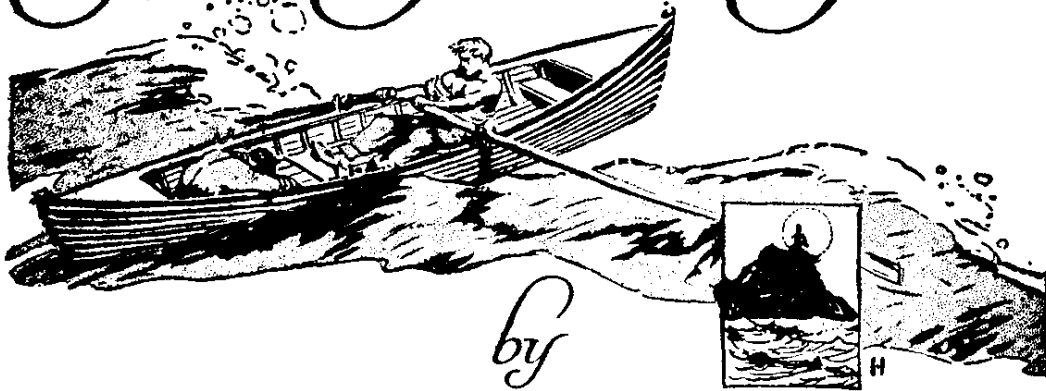


# The Green God



by  
William Call Spencer

**T**HEY were following the last of the storm, climbing soggily the great rollers, nursing the boat carefully through the white-caps, making consistently for the island with the dead tree spire.

Rill, with head sagging on his narrow chest, scraped rhythmically with the bailing-pail, along the bottom, over the side, scrape and over, scrape and over, never ceasing, rarely looking up, his thin face lined with fatigue.

The other man swung forlornly on a pair of great oars. His head was thrown back, exposing the neck-column that sat on the thick torso, beautiful as the neck of a Greek vase. The two rarely spoke, unless concerning the course.

They had not changed posture since the day before, when, after the delirium of the Bertha's foundering, they had found themselves as they were now, the one rowing, the other, of lesser physique, bailing. The storm had driven the packet boat that plied north from Skagway out of her course. They were somewhere in the Aleutian Islands. That was all they knew, that, and a hunger that lost itself somewhere in thirst.

The danger of capsizing hourly had grown less, seeming queerly enough to lessen with the weakening of the men's resistance; or possibly it was the other way round. Late in the afternoon, with the sun beginning to shine palely, they came to the island. The surf crashed upon the rocky line in a

steady thunder. Sea-birds swooped and beat above it, their cawing inaudible.

"Guess it's all up," the big man at the oars said. "If we go round to make shore on the lee side, the current'll carry us past like a shot. If we get in the surf, them rocks'll chop us up—for the gulls."

They both stared at the spuming shoreline that momentarily became plainer. The oarsman had the better eyes.

"There's a cove," he said presently. "Sometimes that means a stretch of sand. If the breakers catch you right, you kin carry through, sometimes. Try it?"

The slim man peered through the lank black hair that fell over his red-lidded eyes, noting his informant as he had the shore.

"I don't know you yet," he said. "You a sailor? Got good judgment? Can we do anything else?"

"Name's Pug Norton, sir—cook on the Bertha, sailed regular before the mast in the old days up here. Ain't much I don't know about landin' a boat. I'd ruther get it over quick, there in the pound, than take days to it. I've helped pick up fellows that croaked from the thirst—I swore when my turn came I'd go a quick way. You feel the same?"

Rill nodded his head, and went to baling again, head drooped forward, shoulders bent. The sailor, Pug, gazed more frequently over his shoulder and sent the boat along a bit faster. Perhaps he intended to try the wild ride before dusk put a false light on

things. They had no more speech, for they had said quite all that was necessary to say with thickening tongues.

The moment came when the boat was opposite the little cove, and the sailor simply, without hesitation, headed in for the breakers. They were big, as they usually are in Alaska, and always after a storm. Pug had a parting fragment of advice to give:

“If this here boat founders way out, just hang on tight. If she busts on shore, keep away from her. I’ve seen a Malay get his nut cracked between the boat and the sand. An’ I guess you know enough not to fight—if we ain’t carried in, we don’t get it, that’s all.”

