

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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F E A R

By David R. Solomon

THERE were only five words. They neither affirmed nor denied what had gone before. But they changed the whole trend of the argument.

The men of the engineering gang were lying around the camp-fire, preparatory to going out on the job. It was cool in the shade of the thick trees, with the damp feel of early morning hanging over everything. Farther out, over the river, the sun gave promise of better weather later in the day.

Smoking, waiting for the laggards to clean up their plates, the engineering gang—according to invariable man-custom—had begun experiences, jokes, arguments. Over all hung the pungent smell of strong, fresh coffee, and much frying bacon.

Baldy Jenkins, the eighteen-year-old had started it.

"Wish I had a million dollars," he remarked.

Red Flannel Mike gave the ball a roll.

"You do not," he denied stontly. "Be givin' you a million—and the Lord himself only knows what you'd be a-doing wid it."

"Hell I don't," said Baldy. "Bet I could tell you right now how I'd spend every penny of it."

"Bet you don't," broke in smother of the gang. "Fellow never does know what he's goin' to do till it hits him, square between the eyes."

"Offer me a million," insisted Baldy Jenkins.

"Aw, not that way. Take somep'n where two men might act different. You

don't know what you'd do. I don't. No man does—no more'n that kid over there does."

His lary gesture indicated a small, khaki-trousered figure. The eyes of the rest of the gang followed.

At first glance she might have been a lad of ten or eleven years. Closer inspection, however, showed the mop of flaxen hair, bobbed off at the level of her ears, and the tender, little-girl face. She was marching around the camp like an inspector-general of an army, into this, that, everything.

"Cert she wouldn't," affirmed Red Flannel Mike. "Coulter's kid's just like you or me. She'd have to be up against it to know—an' maybe not then."

"Huh! Even that kid."

Baldy snatched up the gauntlet. They were off. Hot and royally waged the battle.

The advocates of the unexpected gained ascendancy. Louder and more extravagant grew their claims. No man could predict anything. No man knew what he would do. Put him face to face with any situation, any danger, and he would act differently from the way he thought he would.

It was then that Coulter spoke.

He did not raise his voice. If anything, it was lowered. Hitherto, he had sat, silent, listening to the battle of words, his bandaged left arm swung tightly at his side.

"I don't know about that," was all he said.

Sudden quiet fell. There came a restless stirring, then tacit agreement. These men of rougher employment—

axmen, chainmen, engineers—centered their gaze upon Coulter's bandaged left arm.

They knew what he was thinking about. They, too, had seen. They agreed with him that he could have but one possible reaction to one set of circumstances.

All of them were employees, of one branch or the other, of the Consolidated Lumber Company. Coulter was in the legal department. There had arisen a nice question as to the exact ownership of a certain tract. Rather than take chances with the heavy statutory penalties for cutting trees upon another's land, they had sent a lawyer upon the ground. His work was finished. He was ready—more than ready—to return.

City-bred, city born, Coulter had welcomed the chance to see a Southern swamp. He had read, all his life, of Dixie, the land of the magnolia and cotton, of the mockingbird and the honey-suckle. He had welcomed his mission. He had even brought his daughter, Ruth, along.

That was not at all unnatural, however. Wherever Coulter had gone for the last ten years, there, too, had gone Ruth. They had not been separated longer than a day since the gray dawn that the other Ruth had placed the tiny bundle in his arms and turned her face to the wall.

The child was all that was left of their love save memories. She was Coulter's sole interest in life.

Coming to this camp, Coulter had clad her in khaki, and turned her loose in the open. It had done her good.

The eyes of the stained figures around the camp-fire followed his gaze. They knew something of what he was thinking. They had heard him, in the midst of his pain, setting his teeth, gasp: "Get—Ruth away—where she—can't hear!"

That, from a man whom they had to restrain from killing himself to get freedom from the torture, was enough.

Coulter's ignorance of the South and of the woods had been, perhaps, to blame. He did not know. All that he could remember was that he had been

bending over the spring, his left arm resting upon the brink. He had not seen the moccasin until it was too late.

Vividly, even yet, he saw the darkish head and body, the supple, writhing, the swift dart and the flash of pain—and then agony; much agony, deep, soul-biting torture.

THERE was no doctor at the camp. There had been a delay before, stupefied, he thought to let them know he had been bit. And then—more agony; agony piled upon agony.

Not concealing their doubts as to their chances of saving his arm or him, they had slapped the rough tourniquet upon his arm, and had twisted down upon the stick until he moaned, unwillingly, in pain. Then they had dipped one of the big hunting knives into boiling water, and had cut his arm at the bite mark—gashing it across, with great, free-handed strokes, then back again at right angles; squeezing the cuts to make him lose the poisoned blood.

Then they had cauterized the wound. Sick, half faint, to Coulter it seemed that they were deliberately thinking up additional tortures. The white-hot iron that seared his flesh, tormenting the agonized ends of nerves that already had borne past the breaking point, was the final, exquisite touch of agony.

Coulter was one of those men who bear pain—even a slight pain—with difficulty. Even the sight of blood made him faint. This was horrible beyond anything he had ever dreamed. The physical racking; the feel of the steel blade cutting through his own flesh and sinew, down to the bone, made him bite his lips till they spurted blood, in the effort to keep from screaming aloud.

