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Black Caesar's Clan

Albert Payson Terhune

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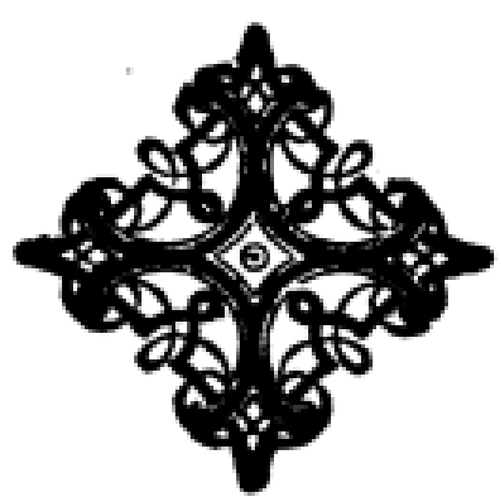
BLACK CÆSAR'S CLAN

A Florida Mystery Story

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

AUTHOR OF

"Black Gold," etc.



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BLACK CÆSAR'S CLAN. I

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED, MOST GRATEFULLY

TO MY FRIEND

JOHN E. PICKETT

EDITOR OF

"THE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN"

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FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

And so on, until it had formed a tangled root-fence for many yards alongshore. After which, its work being done, the mangrove proceeded to grow upward

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into a big and glossy-leaved shade-tree; making buds for further fences.

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

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

Presently, a coconut, hurled from its stem in the Bahamas or in Cuba, by a hurricane, set its palmleaf sail-sprout and was gale-driven across the intervening seas; floating ashore on the new-risen land. There it sprouted. Birds, winds, waves, brought germs of other trees. The sub-tropical island was complete.

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

So Florida was born.

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

Dredge and shovel are laboring hard to guide or check the endless undersea coral growth before bay and channel and lagoon shall all be dry land. The wormlike, lazy, fast-multiplying Anthozoa is fighting

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passively but with terrific power, to set at naught all man's might and wit.

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

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

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

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

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

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE.

"Sunnybank,"
Pompton Lakes,
New Jersey.

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CHAPTER I

THE HIDDEN PATH

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BLACK CÆSAR'S CLAN

CHAPTER I

THE HIDDEN PATH

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

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

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

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the mangrove swamps. And a rarely beautiful White City had sprung up.

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

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

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

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

A buzz of approval swept the listeners. That same buzz came irritatingly to the ears of a none-too-sprucely dressed young man who lay, with eyes shut, under the

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shifting shade of a giant palm, a hundred yards away. He had not caught the phrase which inspired the applause—thanks to the confusion of street sounds and the multiple dry rattle of the palm-fronds and the whirring passage of a sea-plane which circled above park and bay. But the buzz aroused him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As he reached the bit of sandy foreshore, he paused

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scarce had he touched ground when he was up.

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

A collie has brains; beyond most dogs. And this collie recognized that the pleasant-voiced, indolent-looking stranger had just rescued him from a captor who had been treating him abominably. Wherefore,

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in gratitude and dawning adoration, he came to pay his respects.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instead, with the speed of light, he stepped in; ducking the hammer-fist and plying both hands with bewildering quickness and skill, in a shower of half-arm

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blows at the beach comber's heart and wind. His strength was wiry and carefully developed; but it was no match for his foe's. Yet the hail of body-punches was delivered with all the effect that science and a perfect knowledge of anatomy could compass.

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

There was no space for maneuvering or for wriggling free. Clear from the ground Brice's feet were swung. The breath was squeezed out of him. His elastic strength was cramped and made useless. His lungs seemed bursting. The pressure on his ribs was unbearable. Like many a better man he was paying the price for a single instant of overconfidence.

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

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

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

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

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

Yet, the iron-bodied man on whom it was inflicted merely grunted again and, under the avalanche of blows, managed to regain his balance and plunge back to the assault. A born fighter, he was now obsessed with but one idea;—namely, to destroy this smaller and faster opponent who was hurting him so outrageously. As far as the beach comber was concerned, it was

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a murder-battle, now; with no question of mercy asked or given.

