

Bill Bolton—Flying Midshipman

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FLYING

MIDSHIPMAN ***

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BILL BOLTON

Flying Midshipman

BY

Lieutenant Noel Sainsbury, Jr.

Author of

Bill Bolton and Winged Cartwheels

Bill Bolton and the Flying Fish

Bill Bolton and Hidden Danger

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MADE IN U. S. A.

Dedication

To

OLIVER TEMPLETON JOHNSON, JR.

known to his friends as "Buzz"—an

inveterate reader of my books.

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CHAPTER I—THE HURRICANE

“I can’t keep her in the air any longer, Dad!”

Bill Bolton shot the words into the mouthpiece of his headphone and pushed the stick gently forward. The amphibian which he was driving nosed into a long gliding arc toward the angry whitecaps of the Bay of Florida, a thousand feet below.

“Too much wind?” called back Mr. Bolton from his seat in the rear cockpit.

With a sharp bank Bill saved the plane a side-slip as an unusually heavy gust caught her.

“Too much wind is right. Those black clouds to the southeast mean a hurricane or I’m a landlubber. We’re soon going to be in for it good and plenty. It’s already kicked up a heavy sea below. I should have landed sooner.”

“If we crash, we’ll have a long swim,” was his father’s sole comment.

Bill cut his gun and having brought the plane into the teeth of the wind which was increasing in violence momentarily, he shot a quick glance overside. Row after row of spume-capped combers met his eye and his face became grim with determination.

At an altitude of perhaps twenty-five feet he began to draw the stick slowly backward, breaking his glide. Careful not to stall her, with his eyes on the water just ahead he allowed the nose to come gradually up until the amphibian was in level flight. In such a wind this proved a most difficult evolution, for savage squalls lashed the plane until she acted like a wild colt on a leading rope; and a crash seemed imminent.

Struggling to keep the plane on an even keel, Bill continued to pull back his stick, raising the nose and depressing the tail. Then with a final pull he stalled her, the heel of the step made contact with the top of a whitecap and amid a cloud of spray the amphibian skimmed ahead on the water. Before her nose could play off, Bill had the sea anchor overside and a moment later the heavy boat was tugging on the line to the collapsible canvas bucket that kept her head into the wind.

Bill whipped off his headphone and goggles. Then he made the pilot’s cockpit secure by cleating down a waterproof tarpaulin over the top, flush with the

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deck, and climbed into the rear cockpit which had seats for two passengers.

Vast clouds growing out of the southeast almost covered the heavens now, concealing the sun. And as it grew darker the wind's velocity steadily increased.

"She'll ride better with me aft," he explained to his father, "and the tarpaulin will shed water like a deck. If the fore cockpit shipped one of those big seas, we'd fill up and go down like a plummet."

"I admit that I'm not much of a seafaring man," said Mr. Bolton, "but why you keep the plane heading into those combers is beyond me! Why not run before the gale? Wouldn't we ride easier?"

"Possibly—but we can't get into position to do that now. I threw over the sea anchor to keep her as she is."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because if I hadn't, she'd have nosed round broadside to the waves and foundered with the weight of the water pouring down on her lower wing sections. If I tried to bring her before the wind now, she'd do exactly that as soon as her head played off."

In the white glare of a lightning flash which brightened the horizon for an instant, Mr. Bolton glimpsed his son, staring into the teeth of the storm.

"Then why didn't you land the plane with the wind instead of heading into it?" he queried in a perplexed tone.

"All landings must be made directly into the wind, Dad," Bill explained patiently. "A plane stalls when its speed through the air drops below a certain

point. If there's no wind its speed over the surface will be the same as its speed through the air. But any wind at once affects its velocity over the surface, which

will be the composition of the speed of the plane through the air with the speed of the air over the surface. You see, a plane which stalls at forty miles an hour will, when landing into a fifteen-mile wind, make contact at twenty-five miles an hour. The same plane headed down-wind would land at fifty-five miles an hour.

And that difference of thirty miles an hour in landing speed might easily spell the difference between a good landing and a wrecked plane.”

His father smiled in the darkness.

“You talk like a textbook, Bill. But you do seem to have learned something at Annapolis during the past year.”

“Learned that in flight training, before I entered the Naval Academy,”

replied his son. He ducked his head as an unusually vicious wave swept over

the forward decking, deluging the two in the cockpit with stinging spray. “This is going to be a wet vacation, by the looks of things.”

“Who’d have thought we’d be in this fix when we left Key West at four this afternoon! Now we’re stranded—somewhere in the Bay of Florida—and instead of dining cheerily with the Wilsons at Miami, and going on to that important vi

business conference afterwards—”

“We’re likely to make good bait for the sharks in this neighborhood!”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything we can do, son?”

“Not a thing—but grin and bear it until this wind blows itself out.”

“And it will get worse before it gets better!”

“Sure! Cheer up, Dad—we’ll weather it yet.”

“Don’t mind me, Bill. I’m—that is, I’m not feeling quite myself. Haven’t since we came down, as a matter of fact. I’ve never been—seasick—before—” Mr.

Bolton’s voice sounded rather feeble.

“It’s the motion, combined with the smell of gasoline, Dad. Every naval flyer knows that feeling, your son included, at this particular time. You’ll feel better when you’re empty.”

“I certainly hope so,” faltered Mr. Bolton.

“Just let your mind rest on a fatty piece of pork swimming in its own hot grease, for a starter,” Bill suggested, grinning to himself.

“Mmmm—” Bill’s father stood up suddenly and leaned far overside.

His son followed suit almost immediately.

Presently they returned to their places, weak and empty, but considerably more comfortable.

“I wonder why the thought of fat pork always gets one going,” mused Bill, handing his father the water bottle.

Mr. Bolton slaked his thirst and handed it back, whereupon Bill took a couple of long pulls.

“Feel better, Dad?”

“Yes, thanks.” He paused a moment, then continued in his normal tone.

“The plane doesn’t seem to be pitching so wildly—”

“No, the wind is increasing steadily, and flattening out the water.”

“Isn’t there something we can do now?”

“Yes. It’s getting pretty wet in here. Give me a hand with this tarpaulin, please.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Batten down the cockpit cover.”

“But, my boy!” Mr. Bolton’s voice showed a trace of nervousness for the first time. “If we put the cover on the cockpit, we’ll be drowned like rats in a trap if the plane goes down. I confess I’m not keen on the idea.”

“If the plane founders, we’ll drown anyway,” was his son’s business-like reply. “No swimmer could live more than a minute in water like this. We’re in a tight fix, Dad, and our only chance is to ride out the gale. This plane will sink like a stone, once the real hurricane hits us, unless she is pretty near watertight overall. Let’s get busy before the wind makes the job impossible.”

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“I guess you’re skipper,” Mr. Bolton replied, and he hastened to comply with Bill’s request.

It was difficult work fastening on the waterproof cover from the inside, but at last it was accomplished, and Bill flashed on his electric torch. With some trouble, because of the violent pitching and rolling of their little ship, he took down the two passenger seats which were collapsible, and stowed them in the luggage hold aft. It now became possible for father and son to sit upright on the flooring.

“We’re as snug as a couple of bugs in a rug, now,” breezed Bill with satisfaction as he made the last seat secure.

“More like nailing down the lid of our coffin,” observed his father. “I hope

I’m not afraid to meet my Maker, but I’d much prefer doing so in the open. However, I am certainly proud of the way you’re handling things, my boy. From now on, I’ll stop grumbling. When you reach my age, you’ll find that an upset stomach paints everything else black.”

With startling suddenness, the howl of the wind stilled, and the two in the

cockpit could hear plainly the splash of the waves against the hull. This eerie silence lasted for perhaps a minute, to be superseded by a dull roar that grew stronger and louder every split second.

“Hold fast! Here she comes!” shouted Bill. With his back against one wall and his feet against the other, he braced his body for the shock of the wind.

In a crescendo of thunderous warning the hurricane struck them. Down and still further down went the nose of the plane beneath the smashing wind.

Would she never come up? Would the anchor line hold? Bill wondered

frantically. Then he caught his father’s twisted smile, and answered it with another. Dad was a real sport—true, he was a business man, and more at home

in a swivel-chair behind a desk than in a pounding seaplane in a gale. But the old man was right there when it came to real pluck. That smile, with beads of

perspiration standing out on his forehead proved it. Bill tingled with pride and satisfaction.

It was different, of course, with himself. He was a midshipman and a flyer,

and it was his business to take risks. This was about the tightest fix he had been in so far, he thought. Never had he heard anything like the fearsome, shrieking roar of this wind.

Ah! The plane’s head was rising! He could feel it. Soon the sea would get up again. Would they be able to ride out the storm?

Mr. Bolton fished a notebook and pencil out of his pocket, and after writing a few words, passed them to Bill.

“Have you a map of these waters?” he had written.

Bill shook his head. “It’s in the forward cockpit,” he wrote. “We were about twenty-five miles south of Oyster Keys when we landed. The mainland is a few miles north of them. Uninhabited mangrove swamps, I think.”

He passed back the notebook and pencil. And after glancing at what he had written, Mr. Bolton scribbled a few more words and handed Bill the book again.

“How about Oyster Keys?” read his son.

The wind was making less commotion now, so Bill tried using his voice.

“Low-lying islets,” he shouted. “I don’t think anybody lives there. Even head on to the storm as we are, the plane is drifting toward the keys—sure to be.”

“That’s good,” shouted back his father. “Maybe we’ll make one of them by morning.”

“I hope not!” was Bill’s reply. “Not in the sea that will be running by then.

We’d smash up sure in the breakers.”

Mr. Bolton made no answer to this announcement and Bill spoke again.

“We may need this flashlight again before morning, Dad. The batteries are small. They won’t last forever. Sorry, but I’m afraid we’ll have to sit it out in the dark.”

Mr. Bolton nodded. “Goodnight—and good luck, son.”

Bill snapped off the light. For what seemed a long time he sat there in

darkness so black that with a hand held close to his eyes, he was unable to see the faintest outline of it. The strain and excitement were beginning to make

themselves felt. Bill began to realize that he was tired. He curled up into a more comfortable position and rested his head on his arms. Five minutes later he was sound asleep.

He was awakened from dreamless slumber as his head struck something

hard and unyielding. His hand sought the electric torch in his pocket and drew it forth. By its light he saw his father sleeping on the flooring close to him. A glance at his wristwatch showed that it was five o'clock, and therefore daylight.

He wound the watch, and without waking his father, undid a corner of the cockpit cover.

The wind had fallen to a fraction of its former strength. A grey, cloudswept

sky met his gaze, and below it, towering waves which seemed bent on burying

the small craft beneath tumbling torrents of angry water. The plane was probably leaking a bit, but that was to be expected after the beating she had been taking all night long, and was still taking. Staunch little bus!

Then he turned his head and involuntarily caught his breath. Dead aft and

not a quarter of a mile away lay a long line of pounding breakers!

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CHAPTER II—THE KEY

“Good morning, son,” said a voice behind Bill. “Reckon the Old Man got his wish.

One of the Oyster Keys, isn't it?”

“Shouldn't be surprised,” returned Bill without enthusiasm. “We'll soon

know more about it. At the rate the plane is drifting backwards, we'll be up to the breakers in about an hour.”

“How about starting the engine and—er—sheering off?”

“Not in a sea like this, Dad. She’d go down in a minute, just as soon as her head played off. Our only chance is that she drifts past that point over there to starboard. There may be a bay behind it and if we can make quieter water, we may win out yet.”

Mr. Bolton slapped him on the shoulder. “That’s the way to talk! You’re a great comfort to your old Dad. How about a little breakfast before rounding the point, eh?”

Bill laughed. “You’re on, sir,—if you’ll take off these cockpit covers, I’ll go below for the emergency rations!”

“Make it snappy, then. I’m hungry enough to eat a horse. Or fat pork swimming in its own grease, for that matter!”

By the time Mr. Bolton had the tarpaulins stowed away. Bill produced sandwiches and coffee hot from the thermos bottle.

“New life and no mistake,” Mr. Bolton remarked, munching contentedly.

“What do you think of our chances now that you’re able to satisfy the inner man, Bill?”

“Not very good, sir. The tide is carrying us toward the point, but this wind is causing us to drift backward onto the breakers at a rate of at least three feet to the tide’s one.”

“I don’t see any signs of life on the island,” observed his father.

“No, if anybody lives on that key, the house is behind the cliffs. I’ve been watching for a sign of smoke, but haven’t sighted anything so far. Queer formation, those cliffs, for this part of the world. Most of the islands are so low

and flat they're covered with water at high tide."

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They finished their breakfast in a leisurely manner, and stowed away the remainder of the food.

"I guess we aren't going to make the point," said Bill when their tailplane lay not more than a quarter of a mile off the breakers. "I've got another idea, though. Stupid of me not to have thought of it before. It's a ticklish job, but if I don't swamp her, we ought to get round that promontory."

"Anything is better than this inaction. What's the good word?"

"I'm going into the fore cockpit and start the engine."

"You mean we can pull in the sea anchor and taxi out of this dangerous position?"

"Hardly that. The old bus would pound to pieces in this sea if I tried to send her over these waves. The idea is to give her just enough headway to offset the wind drift that is driving her ashore. I want to keep her the same distance off the surf that she is now. The tide will then have a chance to carry us sideways round the point. There's bound to be quieter water to leeward of that headland."

"Sounds fine! Anyway, it gives us a chance. What can I do to help?"

"Crawl out on the nose, please. When I give the word, haul in the anchor line. If you try to get the sea anchor aboard from a cockpit the bus will slew to the side and I'll never be able to keep her headed into the wind."

Bill took his place at the controls in the fore cockpit and idled the engine until he was convinced everything was running smoothly. Then he placed his feet on the rudder pedals and motioned his father to proceed.

The huge white-capped rollers, aftermath of the hurricane, tossed the plane up and down as though each oncoming wave was bent on destroying her. Bill knew that his father's task was no easy one. The decking forward of the cockpit was rounded and absolutely smooth. There were no handholds to prevent one slipping off its wet surface.

With a smile, the middle aged gentleman climbed out of the cockpit, lay flat on the deck and wormed his way toward the nose with a wriggling motion that allowed both his arms and his legs to hug the slick planking.

Arrived at the end of his short but perilous journey he sat up, and straddled the deck as though he were riding a very broad horse. Then with a hand on the anchor line, he looked back over his shoulder.

Bill was ready for him to start, and with his stick held well back of neutral to prevent the nose dipping under the waves and throwing spray into the propeller, he held up his free hand.

Mr. Bolton immediately started to haul in the line and Bill opened his throttle. Keeping just enough headway on the plane to be sure he could hold her pointed as he wished, he waited until the sea anchor was on board and his father safely aft in the passenger cockpit again, and then slightly accelerated the

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engine. Even this small burst of speed caused the amphibian to bury its nose

in the combers; and all but foundered her under a torrent of sea water. Bill instantly idled down until the staunch little craft was moving through the water at the speed of a fast walk. He soon found that by keeping her going at this rate he prevented her drifting backward with the wind. Deviations from his heading

were prevented by use of the throttle rudder and ailerons.

It was strenuous work, fighting waves in a heavy amphibian, and incom-

parably more tiring than driving her through the air. Moreover it took his whole power of will and concentration to keep her head from playing off and becoming the forerunner of sure disaster. His back and shoulders began to ache under the strain; and soon his leg muscles were an added source of torture because of the excessive pressure he was forced to use on the rudder pedals. He dared not shift his gaze aft, so when they had been travelling the monstrous treadmill grind for an hour by the clock, he hailed his father: "How are we making it?"

The roar of the propeller and engine almost drowned the words as the wind

whipped them back to Mr. Bolton. Sensing, however, that his son wanted some-

thing, he donned a headphone and picked up Bill's set on the other end of the

line. He climbed out of the cockpit and leaned over Bill, adjusting the receiver and transmitter so that the busy pilot could talk to him.

"What did you say?" he asked from the rear cockpit once more.

"Want to know if we'll round the point. If I turn to look, I'll swamp her."

"Sorry," returned his father. "I hadn't realized—— Yes, we're abreast of the head now. There seems to be quite a large cove and quiet water beyond. Can't make it out just yet. Anything else?"

"Yes. When we're round, let me know what's behind the head."

For nearly ten minutes there was no further conversation. Then Bill heard his father's voice in his ears again.

"We're past now. That head is the western end of the island, and behind

it is an almost landlocked cove. You'll have to make a turn to the left to get in there. Think you can do it OK?"

“It’s a case of have to, I guess,” was Bill’s answer.

He closed the throttle and, careful to maintain sufficient speed for steer-
age way, allowed the plane to drift backward in the heavy wind until the mouth
of the little harbor lay off his port quarter. Exerting pressure on left rudder, he
allowed the plane’s nose to play off to port for the fraction of a second, then
kicked her ahead and dead into the wind again, so as to take the advancing wave
nose
on.

Soon their slow progress to port was perceptible. As they drew closer into
the lee of the headland, the wind was less violent, the waves though high lost
their caps of white spume.

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Bill gauged his distances to a nicety. His spurts to port became longer, until at
last he manœuvered his craft, floating backward and sideways, to leeward of the
narrow opening between the cliffs. Then with a vigorous burst of the engine, he
swung round to port and sent the amphibian hurtling into the harbor.

“Splendid, son, splendid!” sang out Mr. Bolton, as Bill cut his gun and
ripped off his headphone. “We certainly are in luck. This island is evidently
inhabited, after all. Look over there!”

Bill was already scanning the cove with a gaze that grasped every detail.

As the plane continued to float shoreward over the quiet water, he saw that the
harbor was almost landlocked. Broad white beaches ended abruptly in steep
cliffs, forty or fifty feet high. Directly ahead a long concrete pier jutted into the
bay and nearby a large yacht and two big amphibians lay at their moorings.

“Yes, there are people here,” replied Bill. “That road zig-zagging up the cliffs
probably leads to the houses. Funny that nobody has sighted us. I wonder what

they're doing with a sea-going yacht and a couple of planes?"

"Some millionaire's hobby, no doubt. This key probably belongs to him.

Hadn't we better tie up to the dock and go ashore? We've had a strenuous time of it, and I frankly admit I'm dog tired. Clean sheets and a comfortable bed, for five or six hours, will make new men of us both."

"I'm with you," smiled his son and sent their plane skimming toward the pier. They made fast to a couple of ringbolts in the concrete and after securing the plane, picked up their suitcases and stepped ashore. Without further waste of time they breasted the winding road that led up the cliff.

"I hope you're right about the millionaire," remarked Bill, as he trudged beside his father. "That should mean a comfortable house and a good feed. Sandwiches are all right, but they don't go very far when you're downright hungry!"

"Well, this road cost a lot of money to build," puffed Mr. Bolton. "It seems to me that this key is the winter home of some pretty wealthy people. Ah, here we are—top at last!"

The cliff they had just ascended evidently extended entirely around the shoreline of the key. Before them the ground sloped into a natural, bowl-like depression. This valley ran the length and breadth of the island, which was about five miles long by two miles wide. The road, gleaming white in the morning sun, ran straight down the valley, to a group of low white buildings, a mile or so away. A heavy growth of trees and shrubs covered the valley. There seemed to have been no attempt to cultivate the soil, and except for the road, the group of buildings and a large house that perched on a knoll in mid-valley, nature had been allowed to run its own pace.

"Quite a settlement," commented Mr. Bolton.

“And quite a walk—in this hot sun,” grumbled Bill, shifting his loaded suitcase from one hand to the other.

“Oh, it will do us good to stretch our legs. Come along. Southern hospitality is famous, you know. We’re sure to get a warm welcome, especially in this out-of-the-way place.”

“It’s warm enough for me, right now,” retorted Bill. “Gee—what’s that!”

“Halt!” cried a rough voice. “Stand where you are, or I’ll fire!”

Two men sprang from behind the cover of a rocky outcropping near the roadside. Both of the newcomers held repeating rifles at the ready. They advanced down the incline toward the Boltons.

CHAPTER III—PRISONERS

The armed strangers were a swarthy, black-browed pair, clad in sleeveless cotton under-shirts and ragged cotton trousers of no particular hue. Both wore the floppy, broadbrimmed straw hats common in the tropics, both were barefoot and carried canvas cartridge belts slung over their left shoulders. A more villainous pair could not be found anywhere.

“Stick ’em up!” commanded the taller of the two.

Bill dropped his suitcase and defiantly thrust his hands into the pockets of his breeches.

“We’re not armed,” he said steadily, and ignoring the man’s angry growl, turned to his father. “If this is a sample of the famous hospitality you were talking about, Dad, a little of it is plenty!”

“Search ’em and search ’em good, Diego!” shouted the leader. “If they make a move ter pull a rod, I’ll drill ’em.”

“But, I say—— Hold on!” Mr. Bolton exclaimed indignantly as Diego relieved him of his watch and wallet.

“Hold up, you mean,” remarked Bill grimly. “A sweet gang of robbers we’ve fallen into if the rest of them on this key are anything like these two thugs.”

“Shut yer mouth, or it’ll be the worse fer youse!” snapped the highwayman.

“Mebbe yer get dese tings back when yer goes up ter de big house, an’ mebbe yer don’t. Dat’s none o’ my business. It’s up ter de boss.”

“I’ll bet he’s a gentleman of the old school,” mocked Bill. “Tell me, Bozo, what do they call this place? Who is the hospitable owner?”

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“Ain’t none o’ yer business,” snarled the man. “Gimme more o’ yer lip, an’ I’ll give yer de butt of dis rifle between de eyes. Pick up dem bags and march. Straight down de road—dat’s de way.”

Forced to obey, the Boltons took up their suitcases again and continued along the dusty highway, but this time accompanied by an armed rear guard.

“We’re arriving in style, anyway, with an armed guard,” Bill muttered to his father. “What sort of a dump do you suppose we’ve crashed into?”

Mr. Bolton, whose face was crimson with annoyance, shot a glance of reproof at the tall, broad-shouldered young fellow at his side.

“Whatever it is, you’ll only make things worse by trying to heckle these people. The men behind are quite evidently underlings. When we meet this boss they speak of, it will be time enough to demand an explanation. Why the owner of this place should treat strangers in this cavalier manner is beyond me, I confess.”

“If you ask me, Dad, I believe we are walking into a mess that has last night’s seance at sea beat forty ways to Sunday.”

“I hope you are wrong,” his father answered stiffly. “But if Diego and his loud-voiced friend aren’t criminals they should be, with faces like theirs. We certainly seem to have been blown out of the frying pan straight into the fire.”

Quarter of an hour’s walk brought them to the first of the buildings they had sighted from the hillside. Closer inspection proved it to be a long, one-storied affair with a flat roof and whitewashed stucco walls. It looked hot and stuffy, and the Boltons noted that the small windows set high up were barred with rusty

iron.

“Looks like a Mexican jail to me,” declared Bill.

“I’ve never seen one,” his father replied. Mr. Bolton was in no state, physically or mentally, for facetious conversation.

“Neither have I, except in the movies—”

“An’ dis is where we stops. In yer goes!”