Rill dropped the bucket and hung on to the gunwales as the other, choosing his time, strained at the oars. They shot in, lifted by a swell, dropped, were carried again, and again dropped just before the wave foamed and curled. The sailor had timed it well. He had the boat further in by the next break, so that at any rate the tremendous fall of water did not bash them. Instead they met the crazy blanket of foam. Rill perceived vaguely the other flashing the oars frantically, then the boat sank from under him, and he went down, clinging like a barnacle to the gunwale. He remembered coming to the top again, and swirling madly, giddily over and under the boat. Finally he let go. He felt his arm seized, and then his consciousness went.

When it came back he was lying with his face in the sand a foot or so beyond high-water line. He coughed weakly and opened his eyes to see the sailor, Pug, reeling toward him through the dusk, carrying something in his cap. Rill wondered pettishly how the sailor had kept that cap.

“Pool of rain-water back there,” Pug said. “Scummy-like, but good enough to rinse the salt water out of your mouth. Here.”

He lay down on the sand above Rill, and before the latter was through with the water he was sleeping. Rill had time to note the brine still dripping from him into the sand and to observe the same phenomenon occurring in his own case before he too fell back with a relaxing sigh into deep slumber. That was the end of their first day.

The second held other problems, chiefly those of food and water and shelter. They spread their clothes to dry on the sand, and occupied that time in collecting sections of the boat that had come ashore. Tangled and caught with sea-weed they found the

long painter-rope. Norton patiently worked it free and coiled it to dry. But most pressing was the question of food. Later they could unravel a bit of the rope and form a fish-line, but the need was immediate. They put on their shoes and scoured among the rocks, catching little crabs and minnows, of which six might make a mouthful. They ate these raw for an hour or so, with the help of Norton’s jack-knife.

“I got a tin of matches in my pants for next time,” the latter explained. “But they eat good this way, huh?”

The sailor was the provident man, forehanded, capable. The thin-faced one with the wide forehead and loose lip would not have seen the practical wisdom of carrying matches in a water-tight receptacle.

In the afternoon they circuited the island and partially explored the interior, which indicates its size. Of man they found no trace, except, on the highest point, charred wood from some signal-fire. They were concerned chiefly at their failure to discover running water, for what pools they found in the rocks were brackish and filled with life, both animal and vegetable.

“If we had a kettle we could cook it”

Pug observed. “But we ain’t.”

The dead tree they had seen the day before was a pine, and they collected the brown needles for a bed. The day passed very quickly with the multitude of tasks. At night they slept close together for the warmth. The sailor got up once to see to the fire, but the other slept through without a wink of the eyelid.

They fashioned a low shelter, roofing it with needles and with green from the profuse underbrush. They made a fireplace that would endure the heavy rains. In all these things the sailor advised and directed, and Rill, unaccustomed to that, had to conceal his irritation. He did as the other advised, however, because invariably that was the best method. He had to admit that to himself, and the sailor took it as a matter of course. The latter would not have comprehended passing a mistake for the sake of the other’s self-satisfaction.

For instance, the cook had made a bird-snare and caught a gull. After their meal from it Rill threw carelessly the bones into the fire and leaned back. Pug swore and forked them out.

“You got to be more careful,” he admonished the other. “Them bones is valuable.”

Rill considered Pug, sucking his loose under lip.

“You got the bulge on me out here,” he answered. “If we were in town I might appear in other light—what an you doing?”

Pug had cleaned the clavicles or furcula, which in a chicken is the wishbone, and was carving it.

“Fish-hook,” he replied, and opened up the other phase. “I knew you was a city guy. I piped you stringing along with the other passengers on the Bertha. You was mostly at the tables in the smoking-room, wasn’t you? But I ain’t placed you—sometimes I think you’re educated, and next minute you’re spielin’ as if you was raised on the water-front.”

Rill did not avail himself of the request for an autobiography. He got to his feet and scanned lazily the empty sea.

“Yep, Pug, I’ve been arbiter elegancia, so to speak, among the esthetes and the patricians, and again I’ve mooched a plate of beans from a Cholo tamale man. While you’re fishing this afternoon, I’ll go over the island again.”

Pug watched him put his hands in his pockets and stroll easily around the curve in the shore.

“He’d bag a gink for a dime, if he thought he could get away with it,” he murmured to himself, and went on with the hook-making.

He was cleaning a meager catch of fish when the one who had gone exploring came back and sat down beside him.

“You got to be expert to bring ‘em in with this here hook,” Pug announced, and considered that he had done his duty in the matter of small talk. But the other appeared engrossed.

