Hal hopefully.

But Monty would have no such easy comfort as that. "I don't know whether it is or not," he said bitterly. "Anyhow, it don't matter. It will be our

fault from this time on if we don't make a change. Because now we've heard the truth. Our faces have been rubbed in it. Oh, God! if I could only forget it."

"What can we do?" said Hal. "Do you realise what we're up against?"

"Perfectly," said Monty. "It's a whole system organised to keep us what we are. And the only way to beat it is by making a clean break."

"How could we make a break?" said Hal. "If we disappeared the whole world would be aroused."

"That's the ridiculous part of it," said Monty bitterly; "they treat us like crown princes or something, and we're no more than any other pair of sapheads."

"We'd be found within an hour," said Hal. "Where could we run to where they wouldn't recognise us from our photographs?"

"I don't know," said Monty, "but we've got to get down to realities somehow. The man was old," he went on with fresh bitterness, "but if he'd been young I would have had to take it just the same, because I don't know how to put up a fight. I've always had a raft of servants to back me up. I haven't got the spirit of a coward, but I have to play the part of a coward until I learn how to stand up for myself."

"I'm with you if you can think up some way," said Hal.

They threshed the matter out without being able to conclude on a course of action. However, it was a relief to share it, and in the course of time they fell asleep.

Some hours later Monty was awakened by the stopping of the train. All was quiet outside, so it could not be a station. He ran up the blind and looked out. Since it was dark inside the car, he could see a little way into the night. A dreary outlook. The train was standing on an embankment. Below, a naked flat field stretched dimly away into obscurity. There were some ragged bushes at the foot of the bank; no lights anywhere, no sign of human habitation.

He raised the window and the sweet mild air of night enveloped him, very grateful after the frozen North that he had just left. It roused something in his blood. Sticking his head out and looking ahead, he saw a red light beside the track barring the way of the train. The engine was panting softly. Looking the other way, he could see far down the track the red light of the trainman, whose duty it was to guard the rear. It was perhaps two o'clock.

The red lights in the still night, the softly panting engine, somehow made Monty's heart rebound. A sudden resolution seized hold to him. To hell with

agonising over things. Here was their chance. He leaped out of bed and shook Hal.

“Get your clothes on!” he said crisply. “Here’s our chance to disappear!”

“Wh-what are you going to do?” stammered Hal, only partly awake.

“Drop out of the window. Nobody will see us go. We won’t be missed until morning.”

“Where are we?”

Monty had already switched on the lights and was throwing down the baggage from the racks. “I don’t know and I don’t care,” he said curtly. “It’s somewhere in the open country. The track is blocked. We’ve got money, we’ve got guns, we’ve got plenty of junk to sell when we need more money. . . . Pull your pants over your pyjamas and stick your feet into your shoes. I’ll drop you the rest of your clothes through the window. It’s warm outside.”

Hal started to obey even while he raised objections. “What are you getting me into? Let’s talk it over first.”

“No time for talk. Get a move on you, or I’ll go alone.”

Hal allowed himself to be pushed, half-dressed, to the window-sill. “Wait a minute,” he kept saying. “Wait a minute.”

“You got to go first,” said Monty. “I’ll pass everything down to you.”

“Good God!” said Hal, “suppose the train goes on and leaves me there alone.”

“It’s got to whistle first to give the trainman time to run up. There’s plenty of time.”

Hal, still making sounds of protest, eased his body through the window and dropped to the ground beside the car. Monty, looking anxiously down the track, saw that the vivid red eye was still holding up the engine. He hastily passed down clothes to his partner, then the bags one after another; suitcases, kit-bags, gun-cases; everything they had with them in the drawing-room—except the golf-bags. A rich man’s pastime! thought Monty, as he left them standing in a corner. His point of view had suddenly changed.

He turned out the lights and dropped down beside his partner. Hal seemed to have come awake at last. “Good God! what have we done!” he gasped.

“Well, it’s done,” said Monty shortly. “We can’t climb back again. When you find yourself in a box, the only thing to do is to smash out regardless,”

he went on. "I feel better already. Quick! help me drag this stuff down into the bushes. The trainman might see us when he comes up."

It required two trips up and down the bank to get all their belongings hidden. Crouching amidst the bushes, they tried to finish their dressing—not an easy business with the stiff little branches sticking into them from every side. The night proved to be not so warm as it had felt at first. They shivered.

Several minutes had still to pass, before the engine got a clear track, and this put a severe strain on Hal's morale. "We could still go back," he muttered. "If we hollered for help they'd open the vestibule doors for us."

"Yeah," said Monty bitterly, "and a pretty pair of fools we would look, passing our baggage back into the train." As a matter of fact, Monty had the moment of wavering, but he would never have owned to it.

The red light turned to green; the engine emitted two short blasts of its whistle, and the little red light far in the rear came bobbing along the track. The trainman swung his lantern as he caught the rail of the last car and drew himself aboard. The engine snorted like a leviathan, and the long dark train started to move. Quicker and quicker issued the hoarse snorts, and the sleek cars slipped by at an ever-increasing speed, until the trainman appeared enframed with his lantern in the rear vestibule. He leaned on the gate whistling, all unconscious of being watched. The red lights swung around a curve and out of sight. Monty and Hal were alone.

They stood upright and looked around them. A dark overcast sky and a flat field merging into the surrounding blackness; the railway embankment issuing out of the darkness on one side and disappearing into it on the other; such was the prospect. A heavy smell of saturated earth filled the air. A silence like nothing they had ever known seemed to take them in its grip. They strained their ears to catch the last murmur of the departing train. When that passed out of hearing there was nothing. The earth was like a black void.

"Where do we go from here?" said Hal, with a laugh to cover the tremor in his voice. It was not the first time he had been out in the small hours, but this was rather different from having a good car under you on a main motor road.

Monty had the same momentary sinking feeling, and he too laughed it off. "Well, we've got the world to choose from," he said. "There are no strings on us now."

Immediately after it had disappeared around the curve they had heard the train roar over a steel bridge. Bridge suggested river. They decided to

explore first in this direction, and plodded along the track, stepping from tie to tie. They left their baggage under the bushes. On the other side of the embankment lay a featureless field exactly like the first, without a tree to break its unnatural flatness. It did not seem like the world they had known.

“If there’s a river,” said Monty, “we must get hold of a boat to carry our stuff. A boat is better than a wagon because it leaves no tracks.”

“We wouldn’t know where the river went,” said Hal.

“All the rivers hereabouts empty into the Mississippi.”

“Which way?”

“Downstream, stoopid. Once in the Mississippi, there must be plenty of hiding-places on the islands.”

“How about grub?”

“One thing at a time!”

Sure enough they presently came to the end of a tall steel bridge thrown across a river of moderate size. The railway embankment ran into a broad levee running right and left along the river, which suggested the proximity of the Mississippi. There was not a tree anywhere nor a rise in the ground to break the monotony, only flat fields and artificial banks. However, a well-beaten path running along the top of the levee suggested that there were people somewhere in this stark land.

From the bridge they emptied their pockets of all letters and papers that might identify them. A gold cigarette-case of Monty’s had to go, though they could have raised a pretty penny on it; but it was engraved with his full name.

They then tossed a coin to decide whether to turn right or left on the levee: heads right; tails left. Hal struck a match as Monty clapped the coin. Heads got it.

For a while as they proceeded along the levee there was nothing to be seen but the flat field on one side and the dim river on the other. They sensed a corresponding levee across the water. Then, as they gradually rounded a bend, they perceived a faint glow at the water’s edge ahead of them. Something human there, evidently. They approached it hopefully.

The glow gradually resolved itself into the embers of a dying fire. It was built on a stretch of foreshore between the base of the levee and the river. When they arrived above the spot they saw a big open motor-boat moored to a stake driven into the edge of the mud, and half a dozen shrouded figures lying in a row, feet to a fire. They had too much the look of corpses to be an

agreeable sight. The whole outfit had a ghostly, unreal effect in the darkness. Monty and Hal hesitated before accosting it, as well they might.

The die was cast for them. There was one among the shadows below who was awake. He had seen their figures outlined against the sky. A rough voice came out of the darkness:

“Who the hell are you up there?”

“Friends,” said Monty.

“Well, come on down and show yourselves.”

They hung undecided.

“Let’s beat it,” whispered Hal, pulling at his partner’s arms.

Monty resisted. “No! We can’t turn tail the first time we’re challenged. Half a moment till I think up a story to tell.”

“Come down here!” repeated the voice, “if you’re on the level.”

“Come on!” whispered Monty. “Keep your mouth shut till you get your cue from me.”

They went down the bank with, it must be confessed, fast-beating hearts. Somebody had thrown dry branches on the fire, and the flames were leaping up, illuminating a wide circle in the dark. At the first sound of voices all the shrouded men had awakened and freed themselves from their blankets. There was something highly ominous in their quiet alertness; six rough-looking men who needed shaves all around. The closer you got to them the less prepossessing they appeared.

Loud exclamations of derisive astonishment broke from them. Monty and Hal, who had dressed in the dark, did not look quite their customary fashionable selves; still, they were a remarkable pair to appear suddenly out of the night in that wild spot.

“What the hell!” cried one. “A couple arrow-collar boys!”

“It’s Percy and Ferdy theirselves!” said another.

“Cake-eaters!” jeered a third.

The man who had first hailed them was the strangest-looking specimen in the lot. Extraordinarily tall and lean, he had a narrow face with bald spots over his temples that ran back to the middle of his head, leaving a lank spear of blond hair between. It gave him an unwholesome look like a skinny, moulting fowl. He had a gun in his hand.

“Stick up your hands,” he commanded in a harsh cracked voice. He patted their clothes in a practiced fashion. Satisfied that they were unarmed, he dropped his gun in his pocket. “What ya hanging round here for?”

Monty thought: I must put up a good bluff. "We were travellin' down the river," he said, hardening his voice. "In a canoe. We run into something and ripped a hole in her. We got ashore with our stuff, but we lost the canoe."

"In them clo'es!" sneered the lean man. "Come across, where's your gang?"

"We were all wet; we had to change," said Monty.

"Say, you're still wet, fella," said a voice, and a loud laugh went around the circle.

Monty was stalled for the moment. He had to admit to himself that his story lacked plausibility. However, at this moment a seventh member of the party made himself known. He had evidently been sleeping in the boat.

"Lay off it, Long," he growled, stepping ashore.

Though he was younger than most of them, it was evident in the first word he spoke that he was the boss. A tall powerful fellow with a thick body balanced upon shapely, active legs. As compared with the others he was quite dandified: boots laced to the knee, whipcord breeches and blue flannel shirt. He had shaved that day. With his coarse strong features and hard glance, he was a much more formidable figure than any of his dissolute gang. Whatever he might be, he counted as a man. Monty felt himself quailing under those inhuman black eyes. He resisted the feeling.

The big fellow appeared friendly. "H'are ya fellas?" he said suavely. "Don't mind these men. They been hittin' the hooch, and it spoils their manners. It's nothin' to me how you come here. Have a drink. You, Shyster, fetch a fresh bottle ashore. Sit down, boys. Sit down!"

From a man of his sort it was insidiously flattering. Monty's spirits began to rise. If the leader was for them, he thought, to hell with the rest. Anybody could see he had his men well in hand. All sat down. The leader asked a couple of careless questions, and Monty repeated his story of the loss of the canoe with added details. He appeared to be believed.

Meanwhile, the one they called Shyster fetched a bottle from the boat, opening it by the simple expedient of cracking off its neck on the gunwale. This man was elderly, and had the look of a respectable business man who had been on a month's drunk without changing his clothes.

"Drink hearty, boys!" cried the leader. "There's plenty more. You don't need to be afraid of that stuff. I can see you're regular guys, and I don't mind telling you we're in the business. We always save some of the best for ourselves."

Hi-jackers! thought Monty, with a breathless sense of danger. Well, they were in for it now; the only thing to do was to put up a good bluff. He was

glad of a drink. It was good stuff; French brandy, he judged, and like liquid fire; it brought the tears to his eyes.

When the bottle came to the leader he tossed it up and held it until Monty reckoned he must have swallowed half a tumbler full. Yet he never batted an eye. Galvanised stomach, all right. Monty felt like a man in a dream. Things were happening with the same crazy unreasonableness as in dreams. Hal sat beside him with closed mouth and wary eyes. As Monty glanced around the squatting circle, the firelight throwing up grotesque shadows on the rough faces, the bottle passing from hand to hand, he thought: Gosh! what if the folks could see us now!

“So you saved your outfit all right,” the leader said carelessly.

“Yes,” said Monty.

“Where did you leave it?”

“Alongside the railway track. We carried it up there hoping there might be a station near.”

“What brought you down this way?”

“We saw the light of your fire. We were looking for transport of some kind.”

“Where to?”

“Any place where we can get a skiff and some rough clothes to go on with our trip.”

“Where you heading for?”

“No place in particular. Wherever there’s good hunting.”

The leader grinned in a peculiar fashion. “Now that’s a note!” he said in a friendly way. “We’re bound hunting ourselves. Yeah, business has been good, and we allowed to take time out and hunt down in the Louisiana swamps for a bit. Men have got to have some relaxation.”

The other men were allowing their leader to do all the talking. They stared at the young men with an expression that Monty could not read. There was some sniggering amongst them, and slapping on the back, but Monty ascribed that to the liquor they were drinking.

“You can come along with us if you want,” said the leader off-hand.

Monty hesitated for the fraction of a second. In that space of time he did considerable thinking. If the man was on the square it was a rare chance. They could never be traced this way. If, on the other hand, he planned to rob them, why they were in his power anyhow, and they might as well put a good face on it. Let him rob them—their foolish outfit was of darn little use to them now.

“Of course, we live pretty rough,” the leader went on, “but if you can’t stand it you can always leave us.”

“We expect to rough it,” said Monty, more modestly than he had used that phrase earlier this night. He had travelled a long way since then.

“Then it’s a go?” said the leader.

“Sure,” said Monty, “and much obliged for the offer.”

“Fine!” said the leader. “Here, Long, you and Pat go back with the fellows, and help fetch down their outfit.”

CHAPTER IV

BORN ANEW

WALKING back along the top of the levee with the narrow-headed man and the hulking lad they called Pat, Monty's instinct was to make himself as solid as he could with his companions.

"I'm Jack Jones," he said, "and my friend is Bill Smith."

"Sure," said Long, "there's so many Jacks and Bills, I'll call you Jonesy and Smitty to distinguish like."

"It's all right with me," said Monty.

"Me, I'm Long Leet, and this is Pat Sheedy," said Long in his turn. "Where you boys from?"

"St. Louis," said Monty at random.

"That so? I know it well."

"What's the leader's name?" asked Monty.

"Ike."

"Ike who?"

"Oh, just Ike," was the vague reply.

"And who's the other one?" asked Monty: "him they called Shyster. That's a funny name to give a fellow."

"Just a josh," said Long. "It's because of him being a lawyer. He's a useful man."

He went on to supply further information about the gang. "The fat guy who talks so soft, he's Bun Thatcher. You wouldn't think it to listen at him, but he's the hardest nut in the crowd. And the big guy who looks like a college boy, he's Sandy Mitchell, and the pie-faced one is Cheese Garvey. He looks cheesy, that's how he got the name I reckon. You want to look out for them guys."

"Why?" asked Monty, not without anxiety.

"Oh, they're all right," said Long, "but they act ugly when they're drinking. Youse fellows wouldn't want to mix it up with that scum. You wouldn't demean yourselves."

"We'll take our chance with the gang," said Monty.

“Sure! Sure!” said Long. “Anybody could see youse two were good guys.” He was taking pains to butter the grating voice now. “This what I got to say. Me and Pat here, we aim to be your partners, like. If the other guys get fresh with you they’ll have us to fight, see? Is that right, Pat?”

“Sure!” rumbled Pat.

“Pat packs a wallop like John L. Sullivan,” said Long enthusiastically. “He’s an old-fashioned scrapper he is. Stands his ground. All the other guys has a big respect for Pat.”

“At that, I ain’t no better than you are, Long,” said Pat modestly.

“Oh, I can hold my own, I can hold my own,” said Long.

This was much too smooth, and Monty didn’t credit a word of it. When they reached the spot where the baggage was cached the reason for it came out. Long and Pat hung around, striking matches to see what there was. Monty urged them to pick it up, but they made no move to do so.

“Say, how about giving me and Pat a little present,” said Long. “Just a remembrance, like. Anything at all.”

Good sense suggested to Monty that it would be foolish to give in to them, and he said good-humouredly: “I can’t open the bags here. Come on, up with them. We’ll remember you lads later.”

They obeyed sullenly.

When they returned to the camp the other men had made up a good fire and were sitting around it grinning. Monty would have given a good deal to know just what that grin signified. When the baggage was carried within the circle of firelight—sleek pigskin kit-bags with brass trimmings; Gladstone bags of rich-looking walrus; smooth cowhide gun-cases—loud exclamations of greed broke from them, and it was clear enough then what they were thinking of. Ike silenced them with a curt oath.

The bottle went around again, and Ike said in his hard, clipped voice: “Let’s go, boys. Carry this stuff aboard, and pick up your beds.”

They moved quickly, grinning sideways at Monty and Hal. The baggage was dropped amidships, and the men’s beds hastily rolled up and shoved under the seats. The boat was a big round-bottomed craft that would have carried four times their number without crowding. She had an old-fashioned Globe engine in the stern, slow and powerful. The young man whom they called Sandy Mitchell worked over it with an oilcan.

Lowering his voice, Ike said in a friendly way: “Stick by me, fellows. We’ll stay up in the bow together where we can talk.”

Monty felt better. It is always easy to believe what you wish to believe. This one was white, anyhow, he thought. Almost like one of themselves. As long as he stood by them they were all right.

Being told to get aboard, Monty and Hal seated themselves towards the bow end of the seat running lengthwise along the side. Ike was opposite them, steering with a little wheel affixed to the gunwale. The men were further aft. They pushed her off the mud with poles; Sandy rocked the fly-wheel, and, after a preliminary backfire or two, the engine began to cough hoarsely. They swung slowly around in the stream, and the levee banks moved by.

As soon as they were clear, Long made some low-voiced remark, and the men around him laughed. The sound struck a fresh uneasiness into Monty. He and Hal were helpless now. In order to show them he was not afraid, he said to Hal:

“Well, Bill, this is easier than driving a paddle, eh? Quicker, too!”

“Sure thing, Jack,” said Hal.

“Quiet there,” growled Ike.

They passed a skiff moored to a stake on the same side of the river they had just quitted. Monty realised there must be a house on the other side of the levee. So near! he thought, with sickening regret. If he had only known!

A moment later the levee fell back on either side, and they found themselves out on wide water hemmed in by the night. The Mississippi! A fresh breeze struck on their cheeks, kicking up a sea that made the heavy boat roll lazily. The shore they were leaving quickly faded, and they could see nothing but a patch of restless water in the misty dark. There were no stars. Ike spun the little wheel and the wind came into their faces. He had turned down-stream. The boat began to pitch gently, slapping the waves with her blunt bows.

There was a lot of whispering amongst the men amidships. The neck of another bottle went overboard. Monty wondered that Ike let them drink while they were afloat. Perhaps he had not such good control over them, after all.

Long said: “Make a light so we can see it.”

Ike said without turning his head. “Keep it down in the bottom, so it won’t show ashore.”

A lantern was lighted. It revealed five of the men squatting in a circle around the baggage. Sandy Mitchell, at his engine, was cut off from the others by a pile of freight under a tarpaulin. Long coolly unfastened the catches of Monty’s kit bag.

“This is the biggest one,” he said.

A hot tide of anger ran through the owner’s veins. “Are you going to stand for this, Ike?” he said indignantly.

Ike replied with a fleering laugh. The real nature of the man came out with that. “Say, what do you think this is?” he drawled. “A Chatauqua party?”

Monty stared at him, a little slow to take in the situation. His first feeling was a kind of disgust. He had been ready to admire this man’s strength, and here he was revealing himself as a slimy liar like the others. All he had been after was to get them into his boat. Monty’s look of surprise sent Ike off into fresh laughter. That was his answer to everything: a brutal laugh.

Monty and Hal exchanged a blank look. They had read of the exploits of hi-jackers without really taking it in. Absolutely without decency! They thought. Then what hope is there for us? Monty set his jaw. Well, they’re not going to get any change out of me, he thought. Hal began to curse the men who were opening the bag.

“Shut up!” said Monty sharply. “Let them have the stuff.”

This caused a great laugh from the men in the bottom of the boat. “Cheese!” cried one, “they’re givin’ us the stuff! Ain’t they liberal!”

Sandy Mitchell scrambled over the pile of freight. “Here, I’m in on this,” he said.

As soon as Long got the bag open six dirty hands dug into it simultaneously. They immediately began to snarl at each other.

“Choose one man amongst you to hand the stuff out,” said Ike contemptuously. “Or you’ll be killing each other directly. Not that I give a damn. But I’ll shoot the first man that draws a gun.”

A wordy wrangle resulted because no man could trust the others. In the end they elected Sandy Mitchell because they had to choose somebody.

“I’ll take all the guns for my share,” said Ike coolly. “If any money or jewellery is found it goes into the pot.”

The arms were passed forward. Ike thrust them under the seat behind his legs.

Accompanied by the coughing of the engine and the slapping of the bows, a weird scene was enacted amidsthips by the light of the lantern. They emptied all of Monty’s and Hal’s clothes on the bottom boards and tossed the bags aside. Then Sandy, squatting on his heels with his back to the pile of freight, began handing out the silk shirts, cravats, socks, handkerchiefs, etc. The recipients stuffed these things inside their clothes for safekeeping,

or tied them around their necks, or pulled them over their heads, until they looked like some new kind of scarecrow in the flapping silks. Meanwhile the bottle was circulating, and they were getting very drunk.

“Gee!” said Bun Thatcher in his thick, soft voice, “there’s quality for you! Think of feeling this next to your skin!”

The grotesque Long Leet drew an elegant white suit of Monty’s. “This’ll make a hit with the dames!” he said, grinning.

“Wow!” yelled Cheese Garvey. “Let me be there to see it, that’s all!”

“Useless, useless, Long,” said Shyster drunkenly. “You ain’t got the personality to carry it.”

A nightmare scene to Monty and Hal. Nobody paid any further attention to them. Monty felt in some queer way as if he were looking on at something that did not concern him particularly. Ike was still sitting across from them with a nonchalant hand on the wheel.

When the distribution was completed there was considerable grumbling. Cheese Garvey came staggering forward. He was a mean looking little fellow with a pallor that was corpse-like in the lantern-light. Monty’s flesh crawled at him.

“I didn’t get no nobby shoes,” whined Cheese. “Ev’y guy got a pair but me.” He pointed to Monty’s feet. “I’ll take them you’re wearing, Jack. Take ’em off, pronto.”

“I’ve got to have shoes to walk in,” said Monty indignantly.

This was greeted with a shout of laughter. “You won’t need shoes where you’re goin’,” said Cheese, leering.

An icy hand seemed to pass down Monty’s spine.

All the men had edged forward. Placing the lantern at the feet of their victims, they squatted around it inspecting Monty and Hal with drunken gravity, and discussing their clothes as if they had been on display in a store.

“I’m entitled to a whole suit,” said Sandy. “I’ll take that what Jonesy is wearing. It will show my figger good.”

“I’ll take the other fellow’s suit,” said Cheese. “I can get it altered to fit.”

“That’s a tasty shirt Jonesy is wearing,” said Bun Thatcher. This one was a bloated, red-faced man who seemed to lick his lips before speaking.

“Go on, Bun,” said Shyster. “You got four shirts to my three already. Jonesy’s shirt is mine. But I’ll swop with you for that green tie you got.”

Monty and Hal were hypnotised by this scene. In the complete disregard of the men they seemed already to have ceased to exist. It was like a

creeping paralysis. With an effort Monty broke the spell that constricted his throat.

“This has gone far enough,” he cried. “If you steal our outfit we can’t stop you, but before you lay hands on us—”

“Well, what about it?” sneered Ike.

“It would pay you to hang on to us,” said Monty. “I’m Monty Dixon and he’s Hal Green.”

This struck the men as the richest joke of the evening. They rolled on the bottom boards, slapping and clutching each other in their mirth.

“Is that so?” drawled Ike. “And we thought you was the Prince of Wales and his brother, Prince Henry.”

In vain Monty and Hal protested that they spoke the truth; that they could prove it up to the hilt if given a little time. The men were too drunk to take it in. Ike was just as drunk as the others. He was the worst type of drunk, steady as a tree and poisoned through and through with the stuff. Monty, with a dreadfully sinking heart, perceived that they were doomed. But he would not admit it to himself. It is impossible at twenty-four years old to visualise the end of all things coming like that.

“Take off them shoes!” yelled Cheese, grabbing at his feet.

“You go to hell,” cried Monty, kicking out.

He was dragged to the bottom of the boat, and several men fell on him. He struggled with all his might, as every living creature must, but of course it was useless. But in his mad passion to fight back he was mercifully incapable of thinking, or of feeling the blows that rained on him. He dimly sensed that Hal was struggling alongside of him. He was dragged aft to get him out of the way of the other. They laughed at his struggles. To Monty it was like the laughter of fiends in hell.

Garment by garment his clothes were pulled from him, until he could feel the cold wind on his skin. He heard Hal’s strenuous yells choked by a watery gurgle, and, with one last supreme effort that almost broke his heart, he attempted to pay off his assailants for that. But more men fell on him. He was helpless. He felt himself lifted high and swung out over the gunwale. They let go. The icy water closed over him. The last sound he heard was the soulless chug-chug of the motor moving away. He struck out blindly.

Coming to the surface, he instinctively headed away from the boat. He heard Cheese Garvey’s high-pitched voice crying out: “There he is! There he is! The —— —— —— is swimming! Give me that gun!” There was an explosion, and a bullet plopped into the water near Monty’s head. He let

himself sink. This seemed like the final inhumanity, and his heart turned sick.

He had never learned how to swim under water. He had to come up for air. There was more yelling and shooting from the boat, but the bullets went wide, and Monty plucked up courage. He heard Garvey excitedly yelling to Sandy to stop the engine. "He's swimming away! He's swimming away!" he cried. Ike's hard, clipped voice struck in: "Let him swim! It's two miles to shore." The noise of the engine became fainter. The shooting ceased.

Monty's arms and legs functioned automatically, but hope was almost dead in him. Two miles! He had never in his life swum further than a hundred yards or so. He didn't even know in which direction the shore lay. What was the use? he thought. Why not let it end? But he could not stop his arms and legs from moving.

Suddenly, quite close, he heard a gasping voice cry: "Monty! Monty!"

He hesitated before replying. He knew how desperately a drowning man clutches another in the water. What was the use? He couldn't save himself, much less Hal.

"Monty! Monty!" cried the voice. "I'm going!"

New feelings stirred in him. Up to that moment he had never put the need of another before his own. Selfishness was the law of the pack he hunted with, and he had never questioned it. But during the last few minutes he had been forced to face the ultimate, and all his disguises had dropped away. What had survived was the essential man. If I leave him, he thought, I'll be like those brutes in the boat.

"Keep going!" he called strongly. "I'm coming to you."

Almost immediately he saw Hal splashing in the water. Keeping out of his reach, he said: "Don't clutch me or I'll have to smash you. Lay a hand on my shoulder and keep on swimming."

Hal obeyed him. They struck out together. The fact that he had someone dependent on him steadied Monty and gave him fresh courage. He began to get his bearings. The wind was blowing up-river; therefore if he kept it on his cheek he would be heading ashore. He saw, or thought he saw, a vague blur to the west which suggested that was the nearer shore. A yellow spark shone out on that side, and then he was sure.

"Look, Hal, a light!" he cried. "Now we've got something to head for!"

"What's the use!" muttered Hal. "It's miles away. I'm giving out already."

“Keep going!” urged Monty. “Take it easy! Save yourself. We’ll make it yet!”

For a while there was silence. By degrees Hal’s weight became heavier on Monty’s shoulder. Finally he gasped:

“The light’s no nearer. I’m all in. I’m going down.”

Monty had caught sight of a shadow on the water. “Keep going!” he urged, setting his teeth. “I see something floating on the water. We can make it easy.”

Both were labouring now. After a dozen painful strokes Monty could see a great tree in the water. It had been stripped by the freshets and whitened by the sun; it had come a long journey. At one end a tangle of broken roots stuck into the air. It was then not ten yards from him, but those last few strokes required a more than human effort. His lungs were like a pair of broken bellows that would not fill, his limbs were leaden weights to raise. To make matters worse, Hal kept muttering: “I can’t make it! I can’t make it!”

“You’ve damned well got to make it!” muttered Monty between his teeth.

He touched the tree with his finger-tips, but had the strength for one more stroke. His nails scratched the smooth surface and slipped off. He sank under the water. When he came up again with a last despairing kick, he managed to get his arms over the trunk, and hung there gasping. But Hal had slipped off his back, and tears of exhaustion and anger sprang into Monty’s eyes. After working so hard, to lose him now!

However, Hal rose sluggishly to the surface near the tree, and Monty fastened a hand in his hair. He dragged him to the tree, and by sheer force of determination worked his limp body over the trunk until he hung upon it of his own weight. Like himself, Hal had been stripped to the skin. “Let me down,” he muttered like a man in his sleep. Monty desperately held him in place.

A measure of strength returned to Monty, but the icy water struck a chill to his very marrow. “Keep your legs moving to help the circulation,” he said to his partner.

There was no answer.

Monty in alarm cried, “Buck up, man! We’re safe!”

“We’re no nearer the shore,” muttered Hal.

“I’ll shout for help,” said Monty. “There may be a boat on the river. Maybe my voice will carry to the shore.”

“Don’t you do it!” cried Hal, roused to a fresh terror. “Those men might hear you. If they thought we were alive they’d come back and finish us!”

So Monty held his tongue. He could hear Hal’s teeth chattering. They seemed to have touched rock bottom in misery. As a man will when things are at their worst, Monty suddenly began to laugh.

“What’s funny?” asked Hal peevishly.

“I was just thinking,” said Monty, “we were wishing to-night that we could get a new start. Well, here we are, born naked into the world again.”

“Nothing to laugh at,” stuttered Hal.

CHAPTER V

RESCUE

FORTUNATELY for the half-frozen men the dawn was not long delayed. With infinite relief Monty saw the easterly sky grow pale. A band of rose hung suspended above the horizon. There was a blanket of fog lying on the river, and even after the sky had grown bright he could distinguish nothing around them but a patch of yellowish water fading into the mist. It was like being in a quiet room with walls of fog. The shore might have been close at hand or miles away. The wind had gone down.

Hal hung limply upon the half-submerged log, and Monty was scared by the change in his face when it became light enough to see it. His parted lips were blue with the cold and fixed in a grimace of pain. His eyes were half closed. He looked scarcely conscious.

“Hal, for God’s sake, buck up!” cried Monty anxiously.

“Can’t hold on any longer,” mumbled Hal.

“You’ve got to!” cried Monty. “It’s day now. We’ll soon be able to see where we are.”

He looked around him desperately for some means of tying his fainting partner to the log, but, of course, there was nothing; nothing but the two bare bodies and the water-worn log. It was impossible for two humans to be reduced to a greater extremity. No help anywhere.

And then, like a miracle in the fog, the sound of a woman’s quiet voice came to Monty’s ears, almost within arm’s length it seemed. She said: “You must be mistaken. I can’t hear anything.”

Monty, dumbfounded, was unable to speak. He thought his mind was wandering.

But a man’s voice, apparently faint and broken with weariness, answered the woman: “No, I heard voices.”

Monty found his voice then. “We’re here! We’re here!” he cried. “Right close to you!”

There was no answer, but the sound of quick strong oar-strokes *moving away from them!*

“Help! Help!” Monty cried wildly. “Don’t leave us! We’re in the water!”

The sound of oars ceased, and he had the sense that a low-voiced consultation was taking place somewhere near. The uncertainty was almost more than a man could bear. He redoubled his pleas for aid.

“We’re hanging to a log in the water. My partner’s all in. I can’t hold him up any longer!”

The dark form of a skiff resolved itself out of the mist and floated near.

“Oh, thank God!” groaned Monty, and in the reaction that overcame him he almost lost hold of the tree and of Hal too.

The skiff was rowed by a girl, and at her feet the figure of a tall old man was stretched in the bottom of the boat, his head resting against the stern seat. It was evident at a glance that he was far gone. The girl, on the other hand, was a superb physical specimen, square shouldered and deep breasted. She was wearing a faded print dress and a sun bonnet which had slipped to her neck, revealing a thick braid of bright chestnut hair twisted round her head. She had a noble expression of courage and resolution, but anxiety had turned her face hard.

They looked at each other: the two naked men in the water, the girl and the dying man in the skiff; like all human beings when they come to grips with life, they wasted no words on the strangeness of the situation.

“How did you get in such a fix?” the girl asked coldly.

“A gang of thieves stripped us and flung us overboard last night,” said Monty bitterly.

“I can’t help you,” she said grimly. “My father has no spare clothes, and we have little enough food for ourselves. I have all I can han’le here,” she added bitterly.

“You wouldn’t leave us to drown!” cried Monty.

“The sun will soon be up,” she said coolly. “You are near the Arkansas shore. Somebody will soon see you and take you off.”

“My partner is all in!” cried Monty. “Look at him! He can’t hold on any longer!”

“I’m sorry,” she said hardily, “but what can I do?”

The sick man stirred and said feebly: “We cain’t leave them, Rose. ’Twouldn’t be right. You’ve got a couple of spare dresses in your bun’le. Let them cover their nakedness with that. We can put them ashore some’eres.”

“You know we dassen’t show ourselves near the shore,” she said with quiet bitterness.

“Then we can feed them to-day and put them ashore to-night.”

"All right, Pap, if you say so," she answered obediently. She unfastened her bundle and took from it two old print dresses like the one she was wearing. She tossed these behind her into the bow of the skiff, and manoeuvred herself close to the men in the water.

"Climb into the bow," she said, and indifferently turned her back.

Monty worked himself over the bow of the skiff, and with a good deal of difficulty succeeded in hauling the limp figure of Hal after him. They drew the cotton dresses over their heads. In these garments they cut very ridiculous figures, but they were much too far gone to think of laughing at each other. Complete exhaustion followed upon the relief of being rescued. There was no seat in the bow of the skiff. They sank down on the bottom and rested their heads on their knees in a blessed stupor. The girl passed them a flask. A swallow of the contents brought warmth back to their numb bodies.

Meanwhile she bent to her oars as ably as a man. The fog surrounded them on every side, yet she seemed to know where she was going. For a long time nobody spoke. The girl obviously had too much on her mind to concern herself further with the troubles of two strangers, and the two young men were fully occupied in getting their strength back.

Finally the old man's weak voice was heard. "Don't row too far, Rose. We ought to be off the mouth of the Chickawa now. Rest on your oars a piece and study the eddies."

She obeyed him. After awhile she said: "There are two currents. One is reddish."

"That's the Chickawa," said her father. "Row against the current. There are islands near the mouth where we can lie hid until dark."

Monty raised his head and began to take interest in his surroundings. He wondered what the girl and her father were running away from. Her close-shut mouth discouraged questions. Upon getting into the skiff he had seen that the old man was bandaged around his breast. His condition, then, was the result of a wound. What a lot there was going on that you never suspected, Monty thought, until you were knocked off your base yourself. A dying man ought to be lying comfortably in his bed.

He watched the flat straight back of the rowing girl, and it suddenly struck him that she was a beauty. Heretofore he had never looked for beauty in a print dress. That shining head was set upon her shoulders as proudly as a queen's. She often turned her head to gauge her course ahead, but never deigned to look at the two young men crouched in the bottom.

Whenever she glanced over her shoulder Monty's face grew hot, and he wished that the bottom of the skiff might open and let him through. He was horribly conscious now of the figure he was cutting in that ridiculous garment that he kept pulling over his knees, and trying in vain to close across his manly chest. If only he could show himself to her properly dressed!

Then he realised that he was ravenously hungry, and fell to speculating as to when they would eat.

After the sun had risen the mist lifted, and they found themselves out in the midst of an eddying reddish flood. Its volume was much less than the Mississippi, but it was a big river nevertheless. The surrounding country was flat and featureless; in fact, from the skiff nothing could be seen over the levees but an occasional tree-top. The whole flat world appeared to be empty of mankind saving themselves. A short distance ahead of them a wooded island divided the stream, and the girl rowed hard against the current to gain its shelter.

This river was at flood stage. Reaching the island, they found the trunks of the outermost trees awash. Pushing the skiff in amongst the trees, it was lost to the sight of the world. The oarswoman grounded it on dry land towards the middle.

"Hop out!" she said coolly.

It was an ordeal for the shamefaced pair to rise up in the ludicrous garments that flapped around their knees. But there was no help for it. The girl paid scant attention to them. She only said:

"Fetch dry wood for the fire."

She busied herself cutting green branches to make a couch for the wounded man. She helped him to his feet with infinite tenderness. It was all he could do to make three steps from the skiff to his bed. Meanwhile Monty and Hal, having assembled a miscellaneous store of wood, mostly punk, were standing about helplessly.

"Well, make a fire," she said sharply.

"There's no paper to start it," said Monty.

With a brief stare of astonishment, she set about whittling shavings for that purpose. Monty and Hal withdrew into some bushes that partly concealed them and watched her. Monty began to resent the cool airs that made him feel so cheap.

"It's not our fault that we look like a couple of scarecrows," he muttered. "I wish I could show her!"

"I don't notice it," said Hal, with a shrug. But his attempt to look high-bat in the old print dress was so comical Monty suddenly snorted with laughter. Then Hal got sore.

Breakfast consisted of coffee without milk or sugar, baking-powder biscuit, and one small slice apiece of fried fat back. Monty, licking his fingers, thought longingly that he could have done with a little more; but when he saw the smallness of their store he realised that it was no common act of generosity to share it. He tried to find the words to thank her.

"Certainly is kind of you to feed us," he said awkwardly. "I wish I could repay you."

For the first time she looked at him as if he were a human creature. He was obliged to make up his mind about her all over again. This girl was not really hard. There was a depth of sadness in her eyes that hurt him. "Oh, what's a little meat and meal?" she said quickly. Feeling perhaps that some further explanation was required, she added with lowered eyes: "You mustn't think bad of me if I seem to have no feeling. I've got so much trouble!"

"I know that," said Monty quickly. "What has happened?"

She shook her head. "Best not to tell you," she murmured. "You may be questioned about us later."

"Well, I wouldn't give you away," he said sorely.

"I know. But if you don't know anything you won't have to lie."

"If I knew your name and where to find you," he said eagerly, "I could repay you later. I could help you."