Diego’s partner appeared at Bill’s elbow and motioned toward the building with the muzzle of his gun. Diego, who so far had made no observation of his

own, produced a key. The heavy door swung inward and the Boltons were rudely forced to enter.

They came into a fair-sized room, sparsely furnished with a chair and a few wooden benches. As they passed into a long corridor lined with cells, Diego's pal relieved them of their suitcases, while Diego unlocked a door and motioned with his rifle for father and son to step into the cell.

"This is an outrage!" exploded Mr. Bolton.

Without a word, Diego slammed and locked the door behind them.

Bill, who feared that a show of resistance might cause the men to separate

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him from his father, cut in upon his parent's fury.

"Hey, you, Diego!" he called.

Diego stopped and turned round.

"Speak English?" Bill pressed his face against the bars and stared at the man, who exhibited no sign that he understood.

"My Naval Academy Spanish won't pass muster, so I reckon it must be English," continued Bill ruefully. "Anyway, I'll take a chance. Look here, Diego. Bring my father and me something to drink—something cool and wet—with ice in it if you can—and I'll make it all right with you when the boss learns who we are and lets us go. If I'm talking too fast for you to follow, I'll say it all over again.

How about it, my lad, do you get me?"

A sour grin spread over Diego's none too prepossessing visage.

“Youse an’ yer ole man go blow yer tops!” he replied in the best Bowery argot. “Whadda yer take dis joint for—de Waldorf?”

He spat his contempt on the filthy floor and passed out of sight.

“You never can tell when you’ll run into home-folks,” said Bill with a smile at Mr. Bolton.

Bill’s father looked hot and desperately weary. He spoke in a dejected tone.

“I admire your cheerfulness, son, in this trying position. But if you will desist from buffooning the situation, it would be a relief to me. Of course, I realize our arrest is a mistake. And the owner of this island will surely make amends as

soon as I tell him who we are. In missing that conference in Miami last night, my entire business interests were jeopardized. If I can’t get there before those men leave for the North, you and I, boy, are liable to suffer a heavy financial loss.”

Bill tossed his jacket on the dirty floor and sat down with his back to the

wall. “Thanks, Dad—but I guess you know I’m not playing for admiration. I

realize the seriousness of this mess we’re in just as fully as you do. And one thing I do believe: we’re going to have to shell out plenty of cash in a very little while, if you let the ‘boss’ over at the big house know you’re Bolton of the Bolton Sugar Corporation!”

His father looked at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I believe,” went on Bill, “that this is going to be a hold-up game from start to finish. If we haven’t dropped into the winter hangout of some Chicago beer

baron or New York racketeer, I’m a ground hog!”

“Mmm—ransom, you mean?”

“I do. I shouldn’t be surprised at anything after meeting Diego and his

bullying pal. Any man who would hire a couple of gunmen like those fellows is

sure to be a bad egg. And we're getting a taste of his generous hospitality right now. Of course, I don't know what his particular game is, but it's bound to be something pretty low. When he finds out you're a power in the business world,

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he's sure to bleed you."

"I dare say you're right," his father returned gloomily. "I'll have to keep my identity hidden. By thunder!" he slapped his knee in vexation. "The man

knows *now*, exactly who I am. Those villains took my wallet! My cards and some valuable papers were in it, to say nothing of the currency I carried, though he can have that and welcome."

"Tough luck, Dad—I never thought of that. Now we are in for it. Ugh! I wish those birds would bring us a drink. My mouth hurts, it's so dry."

"Filthy place, this—what with the stench and the heat—One of these days I'll make it even hotter for the man who is accountable for this!"

"Sh!" cautioned Bill. "Here they come!"

Diego and the other man came into sight between the bars. Diego unlocked the cell door.

"On yer way!" he barked. "De big boss wants ter look youse over."

"Anything's better than this hole," observed Mr. Bolton, and picking up his coat he preceded Bill out of the cell.

"Mebbe—and mebbe not," said Diego's partner, and they both chuckled hoarsely.

"How about some water to drink?" inquired Bill.

“Do I look like a soda fountain? Tell yer troubles to de boss. Servin’ drinks ain’t my job.”

The sun’s heat was terrific out on the road, and the glare was blinding. All wind from the sea was cut off by the valley, and the very trees seemed to shimmer under the broiling rays.

They passed several other buildings which looked like barracks and warehouses, but saw no people. If there were any, they remained indoors.

“This is a sweet place to pick for a winter home,” gasped Bill, mopping his streaming forehead. “The thug who runs things here must be a darned cold-blooded guy.”

“Very probably,” returned Mr. Bolton, “but the place, though hot, has its advantages, if he is what we surmise. It is quite out of the world, and except from the air, no one would guess that the island is inhabited.”

“Home at last,” remarked Bill after a few minutes, as they turned up the incline toward the white house on the knoll. “Thank heaven there’s a bit of a breeze up here. Whew! This bird certainly lives in style!”

The road swept up through beautifully kept flower gardens to the front of the house, which appeared to be a really huge mansion. Wide verandas surrounded the rambling building on three sides, and the cream stucco walls contrasted pleasingly with the dark green of its tile roof. Money had been spent here with a lavish hand. The place looked cool and inviting. The Boltons wondered

what it would hold for them.

They were led into a spacious hall, panelled in mahogany. Here again, the Persian rugs scattered over the polished floor, the fine wood and carving of the furniture, and a number of excellent paintings on the walls, all bespoke the hand of wealth.

Bidding his prisoners remain where they were, Diego crossed the hall and knocked at a closed door.

“Come in,” called a man’s voice, and Diego disappeared into the room, closing the door behind him.

Bill started to make some comment on their surroundings to his father, but their other guard growled at him to keep quiet. Then Diego reappeared and beckoned them into the room.

This large apartment was handsomely furnished in the manner of a business office. Behind a huge, flat-topped desk sat a fat young man dressed in immaculate white linens. Blue-black hair and an olive complexion bespoke his Latin origin. Two other young men, clad also in white, and bearing a strong resemblance to the man at the desk, lounged in wicker arm chairs. All were smoking

long black cigars.

“And what, may I ask, is the reason for this outrage?” began Mr. Bolton, walking up to the desk. “Is it your custom to have visitors to this island treated like criminals and thrown into jail?”

“It is,” the fat man remarked blandly, without removing the cigar from his lips.

Bill's father was taken aback by this unadulterated candor, but neither by manner nor change of tone did he betray his surprise. "How much do you want to let us go?"

The man at the desk knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Why, it's not a question of money at the present moment, Mr. Bolton.

That will undoubtedly come later. Just now, my brothers and I have need of you in other ways."

"You mean that we are to be kept here as your prisoners?"

"You have guessed the secret, Mr. Bolton. And my advice to you and to your son is to do exactly as you are told, without argument or question. Strangers on Shell Island have always found that to disobey commands here is a particularly unhealthy pastime. Obey on the jump—is our slogan. I hope for your sakes that neither of you forgets it." He smiled at them affably and puffed on his cigar.

Mr. Bolton was about to speak his mind when Bill caught his arm. "Stow it, Dad," he said. "That lad has us just where he wants us. I'd like to say what I think, too,—but what's the use?"

Their host waved his hand and their guards led the Boltons out of the house.

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Once on the road, tramping back toward the settlement below, Mr. Bolton passed his arm through Bill's.

"Your Naval Academy training has put a head on your shoulders, son," he said affectionately. "You have developed better control of your temper under stress than I have. I'm glad you stopped me. Ordinarily a man of my position in

the world is in the habit of speaking his mind when provoked.”

Bill nodded. “One of these days,” he said grimly, “I’m going to get that fat slob in there—and when I do, there won’t be enough left of him for the state to burn. What’s his game? Have you any idea?”

Mr. Bolton shook his head. “Not the slightest glimmer. It doesn’t appear to be a case of ransom—or at least, not just yet. Whatever he is up to is obviously illegal. But we’ll probably learn about it before long. The man is an educated criminal. His actions prove it. Our position is certainly serious—very serious.”

“I vote we make a stab at getting out of that cell tonight,” suggested Bill. “If I can get hold of our bus or one of the other amphibians, we’ll get clear of Shell Island in short order.”

“We’ll spend the day thinking up a plan of operations,” agreed his father.

As they came into the settlement, Diego tapped Bill on the shoulder. “Come along with me, guy,” he ordered. “Not you—” he snarled at Mr. Bolton as he started to turn out of the road with his son. “Back to the lockup for yours!”

“Good bye, Dad, and good luck,” Bill called as Diego’s partner herded his father down the road.

“Good luck, and keep a brave heart,” answered Mr. Bolton.

He called out something else, but Bill could not catch the words, for Diego had him by the arm and forced him through the doorway of the barracks before which they had been standing.

He found himself in a large room where thirty or forty men quite as villainous-looking as his guard were lounging about, smoking, sleeping or playing cards. Diego hurried him through this apartment, and down a bare

hallway

to the open door of a small room. Bill saw that except for an unpainted table and a chair of the kitchen variety, the place was empty of furniture. Over the chair a coarse cotton shirt and a pair of cotton trousers were draped. Leg-irons and a pair of handcuffs lay on the table.

“Strip!” Diego pointed to the chair. “Them’s your clothes, guy. Get into ’em.”

“How about wearing my own?” Bill was fast losing his temper. Only the rifle which Diego held pointed in his direction prevented him from sending a right hand jab to the point of the thug’s chin and taking his chance with the others in the room beyond.

“Nuttin’ doin’, bo—” snarled Diego. “Dem’s de boss’s orders. Make it snappy. We gotta get out o’ here right away an’ I want to pin de jewelry on yer.”

“Where are we going?”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere—but you are—” He grinned evilly at the lad—“youse is goin’ ter be took fer a ride.”

CHAPTER IV—THE INVITATION

Diego gave vent to a raucous laugh after making this announcement. He walked across the room, leaned his rifle against the table, and picking up the handcuffs inspected them critically. His prisoner was unarmed and too far away to offer an assault before he could snatch up his gun again. He did not fear Bill physically.

But many people misjudged that slender body with the broad shoulders. The young midshipman was not yet seventeen; nevertheless he was star right end on

the Navy team and as strong as a steel bridge. Now he saw his chance and took it.

Bending down as though to untie the pair of rubber soled sneakers he wore,

Bill suddenly half straightened and his lithe form shot through the air. Before Diego could drop the handcuffs, one hundred and sixty pounds of bone and muscle struck him just above the knees and he crashed over backward beneath a

perfect tackle. The unexpected jar and shock half-stunned him and before he

could gather his faculties, Bill's fist, backed by the venom of a sorely tried temper smashed him behind his left ear. All lights went out for Diego, gangster and gunman, right there.

Bill scrambled to his feet, ran to the open door and peered out. The corridor was empty. He closed and bolted the door and after a moment's thought, he approached the unconscious gangster.

Five minutes later, a young man clad in cotton undershirt, ragged cotton trousers and rubber soled sneakers stepped through an open window on to the

wide veranda which ran along the side of the barracks. On the young man's head was a floppy broadbrimmed hat of straw. He carried a rifle. The owner of these articles lay on the floor behind the window, quite oblivious. When he came to

again, he would find his wrists manacled behind his back, his right leg chained

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to the table, and a gag in his mouth. As Bill Bolton walked swiftly along the veranda, he conjured up the pleasing picture of Diego's awakening, and grinned.

With the hat's brim pulled well down and acting as a partial screen to his

features, he ran down the broad wooden steps and out to the road. Not a soul

was in sight. Then suddenly his heart missed a beat.

“Hey, you! Where you goin’?” called a voice from the porch behind him, and a man he had not seen before ran down the steps. Just then a large handbell was rung somewhere within the building.

“Come in and get yer chow,” called the man.

Bill felt that he would certainly cause suspicion if he refused to obey this suggestion. Moreover, he was thirsty and half famished. So he walked back to the steps.

“I reckon you’re one of the new hands on the yacht,” observed the man.

“That’s right,” admitted Bill.

“Thought so, when I seen yer beatin’ down toward the harbor just afore dinner time. The boss feeds us swell here. Has to, with this gang to look after. Men get easy discontented in a sweatbox like this here island. How’s the grub aboard the *Pelican*?. Useter be pretty bad.”

“I’ve eaten worse,” said Bill.

“Well, come along in and feed here today,” turning back up the steps with him. “It’s a hot walk along that shell road, and I’ll need yer to help herd some of them prisoners down there later on.”

Bill followed him into the building. This time he found the large room deserted, and passing through a doorway to the right, the two entered a big hall, down the middle of which ran two long, narrow tables.

The men were already seated at dinner, and nobody paid the slightest at-

tention to the new arrivals. Bill's companion took his place at the head of a table and motioned the lad to a vacant seat just below. A pitcher of what proved to

be lemonade was within Bill's reach. He filled and emptied his glass three times before he began to feel refreshed. A slatternly negress placed a plate piled high with fried chicken, rice and fried plantains before him and he dug into it with the relish of a starved man.

"Reckon the *Pelican's* chow ain't so good, the way you tackle yer dinner,"

laughed the man at the table's head.

"If they have fried chicken aboard, it never gets for'ard of the cabin," Bill grinned back. He knew that his identity might be discovered at any time and planned to make the most of the meal while he could.

"I run the commissariat and the men here at the barracks," his new acquaintance informed him. "Y' got to feed 'em right to keep 'em contented. The boss is liberal. 'He knows his oats. Bum chow makes fer fights and knifin's in this

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climate."

Bill nodded and kept on eating. A man further down the table raised his voice above the clatter of cutlery on dishes and the hum of conversation.

"Did you hear about the two guys that blew in here on a plane this morning, Tom?" he asked the man at the end of the table.

"I sure did," laughed that person. "I guess they didn't know what they was bumpin' into when they hit Shell Island. You guys won't have to take so many trips to the mainland if suckers come here of their own accord, eh?"

The laughter became general. The men apparently enjoyed the joke.

“Where are they now?” inquired another.

“Tony and Diego’s got them over to the calaboose. They was up to the big house and Martinengo looked ’em over. It’s Bolton, the sugar millionaire, and his boy.”

“The boss could squeeze a bunch o’ kale outen that pair!”

“But then he’d have to let ’em go,” said Tom. “And that would blow the gaff. He’s shippin’ them up to the workin’s this afternoon with the rest of the bunch.”

“I bet there’ll be a holler raised, when old man Bolton doesn’t show up at home,” observed a voice far down the table. “That gang’s got influence and friends. Yer can’t cop a millionaire without runnin’ into trouble.”

“That’s where yer all wet, Zeppi,” called down Tom. “Bolton’s influence won’t count him nothin’ with the Martinengo boys; and his friends will think he’s dead. Went down with his son in the blow last night. There won’t be no comeback. The two of ’em will be dead soon. The workin’s ain’t no health resort.”

“I’ll say they’re not,” returned Zeppi. “Martinengo wouldn’t get me to stick ‘round that dump—double pay or no double pay.”

“Oh, yes, he would—and on the jump,” Tom contradicted. “You’re a new man, Zeppi. Y’ got a lot to learn, and the first thing is that the boss don’t ask—he orders—and so do I. Them what tries to make trouble is put on the spot. Get me?”

Tom turned to Bill. “Some o’ these boobs don’t know when they’s well off,”

he remarked genially. "What do they call yer, young feller?"

"Bill," said Bill. He finished the last bit of his food and poured himself another glass of lemonade.

"Well, Bill, if you hike back to the *Pelican*, that bo'sun will put you to swab-bin' decks or somethin'. I need you later and I'll fix it up with him. You go into the bunk room and turn in with the rest of this crew. Gotta take yer rest now—the bunch o' you'll be up all night."

Bill saw that he had no option but to obey, so when the men left the table

he went with them. His plan had been to go to the jail, overpower Tony and

release his father. They would then make for the harbor, take his amphibian or one of the others moored in the little bay and fly away. Now he realized that he

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must conform to circumstances as he found them. Nobody knew that he was not

what Tom took him for, a deck hand on the yacht *Pelican*. If only Diego were not discovered, he would make another sortie in an hour or so, when the men were

deep in their siesta.

No sound came from behind the closed door to the room where he had

left the gunman, lying gagged and bound, as he trooped down the hall with the

rest. The rear of the long corridor opened into a huge, airy apartment which

ran the full width of the building. Screened windows opened on to verandas on

three sides. The room looked like a hospital ward, with its long rows of cots.

At the head of each bed was a wooden chest with a padlock for the owner's

belongings. A single sheet and a blanket were folded at the foot of the bed, under

the pillow. Everything was neat, and evidently kept in the orderly arrangement of a military barracks. Framed signs on the four walls read, "Silence—No Talking."

Tom, though seemingly a genial soul, ruled with an iron hand.

Bill spread his sheet on the cot pointed out to him, and placed his pillow at

the head of the bed. Then he kicked off his sneakers and lay down. Except for the sound of breathing and the buzzing of a bluebottle against a window screen, the place was absolutely quiet. It was hot, notwithstanding the ventilation, but the cot was comfortable, and try as he might, Bill could not fight off the drowsiness that assailed him.

He awoke with a guilty start to the loud clang of a ship's bell and sat up on

his cot. The hands of the clock on the wall opposite marked five o'clock. He had slept four hours.

"I reckon you had a good snooze by the look of them eyes o' yours," re-

marked a jovial voice and Bill looked up to see Tom standing at the foot of the bed. "Make it snappy, now," he continued. "Take yer gun an' wait fer me on the front porch. I'll be along in a minute and I'm puttin' you on the detail that's goin'

down to the harbor with them boys in the calaboose."

Bill nodded and slipped into his sneakers. He jammed his hat on his head,

and picking up his rifle, hurried from the room. He was angry with himself for having fallen asleep, and now that he had the chance, he meant to take it. Tom, when he came out, would not find him on the veranda. Bill made up his mind to

beat the detail over to the jail and to follow out his original plan of rescuing his father and making their getaway before the men arrived.

He passed down the hall and on through the lounge room, and was running

lightly down the piazza steps when a voice hailed him.

“Hey, youse! Where d’ you think yer headin’ for? Didn’t yer hear Tom tell yer to stick around with this detail until he came?”

Bill stopped and looked back. The man called Zeppi was leaning over the railing. Behind him ten or a dozen men were lounging in various indolent attitudes and laughing at this diversion. Bill saw that they all carried rifles.

“I guess youse ain’t been round dis dump long,” Zeppi was still speaking.

“Let me tell yer, kid, t’ain’t healthy to disobey orders, ‘specially Tom’s. He’s a soft-speakin’ guy, Tom is—but I seen him shoot three guys in the last three weeks fer doin’ no more than you done just now. Get up on this porch before he shows up, if yer ain’t tired o’ livin’.”

Bill hid his disappointment and chagrin and ran up the steps.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m half asleep, Zeppi. I didn’t think where I was going.”

“Okay with me, kid. I’m fair sick of seein’ guys put on the spot fer nuthin’

at all. Just remember that when yer told the *porch*, don’t go out in the road, or anywheres else, when they’s Tom’s orders.”

“Who’s talkin’ about me,” gruffed Tom from the doorway. “Oh, it’s you, Zeppi! Well, what’s the trouble now?”

With a sleight-of-hand motion, he jerked an automatic revolver from a holster under his left armpit and covered the man.

“Okay, Tom.” Zeppi dropped his rifle and raised his hands above his head.

“I was just tellin’ the kid here that he should shake a leg when it come to takin’ your orders, or—”

“Oh, *that* was it, eh?” Tom cut him short and put away the gun. “Sorry, Zeppi—I

come near drillin' you. I'm always a bit rough after a sleep—must watch myself. We're losing too many men. Get into line, you bozos," he commanded,

"follow me by twos—march!"

Bill fell in beside Zeppi, who winked at him. The party clattered down the steps and started along the white road at a smart pace. He felt much as a man might who is being led to execution. His only hope was that Tony would remain inside the jail and that the detail would not be forced to enter.

When Tom turned into the place, motioning the others to follow him, Bill's usually optimistic spirits fell. Tony was found pouring over a *Police Gazette*, his chair tilted back against the rough plaster wall.

"Hello, Tom," he greeted, raising his eyes from the pages. Then his chair came down with a crash and he sprang to his feet.

"What's that feller doin' wid you, Tom?" he cried. "What's he done wid Diego?"

"What feller? What you shoutin' about, Tony?" growled the barracks boss.

Seeing that the game was up, Bill rested his gun against the wall and stepped forward.

"It's me he's talking about," he said. "I'm Bill Bolton."

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CHAPTER V—TAKEN FOR A RIDE

The barracks boss stared at Bill in undisguised amazement, while the others

fingered their rifles. Slowly a twinkle came into the man's eyes and he broke into a roar of laughter.

"When it comes to cast-iron, dyed in the wool *nerve*?" he choked, "you're sure a winner, Bill—Bolton! I took a fancy to yer when I first laid eyes on yer and I'm sorry for yer now. If I wasn't," he shot out venomously, "I'd certainly put a bullet in yer carcass. The joke has been on me, all right—now it's on you. If you bumped Diego off, the boss'll put yer on the spot. Them's rules. What did yer do with him?"

"He's lying in the room over at the barracks where he was about to handcuff me and put me into a pair of leg irons. He's wearing them now, or was when I left him."

"Did you bump him off?"

"No. His jaw may be broken where I socked him—otherwise, I guess he's O.K."

Tom took half a cigar from his pocket, thrust it into his mouth and chewed steadily for a minute or two.

"Well, you're a smart kid, Bill," he admitted, "but not quite smart enough for this outfit. Got the keys to them cuffs and leg irons?"

Bill handed over the keys without a word.

"Zeppi," Tom ordered, "trot up to the barracks. Let that fool Diego loose and bring them things here." He tossed him the keys and Zeppi hurried away.

"You men," continued Tom, "go back to the cells with Tony and bring out them guys. Not old man Bolton, remember. Martinengo ain't sendin' him along

with this batch. Take 'em out the back way and line 'em up in the road till I come.

That's all—beat it!”

Tony and the detail trooped into the corridor, closing the door behind them.

Tom ejected a stream of tobacco juice on to the floor.

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“I don't know as how I can blame yer,” he said to Bill. “You're in a bad way, kid, and I reckon you know it.”

“What about my father? Will Martinengo have it in for him because I tried to get away?”

“Naw—the boss is hot on discipline, but he'll enjoy the joke, seeing as how nobody except Diego is the worse for it. That mug is sure to have a sweet time explaining but youse two won't get strafed. The workin's is bad enough punishment. He'll let it go at that.”

“What are these workings you're all talking about, Tom?”

The man shook his head. “You'll find out soon enough,” he returned evasively. “Here comes Zeppi. Orders is orders, and you gotta get into that hardware.”

Bill was handcuffed and his ankles were locked into iron bands on either

end of a short chain. This made walking possible, but scarcely comfortable, since he could not take a step over a foot in length. He shuffled out of the jail, accompanied by Tom and Zeppi, to find a group of twelve men in chains like himself, lined up by the roadside. Tom gave the word and the party and its guard filed off down the road toward the harbor.