“You can’t read Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese ideographs, can you?” he asked presently.

That was a good Joke. Pug chuckled loudly and laughed again at the straight face the other kept.

“Sure, an’ deaf an’ dumb language, too. You need that?”

“Remember that big regular-shaped rock we saw on the other side of the island? That’s a monolith.”

“A which?”

“The big one near the shore, that stuck up like a pillar, flat on top—now you remember?”

“What about it?”

“I thought it looked queer, and I peeled off some of the moss. The thing is all carved with some

ancient writing, related, I think, both to Egyptian and Chinese, maybe Mexican. And another thing, the stone is granite. You won’t find another piece on the island.”

“Whew!” Pug waited for a moment, studying these bits of information in the light of the other’s facial expression. But a solution not immediately presenting itself, he turned again to the fish.

“And that wasn’t all,” Rill went on. “It looked as if there might have been a road into the island there, and I followed it up. About fifty yards from the monolith there’s a big hole, some twenty feet across. I dropped in a rock or two and judged they fell maybe a hundred feet, and then rolled down a slanting shaft. To-morrow we’ll go look it over. There’s copper indications near there.”

There was new excitement in the sailor that had not appeared even in the fight with the surf. After the meal the explanation came:

“I ran across a poor bum,” Pug said, “down in Sitka a couple of years ago. We had a drink, and he spied a lot of queer bunk. They said he’d gone nuts. Anyhow, he sez he was with a party of Indians in these here islands, prospecting for ore. There was a small island with a big pine in the middle of it what the Indians called ‘The Island of the Lost God.’ They wouldn’t land him till he pulled his gun and threatened to shoot them—said a green devil lived there in a deep cave; a bad one.

“This guy laughs at ‘em an’ makes ‘em lower him into this here cave on a rope—he sez it looks to him like an old copper-mine shaft. The boys up top get scared as soon as he hits the bottom and light out for keeps. He doesn’t know it, though, and goes on in. It’s great, the story he tells about that, about how he meets this green devil coming, grinning at him. He takes a pot-shot at him and shinnies the rope like he was a cat. By an’ by somebody picks him up—crazy with the thirst and the fright and all. But he ain’t never forgot that green thing. Say, I wish we could get picked up right now—”

Rill allowed himself an ironical smile.

“Why, you believe in the story?” he asked.

“No, I don’t say that—but still, my mother was Irish, and she saw the banshee once, an’ she knew the runes of the fairies—we’d best go ‘round the hole,”

“No devil ‘ll scare me away from a lost copper, mine. If there’s anything there you can buy out fifty devils—”

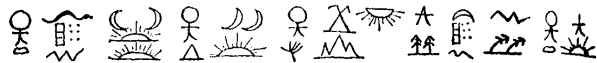
“Make fun if you want—I’ll keep clear.”

Rill made for the inscriptured rock the next day and the sailor followed, somewhat curious. The characters were large and deeply cut, excellently preserved by the six-inch skin of moss that covers everything in that region. Rill scraped merely enough to determine that the entire monolith was carved.

They dug also below the surface, and still finding the strange characters, determined that what they saw was merely the summit or upper half, possibly, of an obelisk. The writing ran in regular lines, sometimes horizontally and sometimes vertically. Rill discovered one line larger and more freely written than the rest, with simpler glyphs. He studied long over this, so long that the sailor tired of it and began to saunter off.

“Wait,” Rill said. “I’ve got part of it. I happen to have a smattering of this science—and when I go down the shaft I want to know as much as this will tell us.”

He began to elucidate, pointing to the row that ran around the stone:



“This line was written in a hurry; it’s more elemental. It’s the original stuff. See the serpent in the second group?—that stands for wisdom. The Pharaohs used the asp, symbol of their wisdom. The serpent tempted Adam and Eve, that is, the beginnings of wisdom or thought brought them self-knowledge. The dragon is the Chinese development of that idea; Hermes’s caduceus has the serpents of wisdom intertwined; there’s a Hindu god that holds out in one hand a big snake—all the same idea.

“Now, that first mark is the anthropomorphic sign and can stand for God. Right under it is a mouth, sign of talk. See the zigzag sign in the second group?—that’s water. Then comes the moon or month and the setting sun; the one like a dead bush is a hand, sign of force or power. The zigzag on a line means mountains sometimes, and in the next group is forest. The triangle thing’s got me guessing, but I can get the epic out of it, anyway.”

