



THE SCREAMING SKULL

By J. ALLAN DUNN

The King's Pardon had been offered to the Buccaneers, and now the King's ships were out to make the everlasting frontier of the seas safe for all. But Swayne and his men scorned the one and laughed at the other even as the hunters closed in upon them.

OUTRANGING the lighter guns of the *Gauntlet*, from the start of the fight the skillfully manoeuvred King's ship had been raking the pirate brigantine with a steady fire from a Long Tom mounted in her bows. For three hours they fought, manoeuvring in the smart breeze in the early evening of a glorious day, the crisp seas blue as indigo, yeasty with spin-drift, the smoke of the guns soaring up in puffs like balloons as they were swiftly served by men naked to the waist, wet with sweat, grimed with powder and splashed with blood.

King's man and pirate alike wore bright kerchiefs bound about their brows, but the buccaneers aboard the *Gauntlet* displayed gaudy silken sashes, velvet breeches and high bucket-topped seaboots of leather, whereas the tars trod the sanded decks bare-footed.

Now less than a cable's length away, now nearer half a mile, tacking and veering, striving for the better position, for a rake of the other's deck, the bright red flashes of fire showed belching from the barking dogs of war as pirate's brigantine or the King's corvette rose to the crest of a rolling

wave and swift gunners set tow to touch-hole. White splinters flew from the black sides that rose gleaming, varnished with the brine.

The flush-decked corvette, frigate-rigged, was handled with as much precision as the overmanned brigantine, and Swayne cursed as he saw that her captain meant to take full advantage of his heavier metals and repeatedly managed a range where the buccaneer's shot plumped short into the sea.

But at sunset the corvette came down, leaping before a quartering breeze, flinging the seas away magnificently to leeward, buoyant as a cork, her canvas snowy white, the red flag flaming in challenge to Swayne's sable banner, keen to make a finish. The sun hung in the west in a growing confusion of purple cloud and wheeling rays of crimson vapor, wheeling over a background of troubled gold. The clouds overhead were silver-white as pearl on their eastern sides, amber and amethyst toward the west. The two ships, filled with men who longed to be at the death-grapple, to decide the supremacy of law or piracy, seemed inconsequential as they fled on the lifting surface of a sea purple as the skin of grapes.

Swayne strutted in confidence on his quarterdeck, togged out in all the glory that delighted his heart: vermilion, gold-laced coat with a blue sash of silk across it, a wide belt, velvet breeches thrust into boots of Spanish leather, plumes in his hat above his hair that hung below the wide collar, long mustachios fiercely curled, a scar across a nose that bridged out like a prow to his strong face.

Hardly less brave of attire and demeanor was Hoyle, his lieutenant, though his face scowled the more from its pockpittedness than Swayne's from its scar. Hoyle worked the ship, following Swayne's orders. Skinner, the quartermaster, chosen representative of the crew, a check on the captain to a certain extent, stood beside Swayne, his green eyes, flecked with brown spots, watching the corvette, unblinking to the increasing glory of the sunset behind her.

Long of arm and bowed of leg was Skinner, strong and active as a cat. He wore short breeches of striped canvas and a shirt of black silk that fluttered open at his hairy chest. His legs below the knees were bare to the horny soles of the splay feet. A fo'c'stle man was Skinner, though rating counted little in this sea brotherhood. He had pistols and a cutlass that swung unsheathed against the hard muscles of his calf, its edge keen as a razor, keen as the two long dirks in his belt.

Swayne roared an order and Skinner looked at him in a surprise that blended with delight.

"You'll let 'em board?" he shouted above the rush of the wind in the rigging, the seethe of the sea and the reports of the stern-chaser that ceased as the helm was put up and the men rushed to the braces.

"We'll meet 'em half way and let the losers go to hell! But we'll set a hurdle or two for 'em to jump. Nettings there. Pikes and cutlasses!"

By the prevailing laws of the Brethren of the Sea, Swayne had the absolute right of determination in all questions concerning fighting, chasing or being chased. In all other matters whatsoever the captain was governed by a majority. His decisions were subject to a later vote if the majority seemed to consider him in the wrong, but here there was no dissenting voice; the pirates believed themselves unmatched at close quarters. The battering from the corvette had enraged them, the pannikins of rum from the broached cask amidships had inflamed their natural deviltry, and they yelled in unison when they saw Swayne meant to come to grips.

AXES and pikes and cutlasses were set handy while they worked frantically to stretch the bulwark nettings. On came the King's ship, her men bunched in three groups, some on the yard-arms, some with grappling irons ready to fling aboard. The dazzle of the sunset was in the eyes of the buccaneers but they were used to such matters and they bellowed a brazen defiance as the two ships closed.

Pikes thrust at men, impaling them; axes swung through soft flesh and splintering bone; pistols were fired point-blank, searing and singeing where the bullets entered. Men poured into the brigantine, swarming the nettings actively as baboons, their sharp steel between their teeth, silent but grim as the outlaws of the sea jabbed and struck at them. Men dropped from the yards; there came clash and grate of steel against steel. The grunt of men hard pressed, the groans of the wounded, oaths, yells sounded while the sunset filled the hollows of the waves with blood that mocked the gore that ran on the slippery decks of the *Gauntlet* as men rolled into the scuppers, clutching at each other's wrists and throats, stabbing, slashing.

In the south a squall gathered, hovering while the fight gained fury. Swayne marked it from the corners of his eyes, his lips set, his nostrils wide for better breath as he lunged and parried with his Spanish blade against the onslaught of the corvette's first lieutenant, an old sea-dog with a wrist of steel and the cunning of a master of fence.

Swayne swiftly calculated the chances of victory or defeat, fearing the latter, even for himself in his present issue. He was wounded in the leg by a bullet from the corvette's foretop and at his best he was no match for this man who changed his style of fence at will, who had learned in the schools of France and Italy and Spain and practised them all in bloody battle.

There was no quarter. Every man pirate of them would be hanged at Gallows' Point, Port Royal, if they were taken alive. It had been a mistake to let the King's men board. Slowly but surely they were driving the buccaneers back. Hoyle was down, cleft from shoulder to the middle of his chest by a gigantic seaman whom Swayne himself had spitted the next instant. Skinner was back to the rail, with three or four comrades, fighting like maddened cats against odds.

Swayne shouted for a rally, tried to lead it, and left an opening that was instantly entered by the point of the imperturbable Englishman. The

blade ran through his chest and lungs. Swayne stood for a moment with disbelieving amazement in his eyes as the other withdrew his sword and gave him a little nod. His own hilt was suddenly too heavy for his nerveless grasp; his voice failed him; he coughed and fell with a gush of blood from his lips.

The loss of a commander may make for despair of two kinds, the one generated by loss of hope that scatters courage and stays all effort, the other that produces a furious struggle against impending doom. Skinner broke through the cordon that had hemmed him in, hewing a way for himself with his reeking cutlass, his fierce face aflame, filled with the valor of desperation.

"It's over with 'em, lads, or Port Royal for us all!" his great voice roared.

The rally sent the corvette's boarders back to their own deck, cursed at by their officers for cowards, smarting and stiff with wounds, almost spent with the fury of the onslaught, the pirates in little better shape. In the lull the gunner of the *Gauntlet* appeared with case-boxes he had swiftly manufactured during the boarding flurry. They were filled with powder, small shot, slugs and scraps of lead and iron, a sputtering quickmatch in the mouth of each of them as they were flung by lusty arms wherever men grouped aboard the King's ship.

