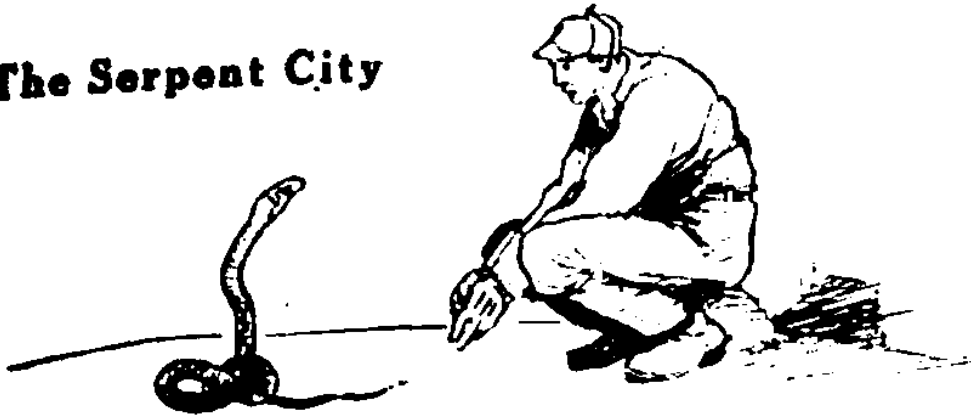


From a Frontiersman's Diary

The Serpent City



By Edison Marshall

It was curious that three such good woodsmen should wander into the hills and fade from the earth. But as they were men steeped in iniquity, no one mourned their loss.
— From a Frontiersman's Diary

THERE is one mystery in the Southern Oregon mountains that never grows old, and never is understood. Even ancient Abe Carver, who knew the strange ranges as never geologist can hope to know them, who had melted snow in his veins for blood, and strata in his frame for bones, found it a fresh marvel at every fall of darkness. It is the mystery of the mountain night

It doesn't seem to be the same night that falls over cities and plains. Even the stars look different. There is no smoke to hide or blur them, and they seem to hang just at the top points of the tall, dark pines. Once really to see them, the people say, is to lose at once the worst of a man's fears of that time-honored bogey, death. They give a queer feeling of insignificance, too, that is remarkably good for men. But they are just a small part of the mystery.

There are the smells, never to be forgotten. One of them comes from the balsam, and is more wonderful than any chemical perfume could possibly be, and gives more light, far-flying dreams than is possible with opium. Some of them come from the lakes that make a silver chain from one end of the Back Country to the other—the smell of wet banks and Heaven alone knows what. Blending in the mixture are such good and healthy smells as sun-baked earth, and fern beds, and little, shy mountain-daisies that are almost as hard to see as the little rock-rabbits close to snow-line. These are the smells that a man can perceive, but of course a man has a ridiculously rudimentary sense of smell. You can tell, by watching the night-hunting of a wolf, that he experiences a whole scale of smells on either side of the little octave known to men.

THEN there are the sounds that make a mystery just by themselves. Of course, the human sense of hearing has very limited and definite frontiers, but even for human ears the mountains have enough unknown sounds to draw a man's thoughts, as a sponge draws water, far into the strange, little-used spaces of his mind, where he does not like to have them go. Students who have sat in a collegiate class of psychology and have watched the tuning-fork experiment are best able to understand these human limits. As the note sounds higher and higher, fewer and fewer students are able to hear it, until only one is left. At the next note the one remaining cannot hear, either. But it is perfectly evident that the forks are still making vibrations, if the human ears were only tuned to hear them. It is the same below the lowest note that a human ear can perceive. And part of the mystery of the mountain night is the ever-present impression that if one's ears were just a little sharper, there would be a thousand sounds that people have never dreamed of. But after all, perhaps these limits are a good thing. As it is, men are having a hard enough time clinging to their long-harbored theories of life and death.

