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Fangs of Gold

by

Robert E. Howard

"This is the only trail into the swamp, mister." Steve Harrison's guide pointed a long finger down the narrow path which wound in and out among the live-oaks and cypresses. Harrison shrugged his massive shoulders. The surroundings were not inviting, with the long shadows of the late afternoon sun reaching dusky fingers into the dim recesses among the moss-hung trees.

"You ought to wait till mornin'," opined the guide, a tall lanky man in cowhide boots and sagging overall. "It's gittin' late, and we don't want to git caught in the swamp after night."

"I can't wait, Rogers," answered the detective. "The man I'm after might get clean away by morning."

"He'll have to come out by this path," answered Rogers as they swung along. "Ain't no other way in or out. If he tries to push through to high ground on the other side, he'll shore fall into a bottomless bog, or git et by a gator. There's lots of them. I reckon he ain't much used to swamps?"

"I don't suppose he ever saw one before. He's city-bred."

"Then he won't das't leave the beaten path," confidently predicted Rogers.

"On the other hand, he might, not realizing the danger," grunted Harrison.

"What'd you say he done?" pursued Rogers, directing a jet of tobacco juice at a beetle crawling through the dark loam.

"Knocked an old Chinaman in the head with a meat-cleaver and stole his life-time savings--ten thousand

dollars, in bills of a thousand each. The old man left a little granddaughter who'll be penniless if this money isn't recovered. That's one reason I want to get this rat before he loses himself in a bog. I want to recover that money, for the kid."

"And you figure the Chinaman seen goin' down this path a few days ago was him?"

"Couldn't be anybody else," snapped Harrison. "We've hounded him half way across the continent, cut him off from the borders and the ports. We were closing in on him when he slipped through, somehow. This was about the only place left for him to hide. I've chased him too far to delay now. If he drowns in the swamp, we'll probably never find him, and the money will be lost, too. The man he murdered was a fine, honest old Chinaman. This fellow, Woon Shang, is bad all the way through."

"He'll run into some bad folks down here," ruminated Rogers. "Nothin' but niggers live in these swamplands. They ain't regular darkies like them that live outside. These came here fifty or sixty years back--refugees from Haiti, or somewhere. You know we ain't far from the coast. They're yeller-skinned, and don't hardly ever come out of the swamp. They keep to theirselves, and they don't like strangers. *What's that?*"

They were just rounding a bend in the path, and something lay on the ground ahead of them--something black, and dabbled with red, that groaned and moved feebly.

"It's a nigger!" exclaimed Rogers. "He's been knifed."

It took no expert to deduce that. They bent over him and Rogers voiced profane recognition. "Why, I know this feller! He ain't no swamp rat. He's Joe Corley, that razored up another nigger at a dance last month and lit out. Bet he's been hidin' in the swamp ever since. Joe! Joe Corley!"

The wounded man groaned and rolled up his glassy eyes; his skin was ashy with the nearness of approaching death.

"Who stabbed you, Joe?" demanded Rogers.

"De Swamp Cat!" The gasp was scarcely audible. Rogers swore and looked fearfully about him, as if expecting something to spring on them from the trees.

"I wuz tryin' to git outside," muttered the Negro.

"What for?" demanded Rogers. "Didn't you know you'd git jailed if they caught you?"

"Ruther go to de jail-house dan git mixed up--in de devilment--dey's cookin' up--in de swamp." The voice sank lower as speech grew more difficult.

"What you mean, Joe?" uneasily demanded Rogers.

"Voodoo niggers," muttered Corley disjointedly. "Took dat Chinaman 'stead uh me--didn't want me to git away, though--then John Bartholomew--uuuugh!"

A trickle of blood started from the corner of his thick lips, he stiffened in brief convulsion and then lay still.

"He's dead!" whispered Rogers, staring down the swamp path with dilated eyes.

"He spoke of a Chinaman," said Harrison. "That clinches it that we're on the right trail. Have to leave him here for the time being. Nothing we can do for him now. Let's get going."

"You aim to go on, after this?" exclaimed Rogers.

"Why not?"

"Mr. Harrison," said Rogers solemnly, "you offered me a good wage to guide you into this here swamp. But I'm tellin' you fair there ain't enough money to make me go in there now, with night comin' on."

"But why?" protested Harrison. "Just because this man got into a fight with one of his own kind--"

"It's more 'n just that," declared Rogers decisively. "This nigger was tryin' to git out of the swamp when they got him. He knowed he'd git jailed on the outside, but he was goin' anyway; that means somethin' had scared the livin' daylight out of him. You heard him say it was the Swamp Cat that got him?"

"Well?"

"Well, the Swamp Cat is a crazy nigger that lives in the swamp. It's been so long since any white folks claimed they seen him, I'd begun to believe he was just a myth the 'outside' niggers told to scare people away from the swamp. But this shows he ain't. He killed Joe Corley. He'll kill us if he catches us in the dark. Why, by golly, he may be watchin' us right now!" This thought so disturbed Rogers that he drew a big six-shooter with an enormous length of barrel, and peered about, masticating his quid with a rapidity that showed his mental perturbation.

"Who's the other fellow he named, John Bartholomew?" inquired Harrison.

"Don't know. Never heard of him. Come on, let's shove out of here. We'll git some boys and come back after Joe's body."

"I'm going on," growled Harrison, rising and dusting his hands.

Rogers stared. "Man, you're plumb crazy! You'll git lost--"

"Not if I keep to the path."

"Well, then, the Swamp Cat'll git you, or them gators will--"

"I'll take my chance," answered Harrison brusquely. "Woon Shang's somewhere in this swamp. If he manages to get out before I get my hands on him, he may get clean away. I'm going after him."

"But if you'll wait we'll raise a posse and go after him first thing in the mornin'," urged Rogers.

