

## CHAPTER I

### Beyond Belief

"What, what young men, have you been doing? Have you had a fight in the mud with an alligator?" exclaimed Elbert Whitmire, the hotel-keeper at Fort Myers, Florida.

"What do you mean?" asked Bill Argo, the twenty-year-old tourist and explorer.

"Why, when you left here last winter you were young men, but now, all ragged, haggard and worn, you look like men of forty. Where on earth have you been? Explain yourselves," urged Mr. Whitmire.

"In a tiny motor boat, last January, Dave Williams, Charlie Towns, a trapper and guide,

and I went cruising and exploring in the jungles and everglades of South Florida and reaching a point where no white man had ever trod before, we stopped to admire the wonderful scenery, and while thus engaged———”

“Stop, Bill Argo, stop!” exclaimed Dave, his good natured, seventeen-year-old companion. “You cannot describe those things, and if you could no one would believe them. They are simply beyond belief, so hush!”

Then Bill, the tall and stalwart young adventurer, with a rugged face, big head, big ears, big nose and broad, relentless chin, gave Dave a searching look with his sky blue eyes and said: “Well, the story is true, and I am not afraid to tell it; so after supper let’s relate the story.”

Dave continued to object.

“When we escaped with our lives, lean and forlorn and ten years older than we actually were, we promised each other to keep these things a secret until they could be verified by a dozen of the best preachers in America, so hush!” said Dave.

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"Well, I know we made such a contract, but I find this story hard to keep. I do believe it will break out in spite of all I can do."

"You must fence it in and hold it down, for it is silly to tell the truth when you know no one can believe it. I would hate for us to be considered the two biggest liars that ever toured in the State of Florida, or explored in its wild and untrodden woods. So hush, and stay hushed!"

"Go on Mr. Argo, and tell it!" cried the hotel-keeper. "My guests are now excited. They are on tiptoes. Tell it!"

"Yes, tell it," echoed Bob Hannah, the fat sport from Washington. "I want a thriller to tell my friends when I go home. Go on."

"Do tell it, Mr. Argo," urged Ed Bingham, the local banker. "I live in South Florida and am prepared to believe anything that occurs in that wild and wooly country. So, go on! You have me excited, too."

For a moment Bill hesitated.

"Well, I would like to tell the story, but I did

promise Dave to keep it a secret. So I guess I had better remain silent, though I really thought we made the promise in jest."

"Tell it, Mr. Argo," the hotel-keeper urged, "or these children will not sleep to-night."

"Hurry, Mr. Argo," the fat sport sighed, "for I am not a good sleeper myself."

"Speak up, Mr. Argo, and tell a big lie if you want to; I will believe it," entreated little Whitmire Morgan.

"They must have a real story to tell," explained Mr. Bingham, "for they are worn and tattered and look nearer forty than twenty."

"Tell it! tell it!" shouted all the guests.

"What do you say, Dave?"

"I say, sit down and hush!"

"Mary, you and Rebecca go sit on the sofa with Mr. Williams and hold a hand each, while Mr. Argo tells the story. Go, young ladies, go!" commanded Mr. Hannah.

Laughing, the girls ran over, sat down by

Dave, and seizing his hands said: "Now, Mr. Argo, go on; we'll hold him and protect you."

"He has surrendered to those soft little hands," chuckled Mr. Hannah; "so proceed, Mr. Argo; proceed, and begin at the beginning and tell it all."

Everyone sat still and waited in breathless expectation.

"Dave and I live in Atlanta, and, coming South last winter, we decided to seek real adventure. We employed Charlie Towns, a trapper and guide who had a little motor boat, to take us on a cruise to the unexplored region of the Everglades.

"So, on January first, we set sail down the Caloosahatchee to the Gulf, and coasting southward for some seventy-five miles, we made our way from the Gulf along narrow streams in the saw grass and mud to the Everglades, and there casting anchor, went ashore to camp, hunt and explore."

"Sitting by the camp-fire that night, I said:

'Charlie, we want to penetrate the Everglades further than anyone has ever gone. Can you point out the peninsula that plunges into the Everglades deepest?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'The Snakehead Peninsula, or chain of islands, thirty miles north of here does that, but few have been to Snakehead Island in that chain, and none, no not one, has been to the country beyond.'

