



The Golden Pears

Raymond S. Spears

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A Story of the Dark Bend Swamps

by

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Chapter 1

DURM CLINCHELL sat on the high bank of the St. Francis River, in the Dark Bend swamps, opposite a little rippling shoal between two long, curving still waters. Across from him was a wide, white sand-bar, along the back of which was a growth of willow-trees, and beyond which was the dark brake timber. His feet dangled down the steep, caving bank, and his eyes turned restlessly up and down the river.

Across his lap rested a repeating rifle. On his head was a broad-brimmed black hat. His upper lip was smooth-shaven, while his chin carried a grey rope six inches long and two inches in circumference. His bushy eyebrows were heavier than many a mustache. His eyes were of a stern, pale brown—paler and grimmer than ever just now.

His business there was to kill a man. The man to be killed was Lunmer Andrest, an impudent young pup of a swamp-angel who didn't take Durm Clinchell as seriously as some others did, in spite of all that the old man had done and been in the Dark Bend swamps.

"Now if I hadn't ever killed anybody, he would have been excused," Clinchell swore to himself; "but I'd killed fellers before. Men that don't mind their own business has naturally got to be killed up—he knows that!"

"Hands up, Mr. Clinchell!" a stern voice hailed the thinker from behind. "Don't you touch that gun, Mr. Clinchell, or I'll just naturally plumb you through the liver an' lights!"

The old man's hands went up. Andrest had failed to come down the Stillwater in his canoe, to be shot at seventy yards, according to program. He had landed up-stream, around the bend, and crept down a dry bayou. Taking advantage of the soft, swampy ground, he had obtained the bushwhack advantage and caught his enemy unawares.

"Get up!" Andrest ordered. "Let that gun slip onto the bank, or into the river, I don't care which, only don't touch it—no, sir!"

Clinchell did as ordered. He left the rifle lying on the bank and halted ten yards away. Andrest picked it up, and then marched his prisoner along the bank to where a canoe was tied by a bit of trot-line to a snag root in the eddy of the sand-bar at the head of the Stillwater up-stream.

"I 'low I'll take you for a canoe-ride, Mr. Clinchell," the young man observed politely. "You hadn't any call to layway me, and—"

"I told you to keep clear and shet of my gal Sue Belle!" the old man exploded wrathfully. "Didn't I fair-warn ye, and didn't—"

"Sue Belle 'lowed if I didn't get to see her, somebody else would, an' so I just naturally 'lowed I'd get to see her, Mr. Clinchell. You've been disturbin' things round here enough. I'm going to take you down to Deerport and have you bound to keep the peace. Then, if you 'low to shoot me, or kill me up, it 'll be illegal. Get into that canoe, now!"

Old Clinchell choked, but he sat down in the bow of the canoe with his hands clasped across his shins. This was a new experience. He had always surrendered honorably after killing his man, but now he was captured before he could carry out his threat to shoot young Lunmer Andrest.

"Yes, sir!" Andrest continued. "I 'low I'll bond you to keep the peace!"

Accordingly the canoe started down the St. Francis, paddled by Andrest, who had a rifle on each side of him. It was fourteen miles to Deerport, but the trip was made quickly. Durm Clinchell's only possible chance to escape was to upset the canoe, dive deep, and thus elude his captor. The prisoner would have tried it but for a statement made by Andrest at the very start.

"You keep those hip-boots on, Mr. Clinchell!" he had said. "I've took mine off. If you upsot this canoe, with those hip-boots on, they'll suck you right down into the mud, sure. I'm barefooted, an' I'll float. I'll go back up an' marry Sue Belle, an' we'll spend good cotton and gum-log money—yes, sir!"

At that boast old Clinchell's ears turned bright red, and his neck looked sunburnt, for he believed that it was true. He believed a good many things that weren't so, that old St. Francis River plantation-owner. On the other hand, he didn't believe some things that were true. For instance, he never would have credited Sue Belle with saving him from the wrath of Lunmer Andrest.

"Lunmer," she had declared, "if you got killed, it's your fault; but if my daddy—dear old daddy!—gits shot up, I'll see that you got hung, shore as you're borned! Course I like you, Lunmer, but you mustn't kill my old daddy—no, indeedy!"

"But he's threatening to kill me!" Lunmer protested.

"Suttinly—ain't you tryin' to steal his gal?" she asked blandly. "Wouldn't you want to kill anybody in the world that tried to steal me?"

"Course I would!"

"Then why shouldn't my old daddy want to kill you?" she demanded triumphantly.

"Well, then, I'll—I'll—"

"I don't cyar what you do, s'long's you don't kill my old daddy," she smiled. "And s'long's you don't get killed yourself," she added.

All these things, and more, had led up to the scene when Andrest bushwhacked old Clinchell and started him down to Deerport to put him under bonds to keep the peace.

They went ashore at the Deerport steamboat-landing, and Andrest marched his captive up the clay bank into the main street. Clinchell marched with his hands in the air, for Andrest feared there might be sixshooters and long knives among the old man's garments. He carried the two rifles, one in each hand, ready to drop one and throw the other to his shoulder at the first hostile motion. He would have shot, then, and Clinchell knew it.

On the court-house steps sat Sheriff Ferris, two or three deputies, and County Judge Darkin. Old Clinchell had been tried four times before Judge Darkin, twice on the charge of homicide and twice for disturbing the peace by killing people. All four times Clinchell had been acquitted, his attorney having produced evidence that he had acted in self-defense.

"Well, 'fore the Lord o' gumption, what's this?" Sheriff Ferris demanded. "What has happened?"

"That young ras—"

"Hold on, Mr. Clinchell!" Andrest ordered. "You're my prisoner. If you run and try to escape, I'll shoot the living sunlight through you! Same way if you talk, and try to escape that away! You understand just what I mean. I won't have no nonsense! That tongue of yours has let you escape hanging four times, and you can't escape me thataway. No, sir! You try to talk yourself leg-loose, an' I'll plug you right through, jes' the same's if you tried to run. You try either way, and I shoot!"

A slow smile spread across Judge Darkin's countenance. He was used to subtle arguments, and he keenly appreciated a distinction that was no difference. Leg-bail it or tongue-bail it—for the first time in his life he saw that point clearly demonstrated. He turned a keen eye on the young man, who stood grimly silent, giving the old planter all the chance in the world to get himself out of the scrape by talking—if he wanted to take that chance.

Old Clinchell blinked. His eyes stared large in surprise. This day was a novel one in his years of experience. He heard the calm voice of Andrest take up the subject of the visit to Deerport.

"Judge Darkin," Andrest began, "I brought this man down here to have him put under the bonds to keep the peace. I hated to kill him. He sure 'lowed to kill me; he's been telling all around that he'd kill me fust chance he had. He hasn't had that chance, not yet. He was sitting on the caving bank, up St. Francis, 'cross from that shell sandbar, waiting, to-day. Like's not he'll lie and say—"

"You mean to say I'd lie?" Old Clinchell turned and burst out with wrath.

"Yes, sir—lies like a coon, like a cottonmouth snake—and I'll shoot you, same's I would a possum, if you don't shet your mouth. He'd lie and say he was watching for a deer. He warn't. He heard say I'd come down St. Francis, 'round Dark Bend, to-day. He was there to git me. I set a trap for him, and there's his rifle. I come to get him put under bonds—"

Judge Darkin shook his head.

"Mr. Clinchell is a very important citizen. Accusations against him must be supported by evidence."

"Yes, sir, o' course, an' I ain't nobody but Lun Andrest. But Mr. Clinchell's anxious to be put under bonds—he sure is! He's going to beg you to put him under bonds—sit down there, Mr. Deputy! Don't try to shuffle around behind me! Understand that? Yes, sir, Mr. Clinchell wants to be put under bonds—don't you, Mr. Clinchell?"

"What? Me want to be put under bonds? Why, you—"

"Hold on, Mr. Clinchell! Let me explain my position. Sit down, Mr. Sheriff! Don't you move around thataway. If you're a friend of Mr. Clinchell's, don't try to get around behind me, for I'm going to kill him fust!"

The young man was grim and angry. His eyes shone with hate. These county officials were Clinchell's friends. Clinchell owned fifty thousand acres of gum and cypress land, and picked a thousand acres of cotton every year. He could kill a man, and no one would say a word beyond seeing that he was tried for homicide and properly acquitted. Andrest was just a poor boy, with few friends and no relatives. He knew what to expect there in the county court of Cypress County.

"Yes, sir," Andrest continued, biting his words into square chunks, "Mr. Clinchell wants to be put under bonds to keep the peace. The reason is, if he don't go under bonds to keep the peace with me, I sure got to kill him, right here in the co't-house square! Then I'll have to shoot the sheriff and the county judge, so's I'll get a fair trial come next court. I'm tellin' you, not makin' no threats, understand. It's ag'in' the law to make threats. If Mr. Clinchell don't want to go under bonds, o' course, I got to protect my life. That's self-defense. Sheriff Ferris heard him say he'd kill me—heard him say it over his dinner-table last Saturday evening. Now didn't you, sheriff?"

The sheriff blinked unhappily. Clinchell was glaring at him, and the county judge was assuming a calmly judicial air.

"You wouldn't say a lady lied, would you, sheriff?" Andrest continued harshly. "I don't allow any man to say a lady lied, Mr. Ferris!"

A look of astonishment supplanted the anger in Clinchell's expression.

"Mr. Clinchell's interested in you're not saying a lady lied!" Andrest warned the sheriff. "You heard this man say he'd kill Lunmer Andrest last Saturday, didn't you, sheriff?"

"Yes, sir!" Sheriff Ferris popped out, while old Clinchell turned and looked longingly toward the swamp north of the bayou beyond the town limits.

"There, judge! There, Judge Darkin! There's a plumb honorable witness, sayin' this man threatened to kill me!" Andrest remarked evenly. "I'm not blamin' the sheriff now for not telling this gentleman he was a prisoner, right there, and bringin' him down himself to put him under bonds. I'm just suggestin', though I'm no lawyer, judge, that no common, ornery hundred-dollar bond will restrain this old scoundrel here. You know his record. He's a skinflint, but he never was mean about his lawyer fees or his politics money. He'll be plumb keerful how he vi'lates a real bond, sir!"

"Perhaps you think you can tell this court its duty?" Judge Darkin demanded with real anger.

"No, sir!" Andrest shook his head. "Sit still there, sheriff! I don't tell no judge his duty. But I'd sure hate the name of killin' up a county court for self-defense. You see, a man can protect himself from gettin' killed. If it's one man shootin' at him, all right. If it's one man shootin' and another man tryin' to distract the principles of the affair and mixin' in—same way. If I got to protect myself from the Cypress County gov'ment, after havin' appealed to it for protection, all right, I'm not responsible. I got a case, now, that I could fight right plumb up to the United States Constitution. Government is government, but a gang of murderers is a gang, if one side of it jes' sets the other side, that does the killin', free. That's law. You make that bond respectable and according to what is!"

"Yes, sir," Judge Darkin said. "Deputy, go get the county clerk; tell him to bring peace bonds with him."

By this time a little crowd had gathered around, staring at the scene. They were mostly no-account swamp and bottom-lands people—malaria-l, mosquito-bitten, gallinipper-harassed, and dyspepsia-depressed. They grinned at the predicament of the county government and several of its leading citizens. The leading citizens blushed and tried to be oblivious.

County Clerk Farl appeared with an old-fashioned secretary. The deputy had warned him of the condition of affairs, and he was ready to do his duty, impersonally and according to the court's directions.

"Fill in that bond," Darkin ordered harshly. "Make it—make it for fifty thousand dollars. Killing is murder, and murder has got to stop in this county!"

A gasp of astonishment sounded from the spectators. Clinchell started up.

"Why, who'll go my bond fo' that much?" he demanded.

"I don't know, sir," Judge Darkin replied indifferently. "You let yourself into this thing; now you got to find your way out. If you 'tended to things up there in Dark Bend swamps, it 'd be all right. When they get down here into civilization, the law takes its course!"

Clinchell looked from side to side. He was wealthy—he had hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of property; but at first flush he could think of no way of providing a fifty-thousand-dollar bond to keep the peace.

"It 'll be all right!" he exclaimed hopefully. "I'll sign it!"

"No, sir! You'll go into jail, sir, till there's sureties to satisfy this court!" Judge Darkin replied.

The judge signed the paper and handed it to the sheriff.

"I surrender this man to you, Mr. Sheriff," Andrest said. "Thank you, judge! A man gets desperate when an old scoundrel like this one sets out to shoot him, 'specially when a man knows that there's no court to punish him if he does meanness. I 'lowed the only way to do was get him peace-bonded 'fore we got to shootin'. If that don't do no good, I'll do some bushwhacking—yes, sir! That ain't no threat, sir; it's a promise. Good day, sir!"

"Good day, sir!"

The judge rose to bow. Andrest backed away, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He left Clinchell's rifle on the sidewalk and returned to his canoe. Five minutes later he was paddling up the St. Francis again.

Sheriff Ferris went around to various law-offices with Clinchell who felt that he needed legal advice, but his requests were not for ways of breaking the force of the peace bond. If that peace bond were set aside by judicial action of any kind, a determined young man with a first-class rifle would be turned loose, too.

What Clinchell wanted was a proper surety for the bond, and this he obtained at last by making out a mortgage on certain timber, which he offered to Danton Lesgar, president of a local bank. With this mortgage for security, the banker went over to the court and signed the paper.

"Say, judge!" Clinchell said, when the formalities had been finished. "Suppose I violate that bond—suppose I shoot that young scoundrel?"

"You forfeit fifty thousand dollars."

"That all?"

"No; it's a serious crime to kill any one when you are under peace bond, especially as you are particularly enjoined in this bond to keep the peace with Lunmer Andrest. If you kill him, you'll sure hang!

"What?"

"Yes, sir. If I'm the judge, you'll be hung!"

"S-s-say—how long is that bond for?"

"One year."

"Then—then it—"

"Expires."

"Then killing wouldn't be so—so—"

"So serious? As an officer of the court, I might suggest to you that what you are talking now will be very strongly corroborative of premeditation, if you kill young Andrest after the bond expires. As a friend, I might urge on you that the young man seems to know what he is about, and if I were a betting man I'd like to put down something on his not being killed by any one."

Clinchell turned and strode away angrily. He picked up the rifle from where Andrest had dropped it and took the trace, his short cut for home in the Dark Bend swamps. As he strode he kicked up dust, and the dust curled up behind him.

When he was far out of hearing, Judge Darkin turned to Sheriff Ferris and asked casually:

"By the way, sheriff, the complainant referred to some lady in the case—said that it would not be discreet to accuse her of prevarication. Might I ask, as a friend, you know, what ladies were present at that dinner where old Clinchell uttered his—indiscretions?"

"I've been trying to remember." Sheriff Ferris shook his head. "There was a yellow girl waiting on the table, and an old mammy sorting out the hot bread and pones and chicken and beef and so on in the fireplace, so's we'd have enough to eat. You see, we were mostly talking business and politics—sho!"

"What's the idea, sheriff?"

"Sue Belle Clinchell—sure as you're borned, judge! That was the only lady there was, and she's pretty! Yes, sir!"

"It occurred to me that perhaps she was the lady." Judge Darkin nodded, pleased with his own powers of deduction. "I was wondering why young Andrest didn't kill the old cuss and be done with it. Now I understand—old man Clinchell's the father of his sweetheart. Um-m!"

"It 'd be mean if you'd killed your wife's daddy." The sheriff shook his head. "She'd be always throwing it in your face!"

"That's so. Wonder what Andrest does to live!"

"He's a trapper—hunter—he don't amount to much."

"No-o, not yet." Judge Darkin nodded. "He had a smart way of talking, though. You know, I'm glad he made us put that peace bond the way we done. Course, old Clinchell would have honored a hundred-dollar bond same's a big one—to save his neck. But fifty thousand—sho! When he thinks it over, he'll sure be plumb proud!"

Chapter 2

Lunmer Andrest, as soon as he was around the bend up the St. Francis, sank his paddle deep in the pale-green Stillwater and drove his sassafras-log canoe swiftly upstream. It was a long, beautiful canoe. The outside and bottom were as smooth as polished oak, and the inside was cut out as accurately and smoothly as it could be planed. There had been a bend in the log that enabled the adz-man and chiseller to give the bow and stern a pointed rise of beautiful shape.

From the head of Lake Nicormy to the foot of Crowley Ridge, at Helena, where the St. Francis empties into the Mississippi, there was not a prettier canoe than Lunmer Andrest's.

"Lunmer jes' natcherly has an eye for pretty tricks!" someone had said.

"No man ever was wuth shucks who run to posies an' red birds an' pretty tricks!" old Clinchell had growled in reply.

"Course some men that's real practical sets store by pretty women," Si Hed Jesnie suggested slyly.

"Sho!" grunted Clinchell angrily, and yet feeling a kind of compliment at that. Old Clinchell did have a hard time trying to keep all kinds of men from bothering his girl, Sue Belle.

A man with an eye for pretty tricks had no business with the daughter of an eminently practical citizen like old Durm Clinchell. If Andrest had only been able to see himself as other people saw him, he would have understood the condition; but he told himself that of all the pretty tricks in the Dark Bend bottoms, Sue Belle Clinchell was the finest. On her side, for reason or whimsy of her own. Sue Belle Clinchell seemed to favor the trapper and fisherman who lived in a little yellow shanty-boat in one of the long, half-moon eddies of the St. Francis River.

Andrest drove his fine canoe up-stream to his home stillwater. As he rounded the last turn on the way, he saw his little yellow house-boat resting under the huge, outswung branches of a monster gum-tree. The leaves of the gum were pale yellow, too. Fat red squirrels were romping in the neighboring trees, and back in the woods young wild gobblers were trying to give weight to their gobbling practise.

High overhead, a flock of wild geese lettered the sky as they flew southward. The tree-tops, the mid-height branches, the shrubs next to the ground, were alive with migrating birds—warblers, wrens, thrushes, and such like. A swarm of robins left a narrow sand-bar with a roar like a tornado, their wings beat the air so swiftly and there were so many thousands of them.

With his eye for beautiful things, Lunmer Andrest lost few details of the scene of his home eddy. He had dropped down Little River out of the back country of New Madrid several years before. He had floated with spring and winter tides till he found the Dark Bend swamps, and they satisfied his need for fish, game, and fur. He could find beauty anywhere, except in the great city country up on the Ohio, from which he had fled.

Now, having run his canoe to the stern of his cabin-boat, he walked the length of the craft, caught the trot-line at the bow, made it fast to a timber-head of the houseboat, and stepped upon the deck. The fact that he could walk fifteen feet along a polished bottom sassafras canoe without upsetting it, without even thinking that he was doing anything unusual, indicated his skill and long practise in such craft.

He stopped on the house-boat deck and looked at the scene for which he had such fond regard—the unspoiled swamp wilderness with its birds and beasts, the river with its limestone green, the sky with its soft radiance.

"If men would only leave a man alone!" Andrest sighed. "I'm peaceable; I mean harm to no one; but they just won't leave a man alone!"

With an angry gesture, he flung open the door of his cabin and entered. The day had been a trying one. He had looked forward to it for sixty hours or so with distaste amounting almost to dread; but old Clinchell had become unbearable, and it had been necessary to bring the questions at issue to a head.

"I got out of it better'n I had any right to expect." Andrest shook his head doubtfully. "I 'lowed I'd sure have to kill him or somebody, but the politicians down to Deerport seemed to understand. They was real reasonable. Like as not they knowed I meant what I said. Perhaps they're tired of old Clinchell's meanness theirselves. I got him under bond, anyhow. Now, if he kills me, there ain't no self-defense or legality to it nohow, and it 'll cost the old scoundrel fifty thousand dollars. He'd just as soon pay two-three thousand dollars in lawyers' fees and court troubles for killin' a man, but fifty thousand's different. I bet it wouldn't be any satisfaction killin' a no-'count shanty-boater if you forfeit fifty thousand dollars. It wouldn't be to me, I know that!"

"Wu-hoo!"

A voice sounded from up the bank. The morose depression vanished from Andrest's countenance. That voice was sweeter than any bird's to his ear, and he knew some lovely singing birds. He sprang to the bow deck and up the bank. His face was alight with smiles. His eyes were shining with happiness.

At the top of the bank he looked the half-circle around, but saw no one. He laughed aloud.

"Hoo-wu!" he replied and then ran out in a half-circle to accept the challenge.

Sure enough, he found tracks, and following these in the soft wood loam he traced their maker into a crevice in a cottonwood-tree that was seven feet in diameter. He went right into the hollow, and immediately there was a shrill squeal.

Backing out, Andrest was followed by a young woman, hardly more than a girl. She looked him fairly in his blue eyes and demanded:

"Well, sir?"

"He's bonded!"

"Then he cayn't kill you!" she exclaimed. "And you didn't get to shoot him?"

"I just got the drop on him, and I took him down to Deerport—"

"And Judge Darkin bonded him?"

"He sure did."

"But he's friendly to daddy!"

"He bonded him," Andrest insisted. "Course the sheriff 'lowed he'd heard old—your daddy say he'd kill me."

"Why didn't he he? He never let on but lie before!" she demanded.

"I asked him did he want to tell me a lady lied. Then he said your daddy 'lowed to get me."

"You—you asked him that?" she demanded, her face blank with surprise. "Sho! And there's folks that 'lowed you—you warn't quite bright!"

Andrest grinned sheepishly.

"I just wanted to know!" she exclaimed. "Good day, sir!"

She turned and fled into the big timber. Unhitching a mule, she mounted and soon disappeared.

Andrest looked after her long after she had been lost to his view in the dark woods. It was friendly of her to come and see him there. She always had been friendly to him. Sometimes he wondered at that—the daughter of a rich old planter, who might have been friendly with any young man in the St. Francis bottoms, where there were young men of the quality kind.

He was under no illusions regarding his position. Clinchell had been bested personally, but the old man would now work his schemes indirectly. Andrest knew that his troubles had but just begun.