She shook her head again. "We don't want any help," she said. And then, with a shake of her head as if to drive out her painful thoughts, she said with her old brusqueness: "You and your friend better lie down and sleep. You must want it."

Monty turned away puzzled by the riddle of her character. He didn't know how to take her. It was far from warm under the shadow of the trees, and the damp earth offered anything but an inviting bed to one clad only in a print dress. However it appeared that she was not yet done with her generous impulses.

"Here, take my blanket," she said, blunt as a boy. "I have a sweater."

Monty and Hal rolled up together in the blanket, and Hal was almost instantly asleep. For awhile Monty lay watching the girl. She lay beside the fire, supporting her cheek on her palm and sadly watching her father. The old man's eyes were closed.

She gave Monty something new to think about. Up to this time he had graded women according to their ornamental qualities, but this one forced him to take account of that mysterious something called character. Yet she had the looks too. His last conscious thoughts were: If she was dressed up she'd put them all in the shade. . . . God! what a figure. How could I ever have fallen for a skinny girl? . . . Rose suits her for a name, so old-timey and natural.

Monty and Hal slept and ate and slept again under the big trees. In mid-afternoon Monty arose well slept out, leaving Hal rolled in the blanket. Rose was nowhere to be seen, but the old man was awake. Lying curiously still on his couch of branches, only his eyes appeared to be alive.

"Rose is fishin'," he said in answer to Monty's searching eyes. "Sit down and chin. Misery loves company."

Monty obeyed, slightly uneasy in the presence of one who could joke when he was visibly at the point of dissolution. He was a tall lean old man of an uncommon breadth of shoulder. His eyes were sunk in two deep caverns and the skin drawn tightly over his bald skull. He had a white beard trimmed to a neat point, and, far gone as he was, there was still something knightly and gallant in his aspect. Monty was reminded of the illustrations in DON QUIXOTE.

"Do you smoke a pipe?" asked the old man.

Monty shook his head. "Only cigarettes," he said, hungrily reminded that he hadn't tasted smoke in nearly twenty-four hours.

"Oh," said the old man, "I was hoping maybe you could fill my pipe for me."

"I'll try," said Monty.

"It's in the breast-pocket of my shirt."

Monty fished out a corncob pipe, a plug of black tobacco, and a penknife. Under the old man's directions he shaved the tobacco, ground it in his palm, and filled the bowl. He stuck the pipe in the old man's mouth and held a match over the bowl while he drew.

After a puff or two the old man said wearily: "Take it away. I cain't taste it nohow. Reckon I'm done finished with the pipe."

Monty knocked out the coal and returned the pipe to the owner's pocket. "I see you're wounded," he said.

The old man gingerly touched his side. "Got a bullet in here for remembrance," he said, with his faint smile.

"You ought to have medical attention," said Monty.

"Oh, Rose can dress it as good as any doctor," he said calmly. "Not that it matters. It has touched a vital spot. I can feel things breaking up in there. I shan't last long. Reckon I'd be daid already if I wasn't so tarnal tough!" he added, smiling.

"You ought to be in bed," said Monty, distressed for him.

"Bed?" he said in his still and faintly amused voice. "What difference does it make? We took to the river so's I could die free," he added.

Monty was touched with awe. This was real. How trivial by comparison all his former life appeared. "Does she know?" he asked.

"Yes, she knows I'm going," was the answer. "It was her idea for us to strike out together."

"How terrible for her!" said Monty.

"Wa'al," said the old man, "Rose is no bread-and-butter miss. She can face realities."

"Have you no home, no other family?" asked Monty.

"We have a home, but it is closed to us," he answered enigmatically. "As for the family, we are the family."

"How did you get your wound?"

"I will never tell you that," said the old man coolly.

Monty perceived whence the girl drew her strength of character. He respected their reticence. "I wish I could help you out some way," he said awkwardly.

"The wish is enough," said the old man courteously. "I take it real kind of you."

Rose appeared between the trees carrying a big fish of the carp or sucker family. She looked sharply from her father's face to Monty's and back again, trying to read what they had been talking about. Whatever it might have been, she could see in the young man's look of concern that he was their friend, and her own hard and wary gaze softened somewhat.

She held up the fish. "It's not prime eating," she said, "but, anyhow, we'll have enough for once."

Monty's heart had leaped up at the sight of her. Funny, he thought, a girl he hadn't exchanged a hundred words with. While she was preparing supper he hung around her, eager to be of service, but, it must be confessed, generally getting in her way. He cursed his own helplessness. Hal, who had awakened, sat a little way off, drawing his bare legs under his skimpy skirt and looking injured.

"I wish I could go along with you and help," said Monty to Rose.

“That’s square of you,” she said, “but, you see, it’s impossible.”

Monty was depressed by her matter-of-factness. The worst of it was, he had to admit to himself she was right. What could he do for her? “What will you do after—after—?” he asked. It was difficult to complete the question.

“After he is gone?” she said calmly. “I can always earn my living.”

There was something almost terrible in her quiet assurance.

When it was dark they carefully lifted the old man into the skiff and pushed off. Monty and Hal squatted in the bow as before. Rose would not allow either of them to relieve her at the oars. Squaring her shoulders, she rowed with a will. It was slow going against the swift current.

The old man said: “Keep near to the right-hand shore. The nearest village is on that side. Ten miles up-stream as I recollect. You’ll know it by the warehouse on the levee.”

Monty’s spirits sunk hearing this. How in heaven’s name were he and Hal going to make out in a strange country dressed as they were? He said nothing.

There was no conversation *en route*. After a long time Monty broke the silence by saying softly: “The warehouse is just ahead.”

“We’ll put you ashore here,” said Rose.

Hal was roused to protest: “You can’t leave us like this!”

“What else can I do?” she said.

Hal had no answer.

“You have only to apply at the first house,” she went on. “Anybody will help you when they hear your story.”

Hal continued to protest.

“Oh, for God’s sake be quiet!” she cried in low-voiced distress, “or you’ll bring somebody down to the river.”

“Shut up! or I’ll knock you overboard!” growled Monty.

Hal was so astonished by Monty’s new tone that he obeyed.

“Take off the dresses,” said Rose grimly.

Monty’s courage failed him then. “Couldn’t we—keep them until we can get something else?” he stuttered.

“They are all I have,” she said. “I can’t replace them.”

Her logic was unanswerable. “All right,” said Monty, hardening his voice. He pulled the dress over his head.

Hal clutched his around him. “I can’t face the world naked,” he protested.

“You look worse in my dress than you would without any,” said Rose.

“Take it off!” growled Monty, and Hal obeyed.

The skiff grounded in the mud, and the two men stepped ashore shivering. Monty, hating to lose her, said:

“If we knew your name perhaps we could find you later.”

“We don’t wish to be found,” she said relentlessly.

He had to let go of the boat. There were no farewells. She backed water with her oars and the skiff was swallowed in the darkness. Monty felt as if she were taking a part of him with her. She settled into her steady quiet stroke. They stood listening until they could no longer hear it.

“Oh, God! what will we do now!” muttered Hal.

Monty, recalled to actualities, felt a crazy impulse to laugh. “I admit the situation is new,” he said.

“What will we do when daylight comes?” said Hal.

“Oh, modesty can be carried too far,” said Monty. “Buck up! You were born naked, weren’t you?”

“If I can’t find a place to hide I’ll throw myself into the water!” cried Hal wildly.

Monty did not take it very seriously. “Just as you like,” he said. “I’m going to look for some clothes!”

CHAPTER VI

BURGLARY

ON top of the levee crouched a low building evidently used for the storage of freight. Creeping up to it, Monty found that the door was padlocked. There were no windows. He snaked his body across the top of the levee and peered down the other side. His eyes were well accustomed to the darkness, and he could make out the dim shapes of several scattered buildings. No light showed in any window.

For a long time he dared not venture any further. Notwithstanding his confident words to Hal, his heart sank at the notion of applying to any house for help. What a fool he would look, crouching outside, when someone came to the door! And, if it chanced to be a woman, she would surely start screeching before he had a chance to tell his story. And rouse the village—and the dogs. In his naked state he could picture the fangs of dogs only too realistically.

However, after his boast to his partner he could not go back without trying his luck. He forced himself to creep on down the further side of the levee. The building nearest him was of considerable extent. It faced the levee and had a wooden porch across the front. Monty could make out a sign on top of the porch, and he supposed it to be a store. The thought leaped into his head: Why not steal sufficient clothes to cover him? It would be better than showing himself at any door. His present circumstances would justify even theft, he told himself.

But it was one thing to make up his mind to break into the store, and another to carry it out. He turned clammy at the idea. I'll never have the nerve! he thought, and his respect for thieves went up. Nevertheless, his legs carried him up to the porch. When the boards of the floor creaked under his weight he broke into a sweat of terror. But nothing happened.

The windows opening on the porch were closed with heavy wooden shutters; the door had a hasp and staple with a padlock through it. The wood of the door was old, and the hasp loose. If I could work something under it I could yank it off, thought Monty. It would make a hell of a racket, but if I could once grab some clothes I wouldn't care what they did to me.

He had heard that in the country store-keepers frequently lived above their stores, or in the rear, and he thought best to reconnoitre before making any further move. He crept around the building on all fours, running into

different objects and cutting his knees on broken glass. But he satisfied himself there were no living quarters in the building; nothing but a loft overhead and sheds in the rear. Moreover, there was no other building within a hundred yards or so.

The ground sloped a little towards the rear, consequently the side windows were out of his reach. He saw that they were not shuttered, and guessed that it might be easier to enter this way, rather than through the front. He had collided with some empty barrels on his way. Retracing his steps, he cautiously rolled one of these under the window, and, standing it on end, climbed on top. To his joy he discovered that the window could be raised. But it was without weights, and he had to search for a long time along the ground before his hand encountered a stick of suitable length to prop it open.

This much accomplished, he still hung on top of the barrel shivering with fear and cold. The thought had come to him that it was quite likely one of the clerks slept in the store to guard against thieves. In the end, with a desperate resolution, he slung a leg over the sill. Whoever might be there, he told himself, he'd have to clothe the robber for decency's sake before handing him over to the police.

Inside, Monty leaned against the window-frame with his heart pounding like a hammer, and his lungs struggling for breath. Well, it was the first time he had committed a burglary. Thinking it would be safer, if there was a man there, to rouse him deliberately rather than to stumble over him by accident, he spoke aloud: "Is there anybody here?" The husky tones of his own voice sounded strangely in his ears. Nobody answered him.

He had only a vague notion as to the arrangement of a country store, and he could not make head or tail of this one. Whichever way he turned he ran into some fresh object, brooms that came down with a clatter; iron tubs or tinware that resounded like drums and brought the sweat of terror out on him again. He finally went down on hands and knees on the splintery floor, feeling his way before him. At length by sheer luck he fetched up against the counter.

Rising up and feeling over the counter, his hand struck a box of matches. It required a strong effort of the will to nerve himself to the point of striking one. In the light of the little flame he got the general hang of the place: the counter against which he leaned with the shelves against the wall laden with canned goods; the stove in the middle of the floor, and beyond it the heavier goods piled against the further wall; boxes, bags, barrels, implements of many sorts. No clothing in sight. His heart went down.

Making his way to the rear, he struck other matches, and finally he saw before him a table piled with khaki pants and other garments. The sight of water to a man dying of thirst could not have been more welcome. Pants! he thought with a sob of joy. Blessed pants! Pants spelled salvation! He broke into foolish laughter. Snatching the top pair, careless of the fit, he pulled them over his legs. As ill luck would have it, he picked an out-size; he had to twist the waist-band and turn it under in order to keep them up. But what matter? Once covered, he felt able to face anything.

His next thought was of Hal. He rolled up a second pair of pants for him. Khaki shirts were piled alongside. Monty put one on and took another for Hal. There was a pasteboard box containing cloth caps, that he tried on one after another until he found two that fitted. Hal's head he judged to be about the same size as his own. Finally on shelves against the rear wall there were shoes in boxes. Monty fitted himself as well as he could in his hurry, and took a pair at random for his partner.

Having secured the vital necessities of covering, he felt that the fixings might wait. Better get out of here while the getting's good, he warned himself. He made his way to the front of the store looking for food of some sort. All he could find as being ready to eat were biscuits in packages, and he took what he could carry.

Climbing back out of the window, he softly let down the sash and threw the stick away. He rolled the barrel back to the place where he had found it. The village still slept. As he had been careful to put back everything he had knocked down, he hoped with luck that the store-keeper might not discover he had been robbed. Still, he had a healthy desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene before morning.

Carrying his loot, he made his way back over the levee with light heels. No scruples troubled him. We had to have it, he told himself, and that seemed a sufficient defence. His blood was up with triumph. I did it! he told himself. I'm not such a duffer, after all!

Climbing down the river side of the levee, he found Hal squatting in the same place where he had left him, a shapeless whitish blur in the dark.

"Did you get anything?" Hal whispered tensely.

Monty could not resist the impulse to plague him a little. "Nary a thing," he said in a discouraged voice. "I couldn't bring myself to knock at any door."

"Good God!" cried Hal. "What will we do when morning comes!" Suddenly it struck him that his partner was not quite the same colour he had been when he left. He put out his hand and felt the shirt. "Oh, you liar!" he

cried, with a catch of joy in his voice. "You're dressed! Are these for me? Are these for me?"

"Sure," said Monty, thrusting the bundle at him. "Cover your nakedness."

Hal plumped down and started pulling on the pants. "Thank God! Thank God!" he groaned. "I never put in such an hour in my life! I never expected to see you again." Presently he said in surprise. "These things are new. Who gave them to you?"

"I stole them out of the store," said Monty, putting on a casual air.

"Stole them!" gasped Hal. "Good God!"

Monty was flattered by his amazement.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Hal when he was dressed.

"Beat it away from here," said Monty.

"We don't know where we are. We don't know which way to turn."

"It don't matter," said Monty. "We want to keep out of jail."

They climbed the levee. There was a dirt road on top running right and left. "Here's our road," said Monty.

"Which way?" said Hal.

"This way on a chance," said Monty, turning up-stream.

He was not leaving it to chance so much as he wished to make out. He had an object in turning up-stream that he was hardly prepared to admit to himself as yet. Rose had gone that way. She could not make much time against the current. Before morning they might overtake her.

They walked throughout the balance of the night. Long walks were new to these two, who had had cars of their own since they had put on long pants. Their legs stiffened, and the ill-fitting shoes chafed their sockless feet. However, they kept going, spurred by the dread of jail. The road followed the levee the whole way. They passed several dark villages sleeping below. Monty kept his ears pricked for the sound of oars on the river, but he heard nothing.

Morning revealed the countryside unchanged from what they had seen the previous morning: a featureless, dun-coloured landscape. On their left the reddish muddy flood swirled down, with a levee on the other side. On their right the bottom lands, brown at this season, stretched away to low hills. An occasional group of farm buildings, with trees, broke the flatness. There was no skiff to be seen anywhere on the river. Monty wondered where Rose and her father would find a hiding-place in this bare world.

As they rounded a bend of the river a big steel bridge came into view a couple of miles ahead. "Railway!" exclaimed Hal, with a brightening eye. "That must go somewhere."

"Well, they usually do," said Monty dryly. His face turned serious at the sight of the railway. He guessed what was passing through Hal's mind. In his own there was only confusion. While they covered the two miles he had little to say.

There was a village at the end of the bridge; half a dozen slatternly, unpainted shacks and a railway station. It was still early and none of these places showed any signs of life except the station. This stood about a hundred yards to the right of the levee. The doors and windows were open, and the station agent was sweeping the platform. Possibly an early train was due. It was the first specimen of their own kind the walkers had seen.

"The station is open," said Hal with satisfaction.

"What of it?" said Monty, scowling. "We've got no money for tickets."

"We can telegraph home collect. Come on."

"Wait a minute," said Monty, hanging back. "I've got this to think out."

"To think out!" said Hal, with a stare. "What's the matter with you?"

Monty's face was drawn with doubt. There was a sharp struggle going on in his mind: comfort and security on the one side; danger and difficulty on the other. The pull of his old easy life was tremendous—and so was the other. There is a rare spice in the unknown. He could not make the throw.

Hal, who saw only one course, could not understand his hesitation. "Come on!" he urged.

With that, something clicked inside Monty. "I'm not going," he said. "I'm going to stick it out—on my own. If we went home now what short sports we'd look. Made a bold break on our own—and telegraphed home for money in twenty-four hours! No! if I crawled home now I'd never be anything but what I was before—a parasite on the old man, a loafer, a lap-dog. I've seen a bit of real life now, and I'm going in for it."

"Good God!" cried Hal, "without money, without decent clothes, without food! How will you live?"

"I'll work," said Monty, "like any other man."

"You don't know the ropes!"

"I'll learn 'em!"

"Don't be foolish," said Hal. "You and I don't have to work."

"Yeah?" said Monty. "That's what we've always been told, and that's what's the matter with us."

“Think of your folks,” protested Hal. “They’ll be near crazy not knowing where you are.”

“I’m sorry for that,” said Monty obstinately, “but I can’t help it. I’ve got myself to think of. It’s partly their fault. They’ve made me pretty near useless at home. Now they’ll have to put up with it.”

“Well, you can do as you like,” said Hal. “Me, I’m going to telegraph home, and I’m going to sit right in the station yonder until I get an answer. I’ve had plenty of real life. I’ve been robbed and beaten up by bandits. I’ve been stripped naked and chucked into the Mississippi and shot at in the water and all but drowned. Not to speak of being starved and frozen. After that the old man is welcome to support me all he has a mind to: I can take any amount of money from him without hurting.”

“That’s cheap talk,” said Monty gloomily. “The kind of thing that brings loud applause from nit-wits. You heard what Buck Bidlong told us in the sleeping-car. That’s what a man thinks of us however we may try to laugh it off. Well, I’m not willing to rest under it. I’m going to be on my own.”

“Go as far as you like,” said Hal, “but excuse me!”

This appeared to be final, but they could not part so easily. Long association had made them dependent on each other. They looked away from each other, scowling, but they made no move. Monty began to soften towards his old friend. After all, it would render his choice doubly difficult if he had to go it alone.

“We been together near eight years,” he muttered sorely. “Are you going to shake me like this?”

“You’re shaking me!” retorted Hal.

“Nothing to it! You’re only raising a dust to confuse the issue. This is our chance to make good. Are you going to pass it up?”

Hal, feeling the strong pull of his words and determined not to give in, became violently excited.

“Aah, you make me sick!” he burst out. “With all your talk about making good. Do you think you got a mortgage on decency? It’s all hooley, anyhow. The truth is, you’re after that girl!”

“That’s a damned lie!” cried Monty, furiously angry in his turn, because there was a large grain of truth in the charge, and he would not acknowledge it to himself. “What’s the girl got to do with it? She’s nothing to me!”

“That fetched you! That fetched you!” mocked Hal. “I can’t congratulate you on your taste. What do they call them down here? Po’ white trash; crackers.”

Monty turned white, and cursed him from the bottom of his heart. “Rotten lump of blubber! All you can do is sit on your butt and insult your betters. You can’t even recognise real people when you see them. Only their clothes!”

“All right!” yelled Hal. “You dress your way and I’ll dress mine.”

“I’m damned if you will!” cried Monty. “You’re coming along with me. I’ll try to drive some sense into your head. If you haven’t got guts enough to make a man of yourself I’ll do it for you!”

“Like to see you!” sneered Hal.

“All right!”

Monty suddenly twisted his hand in the collar of Hal’s shirt and started him running across the track and up the levee. Hal, taken by surprise, was unable to resist the push. He let his legs go limp and dropped, breaking Monty’s hold. Rolling clear he sprang to his feet and came back at Monty, his face working with rage. Monty waited for him.

To tell the truth, it was one of the funniest fights that ever took place between two grown men. It would have made the fortune of a vaudeville team could they have rehearsed it. Neither of the contestants had any notion of how to handle himself. In that they were well matched. The fighting spirit was there all right. They rushed at each other with their fists beating the air like flails. When a blow landed it did no particular damage. They wasted their strength in wild rushes and passes, spinning around and often falling down of their own impetus.

The station agent was the solitary spectator of this astonishing scrap. Leaning on his broom, he stared open-mouthed. “I swam!” he murmured. “I swan! Did anybody ever see the like!” It was hard to decide whether they were in earnest or not.

They wrestled impotently all over the levee. Once they dropped out of sight down the other side, but quickly reappeared, chasing each other in circles and indulging in the strangest-looking antics in the effort to hit each other. Unable to stand up, they rolled on the ground like a pair of cats, the top man always trying to drag himself free so he could hit, and the under man clinging to him to save himself.

It did not last long. They had been walking all night, and exhaustion supervened. Monty got fairly astride of Hal and pounded his head on the earth until he ceased struggling.

“Get off me,” muttered Hal.

Monty arose. Hal, wrapping his arms around his head, cursed him impotently from the ground. “I’ll kill you for this! I’ll kill you!”

Monty, seeing that he was licked, let him have the satisfaction of cursing. Having licked the son-of-a-gun, his heart softened towards him. The truth was he had fought Hal simply because he couldn't bear to let him go.

"Come on," said Monty as if nothing had happened, and walked off up the levee. Hal scrambled to his feet and followed, still cursing him viciously—however, he followed.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" murmured the astonished station agent. "Must be a couple of loonies escaped from some'eres."

Monty had no feeling of triumph, for out of the tail of his eye he had seen the station agent grinning. Gosh! what an exhibition we must have made of ourselves! he thought, turning hot. Like a couple of women clawing each other. What kind of a figure would I have cut if I'd been up against a fighting man! He gritted his teeth together. By God! I'll teach myself how to stand up to a man! I'll learn how to use my fists if I have to take a hundred beatings in doing it!

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST JOB

A COUPLE of dilapidated specimens of humanity sat on the levee clasping their knees and looking out across the river. Their ill-fitting khaki clothes, though new, had evidently been slept in more than one night, and bore the stains of mud and rain. Their faces were decorated with a four days' growth of beard. Not much chance of anybody recognising in them the two scions of wealth for whom the country was searching.

All along the river they had been hearing about the floodgates, a great piece of engineering undertaken for the Government, where work was to be had, and now the busy scene was before them. However, the river itself offered a serious obstacle, since the work was on the other side. There was a ferry running on a steel cable, but when they had applied to the ferryman for a lift he not unreasonably asked them if they thought he was in business for his health.

Monty had attempted to argue the question with him. "We don't ask you to make a special trip for us," he said.

"Well, now that's square of you," said the ferryman sarcastically.

"But when you're making the trip, anyhow, you won't lose anything by taking us, because we haven't a cent."

The ferryman was not impressed, and they had been obliged to sit on the levee all morning watching the work they could not reach, while the pangs of hunger gnawed their bellies. An occasional handout from the farmhouses along the road had given them just strength to keep on walking and no more.

The floodgates were for the purpose of controlling high water in the Chickawa. A canal southward from this point carried the surplus water into the bayous of Louisiana. The watchers were not engineers enough to understand in detail what was being done; but at the north end of the works they could see where temporary wooden gates had been let into the levee. They were open at present, and they could hear the roar of the water pouring through. Below, a retaining wall of masonry was rising behind the present levee with openings for permanent gates. Long sheds had been built to house the workers, and farther down-stream a straggling, mushroom village had sprung up. Boats of all sorts were moored to the levee.

Towards noon a motor truck came bumping up the levee road laden with prospective labourers for the work. Monty eagerly applied to the foreman in charge.

“Can you use a couple more men?”

“Men?” answered the foreman, pulling a droll face. “How do you get that way?”

There was a loud laugh from the crew, and Monty fell back abashed. However, it appeared that the foreman was only showing off a little for the benefit of his hirelings. “Hop on,” he said indifferently. Thus they got across.

An hour later, having been fed in a mess house with hundreds of labourers, they found themselves at work on the earthen bank behind the retaining wall. Light rails had been laid down, and long strings of little cars laden with earth were pushed along it. Monty and Hal were supposed each to dump a car by pulling a lever, and afterwards, when the train had been drawn out of the way, to help the earth over the edge with their shovels.

It was the easiest job on the works they had been told and the new men were always put on it, but neither of these had ever in his whole life manipulated so rude an implement as a shovel, and after an hour of it Monty felt as if his back was breaking. The handle of the shovel burned his hands as if it were red hot. It was so arranged that as soon as a string of empties was drawn away, freshly filled cars took their places. Only the most expert shovellers enjoyed a breathing space.

Hal was worse off than Monty. His face was pale and streaked under the strain, and, though the loose earth was piling up around him, he stopped often, staring at it in a bewildered way. It was obvious that he couldn't last out the afternoon. Monty could give him no help. Suddenly a hoarse voice came down from the stone wall behind them:

“Hey, you! You with the dirty pants! What do you think you're doin'? Playin' golluf?”

Hal made a desperate effort, but his nerveless arms were no longer capable of lifting a shovelful of earth. The foreman sent down another man to take his shovel.

“Get the hell out of here!” he roared.

“Where will I go?” asked Hal innocently.

There was a laugh down the line.

“What the hell is it to me where you go?” bawled the foreman. “Go find a hole and bury yourself!”

The crestfallen Hal slunk away, pursued by laughter and rude jests. A feeling of despair took possession of Monty. I'll never be able to last out until evening! But he set his jaw and crushed it down. If Hal can't hold down a job, I've got to work for both, he thought. I suppose if other men can do it I can!

There was a red-hot wire stabbing under his shoulder-blades, but he would not recognise it. The sweat ran down in his eyes, making them sting; he told himself as long as he could sweat he was all right. Somehow he managed to keep the little space around him clear of loose dirt, but he had the discouraging sense that he wasn't getting anywhere; time was standing still. After hours had passed, as it seemed, he stole a look at the sun and it was in the same place.

Well, then, he mustn't look at the sun any more, but keep his eyes on the shovel. Make his mind a blank and his body a machine: lift and throw; lift and throw. If the gang would strike up a song it would be easier; but these men didn't sing at their work. Lift and throw; lift and throw; the whole span of life seemed to stretch between now and the blessed evening.

By and by, as a result of his intense concentration on the shovel, it seemed to him he wasn't suffering so much. There were bright spots dancing on a black ground before his eyes, but that scarcely mattered, because he didn't have to look closely at what he was doing; just keep the loose earth moving. Then for moments at a time he forgot everything, and came to again to find himself still shovelling. This was fine; at this rate the time would soon pass. Suddenly everything turned dark at once and he felt himself pitching over the edge with his shovel. The thought flitted through his mind: As labourers Hal and I are complete washouts!

He stuck in the loose bank before he had fallen far. He did not lose consciousness completely because he could hear the men shout and the foreman curse. "The ——! Pick him up and load him in a car. ——! if I could only get a few he-men to throw dirt!"

Monty was picked up, carried to the top, and dropped in a huddle in one of the hopper-shaped cars. The train started with a jerk and banged back over the loose rails. He passed out completely.

When his senses returned he found himself lying in a delicious clean bed in the middle of a white-enamelled room. A woman in white, wearing a white cap, was moving around. He thought he was dreaming, and hastily closed his eyes so as not to wake. But he could hear steps, and he reflected that you do not hear sounds in your dreams. He opened his eyes and it was all there still. The nurse was looking at him.

“Feeling better?” she asked cheerfully.

Monty nodded, and asked the sick man’s invariable first question: “What time is it?”

“Nearly five,” she said, glancing at her watch.

Monty groaned in relief. They could not put him back to work again that day.

Presently a fresh anxiety attacked him. What in heaven’s name would have happened to Hal with nobody to look after him? Monty didn’t give his partner credit for much sense. He was certain that Hal had got himself into some fool jam or another, or else the rough characters around camp had beaten him up.

“When can I get up?” Monty asked the nurse anxiously.

“What’s the rush?” she said cheerfully.

“Well, I got to find my partner——”

“He’s waiting outside.”

When he entered the room, instead of being down and out as Monty expected, Hal was grinning from ear to ear. “I’ve got a job,” he said at once. “Keeping inventory at the stores. There’s a place for you too, to-morrow. It’s a cinch!” There was evidently more to come, but Hal checked himself, with a glance at the nurse.

She presently left the room on business of her own, and Hal, drawing close to the bed, pulled a Little Rock newspaper from his back pocket. “It’s three days old,” he said. “I pulled it out of a truck-box as I came along.”

Upon spreading it out on the bed, Monty read in letters two inches high running across the front page:

NO TRACE FOUND OF MONTY DIXON AND HAL GREEN

Underneath were their photographs, transmitted by wire from New York. Monty gulped. He had known this must be happening, but the actuality staggered him. He visualised every newspaper in America coming out with the same scare heads, and every newspaper reader fastening his eyes upon them. Millions and millions! This was fame—of a kind! He skimmed over the story beneath.

Upon the arrival of the New Orleans limited at its destination the drawing-room occupied by the two millionaires’ sons was found to be empty. The window of the room was open, but there were no evidences of foul play. The door was locked on the inside. It was supposed that the lads had been kidnapped. Their parents had long been in fear that something of

the sort might happen. How their assailants had got into the drawing-room was a complete mystery. A hundred private detectives had been put on the case, starting operations from every station where the train had stopped during the night.

It appeared that the limited had been halted by a block in a lonely spot north of Marigold, Miss., and this neighbourhood was being searched also. In view of the fact that the lad's baggage was missing (with the exception of their golf-clubs), it was the belief of the railway police that they had left the train of their own free will, but their parents scouted this theory. Why should they have run away on the eve of the sporting trip to which they looked forward with such keen enjoyment? it was asked. Each father had offered fifty thousand dollars reward for information leading to the recovery of his son.

Monty whistled softly. "Gee! a hundred thousand dollars! Ike the bandit will be sick when he reads this!"

"A hundred thousand dollars!" echoed Hal. "And us without a red cent between us. It's a funny world!"

"We're not worth it," said Monty, grinning.

The nurse entered. Coolly turning the page, Monty affected to be interested in something on the other side.

"I see by the paper that Monty Dixon and Hal Green have not been found," she said brightly.

"Well, it's nothing in my life," said Monty.

She was bringing Monty's supper on a tray. After the past few days the Ritz could not have sent up a more tempting set-out. Hal, glancing at it out of the corners of his eyes, said with a great air of unconcern:

"Well, I'll be getting along. See you later, Monty."

"Where you going to eat?" asked Monty.

"I don't know yet."

"Say, Nurse, couldn't you rustle a little grub for my partner?" begged Monty.

She was a good-natured soul. "I couldn't bring anything for him," she said, "but of course, if you were to ask for more you could have it."

"Fine!" said Monty. "I ask for more. Sit down on the bed and fall to, old sock!"

After supper they received a visit from the doctor. A quiet, homely little man with a disillusioned eye, there was something about him that won the young men's confidence. Talking it over afterwards, they agreed it was

because he was the first man they had met on their travels who was willing to take them as he found them.

He stuck a thermometer in Monty's mouth and felt his pulse. "Nothing the matter with you," he said presently. "You're discharged. Whose gang are you with?" he asked. "Your boss didn't send in the customary forms with you."

"Reckon I'm fired," said Monty, grinning. "My partner was already fired."

"Have you got any place to sleep?" asked the doctor.

Monty shook his head. "We're going to work in the store-room tomorrow."

"I want this room for a typhoid patient," he said, "but you can lie down on the floor of my office if you've got nothing better. Stop in on your way out and I'll show you." He went on his way without waiting for their thanks.

"Well, there's one white man," said Monty.

It didn't take him long to assume his two garments and his dusty shoes. They found the doctor lighting a cigar in his little office by the front door. He pointed to two blankets that he had laid on a chair for them. "Go take a walk and see the sights," he suggested dryly. "When you get back I'll be through here."

His friendly manner induced the two lads to linger. "Reckon you get some funny cases here, Doc," said Monty.

"I'll say I do," said the doctor, smoking ruminatively. "Seems like all the drifters in the Mississippi basin fetch up at this camp. The crevasse in the levee here opened a way for small boats into the swamps of Northern Louisiana. A kind of no-man's land. Couldn't be reached before except by a long journey from the south. For the past two years men have been straggling in there. Queer fish! Queer fish! Adventurers and runaways. There's many a wanted man hiding in there. Many a one will find his grave there."

"What sort of a country is it?" asked Monty curiously.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "They go in, but they don't come out again."

"Plenty of game, I reckon."

"There ought to be. It's never been disturbed. Two days ago there was an outfit went in," the doctor continued; "party of men in a big open boat with an engine. Had a good look at a couple of them. Hardest looking customers I've ever seen, and I've knocked around some. Offered me a dandy express

rifle with gold inlay. Prettiest gun I ever saw. But, of course, I wouldn't touch stolen goods."

Monty and Hal avoided looking at each other in order not to give anything away.

"That so?" said Monty off-hand.

The doctor went on to relate anecdotes of other queer characters who had gone that way.

After a while Monty said casually: "We saw a funny outfit down the river. Girl rowing a skiff with an old man lying in it. He was either sick or wounded bad. Did they stop by here?"

"Haven't seen them," said the doctor.

"Oh," said Monty; "thought maybe she would bring the old man to you for medical attention."

A patient came in and the two lads went outside the little hospital. It had become dark. The sounds of music drew them down the old levee to the nondescript village that had sprung up below the works. In a long shed with a corrugated iron roof a dance-hall had been improvised. Workmen were sitting around at tables drinking what purported to be near beer, and in the centre a small space had been left clear for dancing. Half a dozen worn-looking girls in gaudy dresses were in great demand for partners. Men who were unable to secure a girl danced seriously with each other. It was a sad-looking entertainment; having no money, the young men did not go inside.

"It's a long, long way to the Biltmore," murmured Monty.

A bouncer ordered them to move on.

Next door was a brilliantly lighted general store doing a thriving business. To the lads' amazement the most conspicuous object on display was one of their own fine pigskin kit-bags resting on a counter just inside the door. They were drawn in to examine it closer. The initials had been scratched off.

The proprietor came strolling over. "Interested in a fancy bag, boys?" he said. "'Tain't often you see such a pretty piece of leather. Real pigskin. You can have it dirt cheap. To speak truth," he added, lowering his voice, "there ain't nobody in this camp as can appreciate how choice it is."

"Where did you get it?" asked Monty involuntarily.

The man's face turned hard and ugly. "What the hell is that to you?" he demanded. "Do you want to buy?"

"Got no money," said Monty.

"Then get the hell out of here!"

They went.

As the darkness swallowed them again, Monty's heart leaped into his throat upon hearing a well-remembered voice call softly: "You, there!"

Whirling around, he found himself face to face with Rose. "*You!*" he exclaimed joyfully.

She was squeezing her hands together agitatedly. It was a disturbing thing to see in one so self-controlled. "Oh, I'm glad you happened along!" she murmured. "I didn't know what to do. I've got to have meal before I can go any farther. I didn't want to show myself in the store. Will you help me?"

"Will we help you? Only give us the chance!" said Monty.

"Get me a hundred pounds of cornmeal in two fifty-pound bags," she said. "Five pounds of lard in a bucket and a big can of yeast-powder." She pressed money into his hand.

The two boys returned to the store. The hard-faced man, seeing that they came to buy, changed his tone. They presently rejoined Rose in the darkness with their purchases. Without a word she led the way down the levee, past the last house and down the bank, to the edge of the water, where they found her skiff moored to an oar driven into the mud.

"Has anybody been here, Pap?" she asked anxiously.

"Nobody," he said faintly. "Who's that with you?"

"The same two fellows we picked up," she said simply.

"Howdy, men," he said politely.

They loaded the grub aboard, and an awkward silence followed. The girl was working her oar free of the mud.

"Well, I must be pushing off," she said at last. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't owe us any thanks," said Monty quickly. An unaccustomed emotion made his voice harsh. "Where you going from here?" he demanded. "Not into the swamps!"

Her silence was a sufficient answer.

"That's no fit place for a woman!" Monty protested. "Half the blacklegs in the country are hiding there, they tell me. Why, the gang of thugs that robbed us and threw us overboard went in there."

"It's a big country," murmured the girl. "We shan't meet them."

"But there are plenty of other scoundrels! What would a woman do there?"

"We are going to a friend," she said. "We'll be all right."

Monty believed that she was lying just to silence his objections. “Take us with you,” he begged. “I know we can’t do much, but we’d be some protection. I can’t stand the thought of your going in there alone.”

“It’s impossible,” she said. “I couldn’t feed you.”

This was unanswerable. Monty turned away, swallowing a groan at his own helplessness. She climbed over the bow of her skiff and pushed off with an oar. “Good-bye,” she said, “and thanks for your help.” There was nothing hard about her then.

“Good-bye, boys,” said the old man.

Monty let Hal answer for both of them. He didn’t trust his own voice. The skiff was swallowed up in the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

IN PURSUIT

“STORES,” where Monty and Hal set to work next morning, was a big iron shed forming the corner of a yard surrounded by an iron fence topped with barbed wire. The entrance was through a gate in the fence, where a watchman was stationed all day to make sure that nobody carried out anything but what he had a requisition for. Light stuff and perishable goods were stored under the roof, while heavy supplies were piled in the yard. A foreman and his gang attended to the loading of the stuff, and the job of the two new hands was limited to keeping inventory: to enter everything that was put into stock and everything that was shipped out; to check up what the books called for with what was on hand.

Their immediate boss was a long-legged young man with a dissipated face, a white-collar man who lived at the swell boarding-house at the upper end of the works. He spent the morning in explaining their work to them in a bored manner, telling them the names of everything and showing them where it was kept. At dinner-time he gave them a note to the personnel manager, who allotted them seats at the mess tables and places in a bunk-house.

After dinner the young man failed to turn up. However, by this time Monty and Hal knew pretty well what they had to do, and they started to work without him.

“That feller don’t have to work,” grumbled the foreman. “His old man is one of the contractors. He can pay youse guys to do his work and still make a good thing out of it, while he amuses hisself.”

“What can he find round here?” asked Monty.

“Oh, there’s plenty doing if you got the price,” said the foreman grinning.

Monty and Hal moved about with their lists clipped to a board supported on the left arm, checking what came in and what went out. In the middle of the afternoon there happened to be a lull, and they retired to the office at the end of the shed for a smoke. Monty had found a packet of cigarettes in the pocket of an old coat hanging behind the door.

“This ain’t so bad,” said Hal comfortably. “We’ve struck it pretty soft, if you ask me.” They practised talking in a rough way so that they could keep

up their end with the men who surrounded them.

Monty did not answer directly. His thoughts were with a skiff heading southward into the swamps. By and by he muttered:

“I wish I could lay my hands on a little money. My God! I’d steal it if I saw the chance.”

“For the love Mike!” remonstrated Hal. “You’re getting the habit.”