The grenades exploded with frightful execution, scattering their rending contents far and wide. The officers of the corvette jumped to bring order out of the confusion, and lead another charge with fresh men who had not yet been in hand-to-hand conflict. The pirates seized the brief respite to catch their laboring breaths. Swayne was borne down to his cabin; Hoyle left in his own blood — dead.

Then the squall swept down, ravening, fierce and fast, veiling the sunset, darkening sea and sky with its pall. The ships had lain bow-and-stern; now the *Gauntlet* flung into the wind to meet the corvette as she came down it. But the gale came from another quarter. It flung itself upon both vessels, setting the corvette aback as it stormed over its bows, driving the *Gauntlet* ahead as the pirates cut the grappling ropes, glad to see the chance to avoid the mustering boarders, maddened by the bursting of the grenades.

One last battery from the corvette's guns roared out before they were clear, splintering and shattering their quarter. As they rolled to the great waves that enveloped them, leaping and ravening

at them out of the roaring blackness, wallowing and plunging before the squall that at once saved them and threatened momentarily to set them on their beam-ends, the carpenter set up a cry for men to start the pumps. The muzzles of the King's ship had been depressed for that farewell broad-side, the cold shot had gone lunging through between wind and water and, with every plunge into the streaking gulfs, water gushed in.

SKINNER was a seaman, every ugly, efficient inch of him, in all but navigation. And now they had an open sea ahead, to the best of his belief. He had to save ship, to get in sail, to repair rigging shot sway, to hastily fish the foremast, quarter-chewed by a lucky shot, creaking and threatening to go by the board.

At it he went, shouting his orders in that almost Stygian darkness with night following hard on the heels of the squall, overtaking it, mingling with it. Lanterns swung and flitted here and there. The decks were cleared of raffle. In the lee scuppers lay the dead and dying of their own crew and from the corvette. The latter Skinner ordered thrown overboard without shrift or mercy. Their own dead went into the gulping maw of the sea, the wounded taken below.

Within an hour he had done what could be done, save for the needed continuance of the clanking pumps, the mauling and plugging of the carpenter and his mates. The gale shrieked and the sea rose, the tempest leveling the crests and sending it in vast sheets fore and aft; rain fell in torrents and salt and fresh water mingled in a constant flood upon her decks where the scuppers and torn bulwarks eddied as they strove to discharge the waste.

The bellow of the wind outvoiced all thunder, but jagged blades of lightning showed the sable and mountainous clouds from which they came. Still the brigantine held buoyancy; the rags of canvas still set held her from too violent lurching as she rushed down the watery valleys and climbed the seething hills. The pumps gained on the leak and at last the carpenter sealed the shot holes in the stout skin.

Skinner entered the cuddy cabin, below the quarterdeck. A swinging lamp illumined it, filled with the prodigality of loot, silken hangings, rich carpets, cushions on the transoms, a silver crucifix on one wall next to a canvas in a rich frame, both ravished from a Spanish merchantman. Carven furniture, gold plate on the table held by racks.

Outside, through the great stern window, the sea slavered at the glass. On the starboard lounge lay the form of the captain, covered with a rug.

Skinner, bare-legged, the rest of him soaking wet, spilling puddles on the floor, blood on his arms to the elbows, on his face that was framed in hair almost as red, was a repulsive sight. He caught at a flagon of wine that was tucked between cushions, knocked off its neck and drank, regardless of the jagged glass that cut his mouth. He kept at it until he had finished the bottle and, flushed with the heady stuff, flung it crashing against the side of the cabin.

Two men followed him in, Tremaine, the gunner, wide-faced, like an owl, and Raxon, a member of the crew who was looked up to by many of them because of his facility of tongue and flow of language. Raxon was a hatchet-faced sea lawyer, making up in wits what he lacked in bodily strength and favor. Both of them were sopping, smeared with blood and begrimed with powder. Tremaine's gore was partly his own and partly from the men he had fought. That on Raxon came from the dead he had helped to fling overboard. He grinned at Skinner with yellow teeth and a side jerk of his head toward Swayne.

"Dead?" he asked.

Skinner shrugged his shoulders. Tremaine went over to the lounge.

"Did you get it out of him?" asked Raxon.

Skinner stared at him blankly. Something like contempt for the dullness of the other came into the eyes of Raxon. One-time scrivener's clerk was he, shipped from the Port of London in a press-gang that he almost forced himself upon, fearing hue and cry for a murder he had committed; deserter, renegade, rat of the seas, with all a rat's cunning and, perhaps, a rat's courage when driven into a corner. So far he had kept out of corners.

He looked at both his companions, both indispensable to the plan he had in mind, if it was still feasible. If Swayne still lived. For wealth was now being weighed in the uncertain balance of the life of a desperately wounded man. Skinner should be captain. That he lacked navigation was to be lamented but Raxon did not consider that insurmountable. Tremaine, a giant, master gunner, was a necessary factor—not so much so as Skinner perhaps, but Raxon knew that Tremaine admired him and he meant to use the gunner to help him against the other.

Skinner was dull but Tremaine was stupid, away from his calling of gunner-seaman. It would

go hard, thought Raxon, if he couldn't use them both to his own ultimate and sole advantage. But—if Swayne was dead?

"He's nigh gone," announced Tremaine, "but there's still breath in him to this mirror." The gunner held up a looking-glass in a frame of rococo silver-gilt and rubbed his great digit through the mist upon it.

"Give him some wine," said Raxon. "Quick! He's got to talk. Look you, Skinner, of all the six men that landed to bury the loot, Swayne alone breathes. The devil himself was against us to-night. First Hoyle killed, then Swayne mortally wounded. Payson, Davis, Poole and Gibbs, every one of them dead—and thrown overboard."

Skinner's eyes, green as sea water, blazed.

"By God!" he cursed as his intelligence reacted to the meaning of the other. "Then Swayne alone knows the place where the treasure's buried,"

"Hoyle and Swayne were the only ones who ever really knew. The other four could have led us close to it. They've gone. Does he take the wine, Tremaine?"

"Aye. He sighed. His eyes are open, but they see nothing."

"They will. Give him more wine. Smile at him, you fool. Make him think you, we are his friends. Skinner, you must do the talking, since you represent the crew. Easy at first, you see? Easy, or he'll die on us. Look."

He had come to the lounge with Skinner and the three of them hung solicitously over the dying man. Raxon drew aside the laced coat, unfastened the cambric shirt with its tucks and frills all wet and red, and showed the slightly puckered wound where the sword had pierced him. Through it oozed crimson froth at every labored breath that barely lifted the captain's chest.

Raxon cursed softly.

"We need a surgeon aboard," he said. "He's got to talk. Skinner, you said there was brandy aft. Get it. The wine's not strong enough."

The effect of the cordial opened the captain's eyes again. This time there was recognition in them, but no especial friendliness. He seemed to recognize the errand upon which they had come, catching him on the edge of the gulf of death, bringing him back for their own purposes. The loot that he and Hoyle had buried had been their own accumulated shares of long looting. The crew had long since spent their shares with gaming and women.

THE *Gauntlet* had been careened for cleaning in an inlet of the Carolina sea Islands when Governor Rodgers arrived at the Isle of Providence with the king's pardon for all buccaneers surrendering in person before the date set as the limit of grace. Swayne, not arriving, had been proscribed but, following the example of Captain Charles Vane, he made no attempt to surrender.

Vane was now delivered over to the law at Jamaica by the men who took him from the island in the Bay of Honduras where he had been wrecked. There were cruisers out rounding up notorious commanders, and Swayne deemed it prudent, lest he be over-hauled, killed, captured or sunk, to bury his treasure for the benefit of his wife and children. Much of it had been taken under privateering rules, most of it from the Spaniards, and he considered it lawful and hard-earned proceeds. Hoyle, a Carolina man like Swayne, and married to the captain's cousin, followed his example.

