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# FANTASTIC

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*Dare he seek the untamed soul which  
abode in the lair of the white otter?*

# The Albino Otter

By Elmer Brown Mason

**M**Y FRIEND, Van Dam, had set out for Miami on one of his mysterious quests, so it was there I sent the telegram, announcing that my painting of Hercules, the extraordinary model for which he furnished me, had taken the first gold medal at the National Academy of Artists. I really didn't expect the telegram to reach him; just sent it in the first burst of buoyancy as a written libation to my good fortune. However, an answer came that very same evening:

You don't say are you going to wear it for a bangle or hang it around your neck at once. Send me here by express ten pounds of round, assorted turquoise blue and light red beads about the size of a small pea and of solid build, and a pound of the purest arsenic railroads toot man felicitations.

Van Dam.

After I had censored the telegraph company's punctuation with an exclamation point after "say," and an interrogation point after "neck," and translated the apparent enthusiasm of the railroads into "*Vraiment, toutes mes félicitations,*" I took up the matter of his commissions.

I never should have been able to get the arsenic had I not happened to mention Van Dam's name in the course of a vehement denial of an intent to poison my neighbors, or at the very least myself. Then, however, the clerk was all interest, and he even directed me to a beadery where I was able to secure the exact articles described. I added of my own volition for good measure some splendidly glittering gold specimens. Despatching the parcel, I returned to the studio and, with the help of three other men, wrote Van

Dam the most insulting letter I could compose.

Among other things we asked if the beads were to be his sole costume, and suggested that he swallow the arsenic and feed himself to an innocent alligator for bait. Pretty poor humor, I admit; but I had lost a whole morning of good painting light while making his absurd purchases, and besides, something I had eaten the night before disagreed with me.

At the end of three months I was getting used to the absence of my eccentric friend, when one afternoon the telephone bell rang.

"Hello!" I said in those dulcet tones reserved exclusively for women, millionaire picture buyers, art dealers, and creditors.

"Glad you have regained your temper, artist-man," drawled Van's voice over the wire. "Come and dine with me this evening," and then I distinctly heard an aside that was plainly not meant for my ears: "Lizzie, stop tickling my neck!"

"All right," I agreed, "but you've got to have something to eat that I have at least heard of before."

Van Dam has a way of concocting mysterious dishes that are delightful until you learn of their derivation from some bird, beast, insect, or reptile, quite unknown to the most cosmopolitan menus.

"And shall I dress?" I added as an afterthought.

"Dress! What for?"

"For Lizzie," I answered with sardonic triumph.

Van Dam laughed. "No, don't bother. She won't mind. We'll have a steak, too. Lizzie likes 'em!"

Van Dam's apartments, or diggings, as



It was white as snow, with eyes of red  
fire an unearthly, beautiful thing.

he prefers to call them, occupy the entire top story of an immense building, and are really a museum of the natural-history collections he has made in every corner of the globe. There his Jap received my hat and stick as imperturbably as though I called every day, and ushered me to the curtains of the dining-room. I pulled them aside cautiously and peeked in at my host. Never have I seen a man so sunburnt! He wasn't red, or brown, or bronze. He was black, and this color was heightened by contrast with the whiteness of a small animal (little larger than a cat) on his knee, which regarded me with inscrutable, malicious eyes.

"If that darned thing is a skunk I won't come in!" I threatened. My knowledge of natural history is slight, and anyway, I distrust all Van's pets.

"Skunk nothing!" he answered indignantly; "that's Lizzie, and she's a white raccoon—the only case of albinism I ever heard of in her family," he added proudly.

"Cost you a thousand dollars!" I ventured sarcastically. Van Dam is shamefully rich, and doesn't in the least mind paying for his whims.

"I bought her for two dollars on the edge of the Everglades, and she is as gentle as a kitten."

"Like all of her sex," I commented, entering and sitting down. "Where have you been, Van, and how did you get such an awful sunburn? I can't say I've missed you, because it's the truth—and that's bad form. But I am curious to know how you combined those many bad things and the arsenic, and what resulted therefrom."