Only one sure escape was open to him, and that was flight. He could drop down St. Francis into old Mississipp', and there would be slight chance of old Clinchell chasing him farther. That meant abandoning the beautiful forest river, fleeing from the wonderful Dark Bend swamps, and leaving Sue Belle Clinchell for some other young man to get. If he went, she would properly despise him; if he remained, he must fight—fight bushwhacking enemies and bought assailants.

Lunmer Andrest could have cried for vexation—could have shed tears, the evidence of the poetry in his soul. Practical people do not weep, but those who love things of beauty know the welling of tears into their eyes. The sign of emotion is no sign of weakness, however; and if he would have preferred peace, he did not flinch from fighting through lack of courage.

He entered his cabin-boat and cleaned his firearms. He had several, each according to certain needs. He had a little twenty-two-caliber repeater, which served to kill squirrels, rabbits, and similar small game. He had a heavy small-bore rifle, good for wild turkeys, wild geese, deer, and other large swamp game. He had a repeating shotgun which brought down wild fowl in full flight—ducks of many kinds, as well as feather birds. In addition to these was a pair of automatic pistols, which he now cleaned and worked with extra pains.

The side-arms were a sign of the jeopardy of the swamps. Many people could get along without them. Men who minded their own business, who courted no women and troubled no neighbor's hogs, who kept far within the bounds of peace and good nature, need carry no pocket or holster guns. But the moment there was a chance of trouble, only the foolhardy would refrain from packing a pocket-shooter night and day.

Andrest put on his wide belt and slipped the automatics into the holsters. The holsters were hidden by his coat. The weight was troublesome, but that was one of the penalties of being prepared for emergency.

What would old Clinchell do? That was the question uppermost in Andrest's mind. He could think of a good many ways in which an attack might be made, but he could not guess from what direction it was likely to come, and he spent a wakeful and uneasy night.

In the morning he set forth in his skiff to pull his hoop-nets. He had the traps in pools in several river stillwaters, and in two deep-water lakes which he discovered back in the brake. When he had raised the nets, he had more than a hundred pounds of fish. He rowed them up to River Bridge, to ship them in a coffee-bag to a Memphis commission merchant. The station-agent handed him an envelope containing payment for the fish shipped two days before—six dollars and a few cents.

"I hear you met up with old Clinchell?" the agent questioned covertly.

"Oh, yes!" Andrest nodded, smiling. "We 'lowed to go to Deerport. It's all right now."

"You say it is?" The agent looked wonderingly. "No, sir; don't you believe it! Old Clinchell's jes' bound to be mean and trifling. Course he won't do anything hisself; but you watch out, Mr. Man! If I had that old man rearing down on me, you know what I'd do? I'd light out'n this Dark Bend district so quick I'd make dust o' mud; I would indeedy!"

"It's a free country!" said Andrest, but he shook his head as he returned down the embankment to his skiff.

As he rowed down-stream he reckoned up his money. An idea had come into his head. Sue Belle was fond of him, and he wondered if he could persuade her to elope with him. He doubted if she would go with a shanty-boater down the Mississippi to live. She was the daughter of a rich old planter—an only child.

One great question was the amount of money available. When one courts the daughter of a thousand-acre cotton-picker, the thought of money bids him pause. The problem of escape and pursuit, the strangeness of the lower river—none of these things worried Andrest. He guessed that Sue Belle would go when they were ready; but he had only a little money, hardly enough to keep the girl in the kind of clothes she wore. One suit, she had mentioned casually, cost forty-eight dollars in Memphis. That wasn't any too good for her, but Andrest's best suit cost eleven dollars and a half, and his work suit had cost two dollars and sixty cents by mail.

Andrest reckoned his whole fortune at just eighteen hundred and twenty dollars, including five dollars of his day's receipts. The rest of his money was buried in demijohns back in the swamp by a certain tree. The shanty-boater did not know how to put his savings out at interest, and he never had dared to ask questions that might awaken the suspicions of the bad men who lurked in the Dark Bend swamps.

Some of them, their neighbors said, would kill a man for fifty dollars—with pleasure, and without conscience. They had killed men for less than that. Andrest's face grew grave as he faced the probability that old Clinchell would consider this means of "losing" his enemy.

When he rounded the river turn in sight of his landing, he looked ahead to where his cabin-boat had been moored. The yellow craft was nowhere in sight. He quickened his stroke, ran down to the landing, and gave a startled look around.

Sure enough, there were the tracks of strange rubber boots. Someone had cast off the lines and set the boat adrift. Perhaps it had been set on fire and allowed to burn down to the water's edge. Perhaps it had been sunk in a deep stillwater; perhaps it was just chopped up and broken to pieces.

With wrath in his heart, Andrest pulled down-stream. Somewhere down the river he would find traces of the little yellow house-boat. As he rowed he realized what was in store for him.

"Old Clinchell's just goin' to pester me!" he told himself. "He's hired those swamp-angels that's scouting around to torment me and trouble my livin'!"

Sure enough, three miles down-stream, as he rounded a bend in sight of Culler's Shoals, he discovered his floating home aground in the little rapid. When he ran alongside with his skiff and looked into it, he found his suspicions corroborated.

A pirate had robbed the boat, spoiling what he could not conveniently carry away. The pretty interior was littered up with flour and corn-meal; the slab of bacon was gone. Andrest's woolen blankets had been cut into shreds; the mosquito-bars over the windows were slit and broken out, and the pails and crockery were, kicked in or smashed. His shotgun and a heavy revolver were missing.

He had always kept the little boat as neat as soap, water, and little tricks could make it. He had woven pretty mats out of the bright feathers of birds that he killed to eat, and hung them on the walls. He had carved bone-hard chunks of wood into little statues and ornaments, polishing and varnishing them. He always had a few posies in a glass dish on the table.

More than that, he had picked up many mussel-shells in the river and along the sand-bars, and had wired them into little jars, in which he grew pretty ferns and plants of his own. His furniture was all home-made, of heavy, black wood, with home-tanned buckskin seats. His pillows were home-filled with goose-down—not the feathers, but the softest fluffs of down.

All his pretty contrivances were trampled up and mixed in the flour and corn-meal which splashed the floor and walls, the vandal having thrown pails of water into the mess. The pirate's footprints had tracked back and forth as he devastated Andrest's home.

"I got to pack a big shoulder-rifle now!" he told himself emphatically. "I cayn't let that hired scoundrel get away, either. He must have jumped ashore somewhere up this stillwater—I'll get to see where he landed!"

Throwing over an anchor to hold the boat on the shoal in case the water should rise, he rowed up the east bank of the Stillwater to the next shoal above. Then he pulled down the west side, watching the bare ground. Half-way down the Stillwater he found the spot where the man had jumped ashore. The track of the flour and cornmeal on the bank was plain against the clay.

"He's a bad scoundrel!" Andrest told himself. "He's careless about his tracks, an' that shows he's afraid of no man. He 'lows there's no one that dares track him back into his dark corner. I'll see about that! I'll see about old Clinchell hiring him, too!"

Chapter 3

The Clinchell plantation occupied a level tract of bottoms more than a thousand acres in extent. On the west side was an old bayou, dry between overflows. On the east side was the St. Francis River. North and south were tupelo and cypress bottoms, covered after every rain with inches of water, and wilderness-grown because they were so low.

The plantation was eight or ten feet higher than any other land for miles around. Formerly it had been a cane-grown ridge, but Clinchell had cleared it, cutting away the timber and rafting it down to Helena. The timber began his fortune; the cotton which he planted among the stumps gave him a steady income, and he extended his claims until he had acquired fifty thousand acres of cypress and gum bottoms, while his cotton-field widened and bore thriftily as the stumps rotted down.

In the days when the Indians mastered the St. Francis bottoms, they had known this cane ridge; and because the Mississippi overflows covered even the cane during the spring and winter tides, they built a dozen mounds, one of which covered more than two acres. The big mound was thirty or thirty-five feet high when Clinchell built a split-board shack on it. He levelled off the tops of the other mounds, and built mule-pens and cattle-pens on them.

When the time came and money in plenty was in his hands, he tore down his old shack cabin, levelled off the big mound, and built a mansion on it. That mansion's foundation was five feet above the highest flood that ever flowed across the St. Francis bottoms from the Mississippi, or down the bottoms out of the Ozarks and other southern Missouri hills.

The foundation was built of stone, brought on barges from a quarry above Cairo, on the Mississippi. At each end was a brick chimney twelve feet wide. The roof was shingled with slate, and no one ever could remember how many thousand feet of black walnut, oak, cypress, and other fine woods went into the floors and ceilings and sides of the Clinchell mansion.

The mansion yard measured eight acres, and contained three smaller mounds, on which house-servant quarters were built. The quarters of the field-hands were away out on the flat land—cabins of logs chinked with lime, standing five or six feet above the level on stout posts.

To this mansion, which had tall white columns in front, green window-blinds, two high stories, and an attic, Clinchell brought the wife of his choice, having killed her other lover in a fair fight over on White River. He installed her with almost regal powers there in his primitive little kingdom of a hundred square miles.

It was many miles from the Clinchell plantation to any other plantation. The St. Francis River was the usual highway in high-water times, and several traces, or wood roads, meandered out from the ridge to the other settlements. One went down to Deerport, one up to the railroad, and other traces led back into the bottoms. These were used by the homesteaders, claim-holders, and fugitives scattered around on little ridges and mounds, which gave promise of being permanently dry land when the big drainage ditches carried off the water that oozed through the levees, fell from bursting clouds, or washed through in waves of overflow when the levees broke.

In thirty years Clinchell had become a rich and elderly widower, and as the father of Sue Belle he was content to let things remain as they were. So far as he knew, there was not a shade of discontent in his whole domain, even Sue Belle preferring the isolated plantation to the town life to which the family income would have entitled them.

"The trouble is those pesterin', no-'count, shiftless young bucks!" old Clinchell told himself as he strode out of Deerport, under bonds to keep the peace with the meanest type of all, a trifling shanty-boater. "That scoundrel—if he hadn't got the drap on me!"

Clinchell shook his shaggy head and gnashed his yellow fangs. He had never been under bonds to keep the peace before. Quite a number of his minor neighbors had been in that position at one time or another. Those who broke the bonds and shot somebody up had had to go to the penitentiary. That was the inevitable result.

Old Clinchell knew that if he made a personal attack on Andrest, public sympathy would be with the shanty-boater, who somehow managed to have a good many friends.

A cold dread had struck his heart when he first discovered, a few weeks before, that Sue Belle—of all girls!—had been friendly around with the shanty-boater. Three or four silver dollars judiciously passed around among yellow plantation girls had brought him positive information that Sue Belle had actually rowed up the St. Francis River with Lunmer Andrest. They were almost courting, though none of the spies reported that they had actually behaved like lovers.

"They was jes' a talkin' an' paddlin'," one yellow girl declared. "They ain' got to bussin' er squazzin' er thataway."

Old Clinchell had almost had apoplexy at the thought of his Sue Belle kissing or squeezing, or anything like that, with the shiftless shanty-boater, who shipped his own furs and fish, who whistled to all kinds of dicky-birds, who knew all the flowers by their right names, and who squandered his time shucking clam-shells and cutting little images out of knuckle woods. He swore that he would "get shet" of Andrest. He ordered the plantation hands to keep him informed about the shanty-boater's movements. He worked himself up into a fine frenzy of anger and resentment.

Then, one day, the sheriff had happened to drive by, having been hunting a "rewarded" fugitive in some of the cane-brake ridges around the plantation. Old Clinchell had snatched at the opportunity to prepare the way for another killing, to be followed by the formality of a trial according to custom in the county court.

"You see how it is," he told Sheriff Ferris. "I just got to get shet of that young scoundrel. Supposing he should run away with this gal of mine? You see what that would mean. Here I'd be left all alone with just this old plantation and a thousand hands or so—nothing but work, work, work all the rest of my life. What did I bring that gal up for, do you expect?"

"It surely is hard!" Sheriff Ferris shook his head. "Can't you just run him out of the country? You know—scare him?"

"Scare him? Why, that man's such aarnation fool, you can't scare him. I had two or three sawmill hands go down there a while back, and they was to beat him up good. Well, what happened? He just naturally give those black men the tearin'est, darin'est scare-up they ever had in all their borned days. He shot the ground from under their feet, made 'em dance, made 'em sing, told 'em they had to pray good. They done it, too!"

In spite of himself, old Clinchell laughed grimly.

"You see, I got to do it myself. I hate to, too. A man don't like to kill anybody, not without it's necessary; but I expect this is one of them times." Clinchell sighed. "So I 'low I'll just set on the bank next week and pot him as he draps down. I just wanted to know about next court-week, so if I had to be locked up it wouldn't be too long, and anyhow not till we get that cut on the red-bank section made and the logs skidded up ready for the barges next tide."

"You know it's against the law, killing is," the sheriff had remonstrated feebly.

"Oh, I know about that!" Clinchell had exclaimed. "I'll stand trial, if I'm caught. I don't want no mistake, like it was last time. Why, I was in jail three months, right in picking-time! All because I happened to forget, being so impatient, that court didn't set till come January, and there it was 'long of October. Well, like's not, you'll get to coming up thisaway again directly, 'count of meanness being done!"

Sheriff Ferris stirred uneasily in his chair. Old Clinchell was not like other constituents in Cypress County. He had lived away back in the Dark Bend country so long among his plantation-hands and sawmill-workers, surrounded by fugitives from justice from a dozen States and even foreign countries, that he had grown careless, had grown to depend less and less on the authorities, and more and more on his own firearms.

When he arrived in Deerport the following morning, Sheriff Ferris had talked the matter over with Judge Darkin, who hardly knew what to do about it. The county government was seriously alarmed, in fact, for old Clinchell was growing almost as lawless as some of the bad men around in the swamps who were being hunted for rewards, on charges of murder, and other serious crimes.

It was a great relief—secret, but none the less sincere—when the young shanty-boater turned the tables on the hot-headed old planter and brought him down to put him under bonds to keep the peace. Clinchell couldn't blame them for being trapped into doing their duty; and it was a warning which the old man could not help but take to heart.

"He's got money enough! He don't have to do his own killing!" people laughed when they heard of the matter. "Lawzee, but that young shanty-boater sure has his nerve with him!"

Old Clinchell was so angry that he forgot to hire a livery rig to drive him back to his plantation in the swamps. He stormed along the trace, growling under his breath, and glancing from right to left, as if that would help him to see his way out of the predicament.

Before he arrived home he saw the truth of what people had said—he had money enough not to do his own killing. However, it was not an easy matter to find anyone to do meanness as regards young Andrest. Everyone knew that Andrest never refused a man a meal, and more than once he had helped the scouts in the dark swamps to get word back to their own people without danger of being traced down and caught for the rewards on their heads.

Perhaps it wasn't killing that young Andrest needed, Clinchell reflected, for killing might bring embarrassment on himself. There were other things less attractive, but equally vindictive, and easier to accomplish. Clinchell stopped at a little cabin on what was called Racer Ridge, and held confab with a lank swamper who sat on a log-end, smoking a home-made cob pipe with a cane stem.

"Well, Jesnie!" he greeted. "You want to do me a favor? Want to earn a week's wages in an hour or two?"

"I shore do!" the smoker replied listlessly and without emotion.

"Well, here's five silver dollars—they're yours, providing. Now listen—you know Andrest's little yellow shanty-boat?"

"Yas, suh."

"Well, Andrest goes away from it real neglectful—takes his fish to River Bridge. So there's a lonesome eddy, and that boat into it. If that boat's tore up, an' what's into it all muxed around—um-m, I'd give ten silver dollars—five now and five when I hear it's done. Understand that?"

"Yas, suh."

"You'd do it?"

"I've no hawd feelings to'd Lun Andrest, suh!"

"You don't have to have. Don't you see, you do it for me! I'm the one has the hard feelings—"

"If I had the hawd feelin's, and wasn't man enough to display 'em myself, I wouldn't ast no other man to show 'em for me!" the swamp man exclaimed angrily and with his first show of feeling.

"Look here! Do you know you built this house on my land?" Clinchell demanded, taken aback by the swamp man's statement.

"Do you know I got a good gun an' it shoots long bullets? If my house ain't left alone I'll know who to shoot!" the swamp man declared emphatically. "I know you, Clinchell—you've done meanness, and you've been hawd with your help and those that ain't done your way. I'm honorable! Lunmer Andrest toted grub to me when I was scoutin'—he knowed I was innocent of killin' Champ Holdun, and he would 'a' swore to it. You never packed no grub to me, and I don't owe you nothin', suh. I'm faithful to my friends, suh!"

"Oh—I plumb forgot, Jesnie. Course Andrest is your friend. You put that five dollars into your pocket—I apologize. A man ought never to step between friends. I 'lowed you were just 'quaintances. You know any one that hasn't any good feelngs toward him? I don't want to make any more mistakes like that."

"Well, now, that's a bird of a longer feather, suh. Course Andrest's a stranger down thisaway, you might say. Course he voted here last 'lection. You know, he kind of argued some with Rip Morlung—"

"That's so, Jesnie! I plumb forgot. I'm obliged to you."

"Rip's not around home now, you know—not lately. I 'low he's scoutin'. He's rewarded since that fuss to the dance—

"Sho! S'posin' I left word?"

"I expect he'd get it—round of Drury's, or thataway."

"I bet he would! Good day, sir!"

"Good day!"

Clinchell took the trace road to Drury's, but before he arrived there he saw Rip Morlung just fading into the dark brake west of the trail.

"Oh, Rip!" he hailed. "I'm friendly! Want to see you a minute on business!"

Rip stopped, turned, and approached the old planter cautiously. At a few yards' distance he stopped, demanding:

"Well, Mr. Clinchell?"

"I got a bad friend I want taught his manners, Rip," Clinchell began. "I understand he's no friend of yourn, too. His name's Andrest, and he's a shanty-boater—"

"I know him! He's purty handy with his tongue, argufying."

"Well, I'll stand the damage if he sues, and I'll provide lawyers if anybody's arrested. I jes' want his boat tore up and set loose down St. Francis. He's—"

"I see you an' him drapping down in hisn's canoe this mornin', Mr. Clinchell. He had both rifles in the stern. I thought sunthin', but, course it weren't my business—not then it wasn't."

"Yes, Rip—he took me down to Deerport and had me peace-bonded. That's why I'm seeing you. You aren't bonded!"

"No, suh! I never was, nor expect to be. I'll die right to the breech of my gun, a fightin' and a shootin' till I die. I never will be took alive!"

"Then it won't harm you none, and it 'll help you some, if you tear up that boat."

"It 'll help me some?"

"Yes, sir! I got ten silver dollars right here in my pocket now for any man that promises to tear that boat up. I got forty more silver dollars to home for the man that goes and tears it up!"

Clinchell drew a canvas shot-bag from his pocket and extracted from it ten silver dollars, which he stacked like poker-chips and held up for Rip to see.

"I'll shore tear that boat up, Mr. Clinchell!" Rip declared. "Set them onto that gum log there, and I'll go get 'em. Course I trust you, Mr. Clinchell, but when a man's scoutin' he's got to keep every man covered and cayn't take no chances!"

"I understand. Rip!"

Thus the bargain was struck, and Clinchell cut across through the brake toward his plantation. He followed a survey-line a mile east and then a mile north on the mile-square lots. Then he struck a township-line, which he followed till he ran into the Hills Trace, leading straight across through the woods to his plantation.

He was very well satisfied with his bargain. It was said in the Dark Bend swamps that no one ever had the best of old Durm Clinchell for very long. He believed that he was invincible, and was pleased to think that Andrest would not long remain in that territory to pester him and make him fear for his daughter.

On the following day, about noon, a yellow boy told him that a "gemman 'lowed to see 'im," and, sure enough, out in the edge of the brake he found Rip Morlung lurking beyond the dry bayou.

"Sho! You tore that boat up so soon?" Clinchell hailed him.

"I shore have, Mr. Clinchell! I knowed from what you said that you was urgent, so I took it this mornin', when he was up to the railroad with hisn's fish. I shore mussed up that boat—hue-e! I jes' waded into his flour and corn-meal!"

The swamp scouter held up his boots for Clinchell to admire the daubs of wet flour on them.

"Here's the forty dollars I owe you!" the old man said shortly, counting out the silver. "I see you did a good job!"

The fugitive took the money and faded into the swamp again. Clinchell turned back into the open field and, circling around by the cotton-pickers, saw that the crew was working to his satisfaction.

He wanted to laugh at the promptness of his answer to Andrest's temporary success. Still, he could not be sure that he was completely rid of the young shanty-boater until word reached him that Andrest had dropped down past Deerport in the little yellow boat. Sometimes young men did not take hints immediately. Sometimes they waited till something happened directly to them.

At any rate, Andrest would now have something to think about besides courting around Sue Belle. More and more Clinchell's satisfaction increased as the day wore on, but the following morning he received a telephone message from Deerport. The sheriff wished to talk to him.

"Hello, sheriff!" he greeted.

"Say, Mr. Clinchell, we got a man down here—feller there's a good reward on, and he was brung in and the reward collected. He says he's a friend of yours, and for me to tell you, and you'll help him out—"

"What's his name?"

"Rip Morlung—you know, the man that shot Foreman Crust into the Dorlat logging-camps—"

"Rip Morlung! Who come in with him?"

"Why, that Lunmer Andrest—you know—the fellow that—"

"I know!" snapped Clinchell. "What does Rip want?"

"He 'lows he wants a lawyer."

"All right—get him Hep Lester!"

"All right, sir. Course, if he's a friend of yourn—"

"I'll be down before court," Clinchell interrupted. "Thank you—good day!"

Old Clinchell turned away from the telephone with a look of disgust on his face.

"The fool! Course Andrest tracked him—and got five hundred reward!"

