

ing while I was trying to light the lamp. "Stranger," I said, "you've lost your boat."

"I reckon so," he said, calm and cool as a fresh kingfish in the ice barrel. "But you needn't call me stranger."

When he spoke like that, I looked at his figure—thin and graceful.

"If this is Spoungecake Key, then you're Pindar Rowe," he said. "You old reprobate. Hold up the lamp. Now look at me!"

"Young Joe Kitchell!" I roared.

It was him, just as I'm telling you. It was Joe Kitchell, with his palaver and cigarettes and his insinuating ways and his slouchy, easy clothes and his diamond scarf pin. He looked just as he used to look in Havana when he was in the sugar trade and later, too. I knew about him.

I knew how they'd put him out of the North American Club, and how an army officer's wife had cut him up one Sunday on those grassy banks of Moro, and how he'd been caught cheating in a game of poker in the Machado Hotel, and how he had left a girl in New York and what amusing ways he had with all women—even the best.

So I leaned across the table and I said sharp, "Who's this girl?"

He smoothed his brown hair and smiled. "Well, Pindar, I reckon you know enough about me and my adventures, I'll tell you. She's a prize. A Cuban."

Maybe he saw me look at him, because he said right afterwards: "She's an orphan. She's just over twenty-one and you'll think it pretty comic, but she's been so carefully raised she won't even let me hold her hand. And money? Mr. Rowe, believe me, I've suffered grief about money so long that I can't believe it's true. Why, just before we left Key West, she sold an American broker who met her there a third interest in the Vista Hermosa plantation and machinery and cane mill. I'm going to be married, Mr. Rowe."

"Umph," I said. "You've been going to get married fifty different times, I reckon."

"Women take a fancy to me," he whispered. "They still do. She loves me. I don't like her to sit and look at me all day. There's such a thing as too much. But this time I'm going to be married all right. I've got to be married. There's no getting the money without it."

Somehow as he spoke, I thought of my wife. There was a bread knife on the table and I could have killed him. The northern had come up. It was howling outside like a pack of dogs. The light flickered. It showed me his grin. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to see him fall forward over the kitchen table.

"What's this runaway business?" I asked him. "Why did you have to start up among these keys alone with her?"

"My dear old Pindar," said he, "that is too plain. When a girl like that goes off alone on a trip like this, she must go back married or not at all. It just cinches the matter. Do you see?"

"Yep," I said. "I do. But have you told this girl you've had a wife?"

"No," he answered, licking his cigarette. "That would scarcely do. This young lady is religious and in her religion they don't marry men who've been divorced, especially when the man wasn't the one who brought the suit. Oh, no. On the contrary, it is much better to deny ever loving anybody before. I've done that. It's comical, isn't it?"

"Will you stick to this one?" I asked, looking at the bread knife. "Will you stick to her?"

"Oh, as long as I have to. Just see how plain I am with you, Mr. Rowe!" said he. "Personally, I don't fancy undressed Cubans. A pretty little thing? Oh, yes. But delicate. Almost nothing. Possibly I am spoiled."

I leaned over the table again toward the rat and I said, "Suppose, Kitchell, I hate you like a scorpion. Suppose I hate your ways and suppose I'm going to stop your game. Suppose I tell her what I know of you."

He just sat back in his chair and laughed. He laughed and laughed and kept on trying to laugh so as to show me how cocksure he was.

"Go ahead," he said, grinning at me. "Go ahead. Others tried it. They tried it in Havana. That's one reason why I had to get away with her so fast. You can try it. Do you think she'll believe you? Oh, I'm not fool enough to risk anything by talking to you. She wouldn't believe you. Tell her! Swear. Take oaths. Cut up all the fuss you want, old feller. She'll hate you for it. Why? Because she believes me!"

I tell you, mate, the man had me ready to do murder. I've seen necessity in my day and I've brought men down with lead. It seemed to me then I never had so much necessity before.

"Kitchell," I said quiet, between the roars of the wind, "you have lived some thirty-eight years. You've done a lot of damage. Somewhere there is more women than I can count on my fingers that owes you a heap of evil. I don't suppose they'll ever pay it. It ain't like 'em, Kitchell, I wish I was going to pay it. Kitchell, I give you warning, man to man. There's a sail-boat belonging to me down at my pier there. When the weather clears, you're going to take it and go to Key West and leave this girl here."

He brushed back some of that silky hair of his, then, and looked at me good-natured and shook his head.

"Nothing like that," he said. "You're mistaken."

"If you don't," said I, "look out for yourself."

But he shook his head again. "You wouldn't kill me, Pindar," he said with his smooth, sure way. He stopped to think it over to be certain, and then he laughed. "You wouldn't kill me, I know

and I felt my blood pounding in my ears. The writing was done. And there it was on the wall. It was his name!

"What's it mean?" I whispers to him.

"What!" he said.

"That writing."

"I don't see any writing," he said. "I was just joking. I meant that things was marked out beforehand. What ails you?"

He looked a little scared then.

"Did you see anything?" he said.

I looked again and the writing was gone.

"Speak up," said he. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You looked as if you saw something," he roars at me. "What was it?"

It came to me like a flash what it all meant.

"You said that sometimes things that happened was marked out beforehand," I said to him. "You was right. Something steered you onto Rib Rock Bar, Kitchell. Something brought you onto Spoungecake Key. Something has been watching you,

but she wasn't there. And I was standing looking when I began to feel as if somebody was watching me from behind.

I turned around and I couldn't see anybody. It was so calm I could have heard a step on the coral gravel a hundred yards away. And nobody was there. And then all of a sudden I saw who was watching me. It was Gus!