'Well now, to Snakehead Island we will go and, exploring it, push to the country further on,' I cried.

'Why, Mr. Argo, you must not think of trying that. You are a city man, not a woodsman. Even I, a native of these forests, have never dared invade that wild and untrodden country.'

'I was born in Atlanta, I confess, but I am a wild man by birth and by nature, and I love nothing so well as the dark, deep woods and the countries remote from the habitation of man.'

'Well, I see you love nature,' said Charlie, 'but you know nothing of woodcraft.'

'You are wrong, Charlie, I have spent all my vacations hunting and exploring in the wilds of the Canadian forests, and all this to my intense delight. So, now, we must be off.'

"Then we walked for three days through the big cypress and reaching the Snakehead, we turned east along the peninsula, which we often found cut in two by muddy passes.

"Walking and wading for five days we at last reached the Snakehead—a beautiful island one mile wide and twice this in length—all covered with palms and stately oaks.

"Resting a night, we arose the next morning and started east through the Snakehead, and, reaching a point about the middle of the island, we saw a small opening in the timber, and inching closer, discovered a cabin made of palm leaves.

'What!' I exclaimed in a whisper. 'Is this the home of someone?'

"The next moment we came upon two old, gray-haired Seminoles, a man and a squaw work-

ing in a garden. Seeing us, they were startled but I spoke to them and they grunted back at me in an unknown tongue. Then they gathered some oranges and gave them to us to eat.

I asked them about the Snakenose Island that lay further east some six or seven miles across an impassable marsh, but they could not understand until I motioned to them my intention of going on. When they caught my meaning they both were seized with stoic fear. He silently motioned for us to return, but she walked westwardly, calling us to follow.

Going a few steps to a tall pine, and throwing her pitiful old arms around it, she pointed to the top. Then she gave a strange grunt and beckoned us to come back.

"What does she mean by that, Charlie?" I asked.

"She is trying to tell us about the big alligators we will have to fight. The Seminoles have a superstitious fear of the Snakenose Island and all the country beyond."



"Poor, ignorant creature," I thought to myself.

"Let's turn back," said Dave.

"Turn back! Not I. No! Never, never. To the Snakenose we will go or fight wild cats until our bloodless faces are as white as snow."

Then we walked off eastwardly, and the two old savages were filled with silent fear and wonder, but in an hour's time we reached the east end of the island. Standing on the muddy beach, we saw in the distance the Snakenose—the unpathed island of fears, wonders and horrors.

"To that island we are bound," I shouted with great joy.

"No, no," Charlie protested. "That island is six or seven miles away. The unknown road is covered with saw-grass, water and mud, all black, thick and quick. No indian or white man has ever attempted to cross that dark and muddy gap. Abandon the enterprise and turn back."

"Your argument deters us not, Charlie, but urges us on, for where the Indians dare not go is the very place for which we are bound."

"The vicious alligators and vile club-tail water moccasins will beset us at every turn. Think of the bottomless quagmires into which we might fall. To sink into a pit, the Indian's hell and the home of evil spirits, how awful! No, turn back, Mr. Argo, turn back," Charlie pleaded.

"For Heaven's sake, let's go home," Dave entreated. "I had rather face the Kaiser's sins than these snakes."

"Be soldiers, boys! You're not women. Put on your accoutrements and let's be off," I urged.

Charlie and Dave stared at each other for a moment.

"Charlie, I want you to tell me just what the Everglades are before I go any further," said Dave.

"Well, the Everglades is a shallow lake, they say a hundred miles across. It is bordered on the west coast, where I know it, with a jungle

of forests, trees, magnolia, vines and ferns. The floor of the lake is covered with a dense growth of saw-grass which, standing thick like wheat, often grows in water ten feet deep."

"How high does it grow above the water?"

Dave asked.

"Oh, it often grows far above one's head, and to get lost in that wilderness is terrible. Many hunters who have gone into that mysterious region have perished alone, and no one has ever found their bodies or their bones."

"Well, is that all?" Dave asked.

"No. There are thousands of low, muddy islands that are covered with trees, bays, palms and ferns, and the whole country is full of snakes and alligators, and for all I know, hundreds of vile creatures unnamed and unknown."