Chapter 4

When Lunmer Andrest took up the trail of the enemy who had wrecked his floating home, he followed it to the near side of a dry bayou that bordered the Clinchell plantation. There he saw where a barefoot boy had approached the flour track and departed again—a messenger. Then he found the tracks of old Clinchell himself. He knew those tracks, for he had often had occasion to observe them.

The vandal's trail led from Clinchell's tracks down the dry bayou to a pool of water, in which the man had washed his boots, as the water and an adjacent gum log showed. Andrest searched around till he found the departing direction of the cleaned boots, but following the trail was much more difficult now. He finally lost the track in a cane-brake, and was obliged to leave it.

He cut through the swamps to Si Hed Jesnie's cabin, which stood at the entrance to an untouched bottom-land wilderness extending over hundreds of square miles of gum, cypress, oak, and other trees, canebrakes, lotus lakes, and sunken lands.

Jesnie was sitting on the steps of his split-board cabin, smoking his home-made pipe with a cane-root stem. He nodded gravely in reply to Andrest's greeting.

"Jesnie," Andrest began, "you've always been a friend of mine."

"I suttinly have, suh!"

"I've never refused you a favor, nor asked one from you. I've always done the best I knew for you and all my neighbors."

"You suttinly have, Lun!"

"Now I've a favor to ask—one that nobody ever need know about—but you needn't to give it if you think it 'd hurt any friend of yours. When I went home to my shanty-boat this morning it was gone—the stakes pulled up. I followed down the river, and it was aground on Culler's Shoals. When I went into it, everything was all tore up—flour and meal on the floor, and a pail of water throwed onto it. My seine-net was dragged into it. I had a can of canvas waterproofing, and it was spilled around. All my feathers and whittled tricks was mixed into the mess. I had a lot of shell tricks—you know those things out of clams—and they was all scattered around. Course I tracked back. I found where the scoundrel who done it jumped up the bank. I tracked him by the clods of flour and meal on his boots to Clinchell's dry bayou. From there the man went to a pool and washed his boots off. I trailed him over yon side the Turkey Ridge cane-brake, but he lost himself there."

"I understand, suh, perfectly," Jesnie nodded.

"You know what I want to know?"

"I expect I could guess some."

"Well, will you tell me is anybody 'sides old Clinchell feeling mean toward me?"

"Suppose you ask names?" Jesnie suggested. "I'm friendly to my neighbors."

"I don't remember but one man ever was provoked at me," Andrest said, as if thinking aloud.

"It was last election. I argued with a man. A man's a fool arguing about politics, without he's political himself. I had quick words with Rip Morlung. Is Rip unfriendly?"

"I wouldn't say he's unfriendly," Jesnie said slowly; "but, you see, in a business way—if he just didn't care, up or down—"

"Somebody might get him to do something for money, even if he himself didn't allow to be mean?"

"Rip wouldn't kill you"—Jesnie shook his head—"not right off by his own self. He isn't that unfriendly. He just don't care, I should say. Course old Clinchell's mean—but he's bonded!"

"And he might get Rip to—"

"He come here—I'm telling you!—he come here to see me. I told him where he'd find Rip—"

"That's what I wanted to know, Jesnie," Andrest exclaimed. "I'm a lot obliged to you. I won't forget. Good day, sir!"

"Good day!"

Andrest turned and struck away through the timber toward his cabin-boat. He dragged it up the shoals and moored it against the west bank of the Culler eddy, and began to clean out the mess the raider had made. He shoveled it into a pail, and then stirred out the flour and meal by repeated filling with water. This salvaged the cartridges. It also salvaged the clam-shell tricks that he had gathered because they were pretty. He washed the faces of the grotesques that he had carved for amusement out of hardwood knots and knuckle pieces.

Before nightfall he had cleaned and mopped out the cabin. The weavings and plaitings which he had made from pretty feathers were all muddied with the meal and flour, but he tried to save them, too, washing them as best he could. If it had not been for the waterproofing he would have been able to clean up most of them; but, as it was, he had to put them aside for future care.

When he started to cook his supper he found that his salt was emptied out and spoiled. That fact added to the cold rage that filled him. He could not eat saltless squirrels that night, for he was not hungry enough. Instead of eating, he shouldered his short thirty-thirty rifle, put fifteen feet of trot-line into his hip-pocket, nicely coiled, and set forth into the brakes, wearing his bear-paw moccasins.

Andrest knew the brakes, night or day. He could tell where he was by looking at the sky on a dark night. The shape of the tree-limbs against the clouds would show whether he was on high or low land. He knew which trees grew in the eternal muck and which on the ridges. Of course, if he found switch-cane or pole-cane, he knew he was on a ridge; and if he did not recognize the place, he knew from his previous course whereabouts he was.

The dark in the sunken lands had no terrors for him. He was so angry now that he could hardly lose his way if he tried.

He knew where he wanted to go. He went straight across the bottoms until he struck Netormine Lake. This was seven miles back from the St. Francis River. Following the shore of this tree-grown lake, he struck a cut-bank, which he climbed, and then he followed the edge of the cane-brake around.

Stopping at last, he listened. Sure enough, there was music in the swamp! Someone was playing a fiddle. The sound was weird, like a ghost's harping. Andrest did not mind that; he crept in the direction from which the music came, pushing noiselessly through the cane-brake, inch by inch, till at last he saw the reflection of a fire on the trunk of a big gum-tree ahead of him.

There was a clearing in the cane-brake, an opening about forty feet across, under the big gum-tree. In this clearing was a little hutch, hardly eight feet square, built of split boards and poles. In front of the open side was a log fire flaring and smoking. Sitting on a log-end was a man, fiddling away for his own satisfaction and company.

The man was Rip Morlung, fugitive from justice and swamp-angel. This was his "main home," and he did not suppose that any one save himself knew where it was. If he had suspected that another man shared his secret, though that other man was counted his truest and safest friend, he would have fled on the instant and built himself another hut in some other brake.

Just by accident Lunmer Andrest had stumbled upon the hiding-place, and he had told no one about it. The knowledge was of a kind that was none of his business until he was obliged to use it in self-defense.

Then he was right glad that he had told no one, least of all Rip Morlung, what he knew. Andrest listened to the music for two hours, and between tunes he listened to Morlung talking to himself. Scouters often get into the habit of talking aloud to themselves back in the brakes.

"I earned fifty easy thataway!" Morlung exclaimed. "I shore mussed up that little old shanty-boat—yes, I did! I bet Andrest 'll quit these yere swamps! Old Clinchell shore was glad he come to me! Impident little pup—sass me, will he? Course I've no mean feelings for Andrest, but he needed settin' down, runnin' around and meeting Sue Belle Clinchell. Course old Clinchell's mad. Why wouldn't he be? 'Oh, come on now, my dicky-bird!'"

Morlung interrupted his soliloquy with a burst of violin music. He played a long, lively tune, "Come On Now, My Dicky-Bird," and listened enraptured to his own music.

Thus he played, and thus Andrest listened appreciatively. The hour grew late. Toward midnight the scouter put his violin tenderly into its case, worked a set of shells through the breech of his repeater, and carefully cleaned it, cleaned his two big revolvers, and counted his fifty silver dollars over and over again.

"Hue-e!" Morlung grinned aloud. "I shore earned fifty silver wheels easy to-day! It were easier ner holding up a commissary—yes, indeed! I'll jes' put this away where I'll find it when I come back."

He walked to the foot of the big gumtree and, lifting out a handful of sticks and chips and clods, pulled into view a stone jug. One by one he slipped the silver dollars into the jug, and as they fell Andrest heard them strike other coins. Morlung replaced the jug, covered it over, and packed it down.

Having thus prepared for the night, he bit off a chunk of plug-tobacco, crawled back into the hut, hung his belt on a fork, and stretched out upon the bunk that he had constructed of poles and canvas. A minute or two later Andrest heard him snoring.

The watcher settled himself where he sat and dozed into sleep. He was awakened by a turkey calling out in the swamp, and saw that dawn was at hand.

Morlung slept late that morning. When at last he stepped out to stir up the coals of his log fire, he neglected to put on his belt with its revolver holsters. As he stooped to roll the log-ends around, Andrest called sharply:

"Hands up, Morlung!"

Morlung's two hands dropped to his waist as he straightened and turned to face the ambush; but his revolvers were not there. Facing the muzzle of the rifle, he had but two choices—one to surrender, the other to make a motion toward his hut, and die.

The fugitive hesitated for only a moment, and then he surrendered. Andrest stepped into the little clearing. When he was at short range he told Morlung to turn and face the other way and put both hands behind him. This done, Andrest looped his piece of trot-line around his captive's wrists and bound them fast. Then he tied the scout's elbows together with another set of loops.

"What you got ag'in' me, Andrest?" Morlung began, whining. "I've never been mean to you! You ain' givin' me up for the reward, are you? There's fellers with lots bigger rewards on 'em than there is on me. I'd help get—"

"You didn't wash the tops of your boots clean, that's why," Andrest interrupted. "Look at that flour and corn-meal on the hang-down of your hip-boots! You didn't wash them clean, that's why!"

"Sho!" Morlung exclaimed. "You—you don't think I did anything, do you?"

"You tore my boat up," Andrest declared grimly. " You were paid ten dollars by old Clinchell first, and then you went back and he gave you forty dollars more. You hired out to tear my boat up; you did it. The damage you did amounts to pretty nearly as much as your reward will come to, and I'm going to—"

"I got some money!" Morlung pleaded. "Don' take me back! They'll send me to the farm for twenty years—"

"I don't want your money. I'm takin' you in for the reward, to pay me for having my boat tore up, and to get shet of such as you. After all I've been here, mindin' my own business, you hire out to a rich old scoundrel to drive me out of this country! No, sir, Morlung, I don't leave this country, but you do! Now march!"

Andrest, while he talked, had found the few things that Morlung had stolen on his raid, and with these in his pockets and game-bag he drove Morlung through the cane and out to the nearest trace. Two hours later they were at the shanty-boat. Andrest took the skiff and rowed down to Deerport, where he drove Morlung up the street to the court-house.

Sheriff Ferris was there.

"Morning, sheriff!" Andrest greeted him.

"Morning, Andrest! Who you got this time?"

"Rip Morlung. You'd know him, only he hasn't shaved off his whiskers."

"Well, that's so, I declare! I expect you want the reward?"

"Yes, sir. He didn't mind his own business, so I went after the reward, sheriff."

"How is that?"

"He tore my shanty-boat up, cut it loose, and let it drift down to Culler's Shoals, more'n three miles from where I had it."

"I don't blame you, Andrest. There's another man up there I'd like to get, too—Hen Fretnel."

"No, sir! Hen don't trouble me and I don't trouble him," Andrest declared promptly. "This man hired out to do me a mischief, and no man can do that and not get the worst of it."

"I think that's so, Andrest; that's what I've been noticing lately. I'll write you the order for the reward."

Sheriff Ferris wrote an order on the Deerport National Bank. Having taken the prisoner to the jail and locked him in, he accompanied Andrest to the bank and introduced him to the cashier.

"This is Mr. Andrest," he said, "the gentleman who just brought Rip Morlung in. I gave him an order for that reward."

"Good!" replied the cashier, reaching for the money drawer. "I believe I've heard of you before, Mr. Andrest, haven't I?"

"Heard of me?" Andrest asked, surprised that a banker could have heard of him.

"Why, yes—President Lesgar mentioned you. You brought us a good bit of business the other day!"

"Brought you business!" Andrest repeated. "Why, I never was in here in my life before!"

"Perhaps not, but indirectly you helped the banking business a good deal. Do you want to take this money with you, or will you leave it here on deposit until you have a chance to invest it?"

"I never had any money in a bank." Andrest shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know about it. Rich fellows have money in banks, but I—I didn't know as poor men could."

"Young man"—the cashier threw up the brass gate over the desk—"let me tell you something. When you have five hundred dollars, you can put it into any bank in the State."

"I thought—I 'lowed a man would have to have a million dollars, or something like that!" Andrest exclaimed. "If five hundred would let me in, why, I could have come in a long while ago—I sure could!"

"You have more than this? I tell you what you need, young man—it's a course in finance! Can you read?"

"Oh, yes—right smart!"

"Well, you take this little folder and you read it. I just happened to hear the other day that you ship an average of eighteen dollars' worth of fish a week—and you have initiative—that's it!"

"Which?" Andrest asked.

"You don't wait for someone else to do what needs doing—that's initiative. Now I'll deposit this in the bank for you, and give you a bank-book. When you've read that folder, you'll know something about money and investing and putting money to work for you. We'll help you. Do you realize that you can put that five hundred to work for you, and make it earn money while you're sitting still?"

"Money work?" Andrest laughed. "Shucks!"

"That's right! Every dollar of that money will earn six cents every year; that's thirty dollars. If you had a thousand dollars, it would earn sixty. If you had two thousand dollars, it would earn more than two dollars a week."

"Sho!" Andrest exclaimed. "I'll sure read this piece of paper!"

"All right!"

The cashier handed Andrest the bank-book, and the youth walked down the street to a lunch-room, where he ate a square meal. He returned to his cabin-boat and began to read the folder that told about making money work for a man. For years he had been reading newspapers, magazines, and books, but without understanding more than the stories.

The little booklet began with a head-line:

PUTTING MONEY OUT AT INTEREST.

He learned that a poor man had a right to do that; and when he read the amounts of money necessary for embarking on this preserve of the wealthy and the great, he was surprised.

"Why," he laughed with surprise, "I could put a right smart of money out to work! Why, I bet I got more'n a hundred pounds of silver dollars in my jugs! Sho! I never knowed what I could do with it!"

He read the entry in his bank-book that showed his deposit of five hundred dollars. It looked businesslike and important. He laughed with delight. He was just ready to learn about finance, and the cashier of the bank had caught him at the psychological moment. He read the little folder, which told about saving money and putting it to work in mortgages, bonds, stocks, and trade. It was a very little primer of finance, but it was the first reader of a new education for Lunmer Andrest.

When the sun set, and night fell quickly upon the bottoms, he did something he had never done before—he tacked heavy pieces of canvas over his shanty-boat windows so that no one could look in at him. He had never felt before that this was a necessary precaution. No one would ever want to harm him, he had thought; but conditions had changed now. He had a desperate enemy, a man who was under bonds to keep the peace, but who would not hesitate to hire whom he could to menace or harm a victim of his wrath.

Pinning up those curtains before he lit his lamp made Andrest wince.

"I'm peaceable!" he exclaimed. "I never harmed any man! Why couldn't they leave me alone? Haven't I the right to talk to Sue Belle if she'll let me? I bet I have, if I shoot that old scoundrel!"

He put away his bank-book and picked up the pail into which he had poured the concentrates of his salvage from the mess on the floor. He sorted out more of the pretty little clam-shell tricks and cartridges. He put the cartridges into tin baking-powder boxes, and the shell tricks he rolled on the table, setting them down in circles and squares and fanciful figures.

Some of the shell tricks were pink, some white, some lilac—there were quarts of them of a hundred different shapes. He had dozens that looked like little round posies. He had a pound or so that were shaped like the teeth of dogs, cats, and other animals—some bright white, and some dull and dark.

He had often amused himself with these teeth, making grinning skulls out of them, some with almost black fangs, and some with gleaming white grins. Having tired of one picture, he would draw another one with the varied shapes and colors.

Thus he had passed many of his evenings. Sometimes he would spend a good deal of time thinking—thinking hard. He was in a swamp-land wilderness. His back track led to a dim and fantastic memory of great cities where he had been hungry and unhappy, skulking like a street cat, keeping out of sight of people for fear of a kick or a slap. Down here in the swampland he was a man among men. He never was hungry.

People had nearly always left him alone; but now he felt their menace. The threat surrounded him with a blankness which his mind could not penetrate. He felt as if the swamp woods contained jeopardies of attack and hurt. Having felt that menace, he realized his own weakness.

There he had been burying his silver dollars, when he might have put them out to work for him! That idea of having money work was a rift in the Dark Bend gloom of ignorance that surrounded him.

Through all the visions of his imagination there threaded one steady, unchanged figure—that of Sue Belle Clinchell.

"She's friendly!" he told himself. "If it wasn't for her I'd light out, but she's friendly! I 'low I'll get to see her again right soon!"

Chapter 5

Old Durm Clinchell swallowed hard when he considered the fact that had been imparted to him over the telephone. Lunmer Andrest had calmly put his hired desperado and bushwhacker in jail, and had pocketed a big reward for doing so! It sounded unbelievable, and if he had not recognized Sheriff Ferris's voice Clinchell would have had his doubts.

Instead of taking the emphatic hint to leave, the shanty-boater was hanging on. It was bad enough to have to take notice of a poor white river-rat, but to have the river-rat actually resist the mandate of a man who picked a thousand acres of cotton and who sold timber rights from a thousand acres every year—that was intolerable!

Clinchell saw now that he must use something besides force. He couldn't kill Lunmer Andrest, and he couldn't hire a man, offhand, to run him out of the country. Some other method must be adopted.

He gave the subject hours of thought between the common tasks which fell upon his hands in consequence of his lack of bookkeepers and clerical helpers. He had to reckon up the work of his pickers, the output of his gin, the cut of his sawmill, and a dozen other things, balancing his own little red book from the reports of his mill foreman, gin boss, and overseer.

His own record did not always tally with the freight receipts handed to him by his agent at the junction of his tap-line with the main railroad. Sometimes he had fifty thousand feet more lumber than he had counted on, and sometimes he fell short a few bales of cotton.

But the annual balance was in his favor, and his income was so large that he found a good deal of difficulty in knowing where to place it all. Usually he bought bonds or mortgages, or added to his holdings of land. He owned several outlying plantations, some back on the hills, where they raised corn and fruit, and some down the river, near Helena. He had purchased some lands away out West, too, but he didn't know very much about them, except that he guessed they weren't of much account. For ready money he depended on two banks of which he was president; but he didn't know much about banking, and was satisfied to know that his check would be honored, despite its rather uncertain penmanship.

Old Clinchell found many things to attend to, but now, between his tasks, he gave his spare time over to Lunmer Andrest. The more he thought about the shanty-boater, the angrier grew his thoughts and the calmer his expression. Time for explosive outbursts had gone by when a young scoundrel like Andrest outwitted him and put him under peace bonds, and then took in a friendly bushwhacker and obtained the reward!

Having ridden his favorite mule out to the sawmill and seen a particularly fine white-oak log sawed, he turned across to the cotton-gin and measured the lint to see whether it was running as long as the standard. He stopped at the tap-line road warehouse and sent a darky to the roof to patch it, because a rain would leak through into the sixty or seventy bales of cotton that were waiting to be shipped. On his way home, he stopped to give a sick mule colt some physic.

When he arrived at the horse-block, and a hostler took the mule he rode, he asked:

"Where's Sue Belle, Timber?"

"Ah don' know, suh!"

"She gone away?"

"Yas, suh—onto that black man mule; an' sho, that mule was a kickin' snorts—yas, suh!"

"Down or up?"

"Down, suh—down the St. Francis Trace."

Clinchell growled and climbed the mound to his mansion. He went up into the cupola on top and took a pair of binoculars from their case. Throwing down the windows all around, he looked down the St. Francis Trace toward the edge of the plantation-field. No one was in sight in that direction; the cotton-pickers, west of the mansion, were working steadily, and through his glasses he could see the overseer watching the weighing of bags of plucked cotton.

From the cupola Clinchell could see into every part of the great clearing in the swamp. He could see, with the glasses, into the woods on the lower lands surrounding the plantation. Over the tops of the trees, in four or five directions, he could see films of smoke, indicating where cabins were located out in the wooded swamp. The big, black cloud of smoke over the sawmill gave reason for the scream of the saws as they bit into the logs.

Looking from point to point, he turned his glasses again to the St. Francis Trace and searched the woods there. Sue Belle always rode around as she pleased. Her father told himself now that she had gone down to Furlent's, five or six miles away, to talk to the Furlent girls, or to the Widow Mendin's. That was what he wished to believe. What he did not wish to believe was that she had ridden down to strike across to the St. Francis River, where Andrest had moored his shanty-boat.

Clinchell knew what had happened to Andrest's boat. Morlung had reported it, and the sheriff had told of Andrest's vengeance on the marauder. The shanty-boater never would have taken Morlung in for the reward alone; something had gone wrong somewhere, and now Morlung was in jail, and there was no telling how much he had told of Clinchell's part in the affair. If he had talked too much—

The old planter whistled under his breath. People were apt to talk too much sometimes. Old Clinchell's early life had been milestoned, so to speak, by injudicious conversations, his own and other people's. If Morlung had been fooled and bulldozed into telling too much, there was no telling what the law of the case would be. It might involve the fifty-thousand-dollar bond, to make up for any damages done to the feelings and property of Lunmer Andrest, if the young man pressed the point.

"He'd ought to be satisfied with the reward!" Clinchell reflected, but he knew that people were very seldom satisfied with what they had in hand.

Thus his mind ran from pillar to post, while he turned in his big swivel-chair to watch the fields, the woods, and the birds circling above the woods. This was his favorite resting-place. Here he did most of his pencil figuring, while he had the very acres under his eye.

He carried in his pocket a great blueprint of the Dark Bend swamps, with all the township section and other land lines marked out, his own tracts surrounded by red ink. It was a large map, and there were dozens of parcels of land outlined in red ink. He knew the contents of every tract, and could describe the crop or the kind of timber on every one. Nothing escaped his eye, and very little ever slipped his memory as regards his property.

He hated young white men, for there was a great dread in his heart lest one of them might take Sue Belle from the mansion and out of his own life. He was determined that such a thing should never happen, consoling his conscience by the reflection that after he was dead she would have lots of money and plenty of time for getting married.

He believed heartily in the new-fangled idea that girls should not marry young. Sue Belle was only going on twenty. She ought not to gallivant around with young men. Any scoundrel that seemed really dangerous, before she was ten or fifteen years older—old Clinchell gritted his teeth and reached for his binoculars, to glance again at the place where the road entered the woods.