"I have been acting as Cupid in the Everglades," he answered; "but let's dine first, and then I will tell you of hate, love, mystery, gold, and great wild places that will make your city-bounded horizon seem as limited as the inside of a teacup."

**V**AN DAM'S table is remarkably wonderful. He may, and I have no doubt that he does, live on grass and raw animals during his sojourns in the wilds, but at home his cuisine would quickly make a bon vivant out of an ascetic. The steak was a kind of a glorified dish that quite belied its respectable, bourgeois name, and the things that went with it were indescribably good.

During the entire meal the white raccoon climbed impartially over us and the table, varying its acrobatics by filching choice morsels which it held in its curious, tiny, human hands and, before daintily

eating them, washed in a glass of water with all the fervor of a religious rite.

"Well," I said, when my pipe was going comfortably and my host had lit a cigarette, "begin at the beginning. What bleached animal started you this time, and what happened?"

"It was an otter," he acknowledged shamelessly. "I met a globe-trotting Englishman at the Old Club who said a Seminole Indian had told him of a white otter in the Everglades that was supposed to have magic powers and charm fish with its ruby eyes. I found out the Indian's name, Osceola, after a former great chief of the Seminoles. With only that to go by, I set out for Miami, which, as you know, is on the edge of the Everglades.

"Speaking of the Everglades, painterman, I suppose you visualize them as an enormous, fertile field, sprouting with corn, watermelons, oranges, and coconut-trees, and cut by neat Dutch canals. You probably owe this conception to someone who was trying to sell you stock in the Drainage Improvement Company Limitless, three hundred per cent profits guaranteed. Your idea is not exactly correct.

"The Everglades are an enormous inland lake, fifty miles broad and a hundred and forty long, with a limestone rim ten feet above mean tide level, and a limestone bottom through which seeps, or sometimes bubbles up, fresh water. This limestone is covered with more or less mud, nearly entirely overgrown with sawgrass, and here and there are islands. The water is fresh and pure, seldom over a few feet deep; the mud is from one to ten feet. There are few mosquitoes since the water moves continually in a northeasterly direction, and is, therefore, unsuited to the development of mosquito larvae. Hence there is no malaria.

"Millions of birds and, I regret to say, an equal number of snakes, some deer, and a few Seminole Indians—the oddest of all the animal dwellers—find a home in this strange place. The Indians live on tiny islands in the midst of the Everglades, or in the impenetrable Great Cypress Swamp to the north. Since their verbal contract with General Worth a century ago they have shown no hostility to white men, in spite of all they have suffered. Time has taught them that in their own protection they must not guide a white man into their fastnesses, though they are always willing to lead out those who get lost in this sea of grass, lured on by legends of islands fabulous in fertility,

overgrown with orange and lemon groves, and even harboring pirate gold.

"You can easily imagine that one Indian name gave me little to go on. It is true that there are less than six hundred Seminoles left; but they are seldom seen, and those I did meet could not or would not give me any information in regard to Osceola, and professed to have never heard of such a thing as a white otter. I tried in every conceivable way to get a guide, all without avail; the best I could do was to find an Indian who agreed to take me to a rookery two days' sail down the coast. Quite frankly I hoped to overcome his scruples during this trip, and by a large bribe prevail upon him to lead me into the very heart of the Everglades.

"A rookery, painter-man, is where one species or several species of birds nest together in communities. The one I sought was of both long and short whites, referring to the lesser and snowy egret, the plumes of which during breeding-time were once worth far more than their weight in gold. Now, thank Heaven, their sale is prohibited, largely due to the splendid work of Dr. A. D. Hornaday, and rookeries, no longer shot up as they were in the old days, show an actual increase in all species.

"My guide was addicted to liquor, a weakness that might have been the means of furnishing me with some information had he not confined his remarks entirely to the Seminole tongue after the fifth drink. He proved, however, a competent man.

"I chartered a small sloop with a crew of two 'conches'—so the local coasting sailors are called—and dropped down the coast. Inside a long key the guide and I embarked in a small, light boat I had brought along for the purpose, rowed to the mouth of a small creek, and commenced our real journey.

