

CHAPTER XII

The Moss Handkerchief

Next morning I awoke at gray dawn and said: "Dave, how do you feel?"

"The howling wolves waked me about three o'clock and I have not slept since. I feel worried."

"What about Dave?"

"I had a dream last night. I thought I was walking around Cheops' castle and the earth opened and swallowed me."

"Oh, well, that is nothing but a dream. Let's get up, eat breakfast and explore the castle," I said.

"I fear that old castle is full of counterfeitters

and I beseech you once more, in the name of my sainted mother, not to go up there to-day for I have had a warning. Let's explore outside the walls now and return and examine the castle later if need be."

"To leave this castle is a cross hard to bear, but I will yield to the wishes of yourself and mother."

Then we got up, ate breakfast, and, rowing ourselves across the moat on the raft, left the wall by the way we came in. Out once more, we turned west, and walking until the middle of the afternoon, we suddenly emerged upon the border of a small prairie. In the center, a clump of rugged oaks stood over and around what appeared to be an old, rusty turtle the size of a cabin.

Turning to look for outlaws we saw a drove of deer grazing about like calves in a pasture, and five large black bears were drinking water out of a sparkling little lake that nestled in the tall green grass.

As we saw no one, we slipped across the meadow, and ascending the rise on which the turtle sat, we walked up to a point near it and stopped to investigate.

"It looks," said I, "like the fossil remains of some unknown and unnamed turtle. Indeed, it seems to be larger than the skeletons of its fossil kin."

"Well, its head, tail, feet and fins resemble a flying machine," said Dave. "What a monster it is."

Then I walked up and hacked its shell with my tomahawk. The old hull was neither wood nor iron, but seemed to be made of hoof or horn.

Turning, we crossed the meadow on the west side of the clump of trees and entered a dark and silent forest. Walking and rambling for some time, we came to an old abandoned garden surrounded by leaning trees that seemed to be weeping for the departed owner.

At the north end of the garden a spring boiled up through snow-white sand, at the foot

of a tall clump of palms. From this silent little spring a tiny brook, winding its way westward for some distance, passed a lone, sad and forsaken cabin whose chimney was gone and whose roof was falling in.

"This," I said, "was once the home of some strange man, but how could he leave a place so beautiful and fair?"

Just at this moment a mocking bird came gliding along through the jessamine-perfumed air, and lighting upon a vine-clad snag, began to sing in all its glory. How sweet and sad it was!

"Where is the man and his wife who once lived here, and where are the children who played around the spring and waded in the little brook?" I asked myself.

While we stood in silence, meditating, Dave whispered: "Hush, Bill, hush. I heard someone cough. I know I did."

"Where?" I asked.

"Behind the old cabin."

For a moment we stood speechless.

Then we saw a tall old man, gray, ragged and shaggy, with stick in hand, come trudging along, at once the picture of sorrow, sadness, desolation and despair.

“Stand close, Dave, and hide yourself among the cedar limbs and moss,” I whispered, “and let’s see what he will do.”

He staggered up to the spring, and gazing at it, gave a deep sigh. Then he stooped down, and dipping up some of the water, in his hand, sipped it. Dejected, he stood with tears in his eyes.

“Bill, this must be the spring and home of his childhood and youth, which he now comes to see for the last time.”

In a few moments the old man put down his stick, and with difficulty crawled down upon his knees, and taking a drink of water rose up with a tear hanging on his wrinkled cheek. Then he took, from his pocket, a bit of moss and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Yes, this place must be his old home and this is his last good-by," I said.

"How sad and dejected he looks," said Dave.

"Well, let's try to comfort him," I suggested.

Struggling up the aged man walked a few steps, and turning gazed back to the desolate old cabin and the spring once more, and leaning upon his stick covered his eyes, again, with his bit of moss.

Hesitatingly he turned at last and staggered on.

When he was near the cedar under which we stood concealed, we stepped out and I said: "My kind friend, what are you doing?"

He stopped and stood dazed and amazed for a moment.

"I am taking the last look at the home I love," he said.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Charley Ross."

"Who brought you here?" I inquired.

"Tanglebeard."

"Well, who is Tanglebeard?" I demanded.

"He is a black giant twice the height of a common man, with a filthy, tangled beard that dangles to his knees. He is half human and more, and possesses powers we do not have," he said.

"Well, what on earth is he?" I asked. "Who is he, and what does he do?"

"He is the cruelest and vilest kidnapper of children, women and men that ever trod on the earth or lived in sight of the sun."

"Well, where did he come from?" I asked, "and how did he get here?"

"During the deluge, a mysterious world in its course swung within a few miles of the earth itself, and the two sailed side by side like birds for the space of forty days and forty nights.

"The atmosphere of that world and the earth mingled and commingled and such a downpouring of thunder, lightning, wind and rain has never shocked the earth before or again.