A flicker, a glimmer of black away deep among the big gum-tree trunks, warned him that someone was approaching with a black animal, and a little later he saw the animal. It was the black man mule which Sue Belle favored as a saddle-horse. The mule was trailing along behind two people on foot, looking first at one and then at the other, turning his wise head from side to side and waving his ears.

One of the persons was Sue Belle and the other was a man. Adjusting the focus of the glasses, old Clinchell glared at the two.

They stopped in the edge of the timber and talked to each other. The mule leaned up against a gum-tree and rested his head on the man's shoulder, which indicated a degree of familiarity maddening for Clinchell to behold. At intervals the man held something up for the mule to eat, and that accounted for the mule not kicking the man through an acre of landscape.

With shortening breath Clinchell watched the tryst. After nearly half an hour he saw Sue Belle put her arm around the man's neck and—but the glasses shook so that he couldn't see straight. When he had them braced against the side of the cupola, and steady again, the girl was riding across the open cotton-field on the roadway and the man had vanished from view.

That man, old Clinchell knew in his heart, was Lunmer Andrest, although he could not identify him with certainty, even with glasses, at that distance. He was so angry that he choked.

"Sue Belle with her arm around a man's neck!" he gasped. "Ain't she no more self-respect than that? I've been too easy with that gal!"

Then his anger turned upon Andrest.

"I got to git shet of that man! Peace bond or no peace bond, I'm going to send him away! What he wants is my money—but for that he wouldn't care none about that girl. Course he wouldn't. I'm a fool I didn't think of that before. Probably he'll be glad to go for a thousand dollars. If I'd only thought before he got that Morlung reward, likely he'd 'a' gone for five hundred, or two hundred. I expect five hundred looked the size of a bale of cotton when he set eyes onto it. Sho! Course he'll take money!"

The anxious father had drawn down out of sight in the cupola, so that his daughter would not suspect that he had seen her. He retreated to the corner room, where he kept his ready money and business papers in a safe, and enough books to give it the name of library, or private office, according to his notion. There he sat in a big leather chair, with his feet on the table and his coat on the floor, his hat on the open door, when his daughter ran bounding into the room.

"Hello, daddy!" she cried, throwing her arms around him and kissing him. "Now what have you on your mind? You going to shoot a sick mule with a broken leg, or did somebody lose a bale of cotton in a mud-hole, or what is it?"

"Nothing on my mind!" he ejaculated. "I'm all right—feeling fine!"

He laughed and threw his pipe upon a platter which served as a tobacco-tray. The platter had a picture of New Orleans on it, and an old French inscription, which indicated that it was part of the dinner-set of a governor-general of Louisiana, and it was worth a thousand dollars; but no one in the St. Francis swamps knew its value. A bowl from the same set was used to feed two pet spaniels out by the house kennel, and the teapot, with its nose broken off, was out in the chicken-coop.

Sue Belle asked her father what he wanted for supper.

"Why—let's see—let's have some fried ham and eggs," he suggested.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed. "Ham and eggs! Is that all you can think of? I tell you—we'll have some fricasseed chicken and creamed potatoes."

The father sighed. He was always asking for ham and eggs, but he generally got some fancy stuff "all chewed up beforehand," as he said.

Sue Belle bounded away again. When she was out of hearing he opened the safe and drew out a cash-box containing bills in thick bricks. The bundles were wrapped around the middle with a narrow ribbon of paper, marked with figures, and at each end was a rubber band.

Old Clinchell meditated over the money for some time. He grinned sardonically as he made up a thousand dollars in bills and another thousand in gold, taking fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces from a drawer of the safe.

"Take a shanty-boater," he nodded complacently, "and he'll just naturally do anything in Gawd's World for money! I'll sure make it an object for that Andrest to get his hull caboodle out of this part of the country. I might 'a' knowed I couldn't drive him out. They live on bullets and getting shot up and kicked around!"

Clinchell put the two thousand dollars into his pocket and replaced the rest of his cash in the safe, which he closed and locked. He went down to the horse-block and shouted:

"Hey, Timber! Bring me my mule!"

A minute later Timber swung around the corner of the fence, leading a saddled mule on the run. The animal stopped at the horse-block, and Clinchell mounted with an agile spring.

"Git ap!" he called, and the mule started.

"Daddy! Daddy!" a shrill cry hailed him. "Where are you going? It's half after five, and supper's almost ready. Come back!"

Clinchell stopped the mule and stared up at the dining-room porch. There Sue Belle emerged from the screens and waved her hands at him, beckoning him to return. She ran down to the fence, treading recklessly through the flower-beds.

"It's time for supper!" she repeated. "You can't go away now! I don't want to eat supper alone!"

"Of course not," he mumbled, looking thoughtfully at his watch. "I declare I didn't know it was so late—why didn't you tell me. Timber? Hyar, take this mule, back, you!"

He swung down from the saddle, and Timber led the mule around to the stable mound, while Clinchell accompanied his daughter back into the house. She led him to the kitchen, where she made him wash his face and soap his hands, he protesting all the time like a sulky boy. She tied his cravat and combed his hair and goatee.

"There!" she declared at last. "You really are nice-looking, daddy!"

"We're going to have music to-night," she told him at the table. "I told the boys to come around and play by the front veranda. There's an itinerant over in the quarters with an accordion, and he plays beautifully."

"Play! Why don't he pick cotton and earn an honest living?" Clinchell demanded. "Those tramp players fill the hands' heads with fool notions."

"And teach the plantation players all the new songs and pieces! I just love to hear new music! They're coming, and I want you to hear them!"

The old planter suffered himself to be led around to the front veranda, where the plantation musicians and the wandering accordion-player sat under the little pavilion roof, out of the dew, and played and sang for two hours. Sue Belle gave them a handful of silver, and the little concert broke up.

Clinchell retired to his library-office and sat scowling at the floor. He was sorry for the delay in getting Andrest out of the country. He wondered how it happened that he had not thought to buy the scoundrel's departure before.

In the morning, immediately after breakfast, he rode down the trace on his way to carry out his new plan. He left the road and crossed to the St. Francis, where the river man's shanty-boat had been moored.

Not till he arrived at the Dark Bend eddy did he remember that the boat had been cut loose and sent drifting down the river. Now he rode down the bank, winding in and out in the underbrush and among the trees. Three miles down-stream he found the yellow boat moored to the bank of the eddy above Culler's Shoals.

He hailed, but no one answered him. The skiff was tied to the boat's stern, but the sassafras canoe was missing. Clinchell looked around with an appraising eye. On the bow deck of the shanty-boat were several broken-topped demijohns, with narrow slits, two inches long and less than a quarter of an inch wide, chipped in their sides. On the deck were some small wooden wedges.

The broken jugs stirred Clinchell's curiosity, and he dismounted from his mule to investigate. Putting them to his nose, he found that two demijohns smelled of the earth, one of stale molasses, and one of old vinegar. He tried to look into them, and succeeded in getting the light right for one. On the bottom he saw a number of round impressions.

He smashed the jug to see better, and there in the old molasses was a silver dollar. He pried it out and looked at it. The impressions in the bottom were unmistakable. The wooden wedges had evidently been corks for the chipped apertures.

"That scoundrel has saved up money," Clinchell told himself. "He's dug it up and run. He knowed he hadn't better stay around here with me after him, you bet! He's took to his heels—he didn't dast to stay even to sell his shanty-boat or skiff. He must have had right smart of money, too—all those jugs full, or 'most full. Well, it saved me a thousand, his going between days thataway—hue-e!"

Chuckling and nodding with satisfaction, Clinchell drove across to the river trace and returned to the plantation. His satisfaction made him beam with delight, and he handed Timber, the hostler, a silver dollar which was all stuck over with lint, tobacco-dust, aiid match-sticks from the planter's coat-pocket.

"Here's a dirty shanty-boat dollar," Chnchell said. "Wash it, and it 'll be good for something at the commissary!"

Timber grinned from ear to ear.

The old planter's satisfaction lasted till the following morning. Then Sheriff Ferris and one of his deputies stopped on their way up to the railroad, where they were to take the train to Mendova, to take charge of a man who had been "rewarded" from Deerport.

"I see Andrest's looking some into business," Ferris said in the course of the gossiping.

"What—looking into business?" Clinchell exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, he sure is. He come to town yesterday with more'n a hundred pounds of silver dollars and halves. He had just about all he could stagger under, they were so heavy. He took 'em to the bank and deposited 'em. Kind o' got the habit of depositing his money when he left the Morlung reward into it."

"Sho! A hundred pounds of silver dollars! Why, that's near to two thousand of 'em, isn't it?"

"Up to that, I expect. I didn't get to hear how much he deposited. Seems like he was plumb ignorant about banks, but they told him about interest, and investing, and money working, and he's enthusiastic."

"He—he come back up this way?" Clinchell managed to ask.

"Yes, sir; he 'lowed he'd haul his fish-nets same as usual to-day."

Clinchell made no comment. The sheriff asked about the cotton pick and then drove on. The planter retired to the cupola on his mansion, and sat there a long time without once looking through the binoculars.

"If I could bust that bank!" he muttered. "If only I could smash that pestering old bank—where'd he be? But I expect I'd better buy him!"

Chapter 6

There grew in Andrest's mind a vision which, through all its changes, urged him to think of money and what to do with it. He had nearly two thousand dollars, his savings from years of fishing and trapping. What to do with the money had never troubled him till he learned that "money buried in the ground does not work or increase, but money put into stocks, bonds, mortgages, or notes does work, and increases night and day."

His own money was buried in the ground, but it should remain so no longer. He went up the river in his skiff, dug out the hidden demijohns, and brought them down to his shanty-boat. The following morning he paddled down the river to Deerport in his canoe with the money in stout bags, and packed them up to the bank.

Urgone, the cashier, welcomed the deposit with a broad smile of satisfaction. He took Andrest into the cage, and they counted the silver dollar by dollar. Some of it was black, some tarnished with dirt, and some bright and new. The total was eighteen hundred and seventeen dollars and fifty cents. That amount was written into the new bank-book under the original entry of five hundred dollars.

"You've made a fine start for a young man," the cashier told Lunmer. "Now what you will want to do is to invest it—not all of it, but a good part of it, say two thousand dollars. That will leave you more than three hundred in the bank."

Urgone gave Andrest a handful of circulars and documents relating to money, investments, and markets where stocks and bonds are sold. It was interesting to the cashier to see the sudden enlightenment of the money-hoarder. He wondered how many thousand dollars were buried back in the swamps. He knew that there were cotton-plantations whose profits were changed into gold and then buried, sunk in the bottoms, no one knew where—and some of it never would be recovered.

"If you put out two thousand dollars at six per cent," the cashier explained, "you'll have a return of one hundred and twenty dollars a year, just as I told you—more than two dollars a week. You read those papers, and when you come back I'll talk it over with you."

"Yes, sir, I'll do it," the river youth assented. "I'll come back. You see, I knew there was something like this; but I never had any education, excepting what I've read and listened around. A man has to have education to know about money working—"

"There are men who have never learned to read or write who know how to make money work," the cashier interrupted. "There are all kinds of education, and money education is one of them. There's not much to it if you just get down to the principles; but some don't seem ever to learn. There are rich men that don't know anything but trading mules. You never know when you are going to find some little thing that 'll make you rich."

"I'm obliged to you, sir," Andrest exclaimed earnestly. "I sure want to know about money. Course, a hundred dollars can work same as a thousand dollars or a million—just as a little man can work same as a big one, only not so much."

"But some little men work ten times as much as some big ones," the cashier reminded him.

"Yes, sir! I'll think about that, too."

On his way up to the shanty-boat Andrest stopped at intervals to read the papers and pamphlets that Urgone had given him. He could understand some of the things they said, but others he could not make out at all. He read them over and over again, and after he arrived at his shanty-boat he studied them, pencil and paper in hand, trying to grasp the science of the figures.

He had been groping for years, trying to "well-fix" himself. He had long had a vague ambition to rise above poverty, but he was surprised to find that a real, live, genuine banker took an interest in him and was willing to show him how to make his fish and fur money work like a rich cotton-planter's or a millionaire lumberman's.

He forgot his dinner till late. After dinner he took his meat rifle and started off through the woods, thinking to kill something for supper. He crossed to the St. Francis Trace, seeing little game and shooting none.

When he looked at the tracks in the trace, he saw where a mule had trotted down. He knew that mule by a nub on one of the shoes. Forthwith he followed the tracks, and, sure enough, he met Sue Belle Clinchell returning up the trail.

She jumped down from the mule, and they walked along together.

"Daddy's awful mad at you," she told him; "but you don't care, do you? You won't be mean about it? You don't know how good old daddy is when he *is* good!"

"I never harmed him, or 'lowed to," Andrest told her. "I'm just a shanty-boater, and I know it. First he tries to layway me, and then he hires a man to tear up my boat. Now I don't know what he'll do!"

"He won't do anything," Sue Belle declared confidently. "I won't let him! You see, he's 'fraid of you—"

"Afraid of me?" Andrest gasped.

She looked at him from immeasurable heights of feminine wisdom.

"Didn't you know it?"

"He 'lowed I'd shoot him? He thought—"

"Worse'n that!"

She taunted his ignorance, but she would not tell him what worse could happen to Daddy Clinchell than being shot from the brush. A slow flush mounted to his cheeks when he realized what she meant; and then she blushed and laughed uneasily.

"I never 'lowed to harm anybody, and I aim always to mind my own business," he declared slowly. "Course I'm ignorant, and I'm—I'm kind of poor, but I'm not shiftless, if I do live in a shanty-boat. I got my way to make in this mean old world, and I'm doing it best way I know how. No man has a right to say I harmed him. No man has a right to set along the river, laywaying me. No man has a right to hire somebody for fifty dollars to tear my boat up. I could 'a' killed Rip Morlung for what he done, but I didn't. I could have took his money to pay for the damage he done, but I didn't. I know right where he buried his money, but I'll never touch it!"

"Lots and lots of people buries their money," she mused. "Daddy told me he used to, but now he buys land, or puts it out to interest on mortgages, or thataway."

"He used to bury his money?" Andrest exclaimed.

"He sure did! He told me once that he had 'most ten thousand dollars in gold and silver buried around before he got to putting it to work for him."

"A rich old planter buried his money?" Andrest repeated wonderingly.

"It was when he was a young man," she explained. "He'd cleared off a quarter-section right here and sold the logs—he sold a lot of them, and he buried the money. Then he learned about interest money, and he began to make money work for him."

"He wasn't always rich—wasn't always a rich old planter?" Andrest asked incredulously.

"Why, no! The idea! He just came back in here poor as anybody."

Andrest grasped the amazing information in silence. It had never occurred to him that people could change their status. He had never observed that people grew older and wealthier or poorer, or fared better or worse. He was a young man!

"Then what does he treat me thataway for?" he demanded with sudden anger. "If he was poor once, what makes him call me shiftless, and what makes him hound me around?"

They had arrived at the edge of the plantation clearing. She impulsively put her arm around his neck. This anger between her father and the young man hurt her feelings. She was afraid, too, of the consequences to which it might lead, having gone so far.

"Don't you be angry with him!" she cried. "It 'll all be all right someday, you'll see, and we'll all be good friends. It's just he don't know you. Daddy's a good old man, and don't you go being mean! Promise me you won't be mean, Lun!"

"Course I won't," he promised.

Sue Belle mounted the mule, to ride across the open to the plantation. Andrest returned into the big timber and headed for home again. On the way he stumbled upon a flock of wild turkeys, from which he shot down a young gobbler.

It was early when he arrived at the boat, and after dressing out the bird, ready to fry for supper, he paddled up the river in his canoe, trying to think his way through the maze that confronted him.

A mile up-stream he turned into Deer Hoof River, a shallow little spring creek which boiled up out of the white sands of a lake six or eight miles back in the Dark Bend swamps. Few people ventured up into this creek. Its course was tortuous, and the surrounding brakes were thick and dark and threatening. No one knew how many fugitives from justice lived there. Some of them were outlaws who had fled from charges of murder.

Nevertheless, the little creek was a favorite with Andrest. He paddled up-stream and then drifted in the shallow current. As he drifted, he picked up strange and misshapen shells from the sandy bottom. The clams were cripples, some of them white and some tinted with dark browns and greens. Here Andrest gathered the pretty little tricks which he liked so well—pieces of shell shaped like bullets and teeth and flower-buds and apples, and countless other known and unknown things.

He found a shell that would weigh nearly two pounds, all crumpled up around the lips, and with hummocks and pits and holes in the body. He opened it with difficulty, using the blade of his knife, and slicing the stout pillars of muscle that bound the lobes of the shell together. He knew from experience that a shell so badly shaped as that was likely to have pretty tricks in it.

He was not surprised to find two of them, one at each pillar of muscle. They were the color of bright new gold, and they were shaped like pears.

"Sho, they're pretty tricks!" Andrest exclaimed. "Glad I come up here to-night!"

They were larger than the ends of his little fingers—larger than musket-balls—and they shone in the light of the westering sun. He laughed with glee as he looked at them. Never had he seen anything more beautiful.

"I've seen 'em all colors, 'most, but never bright gold!" He shook his head. "Seems funny they grow all slicked up thataway, without any polishing or scraping!"

For fear something would scratch them, he wrapped them up in his handkerchief and put them away in his pocket. He examined the strange shell, but there were no other loose shapes in it. Its whole inside was the color of gold, and he decided to take it home to the boat with him. He thought it would make a pretty salt-and-pepper dish.

The sun going down warned him that night would soon be at hand, so he paddled out of the little creek and down to his shanty-boat. As he cooked and ate his supper, his mind reverted to the money he had put into the bank. Old Clinchell had buried money when he was a young man, and he wasn't any better in those days than Andrest himself!

He had not ventured to think very much about Sue Belle. She was quality people; her father was a rich old planter; a great gulf existed between her kind and a shanty-boater. Yet Andrest had stubbornly refused to give up his acquaintance with her, no matter how angry her father might be. Danger and attacks did not alter his mind.

He knew now that old Clinchell not only hated him, but feared him. The planter was afraid that his daughter might run away with a shanty-boater, just as lots of girls ran away with men in the stories and the newspapers. She might be stolen away from her rich old father by a trifling river man!

"Sho, I'd like to steal that girl!" Andrest exclaimed to himself. "I sure would—I bet I'll see about that—but shucks, she wouldn't go with me. She's a fine, pretty girl, though!"

He stopped eating, to consider the amazing possibilities that were occurring to him. Poor shanty-boater, fisherman, trapper, no- 'count river-rat—and yet, perhaps, he might "dast to think seriously" about the daughter of a rich old planter who once was poor himself and used to bury his money!

"Old Clinchell seems to think so, anyhow," Andrest grinned. "He sure is worried about something, and I bet that's it! She's real friendly acting—she put her arm around my neck, begging me not to harm her poor old daddy! Lawzee!"

Andrest blinked as he recalled that pleading caress. He could feel it yet. He forgot his supper thinking about it.

He had been trained by years of habit to see only the vast difference between a river-rat living in a shanty-boat and the quality folks living on great plantations. The plantation folks could do almost anything, but a shanty-boater should never presume on that account.

Now the shanty-boater began to presume. He had money ready to go to work for him; he knew a plantation girl who went out of her way to be friendly—and her old daddy had been common folks years ago, burying money in the ground, just like other ignorant people!

The fried turkey was cold when Andrest ate the last of his supper. When he had finished, he cleared up the dishes and put everything away. He took out the papers the banker had given him to read and pored over them again. When his eyes began to hurt with the unwonted effort, he turned to the two pretty gold tricks which he had found up Deer Hoof River.

Resting on the table, they were beautiful. They reflected the lamplight, and seemed to shine with a glow of their own. He studied them and admired them with all his heart. He hardly dared touch them with his fingers, because his fingers were rough and might mar their polished beauty.

"They're plumb lovely!" he said. "I 'low they're pretty enough to give to Sue Belle; and I will, the next time I get to see her!"

He had carried her messes of squirrels and turkeys and other game. He had showed her wild birds, and they had picked posies out in the swamps—that was just natural. She had brought him cakes and candy which she had made, or which the old kitchen mammy had made; but he had never thought to give her anything like these little golden pears.

They would at least serve as a beginning. He would watch her expression, and see whether she liked them because he had given them to her. If she did, his instinct told him, then she would like other things more worthy, but perhaps no more beautiful in his estimation.

But could a plantation girl like her really be interested in a shanty-boater? It was impossible, he feared; and yet her father had been like Andrest in his younger days!

So he argued with himself, now hopeful, now doubting, until he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a hail from the stream-side. When he peered out he saw that it was morning, and that old Durm Chncshell was sitting on a saddle-mule at the top of the bank. The old man had no firearm in his hands, and he did not seem to have his belt on, either.

Andrest strapped on his own belt and went outside to greet his early visitor.

"Good morning, Mr. Clinchell!" he greeted. "Won't you come down and set up by the stove?"

"Yes, sir, Andrest, I sure will," the planter accepted. "I come down here to talk over a little matter of business. I'm friendly; I just want to see if we can't come to some agreement."

"All right, sir!" Andrest assented. "I'm sure I have no hard feelings, and I don't want trouble with any man in the world."

The old man tied the mule to a branch and climbed down the clay bank to the sand-bar level. He stepped aboard the shanty-boat and walked in to sit by the stove, in which Andrest had cedar kindlings burning hot under hardwood in a minute. He put on the coffee-pot and sat down opposite the visitor.

"Yes, sir?" he said interrogatively.

"I understand you have a lot of ambition," Clinchell began. "You've saved up a little money, and you put it into the bank, 'long of that reward money. I know, because I'm into banks myself, and we exchange information about clients. Now, I'm a man of few words. I don't beat around the bush none. I'll give you five thousand dollars if you'll take your shanty-boat and all your traps and things and drop out of St. Francis River, and agree never to come back into the Dark Bend swamps again. What do you say to that?"

