

CHAPTER II

On The Saw Grass Trail

"Put on your trappings," I requested, "and let's be off to the eastward to find the Coat Man and solve the mystery."

"Well now, Bill, Charlie and I have expressed our opinions and advanced our theories of this coat mystery, but you have remained silent."

"He does say it has a deep, hidden meaning," remarked Charlie.

"I know he says that, but this is far from being a theory. I want something definite," Dave urged, "and we have a right to it before we go any further into this unexplored country."

"You are Captain of this exploration and I in-

sist upon a candid statement of your opinion," Charlie demanded.

Seeing that they both were worried, I decided to give them my theory.

"I attach great importance to this rough piece of metal. I think it is real evidence."

They looked surprised.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Dave.

"The metal looks like, but is not, silver. This leads me to believe that the coatmen are counterfeiters who have a bogus money mint on some secret island in the Everglades."

The theory startled Dave.

"Oh, I had not thought of that!" he exclaimed.
"It does sound reasonable."

"Well, I am satisfied that your theory is correct, and if so there must be a large gang who make counterfeit money for all the crooks in the world," Charlie suggested.

"Such a band of outlaws would be dangerous, and to disturb them would mean instant death,"

added Dave. "We have gone far enough. I move we turn back.

To this statement I made no reply, but looked displeased.

"Well, what do you think of the coffin and the little locked metal box which we cannot open?" asked Charlie.

"I imagine that they are infernal machines left here by the counterfeiters, who expect us to find and explode them and blow ourselves to atoms."

"Be careful with that box, Bill, for I know your theory is correct. Handle it gently. It is now high time to turn back." Dave urged.

"That's me, Mr. Williams," said Charlie.

Then I stood up and, adjusting my hat, looked at them sternly.

"No. We will take the metal box and go on. Be brave. If we unearth a bogus money mint think of the good we shall do our country and our people."

They both sat in silence pondering.

"I love my country," said Dave, "but not well enough to face a colony of outlaws like those."

"I say amen to that," Charlie replied.

"If we find a bogus mint and disclose it to the Government officials, I believe they would tender us a reward—a fortune each."

"How much do you think they would give us?" Queried Dave.

"Fifty to one hundred thousand dollars apiece."

"Now what do you think of that?" Charlie marvelled.

"I crave to be rich," said Dave; "I want to splurge, spend money and have a good time in New York."

"Well, I long to be rich too, but I would keep mine," Charlie gloated.

Presently they made up their minds to go. Whereupon we returned for the boat, and bringing her back to the east end of the Snakenose, we started east through the saw grass marsh in search of the Coat Man.

Soon we encountered divers difficulties. We often found the grass standing in water ten to twelve feet deep and rising high above our heads. At other times we had to wade, push and pull the boat over mud islands and shallow marshes and exhausted, we lay down in the little vessel at night to sleep.

The saw grass, standing like grain in a wheat field, made it necessary for one of us to stand on the front end of the boat to part the grass and pull while the others paddled, pushed and shoved. Now and then we approached small islands no larger than an art square on which stood a lone palm or live oak. Reaching these I got out and climbed them to look for the Coat Man, and for large islands.

On the afternoon of the seventh day we came to an island about the size of a large garden, covered with trees. We all went ashore to sleep on the ground for the first time since we left the Snakenose, and after a feast of fried fish and

hard-tack, we lay down on a bed of moss to rest, sleep and slumber.

About midnight Charlie waked me and whispered, "Mr. Argo, look, look at that light!"

"Where?" I asked.

"In the east. Look. I fear the counterfeiters are coming."

"It is a strange light, but I believe from the way it moves about that it is a Jack with a Lantern. So lie down, Charlie," I said, "and let me watch awhile."

Soon Charlie went to sleep and left me alone to watch the mysterious light that wandered like a candle in an unseen hand over the dark, dismal swamp.

Slowly the invisible old man of legend with his flickering candle in his hand, trudged his way northward among the islands, until he vanished in the distance.

Sitting there, remote from settlements, I thought of father, mother and home. Looking up at the starry heavens and at Job's Coffin, the

strange constellation that always fills my soul with wonder, I heard, on a distant island, the hooting of the great owl and the howling of a lone wolf. And, oh, what a sweet loneliness and solitude!

Next day while exploring the island we found some broken twigs and a pile of moss resembling a bed, but whether these were signs of the Coat Man we would not be certain. So, disappointed, but undaunted, we started again in search of the trail.

Going about one mile the grass became very thick and high, and I went to the front end of the boat to part it and pull.

"We have struck the trail once more!" I exclaimed.

"Where? where?" asked Dave anxiously.

I see handfulls of grass bent and broken with the tops lying east. We are exactly on the trail."

"Explain what you mean," urged Dave.

"One of the Coatmen stood as I am standing

to part the grass and pull the boat, and, catching a handful of grass and pulling, he sometimes bent and broke the bundle and turned it forward. So the broken bundle pointing eastward indicates the direction in which they were going," I explained.

"Well, I am glad we are on the trail once more," said Charlie.

"We are likely to find the counterfeiters," reasoned Dave, "on the first large timbered island. So, we must keep a keen watch, lest we be surprised and killed."

Trailing for sixteen days more on meager signs of the counterfeiters, we came at length into a small river some thirty feet wide, flowing through the saw grass from the northeast. At this point the islands began to grow larger and thicker and all were covered with palms, bay trees and oaks which obscured the surface view and made long vision impossible.