“You mean you can read the stuff?” Pug was somewhat incredulous, this feat appearing miraculous.

“It starts like this—the god speaks, evidently in

warning, because the wise ones take to their boats and go off on the water, six to the boat rowing, I think. Then elapses the time from the new moon to the old moon and two days besides. Again the god warns in some way, and again a period of time. Finally the god acts or uses his power (you see the hand), and some terrible catastrophe occurs.

“The writer tells us of the chaos by putting the sun upside down, as if to say they never saw the sun or the days. But still the men number as the trees of a forest. They had no understanding, and put to sea. You can read the next sign—a big storm, all perish. And finally the god speaks once more, saying that man’s day is over. Some story, Pug?”

“It must have been the green god that did the talking and all. We’d best let the shaft alone. There’s always somebody scouting around these islands: we’ll get took off before long.”

They did wait. The sailor fished and performed the practical duties. The other was absorbed in the efforts to perfect the message, blocked by the meaning of the triangle signs. Together they struggled with the water supply. The pools were slowly drying, and becoming more brackish and filled with life. That was the big problem, the daily mounting worry—water.

The shaft held the only hope. Yet Pug preferred on the whole to struggle with the known phenomena of the surface, and Rill could not bring himself to the point of contending with the physical difficulties, the trusting himself to the rope, the dangers. There was also their mutual suspicion, natural and inevitable, that precluded, short of imminent necessity a combining of forces wherein one must trust the other.

A morning came when Rill, of weaker constitution, vomited after a swallow of the green water. That was enough; he determined immediately to explore the hole. They got the rope, and Pug came presently with a couple of pine-knots and burning brands from the fire to light them.

The edge of the shaft was clean-cut in the soft rock, so that they could peer over and down. Kneeling there, Rill whispered and the sibilance rushed back and forth ended finally in a subdued, venomous hissing at the bottom.

They dropped a stone, and the crash of its impacts mounted in a hollow roar now loudly, now softly, multitudinously. They could distinguish various upper strata, but the lower portion was

shrouded in impenetrable black. The sailor glanced at Rill, and saw a sheen of damp on his forehead.

“What’s up?” he asked, thinking himself of the green thing of the legend.

“Suppose the rope isn’t long enough, or should cut on the rock—sure you can pull me up—and will?”

They did not talk much while the sailor knotted a loop in the rope for Rill’s foot, and tied the other end to a stake driven in a cleft of the rock. Perhaps Rill did feel a qualm, but if so it was not again apparent to the other.

As his end of the rope eventually came into Pug’s hands a frown of worry lowered his eyebrows. He was certain that it was not long enough, when the tension laxed. He peered down. Far away the smoky yellow of the torch wavered upon the roughness of the rock. The man holding it called up, but long before the words came to the sailor they had been mingled and churned into a confused rumble.

Then the torch moved slowly into the wall until the blaze itself was hidden, though he could still see the moving light playing from the tunnel upon the wall of the vertical shaft. With the minutes that grew fainter. There came up a sharp cry of fright, and immediately the yellow glow vanished. The still menacing darkness of the centuries swooped once more, like the drop of a hawk, over the caverns.

With his back to the sun, the sailor listened intently at the edge, waiting for some explanation of that sudden shout and the succeeding silence. He called once or twice, but the sound echoed back to him raucously, mockingly. Presently apprehensions of the green thing, that had lain dormant for a time, swept over him.

His imagination pictured Rill in the grasp of some awful being, some green-tentacled, green-eyed chimera. That heavy darkness might hide any terror. Then he had a moment wherein common sense dictated that Rill had met with some natural accident; had fallen down a hole or dislodged a fall of rock.

It was good to look up at the placid sea and the two or three islands hazy in the distance, the lazy smoke of their signal-fire, the white birds floating and careering along the shore. The sense of freedom, the absence of the strain of always watching the other man, gave him a sort of pleasure.

He was almost glad that he was alone, and

sauntered toward camp. But that act did not seem right; somehow he felt guilty; he felt that he had a duty, difficult and abhorrent, but nevertheless necessary. He went over to the rope and tested the firmness of the peg.

Rill had thrown down the extra torch. The sailor filled a pocket with dry leaves and twigs, enough to light it at the bottom. To slip over the side and descend hand under hand was not difficult. He had had a lifetime of that. But as he went down through the dusk-lit strata to the depths, his fear of that unknown enlarged.