Later in the afternoon in the office, Monty was going through the stationery cabinet which filled one side of the wall. The lower part was filled with boxes of typewriting paper piled upon each other. Happening to strike against the piles, they moved a little, and Monty, thinking nothing of it, shoved them back as far as they would go. The bottom tiers, however, would not go all the way back. They stuck out a couple of inches. In pure idleness he lifted the boxes out to discover the reason. Then he looked around at Hal with a hard grin.

“See here!”

Hal, stooping down, saw lying against the back of the cupboard the polished cowhide case of one of their expensive guns. “Good God!” he gasped.

“My prayer is answered,” said Monty grimly.

“But—but you don’t think you’re going to steal it!” stammered Hal.

“Steal it!” said Monty indignantly. “Our own gun! I like that!”

“Well, he bought it from the thief; he looks on it as his.”

“That’s all right,” retorted Monty; “he knew it had been stolen. Look at the way he hid it. That lets me out.”

“Suppose he comes in,” suggested Hal nervously.

Monty made haste to stick the gun behind a pile of boxes outside the office door, and to return the boxes of paper to the cabinet, leaving them exactly as he had first seen them. “It’s not likely he’ll look for it to-night,” he said.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Hal.

“Sell it to the store-keeper,” said Monty.

“Suppose he has you arrested?”

“Not him,” said Monty coolly. “He’s a crook. He’ll never turn down the chance of turning a dishonest penny. I saw it in his eye.”

“And then what?” asked Hal.

Monty looked around the office with a grin. “Well, I didn’t run away from home to be an inventory clerk,” he said.

By that Hal saw that their adventures were about to begin again. His heart sank. He was a peace-loving soul. Then he had a cheering thought. "Anyhow," he said, "you can't get it out of here. There's that watchman sitting at the gate."

"At this season it's dark by five-thirty," said Monty. "I'll drop it out of the window and come round after it outside."

Hal resigned himself to the worst.

And so it was done. Their young boss did not return before closing time. Monty wrapped the gun in the old coat and dropped it to the ground. The window was barred outside, but there was three inches space between the bars. Monty picked it up a couple of minutes later, and walked along the levee hugging it under his arm.

"Where will you put it until after supper?" asked Hal nervously.

"To hell with supper," said Monty. "This is the time to make a trade. The store will be empty."

They hustled along the levee, Monty carrying the gun-case wrapped in the old coat. When the store-keeper understood the nature of their business, he led them into a little office at the rear. He was a hard bargainer, and under ordinary circumstances Monty would have been no match for him, but in this case the young man's price was fixed by his imperious need, and he could not depart from it. He exhibited the aristocratic weapon.

"A Marvin Wilder express rifle of the latest pattern," he said, "with gold chasing. It cost five hundred dollars."

"How do you know?" asked the store-keeper, with a sneer.

"Well, I know," said Monty, "and you know it too, if you've ever traded in firearms."

"Where did you get it?"

"Never mind that. It's mine. What'll you give for it?"

"All that gold trimming won't help it to shoot any straighter."

"You're not buying it to shoot, but to sell again."

"Who is there in this dump would buy it?"

"Nobody. But you can carry it to Little Rock or to St. Louis the next time you go, and pawn it for more than double what you pay me."

"Well, I'll give you ten dollars for it."

"Nothing doing," said Monty, preparing to wrap it up.

"Name your price then."

“This gun has got to stake me and my partner with an outfit to get away from here. If it’s not good enough, then I’ll keep it.”

“Well, name a figure, name a figure.”

“Seventy-five dollars,” said Monty boldly.

The store-keeper laughed uproariously. “Take it away! Take it away!” he cried, waving his hands.

Monty proceeded to take him at his word. They had almost reached the door before he called them back. “I’ll give you fifty dollars in trade,” he said.

Monty turned around, concealing his satisfaction. This was all he had expected to get. “I can only take part in trade,” he said. “I’ve got to buy a skiff with some of the money.”

“Oh, if it’s a skiff you want,” said the store-keeper. “I’ll trade you a dandy skiff for the gun.”

“Nothing doing,” said Monty. “A skiff would be no good to me without an outfit. I’ve got to have a pair of blankets, a cheap shot-gun, an axe, and grub.”

The store-keeper dissolved in laughter again. “Go away! Go away! Your ideas are too grand for me, fellow.”

However, before they got out of the store he called out, “Come around in the morning, anyhow, and take a look at the skiff.”

“I can’t buy the skiff unless I sell the gun,” said Monty.

“Well, if you like the skiff I’ll stake you to the outfit.”

“In that case,” said Monty, “let’s take a look at the skiff now. I reckon you’ve got a lantern.”

“Sure! Sure!” said the store-keeper, not at all sorry to speed them on their way.

Lighting a gasoline lantern that spread around a brilliant light, he led them down the bank to the water’s edge, where, lying amongst the craft tied there, he pointed out a heavily built, flat-bottomed skiff of moderate size. Monty knew little about boats, but he could see that it was floating and that it was dry in the bottom; hence it must be sound.

“All right,” he said, “if we can agree about the rest.”

Returning to the store, they haggled over the outfit item by item. Monty stuck out for a hundred pounds of flour and thirty pounds of meat, but in order to obtain it he was forced to relinquish coffee, sugar, and cigarettes. When the business was concluded, with the store-keeper’s assistance they carried down the stuff and loaded it into the skiff.

“Where you going, men?” the man asked curiously.

“New Orleans,” answered Monty unhesitatingly. “We want to make it in time for the races.”

“Well, good luck to you!”

Monty pushed off.

“You’re not going to start out now?” whispered Hal, dismayed.

“Why not?” returned Monty. “Have you got any trunks to pack or friends to say good-bye to?”

“No,” said Hal, “but—but——”

“We’ve got to start,” said Monty. “There’s no place where we could leave our stuff without having it stolen.”

However, they did not get far that night. Monty rowed down-stream a little way, and then, striking out into mid-stream, came back softly. Above the camp the deep, throaty roar of the water rushing through the temporary gates held them up. They hung about in the river, afraid to venture it.

“If Ike’s big boat could run it, it must be all right for us,” said Monty.

“But you’ve got to see what you’re doing,” insisted Hal.

The upshot was, they drove an oar into soft mud just below the gates and tied up to it to await daylight. Supper consisted of dry biscuits only. They rolled up in their blankets and slept in the bottom of the skiff.

They were awakened by a yell almost in their ears, and sprang up in affright to find another skiff lying alongside with two young fellows in it, roaring with laughter at the sight of their startled faces.

“Where the hell are you birds bound for?” demanded the one sitting in the stern.

Monty took him in with mixed feelings. A hardbitten handsome fellow not much older than himself, built like a Viking under his faded khaki clothes, and with eyes as blue and cold as ice. His left hand negligently grasped the barrel of a Winchester, and one could see at a glance that he could hit hard enough and shoot straight enough to give him a preeminent position among fighting men. His glance was as unfeeling as stone, but he was not another Ike. He was hard, but he was not crooked; Monty appreciated the difference and was obliged to respect him for it. The second man was of much the same type, but was darker in colour and lacked the godlike arrogance of the blond giant.

Facing him out, Monty answered sullenly: “What is it to you where we’re going?”

“Not a thing in God’s world,” said the young man scornfully, “but I want to know where you’re from.”

“We came up the river,” muttered Monty.

“Have you seen a girl rowing a skiff?” the other demanded, fixing Monty with his glittering eyes. “Had an old man with her, wounded bad.”

Monty had to think quickly before answering. He did not have to be told that this man was Rose’s enemy. The thought turned him cold. What good would he be to defend her against such a one? This man could break him between his hands if he had a mind to. Well, if he couldn’t help her with his strength, he must use his wits. He must lie, and lie convincingly. To lie convincingly, you must embroider it with the truth as far as possible.

“Yes, we met her a couple of times,” he said. “First on the Mississippi, then on this river.”

“When did you see her last?”

“Night before last. She landed to buy meal at the store. Me and my partner carried it down for her.”

“Then where did she go?”

“Up-river.”

The hard eyes bored into him. “What d’ye mean, up-river? Up here to the gates?”

“No,” said Monty hardily, “up-river to the first town. She wanted to get a doctor for the old man.”

“That’s a lie,” was the cool answer. “She didn’t want to take him to no town. He’s wanted for murder.”

This was like an icy douche over Monty. He shivered inwardly, but kept his head. “That’s nothing to me,” he said indifferently. “At first she talked about going into the swamps, but I persuaded her out of it. They’re telling around here how the hardest characters in the country are hiding in there, and I told her it was no place for a woman. A man could do no less.”

The second man spoke up. “This bird is too gabby, Rafe. He shore is lying. Prob’ly stuck on the girl.”

“I reckon!” drawled Rafe, keeping Monty fixed with his terrible eye.

“Well, you can take it or leave it,” said Monty, steeling himself to face it out. “These people are nothing to me, nor you neither.”

Rafe hesitated, studying Monty. The latter waited, holding his breath. Finally Rafe said carelessly: “Well, it’ll do no harm to take a look up-river. We can soon find out from others if she went that way. If this guy is lying, I’ll come back and kill him. Go on, Jim.”

They coolly rowed away up-river, leaving a silent and shaken pair behind them. Hal was pale with fear. Monty was not much better off, but he would not let it be seen. Rousing himself, he said brusquely:

“Come on, let’s shoot the chutes!”

He rowed to the water-gate. It was a formidable-looking place for an amateur oarsman, a long, smooth slide of water ending in a furious boil-up at the bottom. Monty rowed into it unhesitatingly. There was, however, no particular danger in the descent. They shot down, and found themselves floating in smooth water beyond, with no damage beyond a wetting.

From that point an endless straight ditch carried the water away across country. High earthen banks cut off all view of the fields. Monty rowed steadily, keeping his scowling glance fixed on the bottom of the boat.

By and by Hal said, “What the hell did you tell them that for? Won’t do any good. They’ll be right back.”

“I had no choice,” said Monty, without looking up. “It will give her a little more time. If we have luck we’ll come up with her before they do. We can warn her.”

“But they’ll be back. Then what will we do?”

“Stick up for her,” muttered Monty.

“We’re no match for that pair!”

“We’ll have to be.”

CHAPTER IX

DARK WATERWAYS

THE scene was completely changed. The monotonous river bottoms had given place to a tangled subtropical swamp through which the eye could not penetrate more than a few yards in any direction. Man had scarcely reached this wilderness as yet, and had left no marks upon it. Superb cypress-trees, rooted in the water, raised their groined trunks a hundred feet and more into the air like Gothic columns; and on dryer ground spreading live oaks stood foursquare to resist the vines that sought to overwhelm them.

Technically speaking, it was winter and the deciduous trees were bare, but there were not enough of them to be noticeable. From the branches of all the trees hung soft curtains of grey moss, creating a perpetual twilight on the river. In places where the sun struck through, the effect was suddenly dazzling.

“It’s like a scene on the stage,” said Hal.

“No opera house could throw an effect like this,” said Monty. “It’s like something you might dream after a heavy supper.”

The Chickawa River had poured its surplus muddy flood into the swamps without any appreciable effect. The water that bore them along now was a clear dark brown in colour, black when you looked straight into it, sweet and pure to the taste. It was a river snaking its course in endless coils back and forth among the trees, but so sluggish was the current and so divided the channel that they frequently strayed out of it. It was only when they found themselves in slack water that they knew they were lost, and must retrace their way until they found the flow.

By day it was indescribably beautiful, and when darkness fell it became awe-inspiring. They slept on the beaches of sand that often divided the flowing water from the slack water, and if there was no dry land they rolled up in the skiff. The silence was supernatural. It seemed to come creeping with the dark like a living thing and to surround them like something crouched and ready to spring. Silent water, silent trees, silent spaces of blackness between the tree-trunks! How they longed for lights, voices, and the sounds of human traffic then! In the morning the phantoms disappeared.

Their progress was an endless series of difficulties. They had everything to learn; how to pole the boat when the way was too much obstructed for

oars; how to swing an axe, how to make a fire, how to cook, how to fish, how to shoot. Monty wasted the whole box of shells without bringing down anything for the pot, and thereafter the shot-gun was only a dead weight to be carried. They occasionally caught a soft-mouthed fish, but could not depend on it as a source of supply; and as for the problem of baking biscuit before an open fire, Monty struggled with it with indifferent success until the end.

In a week they had met only one man, an unwholesome-looking hermit living in a hut wattled and thatched with palmetto. Red-eyed and yellow-skinned from many a bout with malaria, he displayed but little interest in life, but he told them Rose had passed that way the day before, and that the sick man was holding his own. She had a map, and had asked questions as to the route south. He had told her about Lake Bigarel, a big sheet of water, and had warned her not to try to cross it in a skiff. Beyond the lake, the bayou continued to wind through the swamp, he said.

They were looking for the lake now. Though they were prepared for it, in the end it was sprung on them with all the effect of a surprise. After a week under the big trees they had forgotten what the open sky looked like. Suddenly they rounded a bend and came out on a wide-stretching body of water, and the forest was reduced to insignificance. It was five or six miles across to the nearest point on the farther shore, and right and left the lake extended almost out of sight. The surface was ruffled by the gentlest of breezes; the ripples sparkled like crystal necklaces in the morning sunshine.

They paused to discuss their course. The fine weather tempted Monty, and Hal could see by his partner's face that he was thinking of striking out over the wide sheet of water.

"If Rose was talking about crossing the lake," said Monty, "it shows that she was going on down the bayou."

Hal had accepted the fact that they were bound to go to Rose's aid, but he didn't want to take any foolish risks. "The fellow told her she must skirt around the shore," he pointed out.

"Sure," said Monty, "and if we cut straight across we'd gain hours on her. Maybe we'd come up with her to-day. It's too good a chance to miss."

"He said this lake had a bad name for sudden squalls," Hal insisted, though he was beginning to find out there was not much use in trying to reason with Monty when he took a notion into his head.

"What could happen to us?" said Monty. "It's as smooth as a park lake, and there's not a cloud in the sky. I can do it in an hour and a half, whereas it would take a whole day to go around."

“Go ahead! Go ahead!” said Hal. “Nothing I say makes any difference.”

Monty pulled out for the opposite shore.

It seemed as if the lake had deliberately laid a trap for them. They had not made a mile of the way before the clear brilliance of the morning began to take on a tarnished effect, and they perceived with anxiety that the sky was rapidly thickening all around the north. The wind began to come in vicious little gusts. It was a speedy justification for Hal, but he was too much scared to take any satisfaction from it.

“Turn back!” he begged.

Monty would not yet admit he was in the wrong. “What’s the use?” he said. “I’d only be rowing against the wind. Let it blow. We’re all right as long as it’s behind us. It’ll help us on our way.”

The wind settled down to a hard blow that made an ominous roaring across the face of the water. The sea got up with surprising suddenness. It was as if the waves had lain concealed, ready to leap up in triumph as soon as they got their victims helpless out in the middle. For a while yet Monty was all right. It was true that the wind helped them on their way and the opposite shore came up quickly. But he did not know how to save his strength. He began to tire when they were still only half way.

The farther they got across, the higher rose the waves. They would break alongside and roll along with them, snarling at the gunwales of the skiff, then slowly drop astern. Monty discovered that it was not so simple as he had supposed to row before the wind. For the waves as they slipped astern had a tendency to pull the skiff around broadside. He saw that if the flat-bottomed skiff once got in the trough of those short, steep waves she would instantly capsize.

Necessity lent a new strength to his arm, and for a while he forgot his weariness. But whereas an experienced oarsman would have known when to pull and when to ease off, Monty pulled all the time. Even so he was unable always to present the stern of the skiff squarely to the advancing waves. She yawed unexpectedly and a wave leaped over the counter, drenching Hal’s legs and forcing a cry of warning from his throat.

“Bail her out!” commanded Monty.

Hal snatched up the cooking-pot, and, kneeling in the bottom, made the water fly overboard. More slopped in from time to time, but for the moment he kept up with it. His strained gaze was fixed on the shore ahead. It was coming close now; he could even see the intake of the bayou; a quiet little river promising safety—if they could make it!

The wind had steadily increased in force, and the whole surface of the lake was white and hissing now. The water came in in greater volume; it began to gain on Hal. The added weight of water in the bottom rendered the skiff almost completely unmanageable. Though he pulled his heart out, Monty could not keep her straight before the wind. His false strength failed. A sickening weariness paralysed his arms. We are not going to make it! he thought despairingly.

Hal, seeing by his partner's drawn face that he was all in, said: "Let me take the oars."

"Not a chance!" muttered Monty. "She'd capsize if I missed a single stroke! Bail! Bail!"

Hal needed no urging.

The end came when they were no more than two hundred yards from the shore and safety. Monty, pulling desperately on one side to bring her head around, snapped an oar off short. He fell backwards in the boat and lost the other oar. The skiff immediately drifted into the trough; the next wave raked her from stem to stern and she rolled under, throwing them into the water.

When they rose to the surface she was floating bottom upward. The two men instinctively reached and clung to her like infants to their mother. A flat board nailed along her bottom afforded a precarious handhold. Their fingers hooked over it desperately. A very inferno of wind and water raged around their heads.

"Can you hang on?" yelled Monty.

"Sure!" yelled Hal. He saw his partner preparing to let go. "What you going to do?" he yelled.

"Get that oar!"

"You'll drown!"

"We got to have it!"

The unbroken oar was bobbing in the water only a dozen yards away. But in that shrieking maelstrom it required nerve to let go the boat and swim after it. Monty set his jaw and struck out. After a hard struggle he brought it back to the boat.

"What's the good?" cried Hal. "We can't get the boat ashore."

"It's save the boat or nothing," answered Monty. "The swamp!"

The swamp! Hal had forgotten it. What would they do? A chill struck to his bones, and his teeth rattled together like castanets. But a glimpse of Monty's face drove his fears out of mind. Monty had exhausted himself in rowing and swimming and he had nothing left with which to fight the cold.

“Strike out! Strike out!” yelled Hal. “Push the boat towards shore!”

“I’m all in,” muttered Monty. “I can’t make it.”

“Strike out, damn you!” yelled Hal. “You’ve *got* to make it!” It was like an echo of a previous scene—but their positions were reversed now.

Monty obeyed sullenly. Whenever he faltered Hal cursed him afresh.

The wind, having wreaked all the damage it could upon them, went down as quickly as it had risen. The clouds broke, and the sun poured through, making the wild scene glorious. For a while the waves continued to roar and to break over the men’s heads, but their fury gradually lessened. Finally only an uneasy heaving of the surface was left as a reminder of the squall.

Monty and Hal were then able to turn the skiff right side up and point her towards the shore. They shoved the precious oar under the seats for safety. They had no way of emptying her. She floated with the water slopping in and out. Resting their hands on her stern they struck out with their legs. She was so heavy it was impossible to tell if they were moving her. After endless effort the shore appeared no nearer.

Hal was kept up by the recollection that the water was shoal a long way out; he had marked the lines of breakers during the storm. A merciful numbness had succeeded the first bitterness of the cold, but it was increasingly difficult to exert his legs. Monty’s weakness increased on him fast; it came to the point where Hal’s voice could no longer rouse him. He was just able to hang on, no more.

“I’m going,” he mumbled finally. “So long, Hal.”

“I’m damned if you are!” cried Hal, half crying with helpless anger. He fastened a hand in his partner’s hair.

At the same moment a surprising yell broke from Monty—not of terror. “God! my feet are on the ground!”

Hal began to shake all over then. “Damn you!” he stuttered. “What you want to scare me like that for?” Letting his feet down to the firm sand—Ah! how good it felt!—he rested his head on the stern of the skiff until the fit of trembling passed.

There was a beach of fine white sand between the open water of the lake and the forested swamp behind. They pushed the skiff in until it grounded. They were too much exhausted to attempt to empty it, but could only fling themselves down on the beach gasping. The sunny sand stored a generous warmth. Still Hal would not let his partner rest.

“Take off your clothes and wring them out,” he commanded, setting the example.

When this was done they buried themselves in the warm sand, and gradually a new life began to stir in their benumbed veins. They lay for a long time in a kind of daze just soaking in the warmth and refusing to think of the future.

Monty turned his head to look at his partner. “You saved my life all right,” he said.

“Well, we’re quits then,” said Hal.

“You’re a pretty good sort of an old bean,” Monty went on with a derisive grin.

“What for?” said Hal.

“You never once said: I told you so!”

“Aah!” grumbled Hal. “You did the best you could, I reckon.”

Then they slept; Monty with the painter of the skiff wrapped around his arm, in order to forestall any other trick of nature to separate it from them.

A couple of hours later they bestirred themselves again, sore in every limb, and savage with hunger. Golly! thought Monty; if it feels like this to miss one meal, what’ll it be to-morrow? They patiently rocked the water out of the skiff, drawing her up an inch at a time, until they were able to turn her up on the beach and let the last of it run out. Then, dressing themselves in their dry clothes, they pushed off again, using their single oar for a pole. Everything else they possessed was at the bottom of the lake. Even the oarlocks had dropped out of the sockets when the skiff capsized.

Poling along with the oar, they entered the bayou. At the intake there was quite a swirl of current, which cheered their anxious hearts. “This will take us along with one oar as fast as we could make it with two before,” said Monty. Alas for their hopes! In the swamp beyond, it soon slacked off, and the same care as before was necessary in order not to stray out of the stream altogether. Side channels went off in every direction. The main stream twisted to such an extent that the sun was now on their right hand, now on their left; sometimes in front of them, sometimes astern. Whenever the navigators were in doubt, they clung to a branch and threw leaves in the water, watching to see whether they moved.

So like was this stream to the bayou north of the lake, it was difficult to believe there had ever been an interruption. The same mighty cypress-trees with their brown trunks steeped in the water, sending up their curious “knees” all around, on which they must watch not to run the skiff. The same tangle of creepers and parasites hanging down and making twilight on the

dark water while the sun was still shining. There was no dry land to be seen anywhere in this part.

“It’s just as well we lost our grub,” said Monty dryly, “for there’s no place to cook it, anyhow.”

“How long can a man go without eating?” asked Hal anxiously.

“We are about to find out,” said his partner grimly.

When night began to fall in earnest, they kept on going.

“No use tying up,” said Monty. “There’s neither bed nor supper. I’ll let the current carry us. As long as we’re moving we’re on the way.”

They stretched out in the bottom of the skiff, watching the great trees as they drifted slowly past, and the patches of sky high above, slowly darkening, and finally blossoming with stars. When they hung up on a snag, Monty arose and pushed off.

After a long silence Hal’s voice came out of the dark: “Say, Monty, when we get back to town let’s have our first meal at Pierre’s. I’m going to have roasted oysters Pontchartrain, *suprême* of guinea-hen with potatoes O’Brien and . . .”

“To hell with those fixings,” said Monty. “Me for a tenderloin steak two inches and a half thick.”

“They say that new place Armenonville is better than Pierre’s,” said Hal earnestly. “What do you think?”

“Why not take ship and go to Paris while we’re planning it,” said Monty, “that’s the real home of swell eats. Boy, there’s a little restaurant up on the Avenue Clichy called Pigault’s where they have real common tasty food. I thought it was fierce when I was there, but my taste has changed! my taste has changed!”

“Well, we have a chef,” said Hal, “who makes a chestnut dressing for roast turkey—”

“Oh, have a heart!” groaned Monty. “My stomach is wringing its hands!”

Three days later, at dusk, the skiff was still drifting slowly with the current. Hal lay stretched in the bow, while Monty sat crouched on the stern seat languidly wielding the oar for a paddle. He was too tired to stand up. The scene had changed somewhat. They were in a regular river now, with well-defined banks supporting an almost impenetrable tangle of trees and vines all festooned with the inevitable grey moss. For a long time neither had spoken.

Suddenly Monty roused himself. “Hal! Hal!” he whispered, with sharp urgency. “Look!”

“Where?” cried Hal, rising up.

“Straight ahead of us. On the bank. Do you see what I see or is it only a trick of my eyes?”

“A house!” gasped Hal. “Thank God we’re saved!”

“Wait a minute before you give thanks,” muttered Monty. “Maybe it’s deserted.”

“Give them a hail,” said Hal faintly. “I haven’t the nerve.”

The same dread of a disappointment paralysed Monty’s voice. If there was no help there, he felt it was the end. They drifted closer. The house seemed to be built on an island, for he could see water flowing both ways past the point. Finally he raised a shaky voice:

“Hello! Is there anybody there?”

Immediately a strong voice answered out of the dark: “Hello, yo’self. Who the hell air you?”

Monty drove the boat ashore and they stumbled out. Pausing only to pull it up a little way, they started up the bank. But Hal staggered and went down with a sigh. He lay motionless. Leaving him for the moment, Monty hurried on. He dimly made out a tall figure standing in front of the shack.

“Where’s the other one?” the man demanded. “I heard two voices.”

“My partner has fainted,” Monty said weakly. “We haven’t eaten in three days.”

“Sho!” exclaimed the strong, harsh voice. Monty was struck by a familiar ring in it, but he was too far gone to question anything then.

The man laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, and, turning him around, pressed him on to a bench at the door. He went down the bank, and presently returned bearing Hal in his arms. Kicking the door open, he went in. Monty followed. Hal was laid on the bed, and the man lit a lamp. As the flame came up, Monty was amazed to recognise the hawk-like features and the jutting white eyebrows of old Buck Bidlong. At the sight of that grim old face, he felt slightly frost-bitten; however, Buck was playing the Good Samaritan now.

He raised the lamp to examine his unexpected guests. Naturally he failed to identify these haggard, bearded, ill-clothed specimens with the elegant gentlemen of the sleeping-car. “How did you get yo’selves in such a fix?” he demanded.

“We capsized on the lake,” said Monty. “We saved our boat and one oar, that’s all.”

“You-all ought to had mo’ sense, than to cross the lake in a skiff,” said Buck. “Where you from?”

“Up north,” said Monty evasively.

Buck kneeled in front of the fireplace and blew the embers into a flame. He opened a can of condensed milk, and, diluting it with water, put it on the fire to warm. During this, Hal came to himself and sat up somewhat groggily on the edge of the bed. He too recognised Buck Bidlong, and looked at Monty in a startled way, as much as to ask if he were still wandering in the shadows. Monty with a glance warned him to keep his mouth shut.

All Buck would give them to eat was the warmed milk with a little bread soaked in it. “If you was to fill up ’twould make you sick,” he said. “Sleep on this, and to-morrow you can have a man’s feed.”

“You certainly are good to us!” murmured Monty.

“Sho!” said Buck coolly. “We h’ain’t like city folks down here. We expects to help each other out.”

He made up a shakedown on the floor, and the two lads flung themselves on it gratefully. Monty asked the inevitable question.

“Has a girl rowing a skiff with a sick man in it passed by here?”

Buck glanced at him sharply before he answered. “No,” he drawled, “h’ain’t seen nobody answering to that description.”

Monty’s heart sunk. Was it possible, after all they had been through, that they had come the wrong way? However, his intuition suggested that the old man might be lying, very likely at the girl’s request. He was too weary to pursue the matter then. He slept.

CHAPTER X

AT BUCK BIDLONG'S

MONTY and Hal awoke before day. Buck Bidlong was still snoring peaceably across the shack.

"Hal," whispered Monty, "I've been thinking things over. I believe I'll tell the old fellow who we are."

"Don't you do it," said Hal quickly.

"He's square," said Monty. "I think he'll help us out if he knows. After all, it's owing to him that we're here."

"He'll send word home that he's seen us."

"I don't believe it."

"Could any man resist a hundred thousand dollars reward?"

"I don't think he knows anything about it. He left the train before the alarm was raised. It isn't likely that any newspapers have followed him here."

"Suit yourself," said Hal. "If anybody gets the hundred thousand, I'd as soon it was him."

The old man served up an A1 breakfast. He lived well after his own fashion. Afterwards they sat sunning themselves on the bench at his door. Buck had cleared his point to open up the view. It was a wild and beautiful vista of tangled vegetation and black water. The bayou divided at their feet, passing to the right and to the left.

Monty led up to his subject gradually. "What's the news of the world?" he asked.

"The latest I got is two weeks old," said Buck. "Two weeks ago I left the railroad on my way in." He proceeded to give an account of his visit to New York.

"Don't you read the newspapers?" asked Monty.

"What for should I read the newspapers?" he said coolly. "To be sure, they're full of news every day, but what does it amount to in a year's time? I don't feel none the poorer without it. I've lived a long time. I got plenty to mull over in my mind."

"Sure," said Monty, "but sometimes I should think you would want to hear what was going on now."

“Well, there’s a post-office fifteen mile down the bayou,” said Buck. “I can always row down there when I want the news. I don’t gen’lly find it worth the trip.”

“Don’t you recollect seeing us before?” asked Monty.

The old man turned on the bench and peered first into one face then the other. “Can’t say I do,” he said slowly.

“On the New Orleans limited two weeks ago,” prompted Monty, grinning. “In the drawing-room.”

Buck’s eyes widened as he looked from one face to the other. “Good God!” he muttered, “the rich young fellers, the mamma’s darlings! It is the same!” he cried aloud. “How in heaven’s name did you come to such a pass as this!”

“It was all your doing,” said Monty.

“*My* doing!” shouted Buck.

“You shamed us with your talk about our nursemaids,” said Monty, turning away his head. “Well, when the train was stopped by a block that night, we shook our nursemaids and beat it out of the window. We made up our minds to go it alone. And here we are!”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Buck, staring solemnly. “I’ll be teetotally and eternally damned! Little did I calc’late on my words having so much effect!”

Monty gave him a brief résumé of their adventures, while the old man continued to explode in wonder.

“It was a manly impulse!” he cried, thrusting out his hand. “Put it there, pardner! And you!” he added to Hal.

“I wouldn’t have gone, only Monty made me,” muttered Hal honestly.

“You may think we haven’t got much to brag about,” Monty went on, “the way we’ve been knocked about. But, just the same, we’ve made a stage. The worst has happened to us, and we’re still on the job.”

“Sure!” cried the old man heartily. “Already I can see a new look in yo’ eye. Wouldn’t call you-all nobody’s pets in that get-up.” He roared with laughter at his own witticism.

“We call ourselves Smitty and Jonesy now,” said Monty. “You won’t give us away?”

“What do you think I am?” cried Buck. “Am I going to spile my own handiwork?”

“I reckon there’ll be a big reward offered for information,” Monty ventured.

"Money is nothing to me," said Buck carelessly. "I got everything I want."

"Well, now you know who we are," said Monty, "will you tell us about that girl?"

The old man's eyes twinkled. "What is she to you?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Monty quickly. "That is," he added in some confusion, "she's in trouble, and we want to help her. There are a couple of fellows following her up who mean her no good. We want to warn her."

"Well, I h'ain't seen her," said Buck. "If she passed by here it was after dark."

"I believe you're lying," said Monty.

The old man chuckled, and let it go at that.

Monty took a new line. "Is this an island we're on?" he asked.

"In a manner of speaking it's an island," said Buck, "but it's an awful big one. You could circumnavigate it, I reckon, if you didn't get lost. These bayous meander all over the map of Weesiana. Loops and criss-cross patterns. You can go anywhere you want by water if you're not in a rush. On this side"—he pointed to his right as he faced north—"they call it Bayou Marbœuf. If you follow it long enough it will take you to the Mississippi. There's plenty of people living down there. On this side"—pointing to the left—"it's called Sassafras Bayou. That flows more or less south all the way. Drains thousands of square miles of swamp. No-man's-land."

"Then that's the way she went," said Monty quietly. "Down Sassafras Bayou. I don't know if she talked to you, but, anyhow, she has a map. She wouldn't go back to the Mississippi, because she's just come from there."

Buck's eyes twinkled, but he refused to be drawn.

"I reckon the hi-jackers went that way, too," said Monty anxiously.

"Yes," said Buck, "such an outfit as you describe went down thataway last week. They didn't offer to stop by," he added dryly, "and I didn't press them."

"Will you stake us to an outfit to take the place of what we lost in the lake?" Monty asked boldly. "I'll give you my I O U for it. My father's good for it if I don't come back."

"Sure I'll stake you for an outfit," said Buck coolly, "and a better one than what you lost. To hell with the pay. Didn't you say this was all my doing? I got to stand by the consequences of my own acts, h'ain't I?"

"Certainly is decent of you," muttered Monty, overcome with gratitude. "If you don't mind, we better be getting along."

“For God’s sake!” cried Buck, with his inveterate good humour. “You can’t go to the rescue of no woman in distress till you get your stren’th back. Stop by until to-morrow, anyhow. If she’s already three days ahead of you, one more day won’t be fatal.”

“How do you know she’s three days ahead of me?” said Monty quickly.

“Hah! You calc’lated to catch me there,” drawled Buck, grinning. “You said she was a day ahead of you north of the lake, and I just figured she gained two more while you was drifting through the swamp. I don’t know where she is.”

Monty considered anxiously. He felt pretty well to-day, though he was still conscious of a languor in his bones. Hal was not in the best shape. It was hard for Monty to control his impatience.

“All right,” he said reluctantly, “we’ll wait over until to-morrow.”

“We won’t waste the time,” said Buck cheerfully. “I’ll be getting your outfit together, and I’ll give you a few lessons in the art of taking care of yo’ selves.”

The old man proved to be as good as his word. He not only provided oars, axe, blankets, cooking utensils, but gave them additional clothes, no better fitting perhaps, but of superior quality to the poor garments they had stolen. He added a little lean-to tent to protect them from the weather, a double-barrelled shot-gun, and a revolver, with ammunition for both weapons. Finally he put aside as much grub as the skiff would carry. Not wishing to discourage the young men’s new found notions of independence, he accepted an I O U for the value of everything except the guns. Those were his personal gifts to the outfit.

Monty set up a mark and practised shooting with the revolver. When he overcame his strangeness with the weapon, he found he was a fair natural shot. Hal meanwhile, in order to divide the labour more fairly, took lessons in baking bannock, flapjacks, and pone. Buck instructed both lads in wielding the axe. It was beautiful to see how unerring and easily the old man placed his strokes.

“We’ll never be able to match that,” said Monty sadly.

“You will when you’ve had seventy years’ practice like me,” said Buck. “Watch me. Don’t be afraid to swing yo’ axe. Let the han’le have a plenty leverage. That’s what it’s for. Chopping is easy if you let the axe do its share.”

After dinner Monty diffidently confessed to Buck that his dearest wish was to learn how to defend himself with his fists. “So I can feel confidence

in the company of men,” he said; “so I won’t have to crawl when I get a hard look.”

“That’s the idea,” said Buck. “Stand up! I used to be pretty good with my fists. I am old now, but I can still show you a trick or two.”

On the little flat space in front of the cabin door he proceeded to illustrate to Monty how to guard himself, how to feint, how to use his feet in getting away, and how to deliver a blow. “You got to think two ways at once in a scrap,” explained Buck; “how to smash yo’ man, and how to keep him from smashing you. Don’t be in too much of a rush to hit him. Wait till you see an opening, and send in all you got. ’Tain’t sufficient nohow to punch with your arm. Put yo’ back into it, Jonesy. That’s where yo’ strength is. Put yo’ back in it! If he’s bigger’n you air, remember h’aint one man in a hundred’s got any science. Science is the little feller’s stren’t!”

Buck, old as he was, could hit Monty anywhere he pleased, whereas Monty could seldom reach him. It was humiliating. Nevertheless, after an hour or so, Monty began to get some glimmerings of what the old fellow called science.

When Buck was tired he stood the two young men up before him, and in the manner of a slow-motion picture showed them the mechanism of the different blows, and the correct way to evade them. Then he set them loose at each other, and sat down on the bench, chuckling at their wild rushes and swings.

Monty discovered that he could hit Hal now, but Hal could hit him too. There was more in this than he had thought. He could not keep his mind on guarding himself while he attacked his adversary. It angered him to find that Hal was as good as he was, and he sailed into him in earnest. Hal cursed him and came right back. Certainly, strange things were happening to both of them on Sassafras Bayou.

Buck finally pressed the red-faced scrappers apart. “Time!” he said. “Retire to yo’ corners.” He pulled them down on the bench, one on each side of him, and went on with his lecture on the art of self-defence. “The hardest thing a scrapper has to learn is to keep his haid; he’s got to fight like a devil out of hell with all his wits about him!” Such was Buck’s text.

When Hal had had enough, Monty, still bent on improvement, filled a little bag half full of sand, and, anchoring it between branch and root of a tree, started punching it with a serious face.

With these occupations the afternoon slipped by on wings. Darkness forced Monty very reluctantly to give up punishing the bag. In the shack during the evening, whenever the conversation flagged, he was to be seen

silently practising hooks, uppercuts, and swings with an imaginary foe. The humorous comments of the others troubled him not at all.

When the old man finally stretched himself preparatory for bed, he said with the hard grin that was somehow so attractive: "Well, we had a nice time to-day, boys."

A sudden rush of gratitude rendered Monty almost speechless. "It was the best day Hal and I ever had," he muttered shamefacedly. "We were working for something."

"Better stay another day," said Buck.

"We could stay a month with profit to ourselves," said Monty.

"Well, come on back!" said Buck heartily. "Soon as you set this yer female on her feet, come on back, and we three will batch it together long as you like."

It was curious how Monty, who had always been known for his ready flow of speech on all polite occasions, became tongue-tied as soon as he had real feelings to express. His heart was big with gratitude towards the old man. To think that Buck Bidlong, who had so scornfully lashed them on their first meeting, was now offering to be his friend, filled Monty's cup to the brim. Yet he could only scowl like a criminal and mutter:

"Certainly is decent of you to ask us."

Next morning, while they were at breakfast in the shack, a loud hail came from the bayou. A thick feeling of excitement took possession of Monty, and his heart slowly rose in his throat. He guessed who had come without looking, and foresaw that there was a severe test of his manhood ahead.

He was not mistaken. Upon issuing from the door they met the blond young giant and his darker brother (they were clearly brothers) that they had left in the Chickawa River. Their skiff lay below.

"There he is!" shouted the bigger of the two at the sight of Monty, adding a ferocious oath; "there's the bird I promised to kill, and I'm the man to keep my word!" He fingered his gun significantly.

Buck Bidlong stepped between them coolly. "I don't know what he's done to warrant killing," he drawled, "but I'd be obliged if you'd do it some'eres off my place, stranger. I live comfo'ble here; I don't want no hants."

The young fellow refused to be drawn off by his jocosity. He continued to curse Monty savagely.

"What you got agin him?" asked Buck.

“He lied to me!”

“Did you lie to him?” Buck asked Monty.

