POOR DOCUMENT

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CABBAGES AND KINGS.

The Star's New Series of Short Stories, by O. Henry.

"THE PHONOGRAPH AND THE GRAFT."

"What was this graft?" asked Johnny, with the impatience of the great public to whom tales are told.

"'Tis contrary to art and philosophy to give you the information," said Keogh, calmly. "The art of narrative consists in concealing from your audience everything it wants to know until after you expose your favorite opinions on topics foreign to the subject. A good story is like a bitter pill with the sugar coating inside of it. I will begin, if you please, with a horoscope located in the Cherokee Nation; and end with a moral tune on the phonograph.

"Me and Henry Horsecollar brought the first phonograph to this country. Henry was a quarter-breed, quarter-back Cherokee, educated East in the idioms of football, and West in contraband whisky, and a gentleman, the same as you and me. He was easy and romping in his ways; a man about six foot, with a kind of rubber-tire movement. Yes, he was a little man about five foot five, or five foot eleven. He was what you would call a medium tall man of average smallness. Henry had quit college once, and the Muscogee jail three times—the last-named institution on account of introducing and selling whisky in the territories. Henry Horsecollar never let any cigar stores come up and stand behind him, He didn't belong to that tribe of Indians.

"Henry and me met at Texarkana, and figured out this phonograph scheme. He had $360 which came to him out of a land allotment in the reservation. I had run down from Little Rock on account of a distressful scene I had witnessed on the street there. A man stood on a box and passed around some gold watches, screw case, stem-winders, Elgin movement, very elegant. Twenty bucks they cost you over the counter. At three dollars the crowd fought for the tickers. The man happened to find a valise full of them handy, and he passed them out like putting hot biscuits on a plate. The backs were hard to unscrew, but the crowd put its ear to the case, and they ticked mollifying and agreeable. Three of these watches were genuine tickers; the rest were only kickers. Hey? Why, empty cases with one of them horny black bugs that fly around electric lights in 'em. Them bugs kick off minutes and seconds industrious and beautiful. So, this man I was speaking of cleaned up $288; and then he went away, because he knew that when it came time to wind watches in Little Rock an etomologist would be needed, and he wasn't one.

"So, as I say, Henry had $360, and I had $288. The idea of introducing the phonograph to South America was Henry's; but I look to it freely, being fond of machinery of all kinds.

"'The Latin races,' says Henry, explaining easy in the idioms he learned at college, 'are peculiarly adapted to be victims of the phonograph. They have the artistic temperament. They yearn for music and color and gaiety. They give wampum to the hand-organ man and the four-legged chicken in the tent when they're months behind with the grocery and bread-fruit tree.'

"'Then,' says I, 'we'll export canned music to the Latins; but I'm mindful of Mr. Julius Caesar's account of 'em where he says: "Omnia Gallia in tres partes divisa est;" which is the same as to say, "We will need all of our gall in devising means to tree them parties."'

"'I hated to make a show of education; but I was disincined to be overdone in syntax by a mere Indian, a member of a race to which we owe nothing except the land on which the United States is situated.

"'We bought a fine phonograph in Texarkana—one of the best make—and half a trunkful of records. We packed up, and took the T. and P. for New Orleans. From the celebrated centre of molasses and disfranchised coon songs we took a steamer for South America.

"'We landed at Solitas, forty miles up the coast from here. 'Twas a palatable enough place to look at. The houses were clean and white; and to look at 'em stuck around among the scenery they reminded you of hard-boiled eggs served with lettuce. There was a block of skyscraper mountains in the suburbs; and they kept pretty quiet, like they had crept up there and were watching the town. And the sea was remarking 'Sh-sh-sh' on the beach; and now and then a ripe cocoanut would drop kerblip in the sand; and that was all there was doing. Yes, I judge that town was considerably on the quiet. I judge that after Gabriel quits blowing his horn, and the car starts, with Philadelphia swinging to the last strap, and Pine Gully, Arkansas, hanging onto the rear step, this town of Solitas will wake up and ask if anybody spoke.