The limbs of the pines scratch and rub together with a very curious sound. It is always right over your head, and it dies away on each side of you. The wind tries to force its way through the brush-thicket, and its sound is like a whimper of disappointment. There are a thousand sounds, no two alike, that the wind can make. A few of the million noises of the insect world are pitched in the right key for human beings to hear, and always you are dimly aware that some creature is stalking some other creature in the shadows just beyond. The stalking wolf is one of the most silent creatures in the world, but now and then he cracks a twig, or crushes a leaf. And the darkness itself is a mystery, particularly when the moon is shining through it.

It doesn't seem merely an absence of light. It seems as if it were something in itself that drops down from the mountain-tops. It drops with startling speed, and it lifts the same way. And through it, now and then, you can see far-away forests that seem to have silver poured over them, and curiously dark valleys, and strange, deep glens. The whole region is strange beyond words—with its endless forests and its mysterious lakes and its stone-heaps piled without reason or sense, and its creeks that fade away when you need them most—but particularly it is strange at night. People call it the Back Country because they don't know any other name; it is quite the way of human beings, when they don't know much about a thing, to lop it off with generalities. It is back somewhere behind the hills, and since deer and mines and things can be procured at the very edge of it, there is no sense in entering it very far. As a result, the long-tailed jays still shriek with astonishment and amazement every time one of the curious forked creatures comes into their sight.

It isn't good to be lost in the Back Country. There are no landmarks to guide one out. Streams are often very hard to find, and the human body, not very good at best, soon becomes tired of climbing a thousand ridges that look exactly alike. The great timber-wolves are always waiting for the moment when a man grows helpless, and the long, wild shriek of the mountain lion is apt to frighten a man into that deadly mistake of running in a circle in the dark. Of course, the true-breed mountain lion, weighing one hundred and fifty pounds at the most, is the worst coward in the mountains, but his kill-scream is very disconcerting and terrible.

THE night had just dropped down about Abe Carver's cabin; and the wonder that is a remembered echo of the fear that men had

in a younger world, brought a curious glow in his eyes. He was barely conscious of it. He had other things to think about to-night, for just that day a very dear and ancient friend had wandered away into the ridges, and the hills are always full of death-traps for the unsuspecting. They have always one trick more to play, even when a mountaineer thinks he has learned them all.

People knew at the first glance at Abe Carver that in some one great factor he differed from the common run of mountain men. What the difference was, they usually couldn't say. He dressed just like the rest—mostly in buckskin, which wear like iron, and does not require constant cleaning. Then, his hair was strange and gray and long; his arms and legs were hard and knotted; and his face was scoured and deep-lined, like the face of the mountains themselves. But here all likeness abruptly stopped.

The mountain men never looked squarely into Carver's eyes. They couldn't have told why they didn't. They weren't afraid of him—at least they did not fear bodily injury at his hands. He was neither particularly fast with a pistol nor particularly strong. His eyes were rather large and they had a peculiar fixation. The eyelids didn't seem to close down as often as is natural. They were blue in color, and they were always noticeably bright.

Children have bright eyes, but this brightness of his was not the kind that people love to see in the eyes of a child. Strong drink can brighten a man's eye and there are certain emotions, like fear and pleasure, that makes them sparkle. Carver's eyes had no such warm brightness as is caused by these things. The light to be seen under his brows was just as cold as the glitter that mountaineers behold on the face of the snowbanks in the winter sun.

Carver had lived too long in the mountains, and had imbued too much of their spirit. He had stepped beyond the pale

ordained for human beings, and the mark of a strange, outer world was beneath his lids. The gaunt wolves, howling from the hilltops at night, have something of the same glitter in their eyes. You can catch it sometimes in the eyes of the little cowardly lynx that will mew on your trail all day but never dares attack. And most of all it is the property of the gliding people that live on the lowest of the three planes that make up forest life.

If human being had that look in a younger world, they have mostly got away from it long since. There is no need for it in farms and cities. It is an inheritance from a wilder, more savage time, and now it remains the mark of a wilder, more savage world that begins where the habitations of men leave off. It is the mark of remorselessness inexorable as the cold in winter. It is the brand of the kind of mercy one may expect from a wolf-pack in the snow, or the rattlesnake on the rock. The other brands Carver had—a peculiar stealthy quality in his walk, and a queer repressed note in his voice—were far too obscure for any except the eyes of a naturalist. And no naturalist would believe them if he saw them.