He had shed his skin again and he'd crawled out into his hollow in the sand just this side of that thicket. Only about half of his eight feet was coiled, but his big flat head was up in the air as if he was smelling or listening. It waved to and fro, easy and soft and the muscles in his body were rolling under the skin, looking as if they were travelling down in slow waves from his neck to his tail. He opened his jaws and just dropped those two long white fangs enough to show 'em. And he seemed to be watching me.

"Gus," I said, "where's Bess?"

He pulled himself out into the sunlight, then, and flattened out his sides and laid his chin on the coconut husks. "You want some condensed milk?" I said. "Wait till I've got some breakfast. Lie still there."

So I went back and put some coffee on, and Kitchell got up off the mattress and stretched himself.

"Has Lenora got up yet?" he asked, yawning and pulling his clothes into shape. I didn't answer and he went out. I wished later I'd stopped him.

I'm telling it just as it happened. Let's see. I was turning some cakes in the frying pan when I heard a voice behind me and I turned and looked and saw the girl standing in the door. She seemed like one of those little birds that come there and hop around for crumbs—a timid, pretty little thing. And her eyes were so much eyes! They were so evil and black and round and trusting.

"—senor—I am Lenora Gonzalez," she said, so soft you could hardly hear her. "I may help you with the coffee? I ask, where ess Senor Kitchell?"

I shan't forget her, I tell you—a little thing with a wiled flower in her black hair, and a skin not white or brown or yellow or pink, but only like a few of the Cubans have, so thin and delicate you can see into it the way you can see into a piece of polished shell.

"He's outside, Miss," I said to her, flapping over a jack. "Did you sleep through the storm?"

"Vera leste, senor," she answered, and looked at me out of her big eyes.

It was just at that second there came the pistol shot. The air was so still that you might say that the noise tore a hole out of the morning. I thought at first he'd put a bullet into Lenora Gonzalez. She jumped like a sandpiper that's been hit and came down on her knees holding on to the edge of the door, frightened and shaking like a palmetto. I picked her up on to her feet. She was a grown girl, but she felt like a child.

"Oh, senor!" she cried. "I do not like! I do not like!"

"I know," said I. "But he hasn't shot himself. Not Joe Kitchell. Don't worry."

We heard him coming just as I spoke. He came and stood in the door and he held up something and shook it and a drop of blood spattered on the floor. The something he shook, mate, was those rattles that I hold in my hand now. And these rattles belonged to Gus. He'd killed my snake!

"Mr. Rowe," he said, "come out here! I've just shot the biggest diamond-bark I've ever saw."

"Yes," said I, holding myself back from springing at him. "You killed him. He never did you any harm. But you killed him. He was happy. But you killed him. He was lying asleep there in the coral sand and coconut husks and his back was turned. But you killed him."

The miserable cuss began to laugh and shake the rattles at the little Cuban. She screamed and strank back. And he laughed again.

"Kitchell," I said. "You were meant to destroy. But, Kitchell, you are married out. Last night when the wind was shrieking around this shack you asked me to see letters on the boards. Now, Kitchell, it is bright and sunny. It's not the night. It's the day. Look on the wall there!"

The feller turned. He turned and he dropped the rattles out of his hand. The breath squeaked in his throat.

"What do you see?" I roared.

"Confound it," he whispered, looking around at me. "It was my imagination. I haven't had any sleep."

"What did you see?" I said, for I knew something had come into my shack again.



"You wouldn't kill me, Pindar," he said, with his smooth, sure way.

the cards you hold, my old friend, and it isn't a winning hand."

He sat there for a while, listening to the creaking of the boards when the wind drove against the walls of the shack. I saw the yellow light on his face and it was an evil face, too, for all its even features.

"No," he said, by and by. "I know when I'm going to win. I can feel fate just like a man feels warm or cold. I can tell by the feeling how the ball on a roulette wheel is going to drop. I know whether a card is good or bad without turning it over. Some things is certain. They're marked out beforehand. I feel 'em. I feel a confidence, and that confidence accomplishes anything. Nothing can stop me. And this is one of those times. No man can interfere. It was written down beforehand. This is a wild night—a night for strange things. See the light dance on the wall there. Look. Do you see letters written there—big, red letters?"

I looked, mate, and I hope to drop dead if I didn't see writing on the boards. It was dim at first and danced, and then it settled down and got clearer and clearer like a ship's name through a glass when the fog is blowing away. I couldn't read it yet, but I knew that something had come into the room and was writing there with its finger!

I could see the words growing clearer

Kitchell. Something has a bill against you, that's been standing long enough. Something has marked you, Kitchell. Something will reach out and you will never dodge its fingers. Kitchell, you have come to the end of your rope!"

"You—" he said, and then he stopped.

"It ain't me," I said.

"What do you mean?" he whispered. "You've lived alone too much, Pindar. You're seeing things! Confound you! What did you see?"

I never answered him, nowise. I got up and threw a mattress in the corner by the old music cabinet that used to belong to my wife. He looked at me for a long time and then he got up and walked over to it and stretched out. There wasn't any sound but the wind and the ticking of my clock.

Towards morning the weather broke again and the light that came in through the cracks was pink. I got up out of my chair and I looked at the wall where I'd seen the words and wondered if I'd dreamed 'em.

After I'd gone outside and looked at the sun coming up and the water in the channel all filled and coloured with the white mud brought up from the bottom by the dry norther, I took up my glass and sighted it out toward Rib Rock Bar and I saw the launch was gone. I searched the passes between the Keys for her,