

MACLEAN'S

CANADA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

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Vol. 61 OCTOBER 1, 1948 No. 19

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Printed and Published semi-monthly at Toronto by

MACLEAN-BEVYER

Publishing Company Limited

461 University Avenue, Toronto 2, Canada

JOHN BAYNE MUIRHEAD, President and Chairman

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MACLEAN OFFICE: Maclean-Hunter Limited, 464 Life of Canada Building, 464 University Avenue, Toronto, Ont. Telephone: 913-3141 (12 lines).
 VIKING-POLAR, London.

Subscription prices: In Canada, \$2.00; all other parts of British Empire, \$2.50 per year; United States, Mexico, Central and South America and Japan, \$3.00; other countries \$3.50 per year. Single copies in Canada, 75¢; elsewhere, as second-class mail. Post Office Registration, Ottawa.

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Past drowned cypress and dark palmetto islands they felt their way.

SWAMP JUSTICE

By HUGH B. CAVE

DARKNESS had settled in the swamp, but there was still copper-gold daylight over the creek when Jess Landry poled his flat-bottomed boat up to the mud bank. He was late. Stepping ashore, he slid the craft to level ground with a swing of his arm and reached for the burlap sack in the bow. From the opposite bank a couple of frogs from the village watched him and one nodded.

"Jess, you find that twenty thousand dollars yet?"

Jess replied while tossing the sack to his shoulder.

"No. But I expect to."

"It don't seem you've made much progress."

"Three weeks ain't long," Jess retorted. "This here's a big swamp."

He strode away, annoyed by the mocking tone of their questions but chuckling at their ignorance. It would have taken only a minute more to tip the boat so it would drain, but he was already thinking of his date with Mattylee. With a girl like Mattylee Covell you had to be spry.

On his way up the path, though, Jess paused for an instant to inspect one of the other boats along the creek bank: the best-kept one, fresh-painted and giving off a kind of luminous glow in the waning light. He touched the bottom and straightened with a grunt. His scowl was set firm when he swung down the road toward home.

He hadn't far to go. A round white moon edged into sight over the pine woods to his right. He waved to it carelessly without breaking stride. "You keep shining," he said. "I got some talking to do tonight and with you there maybe Mattylee will listen better."

"You're later'n usual," his mother said when he entered the kitchen where she was ironing.

Jess hooked the wooden washtub out from under the sink with his foot and emptied his frogs into it.

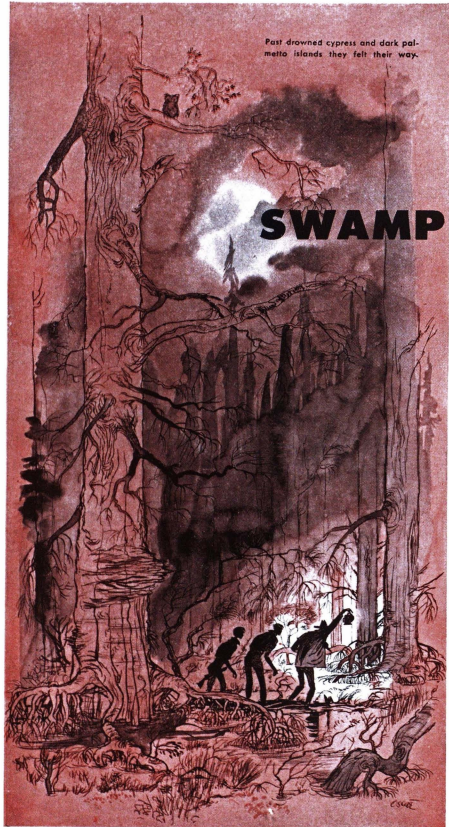
"You sure done good today," his mother said.

"I'll skin 'em in the morning." He tossed the wet bag into the sink and turned for his own room, frowning at her over the shoulder of his khaki shirt.

"Tonight's Saturday."

"You pa can clean 'em if he's sober. You done your share, catching 'em."