Andrest looked up from the floor in astonishment. The old man was glaring at him grimly, but he returned the glare with unflinching eyes.

For a full minute the two stared at each other, the old man's glance turning from Andrest's lips to his nose, from eye to temple, and from ears to hair. Something in the steady, unwavering gaze of the young man did not permit Clinchell to meet it squarely.

"Well?" the old planter asked impatiently.

"I think it's too much," Andrest said.

"Eh? Too much? You'll go for less?"

"Oh, I didn't say that—no, sir!" Andrest shook his head. "That's more than it's worth to have me go away. I'll go when I get ready, Mr. Clinchell, but I'll stay till I get ready to go. I wouldn't go for twice what you say; you haven't money enough to buy me thataway. I'm a shanty-boater, but I have some self-respect, and it isn't for sale. No, sir!"

Clinchell sat dazed for a minute. He glanced back and forth in the little shanty-boat cabin. It was a poor, poverty-stricken little den. Any man who lived in such a place ought to be willing to sell his soul for a hundred dollars or so.

"Then you got to take the consequences!" he roared angrily. "You impident young whelp! You got to take the consequences!"

He turned and strode heavily out of the cabin and across the deck to the sand-bar.

"Say, you forgot something!" Andrest called after him.

"What? What did I forget?"

"The cup of coffee—you'd better come back and take a—"

"You—you—" Clinchell choked, and then ran up the bank to mount the mule as lightly as a boy of twelve years.

Chapter 7

Old Clinchell had found a man whom he could neither frighten, drive, nor purchase. As he hooked his heels into the sides of his loping mule, on his way from Andrest's shanty-boat, he was so angry that he could not think straight. He took his spleen out kicking the tough sides of the animal he rode; but the mule cared not the least, for old Durm wore no spurs, and his heels were broad, with no harm in them for a thick hide.

Gradually, out of his vehemence, an idea began to grow. It was an idea that looked as if it might be worth ripening and bringing to harvest. Clinchell regarded it with interest at the first glimpse, and then with increasing satisfaction as he discovered the kind of bud it had. Its flowering gave promise of rich fruit.

He allowed the mule to stop its gallop, while he studied the notion that had sprouted in his fertile mind. His anger gave way to a grin of cruel satisfaction.

The tradition in the Dark Bend swamps that no one ever crossed old Durm Clinchell with lasting advantage was perfectly true. Abandoned claims, families broken up, fugitives none knew where, and oven graves proved that tradition. Old Durm's mental force and cunning had carried him up until he had the power that goes with owning vast areas of timber-land, with picking a thousand acres of cotton, with renting a score of outlying farms, with a checking account in banks amounting to thousands of dollars, and with the say to elect or defeat almost any office-seeker in Cypress County.

Old Clinchell was rapidly working out a plan to pull down the Deerport National Bank, and thus deprive young Andrest of his money. It had been a good deal of a blow to discover that the shanty-boater had won the five-hundred-dollar reward for Morlung. Many a young fool thought five hundred dollars, or even one hundred dollars, enough money to be married on. Suppose Andrest had that notion, and Clinchell's wilful daughter was so foolish as to yield to him?

His spies had told the planter that Sue Belle and Andrest often met out on the traces and down by the river. Andrest never came nearer to the mansion than the edge of the plantation. The daughter of a proud old planter trysting with a river-rat, with a shanty-boater! No wonder the old man had lost his temper and fired his bolts without taking good aim!

"I won't miss him anymore!" he assured himself. "Next time that young lad 'll sure take all that's coming to him! He'll lose his money and he'll lose his—"

Clinchell allowed himself to chuckle. He was a shrewd old man, with a thousand wiles and ways, and he took an ignorant man's delight in smartness and trickery. First he must make sure that there was no loophole through which the young shanty-boater could escape his wiles.

"He's got two-three thousand dollars, and he could buy as good a lawyer as is to be had around for that," he told himself frankly. "I don't want any good lawyers mussing up my ideas—no, sir!"

The Deerport National Bank had long been rather exasperating to old Clinchell. Its brains was John Urgone, the cashier, who handled most of its business. Danton Lesgar, a retired planter, was the president, and the board of directors also included Attorney Falls and two sawmill men. Its capital was a hundred thousand dollars, and it had deposits of nearly two hundred thousand. It divided Cypress County business with the Planter Bank at River Bridge and the Logging Bank at Bandsaw, both of which were Clinchell's institutions, although he depended on trusted men to conduct them.

"I got to fix things real bright," Clinchell admitted to himself; "but I expect I can do that. Um-m!" He chuckled more than a little. "I been laying for that old Lesgar!" he went on. "Now I got him on a fifty-thousand-dollar paper—it 'll sure squeeze him some, settling that up! Wonder he didn't look into that timber he took for security! Just the timber onto that land, and there's not much but cut-overs. There isn't five thousand profit, taking that timber off. Sho! Those old political scoundrels thought they'd peace-bond me, eh?"

Old Clinchell was cunning. As security for his bond, he had mortgaged the timber on swamp-lands that were already cut over. President Danton Lesgar hadn't been careful what he took as security.

"All I got to do is forfeit that fifty-thousand-dollar peace bond," Clinchell laughed. "Then I'll let them fight for it—old Lesgar's responsible. I knowed I'd pinch him yet. First thing they know, their little old bank 'll be hanging up a notice of readjustment!"

Clinchell was good-natured now; things were going the way he wanted them to move. At one sweep he would rid himself of several annoyances. The Andrest affair was no longer an annoyance, but a means to an end, which did not make the shanty-boater's future any safer as a speculative proposition—not if old Clinchell had figured the matter correctly.

The planter was in no great hurry to put in operation the plan upon which he had determined. He must wait until the proper moment before breaking the Deerport National Bank and young Andrest by the same blow. In a week or two the bank would be moving cotton in large quantities, and the planters who owed it money could be depended on to be slow in taking up their notes, most of which would run till mid-December, or even over the New Year.

Moreover, there was to be an issue of bonds by that levee district, and there had been some question as to whether Clinchell's banks or the Deerport National would get them on the bid.

"They'll get 'em!" Clinchell grinned. "I'll buy 'em from the referee in bankruptcy!"

He rode home in a more complacent frame of mind than he had had since his suspicions regarding Sue Belle and the shanty-boater had been thoroughly aroused. He could see no flaw in his latest scheme, the success of which largely depended on his keeping his own counsel and working out the details himself. He couldn't trust even his personal attorney now.

Sue Belle saw her father enter the edge of the plantation, and she galloped out to meet him and ride home with him. They rode out on the cotton-haul road and watched the pickers. Then they went over to the gin, where the saws were whisking the lint from the seeds for baling in the sighing steam-press.

Watching her covertly, Clinchell could see no sign of abstraction in his daughter. She turned with free mind from cotton-picking to cotton-ginning, and a little later to sawing oak and loading cars on the tap-line siding.

"I'm shipping ten car-loads of riving hickory logs next week," he told her. "They use 'em in making automobile wheels. Like as not you'd like to go tripping around somewheres? How would you like to go for a trip around some of those big cities, eh?"

"Why, I hadn't thought, daddy," she exclaimed doubtfully; adding: "Course I'd like to go—when?"

"Oh, not right away—pretty soon, though." He seemed to study the subject a little while before he added: "Some time we'll up and go, or you'll start off, if I'm too busy."

"I'd rather have you go 'long, daddy," she declared.

"Well, maybe it 'll be so I can."

She left him at the sawmill office, romping away toward the plantation. He wanted to look over the log-camp reports, to make sure that the tree-fellers were keeping up with the schedule and that the haulers were getting in the cut according to program.

He looked into the dusty book which showed the cut-overs, and he verified his memory as regards the timber on the lands covered by the peace-bond mortgage. There were many trees on the tract—all goose-egg, trees, wind-shakes, dead hearts, punk woods, thunder-splits, and the hke. The sound timber had long since gone through the mills, and the land was too low for cultivation, even if it were ditched and drained.

"Lesgar was an old fool, taking a mortgage on that land for the peace bond," Clinchell thought to himself. "There's about ten thousand dollars' worth of culls there, and that's all there is, even on this market."

He rode to the house in time for supper. After supper he sat out on the veranda in the warm of the twilight, with Sue Belle near him in her own rocker.

Sue Belle was grave in demeanor this night. She looked at the far field, her cheeks flushed. Sometimes she looked sidewise at her father doubtfully.

Watching her as he did, old Clinchell did not fail to notice his daughter's nervousness. He held his peace, however, for he had learned not to rouse the young woman's temper by searching her mind too deeply. Besides, if he remained quiet, she was sure to reveal what was on her mind in due course. A wise old widower, he!

Sure enough, she drew a flat tin box out of her waist and opened it.

"Look, daddy!" She laughed, without exactly meaning to laugh. "Do you think these are pretty little tricks?"

She gave him the open box, and he saw two strange yellow sparkles in a bed of lint cotton. They were of a size, and of the shape of two yellow pears, but bright as fresh-minted gold.

He poked them around with his forefinger, and held them to catch the last light of the setting sun.

"Nice little tricks!" he nodded. "Some pedlar come along?"

"No." She shook her head. "I—I just come across them."

She took them, closed the box, and tucked it into her waist again. She had lost none of her nervousness, though her color had grown pale.

Sue Belle was far from being a spoiled child, though she commonly had her own way. Once in a while, however, her father crossed her, sharply and emphatically. He felt that she was afraid of him this night, and he was certain that she was glad when the sun went down and the gloom of night spread across the bottoms.

He was not far wrong in his guess that she was thinking about Andrest. He felt that he had moved just in time to drive the shanty-boater out of the country. In a few days, now, everything would be ready for the execution of his plans.

He was not sorry when Sue Belle left him sitting there to go to her room. It gave him a chance to polish up the last details of his scheme.

In the morning he rode away early, took a gasoline speeder, and ran out on the tap-line to the trunk road, where he went over the books of the Planter Bank at River Bridge. From there he went on to Bandsaw, and looked into the accounts of the Logging Bank. Both institutions held notes of the Deerport National, and Clinchell smiled grimly when he figured up the total amount of these claims. Lesgar had been asking for extensions, which had been readily granted, of course. The obligations falling due a few weeks later were numerous.

Clinchell left directions with the two cashiers as to handling certain affairs of the Bandsaw and River Bridge institutions so as to prepare for the things he had in mind. In order to give the Deerport National ample rope, it would be necessary to extend some of their own obligations—which could easily be arranged through the banks at Mendova.

His day's work revealed how vulnerable Lesgar was. Clinchell had not thought about the subject before, but now he felt sure of an easy triumph over the Deerport institution. Cashier Urgone had been going out of his way extending credit to commissaries and independent sawmill men out in the Dark Bend bottoms. The Dark Bend country was Clinchell's by right of development, and these Deerport fellows had no call to go out there. Worse yet, they had taken particular pains to go after the Morlung reward money, and after young Andrest's account, when they must have known that it was a direct and personal insult to Clinchell.

"We'll see about that!" the old planter grumbled. "There's some people round these bottoms that need a lesson! We'll see about that!"

Instead of returning to the plantation, he took the train for Mendova, the business center of that part of the Mississippi bottoms. He put up in a hotel, and then called his sister on the telephone.

His sister was Mrs. Drury Waspe, a widow, who lived comfortably back on the Cluster Ridge at Provell. It was fifteen years since Clinchell had seen her, and at least ten since he had heard from her, except indirectly. Hardly anyone knew that he had a sister.

She was glad to hear from her brother, however, and begged him to run out and see her, which he consented to do. He abandoned his hotel room, caught the Ohio Night Special, and landed in Provell after midnight. Mrs. Waspe was waiting up to see him.

"Ho law!" he greeted her. "Why, Drury, you're younger than you were twenty years ago, and fine-looking! And I—I'm growing old!"

Then he poured out into her willing ears the story of his woes.

"You see how it is, Drury. You're society yourself; you're quality folks. She's like you are, Sue Belle is, and something has got to be done!"

She listened, nodding her approval to all that he said. When he declared that he must be hurrying right back home, she approved of that, too, although she had really expected to have him stay at least a week, and had intended to scold him for not bringing Sue Belle along.

He caught an early train from Provell, and before noon he was home again on his Dark Bend plantation.

"Where have you been, daddy?" Sue elle demanded. "I was getting scared almost to death!"

"Business—unexpected business—Mendova!" he explained and patted her scoldings away.

He went to sleep on a lounge for an hour or two to make up his lost rest—he told Sue Belle he couldn't sleep for the racket in Mendova—and then rode out to look at the cotton-picking records in the gin-office. As he passed the farther mound, a yellow girl ran out to intercept him.

"Sho, Marse Clinchell!" the girl whispered. "Sue Belle's jes' a meetin' that pore white trash, Andrest! I couldn't get to yo', suh; but two-three days ago they was out in the brake trace, an' he give her a sunthin' into a tin tobacco-box, an' she hollered out an' kissed 'im right smack on the lips—shore as yo're borned, she did! I yeard it, an' I was a stick-throw away, suh. Lawzee! Them two's co'rtin', shore as yo're borned, suh!"

"I'll 'tend to that, Disky. Here's a silver wheel. Don't you say a word what you've seen without I tell you to. I'll have you mule-whipped if you say a word!"

"Not a word, massa!" she grinned with delight, holding up the dollar. He rode on, scowling.

"Kissing that no-'count scoundrel!" he grunted. "Ugh! No wonder she was 'shamed of herself, showing me those little yellow tricks! Time that girl had some manners taught her, it sure is!"

Chapter 8

Andrest watched old Chnchell depart, wondering what next. There was a good deal of satisfaction in the river youth's heart, The old planter was afraid of him! That could mean only one thing—Sue Belle had in some way given her father to understand that she liked the man who lived in a shanty-boat and trapped and fished for a living.

On the following morning he set forth with his little golden pears packed in a double nest of cotton in a tin casket which had once served to hold six ounces of longcut. He felt a new fire in his heart and a new intelligence in his head.

As he had expected, he met Sue Belle on the brake trace. She hailed him with a laugh of delight. Lunmer Andrest was always good fun. He knew the birds and squirrels, and he showed her how to use a twenty-two-caliber rifle. He had taught her the mysteries of an automatic pistol, so that she could shoot it as well as a man.

To-day she found him distraught and hesitant. They walked down the trace together. Sue Belle's mule stalked after. She pointed at the little dicky-birds in the trees, and he stared at them absently or seemed unable to see them. They flushed a flock of black ducks in the green bayou, and he missed several shots at them, though sometimes he was able to bring a duck down on the wing with his twenty-two. He even missed a big fox-squirrel.

"What ails you to-day?" she demanded with the freedom of an old playmate. "Seems like you can't shoot or talk. What's the matter?"

Lunmer tried to meet her searching gaze, but failed. His tongue was apparently beyond his control. He glanced nervously from side to side, unable to look her frankly in the eyes. As long as he was a humble river-rat, and no more, such rallyings had not disturbed him. Now he was nonplused, and his conscience, usually free and painless, troubled him so much that he was sure he had committed a grievous sin in daring to remember that her father had once been poor white trash like himself.

Again and again he put his hand into his coat-pocket and seized the tobacco-box, determined to hand it to her with bold mien. As often his heart failed him, as she diverted his attention to something in the treetops or back in the dark of the woods.

Then, when they had turned and were walking back toward the plantation, he managed to stop her; he managed to get his clutches on the little tin box; he managed to lift its monstrous dead weight out of his pocket, and he poked it into her hands with a gesture that seemed criminal in its awkwardness. He laughed, but it was not lightly; it was a harsh, cackling, uneasy laugh which surprised her.

Before looking into the box she looked into his eyes, and what she saw there in that brief instant startled her. She knew the meaning of that dumb, helpless, pleading look. The look had never before troubled her, but now she turned away quickly, and to cover her own sudden confusion she raised the hinged cover of the box and lifted the covering of boll-cotton.

There were the two golden pears! They were small, perfect, beautiful, and with an exultant cry she accepted them—and obeyed the impulse to reward him with a kiss for his gift. It was a free, quick kiss; but, quick and free as it was, it left them both confused and wondering.

To cover his embarrassment, Andrest told her where he had found the golden pears, and how he had shucked them out of a strange-shaped clam in the Deer Hoof River.

"They're beautiful!" she repeated over and over again. When he helped her mount her mule at the edge of the woods, she once more repeated the assertion with deep meaning, adding: "It's real good of you to let me have them, Lunmer—I sure do appreciate them!"

"They're not much!" He shook his head. "Just little clam-shell tricks. I got 'most a bushel of them, but not like those—not gold color. I never saw them like that before. They're just little tricks!"

"And I love them!" she exclaimed, kicking the mule's ribs with her spur.

As she rode away, she threw him another kiss. From that hour nothing but physical duress could have driven him from the Dark Bend swamps.

He returned to his boat, singing under his breath. His hopes were not impossible, his dreams were not beyond realization. Sue Belle had been glad to receive the pretty little tricks, in spite of their being found in common clam-shells. They were precious to her because Andrest had given them to her. She had declared that she loved them. With the sudden widening of his intelligence and perceptions, he thought that she might almost as well have said she loved him.

"I don't care what old Clinchell thinks now!" he told himself with all the rashness of an independent and courageous youth.

He did not underestimate the difficulties before him, however. He knew that it would take more than the tender regard of the girl to enable him to place himself in a position where he could feel that he was worthy of her. A new world had opened up to his vision because of his adventure in finance when he made his first deposit in the bank.

He had never dreamed of entering the realms of finance where bankers, planters, cotton-brokers, big sawmill men, land speculators, and people of that kind dwelt. It had never occurred to him to ask himself whether or not he could enter those realms. For years and years he had hidden away his surplus silver dollars—for now he knew that they were a surplus. He had found the word in the pamphlets that John Urgone had given him to read and ponder over.

The more he read and studied, the more surprised he became. Sitting now, with the impulse of Sue Belle's regard behind him, his mind drove swiftly to the heart of the subject. He kept the pamphlets open on the table, or folded in his pocket, ready for reference when he could not recall the exact wording of a sentence or paragraph or phrase.

"It is easier to make money than to invest it," he read, and he applied that to his own situation. "I've quite a lot of money, but I don't know what to do with it!"

His mind switched to the fact that "every man must conduct his own business affairs, whether he does it well or ill. If a man knows how to make the most of the wages that he earns, he is that much ahead in training for handling larger business."

The suggestion that he himself was in business surprised him. He tried to figure out the details of his business, comparing it with others of which he knew something. He likened his catching and selling fish to a planter growing, picking, and selling cotton. He compared the furs that he caught in winter to cutting logs; the sale of the furs was like selling logs to a mill.

He tried to write down on a piece of paper all the different processes of business in which he was engaged. He bought eggs from farmers, corn-meal and flour from the store, bacon and pork from settlers in the cut-overs. He discovered that he was doing a good deal of business with very little capital.

He was more and more impressed with the fact that when he slipped silver dollars into jugs buried in the ground he was saving a fortune—money that could be invested and made to earn more money. Nothing had ever been more startling to Lunmer Andrest than this discovery of the realms of finance. He lost sleep at night running over, in his imagination, problems of interest and income and investment in stocks, bonds, or mortgages. He had no clear idea of what stocks were, or how they differed from bonds or mortgages; but he knew that a stock or bond would earn money—five or six dollars a year for a hundred dollars invested.

What with his fishing, his courting, and his financial studies, Lunmer Andrest was a busy youth. He did not see Sue Belle the next day on account of his fishing, and on the day after that he went down to Deerport to talk to Urgone about the twenty-three hundred dollars that he had in the bank. The money was not yet at work, as he understood it, and he wanted to put it to work.

The cashier approved of the result of Andrest's mental processes. He took a personal interest in the sudden awakening of the young shanty-boater's mind to new and strange ideas. He was working out a little theory of his own, there in the Deerport bank, and this eager, attentive youth was just the kind of subject he wanted to work on and with. He insisted that Lunmer should go into the directors' office and sit down.

As soon as he was free he went in and talked to Andrest, putting questions that were direct and pointed.

"How much do you get for your fish?" he asked.

"They pay 'long about six cents a pound—sometimes more, sometimes less. Of course, that's now. By and by it 'll be ten; but take it in the overflow, they'll get so many they won't pay but three or four cents."

"It's a case of supply and demand, then? If there are lots of fish, they are cheap; if there aren't many, they bring good money?"

"Yes, sir."

"You catch a good many in a year?"

"Right smart—I've caught as much as sixty dollars' worth one week; and then again I haven't had enough to ship. They want fifty pounds, anyhow, unless it's game fish."

"Sixty dollars a week is good money. Spend most of it?"

"I don't know—oh, I get new boots, and maybe a shirt or pair of jeans. Nets cost right smart, too. A man spends a good deal, take it the year around."

"Then trapping—does that pay?"

"Sometimes; it helps fill in. Take it last winter, I sold one lot of coonskins for sixty-five dollars; and I had a few mink, rats, possums, and wildcats. I expect I caught three hundred dollars' worth in the winter."

"And how much fish?"

"Why, I don't know. I suppose I get about a thousand dollars a year."

"How long were you saving that eighteen hundred dollars?"

"Since I came back into the Dark Bend swamps."

"Two or three years?"

"No, sir; five—six come next spring."

"You didn't save any before you settled on the St. Francis?"

"No, sir," Andrest grinned. "I didn't make so much, and I spent more. You know, down on the Mississippi there's store boats and sody-water boats and dances. You don't have much left, the week-end or the month-end."

"How did you happen to begin to save in Dark Bend?"

"I couldn't eat it up and I couldn't wear it out, so I put it into the ground."

"Just by accident, then?"

"The silver got so heavy in my pockets, and wore them out so much, I just had to get shet of it."

Both laughed. Even Andrest, now, could see the humor of burying money in the ground to save the trouble of mending holes in his pockets.

Then Urgone turned to the question of investing the money.

