

# **NO HAID PAWN**

Thomas Nelson Page



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It was a ghostly place in broad daylight, if the glimmer that stole in through the dense forest that surrounded it when the sun was directly overhead deserved this delusive name. At any other time it was – why, we were afraid even to talk about it! and as to venturing within its gloomy borders, it was currently believed among us that to do so was to bring upon the intruder certain death. I knew every foot of ground, wet and dry, within five miles of my father's house, except this plantation, for I had hunted by day and night every field, forest, and marsh within that radius; but the swamp and "ma'shes" that surrounded this place I had never invaded. The boldest hunter on the plantation would call off his dogs and go home if they struck a trail that crossed the sobby boundary–line of "No Haid Pawn."

"Jack 'my lanterns" and "evil sperits" only infested those woods, and the earnest advice of those whom we children acknowledged to know most about them was, "Don't you never go nigh dyah honey; hit's de evil–speritest place in dis wull."

Had not Big William and Cephas and Poliam followed their dogs in there one night, and cut down a tree in which they had with their own eyes seen the coon, and lo! when it fell "de warn no mo' coon dyah 'n a dog!" and the next tree they had "treed in" not only had no coon in it, but when it was cut down it had fallen on Poliam and broken his leg. So the very woods were haunted. From this time they were abandoned to the "jack 'my lanterns" and ghosts, and another shadow was added to No Haid Pawn.

The place was as much cut off from the rest of the country as if a sea had divided it. The river, with marshy banks, swept around it in a wide horseshoe on three sides, and when the hammocks dammed it up it washed its way straight across and scoured out a new bed for itself, completely isolating the whole plantation.

The owners of it, if there were any, which was doubtful, were aliens, and in my time it had not been occupied for forty years. The negroes declared that it was "gin up" to the "ha'nts an' evil sperits," and that no living being could live there. It had grown up in forest and had wholly reverted to original marsh. The road that once ran through the swamp had long since been choked up, and the trees were as thick and the jungle as dense now, in its track, as in the adjacent "ma'sh." Only one path remained. That, it was currently believed by the entire portion of the population who speculated on the subject, was kept open by the evil spirits. Certain it was that no human foot ever trod the narrow, tortuous line that ran through the brakes as deviously as the noiseless, stagnant ditches that curved through the jungle, where the musk–rats played and the moccasin slept unmolested. Yet there it lay, plain and well–defined, month after month and year after year, as No Haid Pawn itself stood, amid its surrounding swamps, all undisturbed and unchanging.

Even the runaway slaves who occasionally left their homes and took to the swamps and woods, impelled by the cruelty of their overseers, or by a desire for a vain counterfeit of freedom, never tried this swamp, but preferred to be caught and returned home to invading its awful shades.

We were brought up to believe in ghosts. Our fathers and mothers laughed at us, and endeavored to reason us out of such a superstition – the fathers with much of ridicule and satire, the mothers giving sweet religious reasons for their argument – but what could they avail against the actual testimony and the blood–curdling experiences of a score of witnesses, who recounted their personal observations with a degree of thrilling realism and a vividness that overbore any arguments our childish reason could grasp! The old mammies and uncles who were our companions and comrades believed in the existence of evil spirits as truly as in the existence of hell or heaven, as to which at that time no question had ever been raised, so far as was known, in that slumberous world. [The Bible was the standard, and all disputes were resolved into an appeal to that authority, the single question as to any point being simply, "Is it in the Bible?"] Had not Lazarus, and Mam' Celia, and William, and Twis'–foot–Bob, and Aunt Sukie Brown, and others seen with their own eyes the evil spirits, again and again, in the bodily shape of cats, headless dogs, white cows, and other less palpable forms! And was not their experience,

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who lived in remote cabins, or wandered night after night through the loneliest woods, stronger evidence than the cold reasoning of those who hardly ever stirred abroad except in daylight? It certainly was more conclusive to us; for no one could have listened to those narrators without being impressed with the fact that they were recounting what they had actually seen with their bodily eyes. The result of it all was, so far as we were concerned, the triumph of faith over reason, and the fixed belief, on our part, in the actual visible existence of the departed, in the sinister form of apparition known as "evil sperits." Every graveyard was tenanted by them; every old house and every peculiarly desolate spot was known to be their rendezvous; but all spots and places sank into insignificance compared with No Haid Pawn.