Jess peeled his shirt off in front of the mirror in his



bedroom and wet a towel in the basin of water on the orange crate in the corner. His big hands wrung the towel almost dry again with one quick twist and he rubbed his arms and chest and shoulders until they glowed red, except for the small pale scars of old mosquito bites.

He was big for nineteen. Filling his lungs with air, he hit his fist against his chest and laughed. What Mattylee Covell saw in Ben Pruitt, Jess never would understand, unless she was just using Ben to keep him guessing. She did that so well, enough, he supposed. The thought peeved him a little. He was scowling again as he sneaked a quick look into the other room, at his mother, before stepping into the closet.

Showing aside an old black raincoat hanging deep in the closet, Jess pried out the loose board in the wall behind it and thrust his arm into the hole. He straightened with a brown leather wallet in his fist and from habit flipped it open to make certain it still contained the half dozen one-dollar bills he had hidden away. That was a first-rate hiding place, but Pa was a snoopier. You never knew when Pa would go hunting for liquor money and discover something.

Replacing the board, Jess ran his fingers over it as if stroking a cat. "You're all right," he said. "The best place yet." He was careful to push the raincoat back before closing the closet door.

Dressed, he looked in the mirror again, easing his tie up into the buttoned collar of his pale-blue shirt and sliding a comb through his wavy black hair. His mother admired him with her eyes as she slid his chair back from the kitchen table.

"You take time to eat now," she said. "I got a lick more to do on old man Pruitt's ironing. Besides, that yellow-haired girl isn't going to run away."

"She don't think as much of me as you do, Ma." "You only imagine she don't. Why else do you suppose she made you and Ben promise to share that reward money?"

WITH his mouth full of greens, Jess looked up and met her shrewd gaze. "So's one of us wouldn't get rich a sudden and tempt her into giving too quick an answer. She said so."

"What a pretty girl says and means are different as day and night. She got you and Ben Pruitt to make that promise so's she and you would be sure of half the money even if Ben stumbled onto it. Don't you tell me!"

Jess finished bolting his supper and shoved his chair back. "I look all right, Ma?"

"You look handsome. That Mattylee don't deserve you." She took the bundle of washed and ironed clothes off the sink board and handed it to him. "Go on now. Leave this at Ben's on your way by."

Jess whistled as he went down the road. It was a fine night, the moon well up over the pines now and bright as a big-car headlight. He looked off toward the swamp, brooding black beyond the mud fields to his left, and told himself he wouldn't always be going in there, sweating out a living with gyp pole and traps and rifle.

One of these days he'd own a sport fishing boat, a big new one with golden-brown mahogany trim and a powerful engine and one of those fancy chrome fishing chairs to accommodate sports who would pay fifty dollars or more a day just to be toted around.

Ahead near the road, Ben Pruitt's place stood square against the sky, the moonlight washing up to it over the farrowed acres in bars and slanting off the house itself in a milky mist. Jess heard sounds of a shovelf ringing against rocks. He stopped and then went around the house quietly.

The back yard was almost as bright as daylight and Ben was digging there not ten feet from the house. Ben wore the sweaty shirt and patched khaki pants he wore in the swamp, when picking money for a living, and he was hard at it, the way he did any job of work. He looked up in surprise, the sweat dripping down his square-cut face.

"You sure are dolled up for your Saturday date," Ben said, opening his blue eyes wide.



ILLUSTRATED BY OSCAR

Jess ignored both the comment and the slow grin that went with it. The first was pure envy; the grin was more than likely Ben's way of trying to hide his jealousy. Jess frowned at the broken ground and said, "That's real close to the house to be sinking a well, ain't it?"

"It would be," Ben said, "if I was digging a well. Happens I'm fixing a patch of garden for Pa to grow tomatoes in. His leg's most healed and he's pining for something to keep busy at."

Jess looked up at the window of the room in which the old man had been bedridden since hurt at the sawmill eight weeks before. Eight weeks was a long spell for an ambitious man to be shut in, he supposed; and a long time for Ben, too, with the old man needing care and the house to be looked after. But Ben was used to it. His ma had had been dead years. Hard work was second nature to him.

"You came out of the swamp early today," Jess said. "Your boat was dry when I got in."