From his place at the rear of the line Bill studied his fellow prisoners. They were a nondescript crew, negroes, Indians (Seminoles, from the Everglades, he thought) and poor whites. All were dressed as he was. They were dirty and unshaven, stumbling along quite evidently dispirited and hopeless.

The atmosphere was stifling and the white shell dust stirred by the tramping of many feet set them to coughing. Bill tried to show a brave front to his guards but the utter hopelessness of his position, the uncertain future and the separation from his father made him feel desperately blue and discouraged. He trudged along in the blinding dust and heat, almost praying that his troubles might be ended with a bullet.

But when they topped the rise and began to follow the zig-zagging road down the cliff, the sight of blue water below cheered him considerably. It was cooler out of the valley, and he somewhat regained his spirits. He spotted his own plane, moored out in the bay near the yacht *Pelican*. Tied up to the concrete pier was the larger of Martinengo's two amphibians, a tri-motor plane of huge dimensions.

The shambling party drew closer and he saw that she was constructed with a windowed cabin forward to house pilots and passengers. Aft of this and having a separate entrance was a large freight hold. When carrying a capacity load, he fancied that her weight must be terrific. Now, with her retractible wheel landing gear drawn up to the metal covered hull, the big flying boat rocked gently at her mooring. A mechanic tinkered with her central engine. Two young fellows in

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smart white uniforms and gold-banded caps, who were smoking cigarettes on the wharf called a greeting to Tom as the party arrived. Bill realized that they must be pilot and assistant pilot of this craft. A short gangway led across from

the pier to the freight cabin entrance and over this Bridge of Sighs the clanking prisoners were herded.

The interior of this large compartment of the air cruiser may have been

originally designed for carrying freight. Bill now found that the remodeled hold served quite another purpose. At right angles to the entrance, a narrow corridor ran lengthwise down the middle of the cabin. Opening off this were tiny wooden cubicles with just enough space behind their barred doors for a man to sit on the narrow bench which served as the sole article of furniture in each tiny cell. The place reminded Bill of the eighteenth century prison hulks about which he had

read. Light and air were let in through iron barred portholes and Bill was glad to find that the cell that housed him contained one of these small windows. By squeezing sideways on his seat, he got a restricted view of the bay.

Presently the door to the prison hold was shut and an armed guard took

his seat at one end of the cell corridor. A few minutes later, Bill heard the engine idling and they floated away from the dock. The hum of the three motors soon

increased to a roar and they started to taxi toward the mouth of the harbor.

Trained aviator that he was, Bill Bolton knew the exact instant that the

pilot lifted his heavy bus on to her step. There came an increased spurt of speed, as the plane skimmed the surface of the bay and rose into the air with the smooth grace of a bird taking flight.

Her nose pointed toward the western horizon she sailed over the heads at

the harbor's mouth, gaining altitude every second. When she reached a height

which Bill, staring out of the porthole, judged to be about a thousand feet, her pilot banked sharply to starboard. Again she swung back on an even keel; and

now with throttle wide open the big flying boat roared into the northwest.

Bill saw that the round red orb of the sun was perhaps still an hour above

the horizon. He craned his neck and the sea near at hand became visible. It looked smooth and calm. Here and there low islands, the dark green of their vegetation contrasting with the bluish green of the water, dotted the silken surface of the bay.

Bill straightened on his narrow, uncomfortable seat. Rather than stare at

the poor fellow in the cell opposite, who was weeping, he closed his eyes. But this did no good, for he conjured up the dreadful picture of his father in the stifling calaboose on Shell Island.

Twisting round again, he sought relief from troubled thought in the view

from his tiny porthole. They were traveling overland now. Fifteen or twenty

miles away, he could make out the sea's dim outline. But what interested Bill

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far more was the nature of the country below. Innumerable water-courses in-

tersected a dense cloak of dark green foliage which seemed to be banded with a somber red along the waterways. Then as the plane's pilot dropped her nose,

seeking to avoid the increasingly strong headwind, Bill caught the sickening stench that he remembered so well.

"Mangrove!" he exclaimed aloud, his voice drowned in the roar of the en-

gines. "We're over the mangrove swamps of Florida, south of the Everglades!

That red line along the banks of the streams—exposed roots, of course."

He watched the swamp for some time, wondering what the pilot would

do if a forced landing became necessary, and thanking heaven that the motors seemed to be running smoothly.

Then the amphibian sailed over wide water again. "Whitewater Bay, on

a bet,” thought Bill, who remembered his map of Southern Florida. “Chuck full of mangrove islands, too. If I’m right, we’ll cross a strip of mainland soon, and if that pilot keeps to this north-by-west course, we’ll be over the Ten Thousand Islands in fifteen or twenty minutes!”

Bill’s guess was a good one. The bay gave way to swamp once more, and then they shot out over a weirdly beautiful stretch of water, studded again with countless islands. He knew now that the plane was paralleling the south-western border of the Everglades—that huge, swampy basin on the southern Peninsula which covers an area much the same as Connecticut. But unlike the populous New England state, the only human inhabitants of the Everglades are a few hundred Indians who thread its lonely water-paths in primitive dugout canoes.

Evidently the plane’s pilot did not intend to cross the Everglades. They were still heading north, but the amphibian’s nose had been swung to starboard.

By the time they left the Ten Thousand Isles, Bill realized that they were traveling a point or two east of north. Could it be that they were making for those dark, watery woodlands known as the Big Cypress?

Bill had heard about the Florida Cypress Swamps, and knew them to be a trackless labyrinth of swamps, lagoons, creeks and low, fertile islands, all deeply buried in the shadows of a mighty cypress forest. Twilight was deepening over the earth now, as the red ball of the sun sank below the horizon. Bill thought he could just discern the first outlines of the big trees; then all was dark, and the amphibian roared on into the maw of black night.

He continued to gaze into the darkness. Perhaps fifteen minutes later, his vigil was rewarded by the sight of a pinpoint of red light far ahead and slightly to the left of the speeding plane. It was soon evident that the pilot recognized this signal, far below in the wilderness. The light disappeared from Bill’s view, and

he knew the reason why. The plane's nose was now headed directly for the light and therefore it was out of range from his porthole.

Down there in the trackless swamps of Big Cypress, someone was signalling the amphibian. Could this be their destination? Had they reached "the workings" that the men on Shell Island mentioned with such obvious loathing?

The big bus tilted forward and down. The three motors ceased to function and Bill knew that the plane was about to land.

CHAPTER VI—OSCEOLA

Bill was conscious of the amphibian's upward swing as she leveled off preparatory to landing. Her tail dropped slightly and a second or two later she was gliding through smooth water propelled by her own momentum.

Electric lights flashed in the prison cabin, illuminating the place with blinding suddenness and making it impossible to see further into the black night outside the porthole.

The plane's momentum decreased and she stopped with a slight jar. Orders were shouted. Men called to each other to pull on this rope and that. Then the door to the cabin swung open, the prisoners trooped from their cells, and marched up a gangway on to a large wooden dock.

Lanterns glowed in the darkness. Bill caught a glimpse of black water, then he found himself shuffling along a narrow corduroy road with the rest. Great trees arched intertwining branches overhead and cast an even deeper gloom on their path. From time to time the swaying lantern of a guard cast its beam on

gnarled trunks covered with creepers which reared upward from black water.

There was the rank stench of rotting vegetation in the humid air. Before Bill tramped the log road twenty feet, he was wringing wet with perspiration.

They swung to the right and up a sharp incline, halting before a high stockade. Thick plank doors in the wall of tree-trunks opened inward and the party entered the enclosure. Here arc lights on high wooden standards flooded the

yard with brightness. Numerous one-story buildings were set about a large open square of hard baked earth. So far as Bill could see there were no trees within the stockade, nor had any attempt been made to beautify the place. Most of the buildings were of unpainted boards, although the squared logs of several of the largest proved them of more solid construction.

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Few people were about. The enclosure was as bare and uninviting as a military training camp. It was toward one of the log buildings that the prisoners were hustled. A guard unbarred an ironbanded door and they were thrust within the building. With a clang the door slammed and at last the band from Shell Island were left to their own devices.

Bill looked about him. The only light came from the arc lights' rays which shone through barred windows set high in the four walls. This meager illumination cast the place into somber twilight. Their new quarters consisted of a not too roomy, barn-like, rectangular space, the peak of whose slant roof was lost in the shadows overhead. The terrific heat, the reek of perspiring humanity added to the rank odor of the swamp was almost overpowering.

As Bill's eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom, he soon discovered that the newcomers were to have plenty of company. Dark figures sprawled

in all sorts of attitudes on the damp earthen floor. Most of them seemed sunk in the slumber of exhaustion. A few talked in low tones as though the humidity had sapped all vitality from their voices. From a dark corner came the uncontrolled sobbing of a man in agony.

Bill picked his way over the huddled bodies toward one of the posts in the middle of the room, that helped to support the roof. The clanking chain that connected the ankle cuffs impeded his progress, caught on a projection and sent him headlong on top of another figure crouched on the ground near the post.

“Sorry!” apologized Bill, hauling himself off his victim. “I certainly didn’t—”

“No harm done,” replied a pleasant, though languid voice.

Bill leaned back against the upright and crossed his legs.

“Decent of you to take it that way,” he observed.

“Too much effort to fight,” remarked the unknown with surprising candor.

“This beastly place saps one’s pep. After you’ve been here a while, you’ll feel that any unnecessary effort just isn’t worth while. Came in just now with that new batch, didn’t you?”

“That’s right—how did you guess it?”

“You’re still carrying the iron-ware. Those beasts will take it off in the morning. They always leave you weighted down the first night.”

The man’s voice was deep and resonant. He spoke with the accents of education which prompted Bill to continue the conversation.

“My name is Bill Bolton,” he said, by way of a starter.

“Not Bolton, the Naval Academy end?”

“You *are* some guesser!” Bill’s tone showed his surprise. “I made the team last fall; but how did you happen to place me that way?”

“I played against you in the Carlisle game last year. I’ve got a number now,

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but before I came here I was Osceola, Chief of the Turtle Clan of the Seminole Nation.”

“Carlisle’s All-American half back! I remember you now—I should say I do.

How in the world did you get here?”

“Pretty much the same way we all do. I was kidnapped. And the worst of it is that now these devils have got us, there’s no possible chance of escape.”

“What is this joint, anyway?”

“You mean you’ve no idea what you’re in for?”

“Not the foggiest.

The men on Shell Island spoke of ‘workings’
somewhere—”

“These are the workings, Bolton—gold workings.”

“But I thought I was in Big Cypress.”

“You are.”

“But—surely you can’t have a gold mine in the middle of a swamp!”

“There you’re wrong. Martinengo not only has a gold mine, and a most profitable one, at that—he also runs suction dredges.”

“How come?” Bill was intensely interested.

“The rock floor of the Everglades and these cypress swamps is usually found at a depth not exceeding six feet; but in some places it is twice that far down,” replied the young Seminole chief. “There is gold in the rock below the swamp near here. Martinengo has workings in that rock.”

“Coffer dam?”

“Yes, a coffer dam has been built to keep the water out. The rock near the top is fairly soft and that is probably why the muck on the bottom of the swamp hereabouts contains gold. The colors or particles of the metal run very fine, but they are profitable to mine. At least Martinengo finds it so. For that work suction dredges are used. Oh, you’ll get better acquainted with the whole business soon.”

Bill said nothing for a minute or two. Presently he observed: “What I don’t understand yet, is why Martinengo kidnaps people and keeps them prisoners in this horrible place.”

“Because,” Osceola answered slowly, “the mines are made doubly profitable by using slave labor.”

“What!” exploded Bill, leaning forward.

“Slave labor, my friend. And you and I are two of the slaves. It is cheaper for that gangster Martinengo and his brothers to kidnap negroes, Indians and poor whites than to hire miners. The work is terrific and the climate frightfully unhealthy. These devils would have to pay a very high wage to legitimate workmen. As it is, we don’t live long, here. What with long working hours in a climate that approximates a Turkish bath, the cruelty meted out by the overseers, starvation rations, the general filth and the hopelessness of our position—well, two or

three months of it is about as long as the average man can stand. Swamp fever, snake bite and other diseases usually cut the time shorter.”

“It’s deadly.” Bill’s voice, when it came, was very low. “And to think that

this is going on in the United States of America! Surely, though, the government will eventually put a stop to it?”

“Maybe,” returned Osceola apathetically, “but it isn’t likely that you and

I will live to see it. If the federal government has done anything to break up organized crime that’s terrorizing the country, I haven’t heard of it. By the way, how did these people get hold of you?”

Bill told him, and ended by stating his worries concerning his father.

“Martinengo probably means to get money out of Mr. Bolton before ship-

ping him over here. He’ll never let him go free, no matter what he may promise.

If the secret of Shell Island ever leaks out, it means an end to Martinengo’s profits here.”

“Were you taken on the Island?”

Osceola laughed contemptuously. “I was a fool, Bolton. My ambition since

I was a small boy has been to do something for my people. Once we were great

warriors, today we are a degenerate, ignorant race. White man’s fire-water and lack of education have made us go backward while the rest of the world has progressed. I meant to educate myself first, and when I had acquired knowledge,

I felt I would then be fitted to take up my task. So I went to school and won a scholarship at Carlisle. I still have two more years to go there before graduation. Shortly after the summer holidays began this year,—I had gone back to my people—I took my gun to bring in some waterfowl.

“Well to cut the tale short, I ran into a man-hunting gang of Martinengo’s.

They pretended they were lost and I offered to lead them back to Whitewater

Bay. I suspected nothing. They took me off guard, carted me over to Shell Island with some other poor fellows—and eventually I was put to work here.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Six weeks ago yesterday. We Seminoles stand it better than the others.

Most of us are fever-proof, probably because we have lived in the Everglades for generations.”

“Haven’t you tried to escape?” Bill asked him, and voiced the thought that had been uppermost in his mind ever since he left Shell Island.

“I’ve thought about it,” the young chief admitted, “especially when I first came here. Everybody does, I suppose, but the thing is next to impossible. Trackless swamp all around—it would be sure death to face it without a boat or canoe.

And even if a craft of some kind could be obtained, you would starve to death.

About a month ago, two men escaped but they were caught and brought back.”

“Punished?”

“They were.”

“What happened to them?”

“Condemned to two hundred lashes apiece with an overseer’s wirewrapped whip. We slaves were forced to witness the—execution.”

“Execution!”

“That’s what it amounted to. Both of the poor chaps were, mercifully, dead before the first hundred lashes could be administered. Human flesh and blood couldn’t stand it. The whips these beasts use cut a man to ribbons. We all get a

taste of it, no matter how hard we work. I have no shirt any more. You'll see my back in the morning."

For a long while the two lay there on the filthy earthen floor without speak-

ing. Most of the weary souls had found a temporary relief from their troubles in slumber. Except for the sound of their uneven breathing the place was still as a tomb. Through the barred windows came the occasional sound of a splash

where some denizen of the great swamp slipped from a gnarled root into water, and once the scream of a bird sent echoes reverberating through the night.

Bill came to a decision.

"I'm going to take the first chance that offers," he whispered.

"Chance to escape?"

"Yes, Osceola. This hopeless slavery is worth any risk."

"I believe you are right—but think! Even if you can escape the guards, you will certainly die in the swamps."

"Not if you will come with me?"

"But even I, who know the ways of swamps, can't guide you to safety without a canoe—and there is absolutely no chance of securing one."

"I've got the germ of an idea," said Bill, "It still has to be worked out in detail. Also, it will, of course, depend on whether I am put to work on a dredge, or underground."

"You'll work on a dredge," affirmed Osceola. "We all do in this prison house."

"Good! And I am going to put the plan to test just as soon as I can. To-

morrow, if the opportunity offers. *Will* you join me?" Bill's tone was deadly earnest.

"Any death is better than this living one," replied Osceola in a voice that matched the former's.

"Then—it's a go?"

"You bet it is!" whispered the Seminole, and the two, after sealing the bargain with a handclasp in the darkness, lay down again on the hard ground and fell asleep.

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CHAPTER VII—THE ATTEMPT

The first faint rays of morning filtered through barred windows and there came a rattling of locks on the prison-house door.

"Up and out, you lazy dogs!" shouted a harsh voice.

The overseer's whip cracked, bringing forth a scream from a weary wretch near him.

The slaves got to their feet and shuffled out of the evil-smelling place. Two of them, however, remained slumped on the floor. The overseer turned them over with his foot, then realized that these two would slave no more. He muttered a curse and followed the others into the square.

Here under the supervision of extra guards the slaves were drawn up in line. Bill, and the party who had arrived with him were unshackled and the woebegone crew was ordered to march on again.

Along the side of the square they stumbled, halted again at an open shed

where a ship's biscuit and a small crock of water were handed to each man as he filed past. The line of slaves swung round toward their prison house. Back there once more, they sank to the ground and partook of their morning meal.

Bill noticed that files of other slaves were being herded out of buildings on the farther side of the square, toward the food shed.

"Knock the maggots out of your biscuit and soak it in the water," advised

Osceola, who was seated beside him. "You won't find it fit to eat otherwise."

Bill made a grimace. "I can't eat this filthy stuff, Osceola. Why, it's crawling with the beastly things."

"You'll get nothing more until one o'clock when we knock off for an hour,"

returned his friend. "And at that the ship's biscuits are better than the mess we get at noon. If you don't eat, you'll pass out in short order. Make it snappy, too—they don't give us much time."

Bill nodded and after ridding the biscuit of as many worms as he could find,

gulped down half of the tepid water in his crock and dunked his breakfast in the remainder. While the stonelike substance was softening, he studied the young

Seminole chief. By daylight, Osceola proved to be a tall, rangy fellow, with the

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finely cut features and the high cheek bones of his race. Like most of the slaves, he wore nothing but frayed trousers and Bill saw that his red-bronze back was

crisscrossed with ugly welts from the lash.

When the biscuit was soft enough to eat, Bill crunched it between his teeth

and forced it down with the rest of the water. The evil mess gagged him in spite of his hunger, but he could not afford to starve and lose his strength. By the time he had finished, the slave gang were ordered to their feet again.

Down to the shed they marched, and after depositing their empty water crocks on a table, they were crowded over to the wall of the compound. An overseer, armed with shortstocked whip and automatic revolver unbarred the double doors of the stockade and swung them inward. The guards, armed like their leader, took their places on either side of the long line, and two by two the slaves moved forward on to the corduroy road.

This time, instead of going down toward the lagoon and the dock where the amphibian lay moored, they turned off on a side road. This wound through the swamp between great cypresses whose dark green foliage was intertwined with the lighter green of vines and air-plants, and other parasites. Exposed roots of the trees, interlocked with the roots of their neighbors, looked like giant snakes twisting in and out of the muck and water. Though the sun was but half an hour high the steaming swamp seemed to sap every ounce of Bill's vitality, and with it, the last shred of that hope to which he clung so desperately. In the cavernous gloom of the forest, the vile stench of rotting mangrove was nearly overpowering; and as they plodded on, the heat grew more and more oppressive.

The log roadway was never more than ten feet wide, and sometimes, where it was built to run between two mighty trees, it was even narrower. It wound an uneven passage through the swamp, until about a mile from the stockade, it came out on a lagoon, dotted with cypress-covered islands. Here, sunlight brightened the long stretches of open water, and Bill saw that lovely orchids bloomed on

many of the trees, and that the matted upper branches of the cypresses were brilliant with masses of flowers. Then a black blob on a root near the road uncurled itself, one of the guards tossed a stick and a huge snake slid into the water.

The roadway extended along the lagoon's edge for half a mile. Though it

ended abruptly at this point, Bill saw that preparations were in view to extend it further.

“Those are the gold dredges,” affirmed Osceola, indicating three hulks which looked like crosses between coal barges and canal boats. “Those big funnels at the ends, sticking into the water, are the suction pipes.”

“How do the dredges work?” Bill inquired as they drew nearer.

“They are driven by stationary steam engines,” explained the young Chief.

“Muck and water are sucked up from the lagoon’s bottom, then forced through

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screens and allowed to flow in shallow streams over wide inclined surfaces called tables. These tables are corrugated in such a way that all heavy substances in the silt, like fine particles of gold, are caught in the channels and washed down on to the blankets, while the lighter stuff passes over the side.”

“A bit too technical for me,” said Bill. “What are blankets?”

“I’m not much on mining, but here, blankets are just what they sound like.

They are covered with quicksilver to which the gold particles become attached.

Later the quicksilver is washed from the blankets, and the gold taken from it by some process I don’t know about. I may have missed a few details—probably

have. I’ve only worked on the dredges three days.”

“Then we aren’t *all* gold-miners?”

“Oh, no. Slaves do all the work of the camp. At present, some of the strongest of us are extending this road farther along the lagoon. But we’ve arrived—stop talking now, for it means the whip, during working hours.”

The line halted opposite the dredges moored to the bank, and a certain number of the slave gang were ordered aboard. Axes were passed out to others, who went on board flat-boats and poled out toward the young growths of the cypress islands.

Bill hoped that he would be one of this number, for, with an axe in his hands, many things might be possible. Instead, when his part of the line moved up to where the head overseer was issuing directions, the man pointed to a stack of iron wheelbarrows. After taking an empty barrow apiece, the two friends trundled them in a long line of barrow men down a planked incline to the muck heap formed by the gold dredges. Men with shovels were already stationed here and Bill found that with the impetus of the guards' whips behind them, each man had his barrow filled with mud and rubble in less than no time.

As soon as his own was filled he trundled it up another series of planks to the roadway. Along this the continuous stream of sweating barrow-pushers led him to the end of the road. Here, under the direction of overseers, the loads were dumped into the virgin swamp. It looked to Bill as though the black water would swallow up all the mud they could carry and more, but before many trips had been completed, he could plainly make out the progress of the roadbed.

Soon the labor became a back-breaking, seemingly endless grind. Never once was the weary, sweating crew given a chance to rest. At the slightest lagging, the overseer's wirebound lash descended upon the defenseless back of the transgressor. Loads were heavy and the strain on little-used muscles was terrific, especially on the stretch of planking from the incline up to the road. Before an hour had passed, Bill ached in every limb. Blisters quickly formed on his perspiring hands; he felt dizzy and sick.

All at once a red hot iron seared him across the back and shoulders, and

with a yell of pain Bill sprang forward. From behind him came the guard's warning:

"Snap into it, y' lazy hound—or I'll cut your liver out!"

To retaliate would be suicidal. The man carried an automatic besides this

fearful, wirebound cowhide lash that laid open the bare flesh with every stroke.

Bill's anger blazed at the cowardly blow, but at the same time his hopes of escape sank to lowest pitch. What could unarmed men do against these beasts?

An uprising of all the slaves would be practically an impossibility, quartered as they were in separate prisons. He also began to understand that even the uprising of one prison-house gang was not to be considered. By the end of the day,

these worn out men were sure to be apathetic to any such proposal. The fearful punishment meted out for failure would stop all but the most courageous from

joining a concentrated revolt against their masters—the slim chances of success would deter the others.

Bill discarded all thoughts of such a plan. If he and Osceola were to escape,

they must go it alone. Yet how could it be accomplished? He was still cogitating the matter, when the head overseer raised a police whistle to his lips and blew a sharp blast. Barrows and shovels were immediately stacked and the men lined

up for their noonday meal.