Harrison did not attempt to explain to the man his almost obsessional preference for working alone. With no further comment he turned and strode off down the narrow path. Rogers yelled after him: "You're crazy as Hell! If you git as far as Celia Pompoloi's hut, you better stay there tonight! She's the big boss of them niggers. It's the first cabin you come to. I'm goin' back to town and git a posse, and tomorrow mornin' we'll--" The words became unintelligible among the dense growth as Harrison rounded a turn that shut off the sight of the other man.

As the detective strode along he saw that blood was smeared on the rotting leaves, and there were marks as if something heavy had been dragged over the trail. Joe Corley had obviously crawled for some distance after being attacked. Harrison visualized him dragging himself along on his belly like a crippled snake. The man must have had intense vitality to have gotten so far with a mortal wound in his back. And his fear must have been desperate to so drive him.

Harrison could no longer see the sun, but he knew it was hanging low. The shadows were gathering, and he was plunging deeper and deeper into the swamp. He began to glimpse patches of scummy ooze among the trees, and the path grew more tortuous as it wound to avoid these slimy puddles. Harrison plunged on without pausing. The dense growth might lend concealment to a desperate fugitive, but it was not in the woods, but among the scattered cabins of the swamp dwellers that he expected to find the man he hunted. The city-bred Chinaman, fearful of solitude and unable to fend for himself, would seek the company of men, even of black men.

The detective wheeled suddenly. About him, in the dusk, the swamp was waking. Insects lifted strident voices, wings of bats or owls beat the air, and bullfrogs boomed from the lily pads. But he had heard a sound that was not of these things. It was a stealthy movement among the trees that marched in solid ranks beside the trail. Harrison drew his .45 and waited. Nothing happened. But in primitive solitudes a man's instincts are whetted. The detective felt that he was being watched by unseen eyes; he could almost sense the intensity of their glare. Was it the Chinaman, after all?

A bush beside the trail moved, without a wind to stir it. Harrison sprang through the curtain of creeper-hung cypresses, gun ready, snarling a command. His feet sank in slimy ooze, he stumbled in rotting vegetation and felt the dangling strands of moss slap against his face. There was nothing behind the bush, but he could have sworn that he saw a shadowy form move and vanish among the trees a short distance away. As he hesitated, he glanced down and saw a distinct mark in the loam. He bent closer; it was the print of a great, bare, splay foot. Moisture was oozing into the depression. A man *had* been standing behind that bush.

With a shrug Harrison stepped back into the trail. That was not the footprint of Woon Shang, and the detective was not looking for anybody else. It was natural that one of the swamp dwellers would spy on a stranger. The detective sent a hail into the gathering darkness, to assure the unseen watcher of his friendly intentions. There was no reply. Harrison turned and strode on down the trail, not feeling entirely at ease, as he heard, from time to time, a faint snapping of twigs and other sounds that seemed to indicate someone moving along a course paralleling the path. It was not soothing to know that he was being followed by some unseen and possibly hostile being.

It was so dark now that he kept the path more by feel than by sight. About him sounded weird cries of strange birds or animals, and from time to time a deep grunting reverberation that puzzled him until he recognized it as the bellow of a bull alligator. He wondered if the scaly brutes ever crawled up on the trail, and how the fellow that was shadowing him out there in the darkness managed to avoid them. With the thought another twig snapped, much closer to the trail than before. Harrison swore softly, trying to peer into the Stygian gloom under the moss-festooned branches. The fellow was closing in on him with the growing darkness.

There was a sinister implication about the thing that made Harrison's flesh creep a bit. This reptile-haunted swamp-trail was no place for a fight with an insane Negro--for it seemed probable that the unknown stalker was the killer of Joe Corley. Harrison was meditating on the matter when a light glimmered through the trees ahead of him. Quickening his steps he came abruptly out of the darkness into a grey twilight.

He had reached an expanse of solid ground, where the thinning trees let in the last grey light of the outer dusk. They made a black wall with waving fringes all about a small clearing, and through their boles, on one side, Harrison caught a glimmer of inky water. In the clearing stood a cabin of rough-hewn logs, and through a tiny window shone the light of an oil lamp.

As Harrison emerged from among the growth he glanced back, but saw no movement among the ferns, heard no sound of pursuit. The path, dimly marked on the higher ground, ran past the cabin and vanished in the further gloom. This cabin must be the abode of that Celia Pompolo Rogers had mentioned. Harrison strode to the sagging stoop and rapped on the handmade door.

Inside there was movement, and the door swung open. Harrison was not prepared for the figure that confronted him. He had expected to see a bare-footed slattern; instead he saw a tall, rangily powerful man, neatly dressed, whose regular features and light skin portrayed his mixed blood.

"Good evening, sir." The accent hinted of education above the average.

"Name's Harrison," said the detective abruptly, displaying his badge. "I'm after a crook that ran in here--a Chinese murderer, named Woon Shang. Know anything about him?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied promptly. "That man went past my cabin three days ago."

"Where is he now?" demanded Harrison.

The other spread his hands in a curiously Latin gesture.

"I can not say. I have little intercourse with the other people who live in the swamp, but it is my belief that he is hiding among them somewhere. I have not seen him pass my cabin going back up the path."

"Can you guide me to these other cabins?"

"Gladly, sir; by daylight."

"I'd like to go tonight," growled Harrison.

"That's impossible, sir," the other protested. "It would be most dangerous. You ran a great risk in coming this far alone. The other cabins are further back in the swamp. We do not leave our huts at night; there are many things in the swamp which are dangerous to human beings."

"The Swamp Cat, for instance?" grunted Harrison.

The man cast him a quick glance of interrogation.

"He killed a colored man named Joe Corley a few hours ago," said the detective. "I found Corley on the trail. And if I'm not mistaken, that same lunatic has been following me for the past half hour."

The mulatto evinced considerable disquiet and glanced across the clearing into the shadows.

"Come in," he urged. "If the Swamp Cat is prowling tonight, no man is safe out of door. Come in and spend the night with me, and at dawn I will guide you to all the cabins in the swamp."