"This was not in the Everglades proper, painter-man, but a coastal swamp. The tiny creek we followed was of brackish water and quite deep, though narrow. Sea fish had penetrated far up in search of food, and the waters fairly teemed with marine life of every description. Silvery mullet actually jumped into our boat on three occasions, and we grounded on a great drumfish whose bulk all but blocked the channel.

"There were moccasins galore, and birds beyond counting. It was evidently some time since a boat had passed that way, and the quick-growing vegetation had

nearly closed our passage. Constant labor alone with ax and knife cleared our path, so it was only at evening we reached the rookery, too tired to even look for a dry place to sleep. From the boat, while the light lasted, we watched the birds returning to their nests in the cypress trees and mangrove bushes, egrets, blue and green herons, snaky-necked water turkeys. When it was too dark to see, we withdrew a short distance and ate our evening meal. One thing struck me as rather odd: The birds did not seem as tame as might have been expected after a long period of non-molestation, and were continually hopping nervously to the end of the branches, and even bursting into a snowflake flight that was like the explosion of silver bombs.

"At daybreak we were suddenly startled from sleep. The birds were all gone, and hardly had we realized that it was the report of a gun that had wakened us when our nerves were shattered by two cries of frightful agony. I yanked away the painter that tied us to a cypress tree, seized one oar, the guide the other, and we pulled toward the sound.

"Beyond the trees of the rookery a small island of scrub palmetto came into view, and lying on the edge of the water was an old Indian, a younger man bending over him and hastily tying a cord around his bared leg. As our boat slid onto the mucky land the trunk of a five-foot, diamond-back rattler, its head shot away, was thrashing among the palmetto leaves.

"The younger Indian never looked up from his task; he was now cutting deeply across two fang-marks in the elder's calf, and I noticed his own shoulder visibly swelling.

"Science, painter-man, has provided an antidote even against the supposedly deadly venom of the rattlesnake, and I labored over both men with the anti-venomous serum we owe to Calmette of the Pasteur Institute, and with hypodermic injections of strychnin, and washed the opened wounds with the wine-colored precipitate of permanganate of potash crystals. It soon became evident that the younger Indian would survive—the poison of *Crotalis* seldom proves fatal if the victim is carried through the first hour—but the older man's recovery for a time seemed very doubtful.

"I fought for his life as I have never fought before, and finally the tide turned in his favor. We were then confronted with the problem of getting the patients back to the sloop. Our own boat was too



small for more than three men, but we unearthed a rude dugout for the younger and towed it behind. It was something of a task, and once it turned over and I had to splash around in six feet of water in close proximity to a shark while rescuing the Indian boy. On the sloop we were able to make them both comfortable and hoisted sail for Miami.

**D**URING all this time I hadn't said a word to either of the Seminoles and they had been equally reticent. However, when we were well underway I extracted their story in brief form. Father and son, they had been after sharp-nosed alligators, which is the American crocodile, a sinister, slim, gray-green saurian with black blotches. They had penetrated by an inside channel to the rookery, landed on the scrub-palmetto island, and had slept there that night.

"In the morning the elder man had stepped on the snake, whose rattles had been broken off so it could give no warning, and had been struck. The younger shot off the head, tripped, fell on it, and the fangs entered his shoulder—proving for the hundredth time that a rattlesnake head will bite even when separated from the body.

"By a fortunate coincidence the son was no other than the Osceola I sought. Money, I had found, was of no avail in providing a guide for my quest, gratitude might—and it did. They said no word of thanks until we reached Miami, and then the old man spoke:

"My years are many, and it would not have mattered greatly had I died, but my son is young, and life still is sweet to him. You may ask him what you wish; he is your slave till both our debts of life are paid.'

"I know savages, painter-man, and I made no pretense of the ha-ha-it-is-nothing attitude with which so-called civilized people meet even real gratitude, but answered simply: 'I shall ask him much.'

"Osceola seemed to have entirely thrown off the effects of the snake-bite, but his father fared badly. There were signs of gangrene in the wound and his vitality was very low. I thought it best to leave him in a hospital, and he was too weak to make any serious objection. Then I had my interview with Osceola.

