

CHAPTER V

The Jug

The next morning we woke elated with a glorious day and we came down and ate breakfast, rubbed up and reloaded our sixteen shooters and made ready to explore the island and locate the outlaws.

"What would we do," I said, "if we should all go away and, returning, find the boat gone? We could not build a raft of dry logs on which to return."

"No, that is certain," agreed Charlie. "It would be too wide and heavy to push through the saw grass and drag over mud islands and shallows."

"If the boat were gone we would be doomed to isolation the rest of our days," Charlie continued.

For a time we hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"Well now, Charlie, I want you to stay here," I said at length, "and mind the boat to the death while Dave and I explore the island and locate the outlaws. Your job is easier and safer than our own and we will trust you to have the boat here upon our return."

"Well, Mr. Argo, I will do my best," he said, "but I want you and Mr. Williams to take this infernal machine for I might accidentally strike it against something, and, exploding it, blow myself to atoms."

"Well, hand it to me," I said, "and I will carry it in my hunting bag. I hope soon to devise some way to get into it and learn its contents, for I am sure it will furnish evidence sufficient to solve the Coat mystery."

Then Dave and I started east through the

under jungle to find the mourners we heard at sundown the day before and, if possible, to locate the money makers.

Pushing and hacking our way through vines and tree-like ferns for about one-half mile, we suddenly emerged into an open hammock or hardwood forest of enormous oaks, palms and magnolia trees. Indeed it was the grandest forest I had ever seen, a forest that had grown like polk stalks out of Peruvian guano deposit.

Wild turkeys, peacocks, guineas and wild chickens were loitering about like poultry on a rich man's lawn and they seemed to have no fear. Their extreme docility led us to believe we were about to come either to a house or home or, else, to a country so free from man that the wild creatures had no fear of him.

"If the outlaws are on this island why don't they hunt the game, Bill?"

"I guess they are moneymakers and not hunters, and kill a little game for food near their headquarters," I explained.

Strolling for some distance, we came to a ridge covered with tall slender cedars. They stood thick and their huge trunks resembled the poplar trees on the piedmont and mountains of the Blue Ridge.

As we examined these beautiful cedars that grew in soil half pebble phosphate, we discovered an old cedar stump wedged in, or sandwiched between two large standing and growing cedars, some three feet in diameter each.

"Notice, Dave!" I exclaimed, "that old cedar tree was cut down with an axe. Look at the smooth cuts on the old stump."

"You are correct, Bill, but the old tree top and limbs are totally gone. Who could have cut that cedar down and what did they want with it?"

"That is a hard question, Dave. That old cedar was cut before the young ones came up and these new ones must be one hundred and fifty to two hundred years old"

"This island probably has been, and now is,

the rendezvous of the counterfeiters, not only of the United States, but of the old world, besides," Dave guessed.

"I believe the old stump is a link in the Coat Man mystery," I said.

Continuing for about one mile, we came to a prairie the shape and size of a large river, traversed by a creek lying north and south, and the open meadow was covered with green succulent grass knee to thigh high and was beautiful to the last degree.

Looking north we saw twenty-seven deer grazing about like so many calves in a pasture and to the south we discovered a large drove of elk feeding on the grass and, oh how beautiful they were!

And while thus entranced we heard something coming behind us. We whirled, drew our guns, and made ready to fight. The next moment five moose walked out into the tall grass and began to graze.

"I am amazed, Bill. What can this mean?"

Who ever heard of elk and moose being in Florida. How do you account for this?"

"I cannot tell, Dave."

"I know you can't tell, but you always have a theory for every strange thing. So upon what theory do you account for their presence on this island?"

"I doubt if the elk and moose are connected with the Coat Man and counterfeiters. All those animals were in Florida when Columbus discovered America, and being cut off from man have simply remained here in peace and quiet.

"I believe you are correct about the big animals," said Dave, "but how do you account for the peacocks and monkeys?"

"Well, I think they were probably brought here by the counterfeiters. I dare say the outlaws may have brought their families here and maintained houses and homes and farming to a limited degree."

At this moment a herd of deer bolted from behind a peninsula of timber to the north, and

coming a little way, stopped and gazed back as if they were looking for something in pursuit.

Fearing outlaws, we dashed to cover and peered out to see what had frightened the deer. But nothing appeared, and soon the animals began to feed again. However, one or two kept up a constant watch in the direction from which they had fled.

"Bill, what do you think of that?"

"It may be an outlaw trying to kill a deer to eat."

"That is just what I fear," Dave exclaimed.

Waiting for about one hour we saw nothing, but the deer kept looking back. So we decided to slip up to the tree peninsula and see if we could discover the cause of their fright.

Creeping up to the point, like two cats in the underbrush, we stopped and looked but saw nothing except large droves of animals feeding on further north.

"What could have frightened them so, Bill, do you suppose?"

"Hush, Dave, hush. Be still as death."

"What, what, Bill?" Dave whispered.

"I saw something move under that large moss-covered live oak whose limbs touch the ground."

"Where, Bill, where?"

"Under that old shaggy oak on the bank of the creek, in the middle of the prairie. The one that is so full of moss and hovers over an acre of ground."