Harrison saw no better plan. After all, it was absurd to go blundering about in the night, in an unknown

marsh. He realized that he had made a mistake in coming in by himself, in the dusk; but working alone had become a habit with him, and he was tinged with a strong leaven of recklessness. Following a tip he had arrived at the little town on the edge of the swamplands in the mid-afternoon, and plunged on into the woods without hesitation. Now he doubted the wisdom of the move.

"Is this Celia Pompoloi's cabin?" he asked.

"It was," the mulatto replied. "She has been dead for three weeks. I live here alone. My name is John Bartholomew."

Harrison's head snapped up and he eyed the other with new interest. John Bartholomew; Joe Corley had muttered that name just before he died.

"Did you know Joe Corley?" he demanded.

"Slightly; he came into the swamp to hide from the law. He was a rather low grade sort of human, though naturally I am sorry to hear of his death."

"What's a man of your intelligence and education doing in this jungle?" the detective asked bluntly.

Bartholomew smiled rather wryly. "We can not always choose our environments, Mr. Harrison. The waste places of the world provide retreat for others than criminals. Some come to the swamps like your Chinaman, fleeing from the law. Others come to forget bitter disappointments forced upon them by circumstances."

Harrison glanced about the cabin while Bartholomew was putting a stout bar in place across the door. It had but two rooms, one behind the other, connected by a strongly built door. The slab floor was clean, the room scantily furnished; a table, benches, a bunk built against the wall, all hand-made. There was a fireplace, over which hung primitive cooking utensils, and a cloth covered cupboard.

"Would you like some fried bacon and corn pone?" asked Bartholomew. "Or perhaps a cup of coffee? I do not have much to offer you, but--"

"No, thanks, I ate a big meal just before I started into the swamp. Just tell me something about these people."

"As I said, I have little intercourse with them," answered Bartholomew. "They are clannish and suspicious, and keep much to themselves. They are not like other colored people. Their fathers came here from Haiti, following one of the bloody revolutions which have cursed that unfortunate island in the past. They have curious customs. Have you heard of the worship of Voodoo?"

Harrison nodded.

"These people are Voodooists. I know that they have mysterious conclaves back in the swamps. I have heard drums booming in the night, and seen the glow of fires through the trees. I have sometimes felt a little uneasy for my safety at such times. Such people are capable of bloody extremes, when their primitive natures are maddened by the bestial rites of the Voodoo."

"Why don't the whites come in here and stop it?" demanded Harrison.

"They know nothing about it. No one ever comes here unless he is a fugitive from the law. The swamp

people carry on their worship without interference.

"Celia Pompoloji, who once occupied this very hut, was a woman of considerable intelligence and some education; she was the one swamp dweller who ever went 'outside,' as they call the outer world, and attended school. Yet, to my actual knowledge, she was the priestess of the cult and presided over their rituals. It is my belief that she met her fate at last during one of those saturnalias. Her body was found in the marshes, so badly mangled by the alligators that it was recognizable only by her garments."

"What about the Swamp Cat?" asked Harrison.

"A maniac, living like a wild beast in the marshes, only sporadically violent; but at those times a thing of horror."

"Would he kill the Chinaman if he had a chance?"

"He would kill anyone when his fit is on him. You said the Chinaman was a murderer?"

"Murderer and thief," grunted Harrison. "Stole ten grand from the man he killed."

Bartholomew looked up as with renewed interest, started to speak, then evidently changed his mind.

Harrison rose, yawning. "Think I'll hit the hay," he announced.

Bartholomew took up the lamp and led his guest into the back room, which was of the same size as the other, but whose furnishings consisted only of a bunk and a bench.

"I have but the one lamp, sir," said Bartholomew. "I shall leave it with you."

"Don't bother," grunted Harrison, having a secret distrust of oil lamps, resultant from experiencing an explosion of one in his boyhood. "I'm like a cat in the dark. I don't need it."

With many apologies for the rough accommodations and wishes for a good night's sleep, Bartholomew bowed himself out, and the door closed. Harrison, through force of habit, studied the room. A little starlight came in through the one small window, which he noticed was furnished with heavy wooden bars. There was no door other than the one by which he had entered. He lay down on the bunk fully dressed, without even removing his shoes, and pondered rather glumly. He was beset by fears that Woon Shang might escape him, after all. Suppose the Chinaman slipped out by the way he had come in? True, local officers were watching at the edge of the swampland, but Woon Shang might avoid them in the night. And what if there *was* another way out, known only to the swamp people? And if Bartholomew was as little acquainted with his neighbors as he said, what assurance was there that the mulatto would be able to guide him to the Chinaman's hiding place? These and other doubts assailed him while he lay and listened to the soft sounds of his host's retiring, and saw the thin line of light under the door vanish as the lamp was blown out. At last Harrison consigned his doubts to the devil, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

Murder Tracks

It was a noise at the windows, a stealthy twisting and wrenching at the bars, that awakened him. He woke quickly, with all his faculties alert, as was his habit. Something bulked in the window, something dark and round, with gleaming spots in it. He realized with a start that it was a human head he saw, with

the faint starlight shining on rolling eyes and bared teeth. Without shifting his body, the detective stealthily reached for his gun; lying as he was in the darkness of the bunk, the man watching him could scarcely have seen the movement. But the head vanished, as if warned by some instinct.

Harrison sat up on his bunk, scowling, resisting the natural impulse to rush to the window and look out. That might be exactly what the man outside was wanting. There was something deadly about this business; the fellow had evidently been trying to get in. Was it the same creature that had followed him through the swamp? A sudden thought struck him. What was more likely than that the Chinaman had set a man to watch for a possible pursuer? Harrison cursed himself for not having thought of it before.

