

CHAPTER IX

"Bimini"

Around the breakfast camp-fire we decided to go northeast in quest of the bugler, for the sound was truly human.

"Dave, I am inclined to believe that the Princess may be the daughter of some treasure-digger. The Coat Men may now be here with their maps and charts, seeking for gold and precious stones."

"The Princess," said Dave, "may be the young wife of some nobleman who is here in search of colossal fortunes, and while he searches she, to help him, works the garden."

"It is possible, but not probable, for she looks too young, too fresh and beautiful for that," I argued.

"If we should find the treasure-seekers, Bill, will they be friends or foes?"

"I doubt if they would be either," I suggested; they might be sorry that we have found the island of colossal fortunes; but they, being honest men, could not complain."

"They might be glad to have us," said Dave.

Strolling on 'till four o'clock in the afternoon through dense forests, we came in sight of another range of hills, or tiny mountains, lying nearly east and west, and they seemed to be the tallest we had seen. Climbing to a grassy plot on the summit, we stood and looked at what we believed to be the richest and fairest valley under the sun.

The opposite range lay some four or five miles off, and the valley between resembled a vast meadow, with grass here and clumps of shrubs

and trees there. Indeed it was like the lawn of some great and mighty king.

"What strange animals are grazing about on yonder meadows. Are they buffalo, Bill?"

"They are too far for me to tell," I said. "Let's spend the night here on this glorious range, and looking for smoke and lights to-night, go down in the morning and investigate."

Then we, seeing a golden sunset across a small, crystal lake, got some water and cow cocoanuts, ate supper, and making a bed of moss in the tangles, we lay down to rest, but could scarcely sleep for the howling foxes, wolves and screaming panthers.

When the crows called for day, we arose and saw the sun rise across the valley of woodlands, lakes and meadows, and it appeared to be an earthly paradise, or the home of some great prince or king.

Again seeing the strange animals grazing on the meadows, we descended to the valley below and approached the point where they fed.

"Bill, look at these strange palms. They are not natives of Florida."

"They are beautiful, but do not look like our own. I have never seen anything like them before. Have you, Dave?" I asked.

"Yes, they look exactly like the palms on the river Nile in Egypt, which I saw over there last season. I remember them well. Look, there are some more Egyptian shrubs and trees."

"Are you certain of that, Dave?" I asked.

"Yes, I know it, but how do you account for their presence here?"

"I guess some Mediterranean pirate brought them and set them out, and these are the descendants of those brought over."

"Stop, Dave, I hear something coming on the meadow beyond those trees."

We dashed into a clump of wild roses, and hid.

"Oh, Bill, it is a drove of Zebra. Look, look. There are twenty-nine, fat, sleek and happy, on their way to water. How beautiful!"

"What a mystery," I ejaculated.

"Great stars, Bill, look yonder!"

I whirled around.

"Where?" I asked.

"To the south. It is a drove of camels, Bill."

"They are, for a fact! I guess the pirate who brought the palms brought the camels also. It may be that they maintained houses, farms and homes and brought the camels for beasts of burden."

"That sounds reasonable," Dave agreed.

Continuing across the valley for some two or three miles we came to a charming little river, or creek, winding its way eastward through green meadows. We caught some trout, and in the midst of wild roses and songs of birds, we had a fish fry never to be forgotten.

After lunch we started up the north bank of what we called Meadow Creek, and going four or five miles entered a dense, gloomy forest whose tangled tops made twilight at noon.

"Dave, I believe we shall find wonders on the head-waters of this creek. So look out."

"Look out for what?"

"For anything strange and unusual, for we are in a mysterious country," I said. "We might come upon counterfeiters, though I believe that theory is false. So be ready for anything that might happen."

We were off again through the forest, but it was so dark we had to use our searchlights at times, and the country looked like the home and abode of ghosts.

After awhile I saw another opening in the timber, and stopped to look and listen, but hearing nothing except the hooting of the great owl, we inched a little nearer.

"Dave, I believe it is another cleared patch, but I hear no one working."

Walking to a point near the edge we peeped through the low-hanging moss and saw another garden filled with vegetables but no person was in it.

"Bill, I see a hoe lying out there among the

cabbage, and the ground looks freshly stirred. I do believe the gardener heard us and fled."

Then we crept all around the garden, but found no path leading to or from it, nor did we find any house, home or other sign of man.

"Look," Dave whispered, "the gardner heard us and ran, for the tracks are fresh and a long ways apart. He was running at full speed."

"They are the tracks of a woman, Dave, but she was frightened and fleeing."

"She will go home and tell on us. We may be in a trap."

"I told you to be careful, Dave, and not blunder over the brush, for you can never tell what will happen to a man in a strange country."

"She went up the creek," I said; "so let's follow her with guns cocked and ready."

"Bill, I dread it, for we are about to face strange beings at last."

"Be brave and worthy of the girl you love," I urged.

Starting again up Meadow Creek, and going

for some time, we came to a meadow about two miles square and covered with sparkling lakes, clumps of trees and Royal Palms. It looked like the garden of an emperor.