This time a greasy mess of vegetables and small pieces of rubber-like meat

were ladled on to wooden platters from a barrel on wheels. With this went a

slab of stale bread and a crock of water. The stew, if it could be called that, was lukewarm and so rancid as to be almost uneatable. But Bill wolfed it down, following the others' example, only sorry that no more could be had.

The gang ate their dinner squatting on the corduroy road, and as soon as

they had finished, most of the toilers fell fast asleep.

“They prepare this mess for us once a week,” Osceola informed Bill. “Today is Thursday, and by Saturday the heat has soured it to such an extent that hungry as we are, we leave it alone. No man’s stomach can hold it then.”

Bill finished his bread and the last drop of his water.

“I should think it would pay Martinengo to feed us better,” he muttered wearily. “No wonder the men die off quickly, forced to such labor and under-nourished this way.”

“It costs him little to kidnap new slaves,” grunted the Seminole. “All supplies have to be flown here by plane from Shell Island. But I’m too tired to talk, Bill. Better get what rest you can—the afternoon is always worse than the morning grind.”

He stretched out on the logs of the roadway, and a couple of minutes later, his regular breathing told that he was asleep.

Bill lay down, too, but his aching muscles, the smart of his back where the guard’s lash had cut the flesh, and his blistered hands made slumber an impossibility. Myriads of buzzing, stinging mosquitoes added to his discomfort and he was not sorry when the overseer’s whistle brought the men staggering to their feet again.

Instead of a wheelbarrow, now, Bill and Osceola were given shovels for the afternoon’s work. At first, Bill welcomed the change but soon found that it was quite as arduous as the morning’s toil. There was absolutely no let up. As soon as one barrow was filled, another took its place. The wet mud was slippery, the mosquitoes by the water even more tenacious. He began to feel that death was

preferable to endless days of this kind of thing.

To make matters even worse, the overseer in charge of the shovelers used his lash without mercy at the first sign of flagging. Bill felt its burning pain several times during those hours, as did every other man on the muck-heap.

The woodcutters returned late in the afternoon and began carting their logs up the incline where they were dumped on the mud at the end of the corduroy to solidify the foundation of the extended roadway. The tree trunks were heavy and the men so weak that it took eight or ten of them to carry a single log.

Slowly the sun sank toward the western end of the lagoon and Bill knew that within five or ten minutes they would be forced to knock off for want of light. Then Osceola slipped in the muck and fell flat.

Before the poor youth could get to his feet, the overseer's lash felled him again. But instead of desisting in his cruelty, the man continued to rain blows on the prostrate and half-unconscious body of the Indian.

This was too much for Bill. As the wicked lash descended for the third time, he dashed toward the guard and swinging his shovel like a club, brought it down on the man's skull. The overseer dropped in his tracks and Bill helped Osceola to his feet.

"Follow me," he shouted, "it's now or never!"

Osceola, half dazed, ran with him through the crowd of amazed workmen to the far edge of the muck heap. There came two splashes as the lads dove. Revolvers barked, men shouted orders and the lagoon's glassy surface was churned with bullets.

CHAPTER

VIII—WHAT

HAPPENED IN THE SWAMP

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The water closed over Bill's head. The shock of the plunge put new heart into him and he struck vigorously out keeping well under the surface. His plan was to make for one of the small islands of the lagoon, trusting that oncoming darkness would cover his escape. What he would do after reaching the island must depend upon circumstances.

The green depths of the lake were surprisingly clear. He could see myriads of small fish dart away as he forged ahead. Then a long dark body swept alongside of him. Osceola's sinewy arm caught him by the shoulders and swung him round to the left. The Indian swam ahead, keeping parallel with the bank, his actions showing Bill that he wished him to follow.

By this time, Bill's lungs were nearly bursting and his head throbbed with the strain of remaining under water. Feeling that he must have air or drown, he turned on his back and rose, careful that no more than his nose and mouth appeared above the surface. Two or three life-giving breaths, and he sank again, with the muffled sound of revolver shots in his ears. After another spurt under water in the direction indicated by Osceola, he came up to the surface again, sinking as soon as he had filled his lungs with air.

Rising for the third time, he was surprised to find the young Seminole at his side. Osceola was floating with his head just above the water.

"It's safe to stay up now," he murmured. "Make no sound—and follow me."

The Indian turned on his side and glided forward with the speed and silence of an otter. Bill understood that a splash might be fatal in advertising their whereabouts, and followed in his wake. Though a strong swimmer and a fast one, he could not keep up with the Chief.

Then the sun, already low on the horizon, sank out of sight. Osceola's sleek head disappeared under the canopy of overhanging boughs that lined the lagoon's swampy shore. Soon Bill glided beside him, into the deep shadow under the branches, and although he could not see his friend, he heard his low voice.

"Give me your hand, Bill. We've got to get out of this. They will come here when they find no sign of us in the lagoon."

"Lead on, old sport," answered the white youth. "You're a better man than I am if you can navigate in this gloom."

"Oh, I've got eyes like a cat," chuckled Osceola. "Come on now—there are roots below us—stand on them."

Bill found a foothold on the slimy roots and hand in hand they scrambled out of the water. Osceola led him round the base of a huge tree and onto the sprawling roots of another forest giant.

"This is the one—I've had my eye on it ever since we've been working this end of the lagoon. There's a cleft in the trunk, about thirty feet up that will hold us nicely."

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"Mmm—after we get there!" was Bill's unenthusiastic reply.

“Oh, that’s not so difficult. There are plenty of vines.”

Bill followed Osceola a few steps round the trunk, then felt his hand touch a thick stem that clung to the bark of the tree.

“Follow that straight up,” directed the Seminole. “I’ll go ahead, for I can see.”

“I wish I could,” said Bill. “I’m as blind as a bat in this darkness!”

“You’ll get accustomed to it,” Osceola assured him. Then Bill’s hand was released from the Indian’s grasp and he heard the other moving upward. “Follow me,” he went on, when he was just above Bill’s head, “and if you get into trouble, grab my foot until you can find a toehold.”

The thick stem of the vine proved a comparatively easy means of ascent, and especially so to an Annapolis midshipman. Up he went, hand over hand, his rubber-soled shoes gripping the bark’s rough surface.

“Here we are,” said Osceola’s soft voice presently, “give me a hand—that’s right. Now step in here and squat down. Not so bad, eh?”

“Could be a lot worse,” agreed Bill, finding a seat next to his friend in the wide cleft. “If those guys can’t see any better than I can in this murk, they’ll have a time locating our hideout.”

“They’ll have torches to give them all the light they need,” replied Osceola.

“But they’re not counting on their eyes to find us.”

“Listen!”

Across the swamp sounded the deep bay of a dog.

“Bloodhounds?”

“They keep four of the brutes in kennels over at the stockade.”

“Think they’ll be able to track us?”

“I doubt it. We were walking on roots under water until we started to climb.

Of course we left a trail up the tree trunk, but the hounds are not likely to scent it.”

“Then you think we’re O.K. for a while?”

“We can’t stay here forever. When daylight comes, the guards can spot us easily from the end of the road. This tree isn’t more than thirty yards from there.”

“The question being—where do we go from here?”

“Well, where do we go! We’ve got neither food nor a boat. What with snakes, alligators and other pleasant companions, we won’t get very far on a hike through the swamps. You spoke of a plan some time ago. How about it?”

“Just a germ of one,” sighed Bill. “It needs working out—but with luck you and I will be able to get away from this vile place and go pretty much where we like. It all hangs on whether we can—”

“Hush!” warned Osceola. “They’re coming this way. Look over your shoul-

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der!”

Bill did more than that. He twisted round in the niche and stared into the black opaqueness toward the corduroy road.

Lights, twinkling pinpoints of red, dotted the black night in wavering clusters which advanced along the road. And again the damp, lifeless air was burdened with the deep-throated cry of bloodhounds.

“Those lights will discover us if the searching party leaves the road and comes over this way,” whispered Bill.

“There’s only one thing to do,” admitted his companion. “And we’d better do it now.”

“What’s that?”

“Crawl out on one of these branches and lie flat. You take that one nearest you and I’ll lie on the one that parallels it. Don’t move if they come underneath us. Some of those guards have ears like their hounds.”

Bill had no difficulty in performing this feat, for the branch was thicker than his own body and he wriggled along until he lay fifteen or twenty feet from the trunk of the tree. His eyes had at last grown used to the inky darkness of this forest in the swamp. Peering down through the heavy screen of foliage and vines, the gnarled roots, underbrush and stagnant water below became dimly visible.

To the left, possibly ten feet away and slightly above him, was the branch on which his Indian friend lay. Of Osceola he could see nothing, but he heard the Seminole’s muffled warning as he twisted his body to get a better view and in doing so, cracked a twig.

The lights of the searching party were steadily moving nearer. For a few minutes they seemed to hesitate at the spot where the road ended. Then they came on again and he could plainly hear the dogs splashing noisily about in the

swamp. Still nearer—and the glare of pine torches made it possible for Bill to see that the party were poling canoes—three of them. The flares lit up the swamp,

sending weird shadows here and there as the canoes advanced.

“Them dogs is tryin’ t’ climb in this here canoe,” sang out a rough voice.

“There ain’t no scent on th’ water fer them t’ follow.”

“Let’s go back, Pete,” argued another voice, “if dose guys is in dis swamp dey’ll have t’ stay put till mornin’. Den we can catch ’em easy.”

“Sez you!” returned Pete with a snort. Bill recognized his surly voice as that of the overseer he had felled with his shovel. “Them two can see in daylight just the same as us. An’ one of ’em is an Indian, don’t forget. They’s round here somewhere now an’ with sunup, they’ll hike it.”

“Oh, yeah?” sneered the other. “They ain’t got no boat nor grub. What’s de use of rustlin’ in here now, Pete? Them hounds ain’t no good. What we need is water-rats.”

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“Shut yer trap—and step on it with dat pole!” Pete’s ire seemed to be at the boiling point. “Long as I’m bossing this job, we goes on—see? You bums is pushin’ yer faces into de wrong picture when yer bumps up against me. Scram now—an’ *shut yer traps!*”

Bill held his breath. The canoes were now directly underneath the spreading branch of the cypress where he and Osceola lay hidden. He hugged the limb close, praying that the blazing flares below would not disclose his whereabouts

to the trackers.

Suddenly a sharp hiss sounded in his ear. Thinking that Osceola wished to attract his attention, he turned his head toward the neighboring branch. To his horror he saw a huge snake lower its long black body from the branch above.

The reptile's furiously hissing head was not over a foot from his face. Disturbed by the lights, the angry creature was bent on attack!

Bill clung frozen to his branch. If he moved, the men beneath the tree would be attracted by the sound, and would probably sight him at once. Far better a swift death in the gloom of the cypress than slow torture for Osceola as well as himself if they were discovered.

All this shot through his mind with the speed of light. Then a branch cracked, there came a swishing sound through the air and the snake slid downward, missing him by inches. He saw Osceola draw back the stick with which he had lashed the moccasin, and the air was rent with a terrified scream from below. Peering down, Bill saw a horror which he would never forget. Twined around Pete's throat and head was the viper that a moment before had nearly caused his own death. The frenzied overseer leapt shrieking to his feet and lurched into the water. The canoe capsized and its two other occupants were precipitated into the swamp with their leader.

For several minutes, bedlam reigned. Dogs barked, men shouted hoarsely, their yells awakening the forest birds whose cries of alarm echoed and reechoed throughout the night.

Pete's companions splashed aimlessly about in the muck and water for a

time, then with the help of the other two crews, their canoe was righted and they climbed aboard. The overseer's body did not come to the surface.

"Youse guys can do what yer like," declared one of the dripping men when the uproar had subsided, "Me—I've had enough. I'm goin' back."

"I'm wid ye," agreed a voice from one of the other canoes. "Let's fish Pete out an' go home."

"Say! If youse expects me ter wade round in this muck, lookin' fer a stiff, wid dat snake ready ter bite and plenty more of 'em in dis here swamp, youse got another think comin'——" snarled the first man with profane emphasis. "Dis baby's goin' to catch some sleep before sunup—er somebody else is goin' on de spot 'long wid Pete. Hey dere, bozo—turn dis boat round. I want t' get me feet on solid ground again before sumpin else falls outen de trees ter croak a guy!"

Grunts and shouts of approval greeted this lengthy speech. The canoes headed back toward the road. The trackers, by common consent, were through for the night.

When the lights of the party had disappeared in the distance, Osceola spoke to Bill.

"Come back to the niche on the trunk. Those chaps are off till morning.

We've got to plan, now."

Bill scrambled backward along his limb, and found Osceola before him at their perch. He grasped the young Indian's hand and wrung it.

"You saved my life, Osceola! I thought I was a goner. Some day perhaps I

may be able to show you that I appreciate what you did for me.”

“Oh, that’s all right!” Osceola’s voice showed his embarrassment. “And you did more than that for me on the muck heap this afternoon. Pete’s out for good now—and I must confess I’m not sorry.”

“Here, too.—You spoke of plans just now. Got any?”

“Not a single idea—but what about yours?”

“Well, I was tired and sleepy a while back. Couldn’t think. But that snake woke me up—and how!”

“What are you thinking of?”

“That we wait here for an hour—then hike over to the compound.”

“But—you mean—to give ourselves up?” Osceola cried in astonishment.

“Give ourselves up—nothing! I’m going to get us out of this rotten cypress swamp for good and all. But to get away from here we’ve got to go back there first.”

Osceola grunted. “What you are saying probably means something to you—to me it is as plain as mud. Sounds like a minstrel gag. Tell me, Mr. Bones, when and why we must go in there in order to get out of here!”

Bill laughed for the first time since his arrival at the workings.

“You’re a sketch, Osceola! But I guess you’re right. My plan in a nut-shell is just this. You may not believe me, but if we live, you and I are going out of here by plane—and I’m going to fly it. Do you see now?”

“The amphibian is here, all right,” affirmed the Seminole. “She won’t fly

back to Shell Island until tomorrow. But there's no stealing her, young fellow.

First, she's locked up tight. Second, she's too well guarded."

"Just so," Bill declared, grinning in the darkness. "But my plan is not to steal the *plane*, you know."

"What then?"

"Steal the pilots, my hearty!" This time Bill laughed outright.

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CHAPTER

IX—WHAT

HAP-

PENED IN THE COMPOUND

"How about it?" asked Bill an hour later. "Time to travel?"

"I guess those lads behind the stockade should be pretty well off to bye-bye

by this time," yawned Osceola, getting stiffly to his feet. "In more ways than one, I hate to leave the shelter of this good old tree. It certainly has proved a help in time of need!"

Bill likewise stood up and balanced himself on their airy perch in the dark-

ness. "Well, I can see your point," he answered, "but I'm not getting sentimental about it. Ever since that filthy snake poked his nose at me, I've been waiting for his wife or brother or sister to drop on me. I can't see in the dark like you. So the sooner we make the road, the happier I'll be."

Notwithstanding the urge that prompted Bill to hasten, it took the two

some time to reach the corduroy road. Osceola took the lead. He seemed to have no trouble in discerning obstacles quite invisible to Bill. At the base of the tree,

he caught his white friend's hand, and after a few words of caution, started forward.

To Bill the trip seemed endless. They had not gone far when he lost all sense of direction. Along slimy roots, first above and then below water, they made their way. It was impossible to pierce the inky shadow under the trees. If it had not been for Osceola's uncanny power, half instinct, half sight, Bill would have floundered into the soft mud of the swamp and been sucked down into the ooze. How long the journey took, Bill could never figure out when later he thought about it. The actual distance was not great, but the time taken to travel it seemed years.

"Here we are," exclaimed Osceola at last. "Step on to that log, and be careful.

It runs up the side of the dump at the end of the road."

Bill felt with his foot in the darkness, touched one of the tree trunks thrown down to act as road ballast. A scramble up the steep incline followed, the Indian still guiding him by the hand, and they were standing on the corduroy.

They were now no longer under the forest canopy and above their heads

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the heavens were studded with stars. Without a word, the youths broke into a trot. Fifty yards from the stockade gates they halted. There came a whispered conference, and then two dark figures entered the shadow cast by the trees and crawled forward along the roadside.

Just before they reached the gates they turned to the right. Following the log wall, they continued to creep on until they arrived midway between two of the flood lights which illuminated the compound. These were placed on high poles, perhaps ten feet above the twelve-foot stockade.

Bill grasped more firmly the short, thick stick he carried, and placed his mouth close to Osceola's ear. "Lucky Martinengo never thought that prisoners might want to get *into* this place, rather than break out of it," he whispered. "If those lights faced this way, we'd sure be out of luck."

The Seminole grunted a low assent.

"Stand with your back to the wall," Bill continued, "and give me a hand up.

When the guard comes along, I'll bean him with this club. Then I'll pass him over to you."

"Okay. But after you drop him over, get on this side of the wall again, while

I'm tying him up with the creepers. One of those devils inside is likely to spot you, otherwise."

"Good idea—I'll do that. Ready?"

For, answer, Osceola got to his feet and walked over to the stockade. Here he turned, placed his back against the wall and made a stirrup of his clasped hands.

Bill stuck the club into his waistband and a moment later was standing on

his friend's broad shoulders. Up went his hands and he chinned himself to the top of the wall. A broad sentry-bench ran along the inside of the stockade. Lounging with his back to the logs, sat a guard, every feature of his unpleasant face made plain by the blazing floodlights.

Bill lowered himself onto Osceola's shoulders and leaned forward.

"He's sound asleep!" he whispered tensely.

"Fine. We'll leave him alone, then. Get an arm over the top and stand by for my weight when I hoist myself up."

Bill obeyed and the Indian caught his leg. Then came a moment of severe strain—and Osceola clung to the wall at his side.

Up and over they went together. Bare feet touched the sentry-bench, tiptoed to the edge and the lads disappeared beneath it. They had reached their first objective in less than two minutes.

Safe for the moment from outside observation, Bill followed Osceola as the young Indian skirted the wall in the deep shadow below the sentry-bench.

No word was spoken. Each knew exactly what he must do, and kept his mind
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focussed on that performance. True, the first part of their plan was working out far better than they had expected, but the second and third stages of their enterprise were far more dangerous. Although they were elated by their success so far, neither was overconfident.

Osceola stopped short and pointed to a building that stood possibly twenty yards away. Smaller than most of the houses, it was a bungalow, with wide verandas extending round the entire structure. It was shingled, and topped with a low-eaved roof of attractive green tiles. The contrast between this comfortable-looking dwelling and the barn-like quarters of the slaves was as pronounced as day and night, or the contrast between home and prison. Bill had not slept in a comfortable bed for some time. Then and there he determined to finish out the rest of the night in that bungalow!

Between the sentry-bench and the house there was no shelter of any kind.

Floodlights streamed down on the hardbaked clay of the compound, bringing every rut or small unevenness of the surface into clear relief. Moreover, the ground was within the direct line of vision of the sentries.

“Do we crawl—or make a dash for it?” hissed Osceola.

“The sooner, the quicker. We’re more likely to attract attention moving fast, but we’re harder to hit!”

The Seminole nodded. “Ready if you are.”

“Let’s go!”

Together they sprinted across the open space. Each moment Bill expected the drilling pain of a rifle bullet between his shoulders, and it took considerable will power not to crouch and slacken his pace. Their naked feet made no sound at all on the hard earth and rather less than a second later, the two vaulted the veranda railing and sank down behind it.

Certain that so far their presence within the compound had not been discovered, Bill got to his feet again. With Osceola at his heels, he crossed the piazza to a screened door, pulled it open and entered the house.

They found themselves in a kitchen where a gas stove stood in one corner, across from a large sink. Polished pans and cooking pots hung below long shelves stacked with cans of food, packages of cereal and the like.

“Too bad we can’t help ourselves to a meal,” whispered Osceola. “I’m famished, aren’t you?”

“Sure am. But come on now, when we’ve finished the job ahead, it will be time to think of food. I prefer starving a bit longer—it’s one better than dying by the lash! Through that door is our way. Quiet! if those lads in there wake up before we want them to, you and I are out of luck.”

Osceola opened the door indicated by Bill and they slipped through it, clos-

ing it softly behind them. They were now in a hall which ran forward bisecting
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this part of the house. There were two open doors on their left. Bill pointed to the nearer and they tiptoed to the sill.

Thin rays from the floodlights filtered in through half open blinds. By this dim light Bill and Osceola made out the figure of a man sprawled on a cot by the window. A small bureau, two straight chairs, a wardrobe trunk and grass matting on the floor completed the room's furnishings. On one of the chairs lay a small pile of clothes; on the other, close to the head of the bed was an automatic revolver and a gold-faced watch.

Osceola passed like a shadow across the intervening space and grasped the gun. Bill closed the door to the hall. Neither made the slightest sound. Then Bill nodded to his friend. Osceola promptly kicked the side of the cot and the sleeper awoke to find himself looking into a blue-black muzzle.

"One peep out of you and I'll blow your head off!" remarked the Indian in a low, dispassionate voice. "Turn on your face and put your hands behind your back."

A single glance into his captor's eyes was enough for the fellow on the bed.

Those smoldering fires of pent-up hate won the battle before it was begun. The young man hastened to comply with instructions.

Bill came over to the bed and while Osceola continued to cover their prospective prisoner with the automatic, he tore a sheet into long strips. With these the fellow on the bed was scientifically bound and gagged. Then the two friends moved on to the next room.

In there, exactly the same thing happened. Ten minutes after entering the

bungalow, Bill and his Seminole friend were masters of the place.

“I don’t suppose this house has a cellar,” mused Bill. They were in the kitchen, preparing a much needed meal.

“Not a chance,” said Osceola, from the stove. “You’ll strike water a foot down anywhere in this compound. Haven’t you got those cans of corned beef open? This skillet is piping hot.”

Bill tossed him the cans, placed a bowl of eggs within reach of the cook and commenced to slice bread.

“I asked, because we’ve got to stow those aviators somewhere. Perhaps the joint runs to an attic. That will do just as well.”

“Well, we’ll find a good place for them,” replied the Seminole, intent on his cooking. “Confound them! These aviators of Martinengo’s live like kings. A

house to themselves, all kinds of good things to eat, and we poor devils pigging it a stone’s throw away!—Better break open some more of those cans. I see toma-toes, corn, asparagus and cherries on that shelf. Let’s sample them all. I haven’t had a decent meal, let alone half enough to eat for weeks. How about it? Have

you got an appetite?”

“*Have I!*” Bill began opening the other cans and dumping their contents on plates which he placed on the kitchen table. “I’ll tell you one thing and that is, we eat the rest of this as is. I can’t wait for cooking. Bring over that skillet of eggs and corned beef. I’ll get the coffee. The smell of this stuff has turned me ravenous!”

Half an hour later, the two lads drained the last dregs of their coffee and grinned sleepily at each other across the table.

“Some feed!” Bill yawned and raised his arms above his head. “I bet we’ve got away with three days’ rations. Gosh! One more crumb and I’ll bust! Do you think it’s safe, now, to turn in? I could go to sleep standing up.”