"I am a friend of your people,' I said, 'but they do not trust me. I wish to go into the Everglades to the place where the white otter is, and look upon it. I ask you to guide me.'

"The aboriginal savage, Mr. Painter-Man, may have had a stoical control of his features, but this Seminole Indian certainly did not. Surprise, fear, anger and even horror chased themselves across his face, all to be replaced by a look of bitter resignation.

"The white otter, *hokatee osana*, the white otter! I wish *chitkolalagochee* (the rattlesnake) had struck my heart,' he answered, 'rather than I should do this—but, alas, my father has spoken for me.'

"I have never felt anything more intense in my whole life than the hate of that tall, young, good-looking Seminole in the days that followed. It simply radiated from him. He made me feel as though I were about to commit some awful desecration, for there was plainly a mystery, the secret of which he believed I shared.

"Nevertheless he made his preparations, and even went so far as to suggest, since it was evidently a law of the Seminoles that no white man should penetrate into their fastnesses, that I stain my skin.

"One early morning found me, dyed from head to foot, paddling up the Miami River, and outlet of the Everglades. We soon turned from the open water, and when the saw-grass finally closed over our heads I doubt very much if many men would have envied me. I was going into a land, or rather into a lake, that had never been really explored, in company with a savage who plainly hated and abhorred me from the bottom of his soul.

"It was hot, hot, hot! The edges of the saw-grass cut at the slightest touch—but before me there was always the thought of the white otter!"

Van's eyes glowed fanatically. I could not help thinking that the Indian was not the only savage on that expedition. Surely there is nothing more ruthless than a scientist once he has a definite object to attain!

The white raccoon, to which I was now quite accustomed, curled up between my neck and the back of the chair. Van's low voice took up the tale.

"That day we paddled from early morning until sunset, sometimes along winding channels which were broad and flowing with clear water, but more often through the cruel, cutting saw-grass that parted in the mere shadow of a trail. Often we dragged the dugout along limestone or mud bottoms, and there was never, the long hours through, one word from my companion. At last, as the birds were flying to their roosts, and their evening chorus mingled with the insistent croak-

ing of the frogs, we landed on a small island and pulled up our boat. By a lucky shot I neatly decapitated a Florida wild turkey from a live-oak, and elicited the first sound from my mute Seminole, a guttural 'good.'

"I sha'n't easily forget that night. No sooner were the stars out, and my eyes just closing than there sounded from the shores of our islet the bull-like roar of an alligator, to be answered by another saurian in the distance. All night the limpkins yelled—how birds of their size can make such an awful sound is quite beyond me—and the frogs croaked in seventeen different keys, quite unlike any frogs I had ever heard before.

"I slept little, and toward morning, when my eyes had finally closed in the real rest sleep that every outdoors man knows, I woke suddenly to a frightful, nauseous smell. Turning on my side in the direction of the offensive odor, a luminous mass met my eyes. A huge rattler, its scales shining as though with phosphorus, was piled against the body of the Indian, a raised, triangular head, broad as my two hands, weaving nervously back and forth above its coils. At that very moment the dawn broke, Osceola moved, and the reptile whirred warningly.

"'Keep still,' I whispered sharply, and rolled sidewise from my rubber blanket. A shotgun was beneath my hands and I snatched it up, tempted the snake to strike with a stick, and blew it in two pieces just below the neck. It was fully eight feet long, and it shone with foxfire. Unlike any other member of its family I had ever seen, the stripes ran longitudinally.

"Osceola lay tense and motionless, eyes wide open, staring up into mine as I bent over him. Even when I dashed water in his face he came slowly from his trance. To my insistent demands as to whether he had been struck, he simply shook his head and went dazedly about the preparations for breakfast and departure. I noticed that his eyes followed me continually, however, as I was skinning the snake, and their look of implacable hate had been replaced by a dumb, dog-like wonder.

“THAT morning our trail led entirely through the saw-grass with no open channel. It was unbearably hot, and we both labored like galley slaves with paddle and pole. Suddenly Osceola broke into feverish talk, and, with his eyes shifting back and forth from mine to the snake

skin I had tacked inside the gunwale of the boat to dry, told me the legends of the All-Soul.

