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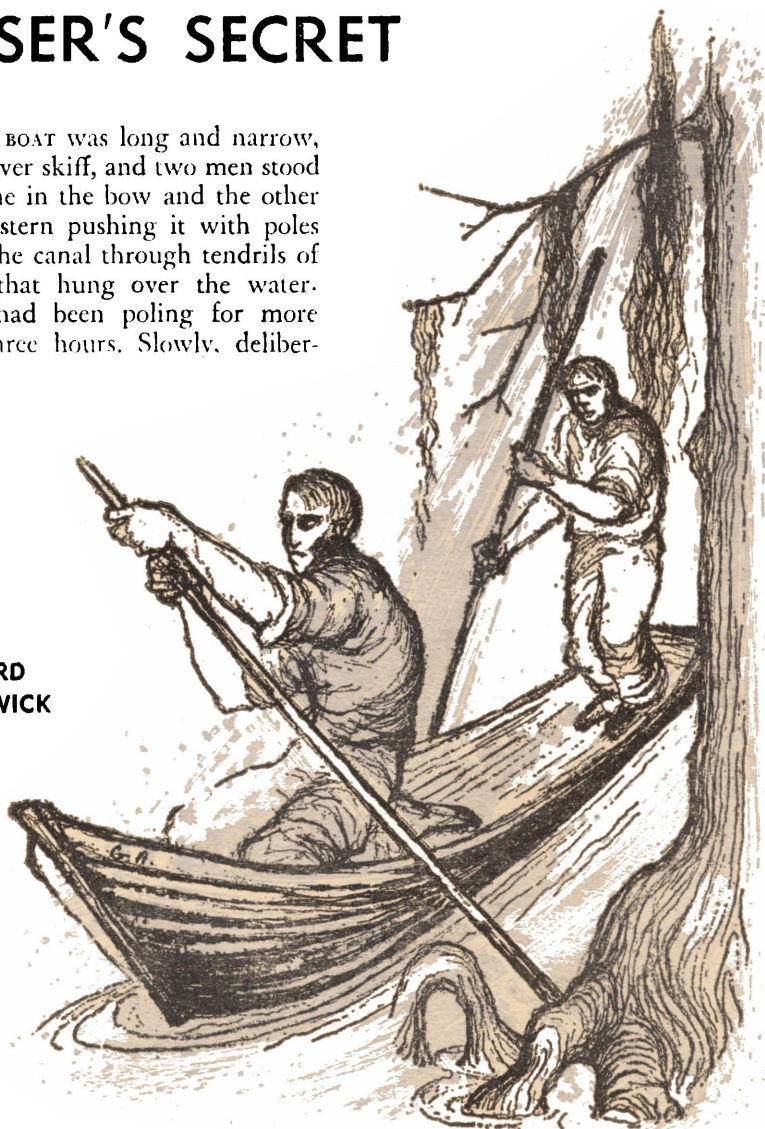
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They poled the boat silently through the starlit bayou. All that stood between them and a fortune was an old man, a rifle and a dog.

MISER'S SECRET

THE BOAT was long and narrow, a river skiff, and two men stood in it one in the bow and the other in the stern pushing it with poles along the canal through tendrils of vapor that hung over the water. They had been poling for more than three hours. Slowly, deliber-

**BY
RICHARD
HARDWICK**



ately, men with a destination and a purpose. The sky to the eastward had not yet begun to grow light and stars still shone uniformly over the vast expanse of sky seen through the branches of the cypress trees that reached out from either bank of the canal. The boat emerged from the tunnel beneath the trees, slipped silently between banks grown high and rank in rice grass descended from the days when slaves worked in the rice fields that were diked off from the river.

The man in the stern, the younger of the two, massively built, hulking, drew his pole up from the water and took a rag from his hip pocket, wiping his face and around both sides of his neck, oblivious to the clouds of mosquitoes that sucked blood wherever they could reach his flesh.

"Ike," he said. He spoke the other's name slowly, as though the rendering of thoughts into words was done only with difficulty. "Ike, are you real sure? About the—the money?"

The man in the bow sighed with exasperation. He was not so large as the first man, though he was large by ordinary standards. He was older by nine or ten years. "I'm sure, Clay. You think I worked for the old skinflint with my eyes shut?" He looked over his shoulder in the faint starlight at the man behind him. "We ain't got for-ever. Get to poling."

Clay's pole pushed powerfully down into the water and they were silent once more, with only the sound of their heavy, regular breathing and the ripple of water away from the blunt bow of the boat. They glided on for fifty yards and Ike made a turn with the boat into a smaller, more congested canal to the left.