Osceola rose slowly to his feet. “Of course it’s safe, Bill. I wouldn’t take a chance—not at this stage of the game, you know.”

“But how about the lad who cooks for our aviator-friends? He’ll mosey along here in the morning, and when he finds *us* sleeping here, there’ll be the devil to pay!”

“Oh, no, there won’t! I know the man who acts as their servant, luckily enough. He’s a sort of trusty—been here a long time—but he is locked up in our prison house every night. That chap is just as keen to get back to his home and his people as we are. There won’t be a peep out of Sam. Our worries will begin again when we leave this place in the morning——But sufficient unto the day _____”

“Good enough!” enthused Bill, also leaving the table. “That being the case, I vote we put the careless aviators in a good safe place. Then me for bye-bye P.D.Q.!”

“If you think,” grinned Osceola, “that *I’m* going to stay up and wash dishes ...” he yawned, “you’ve got see-vee-rial thinks coming!”

CHAPTER

X—WHAT

HAPPENED IN THE MORNING

“Eight o’clock, suh! A fine hot day—an’ yo’ baf is runnin’.”

Bill opened his eyes and stared upward from a soft pillow into the grinning

face of an ancient negro.

“Ise Sam. Reckon Marse Osceola done tell yo’all ‘bout me. Yessuh—yo’ baf

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is runnin’.”

Bill stretched and sat up in bed. “Pinch me, Sam,” he yawned. “Did you really say ‘bath’—or am I still sound asleep?”

“No, suh, yo’ sure is awake, Marse Osceola has just got out o’ the tub. He done tol’ me to wake yo’all.” The old darkey seemed a bit flustered. “Ef yo’ll kindly tell me how yo’ likes yo’ eggs, Marse Bolton, I’ll go on in de kitchen and dish up breakfast.”

“Sam,” said Bill, springing out of bed. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, and your voice is music. Lead me to that bath you mentioned, and lead me quick. Real soap and clean water! Gee—it’s wonderful!”

“An’ de eggs, suh?”

“As long as they are fresh and there’s plenty of them, you cook them any way your heart desires.”

“Yessuh—I will, suh. De bathroom’s through dat door over yonder.”

Thirty minutes later, two spruce young fellows in freshly laundered uniforms of white duck met at the breakfast table in the dining room of the bungalow.

“Is it really the wild Seminole chief, Osceola?” grinned Bill as he stood and gazed admiringly at his friend.

Osceola grinned back at him. “It sure is,” he laughed and took his seat at the table. “They tell me that clothes don’t make the man, but—well, I’d never have known you for the chap I said good night to a few hours ago.”

“I feel like a million dollars!” Bill unfolded a snowy white napkin, while

Sam filled his coffee cup. “Rest, good food and decent clothes, not to speak of a bath, sure do make a difference. These uniforms fit as if they’d been built for us, too.”

Osceola nodded. “These white shoes I’ve got on pinch a bit, but even so, I’m probably a darn sight more comfortable than the lad who owns them. It must be getting pretty hot under the roof by this time.” He motioned toward the ceiling.

“They’ll be found and released later on,” said Bill, his mouth full of buttered toast. “In fact, I’ll leave a note on the table here, when we go, telling where we’ve hidden them.”

“They don’t deserve it,” returned Osceola, “but you’re the boss. Do as you like about it.”

“What time is the plane scheduled to shove off?”

“She generally takes the air about ten. We’ve plenty of time.”

“O.K. We’ll finish breakfast, then I’ll write the note, and we’ll go down to

the dock. I want to get to the plane early. A helmet and goggles for each of us will be a grand help to this disguise. What’s worrying me is the getting down

there. If the guard at the gate happens to know those lads upstairs, and smells a

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rat, things are likely to become rather unpleasant.”

“They are,” said Osceola with conviction. “If we are stopped, there’s nothing for it but to shoot our way out and beat it down to the plane. Maybe we’ll make it and maybe we won’t—— Anyway, we’ll have lived like human beings again for a few hours—and that’s something!”

“You’re right there, old man!” Bill pushed back his chair. “Come in here, Sam,” he called. Then as the darkey appeared through the swinging door, “How’d you like to take a hop, Sam?”

“Oh, suh,—if you on’y could take me with you!” The old man’s voice was husky with excitement and longing.

“If we go, you go,” declared Bill.

“God’ull bless yo’all for dis, Marse Bolton. ‘Deed he will. I done give up all hope o’ seein’ Lize an’ de chilluns long ago. I——”

Bill stood up and clapped him on the shoulder.

“That’s all right, uncle. If things go as we hope, we’ll all be seeing our folks soon. Go into the room I slept in. There’s a suitcase in there, and there’s one in the other bedroom, too. Pack them with anything you please, and follow us down to the dock with both bags when we leave here. Carry them aboard the plane and forget to come ashore. I’ll find a place you can stow away, never fear.”

He cut short the old darkey’s thanks and sent him hurrying off to pack.

Then, after rummaging about, he found paper and pencil. A moment or two later he tossed the note he had written on to the table, for Osceola to read.

“I don’t suppose there’s much of a chance we’ll have the bus to ourselves?”

“Hardly. She only runs three times a week and from what I’ve heard, there

are always passengers to be taken to Shell Island. Where will you head for?"

"Miami, I guess. Any town with a police station and a jail for our passengers! But Dad and I have slews of friends in Miami, and we may need friends badly before we're clear of this business. How does that suit you?"

"It's as good a spot to land as another. I want to see this place and Shell Island cleaned out before I go home."

"Just one thing more, Osceola."

"What's that?"

"If there's trouble aboard the amphibian—with the passengers, I mean—well—I'm not coming back unless I can bring a posse."

"You'll crash her first?"

"Just that—agree?"

"Of course I agree to it. I'd a thousand times rather be dead than live the life of the last few weeks over again. If there's no other way out, crash her. That's a quick end—but to be brought back here means death by inches for both of us."

Sam appeared in the doorway, carrying a couple of suitcases. "I'se all ready,

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gennulmen, when yo'all is."

"That being the case," smiled Bill, "my vote goes for a speedy departure.

Ready, Osceola?"

"Rearing to go." He picked up his gold braided cap and clapped it on his head. "It always sets me on edge to wait—for danger."

“So you rush into battle so as to get it over with, eh?” Bill laughed.

“Something like that. To tell the truth, I think we’re both just a bit beyond ourselves at present. Let’s get out of here.” He walked to the front door and flung it open.

Bill caught up his cap and followed Osceola, with Sam at his heels.

Sun from the cloudless sky poured down on the unlovely prospect before them in a deluge of steaming, tropical heat. The compound, except for a mangy cur or two and a remarkably thin cat, was deserted. The members of Martingo’s company who were not driving his slaves in the swamp preferred the shade afforded by their quarters rather than this blistering sunlight. Presently the little party came to the closed gates of the stockade.

A man shambled out of the guardhouse with a huge key in his hand.

“Youse high-flyers certainly have the life,” he grumbled and rattled the padlock that held the gates. “Nuthin’ ter do but take nice breezy rides and have niggers to wait on you. And me sweatin’ blood ter let you in and out of this here stockade!”

He pushed open the heavy doors just far enough for one man to pass through at a time, stood aside and scowled at them.

“So much obliged, Oswald, old chap,” beamed Bill. “Sorry I’ve got nothing smaller than a demi-grand. Sam, if the worthy turn-key insists on a tip, hand him a cake of soap. He’ll smell the sweeter for it.”

He passed out of the stockade behind Osceola, with Sam grinning from ear to ear, bringing up the rear. Through the closing gates came a torrent of sizzling invective.

“Kind of risky, wasn’t it, Bill?” The Seminole waited for his white friend, then paced beside him down the winding corduroy road.

Bill grinned. “Maybe,” he admitted. “But he seemed to expect an exchange of courtesies. He’s used to getting an earful from the pilots, I’ll bet. And returning it with interest, for that matter. Well, here we are at the dock—and there’s the old bus waiting for us!”

“And nobody around yet but our own sweet selves!” exulted his friend.

“But I’m a blushing rose today when it comes to showing my lovely phiz. Me for a helmet and goggles as soon as possible. Let’s get aboard.”

They slid back the door to the cabin and passed inside. The long apartment was equipped with comfortable passenger seats, five on each side of the narrow li

central aisle. Big observation windows ran the length of the cabin, and a door at the rear led direct to the prison hold in which Bill had made the trip from Shell Island. Investigation proved that the wooden bars of the cells had been removed and piled at the farther end. Neatly stacked in bins arranged for the purpose were a goodly number of small canvas sacks. Each bag was padlocked.

Bill lifted one of the sacks. “Gold!” he cried. “Nothing else could be so heavy. The Martinengos certainly are making a fortune out of these diggings if this is a sample shipment!”

“They’ll not get a chance to lay their filthy paws on that lot if I can help it,”

said Osceola grimly. “Let’s go up front. I haven’t seen a hole a mouse could hide in so far, much less Sam. Perhaps that door with the window in it, at the other end of the passenger cabin will solve the problem.”

“I can tell you now that it opens into the pilot’s cockpit.” Bill started forward.

Upon reaching it, he slid open the door to find himself in a roomy cockpit, fitted with two pilots' seats and complete dual control of the wheel and column type. A three piece glass windshield gave such protection that Bill knew goggles would not be necessary under normal flying conditions.

"It's a swell boat," he remarked. "Luxurious devils, these slave drivers."

Osceola nodded. "Looks pretty nice to me. Certainly is a big ship. Do you know anything about her? I mean to say, can you fly this kind of an airplane?"

Bill smiled good humoredly at the Seminole's worried expression. "This bus is a tailor-made job—no stock model was ever built like this. But I can fly her all right, once I've seen that her tanks are full and tested her three engines. The man who assembled this ship knew what he was doing. There's nothing better

for commercial work than the 200 horsepower, air-cooled radial engines she's equipped with."

"I'll take your word for it, old man. But why not get busy and take off right now? If there are any passengers, they're likely to spot us for what we are. I'm not eager to shirk a fight, you know, but things are sure to become hectic when they find out we're not bound for Shell Island."

"True," said Bill. "But I reckon we've got to go through with it. Your idea's a good one, Osceola, but it just won't work. I thought of the same thing on the way down here. Cast your eye yonder, old sport. Martinengo's minions are taking no chances with pilots pulling anything phoney on their own hook!"

Both Osceola and old Sam glanced in the direction indicated by Bill. On a broad mound of earth, half way up the incline toward the stockade, the ugly nose of a field gun could be plainly seen. Beside the gun stood a sentry.

"That gun would blow this bus to kingdom come if I 'got busy'—as you call

it. I'm going to give the ship a looking-over now, but that's all, till I get word to shove off."

Osceola's face was a study in chagrin and gloom.

"You're right, of course, Bill. I'd forgotten about that gun. Tell me—what are we going to do with Sam?"

"Oh, he can stay in this cockpit. Crawl in behind the pilot's seat, Sam. Lie down on the deck, and curl up so your legs don't show. The partition will screen you from the passengers. Better hop in there now—there's no telling when they'll be along."

"Yassuh, boss, Ise a-gwine dar now. I ain't takin' no chances."

Sam wriggled into his hideaway and Bill turned to Osceola.

"Slip into that jumper and put on your helmet," he suggested. "It looks no end professional. There's nothing for you to do but sit in that seat. You can't very well put down your goggles until just before the take off. So if anyone shows curiosity, pretend to be fixing something on the instrument board. You'll find a screwdriver in the locker, I guess. That ought to help the picture fifty percent at least," he grinned, then went on—"But if you love your life, don't unscrew or tighten anything! There are some men coming down the road now. I've got an

inspection to make and then—I've got to get out on the dock and meet them."

"Can't you stick around here, get the motors started or something?" Osceola's voice was muffled by the jumper he was pulling over his head.

"I'd like to," Bill assured him. "But it would look queer and somebody would be sure to smell a rat. There'll be a guy down here to give me orders, all right. From what we know, the pilots of this outfit keep pretty much to themselves.

Here's hoping I don't run into any of their pals."

"I've got my gun handy, and you're wearing one," said Osceola pointedly, as he adjusted the chinstrap of his helmet. "If it comes to a pinch, we'll shoot it out—field gun or no field gun."

"That's the way to talk!"

Bill slapped his friend's shoulder and went into the cabin.

CHAPTER

XI—WHAT

HAPPENED IN THE AIR

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Then there came the sound of tramping on the wooden planks of the dock. Bill took a deep breath and stepped out of the cabin into the bright sunshine. He counted seven—seven men approaching him.

"Morning," he greeted affably as the leaders drew near. "All passengers?"

"All but me—fer the island," announced the man in advance of the rest, a cadaverous person with a Vermont twang in his voice. "I got too much to do round here to go joy ridin'. Guess I ain't seen you before. Funny, but I thought Thompson piloted the plane up last night."

"Not this plane, Mr.—?"

"Weed's my name, youngster. Who be ye anyway?"

Bill smiled at the matter-of-fact Mr. Weed. "First pilot of this amphibian," he answered calmly.

Several of the other men chuckled. “That’s one fer ye,” exploded one,

“what’s his moniker matter, so’s he can fly the plane?”

“That’s my business,” growled the Vermonter. “Shut yer face, Pete! You’re too goldarned mouthy!”

“Who sez so?” Pete scowled at him and laid a hand on the revolver he carried in a holster under his left arm. “Not you, you nosey hayseed—cut yer cackle and let’s get goin’. I’m fed up to the eyes with you and this stinkin’ swamp.”

He beckoned to the others to follow and the party filed aboard the amphibian.

Weed splashed the dock with tobacco juice. “Guess you must be one of them new aviators the boss has hired,” he observed in his nasal twang.

“I guess you’re right,” said Bill. “Made my first trip yesterday. Any orders?”

“Nope—no orders. You’ve got a bunch of gold aboard—be careful of it, that’s all. What’s become of Thompson? He wasn’t so goldarned stuckup as most of you fellers.”

“Search me—I’m not wet nurse to every bum pilot Martinengo hires,” Bill shot back carelessly. “If that’s all, I reckon I’ll say bye-bye and shove off. The big boss doesn’t pay me to argue with slave drivers.”

“Is that so?” snapped Weed. “Well, let me tell you, young feller, that I’m boss of this camp. What I say here *goes!* ”

“Good!” said Bill. “That’s just what I’m going to do now!”

He cast off the lines that moored the plane to the dock. Then he sprang aboard and slid the cabin door shut and locked it amid a torrent of abuse from the camp boss.

Without a word to the grinning men seated in the cabin, he went forward and into the pilot's cockpit shutting this door after him as well. With a wink at Osceola he slipped into his seat behind the wheel and after giving the plane's three engines a short test, he let in his clutch.

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The big ship, which had been slowly drifting away from the dock and the irate Mr. Weed, began to gather headway. Bill taxied her round in a wide half circle until he got her head into the light wind with a long stretch of open lagoon ahead. A slight widening of the throttle sent the big bus hurtling down the straight-away. Then Bill jerked her onto the step and a moment or two later she was in the air.

Bill climbed until the altimeter on the instrument board marked four thousand feet. Then he leveled off and after a slight bank to port, headed the big amphibian due east. Flying conditions were excellent. A light wind blew out of the southeast, but the air was smooth, without a ripple. A cloudless sky of light blue dipped to a sharply defined horizon; and near the rim of the inverted bowl the pale green of the Everglades contrasted with the darker foliage of the cypress swamps. Here and there and everywhere, lakes, lagoons and wandering streams sparkled and danced in the sun glare like uncut brilliants on a bed of green velvet.

With his free hand, Bill unhooked a headphone set from the side of his seat and adjusted it. At the same time he motioned Osceola to don the set at the other end of the cord.

"So far, so good," he spoke into the transmitter which hung on his chest. "I

don't think we'll have trouble with our passengers for a while yet, anyway. They seem to have no suspicion but what we are Martinengo's pilots."

"But you do expect trouble?"

"Bound to have it. We are off the regular course to Shell Island now. Those lads aft probably won't smell a rat until we get over the Everglades. Then they'll want to know the reason why."

"What can we do about it?"

"Stall 'em off somehow. I'll think of some gag to tell them. When we get nearer Miami, I can wire the chief of police to bring some of his men and meet the plane at the airport."

Osceola's tone was not encouraging. "I wonder," he said.

"Wonder what?"

"I'm afraid you're too sanguine, Bill. I know this type of bully and scoundrel we're up against. What is more—several of those men back there in the cabin know me—I bear the marks of their whips on my back."

"Umm!" grunted Bill, his fingers drumming a tattoo on the wheel. "They'll have to smash the cabin door to get out here. I shot the bolt when I came forward."

"But that door won't hold them if they once get going," he argued. "They'll probably bust through—stick a gun to your head and force you to fly them to the Island."

"But they won't shoot," replied Bill with conviction. "They'll know that that would mean a crash and pretty certain death."

“How do you figure that? If they don’t recognize me in this rig, they’ll think I can take over from you and fly this ship—after your lights have been put out. I tell you, Bill, we’re up against it, good and plenty!”

“I reckon you’re right,” sighed Bill, and was silent.

Presently he spoke again. “A captain should stay with his ship to the last,” he murmured, as if giving vent to his secret thoughts. “But there are exceptions to every rule.”

“What are you saying?” Osceola was puzzled.

Bill hesitated for a moment, then went on with sudden energy.

“Open the locker under this seat. There are three or four parachutes stowed away there. I saw them when I first came aboard. Pull out three of them—one for each of us. When you and Sam have got into yours, I’ll put on mine.”

“How are you going to fly the plane and do that, too?”

“Get yours on and I’ll show you.”

Osceola brought forth two of the parachutes and passed one over the seat to Sam. A motion or two from Bill gave them an idea of how to adjust the harness, and presently Osceola brought out the one for Bill. That young gentleman laid it on his wheel and began to issue further instructions.

“Place your feet on your rudder pedals, Osceola, and keep her nose pointed just as she is. That’s right. Now take hold of your wheel. No—don’t clamp onto it that way. Hold it lightly—that’s better. This wooden yoke to which your wheel and mine are attached controls the elevators, those horizontal planes on either side of the rudder—Push your wheel forward and with it the yoke—your plane flies downward. Pull back your wheel and she flies upward.”

“I didn’t expect to be given flight instruction today—”

Bill laughed. “That isn’t the half of it, boy. I’m telling you this much just so you can guide the ship while I put on my parachute. But here’s some more dope. These wheels are attached by wire cables to the ailerons, those hinged

surfaces at the end of each wing. Their function, as they say in the Air Service, is primarily to impress a rolling movement to the airplane; just as the elevators are to impress a pitching movement. You see, in flying a plane, one not only has to steer it and balance it for the roll to either side like riding a bicycle,—the plane has to be balanced for the pitch fore and aft as well.”

Osceola nodded his understanding. “I get you. Balance for the roll sideways by turning this wheel in the opposite direction from which she’s tipping.”

“Right-o!”

“To raise the nose, I pull back the wheel; to lower it, I push it forward.”

“Go to the top of the class,” grinned his friend. “You’re letter perfect, at least.”

“Good enough. But those gauges on the instrument board?”

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“You can keep half an eye on the inclinometer and fore-and-aft level if you want to; but I always think it is better to learn by the feel of the plane.”

“I’ll do my best,” asserted Osceola, intent now on what was before him.

“Good fella! Some day I’ll start giving you real flight instruction. This is

just a makeshift. Oh, I forgot—this plane is a bit noseheavy. Don’t let it worry you. Keep pulling back on your wheel as she dips. All ready to take over?”

“—Ready’s brother!”

“Okay. She’s yours. Fly her!”

With an eye on his assistant, Bill gave up the controls and busied himself with the parachute. That job completed he made sure the release cord was in working order and spoke to Osceola.

“You’re doing fine. I’ll take her back now. There’s something else I want to

say. We’ll be over the Everglades in a few minutes. And those guys in the cabin will be getting nervous. When the trouble comes, it will come fast. If the ship gets out of control—don’t stay with it—jump! And don’t forget to pull the release cord on your parachute. Pass the word to Sam and tell him to stand up. And, by the way, if I should wave a hand above my head, jump anyway—don’t wait for

me—get that?”

“You bet.”

Osceola pulled a pencil and small pad from the pocket of his jumper. He wrote a few lines and passed the slip of paper to Sam.

“Just one thing more and then we’re set,” added Bill into the transmitter on his chest. “Have your gun handy—and don’t be afraid to use it. Good luck, old skate.”

“Good luck, Bill.”

“Get rid of your phone set now. We won’t need it for the present. The cord might get tangled in things if there’s a rough-house.”

He stripped his own headgear and turned his full attention to guiding the

amphibian.

They were past the Big Cypress now, and far below lay the Everglades. This western edge of the great lake was dotted with uncounted islands, some large, some small, and all covered with a luxuriant forest growth. High sawgrass hid the water, save in numerous little channels wandering in a network, sometimes coming to a blank end, sometimes broadening into clear spaces abloom with pond lilies. This flat, rather monotonous landscape spread on and out as far as the eye could see.

Bill had decided that it would be well to head farther into the north, when he felt the vibration of a sudden jar. His head snapped round as the cabin door crashed open and two men sprang into the cockpit. Both held revolvers and behind them crowded the other passengers.

Instinctively he pushed his wheel forward, then pulled it sharply toward him. The plane nosed over and with increased momentum from the dip it shot upward at a precipitous angle. The result so far as her passengers were concerned was much as though they had been standing on the broad back of a steady circus horse who suddenly metamorphosed into an outlawed bronco—and bucked!

Losing their balance as the amphibian nosed over, the gangsters were hurled backwards by the second maneuver and landed in a sprawling heap by the door, and along the cabin aisle.

A bullet crashed into the instrument board. It had missed Bill's head by the fraction of an inch. And although he knew that the duration of his life would probably be a matter of seconds, he stuck to his post. Forward went his wheel

again, the plane leveled off and with a glance at the calm-eyed Indian beside him, he held up his right hand.

CHAPTER XII—'TWIXT WIND

AND WATER

Osceola stood up and gave Bill a questioning glance which said plainer than words—"Further directions, please?"

Bill motioned toward the lower wing section on Osceola's side of the plane, mouthed the word "jump," and patted the pull ring on his own parachute harness.

Osceola scrambled out of the cockpit onto the wing. For a moment he clung to an interplane strut and beckoned Sam to follow. Sam hurried after him, although from the expression on the negro's face, it was evident that he was terrified. Bill saw him crawl across the wing to the rear edge where Osceola stood. Then as the old man got to his feet, still clinging frantically to the strut, the Seminole, facing forward, gave a tug on his pull ring. The seat pack parachute bellied out behind him and he disappeared from sight.

At the same instant, Bill felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and the blue-black muzzle of an automatic was pushed into his face. Instinctively he leaned forward to dodge the gun. The wheel went with him, and bucking like a frightened cow pony, the big plane shot into a nose dive.