He struck a match, cupped it in his hand, and looked at his watch. It was scarcely ten o'clock. The night was still young. He scowled abstractedly at the rough wall behind the bunk, minutely illuminated in the flare of the match, and suddenly his breath hissed between his teeth. The match burned down to his fingers and went out. He struck another and leaned to the wall. Thrust in a chink between the logs was a knife, and its wicked curved blade was grimly smeared and clotted. The implication sent a shiver down Harrison's spine. The blood might be that of an animal--but who would butcher a calf or a hog in that room? Why had not the blade been cleansed? It was as if it had been hastily concealed, after striking a murderous blow.

He took it down and looked at it closely. The blood was dried and blackened as if at least many hours had elapsed since it had been let. The weapon was no ordinary butcher knife--Harrison stiffened. *It was a Chinese dagger.* The match went out and Harrison did what the average man would have done. He leaned over the edge of the bunk, the only thing in the room that would conceal an object of any size, and lifted the cloth that hung to the floor. He did not actually expect to find the corpse of Woon Shang beneath it. He merely acted through instinct. Nor did he find a corpse. His hand, groping in the dark, encountered only the uneven floor and rough logs; then his fingers felt something else--something at once compact and yielding, wedged between the logs as the knife had been.

He drew it forth; it felt like a flat package of crisp paper, bound with oiled silk. Cupping a match in his hand, he tore it open. Ten worn bills met his gaze; on each bill was the numerals of \$1,000. He crushed the match out and sat in the dark, mental pictures tumbling rapidly across his consciousness.

So John Bartholomew had lied. Doubtless he had taken in the Chinaman as he had taken in Harrison. The detective visualized a dim form bending in the darkness above a sleeping figure in that same bunk--a murderous stroke with the victim's own knife.

He growled inarticulately, with the chagrin of the cheated manhunter, certain that Woon Shang's body was rotting in some slimy marsh. At least he had the money. Careless of Bartholomew to hide it there. But was it? It was only by an accidental chain of circumstances that he had found it--

He stiffened again. Under the door he saw a thin pencil of light. Had Bartholomew not yet gone to bed? But he remembered the blowing out of the lamp. Harrison rose and glided noiselessly to the thick door. When he reached it he heard a low mumble of voices in the outer room. The speakers moved nearer, stood directly before the door. He strained his ears and recognized the crisp accents of John Bartholomew. "Don't bungle the job," the mulatto was muttering. "Get him before he has a chance to use his gun. He doesn't suspect anything. I just remember that I left the Chinaman's knife in the crack over the bunk. But the detective will never see it, in the dark. He had to come butting in here, this particular night. We can't let him see what he'd see if he lived through this night."

"We do de job quick and clean, mastah," murmured another voice, with a guttural accent different from any Harrison had ever heard, and impossible to reproduce.

"Alright; we haven't anything to fear from Joe Corley. The Swamp Cat carried out my instructions."

"Dat Swamp Cat prowlin' 'round outside right now," muttered another man. "Ah don't like him. Why can't he do dis job?"

"He obeys my orders; but he can't be trusted too far. But we can't stand here talking like this. The detective will wake up and get suspicious. Throw open that door and rush him. Knife him in his bunk--"

Harrison always believed that the best defense was a strong offensive. There was but one way out of this jam. He took it without hesitation. He hurled a massive shoulder against the door, knocking it open, and sprang into the outer room, gun leveled, and barked: "Hands up, damn you!"

There were five men in that room; Bartholomew, holding the lamp and shading it with his left hand, and four others, four lean, rangy giants in nondescript garments, with yellow, sinister features. Each man of the four had a knife in his hand.

They recoiled with yells of dismay as Harrison crashed upon them. Automatically their hands went up and their knives clattered on the floor. For an instant the white man was complete master of the situation, Bartholomew turning ashy as he stared, the lamp shaking in his hands.

"Back up against that wall!" snapped Harrison.

They obeyed dumbly, rendered incapable of action by the shock of surprise. Harrison knew that it was John Bartholomew, more than these hulking butchers, that he had to fear.

"Set that lamp on the table," he snapped. "Line up there with them-- *ha!*"

Bartholomew had stooped to lower the lamp to the table--then quick as a cat he threw it crashing to the floor, ducking behind the table with the same motion. Harrison's gun crashed almost simultaneously, but even in the bedlam darkness that followed, the detective knew he had missed. Whirling, he leaped through the outer door. Inside the dark cabin he would have no chance against the knives for which the Negroes were already groping on the floor, mouthing like rabid dogs. As Harrison raced across the clearing he heard Bartholomew's furious voice yelling commands. The white man did not take the obvious route, the beaten trail. He rounded the cabin and darted toward the trees on the other side. He had no intention of fleeing until he was run down from behind. He was seeking a place where he could turn at bay and shoot it out with a little advantage on his side. The moon was just coming up above the trees, emphasizing, rather than illuminating the shadows.

He heard the Negroes clamoring out of the cabin and casting about, momentarily at a loss. He reached the shadows before they rounded the hut, and glancing back through the bushes, saw them running about the clearing like hunting dogs seek a spoor, howling in primitive blood-lust and disappointment. The growing moonlight glittered on the long knives in their hands.

He drew back further among the trees, finding the ground more solid underfoot than he had expected. Then he came suddenly upon the marshy edge of a stretch of black water. Something grunted and thrashed amidst it, and two green lamps burned suddenly like jewels on the inky water. He recoiled, well knowing what those twin lights were. And as he did so, he bumped full into something that locked fierce arms like an ape about him.

Harrison ducked and heaved, bowing his powerful back like a great cat, and his assailant tumbled over

his head and thumped on the ground, still clutching the detective's coat with the grip of a vise. Harrison lunged backward, ripping the garment down the back, wrenching his arms from the sleeves, in his frenzy to free himself.

The man leaped to his feet on the edge of the pool, snarling like a wild beast. Harrison saw a gaunt half naked black man with wild strands of hair caked with mud hanging over a contorted mask of a face, the thick loose lips drooling foam. This, indeed, he knew, was the dread Swamp Cat.