The very name was uncanny. Originally it had designated a long, stagnant pool of water lying in the centre of the tract, which marked the spot from which the soil had been dug to raise the elevation on which to set the house. More modernly the place, by reason of the filling up of ditches and the sinking of dikes, had become again simple swamp and jungle, or, to use the local expression, "had turned to ma'sh," and the name applied to the whole plantation.

The origin of the name of the pond had no source; but there was a better explanation than that. Any how, the very name inspired dread, and the place was our terror.

The house had been built many generations before by a stranger in this section, and the owners never made it their permanent home. Thus, no tie either of blood or friendship were formed with their neighbors, who were certainly open-hearted and open-doored enough to overcome anything but the most persistent unneighborliness. Why this spot was selected for a mansion was always a mystery, unless it was that the new-comer desired to isolate himself completely. Instead of following the custom of those who were native and to the manner born, who always chose some eminence for their seats, he had selected for his a spot in the middle of the wide flat which lay in the horseshoe of the river. The low ground, probably owing to the abundance of land in that country, had never been "taken up," and up to the time of his occupation was in a condition of primeval swamp. He had to begin by making an artificial mound for his mansion. Even then, it was said, he dug so deep that he laid the corner-stone in water. The foundation was of stone, which was brought from a distance. Fabulous stories were told of it. The negroes declared that under the old house were solid rock chambers, which had been built for dungeons, and had served for purposes which were none the less awful because they were vague and indefinite. The huge structure itself was of wood, and was alleged to contain many mysterious rooms and underground passages. One of the latter was said to connect with the No Haid Pawn itself, whose dark waters, according to the negroes' traditions, were some day, by some process not wholly consistent with the laws of physics, to overwhelm the fated pile. An evil destiny had seemed to overshadow the place from the very beginning. One of the negro builders had been caught and decapitated between two of the immense foundation stones. The tradition was handed down that he was sacrificed in some awful and occult rite connected with the laying of the corner-stone. The scaffolding had given way and had precipitated several men to the ground, most of whom had been fatally hurt. This also was alleged to be by hideous design. Then the plantation, in the process of being reclaimed, had proved unhealthy beyond all experience, and the negroes employed in the work of diking and reclaiming the great swamp had sickened and died by dozens. The extension of the dangerous fever to the adjoining plantations had left a reputation for typhus malaria from which the whole section suffered for a time. But this did not prevent the colored population from recounting year after year the horrors of the pestilence of No Haid Pawn as a peculiar visitation, nor from relating with blood-curdling details the burial by scores, in a thicket just beside the pond, of the stricken "befo' dee daid, honey, befo' dee daid!" The bodies, it was said, used to float about in the guts of the swamp and on the haunted pond; and at night they might be seen, if any one were so hardy as to venture there, rowing about in their coffins as if they were boats.

Thus the place from the beginning had an evil name, and when, year after year, the river rose and washed the levees away, or the musk-rats burrowed through and let the water in, and the strange masters cursed not only the elements but Heaven itself, the continued mortality of their negroes was not wholly unexpected nor unaccounted for by certain classes of their neighbors.

At length the property had fallen to one more gloomy, more strange, and more sinister than any who had gone before him – a man whose personal characteristics and habits were unique in that country. He was of gigantic stature and superhuman strength, and possessed appetites and vices in proportion to his size. He could fell an ox with a blow of his fist, or in a fit of anger could tear down the branch of a tree, or bend a bar of iron like a reed.

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He, either from caprice or ignorance, spoke only a patois not unlike the Creole French of the Louisiana parishes. But he was a West Indian. His brutal temper and habits cut him off from even the small measure of intercourse which had existed between his predecessors and their neighbors, and he lived at No Haid Pawn completely isolated. All the stories and traditions of the place at once centred on him, and fabulous tales were told of his prowess and of his life. It was said, among other things, that he preserved his wonderful strength by drinking human blood, a tale which in a certain sense I have never seen reason to question. Making all allowances, his life was a blot upon civilization. At length it culminated. A brutal temper, inflamed by unbridled passions, after a long period of license and debauchery came to a climax in a final orgy of ferocity and fury, in which he was guilty of an act whose fiendishness surpassed belief, and he was brought to judgment.