"Long, long ago, even before the time of the great chief Osceola, whose name my young Seminole bore, there was but one soul to all the Indians of the Everglades, so no one did wrong, since the punishment must fall on all. *Ollahaw* (the orange), and *shottaw* (the persimmon), were their sole food, and they dwelt in friendship with every bird, beast, and reptile. Came a great wind with darkness, rain, and thunder, and when it had passed, *holwagus* (badness) was among them.

"To one man he said: 'Why do you eat only *ollahaw* and *shottaw* when the flesh of *woodko* (the raccoon) is so much better?'

"So the man slew *woodko* and ate his flesh, and so great was the power of *holwagus* for evil that the flesh tasted good to the man, and his descendants ever after ate of *woodko*. And some *holwagus* tempted to eat the flesh of *chofee* (the rabbit), others *foakee* (the quail), others *hilolo* (the curlew), until all the Seminoles were corrupted save one alone, a maiden.

"And the All-Soul left the Seminoles, taking refuge in her as the only good left among them. The beasts, in horror, hid themselves, save *lakosee* (the bear), *ko-watgochee* (the wildcat), and *katsa* (the panther), and they grew claws and teeth for defense, or even attack.

"Then the Seminoles spoke among themselves, saying: 'Let us kill this maiden who will not eat flesh, and the All-Soul will be shared among us again and we shall be happy.' But *holwagus* heard them and gave poison fangs to *chitkolalagochee* (the rattlesnake), making him a guardian of the maiden, because he did not wish her to be killed and take the All-Soul out of the world, but to become bad like the rest of the Seminoles. Man, bird, and beast feared his fangs. All except *holwagus*.

"But the maiden hid in the bodies of animals, going from one to another, until *holwagus* gave up looking for her and went away. He warned, however, that he would come again and steal the All-Soul.

"Osceola watched me very sharply during the last part of this recital, and then, lowering his eyes before mine, complained of his shoulder. I stripped away the shirt to find it badly swollen, and, for a moment, feared that the fangs of the striped rattler might, after all, have touched him. There was no new wound, however, and I put the swelling down to auto-suggestion till my own theory so worked on my

Imagination that I peeled the snake skin from its place and hid it under my rubber blanket.

"The swelling did not increase, but the fever grew on him until, directing me to steer by a cypress that was the only landmark discernible above the sea of saw-grass, he lay down in the bottom of the dugout and promptly lapsed into delirium.

"I pushed steadily on, far from tranquil in mind. The cypress was only visible above the saw-grass when I balanced perilously on the edge of the rude craft. Suppose I should lose sight of it and Osceola should die? I should be as hopelessly lost as a compassless mariner in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

"However, the cypress began to stand out more clearly, and about two o'clock I was suddenly out of the grass. What a picture was spread before my eyes! First came a hundred yards of open water dotted with the brilliantly colored Everglade ducks and ringed by breaking fish. Then, like a green ribbon heavily embossed in silver and gold, a broad band of water-lilies in full bloom girdled an island—an island that fairly smiled with sunlight, happiness, and peace.

"A grove of lemon and orange trees, pollarded so as to rise little above the level of the saw-grass, had shaded out all undergrowth from the clean, gray soil. To the left spread an orderly vegetable garden behind which crouched a low house weather-beaten to silvery gray and surrounded by a multitude of brilliant flowers. Osceola mustered his strength for one look, rose on his elbow, murmured *po-yafit-sa* (heaven), and fell back unconscious. I paddled to the shore and pulled up the dugout as a very old Indian came from the house to meet me.

"He is very sick,' I said, pointing to Osceola; 'we must get him out of the sun immediately.'

"The meaning of the words were plainly unintelligible to the old man, but he understood my gesture. Between us we picked up the fever-stricken boy and carried him to the house, where a couch of fragrant rushes received his burning body.

"For two days, painter-man, I listened to the ravings, half in Seminole, half in English, of that savage, and pity grew and grew in my heart as I fought for his life. The old Indian was a quiet and competent assistant. I was vaguely conscious of another presence in the house, that of a woman, but I was far too busy to even glance at her.

