

CHAPTER IV

The Nest

We returned to the boat to cook supper. Going out into the under jungle to build a fire where the outlaws could not see the smoke and blaze, Charlie chanced upon an abandoned camp, and called to us to come.

"This is another Coatman Camp," I said, "for it looks like the others and seems to be the same age."

"It is now certain," said Dave, "that we have trailed them from the Snakenose to this island."

"And I suspect the outlaws are somewhere on this island right now. So be careful," I cautioned.

"Bill, you are all eyes and ears, and a lizard

could not slip up on you in a wheat field," said Dave; "so while I watch I am going to depend on you for protection."

"I thank you, Dave, for the compliment," I said, "but you both must look and listen for we are now in a dangerous situation."

We built a fire but did not shoot any game for fear the report of the gun would arouse the outlaws. So we caught some fish, and gathered some cow cocoanuts, and had a real fry and feast.

Then we climbed up into the low swinging limbs of large live oaks and, gathering moss, made a bed among the vine clad tangles, and lay down like squirrels to rest and sleep.

Just as the sun set behind golden clouds we heard, away in the east, a strange sound which resembled, in a way, the bellowing of a great bull or the moaning of a cow over her dead suckling.

"What in the name of all the stars at once can that be?" Dave exclaimed.

"I have lived on the border of the Everglades all my life, said Charlie, "but I never heard such a sound before and hope I never will again."

"Well, Charlie, you are a native," said Dave. "We are strangers in this country and you must offer some explanation, good or bad, of that hair-raising sound."

"It may be the sentinel of the outlaws announcing our presence on the island," Charlie surmised.

"I do not believe that," Dave said emphatically, "for no human could make such an unearthly sound."

"Well it might be the lowing of a strange species of the Manatee or Sea Cow that lives in the slow and sluggish waters of South Florida," argued Charlie.

Dave hesitated, and by his look seemed to reject the supposition.

"What is a Sea Cow?" he asked.

"It is a huge creature," said Charlie, "that

lives in the water and feeds on grass and weeds on the banks of rivers and the margins of lakes. It is a cow, a Sea Cow."

"Did you ever hear one go on like that before?" I asked.

"No indeed, no," said Charlie, "but, while it may be a strange species of that animal, I really believe it is a Sea Serpent."

"Well, why do you believe it?" asked Dave, earnestly.

Charlie stammered and seemed to dread to make answer.

"My grandfather lived to be one hundred and four years old," he said, "and was a trapper in Florida. He told my father that the early navigators and sea pirates often saw a huge Sea Serpent on the south coast of the Everglades. They said it was large enough to destroy a sailboat; and seeing it, they always turned and sailed the other way."

"Well, do you believe that sound was made by a Sea Serpent?" queried Dave.

"I do not know," said Charlie, "but the sound is a split between the lowing of an alligator and the hissing of a snake."

This story startled me and Dave.

"Now Charlie," said Dave, "you are dodging my question. You were raised in this country and I want to know just what you believe about Sea Serpents."

"Well, I really believe it was a sea serpent, for Old Lizard, a Seminole medicine man says he once saw a great snake in the Everglades kill and swallow a grown cow."

This said, Dave snuggled up close to me in the nest.

"Now Charlie, do you believe that tale?" demanded Dave.

"In the face of scoffs and scoffers he told the story and stuck to it until he died," said Charlie.

"Well now, Bill, do you believe there is such a thing as a Sea Serpent?" asked Dave.

"Indeed I do, I said. "The existence of such

creatures was doubted at one time, but observations made by reputable sea captains and crews within the last century, seem to establish their reality beyond reasonable doubt."

Dave and Charlie seemed much interested in the snake story and asked for particulars.

"In 1875," I said, "Captain Drevar, an Englishman, set sail in the good ship Pauline from Shields to Zanzibar, and upon his arrival at a point off the coast of Cape Roque he and his crew saw a great serpent rise out of the water and, wrapping its tail around a whale, killed it instantly. In the terrible and frightful struggle they heard the bones of the great whale breaking and snapping like the limbs of a falling tree."

Charlie and Dave took a deep breath.

"How large do they get to be, Mr. Argo?" asked Charlie.

"Another English Captain, in charge of "Osborne", the Queen's yacht, saw a Sea Serpent on June 2nd, 1877, and he estimated its

diameter to be fifteen or twenty feet at the shoulders."

"Great stars!" Dave exclaimed, "it could swallow an elephant."

"Were those the only two ever seen?" asked Charlie.

"No, no," I answered, "a goodly number have been seen at various points in the sea. However, the most of them were observed in tropical and subtropical countries.

"Well, do you believe there are any in this unexplored country?" asked Dave.

"I do not know, I replied, "but I should not be surprised if some do live and lurk around this unfrequented island. This great bull we seemed to hear may have been a sea serpent calling for its mate."

"Well, I love money and long to be rich, but I am now ready to abandon all rewards and go home," said Dave.

"No one loves a dollar better than I do," said Charlie, "but I am now ready to return too."

I stood erect and gave them a glance of disgust.

“Return! Not I. No, never, but to-morrow we will go and find what caused that unearthly noise. It may shed some like light on the mystery of the Coat Man and the outlaws.”

“Mr. Argo, drop your hope of the reward and let’s go back to Fort Myers,” Charlie pleaded.

“Hush, Charlie, hush,” said Dave. “The love of money does not move Bill as it does us. He loves life, but, he would face death and the devil to solve a mystery or to help someone in distress. Listen! what is that?”

“It is the howling of wolves and the screaming of a panther,” Charlie whispered.

“Hush,” said I. “Hush, the bugler is blowing his bugle in the distant northeast again. Just listen. How weird it goes.”

Just at that moment we heard a great splashing in the water. It went like a thousand alligators in a fight.

“Outlaws, outlaws,” Charlie whispered.

"Or a brigade of sea serpents," Dave shuddered.

Cautiously we peeped out of our mossy nest. In a moment we saw a silently moving boat the shape of a duck and the size of a small country church, without mast, light or sails, pass, going south.

"Bill, what in the name of heaven and earth is it?" Dave whispered.

"It is so dark I cannot tell," I said, "but I do believe it is the outlaws, or else a monster sea serpent."

"Oh, how glad I am that we are in a nest and not on the ground," exclaimed Dave.

We then snuggled up under the moss and went to sleep.