

Rope Enough

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A slim chance, but the only way to prove his innocence. And Will knew that if he failed . . .

A Short Short Story

NEARING the island, Will Clay crouched low in the flat-bottomed 'glades boat and tripled his vigilance. Night was ending. The big swamp was fast shedding its shroud of darkness. He had to be wary.

True, the frogs were noisy. But that was no proof that the men hunting him had not been here during his absence. No proof they were not hiding near by to pounce on him. Frogs got over a scare pretty quick.

He wished he could say as much for himself. Since his escape from jail two nights ago, his fear had swelled to terror, driving him on without rest. He was weak from exhaustion. He was hungry. Desperate.

The boat nudged the tangle of cypress roots on shore, and he laid his mud-pole down gently. Sounds carried far in the swamp's hush. But he had to explore the island.

Maybe — just maybe — the man who'd shot Bert Lorden had been in too big a hurry to pick up the empty cartridge case from his rifle. A slim chance! But it was all he had.

He stole forward through slash pine and cabbage palms, fighting back his weariness. Bert Lorden had approached in his boat from the south, at dusk, and been shot while still a hundred feet from the island. Shot low, in the stomach. The killer must have been on high ground. It was a miracle the bullet, tearing through Bert's body, hadn't spun him out of the boat. A miracle he'd lived to pole back out and tell his story.

THE bigger wonder, though, was why the killer hadn't poled out to Bert's boat and dumped him overboard, to Bert's mind, while he lay unconscious. There could be only one answer — the murder wasn't deliberate. After the shooting, the man on the island had fled. Maybe he'd been scared enough to leave the cartridge case behind.

Sheriff Downey hadn't found any case. He and his men hadn't looked for one. Their trip to the island day before yesterday was nothing more than a routine visit to a murder scene. They had their killer, didn't they?

Will prowled through tangled growth toward a likely clear spot. It was a small island — nothing on it to interest a poacher. But it was a good place to pitch camp and work out from. Near by were two small rookeries. A man snaring egrets might camp here, safe from any surprise visit from the wardens. . .

He looked down. At his feet a stake with a frayed tag of rope protruded from the ground. On hands and knees he found holes where other stakes had been driven. Someone had pitched a tent since the last rain. . . He

began to go over the ground with his hands, inch by inch. The man who pitched the tent might have been sitting in it, or just opposite it, when he heard Bert Lorden's boat approaching.

He was dead tired, but he had to work fast! Sheriff Downey'd been convinced of his guilt even before he broke out of jail. Now they'd be searching the swamp for him, with orders to shoot on sight.

He didn't blame them for thinking him guilty. Or Bert, either, for accusing him. For the hundredth time, as in a nightmare, he saw Bert eying him wildly from the bed, saying shrilly, "You done it! You come to me yesterday with a story of a big 'gator you saw on the island. Said you run across it while takin' pictures. You knew I'd go there and try for any 'gator big enough to trap alive and sell to the carnival over to Holcomb! You knew I'd get there at dusk and camp overnight. You were waitin'."

HE REMEMBERED the accusing finger jabbing at him from the bed sheets, and Bert turning a stricken face to the sheriff. "Will shot me because I was set against him marryin' Helen and takin' her away . . . him with his crazy big ideas, his photographs and things! You ask me, his picture-takin' is just a cover-up for poachin'!" . . .

A good boy, Bert. Pig-headed, but honest. It was foolish to hate the sheriff for believing him. Helen's father believed, too. Helen herself had backed away from the bed and stared across it into Will's eyes, torn between love and doubt.

He'd told them in jail that her brother was mistaken. "There was a big 'gator on that island. I remembered a fellow in the carnival advertised for one just last week. He wrestles them, in a tank. I told Bert."

Sheriff Downey, a dark, dour man, growled, "What's this about you poachin'?"

"I'm not a poacher. I take pictures."

"For what?"

"You wouldn't understand. I take pictures in the swamp — of birds and swamp critters, of the swamp itself. Some I sell."

"First I heard of it," Downey snorted.

"Helen knows. We've saved a little money. We plan to be married and go away, so I can study and work at it. . . I didn't kill her brother! We had arguments, but I never killed him!"

"You were in the swamp last night?"

"Yes — alone — taking pictures."

IT WAS hopeless. Maybe breaking out of jail was hopeless, too. And fleeing into the swamp in a stolen boat. But nothing had been more hopeless than sitting in jail with the townspeople shaking their heads, saying, "Look at him. Killed the brother of the girl that loved him. Look at him!" . . .

On hands and knees he searched the ground



Will Clay clutched the cartridge case, his exultation boiling

where the tent had been. If the killer was a poacher who'd been caught here by surprise, he could name the man. Tom Grannan prowled this part of the swamp often. Grannan had snared egrets since he was old enough to pole a boat. Surprised here with a catch of birds, he'd shoot quick enough.

And maybe there was another reason. Tom Grannan had been saying around town lately that Helen was too good for a fool who shot birds with a camera. Helen was his kind of girl. Maybe he'd mistaken her brother for Will Clay.

"Got it!" He reared back on his knees, clutching the cartridge case, his exultation boiling up to a kind of madness. A .300 Savage. That gun of Grannan's, that Model 20, fired a .300 Savage! And they can't blame it on me, he thought wildly. The only gun I own is that old thirty-thirty.

He hurried to the boat. Now if they'd only listen! But he could make them listen! He'd

go to Helen's house. Her father would go to the sheriff with him.

He pushed the boat clear of the cypress roots and stepped into it, reaching for the pole. That was when he saw the other boat, twenty feet away, and the rifle aimed at his head. "Get back on that island, Clay," Tom Grannan said.

HE MIGHT have run for it across the island, plunged into the water and tried to swim. But Grannan in the boat could have overtaken him. He backed up, hating the fear that made him tremble. A moment later Grannan stood before him, aiming the Model 20 at his chest.

"I'll take that empty you picked up. It was real good of you to locate it for me."

Will fumbled the cartridge case from his pocket. His last hope. His last chance of convincing Helen — and the sheriff — he was

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