ABE CARVER walked up and down in front of his cabin; and now and then he searched with his eyes the distant hillsides. The dark was over them, but his eyes were trained to see in the darkness. Sometimes he put his fingers to his lips and gave a whistled call that seemed to reecho endlessly from the pines.

"Funny thing," he breathed. "All the time I've had him, he hasn't been gone at feedin' times before."

The old man seemed very haggard and broken as he began to prepare his simple meal. It had been years since he had supped alone. Always the same faithful loving friend had crouched at his feet. To-night he was gone; and Abe was very lonely and apprehensive

indeed.

There is a kind of fatalism in the creed of the mountains; but it isn't the same kind that is to be found among such old peoples as the Chinese or the Arabs. With the latter, nothings seems to matter much one way or another; and things matter very much indeed in the mountains. The mountaineer is perfectly indifferent to the inevitability of death; but what are half-felt emotions among the plainsmen, are passions with him. He cannot forget an injury. He may not know the meaning of pity; but he loves with the devotion of a dog for his master. The further one goes into the Outer World of the Wild, the more simple and intense emotions become. Abe Carver had only one love, and he gave him all the affection in his heart. That love was his shaggy hound, his companion in the hunt, his partner in his explorations, the sharer of his troubles, his defender and slave and friend.

Shag had trotted away on one of his endless hill-journeys at noon that day. He had taken the trail that went down toward the Trotter place. Abe would rather have had him go in any other direction. He did not like the Trotters, new from a mountain district in the East. They were grimy and vile-tongued and malignant; and he had once had a dispute in court with them over a trap-line. Always before, Shag had returned, bounding like a wolf down the slopes, when the sky first changed to green at sunset. It was nearly nine now; and he had not yet come.

"We'll get you yet," the Trotters had told Carver at the door of the court that day. "We'll bust you open like a ripe papaw!" And then they had whispered oaths down on his head—such oaths as only men who knew the savage mountains can possibly conceive.

"But they wouldn't have shot my Shag," the old man muttered into his coffee-cup. "They couldn't have done a thing like that."

But he was lying to himself and he knew it. There was nothing too low and mean for the Trotters. In this way they differed from most of the mountain men, and even the mountain creatures that range the forest. The latter can be terrible and cruel, but they cannot be low. It is against the laws of the wild.

THE night drew on, hour after hour. Supper was done. Carver built his fire high; and like a form in some curious dark-colored stone, he stood waiting at the doorway. He did not seem to move a hand or lift a shoulder. Men who have walked on deer-trails know that the most draining conduct in the world is to remain perfectly motionless, yet Abe had stood without motion for two long hours, evidently without fatigue.

It isn't exactly a human quality, and it would have been most disconcerting to watch. A lizard on a stone may have that same impassive immobility; and it is particularly a quality of the serpents. But even the larger forest-beasts seem to lack the muscle-control to do it easily. Carver stood with his arms loose-hung, his strange, fixed eyes gazing down the trail.

"It couldn't be that them Trotters have got him," he said again. "If they have—"

The words ended in a sort of throaty sob. For there are certain emotions, as all men know, that cannot find expression in words. The words for them have died from the language in these gentler days.

Then his gray head lifted, almost imperceptibly. Far away down the trail he could hear a sound that was not part of the natural noises of the night. Above the sound of the tree-limbs, above the stir of the wind in the brush-thickets, he heard a faint, low whimper, almost like the noise of the wind itself. And the next instant came an echo of the old, familiar bark of welcome. But it *was* just an echo—the cry of a brave heart that remembers

even as it dies.

At once the motionless muscles of the man sprang to life. He leaped down the trail and a spectator would have been curiously reminded of the lunge of a serpent. The motion was so unbelievably fast, so silent. And in another instant the dying dog was whimpering in his arms.

Its two hind legs were broken—the man could see where the brave animal had dragged them in the dust of the moonlit trail. The hairy coat was matted and wet; the great intelligent head was terribly battered and broken.