"I had this to do," Ben replied, scowling. "Besides, Mrs. Everson had to go home early and someone had to be here to look after Pa."

"There's other things I could be doing, too, beside look for that money, Ben."

"I'll make it up to you," Ben said. "Tomorrow I plan to get to it real early." He chuckled as he swung his hand-handed shovel around to resume digging. "I'll be up earlier 'n you, I bet. Go on now. Don't stand here wasting my girl's evening."

Jess bristled. "Your girl?"

"Well," Ben said, taking the bundle of laundry and setting it down on the back steps, "she's not yours. Anyway, not yet."

Jess walked on through the village and out the north road to Mattylee Covell's house. He was late and Mattylee was waiting on the stoop, sitting on an empty sugar bag so as not to get her dance dress dirty. It was an all-white dress, snug and

shiny, with little half-hitches of frothy stuff at the throat. Her shoes were white, too.

She looked a lot younger than eighteen, sitting there all in white with the moon shining on her yellow hair. "I don't know for sure wh' time it is, Jess Landry," she said, "but if you're late again, I'm real annoyed."

JESS stood and looked at her before reaching into his pocket for the present he'd brought. He could have spent the evening right there just looking at her and talking to her and trying every little while to put his arms around her. But Mattylee had other ideas. She liked music and dancing, with people around.

He held out the present. "Now you can tell how late I am."

Mattylee was pleased. Fastening the strap on her wrist, she turned her arm this way and that, studying the watch from all angles. "But my birthday ain't till next month," she said.

"Birthdays are for people like Ben Pruitt. When I give you something, it's special."

She frowned. "Jess Landry, this watch must have cost all of twenty dollars. Did you find that bank money?"

"Nope. Not yet."

"Then I don't see how you could afford—"

"I scared a big 'gator the other day," Jess said, "while trying to locate the money."

"You said a 'gator skin? Who to?"

Jess glared at her, pretending he was annoyed. "To John Britties, that runs the store in the village. Who else would I sell it to? If you don't believe me, go ask him!"

Mattylee admired her new wrist watch for a minute and then looked up at him, still solemn. "Jess," she said, "do you think you and Ben will ever get that reward?"

Continued on next page

A man doesn't waste time — not when there's a heap of money waiting to be found and a yellow-haired girl trying to make up her mind



Cautioned from preceding page
Is that money truly hid in the swamp somewhere?"

"It's there all right."
"It seems real discouraged. He says if he and you hadn't made an agreement, he'd have gone back to mauling long ago. It's a pure waste of time, he says, and he's dead-weary from having to do all his other chores at night."

"I can't see his here. On the atop he could have her to himself in the quiet evening, if she'd be content to. Her folks went to the moon pictures every Saturday night with Vinny, her young brother, and out here at the edge of the village there would be a man along to bother them. This was a whole heap better than dancing at the hall, where folks would be making him every minute to make certain he didn't get fresh."

"I know for sure that money's hid in the swamp," Jess said, edging close to her, "and I'll tell you why. He had that money when he jumped out of his machine and took off into the swamp here. He must have. And he didn't have it when he was caught poing his stolen boat out of the swamp down near Lancy Inlet the next morning. You know that?"

"But he didn't say he hid it," Mattylee insisted. "He might've lost it or thrown it away to be rid of it."
"He never said nothing. He was shot dead before he could get his mouth open. But a man smart enough to hold up a bank for twenty-two thousand dollars wouldn't throw the money away when he's got it. He hid it, all right, meaning to come back for it."

"Then, why did he come out here and Ben give up hunting for it?"
"They ain't determined enough," Jess said. "They was eager enough in the beginning, but that swamp is a mighty big lonesome place and wears a man down."

"At the dance at the road, Mattylee seemed to be lost in her thoughts until Jess wriggled up real close and began squeezing her against him. She stared then and stood up, fluffing her dress out. "We'll be late for the dance," she said.

"I can't let his breath out, not trying to hide his disappointment. "You don't go dancing Wednesday nights when Ben comes around," he complained.