A boat's crew of four had rowed them ashore to one of the islands lying between Savannah and Charleston, and between Port Royal and Saint Helena Sound. The chest was carried ashore and set down while Swayne selected a place for the men to dig. Before they had finished, according to the measure he had given them, he and Hoyle, who had stepped away, reappeared and told them that they need dig no more, that the chest was already disposed of. Certain other precautions were taken and the boat returned with the crew somewhat chagrined, dimly perceiving that they had been cleverly prevented from ever divulging the place where the loot was buried. It was a shrewd move and Raxon, for one, appreciated it. It was as effective as if Swayne had followed the procedure of other commanders and killed the diggers on the spot lest they talk too much.

"Cap'en," said Skinner, trying to make his hoarse voice pleasant, to cajole his villainous features into a look of sympathy. "You're goin' fast. We've shook off the bloody corvette an' give 'em a taste of hell when Tremaine, here, fixes the case-boxes. So, Skipper, we've saved the ship."

Swayne looked at him with eyes that fixed themselves on the quartermaster's face questioningly. Raxon jabbed the questioner in the ribs.

"Out with it," he prompted. "He'll not last long. Out with it. Fair means or foul. 'Tis a fortune."

"For all hands," backed up Tremaine.

Raxon darted him a look of scorn.

"For three of us, anyway," he corrected. "Let me at him, Skinner."

Skinner gave way, acknowledging the better brain.

"Skipper," said Raxon, his weasel face close down, "you're bound for heaven or hell. In the first place they say there's gold an' jewels like sand and pebbles of the sea. You can't take yours with ye to either one. Left behind in the sand, 'tis only a mockery of what we all fought for. Look you, tell us where 'tis hid, give us a fair share of it for our trouble, and we'll see the rest conveyed to your wife."

Pleased with his own craft, his face half in shadow, Raxon winked at his comrades, who grinned back.

"We'll swear to that, Skipper, on anything ye like. Hoyle's gone but we'll do the like with him." Swayne's eyes held a light in them that made Raxon's voice grow suddenly hard. It was an uncertain light, like the leaping flame of a candle that is guttering down, but it showed mockery and decision for all its fitfulness.

"You can lie to your mates with your glib tongue, Raxon," he said faintly, "but you can't lie to me. Think you I swallow your cant?"

"You wrong us, Skipper. Believe me, 'twill go better with you if you tell us."

"Only fools threaten dying men. The loot will not be lost. The corvette will report the fight and my mortal wound. When that news gets out, Raxon, you fox, I have friends who know its location and will unearth it for those to whom it belongs."

"They'll never get it," said Raxon fiercely. Then, as Swayne smiled at him, he broke into sudden fury. "Give me your dirk, Skinner," he cried. "Tremaine, draw off his boots an' set the lamp to his feet. I'll give you a foretaste of hell, Swayne, if you don't tell."

"So brave? And jumping to my word when I was whole. You dogs! Think you I would trust you? I'm going, Raxon, where you and these two scoundrels cannot follow—as yet. It is in my mind that you will not be long in coming. I'll see to 't—I'll see to 't——" he wheezed, the red froth bubbling about the slit in his chest—"that ye are well received." And he grinned at them out of a face almost as white as his teeth.

"We know the island," muttered Raxon. "We'll dig it over foot by foot but what we'll find it."

“‘Twill be a pleasant task. So, you’re willing to work for it? I’ll give you a cue to follow, lads, as my last words.”

The syllables grew fainter, farther and farther apart. It might be that Swayne spoke against time to avoid torture, knowing how close he was to the end. His eyes still mocked them; his teeth gleamed, for he seemed unable to part them and his words hissed.

“Here’s a lead for you, my bullies—and, on the word of a dying man, ‘tis a good one—go, find your island, if Skinner there doesn’t cast you ashore, then *ask the secret of the screaming skull!*”

He started to laugh; the mirth grew hideous as it changed into a rattle, then a gurgle, as blood broke through his relaxed jaw.

The three looked at each other with eyes that rolled back to the corpse.

“There was a skull,” said Skinner slowly. “The nigger said so—and he said it screamed. Give me that brandy. A murrain on him!”

They drank deeply but hurriedly and they left the cabin. As the ship tossed, the shadows were flung wildly by the gimballed lamp. They flickered on the still features of the dead man, and Raxon, turning as they went out of the cuddy, could have sworn that Swayne, from the far side of the grave, was laughing at them, silently and mockingly.

SKINNER was voted captain, taking up his quarters in the great stern cabin, wearing boots and velvets, gold lace and a hat with a red plume in it as visible signs of his advancement. There were few of the rough crew who considered the matter of navigation or doubted that Skinner could take them anywhere. He himself believed that he would have slight difficulty in reaching the coast of the Carolinas and entering on the sea islands. As to finding the island of the treasure, he convinced himself that that was equally easy.

Gibbs, the negro who had been in the boat that took the chest ashore, was not dead. Another black had been mistaken for him in the confusion after the fight. Gibbs was wounded badly and was astounded at the care he received until the three considered him able to get out of his fo’c’sle bunk and come aft for a talk, filled with gratitude.

He was not overly bright, which suited their purpose, since they planned—or rather Raxon planned, and was clever enough to let Skinner think he advanced much of the scheme—to keep the loot for themselves.

To that end Skinner used his influence to get

Raxon appointed quartermaster. Tremaine remained gunner with his semi-official rating and his extra share. All of the crew had entry right to the cabin, but it was necessary for the three plotters to meet often and these ranks made their conferences seem a part of the barkentine’s routine.

To the crafty scrivener’s clerk his quarter-mastership seemed a rare joke. He was supposed to look after the interest of the crew he was determined upon keeping out of all knowledge and share of the rich booty. There was one weak spot. Some of them might remember the treasure, especially when the barkentine again entered the sea island estuaries.

But Skinner had not thought of it, or Tremaine; it had been Raxon’s wits that took him to the cabin in time to try to get some clue from the dying skipper. For that, he knew that Tremaine and Skinner both respected him, though Skinner’s recognition was underlaid with a temper that Raxon handled carefully. Skinner wanted to be the master and Raxon wanted the precious metals, the gems and jewelry that had gone aboard in the chest. So he pandered to the new skipper, flattered him, moulded him like putty.

The condition of the barkentine gave them excuse for putting in somewhere to refit, and to lay low until the cruisers left those waters. Rum was served freely and the men went to bed drunk and arose “half seas over,” swearing that the cruise was the right sort and Skinner a proper commander. Thus Raxon calculated to keep any of them from thinking.

He suggested that, since the *Gauntlet* had entered the maze of sea islands by Saint Helena Sound, it would be a good plan for them to go in this time by Port Royal, lest some memory be joggled and, with it the question of the loot brought up. To this Skinner assented. The liquor he swigged kept his confidence in his own powers well cocked, though he remembered the general similarity of the islands, with occasional broad reaches, with rivers flowing into them at one end and tortuous passages amongst them. There was a rude chart aboard, and they could impress a native Indian pilot and work their way to the island of the skull.

For there was a skull, fastened high to a dead pine, and Gibbs told in the cabin one night how it was placed there.

“Cap’en an’ Hoyle go asho’ first,” he said. “Tell us to bring erlong dat ches’. Mighty heavy

dat ches'. We couldn' tote it wiv our hands so we put rope about it an' sling two pole. Den we hoist it to shoulder. We row boat in I'll crick an' bye-by we come to bayou. Big 'gator in dat bayou. Time we go out, gittin' dahk, an' dose bull 'gator dey beller like thundeh.