"Ain't much further," he said quietly.

"Ike," Clay said, "how much did you say the old man's got?" He knew what Ike would say, but he wanted to hear it again.

"More money than you ever seen. That old man's got a whole damn trunk full of it. A trunk twice as big as a footlocker!"

Clay grinned broadly into the darkness, even though he did not know how big a footlocker was. He pushed his pole harder against the floor of the canal, surging the boat ahead. Then he thought for a while, a frown slowly creasing his low, sloping forehead. "How come you're so sure about that, Ike? You seen the money?"

Ike paused to wipe away the perspiration from his face. "I ain't opened the trunk and counted the old man's money, if that's what you mean, but I did get a look in his room up there once when the thing was open."

"What was he doing, Ike? Was—was he counting it?"

"Hell, how should I know! I could see the money, stacks of it,

right up to the top of the trunk. And then the old man seen me, and he grabbed up that rifle of his and I beat it down them stairs, *pronto!*" Ike chuckled under his breath. "He fired me that same day. Told me to get out of the county, just like he owned the whole damn thing!"

"A—a whole trunk full of money!" Clay said, the grin breaking out again on his face.

They poled on at the same steady pace. The skiff passed beneath a low-hanging limb and a snake dropped into the boat between the two men. Clay lifted his pole clear of the water and with a swift, almost effortless motion, smashed the reptile's head against the bottom of the boat. He resumed his work as if nothing had happened, his flickering mind still intent on Ike's description of the money. "Ike," he said, "if the old man's got a whole trunk full of money, then how—how come he lives so poor?"

"He's a miser. They're always like that, the more money they got, the poorer they live. You know what a miser is?"

"I—I ain't too positive on that."

"It's a man that let's good money go to waste by putting it away in a trunk to rot."

Clay nodded his head slowly at the other man's back. "That's what I was thinking it was, only I wasn't exactly sure."

"It's about the same thing as an idiot." Ike said, "only an idiot ain't

got the money. Not yet, anyways," he added, and grinned over his shoulder.

"I heard a fella in town say the old man was more'n two hundred years old," Clay said seriously. "And strong as four or five regular men."

Ike shook his head. "I'm beginning to wonder what made me take up with you, Clay. You're just about the dumbest man I ever run on, bar none."

"I don't like you saying that, Ike. I was just telling what I heard in town, that don't make me dumb, does it?"

"Believing things like that makes you stupid as hell. Ain't nobody two hundred years old, and if he was, he wouldn't be strong as one little girl."

Clay thought about that, accepted it. "What—what about that rifle you was telling about, Ike?"

"You think you're going to get your hands on a whole trunk full of money without you have to take a chance or two! Sure, he's got that old rifle, and he's one helluva shot with it. But I figured this thing, Clay, right from first to last, and there ain't nothing in the figuring about either one of us getting plugged. Not if you do what I told you. Now push this damn boat or we'll be tomorrow night getting there!"

So it was true about the gun. That had been worrying Clay for some time, and right now he

wished he hadn't let Ike talk him into coming out here. But Ike had kept on talking about that money and kept forgetting to say anything about the rifle, and after a while all Clay thought about was the money. Until now.

"Suppose he sees us coming up these here canals," Clay said, "don't you reckon he'll shoot at us?"

Ike stopped poling again. "You wouldn't be wanting to back out, would you? I told you to leave the thinking to me, Clay, you ain't equipped for it. A man's got to have something beside hair roots inside his head to figure a thing like this. Like I said the house sets there backed up against these old rice canals, and I know he don't figure nobody could come ten or twelve miles at night through here, not without a motor. It's the front him and that dog watch. He's got a burnt off place in front of the house about a quarter of a mile wide. On a night darker'n this he could pick off a field mouse that was just starting across!"

"I know about that dog!" Clay said, trying to recoup. He touched the long knife in his waistband. "I'll get him, Ike, don't you worry about that!"

"All I know is you better, because if you don't get him, he'll wake that old man and then you can see for yourself how good he is with the rifle!"

"I'll get him," Clay said again, swallowing heavily. He rammed

his pole down into the water, almost throwing Ike off balance with the sudden acceleration of the skiff.

They still had a ways to go, and daybreak was less than an hour away.

The old man—whose name was John McIntosh Wolfe—slept with the fitfulness of an old man. He lay on his back on a great canopied bed, the same bed in which his father and his father's father had slept, and he dreamed of the past greatness of the Wolfe family. He dreamed of times within his own memory when the rice fields had extended as far as the eye could see, and before that were the stories his father had told him.