The tall fellow, with his glittering blue eyes, his superb physique, and his contemptuous assurance, was a terrifying antagonist, and Monty’s legs were trembling. But he kept telling himself: This is the test. Buck is watching to see how you’ll take it. You’ve got to stand up to him. You’ve got to stand up to him. And he answered coolly enough:

“Yes, I lied to him. And I’d do it again.”

“What did I tell you!” roared the young fellow.

“Well, he owned to it,” said Buck; “that’s in his favour.”

“He’s after that girl I told you about,” Monty said to Buck. “I wanted to give her a chance.”

“What is she to you?” demanded the other.

Is he jealous of me? Monty thought wonderingly. “Nothing in the world,” he answered. “Just a traveller like myself that I met by chance. I could see you meant her no good, and I wanted to give her a chance to gain on you. Any man would have done the same.”

“I hate a liar!” shouted the young fellow.

“So do I!” affirmed Buck, with a peculiar twinkle in his blue eyes.

Though he was making out to be neutral, Monty had the comforting assurance that Buck was standing by him like a rock. It heartened him tremendously.

“But at that,” Buck went on, with a reasonable air, “it’s sca’cely a killing offence. Why don’t you punch his haid, stranger. He’d feel it worse.”

The young fellow accepted the suggestion. Giving his gun to his brother to hold, he stepped to Monty with a contemptuous smile and flipped the back of his hand in his face.

“Return that if you’re man enough,” he said.

Monty gritted his teeth, and, hauling off, drove his fist as hard as he could in the direction of the young fellow’s face. It never reached its mark, for his adversary stepped aside. At the same time his fist collided with Monty’s jaw with an impact like the kick of a mule. It lifted the lighter man clean off his feet, and stretched him straight as a string in the grass. Monty lay watching showers of stars in the morning sky.

But the same thought was still cutting in his brain like a drill: You’ve got to stand up to him! He scrambled to his feet, and, though the earth was reeling, he came back to the tall young man, putting his fists up as Buck had taught him, and striving desperately to remember all the rest.

Hal, with a yell of rage, rushed to his partner's assistance, but Buck's long arm drew him back and held him. "It's not fair! It's not fair," cried Hal. "He's double the size of Monty!"

Monty's recently acquired "science" was of no use to him, naturally. Before he could order his thoughts that terrific fist hit him again, and down he went. Five times he was stretched out, and five times he came back, gamely putting up his fists when he was no longer capable of striking a blow. Finally Buck intervened.

"H'ain't you satisfied?" he asked the tall fellow. "Five knock-downs is a pretty good return for one lie, if you was to ask me."

The young fellow turned away disgustedly. "Hell, it's no fun to hit him," he said. "He's too soft."

"Anyhow, I stood up to him!" Monty muttered groggily to Buck. "I stood up to him, didn't I?"

"You did yo' utmost, Jonesy," said Buck, with his hard grin. But there was affection in his blue eye, and a peculiar warmth in the grip of his hard fingers on Monty's shoulder. A great peace filled Monty, sore as he was. The old hawk approved him.

At Buck's suggestion the combatants shook hands sheepishly. "You air both good fellows," said the old man; "I can see that."

The young fellow now introduced himself. "I am Rafe McLeod," he said, with his cool lordliness, "and this is my brother Jim."

The name started a train of recollection in Buck's mind. "McLeod, eh?" he said slowly. "From Tunica County, Mississippi?"

"The same," said Rafe proudly.

"Then I take it these other folks, the old man and his girl, are Deakinses," said Buck grimly.

"Yes," said Rafe. "Sam Deakin and his daughter Rose. I see you have heard of us."

"Sure," said Buck, "I have heard of the McLeod-Deakin feud. I heard of it sixty years ago, when I was a lad. It has lasted too long."

"You are right," said Rafe sombrely. "It has lasted too long. It was them who kept it up," he added hotly. "Whenever the score was even they killed another on our side."

"How does it stand now?" asked Buck, with his grimly ironical air.

"Eleven on our side have been killed, and ten on theirs," said Rafe. "But I will even it and that will be the end. Sam is the last male Deakin."

"Reckon that's no more than fair," drawled Buck.

Monty's heart sank, seeing the old man apparently about to desert the girl's side. Hearing McLeod's story, Monty was startled to discover that such savage and barbarous passions still held sway. He had supposed that sort of thing had been done away with long ago. Why don't the police stop it? he thought. But he had the wit to keep his mouth shut.

"The old man had a bullet in his lung," said Buck carelessly. "He's bound for kingdom come, anyhow. Why trouble to come so far?"

"Don't you believe it!" said Rafe, scowling. "He's as tough as a black gum-tree. Three times during his life he's been shot, any one of which would have killed a common man. But each time he got better and gave us the laugh. . . . The girl aims to nurse him whole again. He will come back and lay for Jim and me. We are the last McLeods."

"How did he get his wound?" asked Buck.

"My Pap gave it to him."

"And he?"

"He killed our Pap," said Rafe sombrely. "We had to wait to bury Pap before we could start after him."

"There's a warrant out for Sam Deakin," put in Jim McLeod. "We could let him hang if we had a mind to. But that's not our way. The McLeods never yet called on the law to help them settle family matters."

"How did the shooting come about?" asked Buck. "Did he lay for yo' Pap?"

"No, we laid for him," said Rafe, unabashed. "H'ain't been no trouble for ten years till this broke out. But Sam Deakin's son was the last one killed, and we knew he would try to get square before he died. Word was brought us that Sam boasted in the store, being drunk, that he would get all three of us, and end the feud with the Deakins to the good. So we allowed to forestall him.

"On a Saturday night," Rafe went on, "we heard he was at the store alone. So we lay for him on his way home. We-all hid beside a branch he had to cross, knowing he would have to walk his horse there. We fired at him as he climbed the bank. But the old devil was on his guard. He fired almost at the same instant we did, and Pap fell over in our arms. Wounded as he was, Sam Deakin put his horse directly to us, and we had all we could do to drag Pap out of the way. Before I could get a sight on him Sam was gone. Jim and me carried Pap home, and then we went to Sam's place. But he had barricaded himself inside. When we was burying Pap, Sam and the girl escaped down-river."

Buck turned to Monty. "I told you he was a square fellow," he said. Buck's face always wore a derisive half-smile, and it was impossible to tell when he was in earnest. "He's only doing what he's obliged to do by the law of his kindred."

Monty, when he thought of old Sam Deakin's fine patience and courtesy, could not hold himself. "You lay in ambush for him!" he said bitterly. "Three against one!" Monty did not realise that the rules of fair play vary according to locality.

"We surely did!" retorted Rafe, bristling up immediately. "Just like Sam would have done to us if he had sons."

Monty shut his mouth. It was useless to reason with such a savage.

"After you get the old man," said Buck, "supposing some other Deakin turns up from some'eres to take up the family quarrel?"

"If he did," said Rafe indifferently, "it would only be some offshoot. The main stem of the family ends with Sam. But at that," he went on, with his lordly arrogance, "I'm going to end this trouble for good and all. I aim to marry the girl. She's a good-blooded girl. She's sound and strong. And I will call my first-born son Deakin McLeod. The feud will end with him!"

Monty could scarcely believe what he was hearing. The blood ran hot in his veins. Sooner than see that happen I would shoot you myself! he thought, fingering the gun Buck had given him. But he kept his mouth shut.

"That's a grand idea!" cried Buck. "Original! If that had been thought of before, all the feuds would have been settled long ago!" There could be no doubt of the irony in his voice now, but apparently Rafe did not notice it. Monty began to suspect that the young Viking was, after all, a little thick in the wits.

"Only," Buck went on in his dry manner, "supposing the girl was to feel a little natural resentment along of the killing of her Pap?"

"She'll get over it," said Rafe coolly. "'Tain't as if she was a man."

"Sho!" said Buck, pulling out a plug of tobacco.

"When did she stop by here?" Rafe demanded eagerly.

"Three days ago," said Buck.

"How was the old man?"

"Bad."

"God!" cried Rafe passionately, "let him live till I can come up with him, that's all! It will be a lasting shame upon me if he dies without my help!"

"Sho!" murmured Buck again. This exclamation of the old man's expressed various shades of meaning.

“Which way did she go?” demanded Rafe.

“Down Sassafras Bayou,” said Buck, coolly shaving his plug.

This seemed like betrayal to Monty. “Would you give her away to him like that!” he cried, angrily turning on the one whom he had looked on as his benefactor half an hour before.

“Sho!” said Buck, wagging his big hand in Monty’s direction. “You don’t understand this case, Jonesy. You are only a No’the’ner. As we look at it, Rafe is certainly entitled to take a shot at the man who killed his Pap.”

Buck and Rafe shook hands. Monty turned away, a little sick at the sight. It did not occur to him that the old man might be playing a cunning part.

“But at that,” Buck resumed, filling his pipe, “I calc’late she only went down Sassafras Bayou to throw pursuit off the scent, as you might say. She didn’t have grub enough to venture into the swamps. She had a map with her that I seen her studying on. My idea is she was aiming to strike back into the Bayou Marbœuf by a cross-channel half a dozen miles down. There’s plenty of settlers down Marbœuf way who would help her along. Anybody would feel sorry for the girl, not knowing the circumstances. I felt sorry for her myself.”

“How will I *know* if she went that way,” muttered Rafe, scowling in indecision.

“Better go down Bayou Marbœuf,” said Buck carelessly. “After ten miles you will find plenty of settlers who will tell you if she is ahead of you. If she isn’t you’ll only be out half a day. But if you went down Sassafras way you might cruise in the swamps for weeks without running into the girl or anybody who would have seen her.”

“You’re right,” said Rafe, making up his mind. “We’ll go this way. Come on, Jim.”

“Won’t you spell a while and eat?” said Buck politely.

“Much obliged,” said Rafe. “We have eaten. We must be getting along. The girl has gained too much on us as it is.”

Rafe and Jim turned away, ignoring Monty and his partner as beneath the notice of men like themselves. This suited Monty very well. It would have gone hard with him to have to take the big fellow’s hand.

“Damned murderer!” he muttered as they went down the bank.

“Easy!” said Hal, nervously, “he might hear you.”

“Well,” muttered Monty, “I may have to shoot him yet.”

Hal stared at his partner speechlessly. Monty Dixon, of Harvard and Park Avenue, already infected with the blood lust of these swamps! Hal looked

around distractedly at the trees, the sky, as much as to say: I ask you! I ask you! And there was no answer.

Buck Bidlong saw the two McLeods off in their skiff. The old man came back up the bank with the derisive, good-natured grin etched around his lips. Monty received him with a long face.

"I thought you were my friend," he said accusingly.

"Sho, Jonesy!" said Buck, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Cain't you see no further than the end yo' nose? I was obliged to quarrel with you, to get him yonder to believe me." The old man began to laugh. "And I'll say you played up to me good. Sho! you like to jump down my throat when I crossed you!" He slapped his thigh.

Monty began to look doubtful. "What good was it to send him down the bayou if he will meet settlers in ten miles who will turn him back?" he asked sullenly. "He'll be back here before noon. And if he crosses over, he'll be right behind me."

"There ain't no cross-channel, Jonesy, except in my imagination," said Buck serenely. "And he won't meet no settlers who will send him back."

As the young man looked at him enquiringly, Buck paused to light his pipe. It amused him to keep them in suspense for a moment or two.

"Listen," he said, "when I come home I had a considerable load of stuff, and a fellow from St. Polycarpe, Ned Hanson, he brought me up in his launch. Ned stayed on with me a piece, hunting turkey, and him and me was here together when the girl and her father come by, and we was sorry for them, as any Christian would be. Before Ned went back we fixed it up together he was to tell everybody along the bayou to say that the girl had gone down thataway if anybody come along asking for her. They're white people down there, and good friends to Ned and me, and you can depend on them to pass the Mississippians along. At least as far as St. Polycarpe, sixty miles. The bayou divides three ways there, and the McLeods can take their pick."

A relieved grin spread across Monty's face. He picked up Buck's knotty hand. "Buck, you're a dandy! you're a dandy!" he stammered.

"Sho, Jonesy, I know it already," said Buck humorously. "I'm a lallapaloosa, I'm a lulu, I'm a bear! And now I'll tell you something else," he went on more seriously. "I tried to persuade the girl to go down Marbœuf way. White people anywhere would have taken them in and hid them if need be. But she wouldn't. Too proud to ask for help. She had a notion because her Pap was wanted for murder and all the post-offices were plastered with bills showing his picture, that every man's hand would be raised against

them. Hell! we ain't so strong for law and order as all that! But I couldn't tell her.

"Well, failing that, I advised her to make for Christian's place, at the head of Bayou Marie. This Christian bird is a famous character in the country, though few have ever clapped eyes on him. I don't know him myself. Christian is what he calls himself; just that. According to the story, he killed a man in Feliciana Parish forty year ago, and has been repenting ever since. After forty years of wrastling with Satan he ought to be pretty strong, I vow. Howsoever that may be, he's got such a reputation for holiness that nobody would dare touch him. He totes a Bible instead of a gun, and has never been known to take a drink. Certain the Deakinses would be as safe with him as anywhere. Moreover, his place is at a dead end of the bayou, and hard to find. Nobody goes there."

When the boys were ready to push off, Buck insisted on loading still another bag of meal and side of meat into the skiff. "You may need it," he said.

He gave them their final directions. "The first landmark you'll recognise is Dubrow Lake, about fifty miles south of here. It's not a lake at all, but a hell of a big marsh of saw-grass you've got to push yo' way through. That'll try yo' guts all right. The stuff grows fifteen feet high. I've put in a machete to help you cut yo' way and a compass to guide you. For you can't see nothing in it. You must cross it due south. Then when you hit the trees again you'll be a little east of Sassafras Bayou. The opening will be hard to find.

"Bayou Marie joins Sassafras forty mile south of the saw-grass," he went on, "but you can't measure miles nohow on that twisty stream, so call it two day's travel. Marie is the fourth biggish side-channel that comes in on the right, but you'll likely miss the others because they look just like the rest of the swamp. But Marie comes in around a hummock, and at the point of that hummock is a hell of a big live oak that you can't miss. It sends out a branch at right-angles low across the water full sixty feet long. Bayou Marie comes in under that branch. No stranger would ever guess it was there. If the water is high you have to shake your skiff over the branch or go round it. I've never gone up Bayou Marie. All I know is that Christian's shack stands at the head of it. They say he has good land up there. Raises his own grub."

With a shove, Buck Bidlong launched the skiff clear of the mud. "So long, boys!" he cried heartily. "Good luck!"

"So long! So long!" they answered.

They headed down-stream, Monty at the oars and Hal steering with a spare oar. The sight of the tall figure with the picturesque white thatch at the

foot of the bank filled Monty with a surge of affection and gratitude that was almost painful. He would not have believed it possible to feel like this towards a stranger. What a man old Buck was, how square and friendly! He bolstered up a fellow's belief in himself. Monty was quite unable to express his feelings. In fact, he averted his face from his friend in acute embarrassment. But Buck understood.

“So long, boys!” he continued to cry. “Keep yo’ tails up! When you come back this way treat the dump like it was yo’ own!”

A bend in the stream shut him off from view.

CHAPTER XI

FINDING ROSE

FOR the next three days Monty and Hal made rapid progress. The hummock on which Buck had built his shack subsided into the black swamp, the cypress trees mingled their branches overhead again, and the curtains of grey moss dimmed the sun. The bayou had not changed, but the voyagers had. Their nightmare of starvation and uncertainty was forgotten. They knew pretty well now what was before them, and each day gave them a little more confidence in coping with it. After all, man was intended to live by his own exertions, and they had the satisfaction of discovering unused powers in themselves and of putting them to work.

Luck seemed to be with them now. Hal revealed a talent for cookery that succeeded in turning out very fair imitations of a frontiersman's bannock and flapjacks, while Monty, to his own surprise, finally succeeded in killing something with his gun; to wit, three wild duck brought down with a single barrel in an opening amongst the saw-grass.

Reaching the formidable obstacle of the saw-grass on the afternoon of the second day, they found that someone had already cut a wide, straight swath through it, pointing south.

"Ike and his gang," said Monty at the sight of it. "Must have been a job to work that big boat through."

"I'm glad they had the work instead of us," said Hal.

"It would make it easy for Rose to cross."

"It's damn lucky they're ahead of her instead of behind her," said Hal.

Monty's face turned grave. There was an anxiety in his mind that he would not speak of, because to speak of a thing seemed to bring it into existence. Please God, Ike and his gang don't stop long enough for her to catch up with them! was his thought.

He knew, of course, that they all must be travelling at about the same rate. On the tortuous channel of the bayou, littered with snags and obstructed by shoals, the rum-runners or hi-jackers, or whatever they were, would not be able to use their engine. They must have lost at least a day in cutting through the saw-grass. And they had been only two days ahead of Rose at the floodgates. On the other hand, they would have gained a day in being able to cut straight across the big lake; moreover, Rose had stopped for some

hours at Buck Bidlong's. Knowing that someone was close ahead of her, she would proceed cautiously. Thus went Monty's anxious calculations.

Like all men in the grip of a master idea, Monty was not the best of companions during these days. Occupied with his own thoughts, he was impatient with Hal's efforts in the way of conversation. Whenever they spelled on a bit of dry land he wanted Hal to stand up and spar with him, much to the latter's disgust. Hal had no such enthusiasm for fisticuffs. Whenever Hal was busy cooking, Monty would rig up his bag of sand and gravely punch it with due attention to style, until it was time to continue the voyage.

South of the saw-grass the black bayou continued to snake its slow way through the vast swamp. Sometimes when they thought they were stepping out on firm ground they sank to their thighs in rotting humus. It was a gloomy world, black, or at the best dun-coloured; few birds, and at this season no flowers. New trees began to appear, one beautiful species with glossy green leaves that relieved the surrounding gloom; magnolia, they learned later. In such a land they saw no four-footed game except muskrats, which hardly appealed to them as meat.

They carefully watched for the streams coming in on the right, and counted two of them. They figured they had made half the distance to the mouth of Bayou Marie. This was on the morning of the fourth day after leaving Buck Bidlong's. Rounding the point of a hummock, Monty, at the oars, seeing Hal suddenly stiffen and his eyes fix on a spot ahead, turned around. No word was spoken between the partners. Monty's heart gave a great jump upon perceiving the stern of a skiff sticking out into the stream a hundred yards ahead. A little smoke was drifting out over the water, but a tangle of vegetation hid the figures on shore.

All faded old skiffs look much alike, but Monty instantly made up his mind this was the one he was in search of. He shouted joyfully, and made the water fly from his oars. In five seconds he had planned out a whole course of action. I'll make her go back to Buck's, he thought; behind us the way is clear. They can lie low there while Hal and I scout down Bayou Marbœuf to find out where the McLeods have gone. Safety lies on that side.

Bitter disappointment awaited him. The two figures beside the fire on shore were both men. Monty found himself looking into a bloated red face and a livid ratlike face that he remembered only too well. It was Bun Thatcher and Cheese Garvey, the two members of Ike's crew that he had most cause to hate. So obvious was the fall of Monty's and Hal's faces at the encounter that the two on shore could not help but remark it.

“Who was you lookin’ for?” asked Bun, grinning.

The sound of that unpleasant oily voice brought back the whole terrible night on the Mississippi. Monty had to think quickly. He saw, at any rate, that he and Hal had not been recognised. “Couple of pals of ours,” he said.

“When did they go down-river?”

“Oh, they was about a week ahead of us,” said Monty. Dire necessity spurred him to lie glibly. “But, seeing the skiff, I thought maybe they had stopped to wait for us.”

“Ain’t seen them,” said Bun indifferently. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” countered Monty, merely to gain time enough to think up two natural-sounding names.

“I’m askin’ you, ‘bo.”

“I’m Tim Cole and this is Pete Wood.”

“You’re well named,” said Bun, grinning unpleasantly.

“Yeah,” put in Cheese Garvey in his high-pitched grating voice. “Coal and Wood are good pardners, all right.”

Monty silently cursed himself for his folly. The names sounded as if they had been assumed on the spur of the moment. However, it was too late now. Monty was distracted with anxiety. If Ike’s gang had got no farther than this, *where was Rose?*

Bun introduced himself and his partner by the names Monty already knew them under.

“Pleased to meet ya,” said Monty and Hal. Both sides were grinning and watchful. Monty wondered if these two could have abandoned the rest of their gang. Where had they obtained the skiff? “Where’s your outfit?” he asked casually.

“Ain’t got no outfit but what you see,” said Bun.

There was nothing in the skiff but a pair of blankets. “You won’t get far with that in this country,” ventured Monty.

“Me and my pardner, we hunts for our grub,” returned Bun boastfully. “The only outfit we want is a tomato can and a blanket.” He called attention to a big bird that was roasting before the fire on an improvised spit and sending out an appetising odour.

“Well, you’re better men than we are,” said Monty, willing to flatter him, if he could gain any advantage from it. “We ain’t seen nothin’ but a couple of ducks amongst the saw-grass.”

“Come ashore and eat with us,” said Bun.

Monty hesitated. "We got to be gettin' on down," he said, sparring for time.

Behind him Hal whispered out of the corner of his mouth: "Don't go! Don't go!"

It was a difficult decision. The recollection of what he had already received at the hands of these men made Monty's flesh crawl. But there was Rose to be thought of. Monty had a horrible suspicion that this was her skiff. While they talked idly between boat and bank, he was sizing it up out of the corners of his eyes. Finally he happened to recollect that the bow seat of her skiff had been knocked out to leave more space for baggage. The bow seat of this skiff was missing. The discovery turned him sick at heart.

"Aw, come on," said Bun. "What's time in this part of the world? We got a wild turkey. If you-all got bread, it's a fair swop, ain't it?"

It had all the cordiality of the spider's famous invitation to the fly. A child would have taken warning from those mean, grinning faces, and from the greedy way in which their eyes ran over the generous outfit piled in the other skiff. Monty was perfectly aware of all this, but he felt that he had no choice now. "All right," he said, with assumed heartiness. "Don't mind if we do."

Hal looked at him as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses. Hal was certainly entitled to some explanation, so Monty fumbled his oars with calculated clumsiness, and was obliged to back off before he could bring his skiff snugly alongside the other.

"That's Rose's skiff," he whispered to Hal. "We've got to find out what they've done with her."

"God help us!" murmured Hal. However, he shut his mouth without further complaint. Hal was hardening too.

Monty and Hal had already eaten one breakfast, but it scarcely mattered to appetites such as they had nowadays. And turkey was not to be come by every day. Even Monty's grinding anxiety could not spoil his appetite. The lads supplied bread and salt to the feast. The four of them squatted on their heels in the spongy earth around the fire, tearing the meat with teeth and fingers. Already Monty and Hal had forgotten their delicate up-bringing. Bun Thatcher, in that unnaturally soft voice of his that suggested rottenness, plied them with questions.

"Where you heading, fellows?"

"Just bumming south," said Monty, playing the careless adventurers. "Thought we might settle down some'eres near the gulf if we found any free land."

“Gee! any boob can farm,” said Bun. “Farming is the meanest occupation on earth.”

“Well, if we see anything better, we won’t pass it up.”

“Where you from?”

“Ohio,” said Monty at random.

“What part?”

“Refuse to specify,” said Monty, affecting a hardy grin. “My reputation ain’t none too good in those parts. To tell you the truth, me and my partner got in a little trouble and had to beat it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Decline to answer.”

“Sure,” said Bun, “you’re within your rights at that. You seem to be well fixed all right,” he added, with a glance at the loaded skiff.

“Oh, we worked all summer at the floodgates,” said Monty, “and got a stake together.”

“ ’Tain’t worth it,” said Bun; “they work the heart out of you on that dump.”

“Yeah,” said Monty, “but we know a thing or two. We got on the soft side of the bosses, and landed jobs keeping stores. There’s good picking in them jobs,” he added, with a grin, by which he meant Bun to understand he was as slick a rascal as any.

“Sure,” said Bun, giving him grin for grin; “I can see youse fellers are smart all right.”

The generous meal had the appearance of stimulating warmth all around; they became as easy with each other as old shoes. As they squatted smoking afterwards—Buck Bidlong had presented Monty and Hal with corncob pipes that they wielded like old-timers, Bun Thatcher said with an apparent burst of confidence:

“Say, I don’t mind telling youse fellows our hangout is two-three hours’ rowing from here. I didn’t let on first off ’cause a man don’t like to tell his business to strangers. But I can see that you’re good guys. There’s seven of us camping together. All swell guys. Come on up and stay the night. We got plenty good liquor. Fact is,” he added, with his mushy laugh, “we got more liquor than meal. We’ll make a swop with you if you want. You don’t need all that meal.”

“Gee! I certainly would like a drink!” said Monty, feeling his throat desirously. “We ain’t got a drop in our outfit.”

At this rate they soon came to an agreement.

“Let’s split up,” suggested Bun. “Let Cheese steer your skiff and Woodsy come in mine.”

But Monty felt he would break down in the glib part he was trying to play if he didn’t get a breathing-space. Moreover, it was obvious that, if they allowed themselves to be questioned separately, discrepancies in their stories would be bound to appear. So Monty said firmly:

“No, my partner and I are accustomed to each other in the boat. You lead on and we’ll follow.”

They set out. What a relief it was to Monty to find himself alone with Hal again. They said little. Monty was grateful to Hal because the latter did not abuse him for carrying them into further danger. It was not Hal’s girl they were trying to save. They agreed to stick side by side as closely as possible, and to refuse with a grin to answer questions.

“It looks natural to make a mystery of what’s past if we’re supposed to be crooks,” said Monty. “But once in a while we ought to appear to forget ourselves and let fall a bit of information. That’ll keep them guessing.”

“Suppose one of them was to recognise us?” hazarded Hal.

“If you could see yourself you wouldn’t fear it!” said Monty, with a grim smile. In addition to everything else, Hal, during his struggle in Lake Bigarel had lost a bit of bridgework. The gap in his front teeth gave him a more disreputable look than anything else could.

“Not a chance of it,” Monty went on. “They never saw us by daylight. And it’s fixed in their minds that our naked bodies are floating down the Mississippi, half eaten by fishes now. Even if the possibility of our escaping should occur to them, they would never expect to see us come down here after them.”

Quarter of a mile down-stream, where the hummock sunk into swamp again, Bun picked his way around some ancient rotting snags and forced his skiff through a dense tangle of vines. Following him, they found themselves in a side-stream that it would have taken a sharp eye to spot from the outside. This they ascended.

After an hour and a half’s slow passage through the still and solitary water forest, they turned a corner, and came upon a scene of life and activity that was startling by contrast. There was a bank that sloped up fifteen or twenty feet above the water. Amidst the general flatness it seemed almost mountainous. It was evidently an old clearing, for the present settlers had only found light stuff to chop away. They had already opened a space a hundred yards wide to the sun. At the top of the little rise a log shack was beginning to take form. Several men were working around it. Monty

recognised the dandified figure of the leader, and the old man they called Shyster still wearing the wrinkled business suit. Evidently the gang was going into permanent quarters here. At the other side of the clearing a little A tent had been pitched, its canvas grey and stained from the weather.

A loud hail went up from the leading skiff, and everybody on the bank turned around to look. Out from under the tent ducked the figure of a woman, and Monty's head spun around. He recognised the coil of bright hair and the faded print dress, and was filled with a hurricane of feelings: joy to find her safe, and dread for the future. Nobody had harmed her so far; that much was clear from her fearless gaze; but how in God's name was he to save her from such a situation?

When they went up the bank the young men and the girl looked at each other, and, warned by the same instinct, suppressed all signs of recognition. Monty made his face a blank, but his heart was taking the hurdles. This woman had that power over him. He wondered what she was thinking of. Was she glad to see him or merely indifferent? Well, she had no reason as yet to think much of him, he gloomily reflected. She was a complete enigma to him. Surely a woman must be ready to pass out with terror upon finding herself in such a trap. But her calm face gave nothing away.

CHAPTER XII

IN IKE'S CAMP

MONTY and Hal were led up to Ike. From amongst the trees nearby came the sound of chopping. The weird figure of Long Leet, more uncouth than ever by daylight, and the hulking Pat Sheedy appeared carrying a log between them. All stared at the newcomers with hard curiosity but no sign of recognition.

By day the leader of the gang was the same tall handsome fellow that had struck Monty's imagination in the firelight, with his high colour and his coarse, commanding features. But daylight clearly revealed the crooked squint in his black eyes. Nobody would have trusted him. He alone of that slovenly crew was freshly shaven and neatly dressed in high laced boots, whipcord breeches, and blue flannel shirt open to reveal his muscular throat. Obviously he did not hate himself.

"Here's two fellows I run into on the bayou," said Bun Thatcher; "Tim Cole by name and Pete Wood. I asked them up to have a drink."

Ike's glance skated over the young men with insulting indifference and rested on their skiff below. When he perceived how well furnished it was, he unbent a little. "That's right," he said, with a hard smile, "make yourselves at home, boys. We'll crack a bottle when we knock off for the day." To Bun he said, handing over a key: "Put all their duffle with ours in the cache. It might rain," he added with ill-concealed cynicism.

This was plain testimony as to what awaited them, but it was useless to protest, of course. Monty said nothing because he did not wish them to discover that he suspected anything amiss as yet. They're welcome to all we've got if I can only sneak the girl away, he thought.

When they turned back to the boat, Rose was still visible fifty paces away, placing a pot on a small fire that burned in front of her tent. She did not look at Monty again. It occurred to Monty that it would seem strange if he did not appear to betray some curiosity about her.

"Who's the lady?" he asked Bun carelessly.

"Friend of Ike's," Bun replied with a meaning grin. Now that he had brought the men into camp, he was no longer taking the same care to smooth them down. "And, if you want my advice, you better not look too hard at her, 'bo."

Monty grinned back in order to carry out the part he had to play. He set his teeth together. With each moment that passed he saw the difficulties of his position multiplying. Sometimes his courage wavered. You were a fool to come here! an inner voice seemed to whisper. You can't do her any good!

The cache that Ike had referred to proved to be a hole excavated in the bank, lined and roofed with logs. The roof was covered with sods to shed the rain. On the creek side there was a small door made out of hastily squared poles and fastened with a formidable padlock. They had to bend double to enter. As they were passing their outfit in, Monty saw that the cache contained a number of cases and kegs of liquor, but very little food. He recognised what was left of the sacks of meal he had fetched for Rose out of the store at the floodgates. Monty's shot-gun was locked up with the rest; his revolver he kept on his hip.

In order to sound out Bun, Monty said: "Seems hardly worth while to take all this trouble if we're moving on to-morrow."

Bun replied with his sinister grin: "Hell, what's the use of pulling out as long as there's liquor left?"

Monty affected to laugh heartily.

The midday meal had already been eaten in camp before they arrived. Monty and Hal volunteered to work on the shack. If it was possible for good-temper and willingness to have any effect with this hard-boiled crew they did not intend to neglect it. It cannot be said that they were successful. The men grinned at their efforts, and passed sly remarks one to another, careless if they were overheard.

"Them guys work like they expected to get some good out of it," said Long Leet.

"Aah, maybe they're aiming to join the gang," said Cheese Garvey.

They all laughed.

"They must think we're half-wits not to be on to them," Hal muttered angrily to Monty at a moment when they were alone.

"Let them! Let them!" said Monty. "If they despise us it will make them careless."

Sandy, Long Leet, Bun, Pat, and Cheese Garvey chopped down small trees, cut the trunks to the desired lengths, and trimmed them. Monty and Hal carried the logs to the shack, where Ike and Shyster squared the ends and laid them in place. By nightfall the walls were up. They were not good workmen, and it was a ramshackle affair. On the following day they planned to roof it with poles and sods. They had neither glass for a window nor hinges for a door. Monty gathered from their talk that the fire was to be built

in the middle of the mud floor and the smoke allowed to escape through a hole in the roof.

Rose meanwhile was cooking supper for the crowd on the fire in front of her tent. Monty perceived with relief that she was not expected to mix with the men. Another fire had been built for the gang near the half-completed shack. Ike himself went over to fetch the food back.

Ike stood for a moment or two talking to the girl, while Monty watched out of the corners of his eyes. Ike posed and swaggered, seeking to impress her with his vigorous masculinity. With what satisfaction Monty would have put a bullet through him at that moment! Rose answered him coolly enough, scarcely raising her eyes from her work. Monty saw that Ike, notwithstanding his swagger, still bore himself towards her with a certain respect. Somehow the defenceless girl had managed to put the fear of God into him. Monty's own admiration for her mounted to the skies.

Supper consisted of white flour bannock, fried fish, and fried fat back. There was plenty of it. They had neither plates nor knives and forks. Each man helped himself out of the pans and used teeth and fingers. There was no coffee, and the men swilled whiskey and water with their food. They soon began to show the signs of it. All except Ike, who drank the most. Ike, pursuing his own thoughts, allowed his men to brag and bicker, with scornful inattention. From time to time, Monty saw his scowling eyes turn desirously in the direction of the other fire. The girl had gone inside the tent. Whatever I do, I must do quickly, Monty thought.

The wary Monty kept up his character of a rattlepate as well as he could, making believe not to notice the hard jeers of the men, and studying them closely. The corrupt and rotting Bun, the corpse-like Cheese Garvey, and young Pat besotted with whiskey; these three were certainly hopeless; the human quality had gone out of them. As to the grotesque Long Leet, certainly he was mean and crooked too, but he did not appear to be as completely sunk as the others. The remaining two were the decentest of the lot. Shyster, the oldest among them, had a sort of pitiful air, and Monty put him down as a victim of circumstances. Probably he hated his present company, but was too weak and broken to cut loose from them. Sandy Mitchell was a tall, clean-limbed lad, handy with tools and fairly good-tempered, but a confirmed drifter. He had evidently drifted into bad company, and here he was.

Monty debated with himself as to the possibility of winning any of these men to his side. In every gang there are certain to be some discontented members. What had he to offer? Suppose he told who he was and held out

the lure of his father's millions? However, they had not believed him in the first place, and he didn't see how he could prove it now.

Later, a quarrel broke out around the fire. Bun Thatcher spoke of returning to Sassafras Bayou next day with Cheese Garvey, and Long Leet said he'd be damned if he was going to work his heart out every day while Bun went on a picnic. Bun denied that it was a picnic. Monty listened attentively. Their speech was guarded, but it soon became clear that the gang kept a lookout on the main bayou for the purpose of replenishing their stock of grub from the travellers who went down. They didn't say how they expected to persuade the travellers to give up their grub, but Monty could guess that.

If they mean to stay here in the same spot, how do they expect to keep it up? Monty thought. Men are not going to keep their mouths shut when they are robbed. And the arm of justice is bound to reach even to this remote place in the long run. The next thought followed inevitably. Maybe they don't figure on letting their victims get away to tell. Why should they? The kind of men who come into the swamp are not likely to be missed if they disappear; and if they should be missed they could not be traced.

A fine sweat broke out on Monty. He shook his head to rid himself of these weakening thoughts. His fists clenched. Somehow we're going to keep alive, he vowed to himself.

In the beginning, Ike appeared to be deaf to the men's wrangling. When it reached his ears he shut it off with a single curt sentence.

"Long and Pat will go over to the bayou to-morrow."

Bun and Cheese got the laugh then. They sullenly left the fire, and, fetching their blankets, rolled up near by. Soon Ike arose and stretched himself. Levelling his hard gaze on Monty, he said curtly: "Hand over your gun."

This was Monty's first intimation that Ike had observed his gun. He hesitated.

"No man is armed in camp but me," said Ike. "You can have it back when you leave," he added with a hard sneer.

A snicker of laughter went around the fire.

Monty handed his gun over. What else could he do? If he had shot Ike dead with it he would still have had six men to deal with. He realised from the first that his only chance against this gang lay, not in defiance, but in the exercise of his wits.

Coolly pocketing the gun, Ike turned away, and, fetching his blanket to the fire, lay down and rolled up in it. The other men followed suit. Monty's

and Hal's blankets had been put in the common store. Monty brought them to the fire.

"Let's go somewhere else to sleep," Hal whispered.

"Nothing to be gained by it," Monty answered. "Only make them suspicious."

They lay down side by side on the smoky side of the fire, which for that reason they had to themselves. Ike was lying by himself half a dozen paces from Hal's right, and the rest were laid out in a row to the windward side of the fire.

Hal brought his mouth close to Monty's ear. "What are we going to do?" he whispered. "They mean us no good!"

Monty smiled mirthlessly at his partner's simplicity. "Take everything that comes," he whispered in Hal's ear. "Don't give them any excuse to pick a quarrel. Leave the rest to me."

"How can you keep on the right side of men if they are bent on picking a quarrel?"

This was hard to answer. "It's only for a day or two," Monty said, just to be saying something. "We can keep it up that long."

Some hours later, Monty awoke to find a light rain falling. His blanket, heavy with moisture, weighed upon him, but the wool still kept him warm. The fire had gone out, and an intense darkness lay upon the clearing. SnORES in various keys arose from the sleepers. Monty sat up alertly. If all slept it would be a good opportunity to do a little reconnoitring.

Ike was the one he was most concerned about. He listened intently for sounds from that direction, but could hear nothing. Monty stood up, taking no care to be quiet. He even made believe to stumble, and then waited, listening. Nobody stirred. He went close to Ike, and could hear his deep and slightly stertorous breathing. A wakened man could scarcely have imitated it. Ike might be able to drink without showing the effects, but when he lay down the fumes overpowered him like any other man. He slept deeply.

Monty stole away from the circle. Moving with caution, a few inches at a time, he made his way down to the water's edge. He discovered that Ike had taken effective measures to prevent his prisoners escaping this way. The two skiffs were chained to a stump; that is to say a light chain had been passed through the hole bored in the stem of each skiff and again through a hole burned in the stump, and the ends padlocked together.

It was a discouraging prospect. To be sure, the wooden stem of the skiff might be split and the chain released; but the blow of an axe would certainly awaken the sleepers. The big motor-boat was secured merely by having its

anchor cast ashore. It would require more than two men to work her down the narrow bayou with its many obstructions, and at night it could not be done at all.

Monty turned back in the direction where he thought the tent lay. He could not see more than a yard before him. After a cautious search, the dim shape of it rose before him, a little paler than the surrounding blackness. He heard the old man gently snoring. Lying at full length, he drew himself up to the tent, and, lifting the bottom of the canvas an inch or two, whispered:

“Rose! Rose!”

“Who is it?” she instantly whispered.

“Your friend.”

She parted the front flaps just enough to reveal the dim oval of her face. She too was stretched on the ground. Their faces almost touched. It was like a lovers’ tryst, but there was nothing loverly in her greeting.

“What did you do this for?” she whispered angrily. “Can’t you see we’re sitting on a powder-barrel here. It only needs this——”

“I know,” said Monty, “but——”

“Oh, go away! Go away!”