"She gave me neck in the tug and made a face at him. "My folks are home Wednesday nights, Jess Landry—and besides, Ben's danced. He's content to sit and fold."

"At the dance, though, she didn't tease near as much as usual. Most of the time she was looking at him. Oh, Jess, snuggled close up in his arms with her cheek hot against the shoulder of his blue shirt. Now and then she glanced up at him, smiling with her eyes."

"Only once did she go off with someone else for any time at all and when she once ended she and the boy had danced with and hurried back to Jess. Jess was sitting on the edge of the platform, talking to old John Brittle, who was playing fiddle."

"John said, "When are you going to quit wasting time hunting for that fool money, Jess, and get me some more 'gator skins'?"

"Ben Pruitt and I mean to find that money," Jess declared.

"John wagged his head, snorting, and said the market for alligator skins had never been better, or the skins harder to come by. Then he saw the watch on Mattylee's wrist and squinted at her over his spectacles. "Like it, do you?" he asked.

"Mattylee only blushed a little. "I told Jess you would when he picked it out," John said. "He could

do better'n that, though, if he'd forget that fool reward money."

"With my half of the reward," Jess said, "I'm fixing to get married, John." He put his arm around Mattylee's waist and squeezed her. "Then you can sell me a wedding ring."

"Any time you're ready," John said. "I'm ready this minute. But this yellow-haired girl ain't quite convinced yet."

ON THE way home Jess was in high spirits. He could see Mattylee was glad to be with him and not thinking about Ben Pruitt at all. She hadn't got peeved when he'd spoken to John Brittle about getting married, either. She walked along beside him, pretty as a white sugar-cake in the moonlight, not talking but holding hands with him and sort of humming to herself, as if she felt good inside. Jess thought of Ben Pruitt and had to smile. "Did you know Ben's pa was up and around?" he said.

"Mattylee looked surprised. "Why, I'm glad, Wednesday, Ben seemed real anxious about his pa."

The moonlight shone on her hair and Jess walked on for a time in silence, admiring her. Then he said, "What does Ben aim to do with his share of that reward when we find the money?"
"Why, I don't know, Jess. Go in business for himself, I reckon."

"Flicking moss?"
"Uh-huh, I guess."

"Me," Jess said, "I'm fixing to buy a sport fishing boat, a fancy one." He squeezed her hand hard. "I guess you'd feel mighty important, being married to a man that owned a sport fishing boat."
"That sure is something to think about," Mattylee said.

JESS came out of the swamp early the next evening, meaning to go to Lancy after supper with yesterday's catch of frogs. The price was better there and he could hang around afterward, looking at the boats in Lancy Inlet.

He looked for Ben's boat when he poled into the creek, but it was not there. That didn't mean much, though, because there was a place closer to

home where Ben could leave it if he wanted to.

"At home a surprise awaited him. Pa had actually come down from Frog morning before going down to the village to do his Sunday drinking. They were in the icebox, ready to be delivered."

"Jess," his mother said, "can you stop by Ben's house on your way?"

"That for?"
"I left a shirt out of their washing. It would only take you a minute." She lifted the shirt—one of Ben's—off the back of a kitchen chair and laid it on the bed in his room.
"All right," Jess said.

"But while he was getting supper, someone else had been around, knocked the door to Ben Pruitt and Willson Covell, Mattylee's father."

"The man, dressed, looking solemn and worried, "I got bad news. I think that money's gone."

"Gone?"
"I think it's been dug up and stolen," Ben said, shaking his head. "On the way to Gator Island today I stopped at one of those little slash-pine islands in there and I found where someone had pulled a boat up and done some digging." He spoke slowly, wetting his lips with his tongue and looking hard into Jess' face. "Mr. Covell and I are going back in there now to take another look. We thought you'd want to go with us."

Jess looked from Willson Covell's long, frowning, white-whiskered face back at the man named "Stolen" he echoed. "But who done it?"

"We hope to find that out," Mr. Covell said, sliding his hand up to the deputy sheriff's badge on his shirt. "Especially me. Hunting that money for the reward was one thing, but hunting it to steal and keep is a different matter."