He had not know they were through. He thought they were preparing additional crucifixion for him.

Red Flannel Mike had slapped the gun from his hands and made him understand, somehow, that it was all over; that they were through. But they watched him the rest of the night.

That was why, as the argument rose around the morning camp-fire, Coulter was very sure that he knew what he would do under one set of circum-

stances. He knew one experience that nothing on earth could send him through again. All that, and more, was in his tone, as he spoke.

At his words there came a restless stirring around the fire. Those men of the engineering gang had seen something of his experience. They knew what he was thinking. The abrupt ending of their argument showed that they agreed with Coulter.

He saw, and understood; and, seeing, smiled bitterly. They knew only a part of it.

To every man there is his one fear. The bravest man that ever trod the earth had his one especial dread. To some, it is fire; to others, cold steel; others still, the clash of physical contact. But, probe deep enough beneath the skin of any man alive, and you find it.

Snakes were Coulter's fear.

He could not explain it. He did not know why he, a man city-bred and born, had this obsession. It had been with him since he could remember. As a child, once he had gone into a convulsion of fear over some pictures of snakes in a book.

The old women of the family nodded their heads wisely, and muttered things about a fright to his mother before his birth. Coulter did not know. All that he was certain about was that the thought, even, of the writhing, slippery, squirming bodies, made his whole being shudder with revulsion, made tingles of absolute horror go up and down his back.

Yes, the gang agreed with him. Yet they had seen only a part of what he had gone through. They had seen and appreciated only his physical suffering—and that was the least part.

Coulter's nerves were in ragged shreds. He started and jumped at the slightest sound. His experience had intensified a thousandfold his nervous horror of reptiles.

The woods, the swamp, were full of them. He ran upon them constantly. All the time he was longing for his hour of liberation, when he could return to the city and to freedom.

The unexpected flutter of a thrush,

as he walked through the woods, would send his heart into his throat and his pulse to pounding in fear. Night after night he woke, chained hand and foot with dread that a snake had crawled up, in the dark, beside him. All the stories he had ever read of their crawling up into camps and getting into the bedding, came to him, lingered with him, tortured him. He was no more asleep before he would awake, bathed in a cold sweat, afraid to move, afraid to lie still.

All that, subconsciously, was in his words, in his manner, in his whole expression, as he said:

"I don't know about that."

THERE came the silence of conviction. Even Red Flannel Mike, most zealous exponent of man's lack of knowledge of himself, was silenced.

"Somebody said something about the kid." Baldy, the eighteen year old, seized his advantage. "I'll bet that even she—"

Baldy stopped abruptly. His whole frame stiffened. His eyes were riveted upon little Ruth. One by one, the rest of the gang turned to follow his gaze. Each followed his example.

Ruth's scream cut the air a moment before Baldy's gasp of horror:

"My God! The kid's got a moccasin on her!"

The child was close enough for the group to see clearly. Her head was bent back, straining away from the writhing horror. The sleek head slithered to and fro, darting, threatening, winding here and there about her. She seemed frozen with fear.

Baldy had started forward. He stopped.

"I—get me a gun!" he barked. "Get a gun! Quick!"

The reptile drew back its head. There came an interruption:

White to his lips, staggering upon his feet, Coulter came forward. His face was ghastly pale. His unwilling feet buckled under him, threatening, each moment, to give way and pitch him forward upon his face.

Slowly he edged closer. The slender head poised, watchful. Coulter's move-

ments were scarcely discernible. Suddenly his well arm shot out, seizing, snatching at that loathsome body.

There was a quick movement of the snake, far too rapid to be anticipated or avoided. The head drove forward. He felt the white hot flash of pain.

The rest was a haze of horror to him. It was rather as if he were a spectator at something concerning someone else. He did not command his body. He knew only, vaguely, what was happening.

There came the feel of a sleek body in his hands, the lash and writhing against his arms of something that fought to break away; then the grinding of his heel upon a head, and the flinging, against him, in death agony. Everything faded out, then.

HIS RETURN to consciousness was marked by a hazy lightness of memory.

In the bitten arm he could feel, mounting higher and higher, the numbness that had marked the other experience. His heart, too, seemed to be acting queerly—just as it had done before.

Red Flannel Mike's broad back was

bent from him as he mixed at something in a basin. They had carried him to his own tent.

Coulter's halster was hanging from the tent pole. The numbness crept higher in his arm. Soon would begin the cutting of his flesh, the darting flames of pain . . .

He could not go through with that again! He could not bear it. Better far to finish with the gun what Mike had stopped before.

Softly he slid the gun from the holster, and raised it for action. His finger pressed upon the trigger.

The weapon was dashed suddenly from his hand.

"What the hell!" roared Mike. "You fool, what's the matter with you?"

"Give—give me that gun!"

"You're as bad as Baldy Jenkins. Been in the woods all his life—and mistakes a coach whip for a moccasin, just because both of 'em are darkish.

"That wasn't any more moccasin than a polar bear . . . Yes, 'course he struck you. Any snake 'll do that—but it ain't always poison. Your arm ain't even go'ner be sore.

"Never mind about this gun. I'll give it back to you—later on."