The noise of his descent came back to him from the walls, almost maliciously, he imagined. From the bottom he looked up. He had never seen a sky of so intense a blue, clotted with winking stars. Though he had heard of this, nevertheless he wished that he had not looked up. It lent too much of an air of unreality to the whole undertaking. He sighed relievedly when he found the torch and got it flaring. The stale air smelt of the passage of Rill’s torch. Sweat came out on his forehead, perhaps caused as much by mental as by physical discomfort. He shouted and waited, but no answer came. The passage curved evidently, for he could not see far. Where it passed through soft strata the sides had been shored up with stone work, with great rocks patiently fitted into each other, narrowing toward the top.

He took a step forward and halted. If he could have found the smallest excuse he would have dropped the torch and the whole business. This adventure was trying him in his weakest part. He felt that his scalp was moving, there was a giddy nausea at the pit of his stomach. The crux of his hesitation lay in his doubt as to whether there existed a green thing in there or whether Rill had met with a natural accident. Some low instinct of superstitious belief insisted on the former, and years of common sense scoffed.

He nerved himself to go forward somewhat as a swimmer brings himself to the point of the first plunge into water that he fears is cold. With sweat pouring from him he edged into the passage, holding aloft the blazing pine-knot, ready to dash back. After the first slight curve the tunnel straightened to such length that his light did not carry to the end. As he advanced he grew more confident; the action involved in keeping his feet occupied him.

The air grew heavier, his lungs worked as if caught in the stricture of a great snake.

The torch burned lower and redly. Once more he called. This time he was startled by an answer, a dull moan that issued a few feet beyond, from between two great boulders. He stooped over Rill, but could find no signs of harm or violence.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Rill rolled his head weakly and muttered. He tried it again, muttering the second time plainly enough for the other to hear:

“Be careful—knocked me out—”

Pug’s torch was nearly gone. He stood up and searched for the one that Rill must have dropped. His eyes wandered up the passage, and abruptly held, dilating. He stood woodenly, nerveless with terror.

His pale light glimmered vaguely upon the green thing that half-sat, half-reclined in a heap of earth a few feet from them. In the quivering light the twisted limbs appeared to move and contort. The green skin upon the skull, drawn back until the cruel mouth grinned insanelly, the hollowed cheeks, the deep eye-sockets that stared at him, the taut, glistening parchment upon the forehead—these fascinated the sailor so that he could not look away. He expected it to stand over him to point its skinny, withered arm at him or to open its jaws, in a shattering laugh.

He heard a coughing choke behind him, and jumped backward, ramming against the wall of the passage. But it was merely Rill.

“Water,” he was trying to articulate, “Some water.”

Swept from his immobility, Pug acted feverishly. He backed over to Rill. In such case as this prayer might be efficacious. He remembered one his mother had taught him that invoked God against devils. He recited it quickly and ran his arm around Rill’s shoulders. Nothing happened; obviously the magic had done its work!

He spelled it out again and backed off, dragging the limp body with one arm while the other held the light upon the green thing, until the returning gloom blotted it out. Then he turned about and, with Rill on his shoulder, strode heavily and hurriedly back. The torch went out and he stumbled along, caroming from side to side, slipping, gasping harshly in the close fetid air.

When he got to the vertical shaft he was forced

to lay Rill down and to rest for several moments. The blood-vessels in his neck and head throbbed from the pressure in the lungs. Rill began to talk:

“I was following along the vein in the roof,” he said. “Climbed up on the rock. I saw the green thing. I think the rock wobbled with me, and I fell. I’ll be all right with a drink of water.”

The sailor moved Rill over to the rope and succeeded in knotting it around his shoulders. That was fairly difficult as it was necessary to lift him into the air while he tied. But still, that was easy compared with his next move. He began to climb the rope hand over hand. With Rill weighting the end he mounted painfully inch by inch the long stretch. If he could have rested midway it would have helped, but that was impossible. The skin began to tear from his hands, a numbness entered the arm muscles, so terribly three times he wrapped his legs in the rope and in a way eased the strain, but his strength appeared to evaporate with these rests.

He had been fatigued before he undertook the climb, from the violent work in the vitiated air. The last ten feet drew from him as much energy and pain as the first half of the feat. He became dizzy, black spots moved before his eyes, the rope in his hands appeared as tenuous as a fine thread, and as difficult to grasp. He had climbed to where the rope went over the edge. He would have to spring his body up two feet and catch the rope beyond the edge before he fell back. How easy to coil about the rope and slide again to the bottom!