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

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

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

Then, as the other charged, Gavin sidestepped with perfect ease; and, when the beach-comber wheeled clumsily to face him, threw one foot forward and at the same time pushed the larger man's shoulder violently with his open palm. It was a repetition of the "leverage theory" Gavin had so recently been expound-

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ing to his antagonist. It caught the lunging giant at precisely the right non-balance angle, as he was turning about. And, for the second time, the beach-comber sat down on the trampled sand, with unexpected suddenness and force.

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

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

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

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

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

Brice twisted to one side, with a sharp suddenness that all-but threw his back out of joint. The knife whizzed through the still air like a great hornet. The breath of its passage fanned Gavin's averted face, as he wrenched his head out of its path.

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

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

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

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

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

No longer was it a question of boxing or of half-jesting horseplay. The use of the knife had put this fight on a new plane. And, like a wild beast, Gavin

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Brice was attacking his big foe. But, unlike a wild beast, he kept his head, as he charged.

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

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

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

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

The trick was not new. But it was fearsomely effective. It was, as Gavin had explained, all a question of leverage. The giant's waist was drawn forward. His chin, simultaneously, was shoved backward. Such a dual cross pressure was due, eventually, to mean one

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of two things:—either the snapping of the spine or else the breaking of the neck. Unless the grip could be broken, there was no earthly help for its victim.

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

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

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

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

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

"Come along, puppy," he bade the wildly excited collie. "He isn't dead. Another couple of seconds and his neck or his back must have gone. I'm glad he fainted first. A killing isn't a nice thing to remember, on wakeful nights;—the killing of even a cur like that.

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Come on, before he wakes up. I'm going somewhere. And it's a stroke of golden luck that I've got you to take with me, by way of welcome."

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

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

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

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

"Don't worry, old chap," Gavin said to the growling collie. "He's had all he can carry, for one day. He's not going to follow us. By this time, he'll begin to realize, too, that his face is battered pretty much to a pulp; and that some of my body-smashes are

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flowering into bruises. I pity him when he wakes up to-morrow. He'll be too stiff to move an inch, without grunting. His pluck and his nerve are no match for his strength. . . . Here we are!" he broke off, beginning to skirt the hither edge of the swamp. "Unless all my dope is wrong, it ought to be somewhere close to this."

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

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

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

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

For a second or so, Gavin Brice stared stupidly at the phenomenon of the jungle-like wall of mangroves

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that had swallowed a seventy-pound dog. Then his brow cleared; and a glint of eagerness came into his eye. Almost running, he hurried to the spot where the dog had vanished. Then he halted; and called softly:

"Come, puppy! *Here!*"

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

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

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

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

Some one had been at much pains and at more expense, to lay out and develop that secret trail. For it

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is no easy or cheap task to build a sure path through such a swamp.

From a distance, forests of mangrove seemed to be massed on rising ground; and to group themselves about the sides and the crests of knolls. As a matter of fact, the presence of a mangrove forest is a sign of the very lowest ground;—ground covered for the most part by salt tidewater. The lowest pine barren is higher than the loftiest mangrove wilderness.

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

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

The silence and gloom and sinister solemnity of the place had had a dampening effect on the dog's gay spirits. The backward glances at his self-chosen master were for reassuring himself, rather than for

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guidance. Surroundings have quicker and stronger effect on collies than on almost any other kind of dog. And these surroundings, very evidently, were not to the collie's taste. Several times, when the path's width permitted, he dropped back to Gavin's side, to receive a word of friendly encouragement or a pat on the head.

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

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

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

Thirty feet from the vines, Brice slackened his steps. His lithe body was vibrant with cautious watchfulness. But, the collie was not inclined to caution. He hailed with evident relief the sight of open spaces and of light,

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after the gloomy trail's windings. And he broke into a canter.

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

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

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

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

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

At the path-end, he and the figure came face to face. Though the other's back was to the fading light, Gavin

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