

NO HAND OF MAN!

By RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

Illustrations by Charles Sarka

"SHE had the largest, softest, most trusting eyes I ever saw."

Pinder Rowe sometimes will say this, and then, if it is evening and supper is over and his corn-cob pipe is glowing, rumbling and bubbling like an asthmatic engine, and if the stars are thick in the tropic sky and sea birds scream in Hawk Channel and a soft breeze, blowing across Spongecake Key, stirs the palms to sounds that suggest silk petticoats, the old man will reach up to a shelf attached to the outside wall of his shanty and feel around for something. This something is nearly six inches long. In the uncertain light of dusk it looks flexible.

"When I sit alone and look at that thing," says Pinder, taking off one of his inevitable shabby derby hats, "I think. Being alone here on this Key ever since my wife died and I gave up wrecking, I get time for it. And I think of what mosquitoes was made for and I think of this thing and him that used to wear it, and why God made death in two needles. Now—Listen!"

With a strange tremulous motion of his knotted, salt-bleached, weather-roughened old hand, he moves the thing toward you. It makes no difference whether or not you have ever heard it before; instinct screams within you, instinct jerks your muscles taut and like a chilly fluid creeps along your skin. The sound is a warning! You recognize in it danger, agony and death.

Then this old rascal, who has a long record of filibustering, wrecking and inciting revolutions in South America, will explain.

THERE'S a time in a man's life for action and then a time when joints are beginning to get stiff, and there's a time to think it over. I sometimes wonder why it wasn't arranged so a man could think first and avoid the mistakes. Never mind. Here I am, living alone on Spongecake, cooking my own meals, and I've got a partner and that partner is solitude. But solitude speaks most ideas to human beings. Solitude is more talkative than running for office and it whispers ideas to you as if it was a person. It's convincing, too. And one thing it told me I can't no way disbelieve. That's about sin.

A hundred times I've heard a voice coming out of the acres of stars at night or from that jungle of cacti and prickly pears baking in the sun. It says that there is a squaring of accounts. It says that something watches and when it sees a bill of sin that's growing too big and ain't paid, it reaches out across land or sea and—strikes! There's mutineers on ships and mutineers on land and mutineers standing out against the orders of the Big Skipper. But the belaying pin comes to 'em. Sometimes in front, sometimes behind. A man stands laughing and spitting in the sunlight and then it comes—crack! And the bill is paid.

So I'll tell you about this thing I've got in my hand, mate, and about him who grew it on himself and what he did for Lenora Gonzalez.

You see this clump of cocoanut palms side of my camp here. They were planted by a poor skipjack of an ice-cream maker from

Pennsylvania who came down here to raise tropical fruit. And now the brush has grown up so thick among some of them that a man couldn't

stick a machete into it. It's nature laughing at what man tries to do and it will always be that way. And the brush is a world itself, I tell you. I, who have been always on the water, was surprised what life there could be in a thicket like that—full of the non-

pareil birds and yellow spiders as big as your hand and lizards with beady eyes and scorpions as black as shoe polish and big

red ants, waving their feelers. It's a world. I used to sit here in the sun adreaming and awatching it.

And one day there came out of that clump a snake. He came out slow, the way tar will move when it's hot. The sunlight was beating down on this coral sand, and he moved like things that are well fed and deliberate and satisfied. Mate, his head looked most as large as a dog's.

I've seen those diamond-back rattlers before. They are a pretty colour—prettier than the tint of a man's skin—and there isn't a motion in their bodies I don't envy. But I reached up onto that shelf and took down my revolver and I was sighting along the barrel of it with my arm cocked like this, when I saw that snake draw his whole length out of the bush. And, mate, he was more than eight feet long!

I had my finger on the trigger. I reckon I was ready to kill. But somehow, just then, I thought of his size and his bright markings and how clean he kept himself and how God made him for some purpose. He was stretched out most full length on the sand there and his head was turned toward me. His eyes seemed half shut and happy, and just then he lifted his head in one of those curves as pretty as the rounding in and out of a young girl's neck. He raised his head and opened his jaws, and inside, except for his black tongue, it was pink as a bleached conch shell. He trembled a little, too, and just as if it was for practice, he darted his head forward and I saw the two white needles. Those fangs moved down for a second from the roof of his mouth. They were more than two inches long! And I put the revolver back on the shelf.

"Friend," said I, "I've seen a lot of rattlers in my day, but you are more of a rattlesnake than I ever saw before. You're a machine of death, and you certainly are perfect and handsome. The Lord made you for something and I shan't do you any harm."

I suppose the sound of my voice startled him. I could see his muscles move under his skin like liquid—like quicksilver. He drew his eight feet into a coil and stuck his tail up into the air, and all the buttons were rattling till it sounded like peas shaking on a drumhead. It sounded like a Venezuelan revolution half a mile away. His head had flattened and swayed back and forth as he looked for the thing that meant fight.