The house was empty now, except for the old man. It was in complete darkness, the windows were all closed and locked, as were the doors, including the door that led from the old man's bedroom into the high-ceilinged upstairs hallway. As he lay there his body was in constant restless motion, an arm, a leg, his head moving from one side to the other. He snored noisily, but the veined lids of his eyes were ready to spring open at the slightest variation in the normal sounds of the night, which he could somehow hear even through the closed doors and windows. It was not an unusual night. He was not expecting anything out of the ordinary, no more than he had expected it each night

for twenty-odd years since his last son had died, since he had lived alone in the house.

Twice he awoke and sat up in the bed straight as a board, staring into the darkness with rounded eyes, cupping hand to ear to amplify some vagrant sound, or lack of it, and finding all well, he slowly lay back and soon was snoring again.

At the side of the bed, leaning propped against a table, was the rifle to which Ike had referred, an old Winchester 76. Beyond the rifle backed against the wall was the trunk, a large square trunk of a type seen half a century ago, with brass hasp and hinges and heavy brass straps and corners rivetted through the wood. The hasp was locked and the key reposed beneath John Wolfe's feather pillow.

He dreamed again, of hundreds of people working in the rice fields and the big house joyous and alive once more.

The sky grew faintly lighter to the east, noticeable by the slight dimming of the stars in that direction as compared to those directly overhead. The going was slow now. Vines hung in thick masses from the trees and the canal had deteriorated into little more than a sluggish ditch. Ike parted a thicket of wisteria and suddenly, directly ahead, was the silhouette of the house, looming, a huge rectangle of darkness against the sky.

Clay made a low sound exhaling his breath. "He—he lives there . . . ? All by himself?" he whispered in awe. Suddenly all the things he had been told were true, and more.

An impatient motion of Ike's hand quieted him. The skiff glided up to the muck shore and Ike climbed over the bow, pulling the skiff a short way after him. Clay followed with some hesitation, laying the pole in the bottom of the boat and taking the long-bladed knife in his hand. On the bank of the ditch they paused, listening for some sound of the dog or the old man. Clay lifted his eyes to the huge bulk of the house, rising high over them, cutting off the light of the stars, spreading out right and left into thick groves of black, enormous trees. No sound came other than the sounds they had heard for the past several hours—birds, frogs, the buzz and hum of mosquitoes, and the occasional bellow of a bull gator or a fish flopping heavily in the canal waters.

Ike touched Clay's arm and the two moved slowly and quietly to the house, then turned and followed the side of it to the left, around the corner, and toward the front. Clay found himself thinking of the old man and the gun. He could almost feel him somewhere behind those dark windows above, looking down and grinning a toothless grin, waiting patiently to pull the trigger. Clay shivered and gripped the knife tighter, with both

hands, as protection against the unseen menace.

Ike stopped, and Clay after him. They had reached the edge of the broad, open verandah that stretched the width of the house across the front behind tall columns. Ike raised his arm and pointed. Clay followed his finger and saw a dog, a large dog, lying asleep on the verandah, head on paws, with his nose into the light breeze that had begun to drift toward the house from the burnt area in front of it. Clay moved around Ike, hefted the knife, slowly, deliberately. His arm drew back, a grin on his face now that the enemy was tangible, visible. His arm moved in a swift arc, the knife left his fingers. It struck the sleeping dog just behind the ear and buried to the haft. Except for a slight spastic movement, the dog remained exactly as he had been, as though he were still merely asleep.

Ike nodded his satisfaction and quickly hoisted himself up and onto the verandah. Clay followed silently, retrieving the knife and wiping it on his trouser leg. He felt the old man's eyes again boring down from behind the dark glass and he moved closer to Ike as they went past the tall front windows to the door.

They stopped before the huge weathered double doors and Ike took something from his pocket and began to work at the lock. He worked for several minutes, turn-

ing his body this way and that as he labored at the lock. To Clay they were long minutes and he wondered after a while if Ike was as good at picking locks as he said he was.

"It's a real old one," Ike whispered over his shoulder, "but I'll get it."

After a minute or two more, Ike sighed and straightened up. He turned the heavy brass knob and the door moved inward an inch. He nodded his head and smiled, then pushed the door a few more inches. Clay felt the sweat rolling freely down his sides. Then the door hinges gave a small squeak and both men froze. They waited, but no sound came from inside the house. Clay could almost sense Ike relaxing, and then he felt the touch of Ike's hand on his arm and they went inside and moved to the left so that they would not be silhouetted against the slightly open door.