In modern times the very inhumanity of the crime would probably have proved his security, and as he had destroyed his own property while he was perpetrating a crime of appalling and unparalleled horror, he might have found a defence in that standing refuge of extraordinary scoundrelism – insanity. This defence, indeed, was put in, and was pressed with much ability by his counsel, one of whom was my father, who had just then been admitted to the bar; but, fortunately for the cause of justice, neither courts nor juries were then so sentimental as they have become of late years, and the last occupant of No Haid Pawn paid under the law the full penalty of his hideous crime. It was one of the curious incidents of the trial that his negroes all lamented his death, and declared that he was a good master when he was not drunk. He was hanged just at the rear of his own house, within sight of the spot where his awful crime was committed.

At his execution, which, according to the custom of the country, was public, a horrible coincidence occurred which furnished the text of many a sermon on retributive justice among the negroes.

The body was interred near the pond, close by the thicket where the negroes were buried; but the negroes declared that it preferred one of the stone chambers under the mansion, where it made its home, and that it might be seen at any time of the day or night stalking headless about the place. They used to dwell with peculiar zest on the most agonizing details of this wretch's dreadful crime, the whole culminating in the final act of maniacal fury, when the gigantic monster dragged the hacked and headless corpse of his victim up the staircase and stood it up before the open window in his hall, in the full view of the terrified slaves. After these narrations, the continued reappearance of the murderer and his headless victim was as natural to us as it was to the negroes themselves; and, as night after night we would hurry up to the great house through the darkness, we were ever on the watch lest he should appear to our frightened vision from the shades of the shrubbery-filled yard.

Thus it was that of all ghostly places No Haid Pawn had the distinction of being invested, to us, with unparalleled horror; and thus to us, no less than because the dikes had given way and the overflowed flats had turned again to swamp and jungle, it was explicable that No Haid Pawn was abandoned, and was now untrodden by any foot but that of its ghostly tenants.

The time of my story was 185–. The spring previous continuous rains had kept the river full, and had flooded the low grounds, and this had been followed by an exceptionally dense growth in the summer. Then, public feeling was greatly excited at the time of which I write, over the discovery in the neighborhood of several emissaries of the underground railway, or – as they were universally considered in that country – of the devil. They had been run off or had disappeared suddenly, but had left behind them some little excitement on the part of the slaves, and a great deal on the part of their masters, and more than the usual number of negroes had run away. All, however, had been caught, or had returned home after a sufficient interval of freedom, except one who had escaped permanently, and who was supposed to have accompanied his instigators on their flight.

This man was a well-known character. He belonged to one of our neighbors, and had been bought and brought there from an estate on the Lower Mississippi. He was the most brutal negro I ever knew. He was of a type rarely found among our negroes, who, judging from their physiognomy and general characteristics, came principally from the coast of Africa. They are of moderate stature, with dull but amiable faces. This man, however, was of immense size, and he possessed the features and expression of a Congo desperado. In character also he differed essentially from all the other slaves in our country. He was alike without their amiability and their docility, and was as fearless as he was brutal. He was the only negro I ever knew who was without either superstition or reverence. Indeed, he differed so widely from the rest of the slaves in that section that there existed some feeling against him almost akin to a race feeling. At the same time that he exercised considerable influence over them they were dreadfully afraid of him, and were always in terror that he would trick them, to which awful

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power he laid well-known claim. His curses in his strange dialect used to terrify them beyond measure, and they would do anything to conciliate him. He had been a continual source of trouble and an object of suspicion in the neighborhood from the time of his first appearance; and more than one hog that the negroes declared had wandered into the marshes of No Haid Pawn, and had "cut his thote jes' swinin' aroun' an' around' in de ma'sh," had been suspected of finding its way to this man's cabin. His master had often been urged to get rid of him, but he was kept, I think, probably because he was valuable on the plantation. He was a fine butcher, a good work-hand, and a first-class boatman. Moreover, ours was a conservative population, in which every man minded his own business and let his neighbor's alone.

At the time of the visits of those secret agents to which I have referred, this negro was discovered to be the leader in the secret meetings held under their auspices, and he would doubtless have been taken up and shipped off at once; but when the intruders fled, as I have related, their convert disappeared also. It was a subject of general felicitation in the neighborhood that he was gotten rid of, and his master, instead of being commiserated on the loss of his slave, was congratulated that he had not cut his throat.

No idea can be given at this date of the excitement occasioned in a quiet neighborhood in old times by the discovery of the mere presence of such characters as Abolitionists. It was as if the foundations of the whole social fabric were undermined. It was the sudden darkening of a shadow that always hung in the horizon. The slaves were in a large majority, and had they risen, though the final issue could not be doubted, the lives of every white on the plantations must have paid the forfeit. Whatever the right and wrong of slavery might have been, its existence demanded that no outside interference with it should be tolerated. So much was certain; self-preservation required this.