This maneuver sent Bill's antagonist sprawling onto the wooden yoke to

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which both wheels were attached, forcing it forward as far as it would go. The gangster's head smashed into the instrument board and he lay inert. Himself

thrown forward by the amphibian's dive, Bill caught at the seat to save his own

head. The man's unconscious body prevented any manipulation of elevators or

ailerons. The plane was beyond his control, and racing earthward with wide open throttle at a hair-raising rate of speed. He must save himself if he could: within a second or so the big aircraft would be but a twisted mass of burning wood and metal flaming in the swamp below. Luckily, the pilot's cockpit had no roof. Bill dragged himself on to the back of his seat, which, now due to the plane's almost vertical position, had become a small, horizontal platform. With a hand on the pull ring of his parachute pack, he dived head first over the cockpit's cowl into the open ether.

The approved types of parachutes are the manually operated free type. A

"free" type parachute is one that is complete in one unit, strapped to the person of an aviator by a suitable harness, and one that has no attachments whatever to the aircraft. A "manually operated" parachute is one that will unpack automatically when the wearer gives a slight pull on the ring located in a readily accessible place on the harness. The aviator can open his parachute just when clear of the disabled airplane or he can make a long free drop away from burning wreckage

or a pursuing enemy plane before he pulls the ring.

And this is why Bill did not pull the ring on his manually operated, free

parachute before diving out of the amphibian. Should the body or air bag of the chute come in contact with the plane, he would naturally crash with it.

Bill was not a trained parachute jumper. That part of an aviator's training

is usually confined to those who specialize in lighter-than-air craft, and Bill was a heavier-than-air pilot. The sensation of diving into the air, several thousand feet above the earth was anything but a pleasant one. But his nerves were steady. He kept his head.

"One," he said to himself, as he sprang outwards and down...

"Two—" He felt his body twisting in his fall. He knew he was catapulting

earthward at a falling speed of nearly 400 miles per hour.

“Three!” He jerked on the pull ring. Would the chute open? Would it be capable of withstanding the shock incurred by the weight of his body falling at this terrific rate of speed? (He knew that the average time required for an air chute to open and assume normal descent is approximately one and three-fifths seconds after the rip cord has been pulled). But that mere second and a fraction seemed interminable. He was falling ... falling...

There came a sudden jerk that wrenched every muscle in his tense body.

His projectile-like speed decreased with uncomfortable suddenness, and he was swung round and upward to find himself sitting in what amounted to a swing,

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with webbing representing the ropes on either side of his aching body. Looking up, he saw that slightly above his head and within reach, the webbing divided

into two, and that the shrouds or small cords leading to the outer edge of the parachute were here attached to the harness he wore, in four places. He was

swaying wildly. In an effort to prevent that, he pulled the ropes, first on one side, then on the other.

All this had happened in an inconceivably short space of time. Three, possi-

bly four seconds had elapsed since Bill had sprung out of the doomed amphibian.

For the moment, his mind had been intent upon his own particular troubles, but now that he swung safely in his harness, memory came back. He turned his eyes earthward.

Almost directly below him, a column of black smoke smudged the clear green of the swamp grass. At the very base of the dark cloud, red tongues of flame shot skyward. Bill turned his gaze elsewhere. His former passengers were

undoubtedly as cold-blooded, black-hearted a band of villains as had ever lived; still, they were, or had been human beings. And Bill had no desire to watch their cremation and the demolition of a splendid plane.

His eyes swept the horizon. Yes, over there perhaps a mile to westward

two parachutes, one far below the other, were floating down toward earth. Even as he looked, the farther one disappeared behind tall trees on an island.

“Confound it all! I clean forgot to tell those two innocents anything about landing. Hope they don’t get into trouble—it’s my fault if they do!”

He knew that the average rate of descent is sixteen feet per second, and

unless one knows how, a broken leg or worse may be the outcome of an inex-

perienced landing. But their luck had held so far, apparently. Osceola and Sam were both sinewy, well-muscled fellows—they would probably come out all right.

For all their sakes, he hoped so. A disabled companion in the middle of the Everglades, with no means of transport other than one’s two legs, would prove a problem that Bill did not care to contemplate.

Then he saw Sam disappear with his parachute in the high sawgrass. He

was coming close to earth himself. In a very few minutes, he would land, and his gaze switched to the terrain directly below.

Osceola had landed on the firm ground of a large island. Sam had not been

so lucky, for Bill knew that the Seminole name for the Everglades is Grassy-Water, and that sawgrass does not grow on dry land. He himself was floating over the

island, but he soon saw that the wind-drift would carry him, too, into the grass unless he could prevent it.

Up went his hands, and getting a good grip on the parachute shrouds, he

pulled down hard on the ropes to windward. The chute immediately bellied in and sideslipped into the wind. He dared not overdo the business, and presently

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righted the chute by the simple expedient of releasing the shrouds. In a fall of one hundred feet, Bill figured he had sideslipped ten. He had seen men spin

their parachutes in order to swing aside from some building or other obstacle.

He knew that the trick is done by pulling down on one side, then releasing the pressure with a sort of flipping motion. He attempted it, without success; after a few failures gave it up in favor of the easier sideslips.

He was almost down now, and delighted to see that due to his system of sideslipping, the parachute would land him on the island.

Down he came, swaying slightly, onto a patch of soft green turf, dotted with wildflowers. Knowing that the body should relax in landing, he made no effort

to stand erect, and endeavored to absorb the shock of his fall to some extent by rolling over in the direction that he was drifting. Consequently, his tumble did him no harm; the parachute rolled into a large cypress at the edge of the open space and came to a stop. The jump was over.

Bill got out of his harness, repacked it, and throwing the bundle over his

shoulder, set off to find his two companions. Over to the west, a mile or more from the island, the burning amphibian sent its tower of thick black smoke mush-rooming skyward.

Bill walked for half a mile along the edge of the sawgrass, and then he saw two familiar figures appear from out a clump of trees.

“Osceola! Sam!” he called, and ran forward to meet them.

His friends waved to him, but did not quicken their pace. The old negro

seemed to be leaning heavily on Osceola's arm, and as he drew nearer, Bill saw that their clothes were dripping wet.

The young Seminole grinned as he came up. "You look as fresh as a daisy!"

His tone was cheerful, though it held a hint of weariness. "I certainly hated to leave you up yonder in the plane with that bunch of cutthroats. Sam did too.

We've been talking about it. Until I saw your parachute open up, I was darned worried, I can tell you."

"Well," beamed Bill, grasping their hands, "it sure is good to see you both again, I'm okay, but I take it you made bad landings. My fault, too,—I should have explained more about it before you jumped."

"Dat's all right, Marse Bill," piped up Sam. "It's me what brung de trouble. Marse Osceola, he sure am a born parachuter! He done landed fine on dis island—but dis old nigger crabbed everything. Come down in de grass out yonder. Dem sharp-tooth edges sure cut me pretty bad. And I ain't no hand at dis jumpin' business nohow. Like to drowned myself if Marse Osceola hadn't come in an' drug me out. Got all tangled up in de grass and dem ropes, wif de big umbrella down on top of me, tryin' t' smudder me to death. I sure is obliged to you gentlemen for gettin' me away from de workin's—but I'd rather stay put there all my born days than go through all dat again. Not *me*, suh!"

The old man sat down suddenly, and began to shake all over.

"Take it easy, Sam," cautioned Bill. "Just don't think about it for a while.

Everything will come out all right."

"I hope so, Marse Bill." Sam's tone, though gloomy, was much less excited.

“Dis heah airplane stuff an’ parachutin’ may be all right fo’ white folks—but if I must do a loop-de-loop, let mine be roun’ some chicken coop.” He grinned

appreciatively at his own joke. “Thank goodness I’m down here where I’s gwine to stay. I ain’t gwine to be a-oozin’ round de sky no mo’—Dis heah nigger ain’t got too proud to walk. Nobody ain’t gwine to ketch Sam a-flirtin’ wif de sun no mo’. Unh—unh! Not *me!*”

Both lads burst out laughing. “You’ve got more nerve than the rest of us put together, Sam,” declared Osceola.

“You sure have!” Bill knelt at his side. “Osceola is a warrior and a gentleman, but he can’t bandage for a tinker’s hoop. Let me fix those things. And how about this ankle—you were limping, uncle?”

“It ain’t no sprain, suh. I kin walk on dat foot—but she sure do hurt po’werful bad.”

“You’ve wrenched and strained it.” Bill’s deft fingers were lightly pressing the old man’s ankle. “We’ll bind it up tighter and keep you off your feet for a couple of days, and you’ll be able to do your hundred yards in ten flat!”

“Help him off with his wet clothes, Bill, while I get rid of mine,” Osceola suggested. “They’ll soon be dry in this sun.”

“That’s a good idea. While you two are drying, I think the best we can do is to have a meeting of the Ways and Means Committee. We’re still an awful longways from anywhere.”

Sam nodded his head vigorously. “You done said a mouf-ful, suh. I hope I ain’ no gloom—but we sure is in a bad fix. Dese heah Glades is a mighty bad

place to git stranded in widout a boat. I don't know but what dem fellers what come down in de airplane wasn't de lucky ones!"

CHAPTER

XIII—OSCEOLA

FINDS A WAY

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The young Seminole spread his dripping uniform on the grass to dry and dropped to his full length on the sward near Sam and Bill.

"We've got to build a boat of some kind," he declared. "Otherwise there'll

be no leaving this island. Let's see what we can scare up between us in the way of tools."

"I got a big clasp knife what belonged to one of dem pilots," volunteered

Sam.

"And I've got the same chap's automatic, and a knife I picked up in the

kitchen," added Osceola. "How about you, Bill?"

"Another automatic and a dry box of matches are the limit of my contribu-

tions," returned that young man. "Not much of an assortment, eh? If we could

get out to the plane we might be able to find an axe or something."

Osceola shook his head. "I doubt it. The smoke has almost disappeared,

which means that the amphibian or what's left of her is sinking in the swamp.

Anyway, without something to float on we can't leave this island. The rock floor of the Everglades basin lies from six to twelve feet down in the muck and water.

Even with a boat, traveling is no joke. That grass grows ten feet high in some

places. You've seen what its saw-tooth edges have done to Sam. That's nasty stuff to fool with—take it from me!”

Bill stared gloomily over the prairie-like monotony of the Glades. Smoke from the wreck had now entirely disappeared. He shuddered as his mind dwelt for an instant on the horrible fate of its gangster-passengers. Then his eye caught the deeper green of trees in the far distance.

“There seem to be a lot of islands in this big swamp,” he said. “Many of them inhabited, Osceola?”

“Not in this part of the Glades, Bill. My people are practically the sole inhabitants of this part of the world. And they live on islands, of course. But a long, long way from here.”

“Have you any plan?”

“Yes—I think so.”

“Well, spring it then, old top. You're in command from now on. I know as little about this kind of thing as—”

“As I do about flying,” supplemented Osceola with a grin.

“Rather less, if you ask me. Let's hear what you propose, Chief.”

The young Seminole did not reply at once. His bronzed forehead was corrugated in a frown. For several minutes he seemed lost in thought.

“There are just three things we've got to have,” he said suddenly. “And we've got to have them right away.”

“Water, food and a boat,” Bill suggested.

“Right. If we’re forced to, we can drink Glades water, but it’s dangerous,

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and would probably make us ill. There ought to be a spring or two on this is-

land; I reckon you’re elected to the job of locating fresh drinking water, Bill, and bringing it into camp.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Food, next,” mused Osceola. “Sam—do you think you can hobble round well enough to attend to the commissariat?”

“I sure can,” grinned the old darkey. “If I ain’t mistook, I done catch a glimpse of half a dozen blue heron back yonder. Dey ain’t chicken, a-course, but dey sure is a mighty fine eatin’. Loan me dat shooter of yourn, Marse Bill, and dis heah nigger will provide dinner.”

Bill passed over his revolver. “I’ll trade you for your knife, Sam, while you get into your clothes. I’ve got to have something to make a water container—that is, when I find the water.”

He pulled his parachute toward him and commenced to untie the pack.

“Reckon I’ll mosey along,” announced Osceola. “I’ve got to manufacture a boat of some sort.”

“You ain’t a-gwine to get far with dat knife o’ yourn in makin’ a dugout, Marse,” broke in Sam.

“But that’s not my idea,” the Seminole said quietly, but without giving any further information about his plans. “Bill, when you get through totin’ water, look me up, will you? I’m going along there to the east. You’ll find me near the shore—and I’ll probably need your help.”

“Okay,” sang out Bill, pulling his parachute from the pack. “I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

Osceola departed, and presently old Sam, after watching Bill for a moment, hobbled off in the opposite direction.

Bill spread out the parachute on the ground and proceeded to cut off a large circular piece of the fabric. Next he cut a piece from the shroud, and painstakingly unravelled strands from the rope. That completed, he cut off three green branches from a nearby sapling—trimmed them, and cut two to a length of approximately

eighteen inches and the third somewhat shorter. After notching their ends, he laid the two longer ones side by side and bound the ends together with strands from the parachute rope. The next operation was to bend them outward and apart at the center and to slip the shorter notched stick crosswise between them.

When its ends were bound to the other poles to keep it firm and in place, he found himself possessed of an oval wooden frame.

Bill now laid this aside and picked up the piece of fabric he had cut. The outer edge of this he lapped over his oval frame. Then with his knife blade he punched eyelets through the double lap of cloth, and by passing strands of the rope through them, shortly managed to bind the edges of the fabric to his frame.

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The result was an open-mouthed bag-like container or bucket, which, inasmuch as the fabric was waterproof, would carry any liquid he placed in it.

His task was now completed, so sticking the open knife in a log where Sam on his return would be sure to see it, he set off with his collapsible pail to find

drinking water.

The island, which Bill found to be about two miles long by half a mile wide, was covered with a heavy growth of cypress. Some of these trees were very old. He came across many whose trunks and branches were smooth and white, crowned with feathery foliage of a dazzling golden green. These beautiful trees usually grow amid clumps of dark evergreens such as bay, magnolia, and myrtle, and the effect was very striking. The small jungle was tropical in nature: stately palmettos raised their plumed heads toward the brilliant blue sky, and the forest glades were painted bright with flowers.

Bill followed one of the green aisles which wandered through the trees toward the middle of the island. Twice he heard the dull intonation of a distant revolver shot and wondered what luck Sam was having with his substitute for chicken. The wood was alive with birds. All seemed quite tame, and paid no attention to this unusual visitor to their sylvan haunts.

Presently he found the marshy ground that he was looking for; and in a little hollow nearby, a bubbling spring of cold, sweet water. Bill refreshed himself with a long drink of the life-giving liquid. Then he filled his fabric pail and went back to the spot where the conference had been held.

Here he found Sam, who already had a fire going and was plucking the feathers from a big, long-legged bird. On the turf beside him lay another. Bill recognized the great blue heron, familiarly known to the natives of Florida as “the Major.”

“I didn’t know that those things were good eating,” he observed as he hung the waterbucket on a branch in the shade. “Dad shot a couple last year which he has had stuffed. They were pretty skinny—bags of bones, that’s all.”

“Dere warn’t no moon, I reckon,” Sam said, busy with his plucking.

“Moon—what do you mean?”

“De moon am full now.” Sam’s grin disclosed two perfect rows of snow white teeth. “Dat’s de reason, Marse Bill.”

“Oh, quit your kidding, Sam!”

“I ain’t a-kiddin’ you, suh. Feel dis heah Major.”

Bill lifted the bird from the old darkey’s knees. It was plump and heavy.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” he exclaimed. “That’s sure a surprise to me, Sam. But I still can’t see what the moon’s got to do with its being fat.”

Sam’s laugh awoke the forest echoes. Evidently he was enjoying the joke.

He reached for the heron and went on denuding it of feathers.

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“Reckin eddication ain’t everything,” he chuckled. “Dis nigger never had no schoolin’, but he know dat de Major only eats when de moon am full. Twelve times de year he am fat an’ twelve times de year he am lean.”

“Well, I’ve got to hand it to you, all right,” laughed Bill. “Now I’m going to shove off and give Osceola a hand. So long!”

“So long, suh. When yo’all hears me whistle—come to dinner.”

Bill found Osceola near the marsh half a mile away. Close by stood a giant

cypress whose straight stemmed trunk must have measured at least twelve feet

where the tall shaft sprang from the buttressed base of the tree, and rose perhaps a hundred and fifty feet in the air, topped by a wide-spreading head of great

limbs and branchlets. At the Indian's feet lay one of these limbs and a glance at its five foot butt showed Bill that the big branch was hollow.

"Hello!" greeted Osceola. "Find your spring?"

"You bet-cha," returned his friend. "There's a bucket of fresh water in camp now."

"That's fine. We're in luck all way round the circle." He pointed to the hollow limb. "There's our dugout. Nature is a great help when you lack tools. She's half built already."

"How did you happen to find it?"

"Well, you see, I knew exactly what I was looking for, and headed toward the biggest cypress in sight. An immense tree like that one is very, very old. It's been here for a thousand to two thousand years, I suppose."

"Whew!" Bill stared up at the towering giant with an interest that was almost reverence.

"Yes, it was an old tree when Ponce de Leon was looking for his fountain of youth in these Glades," continued the Seminole. "But for hundreds of years it has been dying, and these old cypresses die backward, or downward, during a period of one to four centuries. The heart decays and the last stage is generally a hollow cylinder. A hurricane from the Gulf brought down this limb, of course."

"But surely you don't expect to fashion a canoe out of that with a knife!"

"What we can't cut, we can burn. And after dinner, we'll have Sam's help and his knife."

"Gosh—it looks to me as if it will take a year!"

“Two days at the most,” countered the Indian. “The wood, though very strong, is not heavy, except when it’s green; and a dead branch like this is easy to work on. Break off some of the smaller branches and get a fire going in that hole I’ve just finished digging under the limb—see it?—halfway down its length, there.”

Bill went to work, collecting dry wood and twigs for the fire.

“Aren’t you afraid we’ll burn up the whole thing?” he asked, after a moment

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or two.

“Oh, no, that’s easily prevented,” Osceola replied. He had whittled a flat

spade wherewith to dig the fire hole and now he began to pack moist earth round the trunk on the side of the hold nearest to the butt of the log. “Of course she’ll burn a bit inside,” he went on, “but I’ve plugged the butt with moss and dirt.

Mighty little air can get in through that end.”

For the next hour or so the lads were kept busy; the one adding to the pile

of burning brush heaped completely around the limb, the other preventing the

spread of the fire toward the butt of the log. By the time Sam’s shrill whistle announced dinner, the hollow shell had been burned clear of its upper end and

they were able to roll the twenty-foot log clear of the fire.

It was delicious fare Sam had waiting for the lads by the camp fire. True,

it consisted of but one dish, roast heron, washed down with spring water. But

all three diners voted it a success, for a keen hunger is the best of all appetizers, and anyone who has eaten “the Major” when roasted, knows that this great bird

is worthy of any feast.

The meal over, the three adventurers repaired to the hollow cypress log.

Bill and Osceola got to work cutting horizontal grooves along the trunk on lines that marked the top of the gunwales. Their progress was slow, but the dying wood was not over-hard and they made fair headway, despite the inadequacy of their tools.

Stones of any kind were a rarity on the island, and it took Sam all of two hours to find one that would be suitable for an ax-head. This he bound to a wooden shaft with strips of cloth cut from Bill's jumper. When he finished the job to his liking, the ax or hammer resembled those Indian curios one sees in the museums of our large cities.

Toward sundown the mosquitoes which had been pestering them all day, seemed to take on a new lease of life. Clouds of the vicious, blood-thirsty insects swarmed about the toilers, at last making further work impossible. By a vote of mutual consent they left the half-completed dugout to the tender mercies of the stinging pests, and hastened back to the camp fire.

While Sam removed the second heron from the hanging bucket and commenced its preparation over the fire for the evening meal, Bill trudged over to the spring. Upon his return with a brimming bucket, he found that Osceola had built a line of smudge-fires in a circle around the fire, and that once within the ring, there were no mosquitoes.

When Bill suggested that a series of small fires would have been easier to build than a solid circle of flame, the Indian had smiled good-humoredly.

"Maybe so. But then, you know, snakes like warmth and seek it. We've got to sleep on the ground tonight, and there are several species in this neck of the woods, that I'm not keen to have for bedfellows. They won't cross fire or hot

embers, though—‘Quod erat demonstrandum,’ as the geometry books have it.”

“My error,” laughed Bill. “After this, I shall refrain from criticizing my elders and betters.”

When the moon rose, Sam left them, while the lads lay back on their beds

of evergreens and conversed. Several times they heard the report of his gun, but when the hunter returned, carrying three heron and a brace of duck he found

them deep in the slumber of exhaustion.

CHAPTER

XIV—IN

THE

DUGOUT

Old Sam was up with the sun, but it was not until the big gourd he had found the night before was steaming with a luxurious duck stew that he awoke the tired lads.

“How in the world did you concoct this stew, Sam?” Bill waved his wooden spoon—handmade by the old darkey—toward the savory-smelling gourd, which was their common pot.

“But how come, Marse Bill?”

“This stew is boiled isn’t it?”

“Dat’s right, suh, it am.”

“Well, what I want to know is how you were able to make a stew over the fire without burning the gourd.”

“Dat stew was made in the gourd, jes’ as you say,” he chuckled. “But de gourd warn’t over the fire, Marse Bill.”

“Quit your kidding, Sam—and tell me.”

“I done hung the gourd on a low branch yonder, suh, after I put in the meat an’ water. Nex’ I heated two stones over the fire and when dey was real hot, I dropped dem in the stew. Soon as dey got cool, I put in two mo’ hot stones—”

“And that,” broke in Osceola, “is the oldest method of heating water known to man!”

Bill shook his head. “Well, when we left the workings, I thought I was supposed to run this show,” he said gravely. “Guess I was a bit high-hat about
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it, too. And now, everywhere I turn, you two teach me something new. I’ve certainly learned my lesson.—Let’s get to work—I can use brawn if not brain!”

There followed a day of strenuous labor for all of them. The top of the log above the long grooves they had cut the afternoon before, was beaten in with the stone hammer. When it was at last removed, Bill took his wooden adze that he had hardened in the fire, and began to scrape the rotten wood from the inner shell of the canoe. Meanwhile Osceola and Sam whittled out two blocks of soft wood

wherewith to plug the ends of the open log. These were wedged into place and moss hammered into the seams. Then, thwarts were fitted and the canoe sunk in shallow water to give the seams at bow and stern a chance to swell. After supper, all three busied themselves making paddles.

Next day they were up before dawn and hauled out their canoe. After a night's submersion, she appeared to be absolutely watertight. At an early hour, they got aboard, with the remains of their slender store of provisions, and pushed out through the saw grass.

Bill took his place amidships, with Sam in the bow, and the young Seminole wielded a paddle in the stern. "I know that you're skipper of this cruise, Osceola,"

he flung the words over his shoulder, "but I think we ought to go out to the wreck of the plane before we leave this locality for keeps. What do you say?"

"It's okay with me. I don't expect we'll find much. The water is pretty deep in this part of the Glades."

"Do you think you can find the spot? It's more than I could do."

"Oh, yes, easily enough. I was raised in these swamps, remember. I know exactly where the amphibian nosed in."

