

He laughed then—laughed without any fun in it.

"I didn't see anything," he said. "I thought at first I saw letters—my name. It's my stomach. I'm hungry."

But he never picked up the rattles or stopped to get breakfast. He walked out into the sun and I saw him with his hands behind his back and his head bent down as if he was thinking, walking down on to the beach.

There's plenty of people below here that will tell you that I'm a liar. Plenty of 'em don't believe I steered the tug *Moss Rose* loaded with guns under the walls of Morro and landed the whole cargo in Havana without showing my papers. But, mate, I say there is strange things amongst these keys, and what I'm telling is so-help-me truth, as I say it. It taught me that no bill of sin goes too long unpaid, nor a poor living creature needing help that isn't seen in its struggles.

And I say Kitchell went off down on to the shore and began picking up those seashells and throwing 'em into the water.

"Do you love that man?" I said to Lenora.

She nodded and began to call to him—like a child. She called to him and when he roared back for her to go ahead and eat her breakfast she sat down. She sat down at the table I'd set outside the shack door, as meek and silent as if she'd been punished. I think she was a child and didn't know what love meant.

I sat there drinking my coffee and looking at Gus. Eight feet of him was lying over there in the hollow under the coconut palms. There weren't any life in him any more. The bullet had torn a hole in his neck. His head wasn't raised and it wasn't swaying, and his muscles weren't moving under his skin. His colour wasn't bright. Some of his blood was drying on the white sand. He was the most perfect snake I ever saw. And he was dead.

I looked at him and then I saw the grass move beyond where he lay. I could look right over Lenora's shoulder and see the grass move. A head came out of the grass into the sun and then the body, moving slow like a trickle of hot tar. It was her! It was Bess!

She saw him lying there, then—her mate. And she threw her head back and held it stuck up in the air. She had seen him—seen him dead! She went to him and laid her head across his body and he didn't move. An she darted her tongue out and touched him and he didn't move. And she threw her head up again.

Oh, I tell you, mate, it was cruel to see grief so silent—to see her crawl around him and stop and raise her head and shake along her body and then drop her neck across his. And he never moved because he was dead and wouldn't ever move again. She was a rattler. She couldn't scream. She couldn't talk. And finally she dropped her head on the sand as if there wasn't any more strength in her body. She half turned over and the sun shone on the white scales of her belly. It was then that Kitchell, who was down on the beach, stretched his arms and gave a loud yawn.

She heard him and she seemed to know. I saw her coil and raise her neck up and up and up to where she could look over the top of the clumps of grass on the slope. Her head was swaying to and fro like a swinging bracket. And then she rattled.

"What sees that, senor?" asked the little Cuban, catching the folds of her white dress in her little hands.

"Nothing," I said, for I was watching Bess. The snake had seen Kitchell. I knew she'd seen him. He had stuck his hand in those flannel jeans of his and he was still moving off by the water's edge, and Bess uncoiled and began to crawl in the same direction.

"We have lost our boat," said Lenora. "That so?" I says. I wasn't thinking of what she said at all. I might have answered anything. I was watching for Bess to come out on the other side of that patch of prickly pears.

In a minute I saw her. She stopped on a bare spot and though she was some distance away by that time I saw that poor dumb thing coil herself again and curve her neck and raise her head. Then she dropped it and crawled along.

"You, senor, are vera kind," said the girl then. "You have been kind to me! Pardon, senor—what you look at!"

I was afraid the little Cuban would turn around. I was afraid she'd interfere. I could see how Something had snatched out what was to happen. It was working—surer than death! Everything was marked out.

"Miss," I said, "I often look around Spongecake Key."

It seemed to satisfy her, so I took down my glass and wiped the lens and put it to my eye. I could see a heap plainer. I could see Bess crawl out on to that white limestone point that stands up there now over the water. It's white

ing toward the limestone rock. He was being moved there. Something was moving him with its hand.

I saw him when he got to the rock itself. I saw him look up at it and then look out into the channel with the white cranes wading on those yellow sandbars. Then he looked up at the ledge

stone. She never rattled. She waited for his face. Her long body came out of its coil like a steel spring. She went her length—a heavy black streak in the air. She struck him with her head bent back and her jaws wide. She must have driven those two white needles clean through his cheek. She fell back and squirmed on the ground till I could see her white belly.

Kitchell never shouted. He jumped backward. His foot caught. He went head downwards over the rock. I think he struck on his forehead. Because he rolled over and over, then, as if there was no life in him, and fell into the water.

I watched him float off that shallow where I catch mullet. When he was in deeper water he turned face downward. I saw the tide catch him and then I thought he was going to sink. He didn't just then. An eddy shot him around the point out of sight.

"What you look at now?" asked Lenora, with her big eyes on mine.

"Umph," said I. "I was dreaming."

I was planning already how I was going to let her think that Kitchell had gone off with one of my boats and deserted her. These waters and passes never tell what they know. I was planning how I'd let her think he'd run away from her, and how I'd take her back to her home. She was a child. She hadn't learned yet what love meant.

"Senor," said she, with her head on one side and that smile, "you make verria nice—what you call them, senor?"

"Flapjacks," said I.

And then I whistled "The Last Rose of Summer." It's one of my favourite tunes. I always whistle it when I'm a little off my bearings. And I felt just then as if Lenora Gonzalez and Joe Kitchell and I hadn't been alone on Spongecake that night. I felt as though Something else—the thing with the long arms—had been there, too.

Dr. Wu Ting-fang used to tell me many, illuminating anecdotes about the Chinese character. One concerned ingenuity. "A Chinaman, the anecdote ran, found his wife lying dead in a field one morning; a tiger had killed her. The Chinaman went home, procured some arsenic, and, returning to the field, sprinkled it over the corpse. The next day the tiger's dead body lay beside the woman's. The Chinaman sold the tiger's skin to a mandarin, and its body to a physician to make fear-cure powders, and with the proceeds he was able to buy a younger wife."



"He was moving toward the rock. He was being moved there."

by moonlight now. It was white by sunlight then. She stretched herself right near the crest of it, and on that surface she looked as black as a wriggle of ink on writing paper.

Kitchell was still walking along the shore toward the point. He was still picking up shells and pebbles and throwing 'em into the water. I could see how sleek and brown his hair was. I was looking through the glass. He was mov-

again. It was steep there for six or eight feet, as you can see. But he was moved up.

I saw Bess coil. I watched to see if she'd rattle. But she never used it. She never gave any warning. She was thinking of Gus, maybe. No man can tell.

I tried to keep the glass steady. I reckon I succeeded. I saw her wait till his face showed over the edge of that table of lime-

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