"Big ridge on dat islan'. Pine on ridge. Liveoak an' moss all erlong dat bayou. Magnolia tree. Cactus an' spike-plant plenty. Plenty brush. Plenty deer erlong dat way. An' snake. White-mouf wateh-snake. Ef he bite you, you finish. Wil' pig erlong dat place. Rabbit an' pa'tridge. Win' blow low an' sad throo dem tree. Hants erlong dat place."

Tremaine started to curse at the negro's tediousness, but Raxon checked him with a look and passed more rum to Gibbs. He wanted to get all the negro knew.

"Pow'ful hahd time totin' dat trunk. Cap'en he lead to top of hill. Look oveh otheh islan, an' den one mo' island out to sea. Den we neahly fall oveh something in bresh. Golly! Dat bad voodoo conjuh fo' dose t'ree men erlong wid me. Dead man in de bresh. Ant take all flesh, long time. Davis an' Poole in front. Dey step in rib, mighty nigh trip dem. Payson back wid me. He stumble too. I see white bone. No touch me.

"Cap'en look an' laugh. He pick up dat skull. He hand to Hoyle. I tell him it mighty bad voodoo. I tell him every one touch dose bone die mighty soon. Why fo' I know? Becuse my mudder conjuh-woman. I see li'l snake glide out erlong dat skull befo' cap'en take it up. Dat spirit of dat man.

"Cap'en tuhn oveh dat skull plenty time an' say something to Hoyle erbout makin' dat hant watch oveh dat chest. 'Nail it to tree,' he say. Den I know they gwine to die. I mighty scared niggeh myse'lf. But I not tech any dat bone. Mighty careful how I walk."

Tremaine was listening now with dropped jaw. The negro told his tale so well with intonation and gesture that they could see the thing happening under their eyes and Raxon alone was untouched with superstition. Gibbs's skin had grayed with the renewed terror of the affair; his eyes projected from their sockets and rolled with flashing whites under the cuddy lamp.

"Ev'ry one tech dose bones die, 'cept me," he said solemnly. "An' me—I come mighty close."

Even Raxon got a touch of something weird and looked toward the stern window, fancying a cold draught had crossed and slightly lifted the hair on his scalp. He shoved the goblet at Gibbs and

told him to go on. The negro drained it and his skin regained its glossy plum-blackness.

"We git top of dat ridge," he said. "Mighty glad to set down dat ches! Cap'en he tell us where to dig. We bring mattock an' pick erlong, stuck in ropes. Ax too. Cap'en he take axe an' cut sapling—so long. Tell us to dig dat deep. Den he an' Hoyle go off in woods fo' li'l while."

"Did he take a shovel?" Tremaine leaned forward, shooting out the question eagerly, screwing up his eyes at the others.

"No, suh. Dey take ax erlong. Take fowling piece. Dey 'low to shoot pa'tridge. Take skull. We dig, easy at first through sand. Den come rock. Mighty ha'd work, but we know cap'en he 'sist on dat hole bein' deep erlong dat sapling he cut. We sweat; sun staht to go down. All of us in hole so deep no one can see out. Throw up rocks. Bimeby wateh come in fas' but now de sapling reach to bottom an' we climb out

"Den cap'en shoot, two time. Bimeby shoot two mo'. Bull 'gator beller back in bayou. Bird fly. Buzzut fly erlong. Dat voodoo bird. Den I heah something go *tap-tap*—loud, like woodpeckeh on holler tree. I look up an' I see cap'en climb way up dead pine, nail white t'ing to tree. Sun low an' shine red. Shine on dat t'ing. By golly, dat de skull!

"Win' staht to blow. 'Gator beller. Buzzut wheel. Cap'en he come down. Come back wid Hoyle. We 'speck he tell us go git ches' an' put in hole, an' I mighty glad to git troo, git off dat islan'. But he only laugh an' say, 'Nem'mine, boys. Job's all oveh. We fix ches'.' Golly, we dig fo' not'ing at all."

The three exchanged glances.

"How far away was the hole from where you put down the chest," Raxon asked.

"I dunno. Mebbe ten rod, mebbe twenty. Mighty hahd to jedge in all dat bresh."

"You think you can find the place?"

Gibbs did not know, but his life hung on the answer. The same thought was in all their minds; it needed but a look between them to leap and kill the man and silence his tongue for ever, to toss him through the stern window into the wake—once they had pumped him dry.

"I don' want to go on dat place agen," he said.

"Could you find it?"

"I reckon so."

They relaxed. Now they would swear him to secrecy, make him a steward, keep him aft, watch him day and night until they got him ashore—

drunk, if needs be. They would sober him up at the point of pistol and dirk and force him to bring them to where they would see the skull—or, if the winds had blown it down, at least point out the tree.

“Win’ blow hahd when we tuh’n back,” Gibbs continued. “Howl an’ cry. An’ den I hear terrible scream. I look back. *It come from dat skull!*”

“Two buzzut circle low oveh dat tree. An’ I say, ‘Laig, save de body,’ an’ I run, wid de cap’en laughin’ behin’ me. ‘Gator beller, snake rustle troo de bresh, but I come to de boat. Bimeby dey all come. We go back to ship. What happen? Hoyle die. Cap’en die. Payson, Poole, Davis, all die. How come, suppose dat not voodoo?”

“The voodoo’s worked out now, Gibbs,” said Raxon. “Have some more rum. Captain Skinner’s goin’ to make you steward. You’ll sleep in the cuddy. You’ll have it soft, Gibbs, with good things to eat an’ drink. But, understand, don’t you tell that yarn any more. No sense in getting the crew scared. You keep your tongue quiet an’ we’ll see you get paid for it.”

Gibbs showed his ivory teeth in a broad grin.

“Cap’en,” he said. “I’m mighty ‘bliged. Yes, suh. An’ I keep quiet as a winteh terrapin. Me, I don’t like talk ‘bout dat t’ing.”

They sent him forward for his dunnage and Raxon talked fast.

“The skull’s a guide of some sort. They took no mattock. They must have found some sort of cave to hide the chest. We’ll find it. We’ve got to find it!”

He saw Skinner’s green eyes watching him covertly and he read them, though he affected not to, translating Skinner’s thoughts by his own.

“He thinks what’s big for three will be bigger for one, he told himself. He’s right. I’ll make trouble between him and Tremaine. Let one kill the other. Kill each other, if I’ve luck.”

“What made the skull scream?” asked Tremaine.

“It didn’t. It was a bird—owl likely. The nigger was scared stiff.”

“Swayne said it screamed. He expected it to scream.”

“Maybe he thinks he’ll haunt it. It’ll take more than a talking skull to keep me from that loot. Eh, Skinner?”

Skinner grunted and knocked the neck off a fresh bottle of brandy.

more than drifting over a sea that showed hardly a ripple, rising and falling in deep heaves of round swell, the wind, in cats’ paws, ruffling the surface and sending the brigantine ahead with little more than steerageway. Her bottom was fouled with long tropical cruising; only the most imperative repairs had been made since the fight. Her water supply was low and foul, and she was in sore need of refitting, careening and the sailmaker’s art.

It was fact that none of the crew had drawn a sober breath for days, and this afternoon they were roaring, singing drunk, the intoxication doubled by the Carolina heat that made the pitch show in little beads along the deck planking.

They were all agreeable to entrance into Broad River, where Skinner promised them carousal with plenty of fish and fruit and game while they repaired ship. But Skinner’s low brow was creased with care, and Raxon’s weasel features looked pinched and anxious.