The captain went ashore with us, and offered to conduct what he seemed to like to call the obsequies. He introduced Henry and me to the United States Consul, and a roan man, the head of the Department of Mercenary and Licentious Dispositons, the way it read upon his sign.

"'I touch here again a week from today,' says the captain.

"'By that time,' we told him, 'we'll be amassing wealth in the interior towns with our galvanized prima donna and correct imitations of Sousa's band excavating a march from a tin mine.'

"'Ye'll not,' says the captain. 'Ye'll be hypnotised. Any gentleman in the audience who kindly steps upon the stage and looks this country in the eye will be converted to the hypothesis that he's but a fly in the Elgin creamery. Ye'll be standing knee deep in the surf waiting for me, and your machine for making Hamburger steak out of the hitherto respected art of music will be playing "There's no place like home.'"

"Henry skinned a twenty off his roll, and received from the Bureau of Mercenary Dispositions a paper bearing a red seal and a dialect story, and no change.

"Then we got the consul full of red wine, and struck him for a horoscope. He was a thin, youngish kind of man, I should say past fifty, sort of French-Irish in his affections, and puffed up with disconsolation. Yes, he was a flattened kind of a man, in whom drink lay stagnant, inclined to corpulence and misery. Yes, I think he was a kind of Dutchman, being very sad and genial in his ways.

"'The marvelous invention,' he says, 'entitled the phonograph, has never invaded these shores. The people have never heard it. They would not believe it if they should. Simple-hearted children of nature, progress has never condemned them to accept the work of a can-opener as an overture, and ragtime might incite them to a bloody revolution. But you can try the experiment. The best chance you have is that the populace may not wake up when you play. There's two ways,' says the consul, 'they may take it. They may become inebriated with attention, like an Atlanta colonel listening to "March-in Truogh Georgia," or they will get excited and transpose the key of the music with an axe and yourselves into a dungeon. In the later case,' says the consul, 'I'll do my duty by cabling to the State Department, and I'll wrap the Stars and Stripes around you when you come to be shot, and threaten them with the vengeance of the greatest gold export and financial reserve nation on earth. The flag is full of bullet holes now,' says the consul, 'made in that way. Twice before,' says the consul, 'I have cabled our government for a couple of gunboats to protect American citizens. The first time the Department sent me a pair of gum boots. The other time was when a man named Pease was going to be executed here. They referred that appeal to the Secretary of Agriculture. Let us now disturb the senor behind the bar for a subsequence of the red wine.'

"Thus soliloquized the consul of Solitas to me and Henry Horsecollar.

"But, notwithstanding, we hired a room that afternoon in the Salle de los Angeles, the main street that runs along the shore, and put our trunks there. 'Twas a good-sized room, dark and cheerful, but small. 'Twas on a various street, diversified by houses and conservatory plants. The peasantry of the city passed to and fro on the fine pasturage between the sidewalks. 'Twas, for the world, like an opera chorus when the Royal Kafoozlum is about to enter.

"We were rubbing the dust off the machine and getting fixed to start business the next day, when a big, fine-looking white man in white clothes stopped at the door and looked in. We extended the invitation and he walked inside and sized us up. He was chewing a long cigar, and winking his eyes, meditative, like a girl trying to decide which dress to wear to the party.

"'New York?' he says to me finally.

"'Originally, and from time to time,' I says. 'Hasn't it rubbed off yet?'

"'It's simple,' says he, 'when you know how. It's the fit of the vest. They don't cut vests right anywhere else. Coats, maybe, but not vests.'

"The white man looks at Henry Horsecollar and hesitates.

"'Injun,' says Henry; 'tame Injun.'

"'Mellinger,' says the man — 'Homer P. Mellinger. Boys, you're confiscated. You're babes in the woods without a chaperon or referee, and it's my duty to start you going. I'll knock out the props and start you proper in the pellucid waters of this tropical mud puddle. You'll have to be christened, and if you'll come with me I'll break a bottle of wine across your bows, according to Hoyle.'