He considered that for a long time, but he knew that if he fell he would not be able again to get that far. He summoned all his reserve, worked up till one hand was wedged tightly between the rope and the rock, and made the supreme effort. The hand that reached over for the new hold slipped, he began to fall back, the knuckles scraping along the rock. They passed over a ledge, a fissure. He let go the rope and held to that with the ends of his fingers, got the other arm up, and slowly worked his body over.

He lay there on his back, his feet hanging over the shaft, for another period of time. Pain began to enter his skinned hands, a sign of recuperation. There remained the task of pulling up the weak man. The signal fire was nearly out, they had no food on hand, they had found no water.

Dusk was settling before the sailor stood up

and essayed to haul on the rope. He brought up a few feet, but the torture in his hands was excruciating. It was common sense, he decided, to wait until he could surely finish the job. Rill, below, was too far gone to protest. Pug mentally could see him hanging there, swaying loosely in the rope, head hanging to his flat chest.

The sailor shuffled over to their dead camp-fire. There had been scraps on the fish-bones they had thrown away at their midday meal. He needed those. As he worked along he looked out to sea, as the habit had grown, upon them to do.

In the gray light he could not see far. He was looking away when he got an impression of some life upon the great expanse, of something moving between the shore and the horizon. He stopped and stared, his heart palpitating with fear lest there had been a chance of rescue that they had missed. He became certain that it was a small craft of some sort. He shouted crazily; the call carried as far as the sound of a falling leaf in a breeze.

Then he remembered their signal-fire and clambered hurriedly the little summit. He piled on the scanty provision of fuel recklessly, and blew it into a blaze. He could no longer distinguish any movement in the soft darkness, but between the fire and the sea he stood and waved his arms. The glow spread about him, his shadow, gigantic, monstrous, filling half the world.

Twice he replenished the fire, always returning to his position with his back to it. His hope had vanished, he was satisfied he had been mistaken, when cries came from the water edge. While he was climbing down he heard a boat being beached on the sand.

It proved to be a dugout load of Huyda Indians on a cruise. It was for them a simple, smiling matter to draw up the man still swinging on the rope. They became loquacious between each other in their guttural way, marveling at the white men's capacity for dried meat and meal. Rill was weak, still suffering from the shock and his wound and his long lack of water. The Indians, however, refused to remain overnight on the island, fearful perhaps of the green devil, and put to sea with the two white men lying at length on the canoe bottom.

The full moon came up in the clear night, illuming the far islands. The atmosphere was unusually clear, and miles away they made out a tall

peak ringed by a mushroom-shaped cloud. It had never previously been visible.

"Him Grewink," the nearest Indian explained in answer to their questioning gaze. "Him smoke all time." He laughed heartily at his own little joke, and asked

"Mebbe you like smoke, too?"

Rill contemplated the distant peak and presently turned to the sailor beside him:

"Remember the triangle in the inscription that I couldn't make out? I've got it now. That stands for old Grewink or a fellow just like him. See what happened? The volcano began to stir up, and the wise ones left in a hurry. Then they had a big time here, and what with the volcano spouting and earthquakes, they thought the world was ending. Of course it was their god that did it for vengeance, they'd say, and put to sea. A tidal wave or a big storm finished that batch, and the survivors wrote it up on their altar stone. That's some story, Pug."

"But the green thing—that was what drove them out. I don't see how we got away ourselves. I wouldn't go down that shaft again if it was lined with gold—"

Rill, sucking his under lip, gazed up at the spangled cloth of the heavens. The Indians paddled steadily, talking among themselves, guiding the canoe over the lazy, dark swells. Rill appeared to have reached a decision.

"You're a good scout, Pug," he said "You've always been there in the pinch. I was counting on your scare of the green fellow to keep you out of it; I was going to claim the mine and get capital to work it, with you out of the way But you've been square with me, and I'll play the game square for once. The green devil you saw was just a mummy. He's one of the miners that got caught in the earthquake—mighty bad to look at but perfectly harmless, Pug."

"A mummy? You're kidding!"

"No. You see, he was buried in the copper ore, and instead of decaying, he absorbed certain minerals that petrified him, preserved him. Next time you're in New York go to the museum and look at one of them that they found in a copper mine in Chile. In the case of this fellow, somebody must have begun digging, probably the Indian that started the legend, and uncovered him. We'll work up the mine proposition together."