The same corvette that they had fought had sighted them that morning and had chased them all that day. Luck had been with them in the favor of the variable winds or the corvette, always the faster and the cleaner-bottomed of the two, would surely have overhauled them, at least have got within range of her superior cannon and pounded them to surrender. Thrice they reopened distance that had been gained and sailed on with a slant of favoring breeze while the corvette hung with slack canvas, gripped by the Gulf Current that set them to the north and leeward of what wind did blow.

To the men, drinking mock healths to the King’s ship, yelling bawdy songs, the *Gauntlet* had outsailed the other, showed a fair pair of heels. Now, with the corvette hull down, her canvas, hung wide and high for every puff of the fickle wind, gleaming like a fragment of pearl against the misty horizon, they considered the chase fairly over and jeered at the enemy.

“They’ll see us in through their glass,” said Skinner moodily. “They’ll either follow us or they’ll cruise on and off outside between here and Saint Helena Sound like a cat before two mouseholes, knowing we’ve got to come out of one or the other.”

“Why?” asked Tremaine. “Couldn’t we make our way inland, once we’ve got the loot?”

“Yemassee Injuns revolted three years back,” said Skinner. “They got beaten but they ain’t forgotten it. Then there’s the Cherokees. It’s all salt marsh for God knows how many miles back. Swamps on swamps. The ‘skeeters ‘ud kill us if the

THE *Gauntlet* arrived off the low land of Port Royal Sound in the afternoon, doing little

Injuns didn't."

"Or the fevers," put in Raxon. "Carolina ague's worse than the rack. Look you, this ship's consort is like to be at Charles' Town. She may send word. Leave one outside while the other follows us in. Or one come one way, t'other another. 'Tis what I'd do. The odds are too strong to risk against such treasure, to my mind. But—" his gaze traveled craftily from Skinner to Tremaine and back again—"if those drunken fools are of a mind to fight, let's give them their belly's full. Fight they must, for that cruiser is rather bull-dog than cat, to my mind. They'll never quit and, by that token, we must be about the last buccaneer of the old fleet. The game's dead and now is the time to quit.

"What think you of this plan? If yon cruiser does not follow us in too closely——"

"She'll not do that," said Skinner. "We'll creep in on the last of the flood, if this wind holds. They'll have the ebb to stem, and the tides run fast and strong. Let us get in and I'll warrant us being let alone till morning."

"Good."

"We've had luck, so far." Skinner went on. "It may hold. The glass is uncertain. This is the hurricane season. 'Twould not surprise me to see it blow before morning, and we'll find a good lee anchorage in case of it. But your plan, Raxon; what of it?"

"'Twas suggested by a word of yours, Captain," said Raxon with a sly wink at Tremaine, whereby he established with the latter the fact that he flattered Skinner for policy and for peace. "There is a pinnace hangs above the stern window on its davits. A small boat, but large enough for four, together with provisions, and yet leaving room for—let us say—a chest. It has seemed to me not altogether fair that we should glean the booty and leave the crew no share—though they have indeed had and spent their share of it and what we take is but for our pains and trouble to see that the wives and children of Swayne and Hoyle are not left to penury.

"Yet, I say, I have a tender conscience, like the both of you. It irks me to feel that each is not left well treated at the last and I think we have agreed that this is like to be the last of the Brethren of the Coast for a while.

"So, why not let us provision this boat? Let us leave with the crew our blessing and the ship for their own uses and devices while we go see the loot. For this a small boat will serve as well,

perhaps better. Gibbs can row when the wind is not favorable. And, since these foolish fellows might not appreciate the fairness with which we mean to treat them, it might be as well to depart sometimes in the night, this or the next or when it seems most suitable. Or we might go ashore to seek for fresh water and not be able to find our way back. The point is, we make the crew a gift of the good ship *Gauntlet* and all she holds."

"Sink me!" cried Tremaine, clapping his great hand on his thigh with a report like a pistol. "Sink me, Raxon, if you ain't a fox!"

"Nay, give credit where credit is due. I but work out the details from the ideas that the captain, here, sets in my brain."

Skinner chuckled in high good humor. It struck his fancy to leave the crew to wait the inevitable attack by the King's men, holding the empty sack. That was a rare joke and, since he had been given the credit of it, he laughed the more. The touch about the wives and children also amused him.

"We'll see how all works out," he said. "Here is the chart with the sea islands lying close as eggs in a basket, yet with waterways between that are fairly navigable. We'll work up inside close to Saint Helena Sound, yet carefully, lest the corvette's consort meet us there. Then we'll take boat at midnight. I would give much to see their faces next morning when they find us gone. As for finding us, had they the spirit, as soon discover a pin in a haystack."

"Where'll we go," asked Tremaine, practically, "after we get the loot?"

"Make up the coast for Charles' Town itself. There will be none to positively identify us with the *Gauntlet*. We need show no more of value than will pay our way, or, should there come necessity, 'tis said the governor doth greatly admire the palm of his hand when 'tis gilded. He gets nothing from the cruisers and he has seen more than one buccaneer. Or we can go on to the settlement at Georgetown, or further still, by inland waters, to Albemarle on the Chowan River, where men from Virginia have established themselves. We can trade the small boat for a larger to some logwood trader, perchance, either by purchase—or otherwise."

AS THE day waned the breeze grew more and more fitful and at last failed altogether. Now the corvette had the advantage of a breeze further out and came bowling along until her hull lifted.

Skinner ordered the boats out for towing so that they might cross the bar and get fairly into the river before the tide turned. The men refused.

He argued with them for a few minutes, pointing out the necessity of taking advantage of the turn of the tide against their pursuers, of the probability that, if they did not take out their boats, the seaward breeze would bring the corvette close enough to send shot plumping aboard.

"It's fight or pull, you dogs!" he told them at last. "Take your choice. You can sit and handle oars, but I'm damned if there's one of ye sober enough, to stand upright or see straight, let alone fight. Row, and to-night we'll rest easy, to-morrow we'll feast. Stay here and the most of ye'll be stewing in hell by midnight—and I'll be the first to send some of ye there to tell the devil the rest are coming.

"Cross me, will you?" he suddenly shouted in a fury. "Into those boats, you scum! Into them and pull yourselves sober."

In an instant he was down among them, his sword, once Swayne's, pricking and fleshing them, with Tremaine at his back swinging a cutlass and Raxon looking down from the rail of the poop. One man protested and Skinner shot him through the mouth.

"I'll brook no mutiny," he thundered. "You make me skipper and I'll make ye skip. Look at the corvette coming up hand over hand, you mongrel fools."

The breeze still with her, the cruiser was coming up fast. As they gazed they saw a small ball of white detach itself from her gleaming side and the boom of a gun came faintly over the water.

"That's not for us," said Skinner. "'Tis a signal to her consort. Now, you swabs, will you row and go clear, or stay and be bilboed and hung?"

The boats were outswung, manned and soon the *Gauntlet* began to move slowly but surely toward the shore. Another gun sounded from the cruiser. It was not likely that they were wasting ammunition on the chase at such a distance. The consort would inevitably heave in sight before long. Doubtless they could see her already from the corvette's masthead.

"We'll beat 'em yet," said Skinner. He snuffed the air, looked high and low, scanned the horizon and then went into the cuddy for a look at his glass.

"There'll be no hurricane to-night," he told Raxon and Tremaine. "But we'll make the bar half

an hour before the turn. And then our dogs can tow us up the river and out of sight. To hell with the corvette and her consort, too. We'll spend that money yet, fling it to the lasses an' put a jewel on their fingers for a kiss. Eh, lads? We'll ruffle it yet with the best in New York City or belike in London Town itself. We'll pass for rich merchants and choose us each some wealthy wench to wed when we are tired of light-o'-loves!"