“Ike is asleep,” said Monty. “I won’t put you in danger again. But I had to talk to you once.”

“What’s the good of it?” she whispered.

“Well,” murmured Monty, “it was on your account that I came here.”

“On my account?”

“When I met Bun Thatcher in the bayou I saw that he had your boat. I had to find out what had become of you.”

“Now you’re here, how can you help me?” she asked.

“I don’t know—yet,” whispered Monty doggedly. “But, anyhow, I had to come.”

“I don’t want your murder on my conscience,” she said sullenly.

“Don’t worry about that, I reckon we would have been brought in, anyhow,” Monty said. “I saw them casting covetous eyes on our grub. Or else they would have shot us and chucked our bodies in the swamp.”

“I know,” she whispered in a falling voice, “it was the same with me.”

“How did you fall into their hands?” asked Monty.

“When we came down the bayou the old man——”

“Shyster,” put in Monty.

“—was camping alone on the hummock. They had left him there as a picket while they searched for a camp site along the side bayou. I talked with him from the stream, but I would not land because I distrusted him. It was near evening. I went on. When the others came back in the boat he told them, and they came down the bayou and caught us while we were sleeping in the skiff. They made out to act respectful enough, but I knew we were prisoners just the same. I could see if I resisted them they would shoot my father and take me by force. So I made out to go willingly. I thought I could escape down the little bayou while they slept, but the skiff is chained at night.”

“I know it,” muttered Monty. “If I only had a pair of steel cutters, or a file!”

“Why not wish for an aeroplane,” she said bitterly. “It’s just as easy!”

“I’ll find a way yet to save you,” said Monty doggedly.

“No! No!” she said earnestly. “Any such attempt would be fatal. As it is I am in no danger. I am useful to them; I do their cooking.”

“Ike?”

“I can manage him.”

“For the moment maybe,” said Monty gloomily. “How long do you think you can keep it up?”

He heard her draw a quivering breath. “Don’t make me afraid,” she whispered. “If I get to be afraid I’m gone!”

Monty was more moved by that brave and simple confession than if she had wept quarts of tears and implored him to save her. “You’re the pluckiest person I know, either woman or man,” he murmured, feeling for her hand and pressing it.

She drew her hand away, but not with repulsion.

“Maybe there’s another way of escape than by the bayou,” Monty went on. “This is higher land than any we have come to. Perhaps it is the end of the swamp.”

“How would we know that?” she murmured sadly.

“Your map?”

“They took it from me on a pretext. Anyhow, the map doesn’t tell. It only shows the water-courses. In between, the land may be dry or covered with water. Even if it was all dry west of here, my father couldn’t escape by walking.”

“I don’t want to make you feel bad,” said Monty, “but—perhaps he will not live. He said——”

"I know," she interrupted, "we didn't expect it. Just the same, he's getting better. He can sit up now. Soon he will be able to walk a few steps."

Monty was not so sure that this was good news. To be saddled with an invalid would increase the difficulties of escape tenfold. But he did not tell her so. "Then it must be by water," he said, with more confidence than he felt. "We can make Christian's place with only a little food. Buck Bidlong said he raised his own meat and meal."

"We've got to get away from here first," she reminded him; and Monty was dimly aware of her crooked smile. She had softened towards him, and a feeling of joy stirred amidst all the trouble of his mind. Her lips were so near he longed to press his upon them, but he would not impose himself upon her at such a time.

Without any further questioning from Monty, she confided to him the anxiety that lay nearest her heart. "They took my father's gun from him," she whispered. "He is all the time fretting at his own helplessness. If any of them offered to harm me he would kill himself in trying to—trying to— That's what I can't face!"

"That's bad!" murmured Monty.

"But there isn't going to be any trouble," she went on in a stronger voice. "I know what I've got to do. I've figured it out."

"What's that?" asked Monty sharply.

"I won't tell you," she whispered. "It's my lookout."

"Oh, Rose!" murmured Monty. What he feared was that she had made up her mind to marry Ike by mutual contract, simply because he was strong enough to control the other men. In order to save her father's feelings she would make believe she was doing it of her own choice. Ike, that foul scoundrel! The thought of such a marriage drove him wild. "Tell me what it is you're going to do!" he demanded.

She only shook her head.

"Am I not your friend?" he said reproachfully.

It was Rose now who swiftly put out her hand and pressed his. "I told you before," she whispered painfully, "you mustn't blame me if I can't show anything. I'm out of luck, that's all. No use crying. I just got to make myself hard—hard. And take it as it comes. Go, now. You're a good fellow. *Please* go!"

The pressure of her hand made his pulses race. "Rose, wait a minute," he pleaded.

She pulled her hand away. “Go!” she whispered with a new urgency. “My father is stirring. Don’t come again.” She drew back inside the tent.

CHAPTER XIII

POINT-BLANK

It was a surly crew that arose out of the wet blankets in the morning. Blear eyes and yellow skins. Only Ike showed his usual high colour and hard clear gaze. Monty and Hal had to submit to considerable ill-natured joshing because they insisted on washing in the creek. Of the others only Ike seemed to consider that washing was necessary. Sandy fetched a pail of water for the leader, who performed his toilet in such privacy as the half-finished shack afforded.

The men dared not criticise Ike, but Monty and Hal were fair game. The underlying idea conveyed by their crude wit was that the lads were wasting their time washing.

“It’ll be all the same to-morrow, clean or dirty,” said Cheese Garvey, with his death’s-head grin.

Monty and Hal made out to be too simple to get it.

Immediately after breakfast, Long Leet and Pat Sheedy coolly appropriated the partners’ skiff, which was in better shape than Rose’s, and set off down the bayou. The owners of the skiff watched it go helplessly. The populated world seemed a long way off!

The rest set to work cutting and fetching poles to roof the shack. Monty and Hal pitched in with them as a matter of course. Surly sneers were all the thanks they got for it. The gang resented their willing attitude. If the partners had been either defiant or terrified they would have provided better game.

With four axes and seven pairs of hands the work proceeded rapidly. Rain had ceased falling, but the sky was still overcast, and the men were bent on spending the coming night under cover. Sandy Mitchell, the tall lad, who looked nearer human than the others, was wielding a saw to-day. As the poles were brought from the woods, he laid them across two boxes in lieu of trestles, and cut them to length.

In the course of time the saw became dull, and Monty, with thickly rising excitement, saw Sandy produce a small rat-tail file. The sawyer sat on a box, and, gripping his saw between his knees, set to work to file its teeth. Monty was careful not to look at it covetously, but every time he approached Sandy carrying a pole, he was as conscious of the file as if it had been a girl that he was crazy about. He was waiting with a suspense almost breathless to see

where Sandy would put it when he was through. A bag of gold would not have meant so much to Monty then as that ten-cent file. Life literally depended upon it—perhaps four lives.

When Sandy finished his task, all unconscious of the fact that his actions were of such tremendous import to somebody, he casually stuck the little file in a crack of the wall, and picked up a pole, whistling. The work went on. Monty fetching his poles, passed the file twenty times. He dared not take it; the action of picking it from between the logs would have been too significant, but he contrived to brush against it in passing, and it fell to the ground.

Sandy had stuck the file in a rude wooden handle for his convenience. The next time Monty passed, after having dropped his pole, he kicked the handle without appearing to. Every time he passed back towards the woods he gave the handle a little kick, until he had succeeded in propelling his prize a dozen yards from the shack. Then, watching his chance, he swiftly picked it up at a moment when no one was looking, and hid it in his sleeve.

His hopes soared. Already he could see himself leading his little party to safety. We'll take both skiffs, he thought; they'll have their own trouble chasing us in the big boat. They can't get into Bayou Marie with it. Sober second thought reminded him that he was not away yet. All depended upon what would happen when the loss of the file was discovered. It mustn't be found on me, Monty thought. He dropped it into the centre of a rotten stump as he passed, carefully fixing the place in his mind.

Sandy did not require the tool again. Dinner was eaten without anything being said about it. It was not until he gathered up his tools at the end of the day that he missed it.

"Anybody seen my rat-tail file?" he asked of all and sundry.

Monty braced himself to meet the storm.

"Where ja have it?" asked Shyster.

Lucky it was for Monty that Sandy was of a shiftless nature. "Used it to sharpen my saw this morning," he said. "Laid it down somewheres."

Sandy took it lightly, but not so Ike. He instantly appreciated the significance of the loss, and turned pale with rage. "You fool!" he shouted at Sandy, with a string of oaths. "Can't you keep your tools? Do you think there's a store at the corner where you can get more?"

"I'll find it somewheres," said Sandy.

Ike, cursing, strode up to Monty. His eyes bored through him. "Have you got it?" he demanded.

“No,” said Monty, with an aggrieved air.

“Stick up your hands!”

As Monty wore but two garments, it was not difficult for Ike to satisfy himself that it was not on him.

“What I want with his file?” grumbled Monty.

“You look too innocent, damn you!” shouted Ike. With his clenched fist he struck Monty a back-handed blow on the side of the head that sent him reeling. Monty burned with helpless anger, but he held himself in. Anyhow, I have the file, he thought.

He could not quite keep the defiant fire out of his eyes, and Ike was roused to a fresh fury. “Cringe, you mangy whelp,” he shouted, “or I’ll kill you where you stand!”

Well, Monty cringed to please him. My turn will come, he said to himself.

Hal was likewise frisked. His air of innocence was perfectly genuine, but Ike suspected him too. The leader ordered a general search which was without effect, of course. Darkness cut it short. All through the meal Ike seethed with rage, and glowered at Monty. He recognised that Monty was the stronger spirit of the two partners. He may kill me at any chance moment, Monty thought; I must get the file into Rose’s hand.

That night the men carried their blankets inside the almost completed hut, though the threat of rain had passed. Monty and Hal accompanied them, not wishing to call attention to themselves by sleeping apart from the others. They took care to spread their beds near the door. On the other hand, Ike carried his blankets down to the creek and lay down in the remaining skiff. This was awkward for Monty’s future plans.

He was too much excited to sleep. He pictured what Rose would say when he gave her the file. Last night, when I talked about getting a file, she gave me the laugh, he thought. She don’t think much of me. Well, why should she, after the comical figure I cut when she first saw me. But now she’ll have to hand it to me!

One by one the men began to snore. Even when he had succeeded in placing the six separate snores, Monty dared not leave, for they had built a fire on their clay hearth that illumined every corner of the shack. He got up and spread the sticks, then returned to his blankets for another wait. What a slow job it was to lie watching and waiting for the fire to die out of the embers.

Finally he stole out of the shack in complete darkness. He would not head directly for the hiding-place of his precious file, thinking he might be

followed. He made a detour amongst the stumps and approached it from the other side. On hands and knees, feeling before him to avoid treacherous dry twigs, he progressed a few inches at a time, stopping often to listen. By the time he reached his particular stump he was certain there could be no one behind him. Pocketing the file, he started another patient detour around the back of the shack.

At the door of the tent he whispered Rose's name, and she instantly appeared. She was angry.

"I told you not to come again," she whispered before he had had time to open his mouth. "If you come every night you are certain to be found out. Ike will think I encouraged you to come. How could I control him?"

In twenty-four hours he had fallen even deeper under her spell. That soft voice, though it was scolding him, melted him completely. It had become the dearest sound on earth to him. He ached to take her in his arms and to silence her chiding lips with his own. But he was a good bit in awe of her yet. The most he dared do was to pick up her hand and press it to his lips.

She snatched it away. "Don't be silly!" she said. "We're up against realities."

Knowing he had the means in his pocket of making her change her tune, Monty could not help tormenting her a little. "I won't come every night," he whispered, with a grin. "Three nights a week will do. This is extra because I brought you a present."

Rose's anger died down. "I can't make fun with you," she whispered sadly. "I've got too much on my mind."

Monty was remorseful then. "Oh, Rose," he murmured, "I wouldn't make you feel bad for anything in the world. Listen, on the level I have something for you. Give me your hand." He pressed the file into it. "There, what do you know about that!"

A queer soft exclamation escaped her. "Oh! Oh!" Then the cool and self-contained Rose proved that she could be impulsive as well. Her feelings came tumbling out. "Oh, you dear boy!" she breathed. Dropping the file, she suddenly caught his face between her hands, and kissed him.

Strange to say, Monty was not satisfied. It was too impersonal. It did not suggest that she was crazy about him, as he desired her to be. "I'm not a baby," he mumbled.

She paid no attention. Already she had steadied down. "You should be the one to keep this," she said. "Why did you bring it to me?"

"Ike suspects I have it," said Monty. "But he doesn't know that there is any connection between you and me. It's safer with you. Besides——"

“Besides what?” she demanded.

But he would not tell her it was quite on the cards that Ike might shoot him down at any moment. He turned the question aside. “Ike is sleeping in the skiff,” he said.

“Oh!” said Rose, disappointed.

“But there will be wet, cold nights that will drive him back into the shack,” said Monty. “As long as there is any liquor left they will drink, and if they drink they are bound to sleep heavily.”

“You must not come here again until we are ready to make a break,” she said. “How will we arrange it?”

“The first night that Ike sleeps in the shack I will let you know.”

“All right,” whispered Rose. “Go now. Ike might come sneaking up here to listen. We mustn’t risk what we’ve gained.”

“Kiss me again,” whispered Monty. “A real one this time.”

“Certainly not!” she said quickly. “I forgot myself. There isn’t going to be any foolishness like that between us.”

Monty hesitated, full of a dumb resentment. You never knew where you had a girl! If I told her Ike was likely to shoot me to-morrow, she would, he thought. But he put the suggestion past him. “All right,” he said gruffly.

Then Rose was sorry she had rebuffed him. “What’s your name?” she whispered wistfully. “Your right name. So I can think of you by it.”

“Monty.”

“Good night, Monty.”

“Good night, Rose.”

He crawled back to the shack.

In the morning Ike ordered the search for the file to be renewed. Every inch of the ground where the men had been working was gone over. When it was not found Ike was convinced that Monty had secreted it. The radius of the search was extended to cover all the ground near-by. Hal, ignorant of what had happened, searched with the rest. Monty had a difficult part to play. Whether he searched or refused to search they held him equally incriminated. The safer part seemed to be to search with them. They sneered at his efforts.

He attempted a little bluster. “I wish to God I could find it!” he cried. “Then you’d see!”

His acting was of no avail. Ike continued to watch him poisonously. In itself the loss of the file was nothing to Ike, of course. It was the possibility that Monty and Hal might escape by it that enraged him. The outcome was

inevitable. Ike only awaited a pretext to put escape for ever out of their reach.

Fortunately for Monty, at midday a diversion was created by the return of Long Leet and Pat Sheedy. They hove in sight towing a second skiff. The sight of that empty skiff gave Monty a nasty turn. Where were the occupants? He never learned. The outfit it contained was a meagre one; just what two old-timers might carry for a journey: rifle, shot-gun, axe, blankets, cooking-pot and skillet; a sack of meal, a side of meat, a grub-box containing miscellaneous supplies, and a canvas bag with a few spare garments.

It was the sight of the clothes more than anything else that made Monty's blood run cold. Surely none of them could bring themselves to wear them, he thought. On the contrary, they were the first things snatched at. What were a couple of murders more or less to a crew like this? All they were concerned about was the chance of detection, and they believed themselves safe from that in the swamp. The skiff was smashed up with an axe and burned in the fire.

Sandy Mitchell, rummaging in the grub-box, pulled out an old newspaper from the bottom. "Hey, fellows!" he cried. "Here's the news of the world! It's only three weeks old," he added, consulting the date line.

They gathered around him curiously. "Anything about us in it?" asked Shyster curiously.

Sandy's eyes were already arrested by the staring headlines across the front page. "Hey, listen!" he cried. "'Monty Dixon and Hal Green Disappear from train. One hundred thousand dollars reward.'"

It had the effect of a thunderbolt dropping in their midst. They stared at the reader in a dazed fashion. The dullest man amongst them instantly realised that they had thrown away a fortune. What a ridiculous falling of faces there was around the circle. They looked ready to weep with chagrin. Then they began to curse, softly at first, for the full extent of their loss had not made itself felt. It gave Monty and Hal a queer sensation to be listening to their bitter regrets. There was some satisfaction in it; not much.

With the curious perversity of humankind, the men immediately began to blame each other. Bun even turned on Ike.

"You're the boss of this outfit," he snarled. "It was you told us to pitch them over."

"That's a damned lie," retorted Ike. "I just let you follow your natural impulses."

"It was Long first give the word to strip them and hoist them over," cried Cheese Garvey. "I mind it well."

"You lie!" said Long. "Everybody knew what was going to be done with them without saying."

"They told us who they were," mourned old Shyster, pressing his head between his hands, "and we only give them the laugh!"

"I thought maybe there was something in it," said Cheese, "but before I could say anything you had them over the side."

"Oh, you dirty little liar!" shouted Sandy. "It was you started shooting at them in the water!"

"A hundred grand!" groaned Bun. "A hundred thousand smackers! And all without any trouble or risk. Jeese! what a rotten deal. Jeese! it would break a man's heart!"

"A hundred thousand nothing!" wailed Shyster. "If we had them lads safe in our hands we could collect millions if we worked it right!"

"Well, for God's sake you needn't make it any worse!" snarled Long.

Nobody was paying any attention to Hal and Monty at the moment. Keeping a little in the background, they looked at each other. And here we are right at their elbows, if they only knew it! they were thinking.

The men kept it up all afternoon and the loss of the file was forgotten. They cursed themselves and each other; Pat and Sandy fought savagely; a dozen times during the afternoon the fight broke out afresh. The surrounding forest echoed with bitter curses. How strange it was to see the obese figure of Bun squatting on the ground with the tears running down his bloated cheeks. There was nothing respectable in such grief. It had a grimly comic effect.

Only Ike kept his mouth shut. It was not that he loved money any less than the others, but rage worked inwardly with him. He was not a pretty sight in a rage. His high colour paled and his face assumed a mottled effect. The glance of his black eyes became murderous. He was poisoned with his rage.

Monty, taking everything in, and mulling the situation over in his mind, began to breathe more freely. The prospect of a swift death receded. Everything was still dark ahead, but at least he and Hal need not be killed; their lives had a monetary value. Monty was twenty-four years old. It suddenly struck him that the sky was beautifully blue and that spring was coming in in the swamp though it was still mid-winter at home. And there was a girl in the tent that he was willing to die for, he told himself—but how much sweeter it would be to live for her! He did not know how keyed up he

had been until he felt the gladness of renewed hope begin to steal around his heart. While there was life there was always a chance of winning out!

The whole crew proceeded to forget their sorrow in the usual manner, and by the time Ike brought supper over from the tent they were all pretty drunk. On the way to the fire to get his share, Monty saw the newspaper lying where it had been dropped, and he picked it up curiously. He had been struck by something Shyster had said: "Let's see if there's anything about us in it." The men, after what they had discovered on the front page, had read no further. Inside, Monty found this following a St. Louis date line:

"No trace has been found of the notorious Ike McAley and his gang. After the wholesale murder of rival hi-jackers in a cellar on Soulard Street a week ago, it is believed that they escaped down the Mississippi in one of several motor-boats known to have belonged to the gang. The only city down-river that is believed to be big enough to afford a scope for Ike McAley's operations is New Orleans. If they start anything there the police promise them a warm reception. The city of St. Louis is determined to wipe out the stigma of lawlessness that has resulted from this shocking affair, and every available detective has been put on the case. The governors of neighbouring States have notified the Missouri authorities of their desire to co-operate, and to expedite extradition, should the gang be found within their borders. Domenico (Yellow) Pagliariello died in Mercy Hospital last night, bringing the score of the victims to six."

Monty dropped the paper with an indifferent air and went on to the fire. So they were famous and much-wanted criminals. Such a piece of information might come in useful.

Ike, sitting cross-legged by the fire, was laying for Monty with an ugly sneer. Filled with a hell of rage and disappointment, he had drunk heavily during the afternoon, and it showed on him at last. Liquor had the effect of generating hate in the young gang leader, and Monty was the most convenient object to discharge it on. To save his life, Monty could not keep something of his increased confidence from showing in his face, and this was an added cause of offence to Ike. He let the food lie untouched in front of him.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" he sneered.

Monty, with a wary look, kept silent. Nothing he could have said would have helped matters.

"Answer me!" cried Ike, with an oath.

"No, I don't think I'm smart," said Monty.

"You lie! You think you've put something over on me with that file."

"I haven't got the file," said Monty.

"I don't give a damn whether you have or not," said Ike. "But this I know, you're not going to get any advantage by it, see? Because I'm sick of looking at your face. And I'm going to spoil it right now." He drew Monty's own revolver from his hip-pocket.

The other men became very still. Of the six, only one, Sandy, ventured to remonstrate. "Aw, hell, Ike," he said, with a slight air of disgust, "let's have our supper."

"Shut up!" shouted Ike, without looking at him. Ike's gaze gloated upon Monty's face as if he anticipated a physical pleasure in destroying it.

Meanwhile Hal, sitting next to Monty, flung an arm around his partner.

"Let him alone!" he cried.

"You can go with him," said Ike, grinning.

Monty faced him out steadily. "If you shoot us you'll be throwing away your second chance," he said. "I'm Monty Dixon and he's Hal Green."

There was a silence. Ike lowered the barrel of his gun, and his jaw dropped. Then Long Leet's raucous laugh was heard.

"Them ragbags! Don't make me laugh! They think they can work that racket just from hearing our talk!"

"That's one of my shirts you're wearing," said Monty. "And those dirty pants on Cheese are part of a suit of Hal's."

Others joined in the laughter. Ike, shifting the gun to his left hand and leaning over, grasped Monty by the hair and jerked his head back so that the sunset light fell full in his face. Ike searched it, his own distorted face less than a foot away. Then he slung Monty roughly aside on the ground.

"It's true," he muttered. "This is the same fellow who come to our camp that night."

Again there was a silence around the fire. They stared at the partners clownishly. It was the second shock they had had that day.

"How in the hell did you get down here?" cried Long Leet in stupefaction. "When you got out of the river, why didn't you go home?"

"That's our business," said Monty.

Once Ike had told them the fact they all saw it for themselves. An extraordinary change took place in them. They immediately began to fawn

on Monty and Hal. They had no shame in thus facing about. Each tried to thrust himself on the partners' attention.

"I was always your friend," said Sandy. "I spoke up for you when Ike drew his gun."

"Yeah," said Monty, "you wanted your supper."

This raised a laugh against Sandy.

"Well, if we didn't treat you so good," said Long, "it was because we didn't know you. Gee! we'll have a swell time now, huntin' and fishin' and takin' our ease. And the best of everything saved for youse two. You're entitled to it."

"Yeah," said Monty, "seems we have a cash value now."

Every word of Monty's was received with applause now.

The drunken Bun Thatcher scrambled around to where he sat, and, throwing an arm around his shoulders, dithered: "Monty, dear boy, I love you like you was my brother!"

Monty did not feel obliged to put up with this. Without getting up, he hauled off and struck the slobbering Bun a blow that keeled him over sideways. More applause.

"Good boy! Good boy! Monty's some slogger!"

During this, Ike McAley sat glooming in his place. Occasionally he wiped the back of his hand across his eyes, as if to clear his befogged brain so that he could think what to do in this situation. He had put the gun away. Finally he growled:

"Just the same, I've got a good mind to shoot the two of them."

Instantly he was faced with mutiny. The other six made a close group around Monty and Hal. "No, you don't!" they cried. "These guys are our meal-tickets. They're worth a fortune to us. We're not going to let you throw it away!"

"Well, maybe somebody will tell me," sneered Ike, "how we can get the money without getting a rope at the same time. They're hunting for us in ten States. We can't show ourselves."

Their faces fell. Nobody attempted to answer him.

"Even if we could get the money," Ike went on gloomily, "when these fellows got out and told their story it would rouse the country against us. The present chase isn't dangerous. Nobody gives a whoop about a bunch of dago hi-jackers. But if they was to read how you stripped these birds and hoisted them overboard, and how you fired at them in the water!

Millionaires' sons. It would rouse the country, I tell you. They'd hunt us off the map."

"As far as that goes," said Monty, "if we get clear of this, I promise you we won't say anything about it."

"Yeah!" snarled Ike. "What is your promise worth to me? Just as much as the promise of any other liar!" To the others he went on sullenly: "You better let me shoot them and be done with it. We missed our chance when we had it. They're no good to us now."

Old Shyster pushed forward, shaking his fists in his excitement. "Negotiate! Negotiate!" he cried. "That's my line. You keep the boys here safe while I go out and fix it. It won't be no risk to you."

"Aah, your day is done, Shyster," said Ike, with cruel contempt. "You haven't got the guts to pull off a big deal like this."

Shyster showed no resentment. "Then I'll hire a smart lawyer to represent us," he said, tremulous with eagerness. "You can always get one to act in a case like this. I know the ropes. He'll be smart enough to keep out of trouble. He'll make out a good story for us. What the hell, we didn't kidnap the boys. We just happened to run into them, and when we found out who they were we decided to keep them safe for their folks until we made sure nobody did us out of the reward. That paper was three weeks old. The reward will be doubled or trebled by this time."

"Let him go, Ike! Let him go!" urged the other men.

"Shut up!" snarled Ike. "I'll decide this without any help from you."

"Listen, Ike," the old man went on, desperately anxious to convince him. "I'll get me a good-looking outfit in the first town. You know me. I'm accustomed to putting up a front and associating with the best people. Why, I used to be a vestryman in the church. I won't let you down. If I should fall down myself on it, you'll be no worse off. For God's sake, Ike, don't turn this chance down. It'll be the making of all of us!"

"This'll take two or three weeks maybe," growled Ike, half convinced. "How can I keep the boys from running off if they've a mind to. There isn't one of you drunken bums capable of standing watch at night."

"Put 'em in the cache nights," said Shyster, with an ugly grin. "It's as strong as a fort!"

"All right," said Ike. "Eat your supper."

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE

AN hour later Monty and Hal were crouched in their improvised cell, gloomily ruminating on the ups and downs of the past day. They could not stand upright under the low roof of the cache. It had been better built than the shack, and the prospect of escape, to put it bluntly, was nil. It was lined and roofed and floored with heavy logs. The side walls rested upon the logs of the floor, so there was no chance of prizing up one of the latter and digging out. In erecting it the builders had no nails to spare, and they had burned holes in the logs of the roof and pegged them to the walls. Monty, getting under the low end of the roof, soon found that it was impossible to raise it with his back.

The small square door was made of roughly shaped poles spiked to cross-pieces. It had no hinges, but was secured by a thick iron bar running across it. The bar worked on a staple driven into the doorframe on one side, while the other end was fastened to another staple with a big padlock. Nothing short of a battering-ram could have burst it out. All the stores had been carried up to the shack before the prisoners had been thrust into the cache. There was about a half-inch play all around the edge of the door, and all the fresh air they got came in through this crack. They lay with their noses to it.

Through the interstices came the sounds of an uproarious drinking bout in front of the shack. Persuading each other that the million was already as good as in its hands, the crew was celebrating accordingly. And, since Ike no longer had the liquor under lock and key, he could put no check on the consumption. For hours the insane shouting and singing and cursing continued.

"I'm just as glad we're locked up," said Monty to Hal. "Take your sleep."

"How can I sleep?" grumbled Hal.

"We're better off than we were this morning," said Monty. "The only thing I'm bothered about is the girl up there," he added in a lower tone. "If the men were to get out of hand——"

"She's a wonderful girl!" said Hal.

Monty heard this with surprise, but said nothing. It represented a right-about-face on Hal's part. Monty was grateful to him.

In spite of himself, Hal soon slept. Some time later the uproar around the shack ceased with the suddenness that is characteristic of drunken celebrations. Apparently the men fell over and slept where they were. Monty too must have slept, though he dreamed he was still awake; but the whisper of his name at the crack of the door brought him to consciousness with a great start.

"Monty!"

"Rose!"

"What has happened?" she asked anxiously. "I saw them putting you in here."

"Nothing serious," he answered, with his lips at the door. "They don't want us to escape, that's all. They've found out who we are. They're going to hold us for ransom."

"Oh, what rotten luck," she murmured bitterly. "This is the time to get away. I think they're all dead drunk."

"You're right they are," he said. "It's likely they'll sleep until noon. It's up to you to beat it!"

"But this lock and staple are as thick as my finger," she said. "It would take half a day to cut it with a little file, besides the chain on the boat. It's three o'clock now."

"Don't think of it," said Monty. "Cut the chain and take your father and beat it."

"But I couldn't leave you!" she said, with a little gasp of dismay.

To hear her say it was sweet to his ears, though he argued against her with all the eloquence at his command. "Listen, Rose, they're not going to harm us because we mean money to them, see? Our fathers will pay what they demand, so we'll be all right. But that don't help you any."

"But you brought me the file," she faltered. "How can I leave you here?"

"You've got to do it," he urged desperately. "Listen! One more such drinking bout and they may well get out of Ike's control. Where would you be then? For your father's sake, for your own sake, you've got to go. Yes, and for my sake too, if that means anything. If any harm was to come to you while I was locked up here helpless, I'd go crazy."

"All right," she said rebelliously. "But I—I don't go willingly."

"I know you don't," he said. "But there's no help for it. Go cut the chain."

“Monty——” she faltered.

He groaned inwardly. This was getting to be more than he could stand. “Don’t waste any more time,” he whispered urgently. “Let me know when you’re starting.”

She retreated from the door. He listened with his ear pressed to the crack. He thought he heard her catch her breath as if she were crying. Was it because she loved him, or was it merely what any good-hearted person would feel upon leaving a fellow-creature imprisoned and in danger? Well, you couldn’t tell, he thought.

A long time passed. He could hear nothing. At first he was pleased. She is doing her work well, he thought. But as the time lengthened out—to his strained mind it seemed as if hours had passed—he began to fear that something had gone wrong. Had Ike found some way of fastening the skiffs more securely? Could the old man have had a sinking spell? A dozen such possibilities tormented him. That is what it is to be locked up.

And then, without hearing her coming, her faltering voice was at his ear again. “I have cut the chain. My father is in the skiff. We are ready to start.”

“Anybody moving around the shack?”

“No.”

“Thank God!” he breathed with heartfelt relief. “You have no oars?”

“No. They’re in the shack. But I have poles. They’re just as good in the bayou. And I have my axe.”

“What food?”

“Only what was left from supper. Enough for a day.”

“You must make for Christian’s place. He raises his food. It cannot be much more than a day’s journey from here. Do you know how to recognise the mouth of Bayou Marie; the big live oak with the long branch that stretches across low down?”

“Yes. Buck Bidlong told me.”

“Ike will search for you on the bayou. But he knows nothing about Bayou Marie or Christian. Wait there if you can until I can come to fetch you. If you have to leave before I get there, I’m Monty Dixon; you can always reach me through my old man, whereas I wouldn’t know where to find you.”

“Yes.”

“If we are separated, will you let me hear?” Very low: “Yes.”

There was a silence. He was longing for some dearer assurance than that. But at such a moment he would not ask for it. The girl was under too great

an obligation to him. He didn't want to put a compulsion upon her to say that she loved him. To be worth anything it must be free. He waited for it, and it did not come. If he had only known it, it was his name which sealed her lips. Monty Dixon, the multi-millionaire's son!

"Well, good-bye, Rose," he said in an off-hand tone. "Good luck."

Her answering whisper was as soft as the first stirring of wind at dawn. "Good-bye, Monty. God keep you!"

That was all. It was harder than he expected. When she went it seemed to tear something alive and bleeding out of his body, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out at the pain. He flung himself down on the logs of the floor and wrapped his arms around his head, and just saw the thing through as every poor mortal must.

After a long time he got up again. "Well, that's that," he muttered, with a twisted grin. "I wish to God I had a cigarette."

The sun was high in the sky when the door of the cache was opened. It proved to be Sandy Mitchell who had come down to perform that office—a bleary and sickish-looking Sandy. He said nothing. It was clear from his expression that he was solely concerned with his own unpleasant inward sensations. His boozy wits had not yet grasped the fact that there was something amiss in camp.

Monty's first glance upon sticking his head through the door was towards the boats. There was but one skiff lying there. So everything was O.K.

Sandy started back up the rise. "Where the hell is that girl?" he muttered. "Cheese! she's lazy this morning. Hey! how about some breakfast?" he shouted. Receiving no answer, he went to the door of the tent and shouted again. "How about breakfast?" Still, getting no answer, he stuck his head inside. He jerked it out with a comical expression of consternation on his face. "Hey, Ike!" he yelled; "they're gone! The girl and the old man!" His startled glance flew to the boats. "They're gone in one of the skiffs!" he yelled.

Instantly pandemonium was let loose in camp. Ike McAley ran to and fro kicking and slogging his comatose men into activity. From his furious glances at Monty, it was clear that he suspected him of having a hand in the girl's escape, but he was unable to dope out the connection. And, in any case, he could not stop to deal with Monty then. It nearly drove Ike insane that they had to stop and cook before setting out in pursuit.

"Aah, let them go!" growled Bun Thatcher. "They got nothing."

“Let them go, you fool!” cried Ike. “If they get outside and tell their story, how long will it be before we have a sheriff’s posse in here?”

“They got no food. They’ll starve.”

“They only have to lie in the bayou till somebody comes by.”

Meanwhile surplus supplies were stowed in the cache and the door locked. Everything else was thrown into the motor-boat and the skiff. They had to take both boats because they could not tell whether Rose had gone up or down Sassafras Bayou, and must search both ways. Monty learned with satisfaction that he and Hal were to be taken along. Not even one man could be spared to guard them, it appeared. The whole crew was required to work the big boat through the side bayou.

Ike’s passions, as could plainly be seen, were raising hell with him. He wanted to go on ahead in the skiff, but he knew if he did so his sodden and half-hearted crew would do nothing. The upshot was, they all went together in the big boat, towing the skiff; and Ike kept them everlastingly at it with his curses.

It was a gruelling task to force the big boat through the narrow, crooked, and obstructed creek. The engine was of no use to them. They were probably out of gas, and the propeller was unshipped and lying in the bottom. Sometimes in an hour they made but a hundred yards. More than half the time the whole crew was in the water, virtually lifting her over the submerged logs and the bars.

It was near evening when they made the main bayou. Here the party separated. Since Rose had been bound down-stream when they intercepted her, Ike figured she had gone on that way. He went down-stream in the skiff with Shyster. There was a chance, however, that Rose, knowing they would seek her down-stream, had turned back, and Ike sent the big boat up-stream with the balance of his men and the two prisoners.

“If you let the boys get away from you, you’ll be the losers,” he remarked grimly.

“Don’t you worry, boss,” said Bun Thatcher, with an ugly grin. “Them two fellows is so dear to me I can’t keep my eyes off them!”

Long Leet was in command of this party. Ike had put two rifles in the boat. His final instructions were:

“Keep going until you learn for sure she’s not ahead of you. If you meet anybody coming down, don’t bust out with questions. Just chin with them for a spell, and let them tell without being asked.”

As soon as Ike McAley disappeared down the bayou, the crew of the big boat relaxed comfortably. The poles were wielded languidly. Some were for

camping immediately, but Long Leet advised them to keep it up a bit longer.

"Ike might come back," he said.

So they continued to work the boat after a fashion until darkness was actually falling. Then, after they had landed, somebody perceived the glint of a fire up-stream, and they fell pell-mell into the boat again, thinking they had their quarry.

But it proved to be two men camping on the hummock with their skiff at their feet. Monty recognised the tall clean-limbed figures of Rafe and Jim McLeod and stiffened. More trouble. How the hell will they take this situation? he asked himself. He was unable to figure out the answer.

Long Leet and his crew grounded their craft in the mud alongside the skiff and a parley took place between boat and shore. It was not yet completely dark. The usual questions were asked on both sides and warily answered. Monty knew that Long and his men were lying, and suspected that the McLeods were likewise. Clearly they didn't like the look of this boozy, unkempt crew, and small wonder. When Rafe's keen guarded eye, passing from face to face, came to Monty and Hal, he gave no sign of recognition. Like Monty, he wanted to get the hang of the situation before exposing his own hand.

There was a lot of talk which got nowhere. As the McLeods volunteered no information, Long was finally obliged to ask casually:

"Meet any other travellers bound up-stream?"

"No," said Rafe.

Monty was thinking: Rafe is just as dangerous to Rose as Ike McAley. But he's a better man. There's no reason why they should combine. If I keep my wits about me I can play off one against the other. Rafe would help me fool this gang in order to keep them off Rose and her father.

So Monty struck in, with make-believe impulsiveness: "We're looking for a girl rowing a skiff with a wounded man in it."

Bun Thatcher turned on him with a foul oath. "Keep your mouth out of this!" he snarled.

Monty looked startled. "Well, I thought——" he began.

"Shut up!" growled Bun.

Rafe McLeod instantly got the idea that Monty was trying to open communications with him. "A girl!" he cried in feigned surprise. "Well, that explains it, then."

"Explains what?" asked Long Leet.

“Two-three hours ago,” said Rafe readily, “we got a shot at a wild turkey. It fluttered away into the bush, and we landed to look for it. We never did find it nohow. On the way back I allowed I heard a woman’s voice on the river. Didn’t I, Jim?”

“Sure,” said Jim obediently.

“Jim, he give me the laugh,” Rafe went on. “Well, it didn’t seem natural for a woman to be in these parts, so I thought no more about it. It must have been her, though. Reckon she was poling up, and that’s why I didn’t hear no sound of oars.”

Long Leet and his men swallowed this yarn hook, line, and sinker. It is curious how readily liars will fall for the lies of others. This was what they wished to believe.

“Good work!” cried Long. “Only two-three hours’ start of us! We’ll be up with her before to-morrow night!” Feeling that Bun Thatcher’s outburst against Monty required some smoothing away, Long went on glibly: “That pore girl! Her father is wounded bad, and she’s run clean out of her senses along of it. Carried him off into the swamp without no food nor nothing. Just out of common humanity we got to save them and feed them.”

“I reckon,” said Rafe dryly.

“Well, come on, fellows,” said Long. “Let’s go.”

A general grumbling arose. Sandy voiced it. “Hell! we can’t push this scow around the snags by night. She’s got to camp herself, ain’t she? We’ll be just as near her in the morning.”

“Oh, all right,” said Long. “Let’s go ashore, then.”

Rafe and Jim McLeod may have been savage, but they were clean-living men, and they had no intention of standing for this foul crew. The two tall figures arose beside their fire hard and inhospitable.

“H’ain’t no room here for such a large party,” said Rafe in a voice of dry politeness. “It’s too cluttered like. There’s plenty of room yonder across the stream.”

Long’s crew growled truculently at this rebuff, but Long himself was anxious to avoid trouble. There was too much danger that the secret of Monty and Hal might be revealed. “Sure, that’s right,” he said quickly. “There’s a good place across the stream.”