"Easy, son," I said. "Nobody intends you any harm. Lie there in the heat and sleep for all of me."

I've wondered sometimes if he understood me, because he stopped swaying his head and seemed to be looking at me. And then he pulled himself out of his coil, which means a rattler is satisfied and trustful. I like him for that! I lighted my pipe and I watched him that day, on and off, till the red sun went down into the Gulf yonder. And I named the snake. I named him Gus.

He came often. I used to wonder what he did the days when he didn't crawl out of that thicket there. But he never warned me again. I got to like him, I say. Maybe that sounds funny. Yet when a man's alone he gets fond of friendly things, the way I took a notion once for a man-o-war bird that followed me when I was sailing a bad trip by myself in the hurricane season from Havana to Progreso. And when Gus looked dusty and his hide was peeling and scaly, or when he'd drop his head heavy on the sand and act uncomfortable, I used to worry about him as if he was an old pal.

AND then some day, about that time, I'd see him running along against the stems of little bushes and afterward he'd cast his skin and come out as perfect and handsome as ever, with his hide with its diamond marks as bright as polished mahogany and the liquid muscles showing through. Sometimes a hawk would swing a curve over the tops of those palms and Gus would remember when he was a little feller and had to watch out for those birds, and just out of habit, he'd raise the rattles and shake 'em for a hint.

I've poured out many a saucer of condensed milk for that snake. Things that are alive—are alive. And both me and Gus had that between-us, anyhow. And whatever you can say of snakes, I'm going to tell you that this big diamond back never, from first till last, rattled at me again. He knew me, I tell you. And I knew him.

I reckon I never had a bigger surprise than when Gus brought back the girl. He had been gone five days, mate, and the wind had blown and ruffed up

the hollow he'd made in the sand. I went on my trip down the East Coast after provisions and the Florida newspapers, and when I got home I could see that even

then he hadn't come back. I pictured how he used to look, curled up in the sun there, waving his head now and then as if looking for beach mice, or something, or asking me to open another can of milk, or sleeping so peaceful with his sides flattened out and his skin so near

the colour of the coral ruffraff and dried cocoanut husks that you could hardly tell that eight feet of a big rattler was there. I wondered if I wouldn't ever see him again. But the next day he crawled out among those prickly pears and she was with him.

I might as well say I never thought much of her. She wasn't any such snake as Gus. But he'd been away and got her. Maybe she was the best he could find on Spongecake Key here. If he liked her, it wasn't any of my business. I only say, I wouldn't have picked her as a helpmeet for him nowise. But I am prejudiced because she never got over being nervous when I was around, and sometimes she'd forget her manners and coil and rattle if I met her down the shore, and that used to worry him, I reckon, because he liked me.

SHE was shorter than him and her head was narrower, and she was daintier and fussier with the milk in the saucer, and she was very faithful to him, I'm bound to say that of her. She'd crawl along behind him. He was always leading the way. She was affectionate, too. She'd often lay her head across his when he was resting. But the one thing that opened my heart to her a little was the way she'd stay awake and coil herself and watch whenever he was sleeping stretched out and unable to spring, and she'd keep that way no matter how long he slept or how tired she might be. They were happy, I reckon. And Gus knew I wouldn't do her any harm. I named her Bess.

She and Gus was company for me. It was the first year I'd spent here alone on Spongecake and the nights was still. I'd wake and feel around for a wheel or a tiller as if it was in the old days—the days when I'd dropped off into a doze sailing a calm night under a sky full of stars, with the water running off the stern, smelling warm and oily. By day I'd find myself looking around for some sailor who'd done something wrong—to abuse him. I reckon I read "Pilgrim's Progress" a half a dozen times. I was lonesome. My wife—

It seemed pretty good to me when a flip of chance threw the little Gonzalez girl and the man who was with her up onto Rib Rock Bar, and I had to take 'em off and bring 'em in through the night to this camp. They were in a thirty-foot launch when they struck, and though it was calm weather there was a falling tide. I couldn't move her off. A bottom of a boat will stick to that coral as if it had grown there. I got the man and the girl back to my wharf, and I thought I'd take a chance at getting their boat off on the morning tide.

It was as dark as a ship's bilge that night, and the water was alive and burning with phosphorus a hundred different colours. I suppose I might have known a norther was going to set in for a blow and rough weather in Hawk Channel. And I noticed how the sound of my engine stirred up the vultures on the little keys. They were sleeping light and they and the pelicans and white cranes would whirl up till it sounded like thunder. I might have known.

But somehow, I didn't think of any way to get



"Easy, son," I said, "Nobody intends you any harm."