In the bedroom doorway Jess peeled off his pale-blue shirt, tossed it onto the bed, and knelt to unlace his shined shoes. "I was going over to Lancy this evening, but it will keep," he said. "Soon as I get my working clothes back on, I'll be with you."

The moon was still pale and low when the three of them got to the creek. The slough there was hushed and dark, the frogs along the bank falling silent when the ground began to quake under the men's feet. But when the two boats had crept down the curving creek to the swamp proper, with Ben in Mr. Covell's big boat leading the way and Jess following in his own craft, the moon climbed up over the cypress trees and spread a good light. Anyway, it whitened the water lanes, where the trees were well-spaced and the grey-bread moss dripping from their branches was not thick.

Mr. Covell had a battery lantern and sat with it in the bow of his boat to light the way while Ben stood in the stern and poled. There was no occasion for talk. The poles sucked at the mud and rose dripping above the surface. The boats slid onward into the heart of the swamp, feeling their way past the drowned cypress trees and dark palmeto islands. The water hissed and gurgled and then lay quiet again behind.

Jess held his gaze on Ben, turning his head only when some swamp sound drew his attention from his troubled thoughts. So Ben had gone in to Gator Island, had he? He was sly one, telling Mattylee he was tired of hunting the money, then turning around and doing a thing like that. Gator Island was way deep in the swamp.

An hour had passed when off to the right, on the far shore of a sea of waist high grass, a quivering scream pierced the hush. The sound spread out

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bouncing from one dead cypress to another until it thinned and died away. Ben and Mr. Covell turned their heads toward it and Mr. Covell reached behind him for his rifle.

Ben looked back at Jess, eight or ten feet astern. "I had a shot at that old panther this morning, but missed him. You keep your gun handy, Jess."

"All right, Ben."

"He's a big one. I seen him close up."

The boats glided on, Mr. Covell lighting the way and Ben poling slowly. A while later the panther screamed a second time, but farther off, and Jess saw Mr. Covell lay down his gun. Then there was no sound except the infrequent grunting of frogs.

When they were deep in the swamp, farther in than the frog hunters ever ventured or even Ben. Fruit usually went. Ben poled his boat to a small island and stepped out to rest. Mr. Covell climbed out with him and Jess joined them. You got cramped, standing or sitting in a narrow swamp boat for so long.

"Have we got much more to go?" Jess asked.

"A ways," said Ben.

Mr. Covell was holding the lantern high and looking off to his left. "Jess," he said, "I'll wager there's a gator in that hole there that you could come back after sometime." He pointed and Jess saw the mouth of an alligator cave among the cypress knees at the edge of the island.

"John Brittle tells me you sold him a whopping big gator hide a while ago and bought my Mattylee a watch out of the money," Mr. Covell said. "I admire a hard-working boy, Jess."

Jess took the lantern and crouched at the cave entrance, searching for alligator marks. There were tracks, all right, and they were fresh. All around the pool of water in the low ground were signs of other swamp animals which had come to drink—coons and otters and at least one wildcat—and the slick, wavy marks of cottontooth moccasins, some as big around as a man's arm. Jess studied them for some time.

Ben was impatient to go again when he returned. The boats slid out through the purple blossoms and bright green leaves into deep water and the bushes of the swamp swelled back deeper than ever.

THE bottom dropped away soon and Jess swapped his pole for a paddle. The cypress trees here thrust their slender branches high into the white mist of moonlight and there were bird rookeries among the islands. On one of them, as the boats silently filed past, Jess counted more than a hundred ugly-besked birds sleeping on the silvery tree limbs. But there was no sound, not even the rumbling of frogs.

Gator Island was only a little way ahead when Ben turned his boat. The lump of land he made for was small, topped with slash pines and the gnarled white skeletons of a few scrub cypresses. Ben ran his boat against a tangle of roots and clambered out with Mr. Covell and they pulled the craft up to make room for Jess. There was no other place to go ashore. Even here the low ground trembled underfoot like jelly.

Jess picked up his rifle.

"I don't suppose you'll need that here, Jess," Mr. Covell observed.

But Jess hung onto it. "If there's one thing I don't care for, Mr. Covell, it's cottontooths."