He swung the dugout to the left, and a few minutes later they came out of the high saw grass on to one of the myriad water leads that crisscross the Ev-

erglades in every direction. The grass near the Island had not been particularly dense; but now they noticed that the growth which lined the lane of open water was a ten-foot jungle of stiff, saw-toothed stems. Even the lead they were following was not free from obstruction, for huge patches of water lilies choked the way, and the power needed to force the canoe through the tangled masses of blooms came only by back-breaking effort.

"Bill, I think we'll have to pass up the wreck," declared Osceola from the stern of their little craft. "It would take us all day to push our way through the grass and we'd probably get some bad cuts into the bargain. It isn't worth it."

"I thought we might be able to salvage something," said Bill, resting his

paddle on the side of the dugout.

“No chance of that, anyway. The chances are that nothing but the tailplane is above water after her nosedive. These swamps are dangerous to wade about in, even if there is a high bottom over there, which I doubt.”

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“He means de ’gators and snakes,” Sam explained fearfully. “We alls been lucky so far, but let me tell you, Marse Bill, dese Glades is sure plumb full o’ vipers. Dis nigger ain’t gwine to do no mo’ wadin’ unless he has to. Unh-unh! Not *me!*”

Bill grinned. “I retire under force of argument,” he said with mock resignation. “Let’s be on our way again. I think I can see clear water ahead.”

For the next half hour they slaved through the lilies, and in the stretch of open water finally reached, Bill spoke again.

“I know you’re making for the southeast, Osceola. And I suppose you’ve got a plan. But I should have thought you’d point north. Isn’t there an automobile causeway that crosses the Everglades somewhere up there?”

Osceola nodded. “There is, Bill, but I am going to make for the home of my people. I figure that we can get down there in three or four days, if our luck holds. It would take us much longer to reach the causeway.”

“Good enough! Swell plan, I should say.”

“But that’s only half the plan, Bill.”

“What’s the other half?”

“I’ll tell you when I’ve talked with my people. I’m not trying to be cagy, but I’ll need their consent to put it over—and I don’t want to get up false hopes, you know. You don’t mind, if I keep it to myself till I’m more certain?”

“Of course not. I’ve been doing a little thinking on my own. And maybe I can spring mine when you come across with yours. If these all-fired pond lilies would only—”

Bill never finished that sentence. There was a stirring among the lilypads just aft of Bill’s paddle. He caught a fleeting glimpse of what he took to be a gnarled tree trunk among the blooms overside. Then the stern of the dugout rose in the air, toppled over, and clutching wildly at the gunwale, he catapulted into the lilies.

“‘Gator!’ yelled a voice which he took to be Sam’s, and the water closed over his head.

Bill landed on the small of his back, but just as soon as he was able to get his balance under water, he struck upwards with both hands and feet. If a rising alligator had been the cause of the canoe’s capsizing, he wasn’t staying in that unlikely spot!—not any longer than needful.

But instead of shooting to the surface, as he naturally expected, Bill found himself held fast in an interminable network of stems and roots. The horrible sensation of strangling sent all thought of ’gators, poisonous snakes out of his head. Air—he must have air. Nothing else mattered now. He tore at the tangled stems with the vicious energy of a madman.

At last, his lungs bursting, his head popped up through the pads. As he

shook the water from his eyes, Sam's black pate appeared above the surface.

"Whar de 'gator?" he spluttered.

"Search me," gasped Bill. "I didn't even see him."

The dugout floated bottom upwards a few yards away. From beyond it came Osceola's voice.

"Hey, you two! This is no swimming pool. Quit swapping yarns and give me a hand with this canoe!"

"You go, Marse Bill," begged Sam. "I'se afraid dese here chaps will sink."

With an effort he raised his right hand above the water, and Bill saw that it

grasped a duck. "I done tied dese here birds all together fore we shoved off," explained the darkey. "Dey's de first thing I grabbed when dat ol' 'gator come up underneath de boat and turn us over. Dey like to drowned me down in de weeds, an' it ain't likely I'se gwine to turn 'em loose now to fix no dugout. Unh-unh!"

Not *me!* "

Bill, with an amused grunt, started swimming for the canoe in the middle of

this narrative. But by the time he reached it, Osceola had righted it, and worked his way aboard by pulling himself up the rounded stern. When waist-high to

the counter, he seemed to spring forward on his hands, spreading his legs at the same time so as to straddle both bulwarks. A second later he was sitting on the low thwart, holding out a helping hand to Bill.

"Gee, you're an ace in the water, all right," gasped Bill, once he was aboard.

"Some day you've got to teach me that trick, Osceola."

The Indian chuckled. "It takes little more than muscle, Bill, and a certain

nicety of balance. You've got plenty of the first requirement, and the other is only a matter of practice."

"Look, here comes the commissary—he'll take a bit of hoisting!"

Osceola leaned overside and took the string of birds from Sam. "How you managed to hang on to these in the upset is beyond me," he said, depositing them in the bottom of the canoe.

Sam was helped aboard.

"You can't keep dis nigger from his dinner," he grinned. "Dat is, no 'gator can't. Did you see him, Marse Osceola? He was sure a big ol' feller."

"He sure was, Sam. Reckon he was as surprised as we were when the bunch of us came splashing in on top of him. I was glad to get out of the water, though.

It's not my idea of a happy death to form a meal for an alligator. It didn't seem to worry you much. The way you and Bill were holding pleasant conversation out yonder was a temptation to any 'gator or his friends."

"So that's why you asked for help in righting the canoe?" Bill asked.

"You've guessed it. I've got my paddle, and while I collect the other two, I suggest that you clean the guns, Bill. Lucky they were strapped to us." He ripped lxxi

off the tail of his shirt and passed it over. "That will soon dry in the sun, and a gat that shoots is worth somebody else's shirt any day in the week."

"There's one thing about traveling light," admitted Bill, "and especially when your canoe turns over. If you haven't anything to lose, you can't lose it."

“You is forgettin’ the grub, suh,” chimed in Sam.

“But you clung to that like a hero,” grinned Bill. “When we get to wherever we’re getting, I’ll pin a medal on you, Sam. Just now, I’m out of pins.”

“I know you is kiddin’ me,” returned the darkey, showing his teeth in a wide smile. “Some day mebbe I’ll hold you to dat promise, Marse Bill.”

“Okay, Sam. Pass over any hardware you may be toting. I want to clean it.”

That night, after, a weary day of paddling, they camped on an island which embraced several miles of dry land. Here Osceola shot a small deer, which they found a welcome change in diet, from the fish-tainted flesh of birds.

“There are just two things queer about this place,” remarked Bill as they rested beside the fire after supper.

“What are they?” asked the young Seminole chief.

“In every picture I’ve ever seen of the Florida swamps, they have snakes hanging in festoons from the trees—great, big fellows. Yet, so far, I haven’t seen a single one.”

“That’s because they don’t happen to roost in trees. Not in this state. That is, except in the artist’s imagination. There are plenty of snakes, though—rattlers, moccasins and the like. Never go into high grass on these islands, or you are not likely to come out alive. What’s the other queer thing?”

Bill stretched his arms above his head, and lay back comfortably on the warm earth. “Last night,” he yawned, “the mosquitoes nearly drove me crazy.

Today there were very few, and tonight, I haven’t felt one. There’s been no wind to speak of—they can’t have been blown away.”

Osceola laughed. "These glades aren't such bad places to live in. They have some advantages. Of course, it is a snake infested wilderness, but there is such a dearth of stagnant water that few breeding places are furnished for insects. You won't find mosquitoes except along the borders. We are well into the interior of the Everglades, now, that's why they've disappeared."

"Three cheers and a tiger," Bill applauded in a sleepy voice. "Good night, everybody—I'm off to bye-bye."

The next three days were counterparts of the first, except that the party met with not a single mishap. Whenever possible they kept to the waterleads, and Bill soon grew sick of the sight of pond lilies. But at times it was necessary to pole their way through the sawgrass. Often the grass had to be cut away in front, and all three suffered from wounds made by its sharp-toothed edges.

About five o'clock on the fourth day of their journey, they came through half a mile of grass on to an open lead, free for once from lilies. This led toward a large island, little more than a mile away.

"Well, we're here at last," announced Osceola, as they rested from their labors.

"*Here* is right—but where?"

"Some of my people live on that island. We'll be—home—in half an hour."

"You certainly are a wonder!" cried his friend. "I never really thought you would be able to locate them in this wilderness."

"If you asks me," broke in Sam, "I says, let's go! I never did think we'd get dis far without bein' cotched back to those workin's. But now, oh boy! Deer meat is all right an' so am bird flesh. But I likes my vittles varied. Too much of a good thing am nothin' more than too much. Let's go—cause I'm hungry!"

CHAPTER XV—SEMINOLES

The three weary paddlers sent their dugout skimming down the open waterway toward the island. As they approached, Bill saw that Osceola was steering for an encampment that covered about an acre, in a clump of palmettoes near the water.

He soon noticed that the dwellings were built of six upright poles, three on a side, and had gabled roofs of palmetto thatch. Later he was to learn that the floors were made of earth, and the main articles of furniture were large tables which nearly filled the interior. On these tables the Indians ate and slept. Usually there were chests that held their clothing and tools and firearms. Barrels and boxes for provisions and, in rare cases, a sewing machine, completed the essentials. An old sheet or blanket is generally hung at one side of the dwelling to keep out the wind and rain.

Soon the inhabitants of this colony began to crowd to the waterside, waving friendly greetings. A few of the men were dressed in store clothes, but most of them seemed to have an antipathy for trousers. The habits of the Seminole are so amphibious, they are in and out of the water all day long, so that they invariably prefer bare legs. The majority were costumed in the old Seminole manner, in

knee-length tunics of banded red and yellow, tied with a sash at the waist. The

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heads of the braves were covered with red bandanna turbans.

The squaws were easily recognizable by their long calico dresses of blue or

brown, gaily striped in red and yellow, and they all wore long strings of small beads, usually turquoise and crimson. Silver coins beaten into various designs decorated their head-dresses, and were worn as bracelets and necklets. The elder children were dressed exactly like their parents. The younger ones wore what

nature had given them and nothing more.

The canoe drew closer to the bank. Osceola stood up in his place and

shouted some words in a strange tongue. Immediately there came a change in the demeanor of the waiting Seminoles. The mild curiosity in the arrival of strangers, turned to shouts of jubilation as they recognized their Chief. The braves rushed into the shallow water, and raised the dugout with its occupants to their shoulders. Amid cries of welcome the men carried their heavy burden up the bank and into the center of the village.

Here Osceola made them a short speech. There was much handshaking, in which both Bill and Sam participated. Meanwhile, the women rushed off to a circular shed nearby where the cooking for the camp was done. There was a great clattering of pots and pans by the fire, from which logs radiated like the spokes of a wheel, and soon the appetizing odor of food was wafted to the tired travelers' nostrils.

"My people understand and speak English readily enough," Osceola told his friends. "But they like me to speak to them in the mother tongue. I've informed them that you are my friends, that we are weary and hungry and in need of sleep. Come now, we can make ourselves comfortable while the women prepare us a meal."

"An' whatever it is they's fixin', it sure do smell good—yes, mighty fine to *dis* heah chile!"

Sam grinned at Bill happily as they followed their host toward a dwelling somewhat larger and apart from the rest.

"Some of dem squaws sure is grand women," chortled Sam, hobbling along in high glee at Bill's side. "Dis is what I likes, Marse Bill—good eatin's plenty of it, and a fine, strong woman to cook an' work for you." He waved at a two hundred pounder, and when the squaw waved back, he deliberately closed one

rolling black eye in a wink.

“Why, you old rascal!” Bill broke into a shout of laughter. “I thought you told me you had a wife and family somewhere!”

Sam shook his woolly pate in mock pathos. “Done had, Marse Bill, done had. My ole woman b’leeve I’m dead years ago. If she’s alive she’s married, dat am certain. Liza were a sure goodlooker an’ a fine cook—an’ dat kind never am neglected—not for long anyhow.”

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“Take my advice and stop flirting with the Seminole squaws, just the same, or some brave will bounce a tomahawk off that skull of yours.”

Sam spread his palms upward in a gesture of apology. “’Tain’t my fault, Marse Bill, really it ain’t.”

“Whose then?”

“It’s de wimmen, Marse Bill.”

“How do you make that out?”

Sam chuckled and brought his head near Bill’s.

“They’s always a-botherin’ the goodlookin’ men,” he whispered.

Osceola, who had the ears of a cat, turned and winked at the old darkey.

“Well, that lets you out, Sam,” he laughed. “Come inside my house, and rest.

Tomorrow or the next day, there is work to be done. After that you can come back here, Sam, and loaf for the rest of your life. And if you still want a squaw to look after you, I’ll see about it.”

Osceola's house was in reality no different from the other shelters in the camp, except that it was larger, and more solidly constructed. They entered, and Osceola swung himself onto the central table, and the other two followed suit. A semi-circle of Seminole warriors squatted on the ground a few yards distant and talked together in low tones.

Presently two women came in, carrying a large kettle that swung on a stick between them. They placed this on the table, and from its open mouth protruded a single large spoon.

"When in Rome, you know—" smiled Osceola. "Help yourselves—take some, Bill, and pass it on. If you must have knife and fork and plate, they can be produced, but when I am with my people I like to conform to their customs.

Hope you don't mind."

"The community spoon for me, old top," and Bill reached for it. "Is this the national dish?"

"I reckon so. It's a meat stew thickened with vegetables and meal. You ought to find it pretty good."

"I do," sighed Bill, blowing on a piece of hot meat. "This is the best grub I've tasted for a month of Sundays."

"An' could you all please hurry up an' pass dat spoon," Sam broke in eagerly.

"My mouf sure am waterin' for dat stew and my stummick he say 'hasten, brother, hasten'!"

All three enjoyed the feast immensely and it is to be feared that as the stew grew cooler, fingers were quite as often in use as the common spoon. Although it was still broad daylight when they found the bottom of the pot, they turned in,

on the table, and slept like logs, rolled up in blankets, until morning.

The early sun came streaming in through the open front of Osceola's house.

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It shone in Bill's face and woke him. He stretched, yawned and sat up. The young chief and Sam were going through the same motions at opposite ends of the table.

"Morning, men!" he saluted them, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Am I still dreaming, Osceola, or has your village grown during the night? There seem to be three or four times as many people around."

The chief swung off his table bed. "There are probably five times as many,"

he answered. "The villages of my people are small, but there are many of them.

Last night, while we slept, signal fires flashed the news of my return. Come along, and let's get a wash before breakfast. Afterward, there will be a big pow-wow. I am going to put my plan up to the warriors. You can do likewise."

"But I can't speak Seminole," Bill reminded him as they started toward the shore.

"Don't worry, this conference will be held in English. You see," he ex-

plained, "our villages only run to a few families because an island can support only a few people. Over there, beyond those trees, you will find a clearing where our crops are raised; corn, squashes, sweet potatoes, sugar-cane and so on. As you may have noticed, chickens and razor-back hogs run about wild."

"Oh, yes, and in all the big cities of Florida, too," said Bill with a straight face. Then they both roared with laughter at Sam's perplexed frown.

"Humph! You tryin' to joke dis nigger," the darkey rolled his eyes, "but dat's over my head, suh, over my head!"

“You think it is now, but you’ll see!” warned Bill with a twinkling grin.

Then he joined Osceola in his morning ablutions.

An hour after breakfast, the men of the tribe gathered in the open space

between the shore and the village. They sat in a wide circle on the ground, with their squaws and children in the background. Bill and Sam, led by Osceola, were escorted to places in the center of this group. The young chief lighted a long pipe of tobacco, took a puff of the pungent smoke and passed it to his white friend.

Bill choked over the pipe, then handed it to Sam. From the old negro it went the round of the braves.

When the pipe was laid aside, a deep silence fell over the gathering, broken

only by the raucous call of birds in the treetops, or the sudden splash of a leaping fish. This lasted for fully ten minutes, then Osceola arose and with quiet dignity began to speak. This time he used English, and in simple words, but with the

art of the born story-teller that seems inherent in all tribes of North American Indians, he told the tale of his disappearance from the village.

First he spoke of his capture by the Martinengo gang, and how he had been

taken to Shell Island. Then came his trip by plane with other prisoners to the gold diggings in the Cypress Swamp. In graphic language he told of his slavery and of the pitiless cruelty of his taskmasters.

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Outwardly calm, the warriors of his tribe sat listening with faces devoid

of all expression. Yet if one looked closely, one saw clenched fists and tightened muscles, and could realize that this stoic behavior was but a poise that was part and parcel of their tribal training. Actually these Seminoles resented keenly the insult which had been placed upon their young chief. Sometime in the future

their deeds would prove their loyalty—now, he must not be interrupted, he had

more to tell.

Osceola then went on to describe the coming of Bill, the feeling of the over-seer, their subsequent escape and the crash of the amphibian.

“My white brother who sits beside me here,” he concluded, “downed the

man who struck me, thereby risking not only death for his act, but the terrible torture of the lash. He is an officer in the White Father’s great navy, a flyer of airplanes, a person of importance among his own people; yet he did that for a

Seminole he had known less than a day. Without his knowledge of flying, escape from the Great Cypress would have been impossible: and again, when death

at the hands of those gangsters stared us in the face aboard the flying ship, he arranged for the safety of this black man and myself while he stayed behind to battle with them. That is why I take him by the hand now and thank him in the

name of the once-great Seminole nation!”

“How! how!” chanted the warriors, while Osceola bent down and grasped

Bill’s hand.

“Now,” he continued, his thrilling tones chaining the eyes of his audience

to him, “what are we going to do? Are we going to sit quietly on our islands, and let these devils incarnate continue to enslave our brothers and other defenseless people? Have we become women now that the number of our braves is small?

Have we forgotten the deeds of our heroes in the past? Are we content to stand aside, content to let this scum from the big cities offer insult day by day to our once proud nation? Answer me—are we men—or something more pitiful than

the weakest of women?”

“We are men!!” shouted the braves, a hundred hands beating the air while

their voices rang resonantly in the stillness. “Lead us, Great Chief. We will follow!”

“Good. Go to your homes now. Come back here on the third day from this.

Let every man come armed for battle and let him come with food that will last for a week. Go now my brothers, warriors of the Great Seminole Nation—I have spoken.”

Without a word, the men got to their feet, collected their wives and children, and launched their dugout canoes.

“Now let’s hear your plan of campaign,” suggested Bill, as he and Osceola stood watching the departing flotilla. “That was some speech you made just now, even though you did lay it on a bit thick about me. I’m keen to know exactly what you intend to do, now that you’ve got your little army in back of you.”

CHAPTER XVI—THE ADVANCE

“I told those chaps of mine not to come back here until the third day,” said Osceola, “because they will need a couple of days at least to prepare for an expedition of the kind I have in mind.”

“I shouldn’t think it ought to take them that long—what have they got to do?”

“Oh, paint themselves for battle, for one thing. Have a war dance or two, and a lot of the same. You must remember that my people are only semi-civilized.

The only way that anyone can control them is to let them go their own way, when it comes to tribal customs, that do no one any harm. Buck that sort of thing—and you are out of luck—good and plenty!”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply that if I tried to ‘convert’ them, they’d have little use for me—dead

or alive.”

“You mean they’d do away with you?”

“Literally, yes.” Osceola laughed at the expression on Bill’s face. “But don’t worry—I understand them, and so long as I let them alone, they’ll love me. Anyway, you and Sam and I can do with a couple of days’ rest, you know, before we start out for the Big Cypress.”

“I agree with you on that. Gee, this sun is getting hotter than hot. How about going up to your abode? I haven’t sprung my idea yet.”

“Why, that’s so, old man. Certainly, come along—I want to hear what you’ve got to say.”

Once in the dim shelter of the chief’s house, the two sat cross-legged on the central table and Bill opened the conversation.

“Where’s Sam?”

Osceola shook his head amusedly. “Gone off to see how the squaws make that stew. We don’t need him. Spill the good old beans, Bill.”

“Well—your plan is to take your fighting men across the Glades and clean

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out the diggings, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Of course the details must still be arranged, but we have plenty of time to work them up before we start. Have you any suggestions to make?”

“Why not tackle the island first?”

“Yes, I thought of that. But it’s a bigger and harder job than the workings.

Over in the cypress swamps we can come down on the stockade at night and surprise them. Shell Island is quite another proposition. There’s only one entrance to the place,—the bay. And the Martinengos keep it well guarded. The rest of the coastline is one continuous palisade of unscalable cliffs.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong!” cried Bill. “There is a spot where the cliffs can be climbed— *and, not even the Martinengos know of it!* ”

Osceola looked his amazement. “How did you get on to it?”

“Through Sam. He was a house servant, he tells me, for the bosses on Shell Island for several years. Gradually he became a trusty. They gave him the run of the island, and while off duty one day he discovered this place in his rambles.

He says that there is a small, sandy beach at the foot of the cliff, and that any active man can climb up or down without a great deal of trouble. He has done it himself, so he ought to know.”

“Well, that throws a little different light on the picture. I’d certainly like to clean out that nest of cutthroats—but it’s a big job. I hadn’t contemplated doing anything like that. My plan was to free those poor devils who are slaving in the Big Cypress—but——”

“Why not do the thing up brown, while we’re at it? Of course, I needn’t tell you my main motive is to release my father. And incidentally to be revenged on the brains of this outfit—the Martinengos. By Jove, man, I’ve hardly dared think about Dad—let alone mention him—when I picture him in that filthy dungeon——” Bill’s voice broke and he clenched his fists on his knees.

“Naturally, Bill, I understand that. And I am with you every bit of the way.

But I feel that we must reason it out very carefully—we dare not fail, either way.”

“But how can we? With Dad free and Shell Island in our hands, we could clean up the other place properly!”

Osceola shook his head thoughtfully. “It’s a long, long hike from the island

to the gold workings—twice as far from there as it is from here. Even if we are able to capture the island, some of the men are sure to slip through our hands, get away in one of the planes, perhaps and by the time we travel on to Big Cypress, that gang there will have been warned, they’ll be ready and waiting for us. The chances are, in that case, we’d be cleaned out. A surprise attack is one thing, Bill, but a pitched battle with trained gunsters—I’d simply be throwing away the lives of my men who trust me. No, I can’t see it.”

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Bill slid off the table and stood facing his friend. “But you are leaving Dad out of the picture!”

“What do you mean?”

“Dad has influence in Washington. The President is a personal friend of his. Our job is to clean up the island. Then he will get the U. S. government to step in—and they will attend to the Big Cypress business themselves. You see? I should have told you this in the beginning, but I guess I was sort of hazy when I got thinking about Dad.”

The Seminole clapped him on the shoulder. “That,” he said heartily, “is a bird of another color, Bill! And I was worried about my men. Your plan is approved and accepted without question! Now, let’s forget the whole business until my Seminoles come back here. I don’t think I’ve ever been quite so tired as I am at this minute. Just remember that those workings are not any health resort.

I’m all in—and I’m going to sleep until I’m called for dinner.”