The dog did not shrink at the sight of the blue pistol pointing squarely in the moonlight. It could see the eyes that aimed along it, full of the same love it had always seen. When the man's eyes had that look, they were never to be feared. The pistol flame leaped in the dark. And then the only sound on the mountain trail was the faint rustle of leaves stirred by the quivering muscles of the dying animal, and the loving, whispered curses of a weeping man.

It was a long time after this that he left the stiffening body and walked on down the trail. He went towards the cabins on the lower level where the Trotters lived. He went very softly, very smoothly, as if with no muscular exertion. A show-shoe rabbit leaped and fled from his trail. The little squeak of terror that it uttered was the same that its breed had learned in long ages, at the sight of a serpent descending from its ledges on its night-hunting.

THERE are three planes of life in the mountains, and the laws are the same for each. The middle plane consists of all those creatures whose byways are the game-trails in the brush and on the hills—the wolves that never are full-fed, the larger bears, deer like streaks of brown light, and the stately elk. The upper plane is the tree-people and the winged

creatures. Here are the tawny mountain-lion, that lies so close to the great branches of the trees that he is all but invisible, smaller cousin the lynx, the gray squirrels, and such grotesque creatures as the porcupine—always the last hope of a wanderer lost and starving in the mountains. And finally there is the under plane, knowledge of which is still mostly a mystery except to the greatest naturalists.

In this plane are the rodents, the marmots and rabbits and mice and chipmunks, whose forests are the ferns. And worse than any of these are the poison folk, the gray, speckled rattlesnakes on the rocks. The casual hunter in the hills does not see these poison people. In the first place, most of them are nocturnal in their habits. Besides, they are perfectly camouflaged by nature to match the rocks and dust in which they lie. Hunters very rarely go to the rock ledges that they love, the breeding-places where sometimes a hundred of them will sun themselves on the same cliff. And of all the creatures of the wild, theirs is the most remorseless creed.

The wolf turns aside at the sound of their warning rattle. The cattle forsakes the slopes where they take their sun-baths. They have learned in long years to expect no mercy from the poison folk, for the reptiles have a cold malignancy towards all other living things—perhaps because far back in their evil minds they can remember when they were the rulers and owners of the whole world, and they are jealous of these intruders. They strike not only in self-defense or in hunting, like most of the forest people. Men who have been struck by a head that leaped like a whiplash from beneath a rock are well aware of this fact—if they survived to be aware of anything. The birds hate them because when the glittering eyes meet their own, all power to fly away passes from their wings. The little mice and smaller rodents squeak with terror at just the rustle of the leaves in the shadows. And even men,

remembering from a remote time a greater breed of serpents that hunted in the darkness just without their caves, hate and fear them, too.

They do not understand them. They never quite understood the miracle of their changing skins, their long fasts from food and drink, their motionless slumber on the rocks. Men know that the bite from a full-grown rattler is often a very quick and unhappy death; for the venom itself, a certain complex combination of proteids, is almost as deadly a substance as the wisest chemist can evolve in a laboratory.

The poison-folk were Abe Carver's life and study. He had not inherited the usual fear of them. Even in his boyhood he would leave his play to follow the gliding forms through the grass. Their eyes, their habits, their strange, malignant lives, had been a fascination to him in all his long years. And he knew things about them that no living man ever knew before.

HIS first study was the blue-racers, and the garter and gopher-snakes—such snakes as kill their food by constriction of their coiling bodies. They could exert a most remarkable pressure, as the little Abe learned after many experiments; but compared to the rattlers they were dull and stupid things. He had watched them do their strange dances in the moonlight; he had seen them attack a great toad that had been frozen in its tracks with horror; he had beheld them breed and lay their eggs and had been first to see the little wormlike things that left the shells. Later he beheld the same mystery in the viviparous rattlers.

Then one day Abe had followed a great rattler from the river-bank far up precipitous trails to a wonderful serpent colony on the rocks. A man may live years in the hills and never find one of these places; but once he does he remembers it to the day he dies. And

he will go many paces out of his way to avoid the place again.

The serpent cities are great fragments of broken ledge where the rattlesnakes gather in countless hundreds. No man knows what their business is. No man can imagine what consultations the great grey king rattlers have among themselves, what the females—no less deadly and twice as malignant—say to one another, and why they lie for such endless hours so still upon the rocks.