Well, for two days Homer P. Mellinger did the honors. That man cut ice in Anchuria. He was it. He was the Royal Kafoozlum. If me and Henry was babes in the woods, he was a Robin Redbreast from the topmost bough. Him and me and Henry Horsecollar locked arms and toted that phonograph around, and had wassail and diversions. Everywhere we found doors open we went inside and set the machine going, and Mellinger called upon the people to observe the artful music and his two life-long friends, the Senors Americanos. The opera chorus was agitated with esteem, and followed us from house to house. There was a different kind of drink to be had with every tune. The natives had acquirements of a pleasant think in the way of a drink that gums itself to the reconciliation. They chop off the end of a green cocoanut, and pour in on the juice of it French brandy and other adjuvants. We had them and other things.

"Mine and Henry's money was counterfeit. Everything was on Homer P. Mellinger. That man could find rolls of bills concealed in places on his person where Hermann the Wizard couldn't have conjured out a rabbit or an omelette. He could have founded universities, and made orchid collections, and then had enough left to purchase the colored vote of his country. Henry and me wondered what his graft was. One evening he told us.

"'Boys,' said he, 'I've deceived you. You think I'm a painted butterfly; but in fact I'm the hardest worked man in this country. Ten years ago I landed on its shores; and two years ago on the point of its jaw. Yet, I guess I can get the decision over this ginger cake commonwealth at the end of any round I choose. I'll confide in you because you are my countrymen and guests, even if you have assaulted my adopted shores with the worst system of noises ever set to music.

"'My job is private secretary to the president of this republic; and my duties are running it. I'm not headlined in the bills, but I'm the mustard in the salad dressing just the same. There isn't a law goes before Congress, there isn't a concession granted, there isn't an import duty levied but what H. P. Mellinger he cooks and seasons it. In the front office I fill the president's inkstand and search visiting statesmen for dirks and dynamite; but in the backroom I dictate the policy of the government. You'd never guess in the world how I got my pull. It's the only kind of its graft on earth. I'll put you wise. You remember the old topliner in the copy-book—"Honesty is the Best Policy?" That's it. I'm working honesty for a graft. I'm the only honest man in the republic. The government knows it; the people know it; the boodlers know it; the foreign investors know it. I make the government keep its faith. If a man is promised a job he gets it. If outside capital buys a concession it gets the goods. I run a monopoly of square dealings here. There's no competition. If Colonel Diogenes were to flash his lantern in this precinct he'd have my address inside of two minutes. There isn't big money in it, but it's a sure thing, and lets a man sleep at night.'

'Thus Henry P. Mellinger made oration to me and Henry Horsecollar. And, later, he divested himself of this remark.

"'Boys, I'm to hold a soiree this evening with a gang of leading citizens, and I want your assistance. You bring the musicad corn shelled asd give the affair the outside appearance of a function. There's important business on hand, but it musn't show. I can talk to you people. I've been pained for years on account of not having anybody to blow off and brag to. I get homesick sometimes, and I'd swap the entire perquisites of office for just one hour to have a stein and a caviare sandwich somewhere on Thirty-fourth street, and stand and watch the street cars go by, and smell the peanut roaster at old Giuseppe's fruit stand.'

"'Yes,' says I, 'there's a fine caviare at Billy Renfrow's cafe, corner of Thirty-fourth and—'

"'God knows it,' interrupts Mellinger, 'and if you'd told me you knew Billy Renfrow I'd have invented tons of ways of making you happy. Billy The Phonograph and the Graft 1 1-2 was my side-kicker in New York. There is a man who never knew what crooked was. Here I am working Honesty for a graft, but that man loses money on it. Carraembos! I get sick at times of this country. Everything's rotten. From the executive down to the coffee pickers, they're plotting to down each other and skin their friends. If a mule driver takes off his hat to an official, that man figures it out that he's a popular idol, and sets his pegs to stir up a revolution and upset the administration. It's one of my little chores as private to smell out these revolutions and affix the kibosh before they break out and scratch the paint off the government property. That's why I'm down here now in this mild-eyed coast town. The governor of this district and his crew are plotting to uprise. I've got every one of their names, and they're invited to listen to the phonograph tonight, compliments of H. P. M. That's the way I'll get them in a bunch, and things are on the programme to happen to them.'