"Well what was it, Bill?"

"Be still. Don't you see that limb shaking as if someone were swinging upon it?"

"Yes, but I cannot see what does it, Bill. It must be an outlaw lying in wait for deer."

"That is just what I suspect. So be careful."

We waited for several hours but saw and heard nothing more.

The sun being in the tree tops we glided back, and gathering some cow cocoanuts, had supper and making a bed of moss in the tangle of low limbs and vines, retired to rest and sleep.

A little after sundown we heard, in the east again, the mourners begin to lament, and they lamented and lamented, but finally ceasing, we heard in the northeast the bugler begin to blow his bugle again. He blew and blew, and blew, and the hair seemed to stand on my head. After a while we drifted off to sleep amid the songs of the whippoorwill, the night birds, the howling of wolves and screams of wildcats and panthers.

Next morning the butterflies were gliding about like flying diamonds. We got up, came down, ate breakfast and then returned to the point from which we started the day before. We saw nothing except the turkeys, wild chickens and animals eating and playing about in the gentle morning breeze.

Then we set out for the old live oak under whose limbs we had seen something move the day before and creeping up we saw in the sand a panther track.

"Oh, it was a panther concealed here wait-

ing for the deer, and not a counterfeiter," said Dave.

"I guess you are right," I said, but inching up under the low-swinging limbs we came to the trunk of the venerable oak ten feet in diameter.

As I stood in the twilight produced by its moss-clad top I saw some letters cut in the bark and I walked up and read:—

"L" "K"

1916

"Great stars, Bill! These are the letters we found on the coat, on Snakenose Island. Look, it is but two years old. Think of it!"

"Yes, you are right, and this proves that the Coat Man was not killed on the Snakenose, but reached this island safely and cut his own initials on this bark. It is a fresh cut and cannot be older than its date."

"Well, we are closing in on the outlaws," Dave shuddered, "and I fear my love for money and splurging will lead to my undoing."

“Be a man, Dave, and work for your country and if you fail in this, your noble effort, you will die the death of a patriot. So let’s be off.”

Starting east again in search of the mourners and outlaws we came to an immense forest, and going for about two miles, emerged upon a pasture and golf-link looking country where grass, clumps of trees and grazing animals were beautiful to behold.

As we stood amazed we saw a strange row of mounds, apparently one-fourth mile wide and one mile long, and on these tall ridges the deer were feeding like sheep in a pasture.

We went to the mounds and found they were in the shape of six letters of an unknown language.

“Dave you are an artist, so take your pencil and paper and mark down the shape of these letters and let’s try to decipher them from day to day, as we go along.”

He drew each letter, beautifully, and put the sketches into his pocket for further reference.

While we were resting, we saw, through a gap in the hedge of trees to the south, a great cone-shaped mound that looked large enough to cover a city square and was as tall as an oak. We got up and went to it and found our estimates correct. We climbed to the summit and there found an immense old hand-made jug, the size of a barrel and well set in the ground.

"Bill, what on earth? The mouth is sealed with mud, too. Don't touch it. It may be an infernal machine set here by the outlaws to blow us up."

"It does look suspicious."

"Oh, I know it contains some high explosive," Dave gasped. "They knew the most causal pursuer would find this mound and mount it, and being curious, might tamper with the jug, set it off, and blow themselves to pieces. Walk light, Bill, walk light. Let's get off this mound and stay off."

"I am wild to know what is in that jug. Look at the immense finger prints impressed upon it

when the mud was wet and plastic," I suggested."

"Bill, those are not finger prints. They are too large for that."

My curiosity was getting the upper hand of me.

"I don't see how I can leave, ignorant of its contents, for I believe the Coat Man, the old cut stump, and the letter mounds are all in some way connected," I said.

"Well, I will never be here when you touch it," declared Dave, "if I can get away."

"Let's go to yonder big live oak, and getting behind it, shoot the top off the jug and see what will happen," I suggested.

"How far is that oak from here, Bill?"

"About two hundred yards."

"Well, if you will shoot, I'll stand behind the tree with you," Dave answered.

Then we left the mound and went to the big tree and taking aim, I fired and shot the neck off. The jug did not explode, but a black gas

shot twenty-five feet high, and descending quickly to the ground, changed its color and vanished.

In a moment, to the south of the mound, a deer leaped frantically into the air, and giving an unearthly bleat, fell prostrate and died upon the ground, but its companions stampeded headlong into the forest and disappeared.

"Gas! gas! gas!" shouted Dave, and away we went and likewise plunged into the woods on the other side, frightened, exhausted but unhurt.

"Bill, that jug is a gas mine and the wind, being in our favor saved our lives. What do you think of all this?"

"It is a wonder. It looks more like the work of the counterfeiter than anything else, but if so they must have a gigantic factory and turn out bogus money by the wholesale."

Tired and exhausted, we made a nest in the brush and vine-tangles and lay down to listen, first to the mourners in the east, and then to

the bugler in the north; and after a while drifted off to sleep, amid the night-cries of animals and the perfume of the jessamine.