Sometime they lie apart, and sometimes a number of them will make a ghastly mass like the twined locks of a Medusa. Sometimes they stretch two and two, and often the great males will battle to the death for a resting place on a rock too small for both. All these things Abe Carver had seen, and if any man in the world knew the why and wherefore of them all, Abe Carver was he.

ABE had been bitten many times, but he had always carried antidotes of the most scientific and effective kind. And long ago he had become immune to rattler's venom. He wore tall, tough boots,—for a rattler's bile is painful even when one is immune to its toxin,—and he wore long gloves over his wrists and hands. The gloves were just as important as the boots, because in climbing over the snake city a man could only make progress by using both hands and feet.

At twenty-one he had a knowledge of rattlesnakes past that of any naturalist of his period in the world. At forty the poison-folk that ever coil and glide and strike and dance on the rocks were his cult and his life and his eternal mystery. But at sixty he had passed all this. He had lived too long in the under plane. In a measure they had become his own people. They did not mystify him now. Except for a dog that whined and cowered at the extreme frontier of the snake-city, they were the one remaining interest in his life.

At sixty Abe Carver had broken one of the few great underlying laws of the universe. He had probed too deeply into a mystery that had not been meant for human beings to know. It has been the same since the beginning of the world. There have been men who have looked too far into the occult sciences of the East—and their story is a good one to forget. There is a more recent story of a man who purposely went to prison to study the ways of criminals and came out a criminal, himself. Abe Carver had lain for too many long sunlight hours watching the ceaseless roiling of the poison-folk. He had gazed too long into their glittering eyes. There had been a time when he wondered at himself—at the strange pleasure he took in the touch of their cold bodies, but that was past. He had once started with amazement at the sight of his own bright eyes in a looking-glass; but long ago he had become accustomed to their glitter. And once another mountaineer had shuddered and sworn that Carver moved through the hills like a snake itself; but Abe had forgotten that his reply had only been a laugh. These were just externals—simply unconscious imitation. But too many times he had watched the night-hunting of the snakes, had seen their cold rage in battles; their own remorselessness had grown into his blood and fiber.

They feared him no more. He had learned to imitate a little whispered call—more like a hiss than a word—by which they knew their friends; a sound that long ago he had learned was the snakes' peace-greeting. He could whisper it softly at the first stir of a gray ribbon beneath a rock, and it meant that he could pass back and forth unchallenged.

JUST once as Carver walked down the moonlit trail to the Trotter's house, he had to utter the call. Just as he had come down into the lower hills, a gray shadow had streaked across his path. And for the first time since he

had left his dead companion on the trail, he paused tensely.

His eyes probed into the darkness where the snake had vanished. It had been but a gopher-snake, after all; but it had started a queer current of thought in his mind. What had he meant to do by this blind advance? The Trotters were three, all of them dead shots and in the prime of their strength; and he was only one. Does a wolf attack when he has odds of three against him?

He had come up blindly from the trail, his heart full of such cold hatred as most men have long ago lost the power to feel. Hatred must have exercise as well as any other emotion, or it dries up like the poison-duct of a snake of fifty winters—and too many years of peace have killed the power of most human beings to feel it. But Carver had had good teachers.

Even at first it had not been the kind of hatred that ignites the brain and heart and makes a man helpless before his foes. Thoughts must be allowed free play; brains must be kept clear. This is one of the first laws of the wilderness. Yet he had not stopped to plan. He was dimly cognizant of some wild and daring impulse to attack all three of the Trotters as they sat in their cottage—of slaying them as a wolf slays sheep. Yet in a single moment of clear thinking he knew that his one hope lay in strategy alone.

He might kill one of them; but surely the deadly aim of one of the other two would end his own life. One was not enough. Besides, the preservation of one's life is the first law of the forest and no plan must be considered that entailed its loss.

Abe walked softly, stealthily down into the first clearings. Once a horse neighed wildly and fled in unlooked-for terror, and once a toad, usually so dull and stolid hopped frantically into the darkness. In a little while he saw the windows of the Trotter cottage.