They landed on a bank of dry land opposite the McLeods’ camp. It was merely a little island in the surrounding swamp. A fire was lighted and the supper put on.

Later the two McLeods were seen to be putting across in their skiff for a visit—after more information, thought Monty. Long Leet, as they came, muttered to Monty and Hal out of the corner of his mouth.

“If you tell them lads who you are I’ll kill you—get me? We’ll do the right thing by you if you stick with us. But sooner than lose you to them I’d kill you—see?”

The other men murmured their approval.

“I’m not going to tell them anything,” Monty said quickly.

Rafe and Jim were bent on making themselves agreeable now. Sitting by the fire and pulling out pipes, they proceeded to tell yarns. They never glanced towards Monty and Hal, who were a little outside the circle. The McLeods were so obviously a superior sort of men to the uncouth Long and his crew, that the latter were quite a bit flattered by their attention. The greatest friendliness appeared to prevail all around; yarn was capped by yarn in the manner of meeting travellers the world over.

When he felt that they were well established, Rafe, with a careless glance in Monty’s direction, contrived to let him know that he was the one he had come over to see. Whereupon Monty, making a sign to Hal, moved a few yards away from the fire and sat down with his partner. Nobody hindered them, because they could not escape from that place except by boat, and both boats were moored immediately in front of the fire.

While Jim held the attention of the circle with that long-winded folk-classic, “Jus’ wait until Martin comes!” Rafe edged outside the circle without calling attention to himself. When the exciting climax of the tale was approaching he unostentatiously got up and walked over to where Monty and Hal were sitting in the dark. Rafe knew he wouldn’t have much time, so he wasted none.

“What you-all doing in this outfit?” he muttered.

“We’re prisoners,” said Monty.

“What for you blurted out about the girl thataway?”

“Well, I’d sooner see you get her than these dogs.”

Rafe grinned, almost friendly. “She gone down bayou?”

“Yes. Two more of them are after her.”

“Don’t you fret yo’self, fella,” said Rafe. “They h’ain’t going to get her. We got a good idea where she’s at. Buck Bidlong wouldn’t give us no information, but we picked it up from others bit by bit this last week. If she’s got no food she’s haiding for Christian’s place. He’s got the only store of grub hereabouts.”

Monty's heart sank like a stone. All the risks he had taken to help the girl, and the pain he had endured on her account; all his thought and planning gone for nothing! She was lost!

Long Leet had risen from his place full of suspicion, and Rafe could say no more.

Soon afterwards the McLeods paddled back across the stream, whereupon Long came back to Monty and demanded to know with a snarl what the big fellow was after.

"He asked me what was the truth about the girl," said Monty, "and I told him I didn't know."

"What he want to go to you for?" demanded Long. "Why couldn't you stick around and make out you was one of us?"

Monty, knowing his cash value, was not disposed to be humble when there was nothing to be gained by it. "Ah, go to hell," he said, "I do the best I can for you, and that's all the thanks I get."

Long, with a suspicious grunt, let it go at that.

Across the stream the McLeods had heaped up their fire, and by its light they could be seen rolling up in their blankets beside it. Since Ike McAley had issued no liquor, there was nothing for Long and his men to do but follow suit. After considerable low-voiced discussion as to how the prisoners ought to be secured for the night, Long and Sandy approached them, each bringing a length of thin rope.

Monty and Hal had to submit to having their hands tied behind them. An end of the rope was left hanging. A blanket was spread for each of them, and they were ordered to lie down next their keepers. They lay in a row in this order: Long, Monty, Sandy and Hal. Long tied the loose end of Monty's rope to his wrist, and Sandy the same by Hal. The other men lay down in the motor-boat.

"Can't I lie beside my partner so we can talk?" said Monty. "Even felons are allowed to talk."

The reference was perhaps not a tactful one; certainly Long had the look of a jail-bird. "Yeah," he snarled, "so's you could cook up something together, hey? You stay where I put you, see?"

Monty said no more. He lay down with the blood buzzing in his ears. Keep cool! Keep cool! he admonished himself. I'm not going to let this thick-skulled brute beat me out! I'll find a way.

While Long and Sandy settled themselves to sleep, Monty reviewed the situation. If the McLeods went up Bayou Marie, Rose would be taken in a

trap. He must warn her. Well, there he was tied to Long, and Hal to Sandy. The only chance in his favour was the fact that Long and Sandy slept heavily like the brutes they were. Monty went over it step by step. It might be done. At any rate, he was going to try. He would have to steal the McLeods' boat. Maybe that would prevent the McLeods from following him into Bayou Marie.

The first step was to get in touch with Hal. About a yard separated each of the sleepers. Monty made believe to toss restlessly in his blankets, from time to time giving a jerk to the rope that bound him to Long. Each time Long, half waking, would curse him savagely and fall asleep again. But, as Monty had foreseen, Long instinctively responded to the pull on his wrist; and the two of them kept edging to the left a few inches at a time, until Monty lay close to Sandy's broad back.

Sandy lay on his left side snoring raucously. Monty raised himself to a sitting position, taking care now not to disturb Long, and looked over at Hal. Hal was lying with open eyes, watching him fearfully. Monty beckoned to him to edge closer to Sandy, which he did, and then sat up.

"Take up the slack of the line in your fingers," Monty whispered. "So if he pulls in his sleep he'll feel resistance."

After endless patient manœuvring and many failures, the two of them finally got themselves in position where, each partly leaning across Sandy's body without touching him, Monty was able to get his teeth in the knots that bound Hal's wrists. To make a long story short, Hal's hands finally came free. He then quickly freed Monty's hands. They passed the line that was bound to Sandy's wrist around a little sapling, and, bringing it back, tied the end of it to the end of Long's rope. So that if either, half waking, pulled he would feel a natural resistance.

The two of them crept to the water's edge. "What good is it?" faltered Hal. "The boat is full of men."

"I'm going to steal the McLeods' boat."

"You can't. They're keeping watch over there!"

It was true. The McLeods' fire was burning brightly, sure proof that it had been lately replenished. Beside it sat a figure shrouded in a blanket, head on knees. They could even sense the barrel and the butt of the Winchester, sticking out on either side.

Monty watched him for a long time. "I believe he's asleep," he said. "At any rate, I'm going to chance it."

CHAPTER XV

ON BAYOU MARIE

FOR a time Monty and Hal continued to squat at the edge of the water, watching the huddled figure that was revealed in the light of the fire across the stream. He sat with a blanket pulled around his shoulders, a gun across his lap, and his head bowed on his raised knees. It was impossible to tell which of the McLeod brothers it might be. The other lay rolled up in his blanket beside the fire.

"He is certainly asleep," whispered Monty.

"Even so, it's a long chance," returned Hal.

The skiff they desired to steal was lying directly in front of the seated figure and not more than three paces from him. It was moored in the usual fashion, to an oar which had been shoved into the soft mud.

"His mind is fixed on the danger of being attacked by the boat from this side," said Monty. "If there was the slightest move from the boat he'd wake up. But it would never occur to him that a couple of swimmers might come over."

"That may be," said Hal, "but if anybody laid hands on his boat he'd wake up. Even though we didn't make a sound his instinct would wake him."

"Well, I've got to chance it," said Monty. "I'll keep my eye on him, and if he wakes I'll dive behind that clump of bushes at the water's edge. The only difficulty is getting the boat free. Once she's afloat I can pull her around the bushes and she's ours. He can't shoot us in the dark, and he's got nothing to follow us in."

"The big boat on this side——" suggested Hal.

"With a pair of oars we could make two feet to her one."

As they were about to wade into the stream, the man they were watching raised his head and looked about him idly.

"Oh, hell!" whispered Monty in bitter disappointment.

"What will we do?" faltered Hal. "We can neither go forward nor back now."

"Got to think up another plan," muttered Monty. "Wait a minute. Listen, this will be better, anyhow," he presently went on. "We'll cross over below

his camp and separate on the other side. I will creep around through the bush to the back of his camp and make a little noise. McLeod, whichever one it may be, is a born hunter, and he'll be obliged to go see what it is. You'll be watching him through the bushes, and when you see him go back that will be your cue to free the boat. Are you game to do it?"

"Sure," said Hal, a little resentful that Monty should ask it.

Monty pressed his shoulder gratefully. It was a grand satisfaction to discover that Hal was becoming an asset to the firm instead of the liability he had been in the beginning.

"Suppose he takes a shot at you in the bush?" said Hal nervously. "He's probably a dead shot."

"That's a rifle he has," said Monty. "Even a dead shot can't hit me unless he sees me."

They crept down to the lower end of the little hummock of firm ground, and entered the water. It was icy cold, but they scarcely noticed that now.

"Take it very slow," said Monty, "a splash would be fatal."

Once away from the shore, they found a firm, sandy bottom underfoot, as was the case with all the running streams in the swamp. It was only the standing water that covered bottomless muck. When the water rose to their necks they struck out noiselessly. Half a dozen strokes brought them to a foothold again. Under the tangle of leaves on the other side they parted with a handclasp.

"Don't fail to bring the oar," Monty whispered. "The other one is lying in the skiff. Also poles."

Hal, moving his legs with infinite slowness, waded back up-stream outside the line of overhanging bushes. Ahead of him, through the break where the McLeods had landed, the firelight laid a shaft across the black water, and faintly illumined the motor-boat moored to the other side. Moving more and more cautiously, he finally got to a point where, by peeping through the leaves, he could see the watcher by the fire. It was Jim McLeod. He was sitting upright now, smoking his corncob pipe, all unconscious that he was under close observation. The stern of the skiff was now almost within reach of Hal's hand.

For what seemed an endless time Hal waited there, clenching his teeth together to keep them from chattering with the cold. It was a severe strain on his courage. He realised that Monty had taken the hardest end of the job, because he had to force his way through a thicket of bushes and creepers without making a sound until the proper moment came. Hal's legs became so numb with the cold that he had to move them slightly in order to remind

himself that he still had legs. And all the time that grim figure sat smoking by the fire fifteen feet away. If he knew I was here my life wouldn't be worth one cent, Hal thought.

In the end, Jim McLeod heard Monty before Hal did. True to their calculations, Jim instantly threw the blanket off his shoulders and stole back behind the fire, holding his gun ready. He passed out of Hal's range of vision. Hal, with a dumb prayer, moved out from behind his shelter of leaves. In that moment, so intense was his concentration on what he had to do, all fear left him. It was a glorious feeling. Bending double in order to keep as far as possible below the bank, he grasped the upright oar and pulled it towards him. Working it back and forth, he pulled it clear of the mud, and laid it in the skiff. Getting hold of the stern, he drew the boat clear of the mud and pushed it around the bushes. What a blessed feeling of relief when the darkness covered him again! Softly working his body over the side, he picked up a pole at random in the bottom, and gave her a thrust down-stream.

Then he had to wait again, not knowing where Monty would appear. This was the hardest moment of all; to hang around when all was set for flight. Where was Monty? Where was Monty? A pale oval patch showed amongst the leaves ahead of him, and a figure stepped into the water. Hal sighed with relief. A moment later Monty was in the boat. Groping in the bottom, he found another pole, and they sent the skiff flying down-stream.

At the same moment a roar of rage from Jim McLeod announced that he had discovered the theft. He splashed out into the water. They could see him silhouetted against the beam of light from the fire, but he could not see them. Knowing they had gone down-stream, he sent a shot after them at random. It went wide. A slight bend in the stream shut him off from their sight.

But they could hear the uproar reverberating through the forest aisles. The crash of Jim's shot brought the gang across the stream to their feet; they heard Long Leet yelling: "The boys have gone!" and Sandy's curses. Monty laughed as he pictured them running in different directions, and their rage when they were brought up short by the rope which bound them together. Jim McLeod shouted: "They've stolen our boat!" They heard the gang throwing things into their boat and jumping after them. "Come over and get us!" cried the McLeods. When they finally got started the racket died down for a bit.

Meanwhile Monty had taken to the oars. He faced forward in the boat so he could see where he was going, and pushed the oars from him in the manner of a fisherman. Hal lay down in the bow and helped him with his

eyes. Presently the furious cursing was renewed behind them. As soon as they started down-stream the crew of the big boat got in trouble; for when they kept alongshore they fouled snags and overhanging branches, and if they took to mid-stream their poles would not fetch bottom. There was a grand satisfaction to the fugitives in hearing the noise grow steadily fainter as the moments passed.

Monty slowed down his stroke, realising that he had many a long mile to row. "You did fine, old sock!" he said, grinning.

"You had the hardest part," said Hal.

"Not at all. The worst was coming back. He heard me and started after. When he saw I was heading for the stream he ran back for his boat. It was an error of judgment," Monty added dryly.

An hour later they could still occasionally hear faint sounds from behind that suggested cursing.

"A pleasant boating-party the boys are having," commented Monty.

Two hours later all was silent. The only thing that marred their satisfaction was the lack of grub. Already they were savagely hungry.

"Well, we've been hungry before and lived through it," said Hal.

"If we have luck we'll have a big feed to-night," said Monty.

When dawn broke, Monty was still at it. As soon as it became light enough to see, they anxiously studied the shores for familiar landmarks. Even in the overpowering sameness of the vast swamp, there were peculiar-looking trees and bends and islands that fixed themselves on the memory. Seeing nothing that they had ever seen before, they knew they must have passed the mouth of the side-stream where Ike McAley's camp was hidden.

"If I have calculated right, the mouth of Bayou Marie is about twenty miles beyond Ike McAley's bayou. And I'm averaging about the speed of a slow walk. If we can keep it up we'll reach Bayou Marie some time before four this afternoon. I hope to God it's not far up or we'll get no supper."

"Suppose we run into Ike McAley coming back?" suggested Hal.

"Then it will be all day with us," said Monty, grinning. "However, I don't think there's much chance of it. According to all accounts, there's nobody living down this way to give him any directions."

"He might meet somebody coming up-stream who would tell him that Rose had not gone down."

"He might," said Monty, "but everybody we've met so far on this bayou has been bound down."

Hal took the oars, and Monty stretched out in the bow for a sleep.

In the middle of the afternoon they fetched the gigantic live oak-tree on the point of the hummock that they were looking for. There was no possibility of mistaking the place once it had been described. The huge branch stretched out at right-angles to the trunk, fifty or sixty feet long, and so low that it almost touched the land and the water. No one who had not been forewarned could have guessed that a tributary entered under this branch, for it was backed by a seemingly impenetrable jungle.

There was no place where the skiff would pass under the branch, so the two had to sit astride it facing each other, with their feet in the water, and work their boat over it a few inches at a time. It was a gruelling task.

“How in hell do you suppose Rose did it?” suggested Hal.

“Sunk it, maybe,” said Monty, “and floated it under. That would take too long.”

Pushing their way into the jungle, they presently found themselves in a narrow, twisting, black creek, merely a thread of water flowing through a sort of tunnel in the tangled growth.

“Well, at any rate, the big boat can’t follow us in here,” said Hal.

“I don’t believe the McLeods will give away the secret of this place to that gang,” said Monty. “Unless I miss my guess, they’ll shake Long Leet’s crowd and come in here alone.”

“How can they without a skiff?”

“I don’t know,” said Monty, “but I reckon they’ll find a way.”

“And then what?” said Hal.

“Oh, hell!” said Monty, “wait until it comes.”

They slowly poled their way through the constricted tunnel, with the branches scraping along the sides of the skiff and the leaves in their faces. By now they were dog-weary and faint with hunger. They spoke little, for any chance word in their exhausted state was sufficient to provoke a quarrel. Hal looked ready to cave in, but he doggedly refused to put down his pole, however his exasperated partner might curse him.

Slowly the land began to rise, and the whole character of the scene changed. The stream flowed between well-defined banks now, and the profuse tangle of the swamp gave place to a more open growth with trees familiar to northerly latitudes, maple, sycamore, gum, already putting out their buds. The current flowed at a livelier rate, and little riffles appeared, where they had to step overboard and ease the skiff through the shallow water.

“This looks like the sure enough end of the swamp on this side,” said Monty hopefully. “Perhaps we can escape overland to the west.”

“Not with the old man,” said Hal gloomily.

Shortly before the sun went down they entered a narrow winding lake where all current ceased. With its shores lined with reeds, the budding trees hanging over and the sunshine flooding it, it made the greatest contrast to the forbidding swamp that could have been imagined. The branches of the trees were misted with green; fresh grass grew about the roots, and spring flowers were beginning to appear. It was like a spot at home where picnics are held.

After following the course of the lake for half a mile they turned a corner into a long straight reach and saw a sight that gladdened their hearts. At the head of the water stood a little log shack with smoke coming out of the chimney. Where there was smoke there was food!

“Here’s where we eat!” cried Monty, and weariness was forgotten.

Soon they were able to distinguish human figures; somebody sitting at the door of the shack and another—this one a woman—coming down to the shore for water. Springing to their feet, the two young men waved their arms and shouted with all the force of their lungs. The figure of the woman came to attention, but sent them no answering greeting. They knew it was Rose, but she didn’t know who they might be. She ran back into the shack, and, immediately reappearing, handed something to the old man, probably a gun.

“Oh, well, he won’t shoot before he can see our faces,” said Monty, with a laugh. He applied himself to his oars with renewed strength.

A few minutes later they were landing. There was no guard upon Rose then. She stood waiting for them, her face all suffused with colour and adorably softened. Like all strong and self-reliant people when overcome by emotion, she seemed to be asking their pardon for showing it.

Monty, leaping out, cried: “Rose! you *are* glad to see me!” Half beside himself with delight, he flung his arms around her.

Hal, just behind him, turned suddenly and surprisingly glum at the sight of it. Monty couldn’t see him, but Rose did. Thrusting Monty away from her, she said quickly:

“Of course I am! But you don’t have to suffocate me!” Passing Monty, she held out both hands to Hal with a warmth she had never shown him before. “Glad to see you too, Hal!”

It was Monty’s turn to look glum then. You never can tell which way a woman will jump, he thought sorely. If he had known the sex a little better

he need not have felt discouraged. Rose was merely obeying the ancient instinct of woman.

It all passed directly. At such a joyful moment nobody could harbour ill-will. Monty and Hal hastened to the shack to shake the old man's hand. He stood up to receive them. Worn to a mere shadow of himself, with his bald skull and neat pointed beard, he looked more than ever the old knight. The faded cotton jeans and shirt could not hide his innate gentility.

"I shore am glad to see you, boys," he said, with his old-time courtesy. "It troubled us sorely to leave you in the power of those blacklegs!"

Rose, standing beside him, could no longer contain her questions. "How did you get away so quick? Are they after you? Where did you get that skiff? It's not the one you had before."

"One at a time," said Monty, grinning. "They all took after you, and we managed to give them the slip in the bayou. McAley's gang knows nothing about this place. As for the skiff, we stole it."

He did not say from whom, because it seemed too cruel to tell her in that moment of gladness that a new danger was close upon them.

"Is there plenty to eat?" asked Hal eagerly.

She nodded, smiling. When Rose was happy, Monty thought her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Where's the boss of this place?" asked Monty, looking around.

"He's away," she said. "We just helped ourselves to what we found. Hungry folks cannot choose. The door wasn't locked."

"I'll see that he's paid," said Monty.

"We haven't eaten since last night," said Hal.

"Oh!" cried Rose compassionately. "Come in quickly! It's all ready!"

The interior of the hut afforded a surprise. Everything was rough and home-made, of course, but an amount of pains had been spent upon it that you didn't expect to find in a lonely man's shack. At one end there was a bedstead of pine poles with a clean ticking and pillows filled with straw; and at the other end a fireplace neatly built out of stones fetched from the bed of the stream. There was a squared table and two chairs, a wall cupboard, and a shelf of books by the window. Rushes had been plaited into mats for the floor.

The home-cured ham, Irish potatoes, and corn pone made Hal and Monty groan with satisfaction.

"There is no coffee or sugar," said Rose deprecatingly. "Maybe that's what Christian went out for. But only listen to me!" she added, with a laugh,

“apologising for the lack of what is not mine, anyway!”

It was a light-hearted meal, though Monty’s feelings kept going up and down like a spirit thermometer. The trouble was that Rose would scarcely look at him. She addressed all her remarks to Hal. Suppose she likes Hal better than me, he thought. Those were his cold moments. But then she would glance at him through her lashes in a way that made his heart hit the ceiling. Yet there was not a trace of coquetry in her. Well, you never could tell about women.

Monty’s bad news could not be indefinitely withheld, and as soon as they had finished eating he told it. “When we were poling up the bayou in the big boat,” he said, “we ran into Rafe and Jim McLeod. They have been travelling around searching for you, and somebody told them about this place. They have figured out that you are here.”

Rose became very still. All the warm, glad colour faded out of her face. Monty felt a sharp compassion for her. Her respite from anxiety had been so brief!

“That’s their skiff that we came in,” he went on. “We stole it. But I suppose they’ll find some way of following us.”

The old man’s face—he was now strong enough to sit at the table with them—never changed a muscle. Bodily weakness, it seemed, did not affect his courage. “Sho’ly,” he said, with the greatest calmness, “they will follow you here. But, since you have warned us, we will not be taken by surprise.” There was silence for a moment or two, then he added fervently, “Thank God! I found a gun here.”

“Oh, Pappy!” faltered the girl heart-brokenly. “Oh, Pappy!”

“I must do what I must,” he said quietly. “It was not of my choosing.”

“Couldn’t we get away by land westward,” suggested Monty.

“My father couldn’t escape walking,” said Rose.

“No,” said the old man, “but I wish you three to go. I am able to do for myself now.”

“No! No!” said Rose brokenly.

“I would be easier in my mind,” he insisted. “Putting sentiment aside, my race is run. I appear to be getting better, but I still got a hole in my lung. What odds is it whether another bullet carries me off, or the pneumonia? Whereas you—all are young.” He smiled on them with unspeakable kindness. “With all yo’ sins befo’ you.”

“I will not leave you!” cried Rose. “After all we have been through. I will not!”

He shrugged, seeing the uselessness of trying to persuade her.

"But these men ought to go," she went on presently. "This is not their quarrel."

"Not on your life!" said Monty quickly. "What do you say, Hal?"

"I say the same," muttered Hal.

"There is only the one gun," said old Sam, with unchanged courtesy, "while Rafe and Jim McLeod will both be armed. You cain't help us beyond what you have done already."

"Maybe not," said Monty sullenly, "but we're not going to walk away and leave you to your fate. Eh, Hal?"

"You said it," muttered Hal.

The old man gravely shook hands with each of them. "You are brave men," he said. "Yo' feelings do you honour. I will do my utmost to save all three of you," he added coolly.

"At any rate, we're safe for to-night," said Monty. "We were three or four hours ahead of them at the mouth of the little bayou, and they can't come up by night whatever they're in."

The old man did not reply immediately. Stroking his drooping moustache, he had fallen into a study. "We have got to deceive them in order to even the chances," he finally said, thinking aloud. "We must move out of the cabin at dawn and close the door and the window-shutter. We must hide the skiffs where they can't be seen from the bend in the lake. The McLeods don't know we're here," he explained. "It's only a guess. I want them to figure they're mistaken when they see the shut-up shack. I want them to draw close before they land. If they was to land below and creep up on us through the woods, we'd be bad off, certain."

The old man spoke in a gentle, thoughtful voice, but his meaning was deadly. His words seemed to bring Death stalking into the warm and cosy cabin—Death, who is such a distant acquaintance of the young. The two young men avoided looking at each other. As for the girl, she could not bear it. She rose with an abrupt movement and went outside. Monty's eyes followed her wishfully. He did not feel that he had the right as yet to offer to comfort her.

For a moment the old man's face was overclouded. "This ain't woman's work nohow," he muttered. He shook it off with a gesture, and his calm smile returned. "I shore am glad you boys came," he said. "I don't have to say nothin' to you. You're the right breed. You'll help her over her hard time such as you can, and take her out to a civilised country again. It gives me good courage to do what I got to do."

Monty's feelings angered him. "Ah, we're all going out together," he said almost roughly.

Sam Deakin shook his head. "Ah reckon the second one will git me," he drawled, with a faintly derisive grin. "Howsoever ah calc'late to git him simultaneous."

CHAPTER XVI

THE END OF THE FEUD

A PAIR of blankets had been found in Christian's shack. Sam Deakin and the two young men had taken the bed, while Rose carried the remaining blanket into a lean-to at the back of the cabin that Christian used for a storehouse. While it was still dark, Sam awoke Monty with a shake and spoke into his ear.

"I been figuring it all out while I lay here. I want to tell you private, because Rose would only worry herself sick and oppose what I say. Soon as it comes light you row me down to a point on the lake that I have in mind for a good lookout, and leave me there. Rose can stay with me until you come back. Those fellows can't get here nohow for a good two hours after sun-up.

"You and your partner should hide the two skiffs in the rushes that grow along the north side of the lake, and come back here to the shack. Gather up everything needful for a journey; blankets, axe, matches, and all the grub you can carry on your backs. Make it up into packs and carry it around through the woods to a spot near where you left me, and cache it so as you can pick it up again in a hurry. What I'm aiming at is, in case one of them fellows gets me I want you and the girl to have a line of retreat without coming back to the shack. Make your way westward. I figure there's a little divide west of this lake, and if you cross it, you'll come to another stream that will take you somewhere. Do you get me?"

Once more Monty's feelings threatened to master him. "Yes—but——" he began.

The old man pressed his shoulder. "Now don't you go to get sentimental," he said humorously. "Men must take things as they come."

"You take all the risk," muttered Monty.

"Pooh!" said the old man serenely. "It don't trouble me none. For why? Because I got nothing to lose. Between you and me and the bedpost yonder, I'd liefer stop another bullet and have done with it, than drag out a few mis'able years with a hole in my lung. That is, so long as my bullet collects its fee," he added grimly.

In the face of such superb nonchalance, Monty was ashamed of the emotionalism that made his own breast tight. He reached up and grasped the

old man's wasted hand. "Well, I want to say, whatever happens, you've given me a mark," he said gruffly. "Something to keep before me if I live!"

"Good boy!" said Sam indulgently. "Take a look outside and see if the light is breaking."

As soon as it became light enough to see what they were doing, they helped the old man into one of the skiffs, and rowed about a quarter of a mile down the lake to the spot he had picked out. It was a slight point on the south shore which was admirably suited for defensive purposes, since it commanded the approach up the lake and also a long stretch of the shore on the right or south side. If their enemies landed they would naturally come around the south side, since, owing to the configuration of the shores, it was much shorter than the other way.

Along the edge of the water, back of the reeds grew thick bushes of a species of bog myrtle. They were not yet fully leaved out, and when the old man lay down behind them he was well screened from the water, but he could see perfectly. For additional cover he had the young men heap up a little bank of black sand, upon which he rested the barrel of his gun. Sam seemed to have taken a new lease on life this morning. His eye was clear and his hand steady.

Leaving him there with Rose beside him, Monty and Hal returned to the cabin. All was done as Sam had ordered: the skiffs hidden among the rushes, an outfit collected for a possible journey, and the cabin cleared of all traces of their occupancy. This took time, and the hour had now come when the McLeods might conceivably appear.

Shouldering their packs, the two young men left the cabin, with an anxious glance down the lake. Nothing in sight. Alongside the shack Christian had cleared a small field, where he raised corn. He had not yet prepared it for the season's planting, and last year's stalks still stood, leaning this way and that, and rattling their leaves with every passing breeze like a cackle of laughter. The stalks covered Monty and Hal as they crossed the field.

They struck into the forest on the other side. The deciduous trees grew mostly in a belt around the shore, with thick undergrowth. Farther back there was a grove of fine virgin pine, where the going was comparatively easy over a carpet of needles. Monty noted it with satisfaction in view of a possible flight overland. The lake was invisible to them now, but Monty got his bearings by climbing a tree.

Dropping their packs at the foot of a conspicuous pine that they could easily find again, they struck through the undergrowth and rejoined Sam and

Rose in their hiding-place behind the myrtle-bushes. The old man was smoking his pipe.

“The taste for it has come back,” he said to Monty, with a quizzical, grim meaning. “It may be my last!”

What does he have to grin for? thought Monty, with a helpless feeling of exasperation. It only makes us feel like hell!

The old knight, in his innocence, thought he was making it easy for them. But the girl’s face was dulled with anxiety and pain. Her father’s gaiety in the face of danger was something that no woman, however brave, could understand. To her it was almost like impiety.

The four of them settled down to wait. Monty became aware of a nasty little breathlessness that he could not master, and a tendency to twitch in his limbs that shamed him. Why can’t I be as cool as the old man? he asked himself. It was the horrible uncertainty that shook him. If kept up long enough it is enough to break the stoutest nerve. Their enemies might appear at any moment or they might never come. When they *did* come there was no hope of a parley; the guns must settle it. Monty felt as useless as a block of wood, sitting there unarmed.

It was a particularly beautiful morning. The air was crystal clear, and the earth had a new washed and sparkling look. The narrow lake was sapphire, the sky turquoise, the grey trees delicately washed with green. A little breeze whisked the still surface of the water and rose again as frolicsome as a kitten’s paw. All this beauty mocked them in their cruel suspense. What did the earth care? If they were all shot down together it would go on being just as beautiful.

Rose and Hal were no better off than Monty. Old Sam, observing the signs of disorder in his young friends, said easily: “Why do you sit around? It may be to-morrow before they come—or next week.”

“Where else should we go?” muttered Monty.

“Prospect out a way of escape towards the west.”

“We’re not going that way,” said Rose sullenly.

“Well,” said the old man, with a great air of carelessness, “after I account for the McLeods, Ike McAley’s gang will still be on the bayou. I figured maybe our friends here could make a litter and give me a lift through the woods. It would be slow, but we could take our time.”

Rose knew as well as he did that such a plan was perfectly impracticable. “Let the men go,” she said. “I will stay with you.”

Naturally Monty and Hal were not going to leave the Deakins to keep their vigil alone, so all remained as they were.

By and by, in order to ease the tension, the old man started a yarn. “This calls to mind the time when I was a tadpole of six or seven year,” he said dreamily, “and the all-firedest little reb in Mississippi. I drilled my company every day and led them down to the levee, where we lay on our little bellies and made out to sink the Yankee gunboats with our wooden guns. The Yanks were blockading the river. They didn’t trouble the folks on shore at all; their business was to stop cattle and forage and meal from being run across for the rebel armies. My Pap was a blockade runner, and he used to squat for hours just like this behind the willows watching the gunboats through a glass and figuring out their dispositions for the coming night.

“He had a big scow that was rowed with four oars, a man to an oar. One night when I knew he was going across I crept out of the window and down the roof of the shed, and I hid myself in the bow and pulled a tarpaulin over me. Over on the other side my Pap found me, and give me a right smart hiding, but I didn’t care, because I was there then. On the way back with a load of meal in sacks we was chased by a Yankee cutter full of men. Naturally they could row round us in circles, and so we was captured, and carried on board a gunboat. When we were brought before the Yankee captain, Pap was carrying me in his arms. I looked on that Yankee like he was the devil himself, but I wouldn’t let on I was scared. I say——”

The story was not destined to be finished. While telling it old Sam kept the tail of his eye warily down the lake, and he now said without altering his quiet voice: “Here they come.”

The others, looking through the branches, saw down at the bend of the lake two tiny figures, apparently standing on the water, with poles in their hands.

“They made them a raft,” said Sam coolly.

The two had come out into the open unexpectedly to themselves it seemed, for they immediately retreated out of sight again. Five minutes later, having made their observations from under cover, they reappeared, poling slowly along close to the southerly shore. They had to keep close to the shore in order to find bottom for their poles.

“Reckon they don’t think it worth while to be careful,” said Sam, with a satisfied smile. “They have found out from McAley’s gang that I didn’t have no gun, and they know I can’t run away.”

Soon the watchers could recognise the tall figures of the McLeod brothers. They had known from the beginning it could be no other. All the

gentleness faded out of Sam Deakin's face at the sight of his enemies. His eyes narrowed, his mouth was compressed to a thin firm line. It was the old knight's fighting look.

"Leave me now," he said brusquely. "I want no onlookers at my elbow."

A groan of anguish was forced from the girl's breast. "Oh, Pappy, Pappy!" she faltered.

"Come, my girl," he said, with hard kindness. "This is no time for crying."

Commanding herself with a great effort, she kissed him and turned away without speaking again. He eyed her approvingly.

"Go back to the place where you left the packs," he said. "Whatever happens, do not come back here unless I call to you. Understand, if I do not call to you, you are to make your way quietly off through the woods. But I will be all right," he added cheerfully. "Look what targets they are giving me on their raft!"

However, the smile he gave to Monty conveyed a different significance. He took the young man into his confidence with that smile. Monty was the last to disappear into the woods, and, as he turned back, the old man flung up his hand in a gay gesture that bid him farewell. Monty went away too much numbed with feeling to feel anything. Not until later could he take it in.

If it was hard for him to bear, what must it be for the girl? he thought. When they came to the tree where the bundles lay, she sank down, and, resting her arms on her knees, buried her head within them. Monty and Hal stood looking down at her in helpless commiseration. Nothing that could be said would do any good, so they remained silent.

It was maddening to Monty to stand still and wait. He cast his eye aloft at the tree beside them. It grew at the edge of the grove of pines, but was of a different variety of evergreen from the others, a tall, pointed tree with branches growing all the way up the trunk. It would be easy to climb it, and from between the higher branches he might catch a glimpse of what was going on. Parting the branches that swept the ground, he started to mount.

The deciduous trees were not fully in leaf, and it was possible to see between their branches when he climbed high enough. It was the branches of the tree upon which he stood that most obstructed his view. He took the greatest care not to shake them as he mounted from one to another. Suddenly he found himself looking through a narrow opening that commanded a part of the lake shore. The raft was squarely enframed within it.

The raft was a long narrow affair. Rafe McLeod, who was in front, had dropped his pole and was down on one knee with his gun in his hands, warily searching the shore. His brother stood behind him, still wielding his pole. The water washed around their feet. Their outfit was piled on a little platform astern to keep it dry. The spot down to Monty's left, where Sam Deakin lay, was completely hidden from him. There was only that little framed picture of a part of the lake shore.

Almost immediately the raft passed out of it, and he knew he could not see it again however high he might climb, for it was always coming closer to him. So he started down the tree again in nervous haste, suddenly realising that all would be over before he reached the bottom. A shot rang out, followed almost immediately by another. He ran out on a branch, and dropped the rest of the way to the ground.

Two shots, but *whose*? The second shot had a different sound from the first.

Rose, springing to her feet with a low cry, had plunged into the bushes. Hal, with a sharp warning, clutched at her, but she tore herself from his hands and ran on. Monty followed them both down to the beach, screened by the myrtle-bushes. Sam Deakin lay just as he had fired his gun, except that his head was bowed on the little mound of sand. There was a hole in the back of his head. When they turned him over they saw the corresponding hole in his forehead. It was not bleeding much.

So much Monty got in a flash. He snatched the gun out of Sam's hands and looked through the bushes. There floated the raft motionless some twenty-five paces away—empty. The lake all around it was smooth and unbroken.

"He got them both," said Monty hoarsely. "There must have been two shots together."

So it was all over. Monty was dazed with horror. Three lives snuffed out at once! Horrible it was to think of those two handsome young men, hot and quick with life a moment ago, now lying still under the water with the fishes nosing around them. Then his mind flew to Rose.

She was kneeling beside the body with her hands pressed to her breast, looking down with stony, tearless eyes. "Pappy, Pappy, Pappy," she murmured. "All for nothing! All for nothing!"

The same thought was in Monty's mind. All for nothing! It was heart-breaking. Her stony air was more dreadful than the wildest outburst of grief. "Don't look like that!" he cried. "Sam was ready to die. Remember how brave he was. It's fine to think of it!"

She looked at him as from far off, obviously unable to take in the sense of what he was saying.

A sudden sharp cry broke from Hal: "Look! Look!"

Peering through the branches, Monty saw a skiff down at the bend of the lake in the same spot where the raft had appeared half an hour before. It was full of men. At the distance he could not be sure how many. They were motionless, as if they had been startled by something. It was scarcely possible that they could see the empty raft so far away, but they might have heard the shots.

"McAley!" cried Hal.

"Very likely," said Monty, scowling, "but we must make sure."

"Nobody else would crowd so many men into a skiff," said Hal.

"I know," said Monty, "but we need help so bad it would be foolish to run away until we know for certain who this is."

"I can see what has happened," said Hal. "The McLeods made up some story to get Long Leet to put them ashore at the mouth of the little bayou. Then when the gang had gone they built their raft and came up here. Meanwhile Long met Ike McAley coming back, and Ike saw that there was a trick in it. They returned to the place where they had put the McLeods ashore, and they found the little bayou, and here they are."

"Well, we'll soon know," said Monty.

The skiff had got under way and was slowly approaching up the middle of the lake. There was a man standing in the bow, and it was not long before Monty got the long laced boots, the whipcord breeches, the blue shirt of the gang leader. He could recognise the man he hated, almost as far as he could see him.

"You're right," he said curtly. "Come on, let's go."

The girl made no move.

"Come on, Rose," he said gently.

"I can't leave him unburied," she murmured.

"But they'll be here in ten minutes," he protested. "When they see the raft they'll search the neighbourhood. I can't stand off a whole boatload of men. We'll come back later if we can."

She seemed scarcely to hear him. "Go," she said. "Leave me here. What do I care what happens now?"

Monty groaned helplessly. God knew he was full of pity for her, but their situation was desperate. How was he to manage a grief-crazed woman? Well, there was only one way to move her.

“Pick up his feet,” he said to Hal.

Carrying the body between them, they plunged head first into the bushes. Rose followed them then as a matter of course. Her whole attention was bent upon the dead. Indifferent to the exertions that Monty and Hal were making, whenever a branch whipped her father’s unfeeling face, a little groan of solicitude was forced from her.

“Oh, be careful, be careful,” she whispered.

They were leaving a wide, open track behind them, and, of course, when McAley landed there, he could not fail to see it, but Monty hoped that he might be able to throw them off when they came to the pine-needles. After all, their pursuers were city men; they could scarcely have had the experience necessary to enable them to track their quarry through the woods.

At the tall tree Rose picked up the two packs, and they pressed on. Though the old man’s body was so wasted, it was, nevertheless, a formidable burden to carry through the pathless woods. Rose, bent under her double load, was no better off. They were forced to stop often to rest. Whenever they stopped it was pitiful to see how her eyes clung to the poor marred face.

They did not cross the cornfield now, but circled around it through the trees. At a point behind the cabin, when they rested, Monty climbed another tall tree to take an observation, but, though he could see down to the bend in the lake, there was no sign of their pursuers. At this moment the skiff must have been hidden behind the point where the shooting had taken place, and the men themselves searching in the woods.