Ike put his mouth close to Clay's ear and whispered: "The stair's right straight across. The old man's room is the first one up there. We'll probably have to bust—"

He was interrupted by a harshly incongruous *click!* as of a gun being readied at the head of the stairs, and then the old man's voice, filled with terror and at the same time fiercely challenging.

"Who is it! Who's down there!"

Ike's fingers tightened on Clay's arm and they both pushed back against the wall, waiting for the old

man to show a light of some sort. "We got spread out!" Ike whispered urgently. "You go that way—" he shoved Clay to the right. "We'll work around to the bottom of the steps! If you get a look at him, give him the knife! Give it to him *good!*"

"I hear you talking down there!" the old man screamed. "You got no right here, breaking in an old man's house in the middle of the night! Get out, you hear me, *get out!*" He squeezed the trigger of the Winchester, there was an explosion and a flash at the head of the stairs and the slug tore through the partially open front door, showering splinters. He let another shot go to the right and one to the left, and then there was a silence with only the quick, shallow breathing of the three men.

Then the old man spoke again, calmer. "So you ain't got guns, huh? If you'd had guns you'd o' shot when you saw my flash. You best get outta here while you still got your hide. I'll count to three and if you ain't through that door and high-tailing it—"

"You ain't going to count to nothing, old man," Ike said. "We come for your trunk and we ain't going away without it!"

His answer was another shot directed at the sound of his voice. The slug smacked into the wall two feet from his head. Ike stopped talking and moved quietly toward the left of the stairs.

Hearing the old man, and knowing he was there, flesh and blood, momentarily steadied Clay, and when the old man loosed a shot at the sound of Ike's voice, Clay let the knife fly. It struck something at the top of the stairs with a solid *thunk!* And the old man cried out in pain and rage, a high, wavering, frustrated sound.

"I got him! I got him, Ike!" Clay yelled. He could almost see the trunk up there in the old man's room where Ike said it would be, almost feel the money sifting through his fingers. "I got the old guy!" he yelled again.

"Shut up, you damned idiot!" Ike hissed. But the warning came too late. The old man, guided by the sound of Clay's voice, fired. Once. Twice. The slugs seared into Clay, two white-hot tongues of flame, sucking the strength from his limbs as though a powerful vacuum had been created within his chest. He lifted his hands against the pain, tried to move his feet to carry him forward. Neither would respond. He fell heavily.

"I—Ike . . ." He pushed his hand out in the darkness, felt the bottom step. It was so close, the money, just up there at the top of the stairs. A whole trunk full of it, there for the taking with only an old man in the way. Clay tried to drag himself up the step, but a strange weariness was spreading through him barely leaving strength to draw breath.

Ike called to him. "Clay?" in short stacatto, intent on keeping his own position from the old man. "Clay!" the voice rising. There was a tense silence, then a sudden panicky flurry of footsteps. The big front door creaked on its hinges. Another shot blasted from the head of the stairs at the sound, something heavy struck the floor, rolled, and was still.

Minutes passed in black silence, and then from the landing at the top of the stairs a light sputtered, grew. The old man stood beside a table on which was an ornate kerosene lamp. His back was against the wall and the haft of Clay's knife protruded from high in the right side of his chest. His nightshirt was blood-soaked.

"Get . . . out . . ." he said in a thin voice, and began to cough. He coughed for a long time and when he finally was able to stop, he slid slowly down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. The rifle slipped from his grasp and fell to one side.

Below, Clay tried again to move, and though the pain was a torrent inside him, he pulled himself up the first step. He rested, then dragged his body up the second step, the third, fourth, each more difficult

than the one preceding. In ten minutes he made the top, and in the smoky orange lamplight, he saw the old man for the first time. He saw a determined, grimacing, incredibly wrinkled face, with piercing eyes that glittered like wet chips of anthracite.

The old man tried to reach for the rifle, but his fingers barely brushed the stock. The muscles in his neck jerked futilely.

Clay's attention turned to the open door behind the old man. That was the room. It had to be the room. The trunk was in there, and Clay's thoughts went no further than simply seeing it. Laboriously, he dragged himself across the dusty floor, forcing back the pain that pulled like a tide at his consciousness.

The old man, in a sudden desperate motion, kicked his foot out. His leg struck the table and the table rocked. The kerosene lamp tottered a moment, then crashed to the floor. Kerosene coursed across the floor, turning to flame as it flowed. Clay felt the fire creep around his legs, and through it, he could hear the dry, rustling sound of the old man's laughter, like dead leaves blowing across a walk.