THE men had not yet gone to bed; but the fact did not surprise Carver. Of course they had been looking for Abe to attempt some stroke of vengeance and they had no intention of being found asleep. Abe felt a little shiver of gladness, something like the first rapture of passion for the more tired they were in the next day's business, the longer were the odds against them. He stole up to the window.

The three of them were sitting in their filthy room; and drowsiness had begun to dull the savagery of their faces. All evening through they had waited for Abe to come; and now that he was here, they did not know it. They were three great, dark men, foul of tongue and evil of face.

"We might as well go to bed," the oldest Trotter was saying. "The skunk aint comin'."

The second brother stood up and stretched out his arms. "He ain't got the nerve. Whatever made you think he had? He's crazy, anyway—you can see it in his eyes."

"I don't like them eyes," the youngest of the three objected. And he ought to have known, for they were fast upon him as he spoke.

The others laughed. "He's a bluff—and what could he do against the three of us? We'd shoot him like a rat before he got his guns out. But one of us had better keep watch. We'll take turns at it—two hours each."

"Maybe his dog died on the trail, and he hasn't seen him yet," the youngest of the three went on. "We'd hate to have to carry him up and throw him in old Abe's bed."

The three of them laughed—a grim terrible sound that rocked out into the quiet night. The old man's lower teeth gnawed at his lip. He was shaking all over now—yet not enough to stir the dead leaves under his feet. It was not nervousness except in the sense that all wild creatures are nervous at the beginning of a hunt. It was hatred that seemed to shiver

his heart to pieces.

"I tried to live enough life in him to get home," the older brother answered. And they chortled again. Then they lay down in their clothes to sleep.

They did not dream of the two remorseless eyes that glittered through the windowpane. And then, as a shadow goes, the old man glided away. He went into the deepest brush; and the lessons of silence he had learned on the rock-ledges laid his feet like cushions against the dry twigs. Then his lids slowly closed over his fixed eyes, and he went to sleep.

There was work to do on the morrow; and work to be done well needs fresh muscles and clear thought such as only sleep can give. Fifty feet to his right a wolf sept through the early night-hours, waiting for the hunting-time in the dawn. One hundred to his left a rattlesnake curled about a rock still warm from the previous day's sun; and it was deep in its slumber. And to one that looked down from the clouds, the three would have seemed of the same breed.

THE long, silent wait in the brush would have been a physical drain on some men, but Abe knew just how to lie relaxed and conserve his strength. The night drew to morning—a dawn that leaped up over the mountains wherein the trees sprang out of the shadow one by one and grew clear-lined--and the morning drew till noon. The vigilance of the Trotters had grown ever less as the morning hours went by. When they came in to dinner at noon they had decided that Carver would attempt no vengeance at all.

They did not know that even a toothless wolf will fight to the death, and that a rattlesnake will strike after its poison-glands are dried up with age. If they had known these things they might have been more watchful when they went out to their work in the

afternoon.

They did not see Abe creep into the house. If he had glided in the dust like his poison-people, he could have scarcely been less visible. Even the buzzard that keeps grim watch over all the mountains, did not see him.

The house was quite deserted. It was full of the odors of uncleanness—a quality very hard to endure by one accustomed to the clean smells of the woods. And there were hardly enough articles of value in the house for his decoy. It didn't much matter, however. The sight of him leaving the cabin with a full sack would be enough to put then on his trail.

He emptied the potatoes from a burlap sack, then filled the bag with such things as he thought the Trotters valued most. Then he put in a light comforter to give the bag an appearance of weight and bulk.

But he was not through yet. The Trotters carried their pistols, but their rifles were hung on the deer-horns over the little fireplace. A well-aimed rifle-bullet might end the adventure before it had begun; and his next business was to spike the guns beyond repair. It was not hard to do. with a hammer and a brick from the fireplace.

He did not work in silence now. A little noise was better. If the Trotters heard and came, their dog would surely reach him before they did. And he did not wish too long a start on them. He merely wanted to remain just out of pistol-range. And now only one gun remained unbroken.