They went on heading west by the sun. The pine woods continued. Pretty soon they began to suffer from thirst. None of them knew how to look for water in an unfamiliar country. After having had water on every side for weeks past, it seemed like a bad joke. At mid-day they rested their weary backs and limbs only long enough to eat a little cooked bread that was in the pack. It was hard to get it down without water.

“Can’t we bury him here?” whispered Hal to Monty.

Monty shook his head. “There may be one man in McAley’s gang who can trail us through the woods,” he said. “I reckon we’ve left plenty of signs. If we stop to dig a grave they may catch up with us.”

“We’ve got to stop some time.”

“To-night,” said Monty. “At night they have to stop too, and we’ll lose nothing.”

They picked up their burden again. It was slowly stiffening.

Shortly before sundown they came to a narrow opening in the endless pine woods where grass grew. It ran down a slight slope to a group of graceful trees putting out new leaves. Even to their inexperienced eyes the spot suggested water, and they turned aside to it. To their joy they found a spring welling up between the roots, and here they resolved to camp and to bury their dead.

The moment the young men put down the body Rose took up her place beside it. During all these hours she had not spoken, nor had her stony look changed. Monty had the fear that she might lose her mind if he could not break up that awful immobility, but he had no idea how to set about it. He dared not speak of burying the body. But he started a fire beside the spring, and said to her:

“Will you bake bread?”

She nodded, and immediately set to work unpacking what was necessary.

Monty and Hal went a little way off and started to dig. Having no spade, they cut the earth with the axe, and scooped it out with a cooking-pot. It was a slow business. Sam Deakin had to be content with a shallow bed. Rose called them to their supper. They could not persuade her to eat.

Later, Monty hesitated beside the finished grave. It seemed inhuman to lay the poor body in it and heap the earth nakedly upon him. Yet they had nothing to wrap him in. It was Rose who, without any suggestion from the others, solved the problem by taking the axe and cutting a quantity of pine-boughs. They lined the grave with some of these and lay the body upon them. Others were to cover him.

Rose suddenly broke down. Flinging herself in the grass, she wrapped her arms about her father's shoulders and hid her face in his breast. “Pappy, Pappy, Pappy!” she cried. “The bestest, kindest Pappy——!” She lifted a streaming, grief-distorted face. “How can I leave him here?” she cried. “I cannot find the place again. I can never come back!”

The men were crying too, though their hearts were full of relief. They felt that tears had saved her. “Sam would like this place,” said Monty quickly. “It's a quiet, pretty place. And so wild and free; far away from the mess of things. Sam would like it.”

“Maybe so,” she said, partly comforted.

She knelt beside the grave, bowing her head and pressing her hands together. Then, after a final embrace of the dead, she sprang to her feet.

“Cover him!” she said in a gasping voice. “Quickly! Quickly! So I can't see or hear!” She ran blindly away, wrapping her arms around her head.

The young men worked with a will.

Monty sat by the fire until late making a cross for the grave. He thought it would please her when she awoke and saw it in the morning. Having neither nails nor cord to bind the pieces together he opened the top of the upright with his axe and forced a thin crosspiece into the split. The little rat-tail file was still in their outfit. He heated the point in the fire and burned the dead man's name on the crosspiece. It was hardly an expert job, but not bad perhaps for one who had so lately learned the use of his hands.

CHAPTER XVII

THREE'S A CROWD

MONTY and Hal were poling a clumsily constructed raft down an unknown bayou flowing between banks. Rose sat on the logs between them nursing her knees. For a long time they had not addressed each other. During their laborious tramp through the woods and their no less laborious voyage by raft the shadow of Sam Deakin's death lay upon them, and moreover, a strain had gradually divided the three partners.

As Monty put it to himself, Hal seemed to be getting too big for his shoes. What a wonderful trip it would have been if Hal hadn't been tagging along, he thought. Rose and I together! Well, thoughts are anybody's property, and Hal's thoughts were similar. When Rose saw what was happening she retired into herself. She was polite to both, no more. It was like travelling with a stranger.

All of a sudden, Hal, who was in the bow, saw something which arrested his pole midway. "Look!" he cried.

It was one of the simplest things in the world—and one of the most significant: a path. It entered the water from one bank and climbed out on the other. The partners' hard feelings vanished. It was nine days since they had seen a human being.

"A ford!" cried Rose. "We have come back to where people live!"

They discussed whether to explore this path or stick to the stream. It was decided in favour of the latter.

"The bayous were here before the horse-tracks," said Rose. "All the houses in a new country are built along the rivers."

Sure enough, only a few hundred yards farther, they came upon a log cabin beside the stream. A little old man sat on a bench at the door, regarding them with an odd stillness. Shyness overcame them at the sight of their first fellow-creature, and they hung back, reluctant to accost him. When they landed he made no move, but sat there watching them with bright eyes like an excited child. He was so old he had come around towards childhood again. It was Rose who chiefly astonished him; so much pride in a faded and torn print dress; nothing in the old man's experience enabled him to place such a one.

"Where you from?" he finally jerked out.

“Bayou Marie,” said Monty off-handedly.

“Bayou Marie!” he said incredulously. “Ain’t that over Sassafras way? How come you down here?”

“We walked over from Bayou Marie to the head-waters of this stream. Then we walked down alongside the stream till it got deep enough to float a raft.”

“*Walked?*” said the old man staring. “What for?”

Monty did not want to expose Rose’s tragic story to a gaping stranger. “We just wanted to see the country.”

“Funny work for a gal,” said the old man, with a fresh stare. “I been livin’ here thirty-five year,” he went on, “and nobody ever yet come down this bayou. And now you come—with a gal!”

Monty let it go at that.

“Which one of you is married to her?” asked the old man bluntly.

Both young men turned red. “Neither of us,” said Monty quickly. “She’s our sister.”

“Sister? Um! I swan!” said the old man, sucking his lips in, still incredulous.

He was so keen on extracting information it was difficult to get any from him. However, they learned bit by bit; that the stream in front of his door was Bayou Coteau; that Bayou Sassafras flowed in the same direction about fifty miles east at this point, but they emptied into Lake Esperance only a few miles apart. This was the edge of the settled country, and they would find other houses within a day’s journey. The horse-track they had seen passed back of his cabin and followed the bayou down to its mouth.

Lake Esperance was two days’ journey south. It was near fifty miles long. Nowadays lumber companies were operating around the lake. There was a town called Scoville on the east side that was connected by motor-bus with the railway, and there was a new town called Comrade on Bayou Comrade, where lots on the main street were selling for fifteen hundred dollars. Bayou Comrade also emptied into Lake Esperance.

A skiff lay in front of the cabin that Monty eyed covetously. They were heartily sick of their clumsy raft, and if there was a lake to navigate they foresaw that it would be totally useless. Monty offered to swop their gun for the skiff. The old man loved a dicker, and a lengthy discussion followed. However, it was impossible to get anything more out of Monty for a good reason—he possessed nothing more. The bargain was finally struck.

After a couple of hours' spell they went on in the skiff, leaving the inquisitive old man still unsatisfied, still incredulous. Moving along briskly with oars when the way was open, and with poles when the tangle closed in again, the travellers' spirits rose, though the feeling of strain was never far below the surface. Even Rose's quiet eye showed a new gleam. It seemed as if their long ordeal was almost over. Rose would be safe from Ike McAley in the settlements.

"Oh, boy!" cried Hal, "think of sleeping between sheets again in a real bed! Think of sitting down to a table with a cloth on it! Think of the taste of beefsteak and chicken and pie—pie *à la mode*!"

As soon as Hal mentioned the pleasures of civilisation his partner no longer had any use for them. "Yeah," he said, "we're coming to the place where they have all that, but we lack the wherewithal."

Hal's face lengthened. "Well, we only have to telegraph," he said, without thinking.

This made Monty actively sore. "Sure," he said. "Are you going to do it?"

Hal hesitated. "No," he said. It cost him an effort. Why do I have to do what Monty tells me? he thought sorely.

Monty marked the hesitation and thought: I couldn't trust him to stick to it if it came to a pinch.

Monty was always worrying about Rose. In the beginning she had given him some cause for hope, but lately she had frozen up completely. After days of the closest sort of association she was like a stranger. The mysteriousness with which she clothed herself rendered her doubly attractive to a man. Monty was alternately sore and sorry. It never occurred to him that a girl travelling with two jealous men could scarcely have acted any differently.

He wondered if she was turning towards Hal. Had she not always been kinder in her manner towards Hal? He had nothing to go on, but the mere suspicion turned him savage. Suppose she took Hal? You never could forecast a woman's actions. In that case he would lose both his girl and his friend. Meanwhile, what was she going to do when they got out?

"I reckon we ought to make for the town that's nearest the railway," he said as a lead.

"I reckon," said Rose.

"Are you going home to Mississippi?"

"No," she said very low.

“Haven’t you got folks there?”

“Nobody near to me.”

“But you have property there.”

“A farm. There is a cousin who will work it with his. I *couldn’t* go back where everybody knows me!” she cried, with a burst of long-repressed feeling. “It would remind me all the time of what has happened!”

Monty was sorry for her then. “You’re right,” he said. “What are you aiming to do when we get out?”

“Earn my living,” she answered.

It eased his mind somewhat. If she was going to work he could find work somewhere near. A sharp temptation assailed him. If he re-established relations with his father, why couldn’t he marry her at once? However, he put the thought from him. The deepest instincts of his nature urged him to win this woman and to keep her by his own unaided efforts. But suppose Hal wrote home for money? That would give him an unfair advantage. So went Monty’s thoughts back and forth, giving him no peace.

At nightfall the stream, having passed the intervening hours in lazying through the swamp, was running between banks again. They camped in a pleasant spot under a spreading live oak with fresh grass underfoot. Upon exploring the vicinity, they found that the horse-track was still following the general course of the bayou. At this point it ran about a hundred yards back from the bank.

Rose baked the last of their meal into three loaves. “After to-morrow,” she said lightly, “we’ll have to beg our bread.”

“We have the skiff——” Monty began.

“Thinking of eating that?” Hal put in.

Rose laughed at the harmless crack, and Monty turned sore. She knew as well as Hal that he was speaking of selling the skiff at the end of the journey, he thought. He looked from one to another suspiciously. Too much laughter between these two. That was how Hal tried to get around her. God knows what he said to her when his partner’s back was turned.

Their talk was mostly concerned with what they were going to do when they got out. “Gosh!” said Hal. “Think of being able to go into a store and buy a packet of cigarettes again!”

Monty, who was laying for him, came back with: “I’ll give you the first dollar I earn if you’ll promise to smoke yourself to death.”

“Is that so?” said Hal, with an ugly look. “It would take more than you will ever earn, old fruit!”

So it went throughout the meal. On the surface it was just ordinary joshing, but always with an undercurrent of bad feeling.

Rose made out not to get it. However, just as soon as she had finished cleaning up she picked up her blanket with a cool “Good night,” and carried it behind a bush a dozen paces from the fire. That made both men sore, and each blamed the other. To have to share the same blanket was more than either could stand for to-night.

“If you could keep a civil tongue in your head you wouldn’t drive her away,” Monty growled in an undertone.

“*Me!*” retorted Hal, with a hard stare. “I like that! For the past week you’ve been acting like you were poisoned!”

“Maybe I’ve got cause,” muttered Monty.

“That’s wasted on me,” said Hal. “I don’t get it.”

“Maybe you do, and maybe you don’t.”

Both men were careful to keep their voices from carrying to Rose. Rage fumed inside Monty like boiling sulphur. It drove him wild that Hal, whom he had always looked on as number two in this outfit, should have found the nerve to stand up to him like this. Was it some secret understanding with Rose that had given him the confidence? Monty had a terrible desire to take his sneering partner by the throat.

“If there’s anything on your chest, come out with it plainly or shut up!” said Hal.

Monty sprang up. “All right,” he said, “it’s treachery!”

Hal laughed. “I think you’re crazy!” he said.

Throughout the whole course of this quarrel the cause of it was never mentioned by name.

“You make me sick!” said Monty.

“Same here!” Hal retorted heartily. “I’m good and sick of your attempts to run this outfit. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Monty cursed him viciously.

“Come farther away,” said Hal, with an anxious glance in the direction where Rose lay.

“No!” said Monty stubbornly. “I couldn’t see to smash you away from the fire.”

“Let me see you try it,” said Hal.

Monty, with a smile of contempt, struck Hal under the eye. He did not expect this to last long. Hal, who was slow in putting up his guard, was

badly jarred by the blow, but, instead of cowing him, it only released a passionate desire to get square. He came back at Monty swinging both arms, and he landed both blows too—to Monty's surprise. Monty aimed a hook at his jaw, but he jerked his head back.

Instantly they were mixing it furiously around the fire. No chance of keeping it from Rose now. She must have heard the trampling feet, the smack of the blows, and the heartfelt curses. There is no quarrel so bitter as when two pals fall out. They know what to say to each other that stings the most. But Rose gave no sign. If she was watching she kept them from knowing it.

When the first blaze of passion spent itself Monty became warier, and the bits of science he had picked up returned to him. He saw that he was not going to have any walk-away; work and privation had rendered Hal as hard as himself. He retreated before Hal's furious rushes and watched for an opening. When it came he delivered a punch on the jaw that stretched Hal flat on his back. But Hal rolled out of the way as nimbly as a cat, and, springing to his feet, came back at Monty with undiminished fury.

They were soon too short of breath to spend it in cursing each other. They settled down in silence to the grim business. There was no time-keeper in this fight. It had but one round, which must last until one or another quit for good. It was very different from their first set-to. Anyone who had known Monty and Hal in the old days would have been astonished to see this active, well-knit pair manfully slogging each other; taking hard blows without flinching; boring in with a will. On both sides the attack was better than the defence. It was a fine sight, but there was none to see it—except possibly Rose. Monty and Hal themselves did not realise how far they had left their old selves behind them.

Three times Monty knocked Hal down, and twice he came back without pause. Blood from a cut on his forehead ran down into his eyes, but he impatiently swept it aside and watched for a chance to get back. When he finally realised that all the determination in the world was of no avail against Monty's longer reach and better science, a tragic look came into his face, but it was not fear. He fought on. Too late he regretted that he had not taken as much interest as Monty in learning how to spar.

The third time he was knocked flat, Hal raised himself to a sitting position, but refused to stand up again. Even then he would not cringe. "All right," he said sullenly, "I admit you're stronger than me and cleverer with your fists. *But what does that prove?*"

This raised no doubts in Monty's mind. He laughed in triumph. It was the first time he had tasted the wine of victory, and it went to his head. The blood raced through his veins. Rose! Rose! it sang in his ears; you're mine now! It was impossible for him to wait until morning before claiming the spoils of victory. He went straight to the clump of bushes that hid Rose's sleeping-place, careless of what Hal might think.

Dropping to his knees and feeling for her, he whispered eagerly: "Rose, are you awake?"

Unfortunately for Monty, he had forgotten that Rose was not the sort of girl a man could take for granted. "Awake?" she answered coldly. "Did you expect me to sleep through all that?"

In his present superheated condition it was not sufficient to stop him. "It was for you—for you!" he whispered. "Oh, Rose, I'm crazy mad about you! I didn't mean to tell you yet, but I can't keep it in. I'm mad about you!"

She moved away from him. "Keep your hands off me," she said sharply.

That reached him. "What's the matter?" he asked, taken aback.

"Matter!" she retorted. "So you did it for me! I reckon you thought I'd be proud of you!" She laughed in a kind of helpless anger. Then speech poured out with a rush. "Did you think I was sitting here ready to take whichever one of you beat the other? Am I the sort of girl anybody can win in a fight? Not if I know it! I will choose to please myself when I get ready. And not until! Go to your bed!"

The only way Monty could meet this was by becoming angry too. "That's all foolishness!" he answered hotly; "woman's foolishness! I've won you fair and I'm not going to be put off. You've given me plenty of encouragement. You can't take it back now!"

"I made no promises," Rose said quickly. "If you built on it, it was only your own conceit. I wanted to be friends with you because I thought you were steady and good hearted. You spoiled all that by fighting. Hal never did anything to you. You were jealous without cause. Oh, God! haven't I suffered enough already through men fighting! Go away!"

Rose's whole heart was in that cry, and Monty saw at last that he had made a mistake. All the triumph ran out of him. He had made a mistake, yet for the life of him he could not see how. He had only acted as any man would. The fact was women were too complicated for him to dope out. He was in a fog. However, it was clear that anything he could say now would only make matters worse. He got up and went slowly back to the fire with his head hanging.

Hal was lying there under their common blanket. Monty glanced at him sharply. He did not know how much his partner might have overheard. If Hal had grinned he felt ready to kill him. However, Hal was asleep—or making out to be. Monty could not stomach the thought of lying under the same blanket with him. Making up the fire for warmth, he sat down on the other side of it, resting his head on his knees.

By and by Hal proved he was not asleep by saying gruffly: “What are you sitting there for? I’ve left half the blanket.”

“I’m all right,” muttered Monty.

His thoughts were bitter. Rose had put him in the wrong and he felt like a low wretch—but why did he? How could he have acted differently? He began to perceive that men and women had totally different points of view. At one moment he was ready to curse women and their foolishness, and at the next he wanted to crawl to Rose and humble himself. Was ever a man so cursed as himself, he thought, not knowing that every son of Adam is up against the same problem.

He awoke in the cold dawn, finding himself in the same position, the fire black out, and a chill striking to his marrow. Hal got up about the same time. At the sight of each other they half softened—neither had anything to brag about now; but they would not admit it. They avoided looking at each other, each waiting for his partner to make the first move.

Having washed in the stream, they made up the fire. This was always the signal for Rose to appear, but there was no move from behind her bush.

“Rose!” called Hal.

No answer. Monty’s heart sank. He remembered that other morning when she had failed to appear. He suddenly ran and looked behind the bush. Nobody was there. Only the impression of her body in the grass.

“Rose! Rose!” he called loudly, turning all around in the hope of seeing her appear.

Hal joined him. “What’s the use?” he said gloomily. “Her blanket is gone.”

“But the skiff is still there,” said Monty excitedly.

“Sure, she wouldn’t take the skiff. She’s gone by the trail.”

To Monty this seemed like the last blow. A rush of anger and disappointment filled him. An inner voice whispered that he had driven her away, and it drove him wild. He had to have some object to discharge his feelings on. White with rage, he turned on Hal.

“My God! if you give me the laugh I’ll kill you!” he said thickly. “I’ll kill you!”

Hal had no thought of such a thing. The moment that trouble hit them he was Monty’s old pal again. “Give you the laugh?” he said indignantly. “What the hell do you think I am? Aren’t we both in the same boat?”

This pulled Monty up. “You too?” he said.

Hal turned away his head. “How could I help myself?” he muttered. “But I played fair,” he went on. “I never said anything to her.”

Monty almost broke down then. “Oh, God, what a damned fool I’ve been!” he groaned. “What a damned fool!”

“Aw, forget it,” growled Hal.

“Are you willing to shake hands after what’s happened?”

“Sure! I would have done the same to you if I could.”

Their hands shot out and gripped.

“Come on,” said Monty brusquely. “We’ve got to find her, and quick too, or she’ll starve in the bush!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NEW TOWN

A MONTH later Monty and Hal landed from Sam Sollers' motor-boat at the town of Comrade on Bayou Comrade. They were still looking for Rose. At the mouth of Bayou Coteau they learned that she had been befriended by a settler named Joe Burchard and his wife. Mrs. Burchard had refused all information with a smile, but Monty bribed a child, who told them that "Pappy had taken the lady to town in his boat."

"Town" suggested Scoville to them, towards which they had been heading. They made their way around the lake to that place, only to find that neither the girl nor Joe Burchard had been seen there. As the partners were flat broke, the search had to be postponed until they could go to work and earn a stake. They got themselves jobs loading lumber at one of the mills.

Here they had been working ever since. It would have been a perfectly good life had they not had a private anxiety. They were able now to do a day's work with any man, and to keep their end up with the gang after working hours. Monty had palled up with a fellow called Dan Foley, who enjoyed a considerable reputation as a scrapper. At noontime every day they used to put on the gloves in the yard. It got to be quite a joke the way Monty was willing to stand up and take punishment. But he was always learning.

"You'd be pretty good in time, Jonesy," Dan said patronisingly. "You don't know nothin', but you're keen. Never knew a guy who was keener. That's what the fans like. You ought to go in for it. There's more money in it than rustling planks."

"Then what are you rustling planks for?" said Monty.

"Me? Oh, I'm goin' back soon," said Dan. "Got in a li'l trouble down in N'Orleans, and had to beat it for a while."

It was remarkable what a lot of men Monty and Hal met who had "got into a little trouble" one way or another.

"I'm not interested in scrapping as a profesh," said Monty, with a hard grin. "There's just one guy in this world that I'm training to meet. He's bigger than me, so I need science."

"Aw, hell," said Dan. "You're wastin' time settlin' private grudges. Me, I on'y scrap for purses."

From the newspapers they learned that a worldwide search for Monty Dixon and Hal Green was still going on. However, as news it had been crowded off the front page. According to the same source, no trace had ever been found of Ike McAley and his gang. Apparently that case had been dropped. However, a reward of five thousand dollars still stood on Ike's head.

This was a matter of great satisfaction to Monty. Ike was much in his thoughts. The bandit leader had become a sort of symbol to him. This man had struck him twice, and until he had paid back those blows he could not feel that he had consolidated his own manhood. If at the same time he could earn five thousand dollars, so much the better. He knew where Ike was to be found.

Meanwhile the partners kept a sharp watch for Rose. Scoville was the gateway to the outside world, and she could not get out of the country without passing through.

And then one day they heard that two girls were running a "resteraw" over in the new town of Comrade. They chucked their jobs, and here they were with a month's pay in their pockets—less what they had laid out on new suits and the proper fixings.

Comrade was one of the strangest-looking settlements in the country. "Cripple Creek on stilts," Hal termed it. In the beginning a great lumber company had built a mill in the swamp for the purpose of cutting cypress shingles at the source of the raw material. When the material was exhausted they expected to move on. There was no intention of starting a town. The workers were housed on big scows.

But a town had insisted on growing up beside the mill. Dozens of frame houses had been built on piles in two long rows facing each other. Each house had a false front in time-honoured pioneer style, and all were guiltless of paint. In front of each row there was a sidewalk, likewise built on piles. Lumber was the only cheap thing in this country. The space of mucky swamp between the two rows of houses was known as Main Street, and there was a theory that it was going to be filled in some day—but where the filling was coming from nobody could have told you.

Stores, boarding-houses, gambling-dens, and speakeasies occupied most of the buildings; a church, a school, and a picture palace; in short, all the features of a new town. It was a dangerous place to get drunk in, because if a man couldn't walk a straight line he was liable to find himself in the swamp; but men risked it. At intervals down Main Street causeways of logs had been laid down in the swamp, affording a precarious crossing from side to side.

There was neither a horse nor a wheeled vehicle in the entire camp; all communication with the outside world was kept up with boats.

The “resteraw” was housed in the third building on the left-hand side as you walked up from the bayou. It was quite a pretentious structure, with a false front and a wide platform where the customers gathered at meal-time. Monty and Hal walked past the place, not daring to enter until they had worked up a little more courage. Dinner was going on, and through the open door they had a glimpse of a print dress moving between the tables, but it was not Rose.

“She’ll be cooking,” suggested Monty. “That’s the most important job.”

“Let’s get some crackers for a lunch,” suggested Hal nervously, “and not go in until after dinner.”

This suited Monty, and they devoted themselves to investigating the town. In the course of it they contrived to pass the restaurant a good many times, but never succeeded in getting a glimpse of Rose. When you had walked up the sidewalk on one side and back on the other you had seen all there was. On Sunday afternoon all the houses of entertainment were open, but the partners didn’t want to spend their money that way.

It was Sunday. At the bayou end of Main Street the wide wharf made a pleasant lounging-place in the spring sunshine. The mill, silent to-day, was a hundred yards up-stream, connected with the town by a branch walk built on piles. On the wharf, Monty and Hal got into talk with an old-timer, who was sitting on the string-piece recuperating from his Saturday-night bust. He introduced himself as Nick Tobey.

“Going to stop here a piece, boys?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Monty, “if we can get work.”

“Plenty of jobs, plenty of jobs,” said Nick. “As the saying is, it takes three shifts to run the mill yonder; one coming, one going, and one on the payroll.”

“What like town is it?” asked Monty.

“It’s a swell town!” was the enthusiastic reply. “It’s unique!”

“I believe you,” said Monty, glancing at the morass which represented Main Street. The black muck was liberally bestrewn with cartons, crates, and tin cans.

“No need of any garbage collecting here,” said the old-timer, following his glance. “The swamp takes all! Maybe you heard outside that this was a bad acting town,” he went on. “You can take it from me there’s nothing to it! Of course, we believe in personal liberty here; we take our drink and we

shoot crap and no harm thought of it. But nothing what you might call lawlessness. No, sir! Of course, every once in a while some guy gets bumped off, but it's only some no-'count Bohunk, or else there's a good cause for it. Nothing like lawlessness.

"We got a committee to keep law and order here," he went on. "John Blackie is the head of it. We call him the Mayor because he's got the hardest head in camp. He's got a big stake here; owns two-three places. He and the committee keep order without interfering with personal liberty, see? Now you take it when there's trouble between two fellows, the committee brings them together, see, and lets them fight it out. That settles the matter, besides affording healthy entertainment for the crowd. It's better than having them run in by hired police, ain't it?"

"Absolutely," said Monty.

"Why, if this was a lawless town, we couldn't have no reteraw like we got," Nick resumed. "Have you-all et there yet?"

"No," said Monty.

"Well, you got a treat before you. It's run by two beautiful girls, Mary Starr and Rose Deakin. Comrade is proud of them, sir. Perfect ladies the two of them, and just as safe here as they might be in N'Orleans—a darn sight safer! Every man in camp is their protector, see? Just let any guy get fresh in the reteraw and see what he gets. We got aplenty muck handy for them as asks for it!"

Monty wondered how much was known of Rose's story. "Deakin?" he said as a feeler. "I've heard of folks by that name in Mississippi."

"Very like it's the same," said Nick. "She comes from Mississippi. She's a cousin of Joe Burchard's wife, who lives up Bayou Coteau way. She was stopping with them when they heard old Mis' Starr was dead, leaving Mary alone. Joe brought her down, and she went in with Mary. It was a clear gain for us too, for Rose is a better cook than the old lady ever dared to be."

So this was the story that had been given out. "I reckon if she's such a good cook she won't stay single long," Monty said, with an off-hand air that masked a keen anxiety.

"Well, I don't know," said Nick. "Twon't be for the lack of chances if she does. There ain't a single man in town but would value himself above Henry Ford if he thought he had a show. But 'twould sure make trouble with the others," he added, with a grin.

Monty breathed more freely.

After the motor-boat had gone back with its crowd, quiet settled down on Main Street. All the men had sought out the places of entertainment that

they favoured on Sunday afternoon. Hal said diffidently:

“We might go and call on the girls now. There won’t be anybody eating.”

“All right,” said Monty.

But when they got to the restaurant it was only to be faced by a closed door. Upon it was a little written sign reading: Hours for meals: Breakfast 6 to 7:30; Dinner 12 to 1; Supper 5:30 to 7. Presumably the girls were still inside their place, but neither young man had the courage to knock.

“Well, we’ll come back at five-thirty,” said Monty lamely.

They wandered on up the sidewalk and back again, killing time. They never failed to keep the tail of an eye on the closed door, but no one came out of it or entered.

As soon as it was opened they went in with fast-beating hearts. The interior was bare and very neat, with white oilcloth-covered tables, each with its sauce bottles. They were met by a pretty, brown-eyed girl who welcomed them with a frank smile. This would be Mary Starr.

“Good evening,” she said. “Sit down anywhere. You’re newcomers, aren’t you?”

“I’m Jack Jones and this is Bill Smith,” said Monty.

“Well, that won’t be hard to remember,” she said, with a laugh. “What will you have?” She ran over the bill of fare.

“Where’s Rose?” asked Monty breathlessly.

“In the kitchen.”

“Could we see her for a minute?”

Mary looked doubtfully from one to another.

“Tell her it’s Jonesy and Smitty,” said Hal.

The girl’s face lighted up. “Oh, are you *the* Jonesy and Smitty?” she cried. “Rose has told me about you!” Then she looked anxious. “You haven’t said anything about that time, have you?” she asked. “It’s not known here. It would hurt Rose to have it known.”

“Sure, we’re not going to talk about it,” said Monty.

“Wait a minute, I’ll tell her,” she said, flying away.

“Say, she’s a swell girl!” said Hal enthusiastically. It was his way of letting his partner know that he had given up all pretensions to Rose.

An instant later Rose appeared in the kitchen doorway—the same vivid Rose—quiet, strong, and good to the eye. The sight of her caused Monty a surprising shock. Was it pleasure or pain? He could never have told. He was

like a man suddenly deprived of his senses. There was nothing in him but a mighty longing. Rose! Rose! Rose! What a dreary waste life would be without her!

Rose herself was scarcely less embarrassed than the men. However, she was not angry, and thus their greatest fear was lulled. There was a warm flush on her face, a sure sign that she was moved. She was never one to make a fuss. She offered each her hand diffidently.

“Hello, boys,” she murmured. There was a shine of gladness in her eyes.

And then nobody could think of anything to say. They stood around like four dummies. It was a horrible feeling. Finally Monty managed to get out:

“Can’t you sit down for a minute?”

“We never sit down with anybody,” said Rose. “You sit down. I can stay until somebody comes in.”

Monty obeyed her, feeling confused in his mind and sore. He resented being treated like an ordinary customer.

Mary did her best to help them out by firing questions at the men. Where had they been all this time? When had they come to Comrade? Were they going to stay? etc. All of which Hal answered dutifully, while Monty gazed hungrily at Rose’s averted face. Mary was perfectly friendly, but she made it clear that she was all for Rose; her future attitude towards the partners would be regulated by her friend’s. What has Rose told her about me? Monty wondered. He guessed that Mary would never tell him.

Before they got anywhere two more customers came in and sat down. “I must go now,” murmured Rose.

“When can I see you?” asked Monty.

“I stay in the kitchen,” she said, with a faint smile. “But you can see Mary any time you’re hungry.”

Monty was sore clear through. He glanced sideways at Hal to see how he was taking this. But Hal was still looking at Mary. His interest in her was real now. Well, she was a very pretty girl; gleaming teeth, bright eyes; prettier perhaps than Rose—but not for Monty! He saw that he need not bother himself any further about Hal’s feelings.

“You know what I mean,” Monty said sullenly to Rose. “I want to see you alone.”

“We never see anybody alone,” she answered quietly. “It’s a rule we’ve made.”

The bright-eyed Mary nodded her head in affirmation.

“Am I no more than anybody?” said Monty. “After all we’ve been through!”

A look of pain passed across Rose’s face, but it remained firm. “I’m sorry,” she said; “but we have to walk a narrow line here. Or we couldn’t go on.”

“Well, I’ve got to see you once,” muttered Monty doggedly.

The two girls exchanged a look. Rose said to Mary quietly: “Take those men’s orders. I’ll go back to the kitchen directly.”

Mary went off to the other table. Hal, feeling that he had nothing to do with this, got up and walked off, making out that he wanted to consult a calendar that hung on the wall. Rose faced out the sullen Monty in her fearless way.

“I’m sorry if it hurts you,” she said quietly, “but you’ve got to understand once and for all there’s nothing doing.”

“Can’t we be friends?” said Monty.

“Surely,” she said quickly, “just as I am friends with everybody in this place. But no more.”

“Why? Why?” said Monty. “Is there anybody else?”

“There is nobody else,” she said proudly. “Remember, I know who you are. I have told nobody that. Not even Mary. This is only an adventure for you. Soon you must go back to that other life. But this is my life, and I can’t let you interfere with it.”

He attempted to interrupt her. “Rose!”

She would not listen. For an instant her face softened as he remembered it so well. “Don’t think me hard,” she pleaded. “I can’t help myself.” With that she was gone.

Mary returned to the table with her friendly smile. “Well, what’ll it be, boys?”

The room gradually filled with customers.

CHAPTER XIX

BATTLE ROYAL

WHEN he was alone Monty went over and over that scene in the restaurant, considering what Rose had said from every possible angle. As he studied the matter the first blackness of depression began to be lightened by small rays of hope. For one thing, she had said plainly and positively that there was no one ahead of him. Well, a woman who was not yet won could still be won.

Why was she bent on keeping him at arm's length? He was obliged to admit to himself that the reason she had given was a pretty good one. The chivalrous respect that the rough men of Comrade displayed towards the two girls was certainly due to the fact that the girls held themselves aloof from all men. If they once weakened in that attitude the spell would be broken.

But there was more in it than that, of course. Rose had some personal reason for turning him down. In spite of all she had said, Monty's healthy self-love persuaded him that she was not exactly indifferent to him. She had shown full command of her words, but once or twice her eyes had betrayed her. His pulses leaped, remembering the softness which had showed there.

Why, then, had she been so up and down with him? It had something to do with his being the son of the great J. J. Dixon. She seemed to think she was not worthy of sharing so exalted a position. Monty grinned at this point. Maybe she could be persuaded otherwise in time. And if she couldn't, well, to hell with his father's millions. He was able to stand by himself now.

In any case, it was clearly his cue to stick around and improve whatever opportunities might present themselves. He and Hal went to work in the mill, and lodged on one of the scows belonging to the Company. They took their meals in the restaurant. It would have been cheaper to eat at the Company mess, but the restaurant was a luxury the partners were not likely to deny themselves.

Not that Monty got much good out of it. Rose seldom showed herself, and then only for a moment. He soon learned that these appearances might be expected when the restaurant was empty, or nearly empty, and he fell into the habit of dropping in for supper shortly before closing time. Then he might get a smile or even a friendly word or two to keep him going. The customers were not expected to sit around talking. When all had finished eating, Mary would say briskly: "Closing time, boys," and out they had to go.

Nor was it any use trying to see her outside. The two girls always did their shopping together, and went to church together. Outside, their behaviour was just as circumspect as at home. Followers were firmly discouraged. Every counter-jumper in town has a better chance with her than I have, thought Monty resentfully.

Meanwhile Hal was blossoming out under the smiles of Mary. He was luckier, because he, together with all the other patrons, had Mary at every meal. He began to confide his hopes and fears to Monty when they turned in at night. Monty regarded this turn of affairs with mixed feelings. He was relieved that he no longer had to look on his partner as a rival, but in his heart he blamed Hal for his faithlessness to the incomparable Rose. Some people are never satisfied.

In other respects the free and easy life at Comrade suited the young men to a T. They had caught the tone of a man's life now, and nobody ever suggested that they did not belong. Even the hard-boiled John Blackie condescended to swap yarns with them. They were considered to belong to the inner circle of sports and good guys. They became popular.

This was chiefly due to Monty's keenness for the fighting game. As soon as it became known, he found no lack of men to stand up to him. To his intense gratification, he discovered that he was getting better than many of them. He was still too light for the heaviest classes, but his muscles were like steel now, and he was willing to take on anything. In a community where boxing mills furnished one of the principal diversions this was a strong recommendation. Monty could always be depended on to supply sport.

Monty's work of tossing bundles of shingles was well calculated to develop arm and back muscles. Physical fitness was a fetish with him, and his whole programme was arranged accordingly: so much sleep every night; enough food, but not too much, and no liquor. In the beginning he had a good deal of trouble refusing the drinks that were pressed upon him, but when his reason for it was understood he suffered no loss of respect. But he had to put up with a lot of joshing.

"That's all right," Monty would say. "When I meet and lick my man, then I'll cut loose."

"Who's your man, Jonesy?" they would ask.

"I'll tell you when the bout comes off," he answered.

One Sunday evening, Monty and Hal were loafing on the wharf waiting for the crowd in the restaurant to thin out before going in for their supper. Up and down the wooden sidewalks there was not a man in sight. Moored to

the wharf were three motor-boats, two of which were well known to them, one being Joe Burchard's, who had come down for a Sunday in town, and the other a Company boat; the third was a strange craft.

"Whose boat is that?" asked Monty, with a careless glance overboard.

"Search me," said Hal. "I didn't see her come."

Something about the clumsy battered craft struck familiarly on Monty; the seats running lengthwise; the big Globe engine astern. But it was a common type. He hung himself over the wharf to get a look at her name. It had been painted out with a couple of careless strokes that he remembered well.

"By God, that's Ike McAley's boat!" he said, showing Hal a grim face. "You ought to know it!"

"No!" cried Hal. And, after a hasty survey: "You're right! There's the engine-cover under the seat that Sandy Mitchell made out of my slicker! What ought we to do?" he added excitedly.

"The first thing we got to do is to make ourselves scarce around here," said Monty, getting up.

"You're not scared of them, are you?" said Hal, opening his eyes.

"Not exactly," said Monty, with a hard smile. "I want to collar them, and in order to collar them we've got to take them by surprise."

They had not taken more than half a dozen steps away from the wharf before a tall figure came out of one of the speakeasies up-street and started towards them. They recognised Sandy Mitchell, though he was now wearing a heavy beard. Monty and Hal struck across one of the log causeways to the other sidewalk. Minus beards and plus Sunday suits, they were greatly changed since Sandy had seen them last, but they didn't care to risk a face-to-face meeting.

Sandy was not a very noticing fellow, and he kept on his way whistling. He sat down on the string-piece of the wharf, and, sticking his pipe in his mouth, started to whittle a plug of tobacco. It was beginning to grow dark.

"He's standing watch over the boat," muttered Monty. "Looks as if they were planning to turn a trick here."

"What sort of trick?" said Hal.

"How do I know? I reckon they're after Rose."

"My God!" murmured Hal, aghast.

"Let's take a look around town," said Monty.

They glanced into the restaurant in passing. It was well filled and noisy. None of Ike McAley's gang was there.

“Naturally,” said Monty, “if they’re up to mischief, they wouldn’t risk letting Rose see them.”

In French Dan’s speakeasy, a little farther up the street, through the open door they saw Long Leet and Pat Sheedy with their elbows planted on the bar. No other customers were in the place at the moment. The sight of their old enemies made Monty’s bristles rise. Young Pat’s red face was likewise obscured under a heavy growth of beard, but the cadaverous Long Leet was little changed. Some sparse blond hairs were all he could raise on his elongated chin.

Monty and Hal kept on without pausing. In a pool-room farther up they saw Bun Thatcher and Cheese Garvey knocking the balls around. They looked no less brutal and mean than Monty and Hal remembered them. A little more hair on their faces was the only change. This accounted for five of the gang. None of the places up and down either sidewalk revealed the leader.