"Now, while the mighty storm that shook the

earth and its neighbor in their course, was raging at its height, Tanglebeard came in a flying turtle from that passing world, and, circling, lighted in darkest Africa?"

Instantly Dave gave me a searching look.

"I told you that old turtle looked like a flying machine, but surely that story can't be true," said Dave, kindly.

"I do not know," I said, "but astronomers say that head-end, tail-end and side collisions do occur in the heavens, with results too dreadful to contemplate. Just a few years ago the papers said that Halley's comet gave the earth a close call, but, missing each other by a moment, they crossed each other's trail with a terrible drive and each, by the breadth of a hair, escaped unharmed, and dashed whirling on."

"Well, that is true," Dave replied; "so I guess the earth and the Tanglebeard's world have parallel tracks for a forty days' run. But the story of Tanglebeard himself could not be true, for if he had been living when the flood came,

he would have been dead thousands of years ago."

"Oh, you don't understand," said the old man. "Tanglebeard drinks the water of Bimini, the fountain of perpetual youth."

"Great stars, Bill! Do you suppose the beautiful spring we found the other day is the fountain of perpetual youth—the spring which Ponce de Leon sought in vain?"

"I do not know," I said, "but such a spring is the dream of scientists and the hope of a dying world. What does Tanglebeard want with the people he kidnaps?" I asked, turning to the old man.

"He enslaves them to work in his gardens. On dark and gloomy nights he brings us tools and necessary things, and laying them down on our door-steps, gives us orders in a voice dreadful though half human, and then vanishes unseen."

"Have you ever really seen him?" I asked.

"A few times I have seen him in dark, gloomy outlines only?"

"The Tanglebeard theory explains all things, and all my doubts are gone," I exclaimed.

"Yes, you are right," Dave replied.

"Did Tanglebeard kidnap you?" I asked the old man.

"Yes," said he, "when a tiny little boy."

"Can you remember anything of the outer world?" I asked.

"Yes, I lived in a large house in a big grove. I remember mother used to call me honey, kiss and hug me. I just can remember seeing father. One afternoon he came home and gave me a stick of candy. This is all I can remember of him."

"How sad," said Dave.

"Oh, Mr. Ross," I exclaimed, "I now know all about you, your father and your mother."

He blared his eyes in surprise.

"For Heaven's sake, tell me about myself, my father and my mother," he begged.

"You are Charley Ross, the son of a capitalist of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. You were kidnapped when a little boy and your devoted father and mother spent a fortune in a fruitless effort to find you; and, failing in this, they settled down heartbroken, to live on a little farm near Philadelphia. There, today, sad, old and gray they sit, talking of their dear little boy that was taken away."

The old man convulsed and shook, mopping his face with his bit of moss.

"Oh!" he cried, "that I could have seen them one time more before this, my dying hour."

"Dying hour!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean by that?"

"I am on my way," he said, "to burn at the stake to-night."

"Who is going to burn you?" Dave asked excitedly.

"Tanglebeard."

"For what?" I demanded.

"I attempted to escape three times," he said,

“and made him angry, and now, being too old to work, he is going to burn me to-night for the joy of seeing it done.”

Dave's eyes flashed venom and fire.

“We will rescue you,” Dave shouted with a voice full of rage.

“Yes, indeed we will,” I cried.

“Oh, my kind, young friends you can not do it,” he replied. “If Tanglebeard could be found, it would take an army to kill him and rescue me. He carries a great club, a large knife and lung fire enough to destroy a brigade.”

“Let him club, cut and spray and make his vaunting good,” Dave raged. “We will meet him and when he hacks the flesh from our bones the unstarted fight will have just begun.”

“Amen,” I shouted.

“So plunge, plunge, Mr. Ross into the deepest thicket, plunge and hide, and after that fly to the spring of Bimini, fly, drink and be young again,” I urged.

With reviving hope beaming in his face he

cried: "I will try, young man, I will try."

Turning he staggered in haste for a jungle that lay near the fountain of perpetual youth.

"Bill, I am dying to plant a bullet in that devil's heart," Dave roared.

"So am I, but be calm and collected," I said, "for now we have a real foe to face—a half human giant from some other world in space. We need all our valor, wit and wisdom to kill that demon."

As I looked up, the sun seemed to hesitate behind a black, gloomy cloud the size of a field and the shape of a coffin. This cloud, that almost touched the tree tops and the blades of lofty palms, filled us both with superstition anew, if not, indeed, with fear.

As the last rays of light lingered over the western sky the coffin, turning end-ways, set sail for our lonely isle. Filled with fear, we snuggled up in our nest, but nothing came except thunder, lightning, wind and rain. So, after awhile, in our dry and cozy nest, the rain lulled us off to sleep and rest.