On the green sward deer, zebra, camels and buffalo grazed like cattle in a pasture, while wild turkeys and peacocks strutted, and the birds made merry.

About the center of the meadow, and among the lakes, we saw an immense clump of trees resembling a grove, and they appeared to cover a gentle eminence. So home-like was the great lawn that we sat down to look and listen.

Just before sundown a woman came walking out with a bucket or basket on her head. Reaching the open meadow, she turned due north, and passing around some trees, turned west and vanished behind the timber.

"She is the wife of a counterfeiter, Bill, or a descendent of the sea pirate."

We climbed up a cedar to get a better view of the lawn.

"Dave, I do believe I see the corner of a house in that glorious clump of trees."

"I do see it. I know it is a house and it sits in the loveliest grounds I ever beheld," Dave whispered. "Look at those immense trees and gorgeous palms that cluster on the rise between the lakes."

"It must be the home, not of a counterfeiter, but of a great prince or King," said I.

Then we came down, and like two cats, we skulked around the entire meadow, but saw not a house, nor a path or sign of humanity.

"Yonder is a straggling hedge of strange Egyptian trees, oaks and palms that, starting near the forest, ends a short way this side of the lawn," I said. "Now at early dawn tomorrow we must seek the cover of that hedge, dash across the open meadow, for the lawn and investigate that house and hill."

At sundown we made a nest in the tangles and watched for smoke and light, but saw neither. When the wild chickens crowed for day we came

down, and creeping through the hedge, dashed across the meadow to the lawn near where Meadow Creek flowed out.

Then we slipped up the creek among the lakes for about one forth of a mile, and coming to a beautiful branch flowing in from the north, turned up it, and going a few steps, came in sight of a small garden filled with cabbages, turnips and onions.

"Stop, Bill. We are about to face someone. The house is near at hand now."

Inching up and passing the garden that lay on the brook, we saw no one, nor could we discover a path of any kind.

"Bill, what on earth can those pathless gardens mean?"

"I can not tell. They defy explanation; but come and let's go on. Be careful and ready for the best or worst."

Then we stole up the little brook and meadow, whose beauty I regret I cannot describe, and

after a few moments we came in sight of a gentle rise covered with grass, trees and boulders.

Flat rocks, from the size of an art square to that of a small garden, lay nestled among the great trees; while large cabin-sized boulders set here and there, bordered by beautiful grass and wild rose bushes.

"Be careful, Bill, for we are near the house. Go slow."

The next moment we turned a clump of trees in the little meadow, and saw, not a castle, but an immense spring-house built of massive stones and nestled among oaks, Royal palms, tree ferns and boulders, large and small.

We walked up to the spring-house, which was made of onyx, and looking in, saw a spring and a little brook boiling up through a hole in a big flat rock. The water was pink, but after flowing a few steps, it turned perfectly clear.

"This is the most beautiful spring," said Dave, "that I ever saw or ever expect to see, but who could have built this house?"

"Look at the letters on all those flat rocks and boulders. They are knee-high and deeply cut in," I said.

Then we went from rock to rock and from boulder to boulder, but could not read a word of the strange hieroglyphics. Turning, we saw the crumbling walls of five old buildings.

Returning to the spring Dave dipped his hand into the water, but frantically jerked it out.

"That red water burnt my hand. Oh, how it stings!"

"Is it hot, Dave?"

"No, but it burns. It must contain an acid."

In a few moments the pain was gone.

"Now, Bill, what do you think of all this?"

"I believe this is Bimini."

"Well Bill, what on earth is Bimini?"

"When Ponce de Leon," said, I, "came to the West Indies with Columbus, the inhabitants of those islands told him that Bimini was a land to the north and was an island of perpetual youth, and of the treasure of El Dorado. Where-

upon Ponce de Leon sailed north in search of Bimini, the island of youth and fortune, and discovered Florida. He landed and searched through the beautiful wilds of the land of flowers for the fountain of perpetual youth, but failing to find it, returned, sad and broken-hearted."

"This sequestered island must be Bimini and this the spring," said Dave.

"Yes, and these crumbling houses would seem to indicate that this place was, at some remote period, a great health resort visited by a prehistoric race."

Then we sat down on a deep-worn onyx seat, used by a race of the long ago.

"Well, Bill, do you believe this spring is a fountain of perpetual youth which sages have sought in vain?"

"No, I do not, but I do believe it has great healing power, and on account of this, the prehistoric people thought it was a fountain of perpetual youth; and dying, they left behind

them the tradition of such a spring," I argued.

"This must be the fountain and the island to which the West India inhabitants referred and the ones for which Ponce de Leon searched in vain," said Dave. "But do you believe the coat mystery is in any way connected with these things?" he asked

I did not answer at first, but Dave insisted.

"I do not know. But let's spend the night here in the garden of a king and tomorrow go on up Meadow Creek and look for the woman who went out of this place with a bucket on her head. Finding her, all mysteries may be solved."

We ate supper, and making down a bed on top of a tall boulder, lay down to rest, in a silent and forsaken resort where once happy throngs revelled in the gaieties of some prehistoric age.