

CHAPTER VI

The Mourners

After breakfast next day we turned east, in the vanishing dawn of a glorious day, and walking for some hours through a deep forest, we came to a tiny range of mountains, or hills, lying north and south. Mounting to the top we saw, on the other side, a valley, half timber and half grass, too beautiful to describe.

Descending to the grassy meadows at the foot of the range we saw a drove of wild horses grazing in fields of undulating green. When we stepped into view, a beautiful and graceful young stallion, deer-shaped and nimble, raised his proud head and flowing mane aloft, and

snorting, led the band away in haughty triumph to the jungle on the other side.

"What grand horses, Bill! I guess the outlaws brought them or their ancestors, here too, and are now farming a little somewhere on this island."

"I dare say you are right," I said. "Look and listen, for these men are desperadoes. We must see them first, not being seen ourselves, and locating the money mint, we will return to Fort Myers and report the startling news to the Government, astounding the President and amazing the world."

Starting again eastward across the golf-link looking valley and meadow, we saw an island of timber on the prairie, apparently about one-half mile in diameter, and reaching the border, we discovered breast-works higher than our heads, covered with shaggy oaks, some of which must have been five or six hundred years old.

^{to} Mounting the rim of earth we found that it curved, and following it, we returned to the

starting point, which proved to us that it was a circular fort.

"If these trees," said Dave, "are five to six hundred years old this fort was built before Columbus discovered America. Who could have done it? Do you suppose it was the work of Indians?"

"I think not. I have not seen any signs of Indians on this island yet. The lettered mound you copied could not have been built and so shaped by the Indians, for they had no alphabet. These mounds, therefore, must have been built by a race who occupied this country before the Indians came."

"Do you believe these mounds are connected with the Coat Man?" Dave asked.

"I do not know. It is all deeply mysterious. We simply must work, watch and wait for a solution."

Then we decided to go into the center of the circle and investigate the dense forest inside.

So, about an hour by sun, we drank some water

from a sparkling little lake on the meadow, entered the forest, and going for some distance we came to the foot of a gentle rise. Ascending this, we saw a stone cabin on the crest of the hill through streams of low-swinging moss.

In the twilight produced by the tall moss-covered timber the cabin looked like the home of ghosts. Inching closer and closer, we finally came in sight of the door. The cabin looked to be as old as the hill on which it sat. Creepy feelings hovered over us both.

While we stood amazed, a large panther stepped into the door, and looking about and sniffing the air, walked out and went the other way. We did not shoot, fearing the report might bestir the outlaws.

After this we returned to the border, ate the cow cocoanuts, and making a bed in the tangles, we lay down to rest and to listen for the mourners and trumpeters.

Just as the sun set the mourners began again to mourn and lament a short distance to the

east. The sound was awful, lonesome and weird.

"Bill, what can it be? Is it the outlaws signaling"?

"I confess I do not know; but one thing is certain, we must investigate it 'till we find out."

Next morning I said: "Dave, fix your gun, for we are going to explore that cabin."

"Why Bill, that is a panther den; have you no fear? Will you lead me into the jaws of death?"

"No, Dave, no. But if that beast comes out we will kill it."

"Well, I am too nervous to take a quick and deadly aim. If we go I will depend on you, for you have killed many panthers in the Canadian forests."

"Come on, Dave. I will do the best I can."

Returning, we ascended the rise, inched up to the door and looked in. The roof and floor were made of stone that looked very old, and in one corner of the house near the broad fireplace, a dark, gloomy stairway led down.

"This is a house, Dave, with subterranean

rooms and I know it is full of wonders. Take out your searchlight and let's go down into the underground rooms, kill the beasts and explore them."

"For Heaven's sake, Bill, stop. Don't lead me into that den of beasts and ghosts. If I should be killed my sainted mother never would forgive me and you. I beseech you to grant my request one time."

"All right, Dave. I will yield and not go in."

I took out my watch to see the time of day but it had stopped. Then Dave looked at his watch and it, too, was silent. Both had ceased to run at the same time.

"Now, Bill, I am doubly convinced that we are in a strange and dangerous land, and I want to know how you account for this."

"Look, Dave. My compass won't work either and it is a cloudy day, too."

"Well, what shall we do?" asked Dave. "What caused the compass to misbehave?"

"It must be due to some metal deposit in the

subterranean rooms or else in the ground itself."

We started for the open prairie, and going some distance, we noticed that our watches were running again. They had started up at the same instant, but our compasses were still helpless.

We had walked a mile or so when, to our amazement, we found ourselves back at the old rock cabin again.

"Dave, we are lost!"

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"We are lost; we do not know which is east or west, north or south. We started due east from this cabin and thought we were continuing so, but here we are back at the starting point. We have been going in a circle. We are lost, that's all."

Then we started off from the cabin, and walking for some time we returned to the same house.

"Bill we are haunted. We are inside the circular breastworks and it is only a short way to

the open country on all sides, yet we cannot get away from this cabin. The thing that upset our watches and compasses has upset our reason. Shall we famish for water in a doorless and wall-less prison?"

"No, Dave, no. We will get out some time. If the sun would shine we could walk out with ease by going towards it."

We started off again, but, with no better luck, came back to the cabin. Then we began to examine moss, which grows thicker on the shady north of the trees, but found it was as long on one side as on the other due, I believe, to the exclusion of sunlight by the dense tree tops.

To make a long story short, we repeated the mistake eleven times. Then we sat down tired, exhausted and almost famished for water.

"Bill, we are crazy and don't know it. We are in a jail without a jailor but can't get out. I am perishing for water. What shall we do?"

"Oh, well, we will get out somehow. Don't worry."

"Why do you sit with your head so low? Your manner frightens me."

I confess I was worried and my manner must have seemed so.

"I am trying to think up a scheme," said I, "to get us out of this little circle of woods that cannot be over one-half mile in diameter."

"I am famished for water, Bill. You must devise a scheme to get us out and do it now. I am sorry I ever heard of the Everglades of Florida. I long for Fort Myers and Atlanta once moré."

We sat down, with our backs against a tree, to meditate.

"Well, I have thought up a scheme that will work. We can stake ourselves out."

"What do you mean by that, Bill?"

"I will drive down a stake and send you forward to set up another. This done, we will continue to drive down stakes, keeping them all in one straight row, and by so doing, we, of necessity, cannot go in a circle but must walk

straight and will finally emerge into the open country."

"That scheme will work, Bill. Let's go to it."

Then we began to stake ourselves out, and just as the sun set, we heard the mourners lamenting at a point not over two hundred yards away. We stopped and stood amazed.

"Drop the stakes, Dave, for we can walk straight to a fixed noise," I said, "and let's be off to investigate who the mourners are."

In a few moments we saw the circular breast-works and the open country beyond, and great was our joy.

Creeping up and peeping over the bank of earth, with guns cocked and ready, we saw the mourners, a heard of buffalo that, like cows, were moaning and lamenting over the dead body of a comrade. Suprised and astonished, we stood and looked at the noblest beast that ever fed in American forest or grazed upon the open plains.

In a few moments, the great bulls; forming a

circle, lay down with their tails inside, and their heads outside, the circle. This done, the cows and calves walked inside and lay down under the protection of the ever faithful bulls.

Then we made for a spring a few steps away, and drank eagerly. After supper we made a bed in the tangles, and soon were fast asleep.