"On the third day the fever broke,

thanks to a concoction of herbs the old man brought me which I tried in desperation, and my patient sank into a natural sleep. Wearily making sure that he needed no more attention for the present, I twisted into a blanket, shut my eyes, and immediately fell through unlimited space. While the clock went twice round I slept without waking, save when someone held a cool drink of orange juice to my lips.

"My eyes finally opened to a perfect day. The scent of orange blossoms was in the air and a mocking-bird was trilling from a magnolia outside the window. I looked anxiously over at my patient to find him awake and staring at me.

"You all right?' I asked.

"All right,' he grunted morosely.

"We'll see that white otter soon, then,' I suggested cheerfully.

"For answer he raised his voice and called, 'Ocola! Ocola!' and the old man slipped silently into the room. They spoke rapidly together in the Seminole tongue, and then Ocola disappeared to return in a few moments leading an Indian girl.

"There is Hokatee Osana, the white otter,' said Osceola, turning his face to the wall with a groan.

"In my whole life I have never looked on so proud a creature! She stood poised like a butterfly ready for instant flight, her eyes blazing at me, full of hate and fear. She was too small and her features too Seminole to be beautiful, but her hair, showing unmistakable traces of white blood in its brown waviness, was very lovely. Her greatest and most wonderful charm was a birdlike alertness, the lightness of thistle-down, a vitality quick as sunshine.

"I gazed at her, my mouth wide open, I fear, and her eyes finally tore away from mine and sought the figure on the couch. With the change that came over her face as she looked on Osceola the whole situation became suddenly clear to me. I understood the Indian youth's hate, his bitter sacrifice in guiding me to his treasure, grasped the significance of the legend, and the reason it had been told.

"Osceola,' I said sternly, 'it is not a woman with a red skin to whom I asked you to guide me; it is to an otter, a real otter, and white. You have deceived me and your father, whose life, as well as your own, belongs to me.'

"The animal otter is here,' he answered humbly; 'but it is only a shadow; its soul is in Hokatee Osana, and she is therefore the white otter.'



"'It is not a soul I seek,' I answered angrily; 'it is a skin, a white skin.'

"The old Indian broke in excitedly with a stream of words.

"Osceola translated.

"He says, 'Lord, if you take the skin of the real otter, Hokatee Osana dies. Will nothing else please you? He offers what all white men desire—for he knows you are a white man.'

"I wanted time to think. Of course I was going to have my white otter, but I have a fundamental objection to offending the religious beliefs of primitive peoples, and, besides, I know there is something in auto-suggestion—the girl *might* die!

"Show me what gifts you can offer equal to these,' I said scornfully, spilling a pound or two of beads (I received your kindly letter concerning them) on the floor. The girl gave a covetous glance at my offering—she was certainly femininely primitive—the old Indian never even glanced in their direction, but beckoned me to follow him.

“OUT in the sunshine we went through the orange-grove toward the sound of running waters, and Osceola, stopping near the signal cypress, drew back and pointed.

"What has been bred in us for centuries, painter-man, cannot be eliminated in a moment, and I was conscious of a thrill of covetousness at what was spread before my eyes. The ground was strewn with scores of small chests, some entirely rotted

away, some partially whole, and from every one cascaded a stream of gold pieces that blinked dully in the sun. Doubloons, pieces of eight, English guineas, French pistoles, strange octagonal slabs of gold from India and the Orient lay untouched beneath the cypress-tree since the day when their last buccaneer owner had abandoned them.

"I stepped closer and with my foot stirred a mass of metal to that silky rustling that weaves a spell through the rooms of Monte Carlo's gambling palace, and gradually the lust of desire left my blood.

"'What is this foolishness?' I shouted angrily, unmindful that the old Seminole could not understand; 'I don't want this trash! Show me the real white otter—hokatee osana, hokatee osana!'

"He included all the scattered chests in a sweep of his arm and then swung his hands, palms upward, to me in a gesture of offering.

"'No, no,' I refused, 'hokatee osana.'