Still grasping Harrison's torn coat brainlessly in his left hand, his right swept up with a sheen of sharp steel, and even as he sensed the madman's intention, the detective ducked and fired from the hip. The thrown knife hummed by his ear, and with the crash of the shot the Swamp Cat swayed and pitched backward into the black pool. There was a threshing rush, the waters stormed foamily, there was a glimpse of a blunted, reptilian snout, and the trailing body vanished with it.

Harrison stepped back, sickened, and heard behind him the shouting progress of men through the bushes. His hunters had heard the shot. He drew back into the shadows among a cluster of gum trees, and waited, gun in hand. An instant later they rushed out upon the bank of the pool, John Bartholomew and his dusky knife-fighters.

They ranged the bank, gaping, and then Bartholomew laughed and pointed to a blood-stained piece of cloth that floated soggily on the foam-flecked waters.

"The fool's coat! He must have run right into the pool, and the 'gator's got him! I can see them tearing at something, over there among the reeds. Hear those bones crack?" Bartholomew's laugh was fiendish to hear.

"Well," said the mulatto, "we don't have to worry about him. If they send anybody in after him, we'll just tell them the truth: that he fell into the water and got grabbed by the gators, just like Celia Pompolo." "

"She wuz a awful sight when us foun' huh body," muttered one of the swamp Negroes.

"We'll never find that much of him," prophesied Bartholomew.

"Did he say what de Chinaman done?" asked another of the men.

"Just what the Chinaman said; that he'd murdered a man."

"Wish he'd uh robbed uh bank," murmured the swamp dweller plaintively. "Wish he'd uh brung uh lot uh money in wid him."

"Well, he didn't," snapped Bartholomew. "You saw me search him. Now get back to the others and help them watch him. These Chinese are slippery customers, and we can't take any chances with him. More white men may come looking for him tomorrow, but if they do, they're welcome to all of him they can find!" He laughed with sinister meaning, and then added abruptly: "Hurry and get out of here. I want to be alone. There are spirits to be communed with before the hour arrives, and dread rites that I must perform alone. Go!"

The others bent their heads in a curious gesture of subservience, and trooped away, in the direction of the clearing. He followed leisurely.

Harrison glared after them, turning what he had heard over in his mind. Some of it was gibberish, but

certain things were clear. For one thing, the Chinaman was obviously alive, and imprisoned somewhere. Bartholomew had lied about his own relations with the swamp people; one of them he certainly was not; but he was just as certainly a leader among them. Yet he had lied to them about the Chinaman's money. Harrison remembered the mulatto's expression when he had mentioned it to him. The detective believed that Bartholomew had never seen the money; that Woon Shang, suspicious, had hidden it himself before he was attacked.

Harrison rose and stole after the retreating Negroes. As long as they believed him dead, he could conduct his investigations without being harried by pursuit. His shirt was of dark material and did not show in the darkness, and the big detective was trained in stealth by adventures in the haunted dives of Oriental quarters where unseen eyes always watched and ears were forever alert.

When he came to the edge of the trees, he saw the four giants trooping down the trail that led deeper into the swamp. They walked in single file, their heads bent forward, stooping from the waist like apes. Bartholomew was just going into the cabin. Harrison started to follow the disappearing forms, then hesitated. Bartholomew was in his power. He could steal up on the cabin, throw his gun on the mulatto and make him tell where Woon Shang was imprisoned--maybe. Harrison knew the invincible stubbornness of the breed. Even as he ruminated, Bartholomew came out of the cabin and stood peering about with a strange furtiveness. He held a heavy whip in his hand. Presently he glided across the clearing toward the quarter where the detective crouched. He passed within a few yards of Harrison's covert, and the moonlight illumined his features. Harrison was astounded at the change in his face, at the sinister vitality and evil strength reflected there.

Harrison altered his plans and stole after him, wishing to know on what errand the man went with such secrecy. It was not difficult. Bartholomew looked neither back nor sidewise, but wound a tortuous way among inky pools and clusters of rotting vegetation that looked poisonous, even in the moonlight. Presently the detective crouched low; ahead of the mulatto there was a tiny hut, almost hidden among the trees which trailed Spanish moss over it like a grey veil. Bartholomew looked carefully about him, then drew forth a key and manipulated a large padlock on the door. Harrison was convinced that he had been led to the prison of Woon Shang.

Bartholomew disappeared inside, closing the door. A light gleamed through the chinks of the logs. Then came a mumble of voices, too indistinct for Harrison to tell anything about them; that was followed by the sharp, unmistakable crack of a whip on bare flesh, and a shrill cry of pain. Enlightenment came to Harrison. Bartholomew had come secretly to his prisoner, to torture the Chinaman--and for what reason but to make him divulge the hiding place of the money, of which Harrison had spoken? Obviously Bartholomew had no intentions of sharing that money with his mates.

Harrison began to work his way stealthily toward the cabin, fully intending to burst in and put a stop to that lashing. He would cheerfully have shot down Woon Shang himself, had the occasion arisen, but he had a white man's abhorrence of torture. But before he reached the hut, the sounds ceased, the light went out and Bartholomew emerged, wiping the perspiration of exertion from his brow. He locked the door, thrust the key in his pocket, and turned away through the trees, trailing his whip in his hand. Harrison, crouching in the shadows, let him go. It was Woon Shang he was after. Bartholomew could be dealt with later.

When the mulatto had disappeared, Harrison rose and strode to the door of the hut. The absence of guards was rather puzzling, after the conversation he had overheard, but he wasted no time on conjecture. The door was secured by a chain made fast to a big hasp driven deep into a log. He thrust his gun barrel through this hasp, and using it as a lever, pried out the hasp with no great difficulty.

Pulling open the door he peered in; it was too dark to see, but he heard somebody's breath coming in jerky hysterical sobs. He struck a match, looked--then glared. The prisoner was there, crouching on the dirt floor. But it was not Woon Shang. It was a woman.