I was, at the time of which I speak, a well-grown lad, and had been for two sessions to a boarding school, where I had gotten rid of some portion – I will not say of all – of the superstition of my boyhood. The spirit of adventure was beginning to assert itself in me, and I had begun to feel a sense of enjoyment in overcoming the fears which once mastered me, though, I must confess, I had not entirely shaken off my belief in the existence of ghosts – that is, I did not believe in them at all in the day-time, but when night came I was not so certain about it.

Duck-hunting was my favorite sport, and the marshes on the river were fine ground for them usually, but this season the weather had been so singularly warm that the sport had been poor, and though I had scoured every canal in the marsh and every bend in the river as far as No Haid Pawn Hammock, as the stretch of drifted timber and treacherous marsh was called that marked the boundary-line of that plantation, I had had bad luck. Beyond that point I had never penetrated; partly, no doubt, because of the training of my earlier years, and partly because the marsh on either side of the hammock would have mired a cat. Often, as I watched with envious eyes the wild duck rise up over the dense trees that surrounded the place and cut straight for the deserted marshes in the horseshoe, I had had a longing to invade the mysterious domain, and crawl to the edge of No Haid Pawn and get a shot at the fowl that floated on its black surface; but something had always deterred me, and the long reaches of No Haid Pawn were left to the wild-fowl and the ghostly rowers. Finally, however, after a spell whose high temperature was rather suited to August than April, in desperation at my ill-luck I determined to gratify my curiosity and try No Haid Pawn. So one afternoon, without telling any one of my intention, I crossed the mysterious boundary and struck through the swamp for the unknown land.

The marsh was far worse than I had anticipated, and no one but a duck-hunter as experienced and zealous as myself, and as indifferent to ditches, briers, mire, and all that make a swamp, could have penetrated it at all. Even I could never have gotten on if I had not followed the one path that led into the marsh, the reputed "parf" of the evil spirits, and, as it was, my progress was both tedious and dangerous.

The track was a mysterious one, for though I knew it had not been trodden by a human foot in many years, yet there, a veritable "parf" it lay. In some places it was almost completely lost, and I would fear I should have to turn back, but an overhanging branch or a vine swinging from one tree to another would furnish a way to some spot where the narrow trail began again. In other spots old logs thrown across the miry canals gave me an uncomfortable feeling as I reflected what feet had last crossed on them. On both sides of this trail the marsh was either an impenetrable jungle or a mire apparently bottomless.

I shall never forget my sensations as I finally emerged from the woods into the clearing, if that desolate waste of willows, cane, and swamp growth could be so termed. About me stretched the jungle, over which a greenish lurid atmosphere brooded, and straight ahead towered the gaunt mansion, a rambling pile of sombre white, with



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numberless vacant windows staring at me from the leafless trees about it. Only one other clump of trees appeared above the canes and brush, and that I knew by intuition was the graveyard.

I think I should have turned back had not shame impelled me forward. My progress from this point was even more difficult than it had been hitherto, for the trail at the end of the wood terminated abruptly in a gut of the swamp; however, I managed to keep on by walking on hammocks, pushing through clumps of bushes, and wading as best I could. It was slow and hot work, though.

It never once struck me that it must be getting late. I had become so accustomed to the gloom of the woods that the more open ground appeared quite light to me, and I had not paid any attention to the black cloud that had been for some time gathering overhead, or to the darkening atmosphere.

I suddenly became sensible that it was going to rain. However, I was so much engrossed in the endeavor to get on that even then I took little note of it. The nearer I came to the house the more it arrested my attention, and the more weird and uncanny it looked. Canes and bushes grew up to the very door; the window-shutters hung from the hinges; the broken windows glared like eyeless sockets; the portico had fallen away from the wall, while the wide door stood slightly ajar, giving to the place a singularly ghastly appearance, somewhat akin to the color which sometimes lingers on the face of a corpse. In my progress wading through the swamp I had gone around rather to the side of the house toward where I supposed the "pawn" itself to lie. I was now quite near to it, and striking a little less miry ground, as I pushed my way through the bushes and canes, which were higher than my head, I became aware that I was very near the thicket that marked the graveyard, just beyond which I knew the pond itself lay. I was somewhat startled, for the cloud made it quite dusky, and, stepping on a long piece of rotten timber lying on the ground, I parted the bushes to look down the pond. As I did so the rattle of a chain grated on me, and, glancing up through the cane, before me appeared a heavy upright timber with an arm or cross-beam stretching from it, from which dangled a long chain, almost rusted away. I knew by instinct that I stood under the gallows where the murderer of No Haid Pawn had expiated his dreadful crime. His corpse must have fallen just where I stood. I started back appalled.