"Of course," he said, "it would pay the bank more for the present if you would leave it on deposit, and we could give you certificates which would bring you four dollars a year for each hundred dollars; but I think you would do better by putting all or most of it into securities. You can buy railroad, industrial or other stocks or bonds. I recommend you to look over some of these reports, which tell about the business of railroads, steel companies, and other enterprises."

Urgone took Andrest out to the hotel to dinner that noon, and kept him in the bank all afternoon, talking to him and questioning him. It was one of the hardest days Andrest had ever had, for he had to think, had to keep his mind alert in the presence of strange words and new ideas.

When at last he started back up the river, in the late afternoon, he was almost too tired to think, but he was full of a new happiness—the fact that he, a mere river shanty-boater, need not always be poor white trash.

"Any man has it in his power to better his station in life. What is more, it's a man's duty to better it," Urgone had told him.

In this the cashier revealed something of his own philosophy of life. He was doing his share in the world's work, that man Urgone! He knew as little as his young protégé knew about the future; but if he could have consulted a prophet, he would not have done less for Andrest because of any revelation of what was to come.

Andrest wanted to do something for Urgone, who was taking so much pains to make plain the principles and facts of finance—the primary things that offer so many stumbling-blocks to the untrained pupil. He could think of nothing that he could do, but he put back in his mind, for future use, his sense of gratitude to the man who was so willing to help him.

The day was so nearly done that the canoe traveled up the long stillwaters in the shadows, except where the river's course lay east and west. The craft cut the unwrinkled surface, with the green waters underneath, and on each side the reflection of the forest-clad banks. Squirrels sprang from branch to branch or scurried up the tree-trunks; birds chirruped; distant wild turkeys uttered their calls; mysterious sounds floated out of the wilderness of timber.

At long intervals he passed narrow clearings in the woods, where settlers were combating the wild, trying to make cotton-land in spite of the teeming growth of weeds and seedlings. The cane-rooting hogs in the clearings snorted and squealed at sight of the swift and silent canoe; but Andrest, to whom these things were all familiar, hardly noticed the present at all. His mind was busy with the wonderful future which seemed opening before him, toward which he had been blindly and unconsciously struggling when he tried to save his pockets from wear by burying silver dollars in the ground.

Darkness fell before he reached his cabin-boat. When he had cooked and eaten his supper, he went out on the stern deck to sit and look at the reflections of the stars in the water, and to conjure up the hopes and joys which a kindly future might shower upon him, if only he could get into his thick and stubborn head the things that would bring him success.

Suddenly, without warning, a voice shouted to him:

"Hey, you, white man! Hyar's a message for you!"

Something crashed on the bow deck, and an instant later he heard the visitor rustling away through the woods with light, almost noiseless, bare feet. The runner was soon out of hearing, and Andrest went to the bow to see what had been thrown down there.

He found a short, whittled club, with a string tied around the middle. To the string was fastened a folded slip of paper. When he spread the paper out by the light of a lamp, having cautiously drawn the curtains, he found written on it:

Dear Lun:

I wonder wouldn't you-all come to see me to-night, up by the Blue Bayou, at the trace, soon's you can? If I ain't there, wait for me till I come, or till day. You see, I want to talk to you right bad. Sue Belle.

"Sho!" Andrest exclaimed. "Course I will!"

He paused only to add his revolver holster to the automatic holster which he always wore now. He picked up his heavy rifle in starting out, and with a long stride he rapidly covered the distance to the river trace, up which he hurried to the Clinchell plantation. There he circled far out in the cotton-field to avoid passing the mansion and going anywhere near the quarters. He struck the trail near the far edge of the plantation, and a little later, out near the tap-line railroad, he stopped beside the Blue Bayou.

He sat down there, his low whistle having failed to elicit an answer. He sat for hours, but no one came near him. He heard no one, saw no one. Dawn arrived at last, finding him sleepy, much puzzled, and a little alarmed.

"If I ain't there, wait for me till I come, or till day," he repeated.

He waited till sunrise and then started for home again, feeling as if he had been made a fool of, and yet not certain about it. Sue Belle could have called him to the ends of the earth, and he begrudged no effort in her behalf. He was not sure that she had written the note; or, perhaps, she had written it just to plague him.

He met sawmill hands in the road, on their way to work. He again turned out of the trail to avoid going too near the mansion, but he could not help being seen by some of the pickers; and when he looked toward the Cupola on the mansion, where old Clinchell watched his plantation through binocular glasses, he saw someone sitting there.

He went back to his floating home and, after a breakfast which he did not much enjoy, turned in to sleep. He let his fish go that morning, but in the afternoon he pulled his nets, carried the catch to River Bridge, and shipped it on the night train to Mendova.

Then he rowed back to his shanty-boat, and lay awake a long time that evening, trying to think why Sue Belle should treat him so. Or, if it wasn't Sue Belle, who was it that dared to use her name? The letter was in fine, clear penmanship, just such handwriting as he thought Sue Belle would have, though he had never seen any of hers.

He slept uneasily that night, but at last went into a deep sleep, from which he was awakened long after sunrise by a loud shout from the bank. He hurried to the front door, and saw Clinchell, with an overseer and two negroes, all mounted on saddle-horses.

"Say, you!" Clinchell demanded. "Have you seen Sue Belle?"

"What?" Andrest gasped. "When?"

"Since night before yesterday. Have you seen her anywhere?"

"Not—not since Tuesday, sir."

"Where were you Wednesday?"

"Down to Mr. Urgone's bank in Deerport."

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Here, in the morning. I took fish to River Bridge yesterday evening."

"Where were you—you didn't fish yesterday morning?" the overseer demanded.

"No, sir—not till afternoon."

"Why not?"

"Why, I was pretty well tired—I slept all the morning."

"Where were you the night before?"

"Where was I the night before?" Andrest repeated blankly.

"Yes—where were you?"

"Why—why, I was coon-hunting around—what's the matter?"

"I'll tell you what's the matter," old Clinchell interrupted. "Sue Belle is turned up missing. We can't find her nowhere. She's gone! Ain't you seen her?"

"No, sir."

"We'd better drive down to Deerport and meet the sheriff!"

Clinchell turned to his little posse, and, with that, the four spurred their horses and drove at a gallop through the open woods.

Chapter 9

Old Durm Clinchell galloped out to the St. Francis Trace, where he met Sheriff Ferris and another posse on their way out to help in the search for Sue Belle, who had been missing for two nights and a day. They returned to the plantation, and by the time they arrived there twoscore or more of the settlers from the surrounding country had ridden in to join in the hunt.

What could they do in the Dark Bend swamps? There were hundreds of square miles of almost trackless brakes. There were tens of thousands of acres of cypress and tupelo-gum morass, where the surface of the ground was but a thin crust upon a deep, soft muck. There were cane-brakes so dense that old swamp-angels had been known to lose their way in them for days at a stretch, circling around and around. There were deep bayous and shoal lakes where American lotus grew in tufts—lakes whose bottoms were partly hard, white sand, partly quicksand, and partly fathomless mud. Worse than the dark gloom of the timber depths were some of the people who scouted out in the densest of the timber, like the big, red, cane-rooter hogs.

Clinchell had offered five hundred dollars to anyone who would find the missing girl in the brakes. He had offered another five hundred for the arrest and conviction of any one who had harmed her. The assembled swamp people broke up into squads to go out in every direction to ransack the woods.

Before they had fairly started, sawmill hands said that they had seen Lunmer Andrest at daybreak out by the Blue Bayou, on the trace there.

"What was he doing there?" a white man demanded.

Then cotton-pickers told of seeing the shanty-boater going through the cotton-fields that same morning.

"I remember now," said the old planter. "I saw him yesterday morning myself, going out around. I was up in the cupola when I saw him, but I didn't think anything!"

"We'd better go ask him—"

"We stopped there at his shanty-boat," the plantation overseer interrupted. "He denied having seen her. He said he'd been out coon-hunting."

"I think I'll ride down and have a talk with him myself," Ferris said.

No one protested, and the sheriff, with two deputies, rode out of the plantation, cut down the trace, and struck across to the shanty-boat eddy. There was the boat, with a little curl of smoke in the chimney, but no one was on board.

Ferris hesitated a little while, and then one of his deputies picked the lock and they all entered. They found the boat scrupulously neat, with the floor clean, the walls well painted and hung with a few pictures and tricks.

They looked back and forth through the living-room and the kitchen, but found nothing to awaken their immediate interest. On the table was a stack of papers and pamphlets, and one of the deputies exclaimed:

"Hue-e! This shanty-boater's reading right smart! 'How to Make Money Work,' 'Money Invested'— Sho!"

He held up a slip of paper and pointed his finger at the signature—"Sue Belle."

All three men read the note that had summoned Andrest upon his nocturnal errand to the Blue Bayou.

"That's evidence!" Sheriff Ferris exclaimed thoughtfully; adding: "The reason I wanted to come here, boys, was because old Durm's been tearing mad about that boy and Sue. Belle. Like's not they've run off together."

"Old Durm said he was here this morning—the stove's hot yet!" The deputies reminded their chief.

"And he was there, those mill hands said, there at Blue Bayou!"

"And he circled back away out in the cotton-fields, away from folks!"

"Rip Morlung 'lowed as old Clinchell hired him to tear up this boat, and he done it," Ferris repeated thoughtfully. "That's why he don't blame Andrest none for taking him in for the reward. I can't get the meaning of this thing nohow. Shanty-boaters are mostly no-'count; but I kind of like Andrest—I sure do! 'Stead of killing old Clinchell, he acted like a gentleman and had him peace-bonded. Course, if he's harmed that girl—if he's harmed her! We got to find him, boys; but it's best not to talk none about this—swear me that, boys!"

"We won't say a word, suh!"

"There's more to this than we know. I want to get to talk to that boy; but if he's done any crime, why, of course—"

"Course, we got our duty to do, suh!" Sheriff Ferris carefully folded the note and put it into his wallet. They retreated from the shanty-boat and, having locked the door, rode away, discussing the matter in low tones.

"I just wish he'd stolen that girl and done with it!" Ferris shook his head. "I wish he'd 'loped with her! If he'd done that old Clinchell couldn't have touched him. But his being here, and his sneaking around, and her gone two nights—it looks bad. I tell you, that boy's sure in trouble! He'll need all the money he's got in bank to get him out, too!"

"If they wait for him to fight it out," a deputy suggested.

"We'll sure have to hide him out around, if it comes to that," Ferris returned. "I sure want that boy to have a fair trial!"

They met two hounds in leash and a posse coming down the St. Francis Trace. One of the men—Si Hed Jesnie, the swamp man— had a shoe that belonged to the girl in his hand. At intervals he gave the dogs a sniff of it, so that they wouldn't forget what they were looking for.

The dogs picked up a cold trail; but when a clear footprint was found, the swamp man knew that it was more than two days old. It was an old track, made before the girl disappeared.

"She was always riding out on this trace," Jesnie declared. "I saw her walking along with young Andrest a week or so ago, right through here. She was real common thataway, not proud at all. She'd walk along with anybody she knowed, just to talk. Course, there's been some talk about her an' Andrest—"

"What talk was that?" Ferris asked casually.

"Why, no harm into it," Jesnie said hastily. "Just that they were friendly. He gave her a wild turkey once in a while, or a mess of game fish, or enough for a squirrel pie—but so we all did, for that matter. People talked, I suppose, because they were both about an age, and young Andrest wasn't so bad-looking. You know how people talk thataway—course they talk!"

"Oh, of course they talk!"

"Course, Andrest's a shanty-boater."

"But he's been along here right smart," Ferris suggested.

"Yes—five-six years. Time of the big overflow he had two rafts and his shanty-boat loaded of people. He was sure a useful riveh-rat those days! Take those riveh people, and they know how to keep on top the water and live. Good-natured fellow, that Andrest—real friendly."

Ferris left the posse to its trailing and rode on to the plantation. He found old Clinchell pacing up and down on the veranda, his hands twitching, his face working, his eyes rolling.

"Find that scoundrel to home?" Clinchell demanded.

"No, suh."

"Hunt for him?"

"Why, we didn't look around none," Ferris said. "I suppose he's out searching for Sue Belle, the same as the rest."

"Same as the rest!" exploded old Clinchell. "I tell you, I'll make that scoundrel talk, or—or I'll whale the living daylights out of him with a mule-skinner!"

"Why, Mr. Clinchell, what makes you talk thataway?"

"Warn't he out by the Blue Bayou all night? Didn't we find his tracks there? And didn't he come sneaking back in the morning, 'stead of following the trace, going out around through the cotton?"

"What's that got to do with it? You said he was out coon-hunting."

"What was he doing to Blue Bayou all night? There's his tracks, plain as day."

"You know his tracks?"

"You bet I do—a patch on the left sole and slip-nails into the heels, five in one, four in the other. If that man don't answer up I'll shore mess him around; I shore will!"

"Don't forget that peace bond, Mr..Clinchell," Ferris remarked gravely. "It holds, you know—it holds, all excepting in self-defense."

"It 'll be self-defense! I'd shoot him down like a dog! That man's impident!" Sheriff Ferris watched the old man tearing up and down the veranda, swearing and growling, waving his hands and shaking his shaggy head. The sheriff had watched a good many men in his time, good men, bad men, mean men, men who were in earnest and men who put on.

"Yes, sir!" Clinchell shouted. "I'll shoot him like a dog! I know that young scoundrel—I know him!"

"If you lay hand on hair or hide of Lunmer Andrest, you forfeit that bond," Ferris declared sharply. "Don't you blame any man till you know he's guilty."

"That bond won't hurt me!" Clinchell exclaimed. "I can pay forty bonds!"

Summons to dinner took the sheriff, his two deputies, and Clinchell down to the dining-room. They found an abundant meal there, and wagons carried lunches for the searchers out on all the traces and roads leading from the plantation into the timber-brakes.

After dinner Ferris and the two deputies rode away again. At the edge of the clearing the sheriff, who had looked back often, turned to his deputies and remarked:

"The old man's all waked up!"

"Mostly about young Andrest," one of his companions suggested bluntly.

"Just what I was thinking. We'd better find Andrest and get to talk with him. The old man's powerful strong-acting when somebody's watching, but he ate his dinner same as the rest of us, and about as much. I'm not satisfied, not the way things are looking. You ride over to that shanty-boat and get Andrest to come down to Deerport. I have some business to attend to."

The two deputies rode away as ordered, while Sheriff Ferris touched spurs to his horse and cantered down the trace toward Deerport. He rode into the county seat two hours later and went at once to the bank.

"Hello, sheriff!" Urgone greeted him. "Just in time—we should have been closed in a minute or two."

"Here's two reward moneys— five hundred dollars for information showing where Sue Belle Clinchell is, and five hundred for the arrest and conviction of anyone who has harmed her, if she has been harmed. It's offered by old Clinchell."

"Haven't found her yet, then?"

"Not a sign of her. There's something funny about it. I thought I'd run down and see you and Lesgar. Old Clinchell's bound to blame young Andrest, and he's threatening to shoot him on sight. There's that peace bond, you know—"

"Yes, I know, and there's something else, too, sheriff. Lesgar's inside—go in and talk to him. I'll be in as soon as I've closed up shop."

Ferris entered the bank office and found Lesgar poring over a handful of papers. His face wore a puzzled expression. He looked up and greeted the sheriff with an absent-minded nod.

"Hello, Lesgar!" Ferris said. "What's the matter?"

"Why, nothing special. Did you find that Clinchell girl?"

"No. There's something funny about that matter. Old Clinchell's telling around that he's going to tear young Andrest to pieces. I thought I'd better come down and let you know. There's something wrong somewhere. You signed his peace bond, you know."

"What? Yes, but I've a mortgage to cover that, personally, you know."

"It's because I know that I'm telling you," the sheriff continued emphatically. "You know old Clinchell. I'm not saying anything against him, mind you—I know better than that. I'm just telling you."

President Lesgar stared at the papers which he had been examining. Then he looked across the table to where the sheriff had seated himself.

"These are interesting documents," he said, as if to change the subject. "It's curious that I have that mortgage right here. Do you know those timber-lands?"

He read off a list of several mile-square sections.

"I don't know—not for certain." Sheriff Ferris shook his head. "But I know a man who does—who knows every foot of that Dark Bend swamp."

Ferris took the desk-telephone and called a number.

"Hello, Sitson! Come over to the bank, will you?" he said.

Five minutes later the cashier and another man entered the office. The other man wore long, well-dressed leather boots, a gray wool shirt, and heavy woolen trousers, and carried a gray hat in his hands.

"Mr, Sitson," said the sheriff, "you're some experienced in timber-looking—"

"Well, yes—the stave business," Sitson admitted.

"Would you mind telling us about these lots?"

Sitson looked at the list.

"Well," he drawled at last, "some of that might make cotton-land, if it was ditched and leveed."

"I mean the timber on it," Ferris asked, as the two bankers shut their teeth hard.

"Oh, there's some there—the east end of Netormine Gospel Lot is fair—the rest is all culled. If you're looking for timber, there isn't much on those sections. Of course, this isn't to be repeated around, if it means anything. Old Chncell owns all that land."

"It would have saved me a good deal of money if I'd called you in a while ago," Lesgar said frankly. "Clinchell has caught me—and he is pinching me hard!"

The timber-looker made no comment at first, but as the silence grew oppressive he said:

"I've talked frankly with you gentlemen in confidence; I'd rather pull out now, if you don't mind. I don't want any trouble with Clinchell. You know how he is. You can see the lands for yourself."

"We won't involve you in the least," Lesgar assured him. "No one will know. One more question—if that land were skinned down to the bone, what would the profit be?"

"Ten thousand dollars would be a big profit."

The timber-looker excused himself, and the two bankers and the sheriff remained at the table.

"I knew there was something wrong!" Ferris said. "Old Clinchell isn't acting right. He's awful mad when you're looking at him. He wants to kill Andrest on sight, and he'll likely do it. That would leave you in a hole!"

"He's shooting a scatter-gun, Ferris!" Lesgar exclaimed. "That peace bond is only part. These other papers are notices from the banks at Bandsaw and River Bridge. Fact is, we've been borrowing a good deal of money. He's taken up a lot of our obligations—we didn't know he had them. He's been to Mendova and traded in our notes. He's held back twenty thousand in checks, or more. Now they've come down on us with all of them, and that peace bond—that's just an indication!"

"One thing he hasn't figured on," Ferris suggested thoughtfully and with hesitation. "You understand, I don't want any trouble with him."

"Well, I do want trouble with him now," Lesgar replied hotly. "I want trouble with him, and I want lots of it! I know what you are thinking about, sheriff. I'm going to go see him just as soon as we can get to him!"

"Of course, that's up to you; but you know—"

"I know all about it. These papers came in here by a special messenger on the afternoon train. He's all ready for something to happen; he wants it to happen, and, by the skinflint's own hide, it's going to happen!"

Two minutes later Lesgar's automobile drove up to the bank. It was the only car in Deerport, and the three men entered it, to drive out to Clinchell's plantation. The journey took them a little more than an hour—which was good time, considering the fourteen miles of road they had followed.

Old Clinchell was at the mansion, but his horse was saddled, and a posse was gathered at the block. The old planter ran down the mound-side steps as they rode up.

"Oh, Mr. Clinchell! I'd like to talk with you a minute on business," said the bank president.

"No time to talk business, sir!" Clinchell replied, reaching for the horn of his saddle.

"What's the hurry?"

"We're going down to catch a danged river-rat—name of Andrest."

"If that's the case," Lesgar retorted, but with a soft voice, "I hereby surrender you into the hands of the sheriff. I no longer care to remain on this man's peace bond, Mr. Sheriff. Take him into custody!"

"Of course, if you say so, I'll have to do it," Ferris answered, with a politician's propitiating voice.

"What?" Clinchell exclaimed, staring at the men in the automobile as the sheriff stepped down with his right hand on his revolver-butt.

"You are in my custody, Mr. Clinchell," Ferris explained. "You'll 'low us to ride back in the automobile, Mr. Lesgar? It 'll be a favor."

"Oh, certainly—with pleasure!" replied the banker.

"Just step into the automobile with us, Mr. Clinchell—"

"But—but—my daughter—Sue Belle's stole! I—that river-rat!"

The planter was caught unawares. As Sheriff Ferris had suggested, he had overlooked one contingency.

"I will leave my deputies in charge of the search—it won't be any less thorough," Ferris told the planter. "Get into this automobile, sir!" he added sharply.

Clinchell blinked, and his heavy goatee bristled up like the back of a porcupine. Not daring to resist the sheriff, he stepped into the car.

"Home, Sam!" Lesgar ordered, and the automobile backed around and headed down the St. Francis Trace.

The old planter had been forestalled in his plan to violate his peace bond; but there wasn't a man in the car with him who did not realize that this was only the beginning of a cruel little financial feud in the St. Francis bottoms.

Chapter 10

As soon as old Clinchell and his posse were out of sight, Andrest put two big lunches into his game-bags and got out his repeating rifle. Thus equipped, he paddled up the St. Francis until he arrived at a ford from which a road—the East and West Trace—struck through the woods toward the Clinchell plantation, several miles to the west. The ford was in the Dark Bend of the river, which turned and flowed east from the edge of the cotton-plantation till it intersected with the road across the bottom-lands. At the sand-bar where the crossing was made, the river turned south.

As Andrest arrived at the ford and drew his skiff up to make it fast to a snag root, three white men, one of them Si Hed Jesnie, rode out of the woods on horseback. They all hailed him.

"Old Clinchell's tearing!" Jesnie said. "His daughter's missing!"

"He said so at my boat. I'm out looking for her," Andrest replied.

"He came by your boat? Sho! Did he talk mean?" one of the men asked.

"He talked worried. He wanted to know where I'd been," Andrest admitted. "I told him. Course, he had the right to know. Sue Belle's been friendly with me—just friendly."

The three members of the little posse glanced at one another, nodding with approval.

"You watched the river-banks coming up?" Jesnie asked. "She might have lost herself. Wild geese 'd get lost in these swamps!"