HE was still cold as steel; and the only change in him was an added brilliancy in his reptile eyes. But a madness was creeping through his blood like a poison. His face was curiously white; and his motions, ever quickened, became more lithe and sinuous. His age had fallen from his shoulders in a breath. With a clang and clash he struck the fireplace wall with the last of the three rifles

and the lock shattered to pieces.

Far away, though the windows, he saw the three Trotters stop in their work. It was just as he had hoped. He shouted at them, a scream of fury, and crouched to wait the onslaught of the dog. It was bounding across the fields toward the cabin; and in a moment more it would spring into the open door.

The two met in the doorway; and a knife flashed down in a white light. Then, laughed his scorn, and in plain sight of the three men that watched from their fields, he kicked the bleeding body from his path.

With his bag over his shoulder, he started running toward the hills. One of the Trotters' herd of long-horn cattle lifted its head from the grass as he passed and he fired remorselessly at its shoulders. It rocked down with a bellow; and he halted to drive his blade into its neck.

The Trotters were firing now, impotently, with their pistols. And Abe Carver cursed with mad rapture when he saw them spring in pursuit of him. He did not need the sack over his shoulder as a decoy. Once having seen the butchery of the steer and dog, they would follow him till they died.

Just as he had hoped, they soon swung into the long, easy trot that is one of the few accomplishments men have learned from the wild creatures. It is a pace that will run down a horse in time; and they did not question for a moment that overtaking Carver was but the work of an hour at most. They were young and strong, and he was old.

The youngest of the three had gone to the cabin after the rifles; now he had joined them with the story of a fresh atrocity. And the three of them trotted together up the long slope in pursuit of the gray figure just ahead.

THEY did not waste their pistol-cartridges by firing at Carver. A pistol is not particularly accurate at long distances, and

Carver hovered just out of range. They would catch him soon anyway. Besides, a murder at arm's-length would better satiate their fury.

He led them over hills and down into still glens and around the shoulders of mountains and along narrow trails. He was trotting slowly now, and their pace had decreased, too. As danger from pistol-fire grew less, he had permitted the distance to narrow between them. Ever he moved toward the great waste of crag and rock-heap that men called the Dead Indian Mountains. And ever he drew his three pursuers after him...

Now he was traversing the great range itself. The August sun blasted down in fury, and the rocks swam and shimmered in the heat-waves. It was the most horrid hour of the day, just as he had hoped.

The three came hot on the trail, for surely he was almost exhausted now. The great rock-heaps, piled as if in the play of a mad god, looked down at this strange chase, and had never seem the like before.

Now Carver was ready to descend. He knew the country well. A thousand times he had crept down this same precipice of shale—a steep slope that ended on a white rock-ledge below. There was no retreat once one started that descent. Hands and knees and feet were needed to prevent a fatal fall, and only by the most tortuous climbing could one ever leave the white ledge below.

HE dipped down and down; and now he began to utter a little whispered call that was more nearly like the hiss of a snake than a human cry—the friendship articulation of the

poison people.

Literally hundreds of the lithe, spotted ribbons of gray were sunning themselves on the rocks—as always in the heat of the day. Some of them were in ghastly masses and some were stretched at full length. It was the great colony of rattle-snakes that Abe Carver had known of old, the great assembly of poison folk whose bite is death.

They could not see him now, but they heard his call. The rattlers shed their skins in dog-days; and during the period they become temporarily blind. And that is the time that all creatures most carefully avoid the snake-trails in the dust. At such times their malignancy is at its height, and they strike without warning at the slightest movement on the stone.

But they gave no heed to old Abe Carver. They were used to him, and to their own whispered friendship-call that marked him as a brother rattler than a foe. He climbed slowly down, his face and hands and body almost brushing hundreds of the terrible flat heads. Then he dropped his bag and sped into the brush beneath.

And just as he had known, his three pursuers plunged down after him.

THE wild is very old and most imperturbable; and all except its own soft voices are always quickly stilled. A gray old man who had chattered and danced in rapture stretched out in the sun to sleep. And almost as quickly as the ripples die when three stones are cast into the sea, the silence fell again over the serpent city.