Raxon turned to hide the sneer he could not control at the idea of Skinner posing as a merchant, or wooing a rich man's daughter. He had his own ambitions and on their horizon neither Tremaine nor Skinner showed.

The three had the deck to themselves with all the crew still slaving at the sweeps. Skinner put Gibbs at the wheel and the three took the chance to fully provision the stern pinnace, too small for use in towing. Now it was ready for their use at any time, the stowage covered with canvas long before the sweating and sobered men came aboard. The river had curved; the entrance was out of sight, the corvette lost in purple haze as the sun went down.

Still the wind proved freaky. With twilight, a breeze began to blow from the southwest, the prevailing wind of that latitude, coming down the valleys of the rivers that emptied into the isleted estuary. Skinner sought to take advantage of it and follow up the wide and seemingly deep channel. They could see banks of reeds backed by palmettos. Back of them, chinquapin oak, live oak draped with long streamers of moss and thicket plantations of pines. All was on low ground, much of it tidal.

Through the evening sky moved lines of cranes, great flocks of belated ducks coming in from the night. They saw buzzards wheeling and once, when the barkentine tacked, in the momentary silence before she came about, they heard the Carolina nightingale, the mocking bird, that knows no special hours of song. Fish leaped all about them; porpoises and dolphins rolled and the great rays leaped to fall with a resounding crash. Shut in from the sea, here seemed an inter-island paradise—save for the mosquitoes, hovering in clouds.

It was partly the mosquitoes, partly the terrific force of the ebb, increasing momentarily in power and violence as they advanced that proved their undoing. Skinner sought to find anchorage where the breeze would be the strongest and blow the pests from the ship. They passed two islands between which the tide came eddying and swirling

to join the main stream.

There was a leadsman in the chains but the men had started drinking again with their supper when they came abroad from towing, and doubtless the man was incapable. The thing came about suddenly enough yet gently, as the *Gauntlet*, clutched by the tide, nosed on a bar of soft but clinging mud and sand, glided on until suddenly she came up with sails shivering, held fast.

Skinner swore volubly but, beneath his cursing, made up his mind that this was the night for their desertion of the barkentine and the crew. On the falling tide they could not hope to get the *Gauntlet* off, nor was there much chance of getting off by kedging and warping, even on the top of the flood, so deep had she keeled into the stuff that would hold her faster yet before the tide changed. But he did not announce this. After his first outburst, mainly directed at the man with the lead, he made light of the situation.

"It's only soft bottom. No damage. This is a good place to stay till she floods again. Right in the breeze."

He got two fiddles going, had rum brought up and before two hours the deck was a pandemonium that might almost have been heard outside at sea.

If the corvette had sent in boats then the barkentine would have been an easy conquest. To the tunes of the fiddles men howled ribald ditties and danced clumsily, locked with each other like bears broken into a distillery. Raxon watched all from the poop rail, Tremaine beside him, while Skinner mingled at first with the men, edging them on to the intoxication that would presently turn to maudlin daze and then oblivion.

The eyes of the ex-scrivener's clerk glittered, his nostrils dilated. He seemed almost to quiver with repressed activity, like the weasel he was. His brain was busy with many things. Tremaine, big, stolid, leaned his great forearms on the broad rail. Gibbs hovered in the background, waiting orders to bring fresh mugs of wine for the quarterdeck gentry. Tremaine swigged down some rare Xeres as indifferently as if it had been small beer. Raxon drank more appreciatively, more sparingly. He liked the warmth of the wine, the flavor, the effect that charged his courage. But he wanted to keep his head clear.

"Have you had any words with Skinner?" he asked Tremaine.

"Me? None. What of it?"

"Nothing. Tremaine—" he hesitated a moment—"mark you, you are my friend and with

them I play fair to the last drop, the last coin. I may be wrong but Skinner seems to grudge you your share in this loot. He seems to fear that you will give us away by your behaviour after we get clear. Nothing outright, mind you, but little doubts that are close to slurs and put, so I think, to sound me as to whether I agree with him. Skinner will bear watching, Tremaine."

"Stap me, but if I catch him in treachery I'll wring his neck. I'll tear the windpipe out of him and make him chew on't," growled the giant.

"Go easy, man. I'm not sure. If I am, at any time, I'll tell you. Meantime you and I are with each other. We'll pledge to that. Gibbs!"

His face hidden in his cup Raxon grinned, knowing he had sown the swiftly developing seeds of unrest and mistrust in Tremaine's simple mind.

TWO hours after midnight they were away. The crew lay about the decks in stupor as Raxon and Skinner came up to the poop and lowered the pinnace without a splash. Then, from the stern window, all four swarmed down the ropes and cast off. Gibbs took the sculls and, pulling athwart the current, rowed them up a creek, though he protested against landing there.

"Too dahk fo' to see," he said, "but plenty 'gator lie on dem bank. Swish you wid tail an' you go into wateh—dat end of you. Bimeby, flood come, dey all go into hole undeh wateh. Bettah wait till flood come erlong, wait till sun come up."

"It's a good idea—curse the mosquitoes!" said Raxon. "Think you. the corvette will be in on the flood, Skinner? If so we might lay low and watch what happens." He chuckled in the darkness as if he were looking forward to witnessing a play.

Skinner could match that mood and did so. Tremaine said nothing. Whatever he might have thought concerning the treachery of their desertion was overbalanced by the glitter of gold and jewels that was ever before his eyes.

They all smoked constantly to protect themselves from insect bites, swigging occasionally at the liquor they had brought along, dozing off until the negro wakened them. Dawn was in the sky; Vs of ducks were aflight with the strings of cranes and herons. The tide was high up in the reeds and still rising fast.

Gibbs's eyes showed bursting; his ears seemed to be pricked forward.

"I hear plenty rowing," he said in an awed whisper.

They all listened. Plain to their accustomed

hearing came the *click-clack* of oars in the pins, sounding across the water, far off. They knew it did not come from the *Gauntlet*, did not threaten themselves. Down along the reeds to the exit of the creek they hauled with their hands. Before they quite reached it the sound had ceased but they saw a little flotilla of four cutters, oars shipped now and lugs set to the light wind. Swiftly the cutters came on the incoming tide, making for the barkentine where the buccaneers snored on in drunken sleep. They could see the level sunlight catch and twinkle on weapons, on accoutrements of the officers.

"There'll be rare fun soon," said Skinner. "We're well out of it."

But there was little spectacular about the thing that happened, save for its ending. The cutters were close to the *Gauntlet* before some buccaneer with a splitting head and swollen tongue sought the water tub and sighted them, striving to arouse his stupefied comrades in time for a futile resistance. Hardly a shot was fired. From the creek mouth they could see the flash of blades and hear a few shouts promptly followed by hurrahs that were undoubtedly the cheers of British seamen. It was all over in a few minutes. Then the corvette appeared, following up her boats on the lifting tide, a signal weft flying. A cutter stroked back to her, received orders and returned.

The pirates were bundled overside into the sterns of the boats, huddled under the pistols of their conquerors, bound for judgment and the penalty of their acts as proscribed men. Had the *Gauntlet* been surrendered at Providence, any irregularities would have been winked at and, though probably any present loot would have been appropriated, past offences would have been assumed to have been committed under privateering custom against the King's enemies. Letters of marque were readily enough obtained from venal commissioners and the surrendering buccaneers were given the benefit of a doubt as to their sincerity in adhering strictly to the articles of their commissions.