"I saw mule-tracks along, but not hers," replied Andrest. "She's on her mule?"

"Her mule was at the plantation—no saddle or bridle," Jesnie said. "That was early yesterday morning. They're all plumb scairt up!"

"They might be!" Andrest exclaimed. "A white girl lost in these old swamps! The mule come back without saddle or bridle! It's a natural leather bridle, and there's silver stars onto it. There's mean men in this Dark Bend!"

"We 'lowed to circle down the bank of the river along here," Jesnie explained.

"I don't know." Andrest shook his head. "I heard you whooping long before I got here—before you got here, too. She'd 'a' heard for two miles—she's got good ears."

Again the men glanced covertly at one another.

"There's no tracks of that mule in the East and West Trace?" Andrest asked.

"Not that we could tell."

"Suppose I row on up along this west bank and watch?" Andrest suggested. "She could hardly get out the plantation without crossing the river, if she crossed thisaway. I'd know that mule's tracks. She rode around on him a sight. There's a jag out'n his right fore hoof—just a nick."

"There's old tracks all around," Jesnie declared. "Some a week old—ever since the last rain; but not any fresh ones."

Andrest untied his boat and pulled up the river. He kept close to the west bank—which was the south bank at this point, as the stream flowed toward the east. He rowed with a long, hard pull, with his eyes ever on the bank. He knew that section of the river, because he had to row his fish up there to River Bridge.

No mule had climbed the bank anywhere along there for days, and none of the old tracks were those of Sue Belle's mule till he arrived at the plantation. There, at the bayou, was a single track climbing the steep bank, with the mark of hoofs sliding back in the clay.

The tracks were not forty hours old, and Andrest recognized them instantly. They were the tracks of Sue Belle's saddle-mule!

He swung across to the other bank. A short distance up-stream he found the place where the mule had come out of the woods and across the white sand-bar. Hauling the boat out, and throwing over the anchor as a precaution against a rising river, Andrest started on the animal's back track.

He had followed deer by their hoof-prints, and the twelve-hundred-pound mule, loping along, cut deep into the soft, damp earth. The track led northeast through the depths of the woods, and Andrest marveled at the straight line. That mule had come a long way, and was in a hurry, and was bound for home. It had not stopped anywhere to nibble a switch-cane or shrub-leaves.

After noon Andrest stopped to eat a lunch and then sallied on again, wondering at the mule's course through the untouched woods.

"Looks like he might have been stole and then he pulled away," Andrest said to himself.

"Somebody may have stolen that girl!"

Just before dark the mule-track led out into a blazed trace which Andrest had never seen before. This road followed a cane-ridge out of the southeast and headed northwest. The mule had come down the trail from the northwest, but left it with unerring instinct to catch the shortest route back to the plantation. Andrest slept beside the trace, leaning against a tree.

In this trail he could not follow the tracks step by step. Other mules, horses, and at least five or six wagons had followed the trace, and the saddle-mule had shacked along in the middle of the rough road, where its prints were blocked out.

The trail led to the main railroad, which crossed the swamps on an embankment twenty feet high. Here there were a sawmill, a boarding-house, and several board shacks scattered out in the stump-field, some of them built on stumps with outlying posts for braces, high enough above the bottoms to be clear of the lesser overflows.

Andrest had not seen the mule's track for some distance, but he hoped that he might hear a good word at the sawmill village—which was called Gumtree, as he knew by the sign on the little yellow station.

It was mid-afternoon when the trailer reached Gumtree. He went to the station-agent, and asked if he had seen such a mule and such a girl as he described.

"No, suh!" replied the agent, shaking his head.

Nor had anyone else seen the animal or the girl. Andrest was nonplused.

"Is it old Clinchell's girl you're looking for?" the station-agent asked. "You 'lowed she might have come thisaway?"

"I followed her mule-track clear to that trace," Andrest explained, pointing down the road he had followed in.

"You did? 'Cross those Dark Bend swamps?"

"It's not bad—the bayous are all dry," said Andrest, "But how could that mule get over thisaway?"

"There's the Railroad Trace." The station-agent pointed west, along the south side of the railroad. "It's followed right smart by strollers who come from beyond the Mississippi."

"Sho!" Andrest exclaimed. "I've been a wondering! That mule didn't go back the way he went!"

It was late evening, but Andrest started west along the Railroad Trace. When night fell, he stopped at a cabin beside the road. An old man lived in the cabin, and he had a skiff turned upside down on the roof of his home.

"You see, if the overflow comes suddint," the man explained, "I got my boat so's I can row around. I shore hate to jes' set when the water's all over the bottoms. Some ain't forehanded thataway. They don't have a boat when the water comes, and all they got to do is set. Now when I have my skiff, I can row around and, like's not, kill a turkey or a hog, or sunthin' to eat. They don't have to rescue me!"

"You haven't seen a young woman riding through here on a man mule, have you—I mean in the last three or four days?"

"No, suh! There was a quality gentleman stopped in here to breakfast three mornings ago, suh, but no lady drove past; not without it was at night. The gentleman had a lady's saddle besides his own, but there was no lady."

"Who was he?"

"He didn't say, suh—no, suh. You don't neveh get to ask gentlemen who they be when they rides through these swamps. Men have been killed for less'n that, suh—yes, suh. I don't expect you're used to living in these swamps. You see, people who lives around yeah suttingly learns to mind their own business."

"I was wondering if I knew him," Andrest explained. "I know right smart of people down in the Dark Bend swamps—"

"Sho! You from the Dark Bend?" The man straightened up, staring. "Lawzee! Down thataway they's some mighty mean men—yes, suh! The gentleman that was here said he come through there, and that the woods was just alive with swamp-angels, scouting around. He was a real nice gentleman, and he gave me four bits for breakfast. He rode a fine man mule, too—a regular old black one, big's a elephant, with a white spot on its head, just like a horse, and a white hoof—"

"A white spot on its head and a white hoof?" Andrest repeated.

"Yes, suh—warn't that remarkable for a mule? And he had a white tip to his tail. Now some gentlemen would have had those white hairs pulled out'n that mule's tail, but not this gentleman. There they was, white as could be—white as cotton—and they'd neveh been pulled out. Course, I didn't say nothing to the gentleman. I said it was a nice mule, but I didn't describe it none to him. You know, here in these bottoms, you don't want to let on you're noticing. Lots of times people don't want to be noticed. I suppose, down in those Dark Bend swamps, if they see you looking at a mole on the face, or a finger shot off the hand, or anything of distinction like that, they'd be real provoked, and mebbly shoot you up so's you couldn't be a witness, or like that. I hear say it's awful in them swamps. Pussonally, I ain't neveh been there, and I've an ijee I never will get down there. They's a power of killings there, ain't they?"

"Well, some," admitted Andrest; "but not so many as you'd think."

"It's been more'n six months since we had a killing," the loquacious old man declared. "I tell you, it makes a difference having civilization around. Take it when I was a young man; there was meanness around then, lots and lots of it. They killed when there warn't no real use of it, you might say. It was get mad, shoot, scout, and reward 'em those days. Take it when the Bullfrogs and the Red Flannels, as they called 'em, got to shooting. The Bullfrogs was always taking rafts out'n the sunk lands, and the Red Flannels was gentlemen that claimed to own the dead timber that was being rafted, and they'd shoot most inconsequential, so to say. But the laws have come now—yes, suh! They don't shoot without they's got some excuse. But back in those Dark Bend swamps, I bet they's mean! The gentleman that was here said so. Why, he said they'd steal a girl or a mule, or shoot somebody—just like that!"

He snapped his fingers.

Andrest listened with some surprise to what the old man said of the Dark Bend swamps. Rough as many of his neighbors were, he had no idea that the people of his own district were regarded so much askance by the settlers living along the railroads. Still greater, however, was his amazement that the old man should describe Clinchell's saddle-mule so accurately, and that the visitor at breakfast had carried a lady's saddle.

He said nothing about the meaning of the discovery he had made, and he was glad to bed down in a bunk for the night. There he puzzled his brain trying to figure out just what old Clinchell had done, and where Sue Belle was hidden away.

Before dawn he left the shack, returned to the railroad station at Gumtree, and took the train for River Bridge. Thence he tramped down to where he had left his skiff and went about hauling his nets, which had been neglected for more than two days. However, the fish were in fair condition, and he carried his catch to River Bridge.

Nothing had been heard of Sue Belle, but the search still continued. The old planter had been unable to find anyone to go his bail, and was locked up in the Deerport jail, waiting for the president of the Musko Gum Company, of Mendova, to sign a new bail bond; or, at least, so report said.

Having cared for his fish, Andrest pulled back to his shanty-boat, and there, that evening, he sat for hours, puzzling his head about the things which had worried everyone in the Dark Bend swamps. While he thought, he spread his cans of pretty little shell tricks on the table and shaped them into grotesques and flowers and birds. They made gay effigies on the black cloth.

Having been awake so late, he overslept in the morning. He was awakened by a hail from the bank, and he welcomed Sheriff Ferris and Deputy Sheriff Resner. They tied their horses to trees and walked aboard the shanty-boat.

Without parley, Ferris said:

"We had to come and get you, Andrest. Nobody knows anything about this lost girl business, without it's you. If you can give us any help in the matter, I wish you'd do it. Make a clean breast of it, won't you? There's trouble all around. The bank at Deerport is pressed hard. Old Clinchell's squeezing it. He says they favored you, and you're a mean scoundrel. I'm just telling you. Now what do you know?"

"I'll tell you what I know," Andrest replied. "I don't know what to make of it myself. I saw Si Hed Jesnie at the ford of the East and West Trace. Then I rowed to the Clinchell plantation, and there were a mule's tracks up the bank. I knew those tracks, for they had a notch out of the right fore hoof. They belonged to Sue Belle's saddle-mule. I took the back track. I went through the woods all that day, and at night I struck the Gumtree Trace. I'd never seen it before, and I didn't know it, but the mule came down the ridge. Well, I lost the mule-track—so much travel—but I kept on to Gumtree. No one there had seen that mule, but about three miles west, or maybe four, there was an old fellow in a shack with a skiff on top of it—"

"I've seen that skiff—upside down?" Resner asked.

"That's the one. Well, he said an old man came there, a quality gentleman, and stopped there for breakfast three days before. That was the morning the mule showed up at the plantation. That old man rode a mule with a white spot on the head and a white hoof, and the end of his tail had white hair in it that hadn't been pulled out."

"What's that? Why, that's old Clinchell's mule, if I know mules!" Ferris cried out.

"Yes, sir; and the old man told me the gentleman had a woman's saddle—"

"Wha-at?"

"That's what he said. I went back to Gumtree, took the train to River Bridge, followed the river down to my skiff, hauled my nets, and I've been thinking about it ever since."

"He's swore out a warrant charging you with stealing his girl," Ferris said. "I suppose I got to read it to you, so the arrest 'll be legal."

Ferris read the warrant. Andrest listened with paling face.

"I never was arrested before," he commented. "Course I'll go! What evidence has he got about me and her?"

"Not much, after what you just said," Ferris replied; "but he had a yellow man down to see him yesterday. After talking to him a while, Clinchell swore out that information to have you arrested. Course we got to search this boat and around."

"Yes, sir." Andrest nodded. "You can look anywhere at anything I got. If you want me to, I'll help."

"All right! We'll start at one end."

"Yes, sir. That's the stern. Under there I keep it filled with dry wood for kindling. It's a good place under the deck."

He threw open the trap under the after deck, and the officers looked into the space and pulled out some of the wood. Then they looked through the kitchen, and its boxes and cupboards. Andrest moved one of the boxes, and showed them a trap hidden in the floor. Under this there were some canned goods. On the other side was another trap, where he kept a lot of hickory and pecan nuts.

Thus they searched the boat, every foot of it. Two traps under the deerskin rugs in the sitting-room revealed other little treasures. Andrest pulled out a cunningly fitted wainscoting door, and disclosed a take-down shotgun and several hundred shells.

"I have a big empty space 'under the bow, same's under the stern deck," Andrest said. "You pull that wainscoting out there and you can look under. I keep the bow light, though."

Suiting the action to his words, he pulled out the wainscoting, and Sheriff Ferris looked in. He could see nothing in the dark space.

"There's a door in under on both sides?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Andrest answered.

Crossing the cabin, he pulled over the wainscoting. Out of the opening there fell a stirrup. It was attached to a saddle. When Andrest grasped this with a cry of amazement, he turned it up before the two men.

"Why, lawzee!" he cried. "That's Sue Belle's, if I know saddles!"

The two officers watched him with keen eyes as he turned the saddle to look at it, almost forgetful of their presence.

"How did that get there?" Ferris demanded.

"How did it get there?" Andrest repeated; and then he cried out: "Sho! That saddle on my boat—how did it come here? Why—why—yes, sir! How did it?"

"Did you think you could fool us, telling about that old man and the white-tailed, white-hoofed mule?" Ferris said sharply.

"No, sir." Andrest shook his head, turning the bridle over in his hands. "I just told you the way it was. You can find out seeing that old man. He's suspicious, that old feller! You'd better talk slow and around. Then he'll tell you, the same as he told me. It's a pretty saddle, gentlemen, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir—but where's Sue Belle?"

"If I knew, gentlemen," Andrest answered gravely, "a five-horse team of mules couldn't hold me from lighting out thataway—no, sir!"

The two officers looked at each other. They did not know what to think. They thought they could see through old Clinchell's scheme to ruin the Deerport National Bank, and they knew that he had President Lesgar in a tight fix, because Lesgar had said so. Now they wondered what kind of a mess they had found.

"Well, I think we'd better go," Sheriff Ferris suggested. "I hate to do it, Andrest, but it's law. What can we do about the boat?"

"Jesnie will take care of it," Andrest said. "I'm going to take some reading and tricks with me."

The shanty-boater gathered up two game-bags full of things, including the shell tricks and his pamphlets about finance.

"All right, gentlemen!" he said. "I'm ready!"

Chapter 11

Though he had him in jail, old Durm Clinchell had cleverly marshaled his forces against President Lesgar, of the Deerport National Bank, and others whom he was determined to strike because they stood in his way. The Planter and Logging banks had called for the money due them, and the Deerport institution could not raise cash enough to satisfy the demand. Lesgar did not see how to meet the emergency, although he had saved the immediate drain of fifty thousand dollars which would have followed an assault on Lunmer Andrest in violation of the heavy peace bond.

Clinchell had succeeded, too, in jailing young Andrest. The information that he had sworn out against the shanty-boater had resulted in the warrant for the young man's arrest, on the charge of abducting Sue Belle Clinchell and "conveying her to parts unknown." The finding of the girl's sidesaddle in the shanty-boat might have two constructions, but old Clinchell would admit but one.

He did not know what Andrest had done in trailing the homing mule until confronted by Ruster Delve, the old man who lived in the shack with a skiff on the roof. Andrest had not asked the old settler's name, but he was easily found, and he readily undertook to go with Deputy Resner to Deerport, on condition that he should not be taken through the Dark Bend swamps, of which he was so much afraid. So Resner took him the long way around, by the railroad west of the swamps, until they could take Banker Lesgar's automobile on the Hills Trace eastward into Deerport.

Ruster Delve went to the jail, where Andrest was brought to him.

"You-all in jail!" he exclaimed. "Well, I declare! And I never s'pected nothing. Why, if I'd known you-all was a scouter, I'd shore 'a' took you back down in the bresh. They never would 'a' caught you if you'd gone with me!"

Then the sheriff led in old Durm Clinchell, who stopped abruptly, his jaw dropping, when he saw Delve. There was no need to ask Delve to identify the old planter. Clinchell's confusion and surprise were sufficient indication that Andrest had really stumbled upon some of the old swamp man's deviltry.

"Howdy, Mr. Man?" Delve greeted Clinchell. "I shore never did expect to find you in jail! What did you-all do with that lady's saddle you was packing around?"

"I didn't have a lady's saddle!" Clinchell roared. "You're a liar if you—"

"Hold on!" Delve exclaimed, leaping to his feet and backing into a corner of the office, where he drew two long forty-fives from somewhere among his weather-faded garments. "I didn't come yeah to be called a liar! You-all apologize and tell about that saddle, or by—"

Clinchell saw death in the angry old man's face. One long revolver held the sheriff, the jailer, the deputy, and Andrest on one side, while the other covered Clinchell, aimed low at his stomach, no matter which way he sidestepped.

"Tell these gentlemen!" Delve warned.

"Why—why, I had a lady's saddle and bridle—I forgot! I bought it—"

"Where is that saddle?" demanded Sheriff Ferris, overlooking Delve's untactful but effective demand for an apology.

"Why, out on the plantation."

"What kind of one was it? Describe it!"

"Why, a thirty-two-pound saddle and black-reined bridle—"

"What's that?" Delve demanded.

"Why—I—I don't reck'lect!" Clinchell gasped. "I—it were—perhaps it were natural leather color!"

Clinchell was trembling as if he had the palsy. His plans were going awry. When Ferris brought out the woman's saddle which he had found on Andrest's boat. Delve identified it immediately.

"I'd know them silver buckles and stars anywhere!" he declared.

Old Clinchell opened his mouth to speak, but shut his jaws with a snap, his thought unspoken. The sheriff turned to him:

"What do you think you've been doing?"

Clinchell sniffed and turned his back. He retreated through the hallway into the corridor where the white men were confined. He tramped heavily on the stone flagging, and he swaggered as he walked, but the officials, who had seen many bad men's bravado, smiled.

"I 'low you could get to go if you had a bond," Sheriff Ferris said to Andrest. "Course, I expect you'd promise you'd be ready any time to come back—a personal promise?"

"I would be ready any time. That old scoundrel has tricked me, and that saddle was sneaked onto me!"

"I suspected it. The old devil's hid his own daughter out, and he wanted you sent away for it," Ferris said. "I'd talk to a lawyer, if I was you. Clinchell tried to ruin your reputation. That's against the law!"

"Sho!" Andrest exclaimed. "I'll sue 'im! I'll sue 'im for a thousand dollars!"

"Your reputation is worth a heap more'n that!" Ferris declared. "You got money in the bank—you're peaceable and law-abiding and neighborly. You let your lawyer see about that. I'll call Mr. Lesgar; he's friendly, and he'll know about a bond."

Half an hour later, under a thousand-dollar bond, Andrest went forth free. Before the afternoon was over Clinchell was served with papers charging him with conspiracy and libel, and demanding damages amounting to fifty thousand dollars, while Andrest strode away up the St. Francis Trace on his way home

It was a strange shift in the fortunes of the shanty-boater. He had put old Clinchell on the defensive, and the planter was in jail, betrayed and defeated by his own malicious temper and vindictive lawlessness.

On his way through the woods, Andrest checked his gait and began to read snatches in the booklets on finance from the two game-bags which he had filled for a prolonged stay in the jail. In his brief stay in Deerport he had learned of Clinchell's blows at his friend Lesgar, which also threatened Andrest's little hoard. They had forced the bank at Deerport to close, whether temporarily or permanently none could tell. There were some questionable assets which would never be realized if old Clinchell's influence prevailed. If the bank's local debtors—sawmill men, traders, homesteaders, and others—failed to meet their obligations, the sheriff had said, the Deerport institution wouldn't pay fifty cents on the dollar.

Si Hed Jesnie had rowed the shanty-boat up the river nearly a mile, so that it would be opposite his own cabin back on the trace. He was glad to see Andrest.

"I sure thought, when old Clinchell came down on you, you'd get to stay out on the farm most of the rest of your life!" Jesnie declared. "The old man's sure getting overbearing an' mean, having his own way so much. It was getting so nobody could turn around without his say-so; an' now I hear he's in jail hisself!"

When he had told the swamp man about conditions down at Deerport, Andrest crossed to his shanty-boat. After killing two squirrels for supper, he sat down on the bow deck to think. Despite his elation at being home and free again, he was sore in his heart because of the treatment he had received without warrant or justice.

"Why did that old scoundrel try to break me up thataway?" he asked himself. "I'm not going to have my friends treated thataway on account of me. I won't let any man treat me so, neither. No man has any right to treat another man like a dog, no matter how rich he is!"

His meditations stirred the anger of the river youth as it had never been stirred before. He declined to excuse Clinchell on the plea that the planter had acted in defense of Sue Belle.

"I'm peaceable," Andrest repeated to himself over and over again. "I'm peaceable, and I mean harm to no man, but I'm not going to be hounded around anymore. If old Clinchell rides out of Deerport a free man, then I'll waylay him, and I'll see if I'm going to be run around like I was a rabbit with a dog on my track, and nothing to fight back with!"

Andrest meant exactly what he said. He believed that Clinchell would find a bond in a day or two. The sheriff had seemed surprised to think that the rich planter was as long obtaining a surety as he had been; but Judge Darkin had made the bond a really formidable one, and Clinchell had no friends near at hand who could truthfully sign for twice fifty thousand dollars.

Lesgar's experience had been noised around, and there was no one who cared to rely upon any security offered by old Clinchell. His trickery in mortgaging the timber on cut-over land now kept the arbitrary old planter in jail—which was fortunate for him, in a way; for after Andrest had cleared out his nets and begun to run out his lines for the winter traps, he carried his heavy rifle and regularly inquired if Clinchell had been turned loose yet.

"I've run just about so long!" Andrest said to himself. "I've been hounded around and misused and treated low down just as long as I'm going to be. Now I'm going to hit back so's old Durm 'll feel it!"

A week after he returned from jail Andrest found a yellow girl sitting side-saddle on a mule, waiting for him at his shanty-boat landing. The girl was Delfy, Sue Belle's maid. At sight of Andrest, she sprang down from the mule and ran up to him.

"I 'low I better whisper low, Lunmer Andrest"; she began. "Hyar's a writin' fo' you-all. It come last evenin' to me, suh, an' I jes' fetched it down yeah fast as that fool mule could shake his laigs!"