“Just the same, I’d be willing to bet he isn’t far away,” said Monty. “There are plenty of hiding-places. He’s too cagey to show himself openly.”

It was now quarter to seven, and they had to go to the restaurant if they wanted their suppers. There were only three men left in the place; Nick Tobey and a prominent citizen called Pete Pincus, who were eating together, and a strange man. The latter was one of those young fellows who already begin to look a little decayed at twenty-five. He evidently fancied himself as a gab artist, and talked all the time whether anybody was listening or not. He was either a little drunk or making out to be.

Whenever Mary Starr appeared he commenced jollying her. It did not disturb Mary in the least; she was perfectly capable of handling a dozen like him; but it made the two older men sore. In Comrade it was not the thing to get fresh in the “resteraw.” Anywhere else was all right.

Monty and Hal were served with their suppers, and Mary went back to the kitchen. The stranger got up and coolly walked back through the kitchen door. Instantly the four men in the dining-room were on their feet. “Come out of that!” they shouted. Pete Pincus, who was a member of the law and order committee, started after the intruder.

The stranger reappeared in the doorway, considerably scared by the commotion he had aroused. “Aw, hell,” he protested. “I didn’t mean no harm. Just wanted to say good night to the girls.”

“I’ll show you!” said Pete, reaching for his collar.

Rose appeared in the doorway. “Let him go, Pete,” she said quickly. “He isn’t worth bothering about.”

“All right, miss, since you ask it,” said Pete, reluctantly releasing the man. “Git!” he roared, “and don’t show your face in here again!”

The young man made a lightning exit, and quiet settled down on the room again.

“Looks to me like a spy,” Monty murmured to Hal. “Some new fellow the gang has picked up and sent in here to scout around.”

Monty and Hal did not linger to-night, but swallowed their supper in haste and set off in search of John Blackie. At this hour he was sure to be found in the gambling-house he ran at the other end of the sidewalk. The partners made a careful survey of the place before venturing inside, but none of the McAley gang was present. Making his way inconspicuously to John, Monty said:

“Can I speak to you a minute outside?”

John saw by his face that something was up, and said quietly. “Wait around outside, and I’ll be with you in three shakes.”

When he joined them Monty said: “John, there’s a gang of bad actors in town to-night.”

“Yeah?” said John coolly. “I seen one or two new faces.”

“It’s a gang that Smitty and I run into up in the swamps. They murdered a couple of travellers in there just for the sake of their outfit. That’s the sort they are.” For his own reasons Monty did not care to identify McAley and his men more particularly.

“How did they get here?” asked John Blackie.

“In a motor-boat. She’s tied up to the wharf.”

“Well, I’ll get the committee together, and we’ll round them up and ship them,” said John pleasantly.

“That wouldn’t do any good,” said Monty. “They’d only hang around and watch for a chance to get square. Come back some night maybe, and set us afire.”

The Mayor’s face hardened. Fire was the secret fear of every citizen of Comrade. “Then we’ll lock ’em up,” he said shortly.

“We can’t do that if they haven’t done anything,” said Monty. “We’d only get into trouble ourselves.”

“Thought you said they’d done a couple of murders.”

“I can’t prove it.”

“What do you want me to do, then?” asked John somewhat impatiently.

"Watch them with me," said Monty. "They've been hanging around the restaurant. My idea is, they're after the girls."

"My God!" said John.

"I thought some of us could watch from the barber-shop next door," Monty went on.

"All right," said John, "I'll get the committee and we'll go right down."

"But they're certain to have spies out," objected Monty. "If they see a crowd going into the barber's they won't try to start anything. I'd kinda like to rescue the girls," he added slyly. "It would make us solid with them."

John got the idea. "Sure," he agreed, grinning.

"Why couldn't we go through French Dan's and down the ladder at the back," suggested Monty. "Then make our way under the sidewalk and up through the back of the barber's. It would be mucky going, but we could support ourselves by the underpinning."

"Right!" said John. "The barber's in my place now. I'll send him home to unlock his back door, and then he can come back here to put them off, if they are watching. You two go ahead through French Dan's place. I'll bring the others with me. How many are there in the gang?"

"We spotted six," said Monty. "There may be a couple more."

"Then I'll bring five men with me. We don't want too much of a crowd. Have you and Smitty got guns?"

"No."

"I'll bring them to you."

"There's just one thing I want to tell you, John," said Monty; "you fellows have often asked me who the guy is that I've set out to lick. Well, it's the leader of this gang, see? I owe him one or two. I want him taken without being hurt, see? Then I'll show you a fight."

"Good boy!" said John, clapping him on the back. "We'll save him for you."

It so happened that all the buildings near the wharf were more or less of an official character. On the right-hand side were the Company store, a real-estate office, the restaurant, and the barber-shop; and across the way the Company offices, the bank, the post-office, and so on. Consequently this end of town was deserted after nightfall. It had never occurred to anybody before, but the situation of the restaurant was ideal for a kidnapping stunt. After eight o'clock all the men were gathered in the different resorts up-town, deafening themselves with their own hilarity.

Behind the buildings on the right-hand side a long ditch had been dug parallel with the street, in order to drain off the standing water. There was always eight or ten inches of water in this ditch, enough to float a skiff if not too heavily laden, but no one remembered it until afterwards.

Within an hour eight men had gathered in the darkened barber-shop. John Blackie had brought Pete Pincus, French Dan, Frank Evans, and Chad Bolling, all tough hombres, young enough to enjoy a mix-up. Unfortunately there were no windows in the side of the barber-shop which overlooked the restaurant. The best they could do was to look sideways out of the front windows. But it was a clear, starry night, and no one could have approached the door of the adjoining building without being seen.

A long time passed. Nothing stirred outside. The men, bored by inaction, began to suggest that Monty had discovered a mare's nest.

"Maybe so," said John Blackie coolly. "But for one, I'm willing to give a night to watching over them girls."

Shortly afterwards Monty called John's attention to a shadow across the street. It flitted noiselessly from the bank towards the wharf.

"An outpost," said Monty, "going back to report that the coast is clear."

"Fine!" said John. "When they come, let them break in the door before we collar them. Then we'll have a perfect case."

The men waited on the alert with their guns handy. But nothing happened. Again a long time passed. As the fizz slowly went out of them, they began to feel that they had been made fools of. A man hates that.

"Aw, hell," said French Dan. "This is kid stuff. I'm going home."

"Not while I'm here you ain't," said John calmly. "Lie down and take a sleep, and we'll call you if you're wanted."

What happened in the end was wholly unexpected. Nobody came creeping up to the restaurant door. Instead the door silently opened and two men came out, each shouldering a silent, motionless figure.

"God damn them!" yelled John. "They got in through the back!"

They banged the door open and ran out.

"Drop them girls!" yelled John.

Instead of obeying, the two men started to run as well as they could with their burdens. John Blackie and his men sprang after them. They dared not shoot. Suddenly a knot of men seemed to rise out of the sidewalk ahead. As the two with their burdens ran through them they kneeled and fired. Frank Evans hit the wooden sidewalk with a thud, and the others hesitated for a moment.

The kneeling men took advantage of the pause to rise and follow their running comrades, then the Comrade men fired, but their bullets were wasted. Still afraid of hitting the girls, they shot too low. The sound of the shooting brought men pouring out of all the resorts above, but they naturally hung back, uncertain what it was all about. John Blackie would not call for help. An army would have been no good to him if the men in front gained their boat in safety.

Out of the corner of his eye Monty glimpsed the uneven causeway of logs laid across the muck. He grabbed Hal's arm. "Cross over!" he cried. "Cut them off!" They sprang from log to log, and clambering to the other sidewalk, ran on. Several shots were fired at them, but they went wide. All this took but a few seconds—a few seconds of insane exhilaration.

Monty and Hal reached the wharf at the same moment with the two men who were carrying the girls. Monty shot at the legs of one of them. He sank down with a groan and his burden rolled clear. The other man dropped his burden in a panic and ran behind the corner of the store, whence he started shooting at the partners. Monty's gun was empty now.

He put the corner of the store between him and the shooter. He flattened himself against the wall and waited. The ruse was successful. The other man came out, and Monty jumped on his back. He struggled like a cat, but Monty shoved him inch by inch to the edge of the walk. He toppled over, almost taking Monty with him. He hit the muck with a hollow splash. This one was Cheese Garvey.

Monty snatched up the man's gun, but, when he came to use it, it was empty too. He had lost Hal now, but he believed that the two girls were lying on the wharf behind him and the wounded man. All McAley's other men were up-street. Monty was between them and their boat.

The shooting had ceased because all guns were emptied. The men were furiously mixing it up on the platform in front of the big store. The wooden planks resounded with the stamping of feet and the fall of heavy bodies, and there was the unmistakable crack of pistol-butt on human skulls. Men had to smell out their enemies in the dark, and many mistakes were made. Pete Pincus and Chad Bolling fought each other to a standstill at the door of the real-estate office.

But more and more men were coming to John Blackie's aid—too many; they interfered with each other. The bandits were smothered under sheer numbers. That is, all but one. One tall figure, Ike McAley by the size of him, forced his way out of the struggling mass and turned towards the wharf. Only two men barred the way to safety. He seized the first one by the hips,

and, raising him clean above his head, flung him into the swamp. There was a tremendous splash. This was Hal.

Monty crouched to tackle the man. But he saw him reach for a fresh gun, and was just able to drop to the planks as a shot went over his head. McAley leaped over his body and ran for the wharf. Monty strained every nerve to follow. His fingers fastened in the man's shirt, but it was torn from his grasp as McAley leaped over the string-piece. He crashed into the boat below, and, instantly recovering himself, fired back at Monty. Monty ducked behind the string-piece.

With a sweep of his knife McAley cut the painter and pushed his boat clear of the wharf. The knife must have been left handy for just that purpose; they had thought of everything! Monty, unarmed, was forced to lie on the wharf and see his enemy escape. It was a bitter moment. McAley turned over the fly-wheel and the engine started.

Other men quickly joined Monty on the wharf. They had had time to reload, and many shots were fired at McAley, apparently without effect. As the motor-boat came around in the stream, a skiff shot out of the ditch behind the store. Its occupant seized the gunwale of the motor-boat as it came up and sprang in. So two of them escaped. They took the skiff with them. Men on the wharf continued to shoot after them as long as they could be seen.

Others leaped into the Company boat and madly rocked the fly-wheel, but she would not start. It was presently discovered that the batteries had been taken out. McAley had out-manœuvred them at every point! Joe Burchard's batteries were gone also. By the time they had secured more from the store, and had wired them up, McAley had a good half-hour's start.

Meanwhile John Blackie, leaving the preparation of the boat to others, took stock of the spoils and the casualties like a good commander. The girls were quickly unbound and ungagged. They pluckily affected to make light of their experience, but they had had a nasty shock. The two men had climbed from the ditch to a little balcony behind the kitchen. The girls were accustomed to leave the back door open for air. They had been seized and gagged while they slept.

John Blackie was a generous-hearted man. He said to Rose: "If it hadn't been for Jonesy they would have got you sure. It was Jonesy raised the alarm."

Monty, hearing this, ducked in the darkness; he could not face the applause.

Five men had been made prisoner: Long Leet, Pat Sheedy, Cheese Garvey, Bun Thatcher, and Sandy Mitchell. Of these Pat was shot through the foot. None of them would talk. It was presumably the new member of the gang who had rowed Pat and Cheese up the ditch, and who had afterwards escaped with the leader. Shyster never showed up at Comrade. He was too old for such work.

On the other side the casualties were limited to a bullet through the shoulder for Frank Evans and a mud-bath for Hal. The latter suffered no broken bones, but was badly shaken up and was unable to take part in the chase of Ike McAley.

The camp regarded it as a victory, but Monty was sore. What was it to him how many men had been taken since his man had got clear away?

CHAPTER XX

SETTLING THE SCORE

THERE were fifty volunteers to accompany John Blackie in the motor-boat, but the wily mayor would only take four: to wit, Monty, Pete Pincus, Chad Bolling, and Al Minnick, who ran the boat. John blamed the escape of Ike McAley on having too many helpers.

The Company boat was fast; could do ten miles an hour, whereas Ike's boat was certainly not good for more than seven, perhaps not that with a skiff in tow. Still, she had a half-hour's start, and there was small chance of catching her before she made the lake, unless Ike ran her aground. As for Al Minnick, the saying was that he knew every turtle on Bayou Comrade; he could run it as well by night as by day.

They reached the lake without overhauling their quarry. At the mouth of the river they shut off the engine to listen, and they could hear the put-put of the other boat out in the lake, not very far away. They headed in the direction of the sound, but lost much time through the necessity of stopping often to listen. Ike was pursuing a most erratic course, now up the lake, now down. It was like chasing a water beetle.

"He's crazy," muttered Al Minnick. "Why the hell don't he go somewhere? When morning breaks we'll have him dead to rights."

Finally, to their amazement, they heard the boat coming straight towards them. They waited with a quiet engine.

"Crazy! Crazy!" muttered Al.

The tubby bow of the old one-lunger came shouldering through the darkness. She passed by not ten yards from them. There was only one man in her, and he neither looked at them nor moved. The skiff was gone.

"What the hell do you know about that?" the men murmured to each other, struck with awe.

With their superior speed, they soon drew alongside and seized the gunwale of Ike McAley's boat. The man in her was sitting up dead, with a bullet-hole in the back of his head.

"No wonder he steered a crooked course," muttered Al Minnick. He climbed into the other boat and shut off the engine.

The dead man was he whom Monty and Hal had seen in the restaurant earlier that night. Whether it was a chance bullet from the wharf which had

got him or Ike McAley who had shot him down, never became known. Nothing was ever learned about him save that his mates called him "Finger." That is all that appears on the wooden cross which marks his grave in the swamp. It will soon rot down.

McAley was gone in the skiff. They held a council to decide what to do. While it was going on, Joe Burchard came along in his boat. The fact that a desperate criminal was abroad made Joe anxious for his wife, and he was hurrying home.

It was useless to look for McAley in the dark. The noise of the engine would keep him informed of their position miles away. It was decided to lie off the mouth of the bayou until morning, and then search the shores. Both motor-boats could be utilised for this purpose. McAley would no doubt lie hidden by day.

Monty had not much hope of the success of such a search. How could a motor-boat follow a skiff through the mazes of the swamps bordering the lake? He thought he knew where Ike would make for. "I'll go with Joe," he said, "and borrow a skiff from him. I can be searching around the head of the lake while you beat these shores."

"Better take a man with you," suggested John Blackie.

Monty shook his head. The prospect of bringing in his man single-handed gratified his very soul. John lent him a belt containing two six-shooters and spare ammunition.

Joe Burchard and Monty went on together. Joe's place was fifteen miles up the lake. Monty declined to stop there for a rest, but took a little food and immediately embarked in the skiff.

He was certain that Ike McAley would make for Sassafras Bayou. After having been up and down it three times he must know it well; moreover, his cache was in there. Well, if he was making for Sassafras, Monty, owing to the lift that Joe Burchard had given him, must be ahead of him, and all he had to do was to wait for Ike to come up. Monty never doubted that Ike would evade the noisy motor-boats that were looking for him on the lake.

Joe Burchard had carefully described the mouth of Sassafras Bayou, and Monty made it about dawn. It was a good big stream down here, and comparatively unobstructed. For a long distance above the lake there was no dry land on either side except the low sandbanks that in most places separated the stream from the standing water. The forest was magnificent, and yet untouched by axe.

About a mile up-stream, Monty found such a hiding-place as he was looking for. A little inlet enabled him to push his skiff inside the sandbank,

which in this place supported a thick growth of bushes. There he stretched out on a comfortable bed of sand with his boat behind him, looking out across the stream through the interstices between the leaves.

Confident that Ike would never dare show himself on the open lake by daylight, Monty went to sleep with an easy mind. He had the movements of his enemy all figured out. Ike would lie all day in hiding somewhere along the lake shore, and would resume his journey at night. He might be expected along here three or four hours after dark.

Nightfall found Monty, having loafed and slept out the day, keeping vigil behind the bushes. So intense was the darkness under the big trees that he could see nothing, but he was very sure no one could pass by without his hearing him. This was the hardest time; he could not soothe his nerves with a pipe, because in that still air the scent of tobacco would have betrayed him a hundred yards off. Along between nine and ten o'clock he heard the faint, unmistakable sound of oarlocks, and grinned to himself. His calculations had not been at fault.

Ike passed so close to his hiding-place that the oar on that side scraped against the sandy bottom. Monty could see him faintly silhouetted against the deeper blackness behind. No doubt about its being Ike. He knew him by the rakish tilt of his broad-brimmed hat. He was rowing very slowly; facing up-stream and pushing the oars from him.

I could shoot him now, Monty thought; but that would be no satisfaction. He would never know who hit him.

He gave Ike a quarter of an hour, then, pushing his boat out into the stream, he followed; rowing in the same manner and with greater care. Before leaving Burchard's he had greased his oarlocks, and wrapped the oars with rags where they passed through. He paused often to listen. If I can't hear him, it's a cinch he can't hear me, he thought. Plenty of time. Plenty of time. He figured that Ike would not stop now until daylight. A man's first sleep is the soundest, he had heard. He aimed to search for Ike while he slept.

All night the grim chase continued. The sluggish stream made no sound; no fish leaped, no bird twittered, no insect hummed. The silence under the interlaced trees was like that of a closed room. Monty never could hear the oars when he stopped to listen, but once a vagrant breeze met him on a bend bringing the faint aroma of tobacco. Ike had stopped to rest near by and was refreshing himself with a cigarette.

Monty waited in the keenest anxiety. Had his oars betrayed him? But in a few moments the knock-knock of the oarlocks in the other boat

recommenced. It proceeded steadily and unhurried. Ike had not yet taken any alarm. Monty proceeded even more slowly. He treated himself to a pipe, since the air was moving down-stream. Better let Ike gain a mile or two on him. Give him time to eat in the morning before he slept.

With the coming of daylight, Monty's search began in earnest. It was anxious work. There was always the chance that Ike was not sleeping, but watching from somewhere behind the leaves. Monty knew he had one gun; possibly he had others. However, the chance had to be taken. Monty argued that Ike could not have slept much the day before, with the motor-boats searching the lake for him. Was he not bound to relax once he found a hiding-place in the swamp he knew?

Where the stream ran between banks there were few possible hiding-places for the skiff, and Monty's task was easy. But where the swamp spread out on either side the skiff could have been hidden almost anywhere. Monty tried to put himself in the other man's place. If I was in danger of capture what sort of place would I choose? He searched a dozen likely spots without result. The leafage was much thicker now than it had been on his first trip on this bayou.

As the time lengthened out he began to fear that he had passed his man. Monty was prepared to follow him all the way to his cache if necessary, but he had not much food for so long a journey. However, he was presently reassured by seeing a cigarette-butt floating in the water. Ike was still ahead of him—and not far away, because a cigarette soon goes to pieces in the water.

A faint whirl in the black water on his left hand suggested that a tributary came in on that side. Monty was beginning to learn the ways of the swamp. Softly thrusting the nose of his skiff through a tangle of vines and moss, he found a narrow stream on the other side. This is where I would hide, he told himself. And I wouldn't go far up if I knew I had to come back again.

Sitting quietly in his skiff, he studied almost leaf by leaf the dense curtains of greenery that hung down on every side. On the right hand he knew there was hummock land; he had seen it from the main stream. Gradually he made out that there was water behind the curtain of leaves on this side. Carefully parting the leaves with his hands, his heart gave a jump. There lay the skiff he was in search of, moored in the usual way, to an oar thrust in the mud of the bank. It was empty.

Monty's first thought was to make sure that his pistols were loose in their holsters. He then manœvered his skiff alongside the bank, taking

infinite care to make no sound. Getting out, he stopped only long enough to draw it up a few inches. Fresh footprints in the mud showed him which way Ike had gone. Monty followed, snaking his body through the leaves.

He found Ike a few paces away, lying asleep under a big live oak. Under the tree the ground was open. Ike was lying close to the trunk in a hollow between two projecting roots, which held his body as snugly as in a cradle. He was covered by a red blanket. Monty, gun in hand, stood at his feet grimly studying him and debating a course of action.

The safest thing, he thought, would be to let out a yell, and shoot him dead when he springs up. But that wouldn't satisfy me. I want to smash him. I owe it to him. I want to knock him out, and I want him to know who's doing it! In that case, I've got to disarm him.

Ike had spread his blanket and then lain upon it, pulling it over him. He was lying on his left side with his legs drawn up somewhat. His right arm projected from between the folds of the blanket and was flung over his eyes, to shield them from the light. This gave Monty his idea. The roots pin him in on either side, he thought. If I was to drop on his head and arm with my whole weight he'd be helpless.

It was no sooner thought of than done. When Monty's knees descended on Ike's head, the man reacted as swiftly as a wild animal. His whole body heaved up in frantic and repeated efforts to throw the weight off. Monty realised that he would not be able to hold him long. The blanket was thrown back, revealing two guns stuck in his belt. With his left hand Ike was feeling for them blindly, but the arm was pinned under him. Monty snatched one of the guns and flung it away with all his force. He heard it fall in the water. The second followed it. At the same moment, Ike with a supreme effort, threw Monty off.

Monty regained his feet as nimbly as a cat, and backed off, waiting. Ike sprang up with a bellow of rage, and looked around for his mysterious antagonist. He was fumbling at his waist for the missing guns. Seeing Monty, gun in hand, he came to a pause. "*You!*" he said hoarsely. Rage had given his face a mottled look which slowly paled. He thought his hour had come.

Monty, studying him, thought: I can do it, if I keep out of his reach. He shoved the gun back in its holster. "Come on!" he said.

The colour flooded back into Ike's face, and he rushed at Monty with a yell of triumph. The triumph was premature. Monty, gauging his movements to a nicety, side-stepped and sent in a whole arm blow that caught Ike on the

ear and made him rock like a tree in a gale. What a satisfaction there was in the feel of that blow!

Monty retreated, warily choosing his ground. He had to think of a dozen things at once. He had to keep in mind every obstruction of the rough ground, for a stumble would have cost him his life. Ike was hungrily eyeing the pistols at Monty's belt.

Ike put down his head and rushed at Monty with his arms out. Monty received him with a smashing upper-cut in the face. But he misjudged the impetus of the heavy body. They collided, and Ike's arms automatically locked around him. "I've got you now!" Ike muttered thickly. Fear stole into Monty's breast. However, he drew up a knee between them, and, thrusting out with all the power of his thigh, broke Ike's hold. When Ike attempted to seize him again, Monty stopped him with another smash in the face.

"Fight fair," warned Monty, "or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

The next time Ike rushed Monty, he put his fists up and the blow he aimed might well have killed Monty had it landed. But it did not. And Monty's did. Monty could hit him almost where he pleased. Ike's nose and his ear were bleeding. I can do it! Monty thought exultantly. But the big man could take any amount of punishment. *Could* he do it? Had he steam enough to stop him in the end?

Ike was out of condition. Already, with his mouth hanging open like an idiot's, he was sobbing for breath. "Stand still, damn you!" he would snarl at Monty. "That's not my line," Monty replied, grinning.

In one of his rushes Ike stumbled over a root and went to his knees. Monty drew off, waiting for him to get up. Ike rose with a strange look in his eyes. He could not understand such magnanimity. His own desire was to kill. He cursed Monty, all but crying with rage.

This was where training began to tell. Ike's heart near broke with his vain attempts to land on the elusive Monty. A bewildered look appeared in his face. And this was the gang leader that Monty had once been in such awe of! Ike had to stop often, and, every time he stopped, Monty ran in and hit him, always aiming with his right for the point of the jaw.

Ike managed to guard that vulnerable point after a fashion, and Monty tried feinting with his left. Ike flung up his right arm, leaving the left side of his head wide open. I have him now, thought Monty. When he got another chance, Monty repeated the trick; feinting with his left, and gathering all the force of his body into his right arm. When that blow landed, Monty thought his hand was broken—but Ike dropped like a felled ox and lay still.

Monty gazed at him, astonished by the effect of his own blow. Then a flood of joy swept over him. I've done it! he thought. I will never be afraid of a man again! In a way of speaking, it was not Ike that Monty had been fighting so much as his old contemptible self. And he had knocked *him* out for ever.

Ike was not a pretty sight. He had passed out cold. Monty was not worrying about that. He rolled him over on his face as if he had been a sack, and tied his wrists together with cords that he had in his pocket for that purpose. Then his ankles. It must be confessed that he did not handle the limp body any too gently. Bad meat! he thought; I reckon it would poison a dog!

He took Ike under the arms and dragged him down to the water's edge. He chose to load him into Ike's own skiff because the bow thwart had been removed from it. In fact, it was the same skiff in which Rose and her father had set out from Mississippi. How long ago that seemed! It was a job to get the insensate hulk of flesh aboard without capsizing, but Monty managed it at last. Tying his own skiff to the stern of the other, he poled out into the main stream.

There he sat on the stern thwart and took to the oars, facing downstream. Thus he could see where he was going, and at the same time keep an eye on his prisoner. He realised that he was dog-weary, but that was of small account. A great peace enfolded him. Every time he looked at Ike he felt a fresh satisfaction. I've done what I set out to do, he thought; I can lie back for a while now. I can look myself in the face.

After a while he found Ike's eye fixed on him poisonously. But Ike said nothing. There was incredulity mixed with his bitterness. He could not understand how a rich man's son like Monty had knocked him out and taken him prisoner single-handed.

They met the Company boat coming up the bayou with John Blackie and the others aboard. There was a big time then. They clapped Monty on the back until his lungs rang, and hailed him as a hero. This was not exactly an unpleasant experience for one who had been referred to as a lap-dog not so long ago. Monty bore it with a foolish grin.

And this was nothing to what took place when they landed at Comrade that evening. By this time the word had got around that the gang leader was no other than the celebrated Ike McAley. His fame had lost nothing in the telling; king of the hi-jackers they termed him, and killer of twenty men. The whole town turned out to welcome his captor, and lined up in a double row along the sidewalk leading to John Blackie's place.

Monty passed between them supported by the mayor, and with his bound prisoner walking with hanging head behind him, just as in a Roman triumph of ancient days. No doubt, had the populace possessed roses they would have flung them; but the men took it out in cheering, while the women kissed him with loud smacks. Monty did not care much for it. The only woman he wanted to kiss contented herself with waving her hand from the restaurant door.

The only glum face in Comrade (saving those of the prisoners) was that of Hal, though he was trying to conceal it. At a moment when they were alone together, he confided to Monty that Mary Starr had turned him down flat.

“Oh, well,” said Monty, “look at all the times I’ve been turned down!”

The official celebration took place at John Blackie’s for as many as could crowd into the place. Unfortunately there were no fireworks in town, but a lot of ammunition was wasted. Someone had been looking up old newspapers, and when it was announced that the city of St. Louis had offered five thousand dollars’ reward for Ike McAley, all hell broke loose. John Blackie advanced a thousand to Jonesy (as they called him) on the spot.

Monty wished to treat the crowd then, but they wouldn’t take it from him. Every man wanted the privilege of buying him a drink. To their chagrin, he still refused all invitations. He was deaf to persuasion. Only a real hero’s reputation could have survived it. Not a drop, he had resolved, until a certain momentous interview had taken place. But of that he said nothing.

This hero business was wearing on a man. He finally succeeded in escaping alone from the noisy crowd, and made his way down to the restaurant. The door was closed, but to-night he had no hesitation in knocking. Was he not the Big Noise in Comrade?

Rose opened the door a little way. Seeing who it was, she flushed a rosy red, but did not open any wider. “Please don’t ask to come in,” she said, breathlessly. “Please, not to-night.”

Monty, all puffed up with success and applause, was scarcely in the mood to accept a rebuff. “I do ask to come in,” he said. “And what’s more, I’m coming in.” He firmly pushed the door open, and, stepping in, closed it behind him.

Rose turned away with a little sound of distress. Her arms hung down listlessly. Mary was not in sight.

"I've come for you," said Monty manfully. "I'm sick of all this shilly-shallying."

"Oh," she murmured, "must we go through with all that again?"

Monty stared at her resentfully. Certainly he had not expected to be repulsed to-night. "What's the matter with me?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she murmured, always refusing to look at him.

"Of course, all this hero business is foolishness," he went on. "I didn't expect anything like that from you"—he had, though—"but at least I've proved myself, haven't I? I'm worth a girl's attention."

"You are splendid," she murmured very low. "Mary and I will be grateful to you all our lives. I think it is perfectly fine what you have made of yourself."

Monty began to feel better; but she destroyed it all with her next words.

"But what has that got to do with it? Nothing is changed."

"Are you still harping on my family?" demanded Monty. "I'm done with them, I tell you. This is my life now. I've made a place for myself here. I'm never going back."

"You've got to go back," she said. "It's your duty. You have responsibilities to take up."

"Nothing to it!" said Monty. "My father can hire all the men he needs. This is all talk. There's some other reason."

A warm blush spread up from Rose's neck to her forehead. Monty watched it, fascinated. Girls who could blush like that were rare. "Yes, there is another reason," she confessed. It seemed to be difficult for her to get it out. "You—you are engaged to another girl. I read it in the paper."

"So *that's* it!" cried Monty, amazed. He had completely forgotten the fact himself. "But I don't give a darn about her. Nor she about me," he protested. "It was all a made-up affair. Our mothers hatched it between them."

"Just the same, a promise is a promise," murmured Rose.

"If I broke it off——" began Monty.

"No!" she quickly interrupted. "It wouldn't make any difference. That is your life, and sooner or later you will go back to it. Well, it wouldn't suit me. I wouldn't have your fine friends sneering at me. I wouldn't let them say that you'd picked up a wife in the Louisiana swamps. I've got my own pride. I wouldn't shame you."

"Shame me, you!" cried Monty. He suddenly took a new tack. "Look here, this is all foolishness. The only thing that matters is, do you care for

me at all?"

She paused a second before answering, and took a long breath. "No," she said coolly.

A groan broke from him. "Oh, Rose! Look at me when you say that!"

She faced him out. "It is quite true what you say," she said quietly; "if I cared for you none of these things would matter. But I do not—not that way."

This appeared to be final. Monty turned away with hanging head, and got out of the place somehow. He could not know, of course, how a good woman can lie when she thinks it's in a good cause. He could not guess how Rose wept in her friend's arms when the door closed behind him. He went back to John Blackie's and got drunk with a will. But there was no fun in it.

Early next morning he woke up feeling half sick and thoroughly disgusted with life. He had had all the hero worship he could stand. He no longer felt any satisfaction in what he had done, since it had failed to win him the only prize he cared for. Rolling over in his bunk, he looked at Hal across the room, whose expression was as sour as his own.

"Let's beat it away from here," he said suddenly.

"All right," said Hal, "where to?"

"Let's go home," said Monty, with a hard grin. "It would be kinda fun to swell around and brag and show our muscle. We'd be some guys amongst that soft bunch. The liquor's good in New York, the eats are top-hole, and the girls are the pick of the world—and not too stand-offish. Come on, a little luxury would go good after what we've been through."

"All right," said Hal, "I'm on."

They hired Al Minnick to carry them across the lake to Scoville, and departed without any good-byes.

CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

SIX days later Sam Sollers' boat brought them back. They landed somewhat sheepishly, because they had not intended to return when they went away. However, the first shout of welcome cheered their hearts. It appeared they had friends here.

The cry went up and down Main Street: "Hey, fellows, Jonesy and Smitty are back!" Everybody rushed out to shake their hands. It was quite what the newspapers call an ovation. No hard feelings because of their sneaking away without good-byes.

"Jeese, fellows, it's good to see you back! You're as welcome as the flowers in May! Where you been all the time? Reckon you went to town to have a fling. You-all are a sly pair all right. Well, you're entitled to it. Come and put a touch on it."

To all invitations Monty and Hal replied: "It's too early, fellows. See you later."

"Jeese, men, Jonesy's on the wagon again? Can you beat it! Who you aiming to lick now, Jonesy?" And so on. And so on.

It was dinner-time at the restaurant, but they were shy of entering while the place was full. They hung around gassing with the fellows, and went in at five minutes to one. Word of their return had preceded them. Mary greeted them with her whole-hearted smile. Rose appeared at the kitchen door for a moment. Her face went pink, then white, and there was that in her eyes that she could not conceal.

It's *all right*! thought Monty, with both fear and delight in his heart.

No one offered to put them out at one o'clock to-day. In fact, it was Monty who, when the last two or three men had finished eating, said: "Closing time, fellows," and coolly shepherded them out of the door and shut it.

"Come and sit down for a moment, girls," he said boldly. "To hell with dinner." He was bluffing, of course. He did not expect Rose to obey—but she did. Truly, you never could tell about women! They sat down all four at one of the tables. Rose was giving nothing away as usual.

"Well, we've been home," said Monty in a loud, cheerful voice to cover his secret uncertainty; "and here we are back again!"

“Tell us about it,” said Rose demurely.

“I’m free to admit that we were sore through and through when we left here,” Monty went on. “We aimed to cut loose and go to hell without any return ticket. But it didn’t work out that way.”

“We’re going to stay here now,” put in Hal.

“Yeah,” said Monty, “with the reward money we’re going into business.”

“What made you change your minds?” murmured Rose.

“Well, I’ll tell you the whole story. When we got to New York we telephoned our folks from the station, because we didn’t want them to drop dead from the shock, see? Then Hal he went to his house and I to mine. I needn’t go into detail about the big pow-wow that followed. Big crying and kissing feast. Well, it was pretty good at that. After all, a fellow’s folks are his folks. I had handed them a rotten deal, but they forgave me. It was good to see them!

“But as soon as my mother recovered from her high-strikes, she started in to plan everything out for me. Made me restive. That’s the way she is. She couldn’t understand that I had changed for good. Wanted to start right in to iron out the roughness I had collected in the swamps, and make a little gentleman of me again. My mother’s all right, but she’s got gentility on the brain. I reckon it’s because she had a slim time when she was young. It makes a difference.

“My father wasn’t so bad. He grinned when he felt my muscle, and allowed that the whole experience had done me good. But pretty soon he began on his line. Hoped I was ready to settle down now, and take the job that was waiting for me. Said he was ready to feed me responsibility as fast as I could digest it. In an office! All my life! All my life! Gee! the very thought turned me cold! Caught up in the same machinery that has made him old before his time! Why can’t they see? However, I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to spoil the love-feast.

“Well, the next thing was to look up the girls; Sylvia and Stella. I admit we were dead set to see those girls; they looked good to our imaginations; leaders of the younger set and all; the most advanced and expensive article on the market; there’s a whole lot of vanity mixed up in it. That’s how foolish fellows are; when a girl turns them down, they got to rush right off to her opposite.

“Hal and I had agreed not to telephone in advance, because we wanted to surprise them. They’ve got hard enough hearts to stand a shock. So I met Hal in the street and taxied up to the Bullards. They live in one of the latest penthouse apartments, you know—a regular three-story house built up on

top of a twenty-story building. It had gardens laid out on the roof around it, with honest-to-God cedar trees and everything.

“As luck would have it we ran into a big party. Well, we didn’t want to create a stampede by showing ourselves, so, after we left our hats and coats in the foyer, we sneaked out into the garden and looked through the windows. It was a mild night, and we reckoned that Syl and Stell would be out sooner or later. They’re all for sitting out. It’s their line.

“I had a considerable wait, but in the end Syl came skipping out through a French window with Jack Lonergan. His old man is president of a string of banks. They dropped on a bench and went into a clinch before I could even make myself known. Yeah, regular fade-out stuff; passionate! Look at Rose blushing. You don’t know the half of it, dearie.

“I said, ‘Hello, Syl,’ and she unhooked with speed and sat up. ‘Monty!’ she said, and none too sweetly, because she was enjoying herself, you see; but she soon recollected my old man’s two or three hundred millions, and changed it to: ‘Monty, darling!’ Jack ducked, but I grabbed him long enough to ask him not to say he’d seen me, because I didn’t want to start a riot on the roof. I took his place on the bench, and Syl wreathed her lily-white arms around my neck and——”

“Right after the other one!” interrupted Rose, aghast. “Are there girls like that?”

“Sure,” said Monty, grinning, “you’d better take me if you want to save me from it.” He hastened on with his story. “In the beginning her love was just window-dressing, but when she felt me her tone altered. ‘Why, you’re changed,’ she said; ‘you’ve grown bigger!’ ‘Sure!’ said I, ‘I’ve got to be a regular hard guy. I eat nails for dessert.’ She hugged me with a right good will then. ‘Oh, you darling roughneck!’ she cried. ‘I can really love you now!’ ”

The grin faded out of Monty’s face. “I took a sudden disgust to it all,” he went on, stabbing the oilcloth with a fork. “On the level. I mean, the whole darn business; money and swelling around and living soft. And especially those girls; all fixed up and smiling to order; full of professional pep. I seemed to see them as they really were; half mercenary and half—well, never mind the other half. And I had a kind of vision of a *real* woman; one who laughs and cries from the heart; one who isn’t afraid to be good and brave and honest!

“Well, that’s about all,” he said affecting to grin again. “I untwined the lily-white arms and stood up. ‘Nothing doing, darling,’ I said. ‘I just came back to release you from your promise.’ ‘But I don’t want to be released,’

she said. 'I won't be released. I want you!' I made swift tracks for the lobby. 'Jack is waiting inside the French window,' I said.

"I found Hal waiting for me downstairs in the lobby. From the look of him I surmised that his experience had been somewhat similar to mine. He'll tell you himself. It was then five minutes to twelve, and I knew that the Southern express left at twelve-fifteen. 'Let's hop it,' I said, and he said 'Sure!' and here we are!"

"But your folks!" said Rose.

"Oh, we wrote back from Washington next morning," said Monty. "I told them I could love them better if I lived away from home. I said I hoped they would let me come and see them sometimes. But I made it clear that I could never be either a gentleman or a financier. And that's that."

When the story was finished, a heavy constraint fell upon the four people at the table. Nobody seemed to know what to say. Suddenly Hal and Mary, as with a common impulse, got up and disappeared blushing within the kitchen. That untied the knots that had suddenly come into Monty's tongue.

"They've gone out to fix it up," he said, grinning. Rose's hands were resting on the edge of the table. He reached across and took them. "Rose, darling, can't we fix it up, too?" he begged. "Must you still turn me down? I believe that you liked me all the time, and that you only turned me down because you thought it was for my good. Surely you must see now that it wouldn't be for my good!"

She raised her eyes to his, as if beseeching his mercy. "It is quite true," she said. "I loved you from the first."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Trial by Water* by Hulbert Footner]