She was a mulatto, young, and handsome in her way. She was clad only in a ragged and scanty chemise, and her hands were bound behind her. From her wrists a long strand of rawhide ran to a heavy staple in the wall. She stared wildly at Harrison, her dark eyes reflecting both hope and terror. There were tear stains on her cheeks.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded the detective.

"Celia Pompoloi!" Her voice was rich and musical despite its hysteria. "Oh, white man, for God's sake let me go! I can't stand it any more. I'll die; I know I will!"

"I thought you *were* dead," he grunted.

"John Bartholomew did it!" she exclaimed. "He persuaded a yellow girl from 'outside' into the swamp, and then he killed her and dressed her in my clothes, and threw her into the marsh where the alligators would chew the body till nobody could tell it wasn't me. The people found it and thought it was Celia Pompoloi. He's kept me here for three weeks and tortured me every night."

"Why?" Harrison found and lighted a candle stump stuck on the wall. Then he stooped and cut the rawhide thongs that bound her hands. She climbed to her feet, chafing her bruised and swollen wrists. In her scanty garb the brutality of the floggings she had received was quite apparent.

"He's a devil!" Her dark eyes flashed murderously; whatever her wrongs, she obviously was no meek sufferer. "He came here posing as a priest of the Great Serpent. He said he was from Haiti, the lying dog. He's from Santo Domingo, and no more priest than you are. *I* am the proper priestess of the Serpent, and the people obeyed me. That's why he put me out of the way. I'll kill him!"

"But why did he lick you?" asked Harrison.

"Because I wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know," she muttered sullenly, bending her head and twisting one bare foot behind the other ankle, school-girl fashion. She did not seem to think of refusing to answer his questions. His white skin put him beyond and outside swamp-land politics.

"He came here to steal the jewel, the heart of the Great Serpent, which we brought with us from Haiti, long ago. He is no priest. He is an impostor. He proposed that I give the Heart to him and run away from my people with him. When I refused, he tied me in this old hut where none can hear my screams; the swamp people shun it, thinking it's haunted. He said he'd keep beating me until I told him where the Heart was hidden, but I wouldn't tell him--not though he stripped all the flesh from my bones. I alone know that secret, because I am a priestess of the Serpent, and the guardian of its heart."

This was Voodoo stuff with a vengeance; her matter-of-fact manner evinced an unshaken belief in her weird cult.

"Do you know anything about the Chinaman, Woon Shang?" he demanded.

"John Bartholomew told me of him in his boastings. He came running from the law and Bartholomew promised to hide him. Then he summoned the swamp men, and they seized the Chinaman, though he wounded one of them badly with his knife. They made a prisoner of him--"

"Why?"

Celia was in that vengeful mood in which a woman recklessly tells everything, and repeats things she would not otherwise mention.

"Bartholomew came saying he was a priest of old time. That's how he caught the fancy of the people. He promised them an *oldsacrifice*, of which there has not been one for thirty years. We have offered the white cock and the red cock to the Great Serpent. But Bartholomew promised them the *goat-without-horns*. He did that to get the Heart into his hands, for only then is it taken from its secret hiding place. He thought to get it into his hands and run away before the sacrifice was made. But when I refused to aid him, it upset his plans. Now he can not get the Heart, but he must go through with the sacrifice anyway. The people are becoming impatient. If he fails them, they will kill him.

"He first chose the 'outside' black man, Joe Corley, who was hiding in the swamp, for the sacrifice; but when the Chinaman came, Bartholomew decided he would make a better offering. Bartholomew told me tonight that the Chinaman had money, and he was going to make him tell where he hid it, so he would have the money, and the Heart, too, when I finally gave in and told him--"

"Wait a minute," interposed Harrison. "Let me get this straight. What is it that Bartholomew intends doing with Woon Shang?"

"He will offer him up to the Great Serpent," she answered, making a conventional gesture of conciliation and adoration as she spoke the dread name.

"A *humansacrifice*?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "If I hadn't been raised in the South myself, I'd never believe it. When is this sacrifice to take place?"

"Tonight!"

"Eh, what's that?" He remembered Bartholomew's cryptic instructions to his henchmen. "The devil! Where does it happen, and what time?"

"Just before dawn; far back in the swamp."

"I've got to find Woon Shang and stop it!" he exclaimed. "Where is he imprisoned?"

"At the place of the sacrifice; many men guard him. You'd never find your way there. You'd drown and get eaten by the gators. Besides, if you did get there, the people would tear you to pieces."

"You lead me there and I'll take care of the people," he snarled. "You want revenge on Bartholomew. All right; guide me there and I'll see that you get plenty. I've always worked alone," he ruminated angrily, "but the swamp country isn't River Street."

"I'll do it!" Her eyes blazed and her white teeth gleamed in a mask of passion. "I'll guide you to the place of the Altar. We'll kill him, the yellow dog!"

"How long will it take us to get there?"

"I could go there in an hour, alone. Guiding you, it will take longer. Much longer, the way we must go. You can't travel the road I would take, alone."

"I can follow you anywhere you walk," he grunted, slightly nettled. He glanced at his watch, then extinguished the candle. "Let's get going. Take the shortest route and don't worry about me. I'll keep up."

She caught his wrist in a fierce grasp and almost jerked him out of the door, quivering with the eagerness of a hunting hound.

"Wait a minute!" A thought struck him. "If I go back to the cabin and capture Bartholomew--"

"He will not be there; he is well on his way to the Place of the Altar; better that we beat him there."