But these poor wretches were bound for Execution Point, there to swing as examples of those who had defied the King's leniency. Skinner jeered at them and Raxon grinned silently, his tongue showing between his teeth. Tremaine, gold-blinded, looked on without comment. Only Gibbs muttered something in commiseration of his late comrades till Skinner turned fiercely on him.

"Quiet, you black dog! But for us you'd be with them."

"They got 'em asleep," said Raxon. "They've never missed us. They'd not ask for us by rank, knowing they killed Swayne. It may never come out till the trial that we got away. Look, they've set the ship afire!"

"Too much trouble to get her off for a prize," said Skinner with a shrug, as smoke curled up from both hatches and swiftly increased. "That's the end of her. Let's be getting back into cover."

Raxon began to laugh, silently.

"It is rare," he said when his fit was over. "Yon corvette's captain goes bragging that he has killed Swayne. The news goes to Swayne's relatives—if he told the truth in that matter—and they will presently come down to find the treasure—and find it gone."

"Art so sure of finding it?" asked Tremaine.

"Aye," answered Skinner with a snarl. "If we dig the island over."

They did not dare show themselves in the open for fear their absence might be marked, the question of the loot brought up. For two days they did not dare to light a fire and, at the end of that time, they were lost in the labyrinth of the islands where blind channels led into marshes and baffled them fifty times. Reeds grew high above them in the passages and the rough chart was worse than useless. They saw no Indian pirogues nor sign of natives.

On the third day, their best edibles gone, they caught fish and found oysters, not daring to fire a shot at the game they saw. This time they landed and waded to high land to find wood and broil their catch. The mosquitoes plagued them by day and tormented them by night, despite smudges. The bites festered; fevers came on them with chills that held them gripped with ague and left them weak as children.

Gibbs climbed a tree and announced that he saw the main channel and no signs of the cruiser. So they worked their tedious way to open water and crossed it, veering north and seaward, bearing in mind the negro's description of the two islands he had seen between him and the sea from the island of the screaming skull. Now they began to calculate how soon the dead captain's relatives might come with explicit directions.

They were prepared to fight, to murder for the loot; but suppose they arrived too late? They had been ten days in the maze of marshes and islands that were separated and made true islands only at high tide. In the channels, masked by reeds and palmettos, the currents raced, as often against them

as in the direction they wished to go, wasting their time. They grew morose in speculation of it. No longer were they three joined in one enterprise. Skinner seldom talked to them and Raxon ever stirred the poison he had brewed in the mind of Tremaine, with Skinner's attitude to color his suggestion.

The big man glowered at Skinner, becoming obsessed with the idea that the other was plotting how to obtain the loot for himself, though Skinner's main worry was that they had lost too much time. Once he set the blame on Raxon for suggesting the small-boat cruise, but Raxon, fairly sure by now of Tremaine's support, snarled back and reminded him that he, as captain, was responsible for the *Gauntlet* having run aground.

Gibbs watched the three white men with rolling eyes, his blubber lips seldom opened in speech. He was the slave of them all, rowing hour after hour while they lolled in the stern sheets, catching their provender, cooking it, and dreading more and more, as they worked up to where they thought the island lay, that the voodoo of the dead man and the skull would surely be worked upon him for coming back into its province.

TWO more days passed, spent in coasting islands and looking through Gibbs's eyes for familiar signs, searching the trees for one that bore a white object. Their cocksureness faded; they accused Gibbs of misleading them, of deliberately passing signs he knew, threatening him, shaking with malaria, burning with fever, their bones aching with the back breaking *dengue*.

It was Raxon who, at dawn one morning, shook the rest—save Gibbs—and pointed out, across a wide stretch of golden water, an island with a ridge running lengthwise. The ridge was set with pines and on one of these, near the center, something caught the early light and flared like a ball of fire, then faded to white as the sun rose and the light slid down from the tree-tops.

They gazed at it with jaws agape and straining eyes. It was the island of the skull!

"Say nothing to the nigger till we get him ashore," whispered Raxon. "He'll not notice it if we set our course right. If he knew it he might balk."

"Let him," said Skinner. "Let him try to thwart us."

But they took Raxon's advice, distracting Gibbs's attention till they had started when he, with his back to the bows of the pinnace, could see

nothing. Yet he sensed something. As they neared the shores and looked for a landing, he suddenly stopped rowing.

"Go on," ordered Skinner, but the negro's face seemed to have fallen in, the broad nostrils seemed pinched, the cheeks hollowed, and the flesh was gray and beaded with sweat.

"It de place," he muttered. "Voodoo brought us here."

"Is that the creek you rowed up with Swayne and Hoyle?" demanded Skinner. Gibbs nodded mutely. "Then go up it."

"No, suh. If I go ashore dat place I die fo' suah. No, suh! I don' go."

Skinner whipped out the pistol he had primed and kept beside him on the stern seat.

"You'll die now, if you don't go on," he said grimly. "Row."

"Buccra," pleaded Gibbs, while the tide set them down, past the creek entrance. "Voodoo on dat place. You all die suppose you go. I not go."

His oars trailed. Skinner raised the pistol. The flint lifted. "Take up those oars, you dog!"

Gibbs looked pleadingly at Raxon and Tremaine, but got no sign of pity. The same thing was in the mind of all of them. They had sighted the skull. They could find the excavation that had never been filled in. He could do little more for them. They had never meant him to share the loot and become a danger to them. He was doomed.

Suddenly the negro sprang up and leaped overside, swimming out into the channel. Skinner sighted deliberately and fired. The bullet struck Gibbs at the base of the skull and he sank instantly.

"Let the 'gators eat him," said Skinner. "Tremaine, will you row."

The giant pulled vigorously and they passed in, landing at what seemed a convenient place. Through cactus and agave, through thickets of palmetto and thorny briars, they fought their panting way each intent, in that mad race, on reaching the ridge and finding the pine, heedless of the others. Once they passed a pool where alligators floated like great logs and, skirting it, Skinner narrowly missed being bitten by a water moccasin. He slashed off its head with the cutlass he carried as a brush cutter.

The fever caught Tremaine and he pulled up, shaking and spent. The others did not heed him until they heard his exultant shout. He had found the hole dug by the four men who had died. It was half full of water.

Now they hunted under the hot sun like dogs

on a rich scent, thrashing through the brush, seeking caves in a likely looking ledge of sandstone. Noon came and exhausted, torn, bloody, grimed and soaking wet with their own hot sweat, their tongues hanging out of swollen lips, they still pursued the quest, crawling into smothering holes, prodding others with boughs.

There was no sound from the skull that now and then attracted their glance. Once Skinner shook his fist at it, swearing the thing was set there to mock them. They had brought nothing to eat or drink from the boat and none would go back for it, slaking thirst in a hole dug beside a pool too foul for them to risk without some filtration. By mid-afternoon they were done and they flung themselves down exhausted.

The sun began to sink and a wind rose, moaning through the pines. Alligators began to bellow in the lagoons, mudhens called weirdly and once again the long flights of cranes commenced, with the ducks coming in for the night feeding. The buzzards they had seen all day, whenever they happened to look skyward, were still circling, soaring on extended pinions, effortless, afloat rather than flying, watching for carrion.

Tremaine was close to Raxon, who was sick with disappointment and fatigue, sick with the fever, despondent, realizing that they were practically castaways in these fever-ridden, mosquito infested swamps.

"The nigger was right," said Tremaine huskily. "This place has a conjure, or a curse, or both, upon it. We're fooled. Skinner made hint to me, if we should find the loot, that there would be more for two than for three. But I checked him and he saw I was not with him. You were right, Raxon, he is a scoundrel."