“And I’m going to do the same thing. Isn’t that a hammock over there

between those palms? Me for it. You may find a wooden table comfortable to

retire on, but as Sam says—‘Unh-unh! Not *me!* ’ Your hospitality is lavish—but after last night I ache from head to foot. Does the mighty chief mind if his humble servant retires to the hammock?”

“If I had a shoe I’d throw it,” laughed Osceola. “For goodness’ sake, take the hammock, and anything else you want. On your way—I’m sound asleep!”

Sunrise two days later saw a flotilla of Indian dugouts drawn up on the shore of the Seminole’s island. The squaws of the little community had been up half the night cooking, and now the warriors were busily consuming what would probably constitute their last hot meal for some time to come.

There were about sixty braves all told. Gone now were their brightly colored tunics and head-dresses. The entire band had stripped to a loin-cloth, and the face and body of each man was painted in designs of his own fancy. All heads were shaven clean except for the scalp lock, which was decorated with a single feather of the red heron. Each brave carried a rifle, knife and tomahawk.

After they had eaten their fill, Osceola lined them up on the shore and spoke a few words to them in their own language. Bill stood beside him and viewed the little army with keen interest. Never had he seen such a fearsome group. They brought to mind pictures of the frontier days in the old West. If these fellows were really as fierce as they looked, he thought it boded ill for the Martinengos and their gunmen.

When Osceola had finished his harangue, the band of warriors commenced to board their canoes.

“Where in the world is Sam?” Bill asked the chief as they walked toward the handsome dugout that was Osceola’s private property.

“Here I is, suh!”

A painted savage broke from the embrace of a squaw twice his size and girth, and came running up to them.

“Good Lord, Sam! Where are your clothes?” The chief stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

“Ise a Seminole brave, now!” proudly announced the darkey. “Lil Eva, she done fix me up last night!”

“Little Eva!” exploded Bill. “That squaw must weigh two hundred and fifty!”

“Yas, suh! Fine woman. We gwine to git married when I come back from killin’ off dem gangsters. She say dat I’m her fightin’ man now—an’ I b’leeve I cert’nly do look like one.” He admired his painted chest, grinning from ear to ear.

Bill and Osceola looked at one another and roared with laughter. “Well, it’s okay with me, Sam,” declared the chief. “Hop aboard with your armory. It’s time we were on our way. Lucky there are some blankets in the canoe,” he added as he shoved off and sprang in after them, “you’ll probably need several before we get through with this picnic.”

The chief’s dugout, with Bill, Sam and Osceola wielding the paddles, shot swiftly down the waterway. The flotilla of canoes closed in single file behind. At last the expedition was under way.

The journey south through the Everglades seemed but a repetition of their former trip to Bill. The same endless stretches of sawgrass, intersected by lily-choked waterleads swept out to a low horizon. Occasional islands covered with

a dense jungle of brilliant green provided the only variation in the monotonous landscape. The sun swam in cloudless skies, pouring down a heat that burned

Bill's flesh and sapped his vitality. The others, if they minded the terrific discomfort, appeared to ignore it. But Bill was thoroughly glad when at the beginning of the third day, they left the Everglades behind and paddled slowly down the

broad bosom of a winding bayou.

That night the little army camped on the shore near the mouth of this arm of the sea.

"We'll rest up tomorrow and plan the details," said Osceola, as they sat by their campfire that evening. "Shell Island lies out there—about fifteen miles away.

So far, so good. I, for one, am going to turn in now."

"Call me at noon," grunted Bill. "This may be my last sleep on earth—and it's going to be a good one."

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CHAPTER XVII—THE ATTACK

For some hours earth and water had been bathed in the semi-darkness of a misty night when the Seminole canoes issued from the broad mouth of the bayou. The

stench of the mangrove swamps behind them still hung heavy in the lifeless air, and as they advanced, a thick gray fog crept in from the sea. Soon the trailing folds of vapor rolled in opaque clouds along the water, and hovered, damp and

billowing, over the moving flotilla.

Osceola shouted an order in Seminole and a moment later, the bow of a canoe nosed beside the stern of the leading dugout.

“Stop paddling!” he commanded, and his two companions obeyed. “I told the men to close up in single file,” he explained to Bill and Sam. “It is easy to go astray in a fog like this.”

“You said a mouthful,” returned Bill. “And the first thing you know we’ll be heading back to the mainland. There’s not a compass in the whole outfit.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll see that we get to Shell Island all right.”

“Well, you’ve got your hands full,” retorted his friend. “How do you expect to guide us? I can’t see three feet overside.”

“By instinct—an extra sense, perhaps, you would call it. No man of my race ever loses his bump of direction.”

From the fog behind them came the hoot of a nightbird.

“All set—let’s go!” Osceola dipped his paddle. “No talking, please, from now on. Voices carry a long way over the water, you know.”

For the better part of the next three hours, the long line of dugouts forged ahead through the heavy blanket of sea fog. Once more, the journey seemed endless to Bill. His nerves were tingling with the thought of the night’s work ahead. Would Osceola be able to guide them to the island? The chief paddled steadily onward, seemingly never at a loss as to the direction his little craft should take.

Gradually this confidence was imparted to the white lad. They would succeed ... they must. Yet these Seminoles were but untrained aborigines at best. Would they be able to overcome the white men, professionals, only too well

versed in all the exigencies of gang warfare? To the Seminoles this expedition meant merely a matter of revenge, an insult to wipe out. To Bill it meant the life and liberty of his father. They must succeed, he told himself desperately, for the twentieth time—they *would* succeed.

The fog grew less dense. A few straggling wisps of mist played round the line of canoes and were gone. From out the murk came the dull roar of surf breaking on a rocky shore. Then suddenly the grayish white of cliffs loomed up straight ahead.

From Osceola's throat came the raucous screech of an owl. As one man the flotilla stopped moving.

"Shell Island," the chief whispered. "The path up the cliffs is yonder, to the left. You go to the right, Bill. You know my plans, and I know yours."

"O—and likewise, K." Bill's voice was husky with excitement, though he strove to keep it casual. "Good luck and good hunting, old man."

"Good luck, Bill."

They clasped hands, and an instant later, the canoe following drew along-

side. Bill immediately changed places with the Indian who had been paddling in the stern. He placed his rifle carefully on the bottom of the canoe and grasping his paddle, swung the craft round to the right. Three more canoes fell into line behind him, and the four left the main flotilla and headed off to the westward, keeping the cliffs and the pounding surf off their port quarter.

Bill's canoes pushed swiftly ahead over the long ground swell until three

quarters of an hour later, the narrow entrance to the bay was in sight. Now

their pace slackened, the dip of their paddles in the quiet water became barely perceptible, and hugging the deep shadow of the cliff, the canoes glided into the

bay like dark water wraiths on a jet black background.

The sky was overcast, the visibility poor, but Bill could make out the night

lights of Martinengo's yacht. Nearby floated a large amphibian, evidently a sister ship of the one wrecked in the Glades. Tied up to the concrete pier was a smaller seaplane.

For a moment they rested on their paddles. Then at a sign from Bill, the other three canoes made off silently for the yacht.

Bill pointed his own craft for the amphibian. He doubted that a harbor watch would be kept aboard the plane, and in this he found his surmise correct.

Drawing alongside, he made the canoe fast to an interplane strut, and motioned to his two companions to climb aboard.

While the Seminoles searched the hull, Bill busied himself with the engine.

He removed two spark plugs, and disconnected the joints in the pipe line at both the fuel tank and carburetor. When he had finished the Seminoles reported that there was no crew aboard.

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Bill nodded his satisfaction and the Indians followed him back into the ca-

noe. Their next port of call was the seaplane, moored to the pier, where the same performance took place. When this aircraft had also been put out of commission, they turned their attention to the yacht.

As his canoe slid close to the long, black hull of Martinengo's palatial craft, Bill dimly discerned the dark blotches on the waterline below the overhang of

the stern. An instant later, his canoe nosed in among the Indian dugouts.

Not a word was spoken. Except for the lap of wavelets against the yacht's

hull, and stentorian snores from somewhere above their heads, the night was

peculiarly silent. From afar came the dull boom of the surf. Then they heard the *pop-pop* of rifle fire from the interior of the island, more than a mile away.

Bill faced about. "If these gunsters show fight, shoot to kill!" he hissed in

a tense whisper. "But if a man throws down his arms, he is to be bound and held prisoner. I will have no murdering of unarmed men. And anyone who disobeys

this order will be shot out of hand by me. Am I understood?"

He was answered by a low chorus of grunts.

"Then—let's go!"

Leaving but one man to guard the canoes, the little band swarmed over the

low bulwarks and on to the yacht's deck. The sailor on watch was roused from his slumbers to find himself held fast by painted savages. Before he was sufficiently awake to shout for help an oily rag was thrust into his mouth. Then while one

Seminole knotted a scarf about his face to keep the gag in place, he was trussed up with rope from the coil on which he had been sleeping. His bonds were further

secured to a ringbolt in the decking and then he was abandoned.

At a word from Bill, four Indians entered the companionway amidship,

while he and the others hurried on to the forecastle entrance. He found the door closed, jerked it open and ran down a steep flight of steps. His hand groped along the wall in the darkness, there came the click of a switch and the quarters of the crew sprang into view. A table ran down the middle of the long, narrow cabin,

and twelve bunks lined the walls, six on either side. Eight of these were occupied.

Bill's words came sharp as the crack of a pistol.

“Hands in the air! Legs overside—and stay put!”

The man in the second bunk on the right reached stealthily under his pillow,

and flashed an automatic into sight, while Bill’s eyes raked the other side of the cabin. But before the sailor could crook his trigger finger, Bill felt an object whizz past his head from the rear, and to his astonishment, he saw the man crumple as though struck by lightning. The dead body fell to the floor. Imbedded in the

middle of the man’s forehead was a Seminole tomahawk.

This summary piece of justice evidently cowed the other forecastle hands,

for they offered no resistance. They were led on deck and effectively bound with

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rope and laid in a row beside the deck watch.

Bill did not wholly trust his Seminoles to keep to the promise he had ex-

tracted from them. In their eyes this night’s work was a vendetta, war to the

death, vengeance to be atoned by blood alone. They had come here to kill or be killed. He felt almost certain that they would murder these prisoners if given the slightest provocation. Therefore he remained on deck until the last gunster was laid beside his fellows, before going below. As it was, he met the men he had

sent down to the cabins as he entered the companionway.

“Anybody down there?” he asked brusquely.

“Great Chief, there *were* three white men,” the leader said slowly.

“Where are they?”

“They were foolish enough to fight, Great Chief. They have gone to the

Happy Hunting Ground. We have brought their scalps.”

Bill turned away in disgust. Yet there was nothing he could do. Censure at this stage of the game would be sure to provoke mutiny. If he upbraided these savages for acts which according to their code were acts of justice, they would probably throw off his leadership and massacre the remaining prisoners.

“Yellow Wing!” he beckoned to a subchief. “You and Long Snake will stay here with these men. You will be accountable to Chief Osceola for their safety. The rest of us will take three of the canoes and go ashore.”

Bill knew that this order did not please the two Indians, but they made no comment, and he led his group overside.

At the concrete pier he left another Indian on guard, and then, followed by the remainder of his band, hastened up the road to the top of the cliff. Ever since they had heard the report of the first gun, the firing in the middle of the island had been practically continuous. Occasionally it would lessen for a few seconds, to break out in fresh bursts directly afterward. Now, as they ran along the road which led down into the broad valley of the island, the firing became more intermittent, and at last died away altogether.

They entered the belt of woods and were traveling along the winding road-way at a trot when the sound of rifles broke out afresh. This time, the volleys seemed to come from the woods ahead. The party stopped and listened.

“They’re getting nearer,” muttered Bill, after a moment.

“White Man retreating along this road, Red Man following, Great Chief,” declared an elderly Seminole at Bill’s side.

“How do you know they are White Men, Straight Arrow?”

“Those nearest us wear white men’s boots, Great Chief. No Seminole makes

noise like that when he runs.”

Bill could hear nothing except the firing, but it never occurred to him to doubt the keen-eared Indian’s word.

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“Into the woods!” he commanded. “And don’t fire until you hear me whistle!”

The dark shadows of his savage allies seemed to melt into the forest. Bill slid behind the trunk of a palm, from where he had an unobstructed view of the turn in the road beyond. He could hear the sound of running footsteps now. The reports of rifles came nearer and nearer.

Finally a band of fifteen or twenty men appeared around the bend. In the darkness of the dense woods it was difficult to distinguish objects clearly, but Bill saw that four of the men bore a burden, and as they got well past the turn in the road, they stopped and lowered it to the ground. Immediately afterward the trip hammer detonations of a machine gun shattered the night.

There came a flash and a sharp report from the woods on the opposite side of the road. The machine-gunner fell sideways, clutching his shoulder. Another took the wounded man’s place. Before Bill could purse his lips to whistle, first one side of the road, then the other were raked with a hail of lead.

Bill could hear the bullets pinging into the soft palm that sheltered him. He dropped to the ground and lying flat, opened fire with his rifle, while the gangsters’ bullets went on singing above his head. Flashes lit the woods continuously in every direction now, and the night was made hideous by the bloodcurdling

yells of the Seminoles.

Then another and heavier burst of firing came from the bend of the road.

The machine gun was suddenly silenced. The few gangsters that were left turned and fled toward the bay.

Out of the woods leapt painted demons, shouting war cries. The cornered gunmen wheeled and fought like frenzied rats. No quarter was asked or given. Presently the Indians returned to the machine gun.

Bill stood in the middle of the road, his rifle at the ready.

“The first who touches one of these wounded gets a bullet from me!” He shouted menacingly at the Seminoles, who, he knew were bent on taking their trophy.

“And I’m with you on that, Bill!”

Osceola ran up, accompanied by his band of painted henchmen, and immediately reeled off a series of fiercely shouted gutturals in Seminole.

“That will hold them for a while,” he added in English to Bill. “There’ll be no scalping if I can stop it.—Sam! Where’s that nigger?” he raised his voice.

“Here I is, Marse Osceola. Here I is, suh. ’Fore de Lord, I ain’t scalped a prizner!”

“Oh, shut up, and pass over that electric torch you’ve been carrying for me. I want to get an idea of the damage done here.”

“Yas, suh, boss! Here it am, suh.” Sam was still stuttering as he handed

Osceola the flashlight. “Truly, I ain’t done no scalpin’ tonight, Marse——”

“Keep still—or I’ll scalp you!” The chief switched on the light. “Well, if you caught the lads afloat,” he said to Bill, “this is the last of the gang ashore.”

“You mean they’re all wiped out?”

“Well, hardly. Some are, of course, a good number, too. But the live ones are under lock and key in the jail.”

“But Osceola—did you find Dad?” Bill’s voice was trembling with eagerness.

“Sorry, old man—he’s not on the island.”

“What! Don’t tell me he’s dead?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I captured the barracks boss, who seems to be a pretty sound egg. He says that Martinengo left for the workings in Big Cypress —

it seems he is a trained pilot. He took your own plane, and forced your father to go with him.”

CHAPTER XVIII—BIG CYPRESS

AGAIN

Three o’clock on the afternoon of the next day found the two young men standing on the concrete pier, watching the narrow entrance to the bay. Beside them stood the old negro, Sam, an incongruous figure in his war paint, and armed to the teeth.

“Here they come!” cried Bill, as two wicked-looking destroyers, belching smoke from their squat funnels, glided into the harbor. “The old U. S. Navy is pretty prompt, once it gets started, eh? That isn’t bad time at all from Key West!”

“Lucky we were able to reach them by phone. That second ship is letting go her anchor. The one in the lead seems to be making for this pier.”

“I told them there was plenty of water,” said Bill, and they waited where they were until the destroyer laid alongside and made fast. A young man whose smart white uniform bore the black and gold shoulder stripes of a lieutenant-commander ran lightly across the gangway. He was followed by a chief petty officer and a file of men carrying rifles. Bill and Osceola stepped forward to meet them.

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“Who’s in command here?” inquired the officer.

“I am, sir.” Bill stood stiffly at attention. He did not salute. It is not Naval etiquette to do so unless one is in uniform, wearing one’s cap.

“Mr. Bolton, I take it,” smiled the officer. “My name is Bellinger. If it’s okay with you, Mr. Bolton, I’ll take over now?”

“Please do.” They shook hands.

Bill then introduced Osceola and gave Commander Bellinger a brief report of his experiences during the past ten days.

“We’ve buried the dead gunsters,” he ended, “and the live ones are safely housed in their own jail.”

“My word!” exclaimed the Commander. “You chaps have certainly put in an interesting summer vacation—if not a very pleasant one! You’ve seen more scrapping in a few days than I have since the Armistice!”

“The Seminoles were a bit difficult to control, sir,” Bill went on rather hesitantly.

Commander Bellinger nodded. "I'll bet they were. Probably scalped a few of the gunmen, eh? Well, what I don't know won't go into my report. The fortunes of war, you know. But I want you to understand now, Bolton, that the report won't do *you* any harm with the Superintendent of the Naval Academy—quite the reverse, in fact. Both you and Chief Osceola have done well—very well indeed. And," he added, "I think we'd better look over this gangster outfit. You'll want to start your hop soon, I suppose."

Bill nodded as they walked toward the hill.

"I have orders to meet a squadron of seaplanes from Pensacola Air Station at four o'clock in Whitewater Bay, sir."

"How long will it take you to fly over there?"

"Something under an hour, sir. With your permission I'd like the small Loening moored out yonder, and take Chief Osceola with me."

"That's okay with me, Bolton. But we'll have to get going with this inspection. Before you leave I'll give you the admiral's orders, and another envelope which you will turn over to Commander Thomson when you meet the seaplane squadron."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered Bill, and the three breasted the winding road up the cliff.

Bill pushed forward the stick, at the same time he cut his gun and the Loening amphibian he was piloting shot downward. Far below, the island-studded

waters of Whitewater Bay sparkled in the summer sunlight. Lying on its quiet
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bosom like great waterbugs with wings spread were the five seaplanes of the Navy Squadron moored in simple V-formation. Even at that distance, Bill could make out the difference in design of the flying boats.

“Three Boeing PB-1’s,” he announced into the mouthpiece of his head-
phone. “The other two are PN-10’s.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” answered Osceola. “It’s all Greek to me. But how can you tell them apart at this distance?”

“Easily enough—knowing their construction. The PB boats have a tandem engine mounting, for one thing. Can’t talk now—this has got to be a good landing. We’ve a bunch of experts watching us.”

He brought his stick slowly backward, bringing up the nose to level. Then he applied right aileron and simultaneously increased right rudder considerably. When the desired bank was reached, he checked the wing with the ailerons and at the same time eased the pressure on the rudder.

When the plane swung round so that it headed directly into the wind, Bill applied left aileron and left rudder. With wings level once more, he neutralized the ailerons and applied a normal amount of right rudder to steady her.

Once more he nosed over, and this time the Loening sped downward on a straight path into the wind, at an angle of 45 degrees. At a point equidistant from the two rear seaplanes of the moored squadron, Bill leveled off. A moment

later, with hardly a splash his plane caressed the water and glided forward under its own momentum until it came to rest directly aft of the squadron's leading seaplane.

Bill loosened the chinstrap of his helmet, as a figure in a monkeysuit walked out on the lower wing section of the big PB boat, and waved.

"That you, Bolton?"

"Good afternoon, Commander. I've got the admiral's orders aboard."

"Good enough," returned Commander Thomson. "Nose that Loening over here and let me have them. That was a smart landing you made just now. You're a credit to your old instructor!"

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Bill, with a wink at Osceola, and did as he was bid.

"And I notice you haven't lost your nerve, either," smiled the Commander as he took the long blue envelope that Bill handed him. "Cheek is a better word, perhaps."

"I never try to correct my superior officer," laughed Bill, and they shook hands.

Commander Thomson slit the envelope and read the message.

"The Old Man says you are to lead us over," he announced. "And I take it you know what to do when we get there."

"Yes, sir. Received instructions from Commander Bellinger. I've got the

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letter in my pocket. He sent his best regards to you, sir."

“Good old Pat. I bet he’d give half a stripe to be with us. We’ll shove off directly. Run your boat up to thirty-five hundred and retain that altitude until you zoom the stockade. Then climb until you are above us and don’t land until you see me on the water. Got that?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Let’s go, then. Good luck!”

“Same to you, Commander.”

Bill returned to the cockpit of his plane and presently the Loening was taxiing ahead, preparatory to her take-off.

Once in the air, he climbed to the prescribed thirty-five hundred feet. A sharp flipper turn brought the little amphibian on a compass course slightly west of north. Directly on his tail came Commander Thomson’s PB-1, with the other four planes of the squadron bringing up the rear in V-formation.

Bill, of course, did not know the exact location in Big Cypress of Marti-nengo’s gold diggings, but here Osceola’s uncanny bump of direction came into play once more. Not ever did the young Seminole appear at a loss. On they sped, straight as an arrow shot from a bow.

The sun was three-quarters down the horizon when they caught sight of the lagoon in the cypress swamp, with the stockade close beside it. They had timed their arrival to a nicety. The prisoners had just been locked up for the night and their guards were going to supper.

Forward went Bill’s stick and he dived for the buildings with a wide open throttle. He caught a fleeting glimpse of figures running on the open quadrangle

that seemed rushing up to meet him. Then back came his stick again. The Loening bucked like a frightened bronco and zoomed upward a bare fifty feet above

Mother Earth. As she rose, a weighted letter was dropped overboard.

Again Bill climbed, until his plane reached an altitude of possibly a hundred feet above the squadron, which had changed its formation and was now flying in a continuous circle, high above the stockade. Bill leveled off and sent his plane into a series of reverse control turns known as figure eights.

Less than five minutes later, the two in the Loening saw a procession of men form in front of the bosses' headquarters. From there they marched two by two out of the stockade and down the corduroy to the dock. One of the leaders carried a white flag.

Bill reached for a pair of fieldglasses and clapped them to his eyes.

"Martinengo's in front, with the flag!" he cried into the mouthpiece of his phone, nearly deafening Osceola in his excitement. "And yes—that's Dad—beside

him! Gee whiz! If I was a Frenchman, I could kiss the old Admiral! His letter did the trick, Osceola. That old boy is some humdinger!"

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"Wonder what he said in it. It certainly brought them out in a hurry."

Bill laughed. "Bellinger let me read it. Short and to the point—that's the Navy. It read: 'You are through, Martinengo. Walk down to the dock with your men—unarmed. Bring Mr. Bolton with you. My planes are bombers. Charles S. Black, Rear Admiral, U. S. N.'"

“Short and sweet, and very *much* to the point!” laughed Osceola. Two seaplanes glided down out of the circular formation below them.

“There goes the skipper,” exclaimed Bill. “It’s about time we went down and you were introduced to Dad.”

“Okay, boy, but watch your step. We don’t want to crack up now when everything’s turned out so beautifully.”

“Unh-unh—Not me!” grinned Bill, and nosed her over.

Those who have liked this story will be interested in the next book of this series, *Bill Bolton and the Flying Fish*.

The End.

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