"We three were sitting at table in the cantina of the Purified Saints. Mellinger poured out wine, and was looking somewhat worried; I was thinking.

"'They're a sharp crowd,' he says, kind of fretful. 'They're capitalized by a foreign syndicate after rubber, and they're loaded to the muzzle for bribing. I'm sick,' goes on Mellinger, 'of comic opera. I want to smell East River and wear suspenders again. At times I fel like throwing up my job, but I'm d—n fool enough to be sort of proud of it. There's Mellinger," they say here. "Por Dios! you can't touch him with a million." I'd like to take and go back and eat that savore with Renfrow some day; and that tightens my grip whenever I see a fat thing that I could corral just by winking one eye—and losing my graft. By —, they can't monkey with me. They know it. What money I get I make honest and spend it. Some day I'll make a pile and go back tnd eat caviaere with Bily. Tonight I'l show you how to handle a bunch of corruptionists. I'll show them what Mellinger, private secretary means when you spell it with with the cotton and tissue paper off.'

"Mellinger appears shaky, and breaks his glass against the neck of the bottle.

"I says to myself,' 'White man, if I'm not mistaken there's been a bait laid out where the tail of your eye could see it.'

'That night according to arrangements, me and Henry took the phonograph to a room in a 'dobe house in a dirty side street, where the glass was knee high. 'Twas a long room, lit with smoky oil lamps. There were plenty of chairs and a table at the back end. We set the phonograph on the table. Mellinger was there, walking up and down, disturbed in his predicaments. He chewed cigars and spat 'em out, and he bit the thumb nail of his left hand.

"By and by the invitations to the musical came sliding in by pairs and threes and spade flushes. Therae color was of a diversity, running from a threes and spades flushes. Their color patent-leather polish. They were of polite as wax, being devastated with enjoyments to give Senior Mellinger the good evenings. I understood their Spanish talk—I ran a pumping engine two years in a Mexican silver mine, and had it pat—but I never let on.

"Maybe fifty of 'em had come, and was seated, when in slid the king bee, the governor of the district. Melinger met him at the dor and escorted him to the grand stand. When I saw that Latin man I knew that Melinger, private secretary, had all the dances on his card taken. That was a big squashy man, the color of a rubber overshoe, and he had an eye like a head waiter's.

"Mellinger explained, fluent, in the Castilian idioms, that his soul was disconcerted with joy at introducing to his inspected friends. America's greatest invention, the wonder of the age. Henry got the cue and run on an elegent brass-band record and the festivities became initiated. The governor man had a bit of English under his hat, and when the music was choked off says:

"'Ver-r-ree fine. Gr-r-r-r-racias, the American gentleemen, the so esplendeed moosic as to playee.'

"The table was a long one and Henry and me sat at the end of it next the wall. The governor sat at the other end. Homer P. Mellinger stood at the side of it. I was just wondering how Melinger was going to handle his crowd when the home tayent suddenly opened the services.

"That governor man was suitable for uprisings and politics. I judge he was a ready kind of man. Yes, he was full of attention and immediateness. He leaned his hands on the table and imposed his hands towards the secretary man.

"Do the American senors understand Spanish?' he asks in his native acents.

'They do not,' says Mellinger.