"Aye—did he not want me to join with him against you? Now he turns to you to help him against me. If either one of us fell for his plans he would murder the survivor in his sleep. 'All for one and that one, Skinner,' is his motto. Much good it will do him. There's nothing to divide."

"It must be hereabouts," said Tremaine doggedly, "but we can't find it after dark and 'twill be that in an hour. Better get back to the boat. I'm famished and my throat aches for a swig of liquor. Come on."

They both spoke to Skinner who grunted and slowly followed them down. Tremaine led, traversing the ridge to avoid much of the worst of the thorny, prickly undergrowth and to strike down some gully to the creek.

THE twilight purpled, the sun swimming in a mist that turned it to a scarlet disc, then to a crimson, lighting luridly bank after bank of clouds that reached half-way to the zenith. The wind soughed mournfully, coming from the southwest with sudden piping gusts. The air seemed cold.

Tremaine turned into a sandy draw and abruptly halted with an exclamation. Fairly in their path was a chest, metal bound, substantial, big enough to hold the ransom of three kings. With hoarse shouts they all raced toward it, trying the lid, flinging back the hasp before they noticed there was no padlock.

The chest was empty—empty as a broken gourd!

A gust of wind came whistling down the draw, driving grains of sand before it. Suddenly a high-pitched scream sounded, exultant, mocking, devilish. Instinctively they looked around and up. Plainly from the head of the gully where they stood they could see the dead pine. The skull seemed to gaze in their direction, the sunset dying it blood-red from dome to gaping jaws, the eye sockets purple.

Again the scream came and Tremaine wheeled and started to bolt down the draw, plunging through the soft sand like a startled bullock. Skinner stood with his face turned up, snarling half in defiance, half in fear, while Raxon's little eyes glittered in his weasel face like those of a trapped animal.

With that fearful cry the buzzards seemed to wheel lower, the sky to darken. Slowly Tremaine came back as the screams ceased, half ashamed of his panic. The wind was still blustery and all about them the palmettos thrashed as the three stared at the empty chest, the end of their hopes.

"'Tis Swayne's folks! They've beaten us to it," croaked Skinner. "And you to blame or 't, Raxon!"

"You lie!" It needed but small spark to set the tinder of their tempers aglow.

Skinner caught up his cutlass and leaped at Raxon, the blade gleaming red in the rays that streamed into the mouth of the gully, his shadow springing grotesque in front of him. Raxon drew his pistol from his belt and fired it pointblank, but the priming was poor, dampened, perhaps by the sweat that had poured out of him all day. There was only a fizz and a flash in the pan. With a squeak of terror he flung the useless weapon at Skinner, turned and ran, dodging behind Tremaine.

Raxon was no fighter.

Furious, frenzied with disappointment, Skinner cursed at Tremaine for being in his way, and cut at him as he seemed disposed to shield Raxon. The blow sank deep in the giant's defending forearm and the hot blood spurted. With a roar of rage, the gunner caught the cutlass blade, regardless of its edge against his palms, and wrested it away. Then his bleeding hands clutched at Skinner's throat, choking him.

Skinner's own hands sought to tear away the frightful grip that shut off blood and breath. He wheezed as his eyes seemed popping out, his body writhing while he strove to reach Tremaine with kicks that the other did not feel. The strangling appeared for the moment to deprive Skinner of reason; he fought without thought of weapons, striving only to loose the vise about his neck.

Raxon stood apart, watching the struggle. There was barren gain for him now in what he had meant to bring about, but he exulted in Skinner's plight. Tremaine's strength could be used to good advantage in getting away from the place.

Suddenly Skinner fell, limp to all seeming, and Tremaine fell over him to his knees, shaking him as a bulldog might shake its victim. Blood was pouring out of Skinner's mouth and nose; his face was almost black. Yet he had one blow left in him, a last convulsive attempt to best the other. Tremaine's grip may have slackened in the fall. Skinner's groping hands found the hilt of Tremaine's two-edged dirk that slid easily from its sheath. Deep into Tremaine's belly Skinner thrust the keen steel. The gunner toppled forward, fairly on top of his victim. His grasp on Skinner's throat relaxed as the blood gushed from him, but those steel-strong fingers had done their work. The last of Skinner's strength went in that stab.

Raxon watched Tremaine writhing on top of the other until he stretched out, shuddered and lay still. He had retrieved and reprimed his pistol and now he carefully sent a bullet crashing through Skinner's forehead.

His face was that of a balked devil as he turned to go down to the boat, leaving the two behind him on the blood-soaked sand. The last of the sun had left the gully. It was swiftly dark. All about him the palmettos rustled and clashed as the wind whooped. Out of the darkness the two buzzards had dropped and lit at the head of the draw.

Raxon struggled on as best he could toward the creek, sure that Tremaine had chosen wisely

when he picked the gully and that he had only to follow it down to find the water and then the boat. He looked forward to a great draught of brandy. He was in bad shape and felt the fever coming on as he staggered and stumbled through the brush, tripping, held back by thorns, stumbling into bayoneted agaves.

On the brink of the creek, now at low tide, something rustled and struck at him through the soft leather of his Spanish boots. He felt the blow and then the fangs and, though he saw nothing, he visioned a stumpy serpent gliding away. He knew what it was—a moccasin—perhaps the very snake that had slipped out of the skull.

Swiftly the virus ran through his tired body. He felt sick and weak and sat down on a log. Instantly it moved and, with frightful swiftness, flailed with an armored tail that smote Raxon from his feet, his legs broken. Then the bull alligator clamped his jaws upon his prey and waddled toward the creek, dragging the clawing thing that gibbered until first mud, then water, filled its mouth.

High up on the ridge, as the ripples spread out, the palmettos clashed together, the wind whooped, and, high above it, a scream came from the top of the pine where the skull dimly showed. It startled the gluttonous buzzards for a moment; then they went on tearing, gobbling in the dark.

A WEEK later a turtling sloop from Georgetown came to the island and the brother of Swayne's widow, with a cousin and the younger brother of Hoyle landed. They did not go near the gully, where the buzzards had gathered and glutted themselves on rare food, but passed the excavation and, without looking for the chest, went on to the tree of the skull. There was a fair breeze in the pinetops. The three men rolled up the sleeves of their shirts, two took up axes, while the third glanced aloft.

"I thought you said it screamed when the wind blew?" he asked Swayne's brother-in-law.

"It does, but the wind has to be from the southwest and this has quartered from the usual. Moreover it has to be almost a gale to make the device work. It's simple enough. Swayne wrote that he had borrowed it from the Indians of the Isthmus, who use it on the tree-graves of their chiefs. The skull sets in a fork and they made the whistle of a tube, a funnel and a tongue of thin metal, to rest in the crotch below it.

"Swayne wrote he never meant to bury the

chest in the hole he made them dig, lest they blab about it, but he did not think of the tree until he had climbed it with the skull he meant to set there as both guide and warning. You have to mount half-way before you note the opening that tells you it is hollow. They could not see him from the hole where they were busy digging and he had Hoyle send up the contents with rope and a sack he made of his shirt. Swayne hauling and pouring the stuff into the hollow of the tree. Well, let's get at it. It should be but a light task."

The keen blades bit into the dead wood fast

and, presently, the pine toppled and fell crashing to the ground, hollow for half its length. The stump was a heaped casket of objects that gleamed and shone and sent off dancing rays of colored light. From the trunk there rolled other precious things, while more remained within. Gold and jewels winked more brightly as the dust settled.

Through it one of the three saw the skull bound from the ground and, after its leap, go rolling down into a nearby gully. Then he started to help gathering up the loot.