



OUTSIDE the rude shack the blizzard raged with a fury known only to the desolate lands of the Canadian Northwest. At times it seemed as if the storm would lift the hut from its foundation. The two men shivered and drew themselves up closer to the red-hot stove.

They sat for a while without speaking, one—the elder—calmly smoking and the other restlessly fingering the paper he held in his hands.

“How long did you say the provisions would hold out?” he blurted at length.

“Say twenty days—twenty-five at the most,” drawled the other. “But that ’ud mean mighty short rations—a cracker or two a day—that’s all.”

The other read the rude scrawl on the paper he held in his hands.

Strangers, make yourself at home. They ain’t much grub but you are welcome to what there is. I’ll be back with more inside a couple of months.

PETE.

“He’s been gone about three weeks?”

“Yep.”

“Can’t we possibly make the settlement?”

“It’s a fortnight’s hard packing at the best of times. But now—” the elder man shrugged his shoulders— “it’s impossible.”

“And Pete won’t be back for another five Weeks.”

“That’s how I reckon it,” assented the other.

“— it! We would have been safe at the post by now if you hadn’t insisted on coming round by Pete’s.”

“I calculated it would be sort of easier going for you this way. I didn’t figure on Pete being away, sonny,” said the other gently.

“Well, now you have got to figure on us being dead a month by the time he gets back. Yes, dead of starvation! Do you hear me?”

His voice rose to a breaking pitch and, pushing back his chair, he rose to his feet and walked restlessly about the room.

On the table lay a pack of greasy cards. They arrested his attention and he halted beside them. Picking them up he began to shuffle them absent-mindedly.

“There’s no need for us both to

die," he said suddenly.

The other looked up.

"No?"

"No. There's enough food for one, isn't there?"

"As I figure it, there is."

"Then let's cut the cards. The high man stays with all the food; the other goes out. Are you game?"

"I was about to suggest something like that myself."

"Well, come on then," said the other impatiently.

"What shall it be? Best out o' three?"

"No. Why prolong the agony? One cut and ace counts low."

The elder man rose from his chair and walked to the table.

"The two of spades," he said as he cut the cards. "I reckon I go. I'd like to get real warm first; though," and he walked back to the stove.

"Wait. See what I get. Ace counts low you know."

With shaking hands he cut the cards; then, as if by accident, allowed them to drop from his hands.

"Yes, you go!" he cried excitedly. "It was the king of hearts. It's up to you, old-timer. I'm sorry—"

He seemed overanxious to have the other depart.

The elder man rose to his feet.

"Good-by, sonny, and good luck. I hope Pete's on time. As for me, I was always unlucky at cards."

He walked slowly toward the door but paused at the sound of the other's voice.

"Have you any tobacco, old-timer? I— You won't need any and I—"

He stopped in confusion.

"No, I won't need it," and taking a bag of tobacco and a package of cigaret papers from his pocket, he threw them on

the table.

"Good-by."

"Good-by."

The door opened and a wild flurry of snow entered as if threatening to turn the hut into a place of desolation.

The door closed and for a while all was still.

Then came a report like a revolver shot or perhaps the snapping off of a tree-limb. And again all was still save for the waning of the storm.

The man who was left rolled a cigaret, clumsily, for the middle finger of his right hand was missing.

He picked up the card he had dropped from his cut. It was the ace of spades.

With a bitter smile on his face he lit his cigaret and waited for the return of Pete—and life.

THE heat was overpowering. It seemed as if the heat of the long tropical day was concentrated in the tiny thatched hut. Winged, evil-smelling insects flew around the flickering candle; red, hairy spiders ran up and down the wall and in the grass roof a stealthy rustle betokened the presence of a snake.

The monotonous drone of myriads of mosquitoes filled the air, while ever and anon could be heard a deeper note—the beating of the war-drums. Mingled with the sonorous note of the drums were the lustful shouts of bloodthirsty natives.

The two white men looked at each other appraisingly.

"Well, what do you think, Simpson? Do they mean business?"

"—, yes, man! The Barotse nigger doesn't play the war-drum for fun. They are out for blood—yours and mine—and they'll get it. I haven't been trading up here all these years to know nothing about the wily nigger. They let you through

today to add to the fun.”

“But what have they against us?”

“That’s a — foolish question! Nothing. There doesn’t have to be any reason why the Barotse goes on the war-path.”

“Well, we can hold ’em off. They haven’t got guns; that’s one consolation.”

“No, but they have got spears and know how to use ’em. And how long, Jones, do you think it ’ud be before they set the place on fire? Not long. Then it would be a case of burn like rats in a trap or run out to get stuck like a pig.”

“You’re a cheerful sort of cuss.”

“There’s nothing particularly cheerful about it, is there? In another couple of hours, more or less, the sun will be up. Then they’ll rush us. They like to do their work in the daylight.”

“Well, can’t we make a bolt for it?”

“How far do you think we’d get before they got on our trail? Make up your mind that they’re guarding us pretty closely, as you’d soon find out if you ventured far from the hut.”

“But no one’s been near here since I arrived.”

“That’s no odds. You can bet your life that not all of the niggers are down at the big *indaba*. Some are doing sentry-go round this neighborhood.

“Little darlings, aren’t they?” he added ironically as the chanting sounded louder. “It’s a pity you don’t speak the lingo. They’re singing about the tender way they’re going to treat us later on.”

A horse neighed outside the hut.

“What’s to hinder us getting away on my horse?” asked Jones. “They haven’t touched him yet. Let’s double up—it’s a bare chance.”

“A pretty slim one, I’ll say. Here you weigh nearly two hundred pounds and I go a little over. Your nag ’ud founder

before he started.”

The other thought for a moment.

“Well, Simpson,” he said at length, “you take my horse and try to get away. There’s no sense in both of us being killed.”

“That’s true enough, but it’s your horse. Go to it— I won’t.”

“But—”

“No, I won’t. That’s final!”

Again they were silent and again Jones was the first to speak.

“Look, Simpson,” he said angrily. “I haven’t got the nerve to sit here and wait for those black devils to come up here and stick me, especially when I know that one of us could get safely away. On the other hand, I’m hanged if I’m going to ride off coolly and leave you to face the music alone. Have you any cards?”

Simpson produced a pack of greasy cards.

“I often play solitaire when I’m lonely. Want to play?”

Jones shook his head impatiently.

“No. Look here, we’ll draw cards—ace counts high—to see who’ll take a chance on my nag. High goes; low stays. You draw first.”

“All right,” grunted Simpson. “But you might as well go now. I’m always unlucky at cards.”

“Go on, draw, man. You’re wasting time.”

“Ten of diamonds,” said Simpson, showing his card.

Jones drew a card, looked at it and, crumpling it up in disgust, threw it on the floor.

“The eight of spades,” he said. “Good-by Simpson, and good luck.”

“Good-by, Jones. Don’t let ’em take you alive. Keep a shot for yourself. —, but I hate to leave you like this!”

“Oh, get out! Don’t waste any more time. So-long.”

“S’long.”

The door of the hut opened and the shouts of the warriors sounded piercingly on the night air. The heavy reek of jungle sweat stung Jones’ nostrils.

The door closed and all was still save for the threatening roar of the war-drums.

Then Jones, the man who was left,

rolled a cigaret clumsily, for the middle finger of his right hand was missing.

He picked up the card he had thrown on the ground and straightened it. It was the ace of spades.

Then, with a calm smile on his face, he lighted his cigaret at the flickering candle and waited composedly for dawn—and death.