Ben led the way, holding the lantern high. There was bright moonlight still, but swollen cypress roots twisted everywhere over the soft, black earth and the lantern was an aid in showing up the pools of stagnant water barring

the way. Some of the pools were knee deep, and almost all of them, scummed over, looked like solid ground until Ben splashed through them.

Ben was impatient. In a few minutes he had got so far ahead with the lantern that he had to stop as well. He seemed annoyed at having to do that.

"Come on, will you?" he said.

Jess watched him thoughtfully. [I was not like Ben to lose patience, no like him at all, even with so much stake. With one eye on the light and the other on the soft muck underfoot Jess warily skirted a deep pool uncaught up and said, "What's eating you, Ben? If the money's been dug up, there's nothing much to be gained by hurrying, is there?"

"Well, no," Ben admitted. "I guess not. But this place makes my skin crawl."

"Put the light on that hole there so—" But Jess spoke too late. Mr. Covell, hurrying too much to get in up to his waist and all Ben could do was hurry back with the light and give him a hand out again.

Mattylee's father slapped the water out of his trousers. His whiskered scow was fierce. "Now see here, Ben, you take it slower," he said. "We don't want any accident way off in here!"

"I'm real sorry," Ben mumbled.

The place where the digging had been done was just a little farther and the decayed stump of an old slash pine where the ground began to rise. Ben set the lantern on the stump and Jess and Mr. Covell stood at the edge of the hole, looking down. In the top of a tree near by, an old barred owl squawked angrily and clicked its beak at their intrusion.

"It looks like you're right, Ben," Mr. Covell said at last. "No animal made that hole, that's certain."

Jess knelt and thrust his arm down into the soft earth, but the hole was empty. "We don't know for sure that anyone dug up the money here, Jess though," he said. "Just finding at empty hole don't prove much."

"It proves enough for me," Mr. Covell said. "That Trenchard fellow hid the money somewhere and who else would come in here?"

He might have supposed here intending to bury it and then changed his mind and hid it somewhere else. He might have dug his hole and left it empty. We can't be sure anyone else has been here."

"No," Ben said, "this hole was dug with a shovel and Trenchard didn't have an shovel." Look at those squared-off marks in the dirt. Nobody made those with his hands or the end of a pole."

The barred owl on the pine rustled itself and hooted. Jess stepped back shifting his grip on his rifle. "It sure seems odd, you ending this place way off here in the swamp, Ben."

"I told you I was going in to Gator Island. It stands to reason I stopped off at other islands on the way."

"But this here is hardly a like place, Ben—all swamp and cypress roots."

Ben's eyes darkened in the yell^d light of the lantern, but he had a answer. "I was poling along the shore looking her over, and I saw where the boat had been pulled up. A small boat, Jess, about the size of yours." "No," Jess saw here, Ben! "Don't you suggest—" "I ain't said a thing, Jess, but I had an eye on you, then reaching for the light."

"We might as well go back, I'll be in there."

Jess spoke, looking square in^d waist-face. "I think we should look pierced. There's a chance we might find out.

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prints or something to tell us who has that money."

Mr. Covell looked at Ben, too, and nodded. "That's right, Ben."

The island was high in the centre where the taller slash pines stood black in the moonlight, but low and swampy where the soft ground crept under the maze of roots and cypress trees to drown itself in the swamp. Mr. Covell carried the lantern and led the way. Behind him Ben walked slowly with bowed head, peering at the littered ground, and behind Ben, with an eye on him and the rifle held ready to meet any danger, walked Jess.

The earth trembled under their plodding boots. Off in the swamp some small animal squealed in fright and the sound was followed by a loud splash. The barred owl began squawking again.

The three men finished their exploration and turned back. At the boats Mr. Covell shrugged and said, "It looks like the best thing to do is go home."

"And say good-by to twenty thousand dollars," Ben said glumly. "Or the five thousand dollars reward, anyway. Jess, I'm sorry I dragged you out here. I hoped we'd learn something."

"We learned enough," Jess said.

"Meaning what?"