CHAPTER III

Voodoo Lair

As long as he lived Harrison remembered that race through the swamp, as he followed Celia Pompoloi along pathless ways that seemed impossible. Mire caught at his feet, and sometimes black scummy water lapped about his ankles, but Celia's swift sure feet always found solid ground where none seemed possible, or guided him over bogs that quaked menacingly beneath their weight. She sprang lightly from hummock to hummock, or slid between snaky pools of black slime where unseen monsters grunted and wallowed. Harrison floundered after her, sweating, half nauseated with the miasmatic reek of the oozy slime that plastered him; but all the bulldog was roused in him, and he was ready to wade through swamps for a week if the man he hunted was at the other end of the loathsome journey. Dank misty clouds had veiled the sky, through which the moon shone fitfully, and Harrison stumbled like a blind man, depending entirely on his guide, whose dusky half-naked body was all but invisible to him at times in the darkness.

Ahead of them he began to hear a rhythmic throbbing, a barbaric pulsing that grew as they advanced. A red glow flickered through the black trees.

"The flames of the sacrifice!" gasped Celia, quickening her pace. "Hasten!"

Somewhere in his big, weary body Harrison found enough reserve energy to keep up with her. She seemed to run lightly over bogs that engulfed him to the knees. She possessed the swamp dweller's instinct for safe footing. Ahead of them Harrison saw the shine of something that was not mud, and Celia halted at the verge of a stretch of noisome water.

"The Place of the Altar is surrounded by water on all sides but one," she hissed. "We are in the very heart of the swamp, deeper than anyone ever goes except on such occasions as these. There are no cabins near. Follow me! I have a bridge none knows of except myself."

At a point where the sluggish stream narrowed to some fifty feet, a fallen tree spanned it. Celia ran out upon it, balancing herself upright. She swayed across, a slim ghostly figure in the cloudy light. Harrison straddled the log and hitched himself ignominiously along.

He was too weary to trust *hisequilibrium*. His feet dangled a foot or so above the black surface, and Celia, waiting impatiently on the further bank as she peered anxiously at the distant glow, cast him a look

over her shoulder and cried a sudden urgent warning.

Harrison jerked up his legs just as something bulky and grisly heaved up out of the water with a great splash and an appalling clash of mighty fangs. Harrison fairly flung himself over the last few feet and landed on the further bank in a more demoralized condition than he would have admitted. A criminal in a dark room with a knife was less nerve-shaking than these ghoulish slayers of the dark waters.

The ground was firmer; they were, as Celia said, on a sort of island in the heart of the marshes. The girl threaded her supple way among the cypresses, panting with the intensity of her emotions. Perspiration soaked her; the hand that held Harrison's wrist was wet and slippery.

A few minutes later, when the glow in the trees had grown to an illuminating glare, she halted and slipped to the damp mold, drawing her companion with her. They looked out upon a scene incredible in its primitive starkness.

There was a clearing, free of underbrush, circled by a black wall of cypress. From its outer edge a sort of natural causeway wandered away into the gloom, and over that low ridge ran a trail, beaten by many feet. The trail ended in the clearing, the ultimate end of the path that Harrison had followed into the swamp. On the other side of the clearing there was a glimpse of dusky water, reflecting the firelight.

In a wide horseshoe formation, their backs to the causeway, sat some fifty men, women and children, resembling Celia Pompoloi in complexion. Harrison had not supposed that so many people inhabited the swamp. Their gaze was fixed on an object in the center of the opening of the human horseshoe. This was a great block of dark wood that had an unfamiliar appearance, as of an altar, brought from afar. There was an intolerable suggestion about that block, and the misshapen, leering figure that rose behind it--a fantastically carven idol, to whose bestial features the flickering firelight lent life and mobility. Harrison intuitively knew that this monstrosity was never carved in America. The yellow people had brought it with them from Haiti, and surely their black ancestors had brought it originally from Africa. There was an aura of the Congo about it, the reek of black squalling jungles, and squirming faceless shapes of a night more primeval than this. Harrison was not superstitious, but he felt gooseflesh rise on his limbs. At the back of his consciousness dim racial memories stirred, conjuring up unstable and monstrous images from the dim mists of the primitive, when men worshipped such gods as these.

Before the idol, near the block, sat an old crone, striking a bowl tom-tom with quick staccato strokes of her open hands; it growled and rumbled and muttered, and the squatting Negroes swayed and chanted softly in unison. Their voices were low, but they hummed with a note of hysteria. The fire struck gleams from their rolling eyeballs and shining teeth.

Harrison looked in vain for John Bartholomew and Woon Shang. He reached out a hand to get his companion's attention. She did not heed him. Her supple figure was tense and quivering as a taut wire under his hand. A sudden change in the chanting, a wild wolfish baying, brought him about again.

Out of the shadows of the trees behind the idol strode John Bartholomew. He was clad only in a loin cloth, and it was as if he had doffed his civilized culture with his clothing. His facial expression, his whole bearing, were changed; he was like an image of barbarism incarnate. Harrison stared at the knotted biceps, the ridged body muscles which the firelight displayed. But something else gripped his whole attention. With John Bartholomew came another, unwillingly, at the sight of whom the crowd gave tongue to another bestial yell.

About Bartholomew's mighty left hand was twisted the pigtail of Woon Shang, whom he dragged after him like a fowl to the chopping block. The Chinaman was stark naked, his yellow body gleaming like old

ivory in the fire. His hands were bound behind his back, and he was like a child in the grasp of his executioner. Woon Shang was not a large man; beside the great mulatto he seemed slimmer than ever. His hysterical panting came plainly to Harrison in the silence that fell tensely as the shouting ceased and the Negroes watched with eyes that gleamed redly. His straining feet tore at the sod as he struggled against the inexorable advance of his captor. In Bartholomew's right hand shone a great razor-edged crescent of steel. The watchers sucked in their breath loudly; in a single stride they had returned to the jungle whence they had crawled; they were mad for the bloody saturnalia their ancestors had known.

In Bartholomew's face Harrison read stark horror and mad determination. He sensed that the mulatto was not enjoying this ghastly primordial drama into which he had been trapped. He also realized that the man must go through with it, and that he would go through with it. It was more than the jewel heart of the serpent-god for which Bartholomew strove now; it was the continued dominance of these wolfish devil-worshippers on which his life depended.