"Again he went through the dumb ceremony of endowing me with all this strangely stored wealth, and again I shook my head and insistently reiterated my request. Suddenly his expression changed from pleading to fury, and snatching a knife from beneath his garments, he flung himself upon me. An old man, it was an easy matter to send the weapon from his hand to the ground, where it fell with the tinkle of metal against metal.

"Unsubdued, he still defied me with his eyes, and our glances locked. 'Hokatee osana,' I demanded fiercely again and

again, and at last the spirit broke within him. Slowly he turned and I followed his faltering footsteps across a carpet of gold toward the cypress whence came the sound of running water. A stream gushed from the wide-spread roots of the tree, and, as we looked, a white form slipped from beneath and came toward us. It was an otter, painter-man, an otter, white as snow, with two eyes of red fire—an unearthly, beautiful thing, wonderful— Well, look for yourself!"

Van rose, and, switching on more light, stripped away a sheet from a cabinet in the corner of the room.

In the foreground, posed on a tongue of strange gold coins mixed with sand, stood a creature so wonderfully mounted that it seemed alive.

"Van," I cried reproachfully, "you didn't kill that lovely thing! I can understand the slaughter of gorillas and toucans and—animals; but you *could not* have killed that silver spirit!"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," he confessed. "Perhaps I shouldn't have killed it, and then again it is quite possible that I should," he added honestly. "You see it is a perfect type of albinism. The matter was taken out of my hands, however. As it came toward the spot where the old Indian and I stood among the rotted chests, it paused every few steps to gaze at me curiously but entirely without fear from its ruby eyes.

"A spit of heaped gold ran down from us and as its feet touched the first coins something sinuous, deadly, fulvous so as to be nearly indistinguishable from the yellow background, lay in its path. There was a sinister buzz as of some great locust, and I sprang forward shouting. The otter turned quicker than light, but the lash of the rattler's head was a lightning flash—and the beautiful thing was dead when I picked it up."

There was a long silence. Van was gazing musingly into the cabinet.

"Are its eyes genuine rubies?" I asked him.

"Only things I could get to match the real ones," he answered.

"Did the Indian girl die?"

"No."

"What happened to you?"

"I came home."

"See here, Van," I exclaimed angrily, "it's all very well for you to escape alone from places it is impossible to escape from, but you have, in a way, taken me along, and I want to know how you did it? What

happened to you next? How did it all end?"

Van's eyes were on the white otter and he murmured absent-mindedly before answering me, "*Lutra canadensis vaga, varietas alba.*"

"Where was I?" began Van anew. "Oh, yes!

"Well, I skinned the otter and preserved the pelt with the arsenic you were so glad to send me and began to think of getting home. The situation on the island offered an easy solution for anyone with a grain of imagination. The last rattlesnake incident firmly established my disreputable divine origin, and I simply proclaimed my godhead as a reformed and satisfied *holwagus*, and carried matters off with a high hand. My first decree was that Hokatee Osana—the girl—and Osceola should marry, and I performed the ceremony myself."

"What!" I gasped in astonishment. "How did you do it?"

"Oh, Jabberwocky served my purpose perfectly. The line 'and shun the frumious bandersnatch,' particularly impressed 'em. The rest of my beads I bestowed on the bride and gave the bridegroom my shotgun. Then I asked how I was to get back to Miami.

"It was quite evident that I should have to make the trip by myself, because neither of the men would have dared to trust himself alone with me.

"After a great deal of hesitation Osceola finally confided that by keeping the great cypress in line with a tall, yellow pine barely discernible in the distance, I would strike a deep channel which led, though by twice as long a route as we had come, to the Miami River.

"Next day I found this channel, and only just in time to keep from getting hopelessly lost. They must have begun cutting down the cypress the moment I left, for I saw it fall myself from miles away. No human being save a Seminole can ever again find Poyafitsa Island. The rest of my journey was plain sailing, or rather paddling."

I always make some idiotic remark after hearing Van's latest adventure. It invariably leaves my mind in such a hopeless whirl.

"Didn't you get bitten by rattlesnakes, or frogs, or have to eat curlews or—or raccoons?" I asked.

The animal against my shoulder woke suddenly and bit me severely on the back of the neck.