'Then listen,' goes on the Latin man, prompt. 'The musics are of sufficient prettiness but not of necessity. Let us speak of business. I well know why are here, since I observe my compatriots. You had a whisper yesterday, SenorMelinger, of our proposals. Tonight we will speak out. We know that you stand in the president's favor and we know your influence. The government will be changed. We know the worth of your services. We esteem your friendship and aid so much that —Mellinger raises his hand, but the governor man bottles him up. 'Do not speak until I have done.'

"The governor man then draws a package wrapped in paper from his pocket, and lays it on the table by Melinger's hand.

"'In that you will find fifty thousand dollars in money of your country. You can do nothing against us, but you can be worth that for us. Go back to the capital and obey our instructions. Take that money now. We trust you. You will find with it a paper giving in detail the work you will be expected to do for us. Do not have the unwiseness to refuse.'

"The governor man paused, with his eyes fixed on Mellinger, full of expressions and observances. I looked at Melinger, and was glad Billy Renfrow couldn't see him. The sweat was popping out on his forehead, and he stood dumb, tapping the little package with the ends of his fingers. The colorado maduro gang was after his graft. He had only to change his politics and stuff five ngers in his inside pocket.

"Henry whispers to me and wants the pause in the programme interpreted. I whisper back :'H. P. is up against a bribe, senator's size, and the coons have got him going.' I saw Mellinger's hand moving closer to the package. He's weakening,' I whispered to Henry. 'We'll remind him,' says Henry, 'of the peanut-roaster on Thirty-fourth street, New York.'

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GOOD OF THE SERVICE, - - By Henry Irving Greene.

The sea spread before him like an endless sheet of new tin. Presently it heaved a bit as if the sheet had been given a shake, and a long, silent billow glided swiftly shoreward with the sun's rays glancing from it like the white flashes of the heliograph. And a little later the swell burst upon the beach with a metallic crackle and the broad sheet spread away unwrinkled once more, unwrinkled until a plummet of a pelican crashed from the blue above into the green below and shoveled up a mullet with a quick scoop of his pouch. Farther out a silver-plated barracouta leaped ten feet into the air and then fell upon the sea with a spank of his tail that a pair of good ears could hear for half a mile. From the mushroomed top of the wharf spile the boy sat staring into the depths below. The depths were like clear green glass and he could see down into them a long ways.

Back of him, rising like a mirage out of the desert of water, standing ankle deep in the coral dust of the flat key, was the flat city. The sun hung directly over it. The shade had shriveled to thin, dark figures around the buildings and drawn itself into concise circles about the tree trunks. Above the white streets the atmosphere crinkled into wavy hair lines like the heat above a cook stove, and when a faint puff of air wandered along it felt like the hot pant of an exhausted creature. Helplessly the isle parboiled in the great kettle of the gulf and wearily the boy turned his eyes to the line of keys that ran away and away to the east and north. The keys made up the disjointed, forty league long tail of the Floridian peninsula and he sat upon almost the last joint.

"Don't believe I can stand it much longer," he whimpered. "Not much longer, I guess." Oh, how unutterably weary and sick of it all he was! He had never been intended for a soldier; he even winced at the roar of his own gun; yet there he sat a high private in the American militia, a body which as a general proposition fears nothing this side of God. But, of course, at the time he became a member of it his country was at peace, and in addition to that Myrtle had thought he would look nice in a uniform. So join it he did, and when the call had come he stiffened his spine and marched away through the deep canons of the city, with flowers falling upon him from the Alpine heights of the huge buildings, and for the moment had thought war a pretty game after all. But when they reached the station and Myrtle came out of the crowd and hung herself upon him with the cry, "Don't go, Jimmie, don't leave your girl all alone," oh, how heartsick and miserable and wretched he had been then! And how his heart had ached through the days that followed as he watched the interminable backward leap to the telegraph poles across fields that always seemed misty even though the sky was cloudless! And how hungry he had been to hear from her! No letter had come, but another mail steamer was now due and steadfastly he fixed his eyes on the distance.