Except for money envelopes from fish commission merchants and price-lists from fur-buyers, Andrest had received few letters in his life. He accepted this one with wonder. It was sealed, and was addressed to "Mr. Lunmer Andrest."

The yellow girl was uneasy. As he tore open the envelope, she dropped her voice to a low whisper.

"Sho!" she gasped. "I got to tell you-all something, suh. Old marsa, he made me write a letter to you myse'f, t'other night, an' have you meet Sue Belle out by the Blue Bayou. Then he 'lowed he'd whale me if I eveh let anyone know about it. Lawzee! I jes' had to let go that!"

She turned, jumped upon the mule's back, and galloped away. Andrest looked at the letter, hardly noticing what she said. It was more astonishing than any that he had ever dreamed of reading.

Dear Lunmer;

I must write you by Delfy about those little golden pears which you gave me, they are so perfectly beautiful. I am out visiting my aunt at Provell, and she has a friend in the business of buying pearls, and he saw them.

What do you think? I just mustn't keep them. They are worth eight thousand dollars! He said he would pay that for them, and for other pearls in proportion. He was greatly interested in learning about all those pretty tricks you found in clam-shells, and said if they were anything like the golden pears, you must have a fortune in them.

So you gave me pretty little tricks, didn't you? And I just won't keep them, they are too valuable. I wish you would bring some of those little tricks out of clam-shells here so aunty's friend can see them, and see if they really are worth so much.

Don't let daddy know you are coming out here, or let anybody, for he would kill you sure as you're born. He tried to make me say I wouldn't let anybody know where I was, so he could s'prise them; but I fibbed. I wanted to write to you, anyhow, for I never wrote to a beau before. Did you know you were my beau? I did.

Be sure and come!

Sue Belle.

"Sho! She's over to Provell!" Andrest exclaimed. "Go to see her? I bet I will! Old Clinchell's in jail and can't help himself now!"

He did not wait an hour, but gathered up his two game-bags, packed as he had packed them for his stay in Deerport jail. He told Jesnie he was going away again for a few days; then he went on to the tap-line road, caught a log-train to the main line, and bought a ticket to Mendova.

As he rode eastward, he puzzled over the letter that he had received. He could not make up his mind how those little tricks, like pears of new gold, could be worth so vast a sum as eight thousand dollars. He began to wonder if this was not another fooling letter, like the one that led him to the Blue Bayou to wait all night for the girl who did not come.

The writing was much the same, and the yellow girl had confessed to writing that other note. Perhaps her confession was part of the scheme. Some yellow girls are bright, he mused, and if this letter was only another trap—well, he would take a chance, anyhow.

"If you ain't gambling at cards, you are at catching fish, or getting killed up from the bresh!" he said to himself.

He was sorry he had not brought his rifle, but he felt a reasonable safety, in view of his having a good automatic pistol, which he carried all the time because of Clinchell's enmity.

He felt homesick when the train rolled out on the great steel bridge spanning the Mississippi at Mendova. The golden river was nearly a mile wide, and it poured under the bridge, flowing down in what seemed an ever-widening channel, flashing and flickering in the sunshine. In the midst of the vast flood floated a little red shanty-boat tripping down with a man silhouetted against the sun's reflection, resting on the sweep-handles.

Andrest had tripped down the Ohio and down the Mississippi as far as New Madrid, where he crossed into Little River. The lower river was a mystery to him. For some men Mendova was the jumping-off place, below which they dared not venture. Others stopped at Cairo, St. Louis, Vicksburg, or Memphis. A few brave and venturesome souls floated clear down to New Orleans. Still others turned off into the Red River and the Atchafalaya—and it was said that some who went down the "Chafelli" never did get to come back.

Now the mighty Mississippi, which Andrest had not seen for several years, reached up and tried to lure him, tried to draw him back to the flowing torrent that led to the jumping-off place. He had lived so long back in the swamps, on the little green St. Francis—little and green, that is, when it wasn't overflowed and yellow and forty miles wide—that he had forgotten the magic of the big river.

But there was another and a still stronger tug at his heart. He wanted to live on the Mississippi again, but there was a sunnier smile on Sue Belle's face than in all the radiant sunshine on the mile-wide Father of Waters. He told himself that he would try and reconcile the girl with the river, and that perhaps they would drop down the great stream together. He flushed at that suggestion as if it were wanton and wrong to think of her in that way.

"She sent for me to come!" he whispered to himself, that fact becoming more and more certain in his mind. "Sue Belle sent for me!"

But when he read the letter again, and saw the astonishing statement that Sue Belle had received an offer of eight thousand dollars for the two little golden pears shucked out of clamshells, he was incredulous once more.

"Sho!" he sniffed. "That ain't so! There wouldn't anybody in the world pay that much for those little tricks! Not a king, or millionaire, or railroad president, or any such feller!"

The price made him pause in the Union Station at Mendova. Eight thousand dollars! Why, that would buy two hundred acres of ridge cotton-land!

"But I'll chance it!" he decided at last. "It might be she was just fooling me along the way girls do fool a man sometimes, plaguing him."

So he caught the train out to Provell, and arrived there in the hour before sunset. Provell was a Chickasaw Ridge town, and its hills were regular mountains to the swamp-habituated youth. There were streets that rose a hundred feet in five hundred, and the main thoroughfare looked as if it had been shaken and wrinkled up by an earthquake, it was so full of ups and downs.

"Wu-hoo!" a voice hailed him, and there was Sue Belle waving to him.

He hurried to the buggy and climbed in.

"I knew you'd come," she laughed. "And oh, Lun, you're not poor white trash anymore! You're rich! Those two little golden pears—I love them so! But you must sell them, and—"

"You love them?" Andrest asked. "You think I'd take them back if you love them? Shucks!"

"They're beautiful for earrings," she said. "There are ladies who could wear them. Mr. Mier says he could sell them for you—"

"If you love them, and if there's any lady in the world can wear them. Sue Belle, they're for you to have!" he declared. "You sure are better than any spoiled town lady that ever lived!"

"Honest? You'd—you want me to have them—knowing they're—they're a fortune?" she asked.

"I'd starve before I'd let you give them back!"

"You brought those other clam-shell tricks?" she asked.

"About a peck of them," he admitted.

"I don't know," she mused. "I've been wondering—"

She drove him to the house of her aunt, who greeted him cordially. Mrs. Waspe had learned of the value of the two pearls, and she was a practical-minded widow. When she saw the "little tricks" from Andrest's two game-bags, she immediately telephoned for Mr. Mier, of whom Sue Belle had spoken.

Mier arrived within half an hour, and when he saw the quarts of pearls he uttered an exclamation.

"I never saw the like before!" he declared. "You've found a pearl pocket. Some of those baroques are worth a hundred dollars apiece."

Andrest stared, hardly able to believe what he heard. Then his mind turned back to his friends in Deerport, the men who had risked much to help him, only to find themselves attacked by old Clinchell. Worse yet, Sue Belle was Clinchell's daughter, and the friendly widow was his sister.

"I'd sure like to sell some of them," the river youth admitted when the pearl-buyer put the question.

"The best way, I think," Mier said, "is to have me sell them on commission. I'll take as many as you want to sell, and I'll charge you fifteen per cent for selling them—that is, fifteen dollars on each hundred that I can get for them."

"That sounds fair," Andrest said. "I wouldn't know what to do with them."

Two hours later Mier caught the Sunrise Special for New York. He carried a small fortune in pearls in his case, and he had left twice as many with Andrest as he carried away.

Chapter 12

Clinchell found Rip Morlung in jail, waiting for trial and anxious to escape. The planter soon learned that Rip had held his peace as regards his reason for tearing up Lunmer Andrest's shanty-boat, which had been the direct cause of the marauder's capture and imprisonment. Whatever people might think, Morlung had remained true to his employer.

The two had plenty of time to plan and plot in a corner of the corridor, clear of the other prisoners. They conferred between the visits of the lawyers whom old Clinchell had engaged in the effort to secure his freedom—which was proving unexpectedly difficult, for Judge Darkin refused to lower the bond or to accept any sort of straw bail.

For a long time the political powers in Cypress County had been hoping for a chance to bring down old Clinchell, whose autocratic ideas had grown more and more insufferable. The attack on the Deerport National Bank hurt local pride in the town, where President Lesgar was every man's friend.

Rich as he was, Clinchell had stepped too far over the bounds, and the Dark Bend swamps had lost, for a time at least, their influence in politics. The very quality of the food served to Clinchell was significant to the wilful man, for it was precisely the same as that of the other white prisoners. It did him no good to complain. After one outburst he held his peace and consulted with the more experienced Morlung, who had long been used to having every man's hand against him.

One day Cashier Dovent, of the Planter Bank at River Bridge, made a post-haste trip down to Deerport for a conference with Clinchell. He brought with him a sheaf of papers showing various angles of the bank's condition. He asked for and obtained a private interview with Clinchell in the sheriff's office.

"You see how it is," Dovent summed up. "Those Mendova banks and trust companies have called in all their loans to us. Look where that leaves us!"

"Sho!" Clinchell gasped, his eyes staring at the balance against the Planter Bank. "What—what has happened?"

"I called them up on the telephone," Dovent declared hesitatingly, "and Mr. Forwell, of the Chickasaw Ridge, said they'd heard you were in jail, and they wouldn't take any more chances with your—with your—"

"With my what?" demanded Clinchell. "What are you holding out on me?"

"With your bad temper, sir!"

Clinchell gasped. His jaw dropped.

"I ain't in jail for stealing!" he declared. Dovent made no comment.

"I ain't touched another man's dollar, have I? Ain't I honorable, and don't I pay my debts? What did anybody else say?"

"Colfex, of the Deep Waterway, said—he said—"

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said he'd heard you gave a mortgage on the timber on cut-over lands, and—"

"But that was business, wasn't it?" Clinchell demanded. "Wasn't that Lesgar's lookout?"

"I suggested that to them, and they said it was their lookout to get their money out of the Planter and Logging banks just as soon as the good Lord would let them. That's what they said! We have till tomorrow afternoon, Mendova closing-time, to take up those papers, or you can see what 'll happen, sir. The whole darned caboodle goes up!"

"Well, I'm going to kill somebody for this!" Clinchell roared. "It's that trifling Lesgar—he's gone to Mendova with this Cypress County and Dark Bend business! It's our private business around here, and he's—he's gone and brought in strangers that it isn't any business of!"

Clinchell paced up and down the iron-toothed sheriff's office, a panther in a cage. He could see now why no one would go on his peace bond, and why the county politicians were so independent. They had drawn a line around him and left him outside of their powers and activities.

For a time his anger was deep and overwhelming; but as he looked into the predicament in which his overbearing disregard of other people had placed him, he realized that he was straining at the end of his rope just when he thought he held the reins to the bits in countless other men's jaws. The curb of humanity had been applied to his selfishness, and it was an effective curb.

Instead of crushing Lesgar and adding another bank to his collection, both his own banks were menaced.

More than that, he had stretched his assets and mortgaged his lands in order to add to his income and increase his opportunities for wealth. Over in Mendova there were personal notes secured upon his thousand-acre cotton-plantation, and hardly any of his good timber but was covered by conservative mortgages. In all, these obligations were probably less than one-third of the value of his property; but in a foreclosure sale his lands might go for much less than they were really worth. Clinchell had forced mortgage sales too often not to know what they meant to the victim. He choked and writhed in mental agony.

"I want that pistol you carry—understand?" he whispered in Dovent's ear.

The cashier handed it over with a swift gesture. Clinchell slipped it into his pocket and went on talking about the steps that should be taken with the Mendova financial institutions.

"Open that private box of mine," Clinchell ordered. "There's some stocks and bonds in that. Shift them and get telegraph funds for them in Mendova. They'll take care of about half that the banks owe, but there'll still be about a hundred thousand that I've got to take care of. They're going to break me, if they can, 'count of the clause in the mortgage notes that lets them sell me out when the value of the holdings drops and they think they'll lose their funds. They'll have a one-man mortgage sale, and manage to wipe me out! They're laying for me, and I didn't know it. Well, get out of here, now!"

Dovent departed, and Clinchell retired to the corridor, where he paced up and down till supper-time.

It had been a busy day for the jail trustees. They had killed three big hogs, and as night was coming on, with rain threatening, they hung the hogs in the outside jail entrance, leaving the steel-plate door open; but the inside barred door was locked, as usual.

After supper the prisoners soon settled down for the night. Their snoring in various notes filled the small building.

Toward midnight Morlung's cell door opened magically, for his clever fingers had contrived keys out of the flat elm splints of a chair-bottom. He opened old Clinchell's cell a half-minute later.

They dumped the big soft-coal stove in the corridor, lifted out the grate, and dropped it into the water-pail to cool it. Then they took the grate, and catching the nuts of the barred door in the interstices of the grate-bars, they rapidly wrenched the door from its hinges and opened the way to freedom.

Slipping out into the dripping street, the two escaping prisoners scurried around the corners till they were out of town, and then they sogged their way northward toward their own familiar Dark Bend swamps. Durm Clinchell had never broken jail before, and he was angry now to think that he had to do it. Free, and in his own timber-brakes, he could defy the world, he told himself. He would let no man rob him of his hard-earned lands!

That was his idea—to hold the plantation and timber-lands by force against any invader. Rip Morlung promised to help him. Rip said he knew an army of men that he could get to help the old planter to protect himself from the wanton assaults of his enemies.

Old Durm Clinchell had lost his perspective on affairs. He had been his own law for so long that he could not submit to a higher one.

When he reached his house, in the early morning, he ordered out his servants and made ready for war with his enemies. He had ammunition and firearms in plenty, and he had all the guns cleaned and loaded. He decided where he would have his secret headquarters out in the brake, where no one could ever find him—not in a thousand years, he fondly told Morlung, who agreed half-heartedly. Rip had lately had an experience with a hiding-place supposed to be absolutely secure against pursuit!

Nevertheless, Morlung entered with zest into the affair, for he would rather be free and in the Dark Bend swamps than sitting day after day there in the Deerport jail.

At dawn they rode away with their weapons. Clinchell warned the house-servants to keep their mouths shut, and gave one of his men full instructions as to keeping him supplied and informed.

"I'll fight them till I die!" Clinchell declared. "They can't rob me thataway!"

Over a day the tables had been turned on him, but he did not realize his situation. Angry and desperate, he believed what he said. But the next afternoon, when his trusted man slipped out into the brake and met him, the servant said:

"They're looking for you! I brought your papers and mail, same as you told me."

The first page of the Mendova *Chronicle* contained a long account of Durm Clinchell's flight from the jail at Deerport, in company with Rip Morlung, a swamp desperado. Clinchell laughed when he read the account of the escape; but when he saw the subsequent paragraphs he turned pale, for one of them said:

Clinchell formerly owned a large area of land in the Dark Bend swamps, but his extravagances have led to the falling of nearly if not quite all his property into the hands of Mendova financial institutions, which are said to be pooling their interests for the purpose of developing the land under modern conditions. Clinchell was at one time reputed to be worth more than half a million dollars, but his lawless behavior led to his undoing. He was tried four times for homicide during the heyday of his life. Recently he attempted to follow out his policy of violence, only to meet a quiet and unassuming youth of splendid character and unflinching courage, who brought him to Deerport and demanded that he be put under an adequate peace bond of fifty thousand dollars, which was done. Clinchell's inability to obtain proper surety for his bond compelled his incarceration. He rode to his mansion as soon as he escaped, secured large quantities of ammunition and firearms, and is now out in the swamps, hiding with other desperadoes.

With other desperadoes! Formerly owned a large area of land! Clinchell choked as he read. He had made such announcements in the old days, covering his schemes to use the extremity of the law against small holders of property whom he had driven to desperation. It dawned on him in that hour what a weak man he was, after all, and how little chance he had against the machinery of social order.

Hiding with other desperadoes! That was true. Old Durm Clinchell looked over his shoulder as he slunk away in the big timber of the Dark Bend brakes. He did not know at what minute he might be fired upon by some reward-seeker. He did not know when someone, seeing him a hunted fugitive, might shoot him down in revenge for some past grievance.

Furtive and frightened, Clinchell fled into the depths of a mass of cane where Rip Morlung and he were keeping house in a tiny shack, in constant terror lest their gunshots, as they killed a squirrel or wild turkey for food, should bring down upon them an overwhelming sheriff's posse.

Realizing what had befallen him, Clinchell broke down. He lost his nerve. His hands trembled. Rip Morlung, returning from a foraging expedition, found his fellow outlaw lying sick of fever in the shack. He dosed him with quinin and whisky, and grew more and more alarmed as the old man's voice whispered or yelled in delirium.

Morlung—who at least had the virtue of loyalty to a comrade—did not know what he ought to do. If he left Clinchell lying there the old man might die, and that wouldn't be good sense. If he took him in and had him doctored, that would be surrendering him to the authorities—which would be base treachery, according to the code of the timber-brake scouters.

"He's got to have a doctor!" Morlung decided. "If I cayn't take him to one, I got to go get one!"

With that, Rip bound old Clinchell hand and foot and lashed him to the shack posts, so that the delirious man could not escape into the woods, where he would certainly be lost and perish. Then Rip set forth to the brake where they had hidden their horses. Taking Clinchell's big saddle-animal, he galloped through the timber to the St. Francis Trace and followed it down to Deerport, the one town he knew well.

He arrived at Deerport after dark and tied his horse at the edge of town, while he sneaked through the back streets and across vacant lots till he arrived at the back door of Dr. Surey, famous in the bottoms for his skill with fevers and agues.

"I 'low I want to see the doctor," Rip told the mammy who answered his rap.

"Sho! Git around to de office door, pore white trash, you!" the old negress cried.

Morlung, abashed, slunk around to the little office-building in the yard corner. He stepped into the outer room and then into the inner office.

"Doctor," he whispered, "hands up! Git your medicine-bottles, an' a lot of 'em! Don' you open your danged haid!"

Dr. Surey's jaw dropped, and then he smiled into the revolver muzzle.

"Hello, Rip!" he greeted. "Old Clinchell's sick, eh?"

"Why—yas, suh! Git them bottles!"

"Hold your horses and I'll be with you in a jiffy. What did that old fool go and sleep out in the swamps for, this time of year? Might have known he'd get a shakebone fever, old as he is!"

Rip started to go to his horse, but Dr. Surey refused.

"I'm running an automobile these days, and we'll go in that," he said.

So they rode out into the Dark Bend, and Rip brought the doctor to the cane-brake refuge.

"Rip," Surey declared, after an examination of the sick man, "there's one way of saving the old chap's life—that's to take him home and put him in a feather-bed. It's up to you. Of course, the sheriff will get him."

"I—you'll have to tell me what to do," Rip answered helplessly. "I'd fight for him, but if he'd die —"

"He'll surely die. I've 'tended him for twenty years. He's a right sick man, Rip," the doctor declared. "The best job you ever did was to bring me out here."

"Then I'll pack him back to the plantation." Rip shook his head. "If he wasn't so sick, forty possess couldn't take him away from me!"

"That's the best way, Rip. You needn't go clear in—I'll take him the last lap."

So they packed the sick and defeated old planter out to the mansion. Rip rode across the dark clearing to the very gate, and then vanished in the gloom as the servants ran down to answer the doctor's shout.

They carried the old master up into his room, and there the doctor fought with his fever and pneumonia all that night and all the next day. In mid-afternoon Sue Belle and her aunt arrived with Lunmer Andrest from Provell.

Andrest's own neighbors hardly knew him, with his broad-brimmed black hat, his long black coat, his tan gloves, his white collar, laundered shirt, and black leather boots. They stared at him wonderingly as he left the saddle of a horse and hurried up the mound steps with Sue Belle.

Andrest took charge of the plantation affairs. He ordered Clinchell's overseer to continue picking the cotton. When the man demanded on what authority, Andrest calmly assured him:

"I've foreclosed a mortgage and taken the farm over."

He was no longer a shanty-boat swamp-angel, but a quality person in the bottoms.

When President Lesgar and Cashier Urgone rode out from Deerport to congratulate him, and to thank him for making new arrangements for the Deerport National Bank with the Logging and Planter institutions, they wanted to know how in the world it had happened.

"Sho!" Andrest exclaimed, embarrassed by their congratulations. "All there was to it was that those little tricks I found in Deer Hoof River were pearls, and worth a heap of money. Sue Belle found it out, showing two that I gave her—but she's going to keep those. I sold some of what I had; the rest are in a safe-deposit box. Then we heard how they were closing down on old Durm, and him scouting out in the brake. I took up some mortgages, paying cash, and one or two of the Mendova banks went in with me. The Mendova bank folks were mighty friendly, and I got them to let up on the Planter and Logging banks—"

"And the Planter and Logging people couldn't tell us quick enough they'd let up on us!" Urgone interrupted.

"Yes, I told 'em to step lively," Andrest added. "But I expect I ought to thank you, 'stead of you thanking me. How could I do it if you hadn't showed me?"

"I told you it would pay, spreading bank knowledge around among people!" Urgone said, turning to Lesgar.

"Yes, sir; you said it would pay to run a school of finance, and it did!"

"I want to be friendly with you gentlemen," Andrest continued shyly. "I brought over two little tricks for you. They don't amount to much, just little shell tricks out of Deer Hoof River that we had set over to Mendova. They're nice ones, they said—"

"Beauties!" the two bankers exclaimed.

"That's what they call pearls!" Lesgar added. "I used to play with them when I was a boy, finding them in clam-shells. If I'd only known then!"

"I expect you and Sue Belle will be having a big wedding one of these days, Lun, and we'll all be invited?" Urgone smilingly suggested.

"Shucks!" Andrest grinned. "We're done married already! When the old man gets out of his lung congestion we'll have a big barbecue in these swamps, you bet! But Sheriff Ferris 'll have to forget that he's an officer of the law for a while. You see how it is—there'll be Dark Bend scouters around—"

"He'll forget," Lesgar assured him. "This isn't going to be as dark a bend as it used to be, Andrest!"

THE END

The End