"Well, boys," I said, "this sounds good to me; so get ready for we must go."

Soon we were on the way. Sometimes we waded and sometimes we swam in mud, black, slick and slimy; but to our joy, the alligators

and snakes slid off the mud bars into the saw-grass and disappeared.

By sunset we had covered one-half the distance, but luckily we at this moment reached an island about the size of an art square; and on this, tired and exhausted, we feasted upon hard-tack and lay down to sleep.

Next morning as the sun rose in tropical splendor, we started to cover the remaining distance, and, after many dangers and escapes, we landed on the west end of Snakenose just as the sun set behind golden clouds, and we fell exhausted on the beautiful island.

Resting a moment, I shot a turkey that seemed to have no fear, and after a feast of broiled breast and hard-tack, we lay down on mossy beds and slept the slumber the baby sleeps.

At daybreak we rose, breakfasted, and started into the island that seemed to be no longer than an ordinary plantation. Going about one-half mile we came to a beautiful spring at the foot of a gentle rise.

"Look there! Mr. Argo," exclaimed Charlie; "someone has been camping here. Look at the coals and ashes."

"It is a fact, Charlie, I do believe."

"Who could have camped here?" asked Dave.

"I have no idea," Charlie wondered.

"From the appearance of the coals they must be two or three years old," I inferred.

"The campers cut a bush there and sprouts have come up on the stump. I will cut one in two and count the rings," said I.

"What does this mean?" asked Dave.

"A tree puts on a ring each year and, therefore, the number of rings represents the number of years the tree has grown. The campers certainly cut the bush, and the sprouts having three rings proves they were here three years ago," I explained.

"Well, what can this camp mean in a country where no person has ever been?" Dave asked.

"I believe it has some strange, deep meaning,"

I asserted. "Come, let's go to the east end of this island," and off we went.

"I see the campers went east. Look at the vines they cut. The west sides of the vines where the knife entered are smooth but the east sides are torn and splintered."

After an hour's walk we arrived at the east end of the island, and standing on the black, muddy beach, we saw hundreds of emerald islands filled with birds, and a saw-grass marsh that seemed to have no back side.

"Great stars! Charlie, I see a coat collar imbedded in the mud," I exclaimed.

"Where?"

"Right there in the edge of the water. Wait, I will pull it out."

I reached down, and, catching it, gave a pull, but the object stuck fast.

"Be careful. Don't tear it," Dave said.

Removing some mud I raised the coat up and out.

"What a strange looking coat!" Charlie wondered.

"What kind is it?" asked Dave.

"Wait, and let me wash it," I requested.

Then I washed it and hung it on a bush to dry.

"Look at the epaulets! It is a military coat of some high official," I declared.

"To what nation does it belong?" asked Dave.

"I do not know, but one thing is certain, it does not belong to the United States. It belongs, I said, to some foreign country, but which one I cannot tell."

"What on earth can it mean?" asked Charlie.

"I have been trapping in this country all my life but this beats all. It is beyond my comprehension. What do you think about it?"

We all were bewildered.

"I think some European has been here on a hunt and has lost his coat," Dave reasoned.

"But why would an officer put on a military coat in which to hunt in this out-of-the-way corner of the world?" asked Charlie.

"Well, this argument seems to explode my theory. What do you think about it, Bill?" Dave asked.

"This coat has a deep and hidden meaning. The old Snakehead Indians saw and felt it. You remember they advised us to turn back and acted strangely when we walked this way."

"I believe the campers and the coat man are one," said Dave.

"So do I," Charlie replied.

"Look, Bill! Look! Here are two initials, 'L' and 'K' on the coat. Now, in the name of all the stars at once, whose name and coat are they?" thundered Dave.

At this moment I spied a rough piece of metal, the color of silver, and a little box, in the leaves and grabbing them I——"

"Stop, Bill, stop! You shall not tell that. Do you want us to be hailed as the two biggest liars that ever lived?"

"Be quiet, Mr. Williams," Mr. Hannah said in a quiver of excitement.



"Dave, are you afraid to tell the truth?"

"Yes, I am afraid to tell the truth that is beyond the power of belief. You shall not tell the contents of that box until the story has been verified by a hundred truthful men.