Far off on the northern horizon behind which Tampa hid, a small black spot slowly lifted itself over the rim of the gulf and the boy cried aloud as if hurt. No sponger this time, but the hurrying mail steamer smirching the sky with smoke and eating her way voraciously through the sea. From the town behind the watcher came a shrill, quavering yell and a tremor ran through the oak sinews of the wharf as a rush of feet and hoofs fell upon it. A flush of heat and a sudden giddiness came over the boy, and worming his way through the press to the shore he threw himself face downward in the mottled shade, his breast heaving and his lips moving silently.

An hour later he got his letter and read it beneath a banyan tree, leaning against one of the down-reaching arms whose fingers had buried themselves in the thin soil about the giant's toes. His face was drawn and his eyes were full of the mute longing of a starving, dumb animal. For across continent and ocean had come that passionate call of "Come home to me, come home to your girl," and the yearning cry of one's absent first love makes the heart sick beyond all telling.

Potter kept shuffling across the sands, shifted his small eyes from the sick face to the crumpled letter in the tense hand and understood.

Potter was a liar, a criminal, and a beast, and when army officers find that much out about a man they generally treat him accordingly. Furthermore, that affair of his of the night before would most certainly get out, and he well knew there would be something worse than the guard house at the other end of it. Therefore, he, too, longed for a land where things were not getting so hot, and his mind was fully made up that he would depart for it that very night. And so, although he had plenty of troubles of his own, Potter's first impulse at the sight of his fellow sufferer was the impulse of an ape, a desire to mock him, and yielding to it he began to mouth grotesquely. Then another thought suddenly entered his brain and he smoothed his features and drew nearer the tree. For after all two persons are better than one in a boat where there is often work for several hands, and when one of the persons is much stronger than the other, so much the better it can be made for the one. Then, too, a cat's paw is not a bad tool when hot chestnuts are to be raked, and best of all this callow one had probably saved his pay—which Potter had not. So he lengthened his face and spat viciously upon the earth as if he hated all things created.

"To blazes with the army," he said.

The boy turned upon the newcomer and looked at him with tired troubled eyes. "I wouldn't say that," he replied slowly. "No, I wouldn't say that. The army is necessary, and is all right enough for those who like it, I suppose." The man's ears were small and set as closely against his head as if they had been screwed there, but they were plenty large enough to catch the faint reproof of the tone, and he nodded in quick assent.

"Yes, for those who like it. But it is tough for men like us, men with wives or—" He drew the rough back of his hand across his shifting eyes—"or a sweetheart," he added with a husk around his voice. The boy winced as if the word had been a dagger thrust.

"Have you one, too?" he asked, almost reverently, longing to open his bosom to some kindred soul drawing nearer to this man who doubtless suffered as he himself did. Potter turned his face away, sneered and stood flicking his pig eyes across the sea, but the boy thought they were fastened upon a distant vision of her.

"If I could only see her—even for a few days," muttered the man as if talking to himself. Then his forefinger arose until it pointed at a sponging cat boat that lay beached close at hand. "And I could—with the help of that boat." The eyes of the younger man arose in sudden distrust.

"You wouldn't desert," he exclaimed earnestly.

"No, of course not. It would only be a visit home without formal permission; not nearly as bad as sneaking across the line and getting drunk, as half of the best army men do. Then, after I had seen her I would enlist again and serve out my time like a man. And what difference would it make when the army has got more men than it needs, and we are doing nothing but staying penned up here like a drove of dog-herded swine? And maybe when I re-enlisted they would send me where I would be of some real use." Potter dropped his voice to half its natural volume and whispered into the boy's ear. "And it might be the saving of her life. Her heart is breaking, and of course you know women. They can't stand such things forever. You couldn't yourself, and you're a man."

"Oh!" gasped the boy, turning gray.