Just then the black cloud above me was parted by a vivid flame, and a peal of thunder seemed to rive the earth.

I turned in terror, but before I had gone fifty yards the storm was upon me, and instinctively I made for the only refuge that was at hand. It was a dreadful alternative, but I did not hesitate. Outside I was not even sure that my life was safe. And with extraordinary swiftness I had made my way through the broken iron fence that lay rusting in the swamp, had traversed the yard, all grown up as it was to the very threshold, had ascended the sunken steps, crossed the rotted portico, and entered the open door.

A long dark hall stretched before me, extending, as well as I could judge in the gloom, entirely across the house. A number of doors, some shut, some ajar, opened on the hall on one side; and a **\*\*broad' dark\*\*** stairway ascended on the other to the upper story. The walls were black with mould. At the far end a large bow window, with all the glass gone, looked out on the waste of swamp, unbroken save by the clump of trees in the graveyard, and just beside this window was a break where the dark staircase descended to the apartments below. The whole place was in a state of advanced decay; almost the entire plastering had fallen with the damp, and the hall presented a scene of desolation that beggars description.

I was at last in the haunted house!

The rain, driven by the wind, poured in at the broken windows in such a deluge that I was forced in self-defence to seek shelter in one of the rooms. I tried several, but the doors were swollen or fastened, I found one, however, on the leeward side of the house, and, pushing the door, which opened easily, I entered. Inside I found something like an old bed; and the great open fireplace had evidently been used at some earlier time, for the ashes were still banked up in the cavernous hearth, and the charred ends of the logs of wood were lying in the chimney corners. To see, still as fresh and natural as though the fire had but just died out, these remnants of domestic life that had survived all else of a similar period struck me as unspeakably ghastly. The bedstead, however, though rude, was convenient as a seat, and I utilized it accordingly, propping myself up against one of the rough posts. From my position I commanded through the open door the entire length of the vacant hall, and could look straight out of the great bow-window at the head of the stairs, through which appeared, against the dull sky, the black mass of the graveyard trees, and a stretch of one of the canals or guts of the swamp curving around it, which gleamed white in the glare of the lightning.

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I had expected that the storm would, like most thunder-storms in the latitude, shortly exhaust itself, or, as we say, "blow over;" but I was mistaken, and as the time passed, its violence, instead of diminishing, increased. It grew darker and darker, and presently the startling truth dawned on me that the gloom which I had supposed simply the effect of the overshadowing cloud had been really nightfall. I was shut up alone in No Haid Pawn for the night.

I hastened to the door with the intention of braving the storm and getting away; but I was almost blown off my feet. A glance without showed me that the guts with which the swamp was traversed in every direction were now full to the brim, and to attempt to find my way home in the darkness would be sheer madness; so, after a wistful survey, I returned to my wretched perch. I thought I would try and light a fire, but to my consternation I had not a match, and I finally abandoned myself to my fate. It was a desolate, if not despairing, feeling that I experienced. My mind was filled, not only with my own unhappiness, but with the thought of the distress my absence would occasion them at home; and for a little while I had a fleeting hope that a party would be sent out to search for me. This, however, was untenable, for they would not know where I was. The last place in which they would ever think of looking for me was No Haid Pawn, and even if they knew I was there they could no more get to me in the darkness and storm than I could escape from it.

I accordingly propped myself up on my bed and gave myself up to my reflections. I said my prayers very fervently. I thought I would try and get to sleep, but sleep was far from my eyes.

My surroundings were too vivid to my apprehension. The awful traditions of the place, do what I might to banish them, would come to mind. The original building of the house, and its blood-stained foundation stones; the dead who had died of the pestilence that had raged afterward; the bodies carted by scores and buried in the sobby earth of the graveyard, whose trees loomed up through the broken window; the dreadful story of the dead paddling about the swamp in their coffins; and, above all, the gigantic maniac whose ferocity even murder could not satiate, and who had added to murder awful mutilation: he had dragged the mangled corpse of his victim up those very steps and flung it out of the very window which gaped just beyond me in the glare of the lightning. It all passed through my mind as I sat there in the darkness, and no effort of my will could keep my thoughts from dwelling on it. The terrific thunder, outcrashing a thousand batteries, at times engrossed my attention; but it always reverted to that scene of horror; and if I dozed, the slamming of the loose blinds, or the terrific fury of the storm, would suddenly startle me. Once, as the sounds subsided for a moment, or else I having become familiar with them, as I was sinking into a sleepy state, a door at the other end of the hall creaked and then slammed with violence, bringing me bolt upright on the bed, clutching my gun. I could have sworn that I heard footsteps; but the wind was blowing a hurricane, and, after another period of wakefulness and dreadful recollection, nature succumbed, and I fell asleep.