Turning up the Saw Grass River, as we called it, we sailed for some miles, and entering a

swamp covered with tall trees and underbrush, we found that the river forked into a hundred streams and vanished.

Foiled but not deterred, we hacked our way through the jungle for five days; and after diligent search emerged at the point where the diverging streams re-united and formed anew the Saw Grass River. Oh, how happy we were!

Right there we pitched our tents on a high point, and making down a bed of moss beneath lofty palms and rugged oaks, draped with low-swinging moss, we lay down to rest amidst the hooting of owls and the howling of wolves.

While the east was yet gray we arose with the happy birds and sailed up the stream again, and going a few miles, we glided out, at sun-up, into a lake a mile wide and of unknown length.

"Look at that island, look. I do believe it is twenty or thirty miles long," Charlie cried.

"That island," said Dave, "must be as rich as the bottoms on the Nile, for I never saw such gigantic trees in all my life."

“And that, too, is the home of the Coat Man and the counterfeiters,” I said. “Be careful and let’s move back down the river and get out of sight of the island, for the outlaws might spy us.”

Then we oared back and hid the boat in rushes and weeds. Walking out to a wooded point that lay between the river and the lake, we sat down to watch for the counterfeiters on the sandy beach of the high, beautiful island.

“Now we must watch for fire and smoke,” I urged, “and keep our eyes on stems, for we are in a dangerous country filled with shrewd and desperate men.”

We sat there under the trees all day looking in vain for outlaws, but saw nothing except wading birds, wild ducks and geese playing and pattering around.

At sundown we started across the lake to the island, when suddenly something struck the boat a terrible blow from beneath and almost capized us. Turning, we saw an unknown and

unnamed creature with the neck of a snake and the head of a turtle.

Instantly the reptile shot its black head and neck out of the water, and licking out its long, forked tongue, and raising its alligator-like tail aloft, began to hiss and advance.

"Shoot, Bill, shoot!" shouted Dave.

Fearing the monster more than the outlaws, I shot the demon in the head, and down it came with a terrible hiss and vanished beneath the water.

The next moment we saw a number of these demons with bristles on their heads and necks and we, dashing back into the river, escaped unhurt. This done we returned to the observation point, to look and listen.

"Charlie, what were those creatures that fought us in the water?" Dave asked.

"I don't know," he said, "but I believe they are the Bristle-heads my grandfather and father once saw while hunting duck in the Everglades. A monster which they call the Bristle-head at-

tacked them, and after a desperate fight they escaped. They said it had a neck like a snake and a head like a turtle, with a body and tail like an alligator."

"Charlie is that story true?" I asked.

"This happened before my day," he replied, "but my grandfather and father were honest men and told the story to their dying day. Several old Indians have told me they saw the same creatures, but while I have always believed the story, I now know it is true."

"Well, naturalists always find strange birds and animals in new countries," Dave explained.

About dark we heard, in the distant northeast, something that resembled a bugler blowing his bugle. It seemed to issue from a point fifteen or twenty miles away, and was weird to the uttermost degree.

"What on earth can that be?" asked Dave.

"I fear we have been detected," Charlie shuddered, "and that the outlaws are giving signals

of our approach by the blowing of that strange horn."

"What will we do, Bill?" asked Dave.

"If they attack us we will retreat and escape if we can, but if they overtake us we will fight to the death."

"Listen. I hear it plainer now," I said. "It goes like the blowing of a conkshell, and it does not; it goes like a hunter's horn, and it does not; it goes like a bugle, and it does not, but it goes like something, I know not what."

"Let's make for home," trembled Dave.

"No," said I, "we will solve this mystery and if we find a bogus money mint the government will make us rich."

About ten o'clock we started across the lake in the bright moonlight, but before we got under way the Bristle-heads rose up a second time and began to lick out their tongues, hiss and raise their tails in a threatening manner.

"I do believe these vile demons are guards

and sentinels to protect that fair and beautiful island," Charlie surmised.

"That sounds like superstition," I said "but I do admit that there is something strange about this whole business."

Watching and waiting we made three more attempts that night to cross, but each time we were met promptly at the edge of the lake by the Bristle-heads and driven back; so, retiring to the observation point, we spent the remainder of the night on that beautiful peninsula.

The next morning we decided to face the outlaws and cross in broad daylight. So we got ready, and putting on the emergency gasoline, shot out into the lake and made for the opposite shore. But, before the boat had measured its length on the lake, a Bristle-head struck the front end a terrible blow and turning it completely around we dashed back into the river and escaped once more.

"Come," I said; "we must go back a little way and cut down four heavy-topped live oaks

and fasten them to the sides and ends of the boat and thus armored, attempt to cross the lake again, and let the reptiles fight the tree tops instead of the boat."

So we went to work and by sundown we had the tree tops attached and ready.

"Hush," Charlie whispered, "I hear the trumpeters again. Just listen!"

For half an hour we all sat in the boat listening to the weird sound that seemed to come from the same place.

"What on earth can it be?" asked Dave.

"I fear they are signaling our approach," said Charlie, "and crossing, we may be shown before we land."

"I hope not. Raise anchor and let's be off," I ordered.

In a moment we entered the lake and the Bristle-heads began to beat the tree tops with great fury, but none of the blows struck the boat. So again we put on the emergency gasoline, and after a tug of one hour, we landed

safely on a beautiful moonlit beach on the opposite shore.

This done we made down a bed of moss and while two slept, the other stood guard.