"And which, I ask you, has the better right to us: this government with its thousands clamoring for our places at the front, or those weak women with no one to look after them in God's own land?" He waved his hand in a broad northerly sweep and thieved a quick glance at the twitching face of his companion. "I leave tonight at ten o'clock in that cat boat. Be there if you will. Is not, I rely upon your honor as a comrade to say nothing of what I have just told you in sacred confidence. It's a safe, easy cruise in the shelter of the keys to the mainland, and the rest is but a railroad trip. Think it over and take your choice: heaven or this inferno."

The shells crunched under his feet and he was gone. The boy sat down and buried his face in his hands.

How cruelly thoughtless he had been to leave her alone in that great, grinding city. She would never have left him, he knew that; yet at the first miserable excuse he had broken from her ruthlessly and left her to face the world unprotected. Perhaps even now she was ill; she must have been when she wrote the letter that he still clutched. It was so pitiful, so scrawly. And it might be months before he would even know. Oh, for just one day in which to comfort her, explain beg her forgiveness, and tell her how happy they would be when the war was over! And it wouldn't be desertion either; just a little visit as Potter had said. Then, when he had poured forth his love and comfort and she fully understood it all, then he would come back and take his punishment cheerfully. She was suffering so keenly, and women couldn't stand those things forever; he couldn't himself and he was a man. Slowly he arose and wandered back to the barracks, his brain on fire, but with a firm determination in his heart.

Under cover of darkness Potter laid his gun and a bag of provisions in the boat. "Where's your rifle?" he whispered to the boy who sat in the stern.

"My rifle!" returned the other with a start. "I didn't bring it. Why should I bring my rifle?"

Potter made no reply but stood scowling through the night. That had been a very ugly affair of the evening before and he did not intend to be taken alive. Suddenly he drew in the sheet and the craft stuck her nose into the north breeze. Another minute and they had passed through the low surf and were out upon the dark waters where no sound came to their ears but the low snore of the sleeping sea.

Ripley, officer of the day, reported to the colonel commanding.

"Two men deserted soon after taps, sir." The commandant looked up and the bristles of his mustache seemed to turn to wire. The honor of the garrison was in his keeping and there would not be many desertions from his fold if grewsome examples had any moral effect. "Who were they?" he demanded ominously.

"Private Potter, of Company E., whom we suspected of that dirty job the other night. We were just about to arrest him. He took a boy from another company with him."

"How did they get off the Island?"

"There is a sponger missing, sir."

The elder man got on his feet and towered grim and threatening over his inferior. "Send Lieutenant Wright and half a dozen men after them in a launch. He ought to pick them up among the keys before night. Get them alive if possible, but"—the big jaws pressed itself out and the voice was as harsh as the rasp of a saw—"get them.' Ripley saluted, said he would, and went away like a man who is interested in his mission, for even hunting one's runaway comrades is better than no hunting at all, and game was scarce on the sun-blistered keys of the gulf.

The afternoon wore thin and the falling murmur of the ocean tapered into silence. When the tropics rage their voices are masterful, but when they sleep it is with the hush of death. The wind went out with a puff and left the waters like a sea of oil across which the launch scurried like a green waterbug, as she stuck her sharp nose among the countless vertebrae of the continent's disjointed tail. At five o'clock Lieutenant Wright gave a sharp pull upon one of the tiller lines. "There she is, men," he said quietly.

Half a mile to the eastward a cat boat lay beached upon one of the larger keys. Her sail had been lowered, but the brown hull stood out distinctly against the back-ground. Straight towards it the lieutenant aimed his craft, and there was a rattle of gun magazines as the crew shoved their cartridges home. Then something struck the bow of the launch with a thud and the next instant the bellow of a Krag rose across the sea. "Steady, there!" cried Wright as one of the men ducked. "He couldn't hit a —" A squirt of water leaped from the sea into the officer's face and a second report followed hot-foot on the bullet's trail.