"Why . . . we know we've been wasting our time, at any rate." Jess clambered over the tangled roots and got into his boat. "And I know where there's a fine big gator waiting to be caught. I'm fixing to try for that gator on the way back. It would be a pure waste of time to go home without him."

"You be careful," Mr. Covell said. "Don't you go getting lost in here."

Jess laughed and shoved his boat clear of the island. When he looked back, they were taking their own good time about getting their bigger, slower boat into the water.

Jess poled with strong, swift strokes, churning up the miles of swamp. He didn't mean to hunt any alligator, and he was certain Ben and Mr. Covell would not stop on their way out to check up on him. They had paused there on the way in only to stretch the kinks out of cramped muscles and now would be anxious to get home. It was long past midnight, he guessed, though he had lost track of the time.

Of other things he was a good deal more certain. Little things. Taken separately they might not amount to much, but lumped together they became important. A girl's idle chatter, a mess of frogs, the time a man came out of the swamp . . . fit them all in place and they pointed straight as a compass needle.

Jess paused only a moment in the creek to pull his boat up, then made for home at a trot. At the house he moved quickly but quietly from the front door through to the back, stopping a minute in the hushed darkness of his bedroom, snatching a shovel from under the back porch on his way to the road again.

He was breathing hard when he stepped at last in the fringe of pines at the edge of Ben Pruitt's land and, with an eye on the house, stole through the moonlight to the back yard.

The part of the yard that Ben had dug up to make a tomato patch was not large. Jess walked around it and studied it, frowning to himself and glancing up now and then at the window of the upstairs bedroom where Ben's pa had lain sick so long. The window was shut against the night air, but he was careful, all the same, to make no noise loud enough to wake a man.

When he had looked the ground over, he laid his rifle down and began digging. He was on his knees when Ben and

Mr. Covell came around the side of the house and found him. Snatching his rifle, he scrambled to his feet and faced them.

"What in creation are you doing now?" Mr. Covell demanded, eyeing the hole Jess had dug.

"I'm looking for that stolen money!" Jess said. "And by heaven, I've found it!" He stooped and reached into the hole and hauled out a bundle. "Look for yourself!"

"Jess," Mr. Covell said, "you're a handy man with a boat and we had to do some lively poling to catch up with you. You're even handier with a rifle. But I'd advise you to lay that gun down."

Jess swung the rifle up and aimed at Ben Pruitt's middle. "He ain't getting away!" he said.

"There's not a speck of powder in that cartridge," Mr. Covell said, advancing on him. "I switched on you while you was looking at the 'gator cave, Jess. I'm arresting you."

Jess stood and stared wide-eyed at his rifle.

"We knowed you had that money," Mr. Covell said, passing his own gun to Ben and reaching into his pocket for handcuffs. "Trouble was, Jess, we didn't know where you had it, you being so smart at hiding things away from your pa all the time. Only thing to do was scare you into acting foolish and keep an eye on you.

"You made some careless mistakes,

Jess—like telling Mattylee there was twenty-two thousand dollars when the only figure the bank or the newspapers ever gave out was twenty. And telling you pa clean all those frogs and boast about how many you was catching. Jess, my Mattylee is real shrewd when she wants to be, and a man don't mess around with frogs when there's big money to be found. Not unless he's found it already."

"It ain't true," Jess said, backing away. "I just dug this money up!"

"Jess," Mr. Covell said, "why in thunder do you suppose Ben went ahead of us on that island, with the light, and left us to stumble after him? But you didn't blunder into any of those scummed-over holes that looked so solid, Jess. You knew just where to step." He reached for Jess' wrists.

"You can't prove a blessed thing!" Jess shouted, wild-eyed.

"It don't matter a great deal," Mr. Covell said, "so long's we got the money back and Ben collects that reward for figuring you out. But look here at your bundle, Jess."

Jess looked down.

"Ben wouldn't hardly go and tie money up in one of your fancy blue shirts, now would he?"

Jess turned to run then, but Ben was behind him with the rifle. Ben had him covered. There was just nothing left for Jess Landry to do but sit down at the edge of the hole he'd dug and start to howl. ★