"Go on! Go on!" exclaimed the guests. "Do go on!"

"Girls, hug Mr. Williams, and hug him tight while Mr. Argo tells what he saw in the box!" cried Mr. Hannah.

"No, he is my partner and I must respect his wishes. I myself confess that the story, while true, is beyond belief. I will not tell it; so please excuse me."

"My doom is sealed. I will die of insomnia," groaned Mr. Hannah.

The guests were disappointed and downcast to the last degree. The women were pouting, the children desperate.

"Who could be the owner of the coat?" asked Mr. Hannah. "I would give half of my kingdom to know. 'L. K.' Whose initials are those? I

would give up coffee, whiskey and tobacco to know."

"Maybe the initials stand for Lord Kitchner who mysteriously disappeared in the North Sea three years ago," Mr. Bingham suggested.

"Oh, I have thought of that a hundred times already, but he is dead and it is absurd to suppose any one brought his official coat to the Everglades of South Florida and lost it," Mr. Hannah replied.

"Mr. Williams," said the hotel-keeper, "I beseech you to let Mr. Argo tell what he saw in the box. I make this appeal in the name of anxious men, helpless women and children in despair."

"For Heaven's sake, yield, Mr. Williams!" exclaimed Mr. Hannah. "I am now ready to believe that a mouse would spit in a wildcat's face."

"What do you say Dave?" Bill asked.

"Never! Never!"

"Well, I will proceed with the rest of the

story. Maybe Dave will yield later and let me tell it all," said Bill.

"Proceed then, Mr. Argo, proceed. We will be right here when the roosters crow for day," Mr. Hannah chuckled.

"Desiring to know which way the coat man left the island, we began to investigate."

"He left the island here and went east into the marsh," I said.

"What proof have you got of that?" asked Dave.

"Look. The end of that projecting limb is bent and broken and the injury seems to be about three years old, too. Standing here he caught the limb, and swinging down into the marsh, he bent and broke it and let it loose and then went on. Had he been coming out of the water he could not have reached the limb. It is therefore certain that he left going east across the marsh," I pointed out.

But to make matters certain I, turning, examined the north, and Dave the south shore of

the narrow peninsula, while Charlie looked for evidence between us. Finding no clues we all returned to the place we left.

"Great guns!" Dave gasped. "The coat is gone! It has evaporated!"

"In the name of the Sun, Moon and Stars! What could have become of it?" Charlie cried.

"While absent we were in sight of the coat and each other all the time," I said. "What could have moved it? I am amazed."

"Charlie, you and Dave go," I said, "and look in that bunch of scrub palmetto for the coat."

They walked four or five steps to the palmettoes and began the search.

"Great stars!" exclaimed Dave. "Here is a coffin; a great big black one. Come here quick and look at it!"

"It is a fact!" Charlie quivered. "Do you suppose anyone is in it?"

I rushed over, and there lay a large, strong, black coffin in the scrub.

"Let me move it and see if anyone is in it," Dave suggested.

"No, let it alone," I said, "and come back."

"Well, what can it mean, Bill?" Dave shuddered.

"It is a profound mystery," I answered.

"This is a haunted country," said Charlie. "I move we all go home."

"That is what I say," Dave assented.

"No," I said, "these are the mysteries of mysteries, the riddles of riddles, and they shall be solved."

"Mr. Argo, was anyone in that old coffin?" Mr. Hannah exclaimed.

"Hush Bill," Dave commanded.

"Oh Heavens, save me!" Mr. Hannah cried. "If I had it, I would give all the Germans owe to know."

"The late supper bell is now ringing, young men," Mr. Whitmire announced. "So come and eat and finish the story afterwards."

The young men got up and went to supper.

Then the guests rose, and forming a large circle in front of the glowing pine-knot fire, sat down and began to discuss the story to come, and indulged in wild speculation for twenty-five minutes.

"Yonder they come," shouted Mr. Hannah. "Give the young explorers the seats they left, and let's get drunk on the best tale ever told!"

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Whitmire, "this is a serious story which, to these young men, is sadder than a funeral. So we all must sit down and be quiet and not say a word until the story is finished."

"All right," the guests answered.

"Sit down, Mr. Argo, and proceed," Mr. Hannah requested, with an anxious look.