"They are in that low clump at the north end. Give them hell and repeat," he said as he spat the brine from his mouth. Ahead of the launch another bullet snapped a mouthful from a swell, then leaped, and Wilson gurgled and sat down with a hole drilled through his throat. From out the low island growth a form darted, grabbed something from the beached boat, then sprang back to shelter with the quickness of a cat. It had been the work of an instant and Kelley's quickly aimed bullet bit a splinter out of the distant boat a fraction of a second too late. Swiftly the launch shot on, quivering, throbbing, tearing a white-lined trough through the smooth sea, her quick-firing rifles rattling with the vicious rapidity of a machine gun. Three more harmless bullets plunged into the sea and then the fire from the island suddenly seized. But the blood of the pursuers were now coursing fiercely and their steel hail still searched it like a flight of hornets. Full tilt on the beach Wright drove his craft, her nose rooting deep into the gravel as she sent it flying in rattling showers. Then up the bank half a dozen forms leaped with a yell, the butts of their rifles held under their armpits — then stopped.

For, lying upon the ground tightly bound and with a great lump over his eye was Potter, the badly wanted. There was a stupid look upon his face as if he was still dazed from a blow, and Wright bent over him in some astonishment. His rifle and a heavy billet of wood lay close at hand, but the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Wright straightened up and rubbed his chin reflectively. "I understand," he said a moment later. "That was the kid that ran down to the boat and grabbed something. He got the painter and this fish-stunner out of it and then scuttled back here. He didn't like this party's gun play at us, so he clapped him over the head with the stunner and trussed him up so he couldn't shoot any more of us. Good boy." Wright cast his eyes about. "Search the island," he said tersely.

It was only a minute's work to find him. He was lying in a heap, his eyes closed and his face the color of wet ashes. There was blood on the ground beside him and a soiled letter was crushed in his hand.

Two weeks later Potter shackled and under guard, was driven stick-pig into the presence of the court martial at the points of bayonets. His jaw hung after the fashion of a loose hinge and his face looked like that of a man who gazes at short range into the eyes of death. The commandant turned from him in disgust.

"James Merton, attention," said he sternly.

Slowly the boy got upon his feet. His face was considerably thinner and the bandages around his right shoulder showed plainly beneath his shirt. The circles around his eyes were as deep and black as if they had been made by a fist, and his gaze rested helplessly on the floor. From the table before him the commandant picked up a crumbled letter and glanced at its opening line. Then carefully he adjusted his glasses and began to read. The silence of the room was absolute Not a man there but had read those broken sentences, the tear stained paragraphs, the voiceless, passionate, final cry of, "Come home to me. Come home to your girl." He finished it and laid it upon the table, smoothing it with his big hand much as if he had been smoothing the head of a child. "Cursed rot," he said gruffly. Absolute nonsense. Surgeon McMurdo, is this man in such physical condition that he can be shot without endangering his health?"

McMurdo arose. He had made a copy of the letter some days before to send to his wife, and now he adjusted a stethescope to the boy's breast and began to listen, gravely shaking his head from time to time as he looked into the far away. Finally he let the instrument fall to the length of its tube. "I am afraid not, sir. He seems to be suffering from some acute affection of the heart and I fear a gun shot wound would prove fatal."

Then he went back to his seat and the grey heads of the judging officers drew into a close circle. For the main part they were heads that had bent low over more than one cradle and now they nodded in unison as their senior whispered. Then their backbones once more stiffened like steel ramrods as the commandant's harsh voice broke the stillness.

"James Merton, attention! The sentence of this court martial is that you be transported back from whence you came, there to remain in the custody of the writer of the letter which I have before me until the government concludes that it can no longer worry along without you. And from this sentence there is no appeal. Sentries, confine him in the hospital until the first ship leaves for God's country. I will retain this letter as an official, justifying document."

The boy blotted the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and stared about blankly.

"Forward, march!" cried the guard loudly. Then he whispered in the prisoner's ear.

"Trate her tinderly and name the first bye for the ould colonel, ye deserter. Help lively there, young divil, before I jab ye."

The commandant folded the girl's letter and thrust it into the wallet where he carried most of his treasures. "For the good of the service," he grunted with a quick side glance at his efficial brethren.