I do not know that I can be said to have lost consciousness even then, for my mind was still enchained by the horrors of my situation, and went on clinging to them and dwelling upon them even in my slumber.

I was, however, certainly asleep; for the storm must have died temporarily away about this hour without my knowing it, and I subsequently heard that it did.

I must have slept several hours, for I was quite stiff from my constrained posture when I became fully aroused.

I was awakened by a very peculiar sound; it was like a distant call or halloo. Although I had been fast asleep a moment before, it startled me into a state of the highest attention. In a second I was wide awake. There was not a sound except the rumble and roll of the thunder, as the storm once more began to renew itself, and in the segment of the circle that I could see along the hall through my door, and, indeed, out through the yawning window at the end, as far as the black clump of trees in the graveyard just at the bend of the canal, which I commanded from my seat whenever there was a flash of lightning, there was only the swaying of the bushes in the swamp and of the trees in the graveyard. Yet there I sat bolt upright on my bed, in the darkness, with every nerve strained to its utmost tension, and that unearthly cry still sounding in my ears. I was endeavoring to reason myself into the belief that I had dreamed it, when a flash of lightning lit up the whole field of my vision as if it had been in the focus of a sun-glass, and out on the canal, where it curved around the graveyard, was a boat – a something – small, black, with square ends, and with a man in it, standing upright, and something lying in a lump or mass at the bow.

I knew I could not be mistaken, for the lightning, by a process of its own, photographed everything on the retina in minutest detail, and I had a vivid impression of everything from the foot of the bed, on which I crouched, to the

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gaunt arms of those black trees in the graveyard just over that ghostly boatman and his dreadful freight. I was wide awake

The story of the dead rowing in their coffins was verified!

I am unable to state what passed in the next few minutes.

The storm had burst again with renewed violence and was once more expending itself on the house; the thunder was again rolling overhead; the broken blinds were swinging and slamming madly; and the dreadful memories of the place were once more be setting\*\* me.

I shifted my position to relieve the cramp it had occasioned, still keeping my face toward that fatal window. As I did so, I heard above, or perhaps I should say under, the storm a sound more terrible to me – the repetition of that weird halloo, this time almost under the great window. Immediately succeeding this was the sound of something scraping under the wall, and I was sensible when a door on the ground–floor was struck with a heavy thud. It was pitch–dark, but I heard the door pushed wide open, and as a string of fierce oaths, part English and part Creole French, floated up the dark stairway, muffled as if sworn through clinched teeth, I held my breath. I recalled the unknown tongue the ghostly murderer employed; and I knew that the murderer of No Haid Pawn had left his grave, and that his ghost was coming up that stair. I heard his step as it fell on the first stair heavily yet almost noiselessly. It was an unearthly sound – dull, like the tread of a bared foot, accompanied by the scraping sound of a body dragging. Step by step he came up the black stairway in the pitch darkness as steadily as if it were daytime, and he knew every step, accompanied by that sickening sound of dragging. There was a final pull up the last step, and a dull, heavy thud, as, with a strange, wild laugh, he flung his burden on the floor.

For a moment there was not a sound, and then the awful silence and blackness were broken by a crash of thunder that seemed to tear the foundations asunder like a mighty earthquake, and the whole house, and the great swamp outside, were filled with a glare of vivid, blinding light. Directly in front of me, clutching in his upraised hand a long, keen, glittering knife, on whose blade a ball of fire seemed to play, stood a gigantic figure in the very flame of the lightning, and stretched at his feet lay, ghastly and bloody, a black and headless trunk.

I staggered to the door and, tripping, fell prostrate over the sill.

When we could get there, nothing was left but the foundation. The haunted house, when struck, had literally burned to the water's edge. The changed current had washed its way close to the place, and in strange verification of the negroes' traditions. No Haid Pawn had reclaimed its own, and the spot with all its secrets lay buried under its dark waters.