Harrison rose to one knee, drew and cocked his revolver and sighted along the blue barrel. The distance was not great, but the light was illusive. But he felt he must trust to the chance of sending a slug crashing through John Bartholomew's broad breast. If he stepped out into the open and tried to arrest the man, the Negroes, in their present fanatical frenzy, would tear him to pieces. If their priest was shot down, panic might seize them. His finger was crooking about the trigger when something was thrown into the fire. Abruptly the flames died down, throwing everything into deep shadow. As suddenly they flared up again, burning with a weird green radiance. The dusky faces looked like those of drowned corpses in the glow.

In the moment of darkness Bartholomew had reached the block. His victim's head was thrust down upon it, and the mulatto stood like a bronze image, his muscular right arm lifted, poising above his head the broad steel crescent. And then, before he could strike the blow that would send Woon Shang's head rolling to the misshapen feet of the grinning idol, before Harrison could jerk the trigger, something froze them all in their places.

Into the weird glow moved a figure, so lithely that it seemed to float in the uncertain light rather than move on earthly feet. A groan burst from the Negroes, and they came to their feet like automatons. In the green glow that lent her features the aspect of death, with perspiration dripping from her draggled garment, Celia Pompoloi looked hideously like the corpse of a drowned woman newly risen from a watery grave.

"Celia!"

It was a scream from a score of gaping mouths. Bedlam followed.

"Celia Pompoloi! Oh Gawd, she done come back from de watah! Done come back from Hell!"

"Yes you dogs!" It was a most unghostly scream from Celia. "It's Celia Pompoloi, come back from Hell to send John Bartholomew there!"

And like a fury she rushed across the green-lit space, a knife she had found somewhere glittering in her hand. Bartholomew, momentarily paralyzed by the appearance of his prisoner, came to life. Releasing Woon Shang he stepped aside and swung the heavy beheading knife with all his power. Harrison saw the great muscles leap up under his glossy skin as he struck. But Celia's spring was that of a swamp panther. It carried her inside the circular sweep of the weighted blade, and her knife flashed as it sank to the hilt under John Bartholomew's heart. With a strangled cry he reeled and fell, dragging her down with him as she strove to wrench her blade free.

Abandoning it she rose, panting, her hair standing on end, her eyes starting from her head, her red lips writhing back in a curl of devilish rage. The people shrieked and gave back from her, still evidently in the grip of the delusion that they looked on one risen from the dead.

"Dogs!" she screamed, an incarnation of fury. "Fools! Swine! Have you lost your reason, to forget all my teachings, and let this dead dog make of you the beasts your fathers were? Oh--!" Glaring about for a weapon she caught up a blazing fire-brand and rushed at them, striking furiously. Men yelped as the flames bit them, and the sparks showered. Howling, cursing, and screaming they broke and fled, a frenzied mob, streaming out across the causeway, with their maddened priestess at their heels, screaming maledictions and smiting with the splintering fagot. They vanished in the darkness and their clamor came back faintly.

Harrison rose, shaking his head in wonder, and went stiffly up to the dying fire. Bartholomew was dead, staring glassily up at the moon which was breaking through the scattering clouds. Woon Shang crouched babbling incoherent Chinese as Harrison hauled him to his feet.

"Woon Shang," said the detective wearily, "I arrest you for the murder of Li-keh-tsung. I warn you that anything you say will be used against you."

That formula seemed to invest the episode with some sanity, in contrast to the fantastic horror of the recent events. The Chinaman made no struggle. He seemed dazed, muttering: "This will break the heart of my honorable father; he had rather see me dead than dishonored."

"You ought to have thought of that before," said Harrison heavily. Through force of habit he cut Woon Shang's cords and reached for his handcuffs before he realized that they had been lost with his coat.

"Oh, well," he sighed. "I don't reckon you'll need them. Let's get going."

Laying a heavy hand on his captive's naked shoulder, Harrison half guided, half pushed him toward the causeway. The detective was dizzy with fatigue, but combined with it was a muddled determination to get his prisoner out of the swamp and into a jail before he stopped. He felt he had no more to fear from the swamp people, but he wanted to get out of that atmosphere of decay and slime in which he seemed to have been wandering for ages. Woon Shang took note of his condition with furtive side-long glances, as the stark fear died out of the Chinaman's beady black eyes to be replaced by one of craft.

"I have ten thousand dollars," he began babbling. "I hid it before the Negroes made me prisoner. I will give you all of it if you will let me go...."

"Oh, shut up!" groaned Harrison wearily, giving him an exasperated shove. Woon Shang stumbled and went to his knees, his bare shoulder slipping from Harrison's grasp. The detective was stooping, fumbling for him when the Chinaman rose with a chunk of wood in his hand, and smote him savagely on the head. Harrison staggered back, almost falling, and Woon Shang, in a last desperate bid for freedom, dashed, not for the neck of land between which himself and Harrison stood, but straight toward the black water that glimmered beyond the fringe of cypresses. Harrison fired mechanically and without aim, but the fugitive kept straight on and hit the dusky water with a long dive.

Woon Shang's bobbing head was scarcely visible in the shadows of the overhanging ferns. Then a wild shriek cut the night; the water threshed and foamed, there was the glimpse of a writhing, horribly contorted yellow body and of a longer, darker shape, and then the blood-streaked waters closed over Woon Shang forever.

Harrison exhaled gustily and sank down on a rotting log.

"Well," he said wearily, aloud, "that winds *that* up. It's better this way. Woon's family had rather he died this way than in the chair, and they're decent folks, in spite of him. If this business had come to trial, I'd have had to tell about Celia shoving a knife into that devil Bartholomew, and I'd hate to see her on trial for killing that rat. This way it can be smoothed over. He had it coming to him. And I've got the money that's coming to old Li-keh-tsung's granddaughter. And it's me for the feather beds and fried steaks of civilization."

THE END

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