

CHAPTER XVII

The Search For Charlie

Within twenty-four hours we arrived, one morning, eager and anxious, at the landing but Charlie and the boat were gone.

Shocked, we stood dazed and amazed!

"Where is Charlie and the boat?" Dave asked with a sigh.

"I do not know," I said "but let's look for them."

"So, for ten hours, we searched the forest and the beach for Charlie and the boat, but did not find a vestige of either and, returning at sundown, made a bed in the tangles and lay down to rest, in agony too great to bear. The next morning we woke and began to consider what to do.

"Dave, I believe Tanglebeard has caught Charlie and has either enslaved him or burnt him."

Dave looked sorrowful and I felt utterly miserable.

"I am sure of that, Bill, but what do you suppose he did with the boat?"

"I do not know," I said, "but I guess he either hid it or destroyed it."

"What shall we do?" I think we had better make a raft and go home," said Dave.

"And leave Charlie? Not I!"

"We will hunt him and if we find him, rescue him, or die in the attempt." I said. "Abandon such talk. We could not return through the saw grass, on a raft, anyway."

"You are right," said Dave, "and I will go with you to hunt Charlie."

So we sat down, ate breakfast and started back to the north end of the island to look for him

"I am sorry for poor Charlie and the captives.

But oh, for one shot at Tanglebeard's old, bushy head!" said I as we started.

On the afternoon of the second day we came to the east end of a meadow that, rising, overlapped a grassy ridge to the west. The meadow and ridge looked like a pasture, with a tree here and there, but the crest of the ridge was dotted with a few shaggy old cedars that stood projected against the western sky.

Tired and wearied, we sat down on an old log to rest and to watch the deer, moose and buffalo graze on the tall, green grass; but just before sundown we ate supper and lay down in full view of a golden sunset that blessed the heavens themselves.

We lay there, forgetful of our troubles, 'till twilight began to steal over the beautiful island when, suddenly, we saw a great creature rising up the east side of the ridge and moving away from us.

"What on earth can it be?" Dave whispered.

"I cannot tell. I wish I knew."

The next moment the great creature rose to the crest of the hill and, stopping, stood against the pink sunset.

"It is an elephant, Bill."

"What on earth is that thing on its back?"

I asked.

"It looks like the dim and shadowy outline of a man. It is old Tanglebeard!" Dave cried, in a whisper.

"I can see his long beard yield to the breeze. It is Tanglebeard, sure enough, who has started on his nefarious night errands," I said.

"He has stopped his elephant to spy the country over. Look! I can see him turn his head from side to side," said Dave, nervously.

"He seems to have a big bundle buckled on behind. I wonder," said I "what it can be?"

"I dare say it is a jug of lung-fire. . Look," said Dave, "he moves off, and on and out of sight on the other side."

"What an awful sight!" Dave groaned.

"Yes," said I, "he looks worse than a thousand ghosts."

Then we lay down and tried to go to sleep, amid the howling of the foxes and wolves, but could not until a late hour.

The next morning we rose up at early dawn and sat in our bed to look for Tanglebeard. In a few moments we saw him rise up from behind the ridge on his great elephant and, stopping and scanning for a moment, come on down, and turning north, vanish behind the timber.

"Let's go Dave, get on his trail, follow him home and kill him. The slaves say he travels only at night and sleeps in daytime, so we may find him asleep in his bed and stab him in the heart before he wakes."

"I shudder to think of it, Bill."

"It is an awful job I know," said I "but we must save Charlie, the captives, and ourselves."

Coming down, we went up to the ridge where the elephant had crossed, and there saw a dim trail made by the feet of the great beast.

Then, slowly and cautiously, we sat out on the trail after Tanglebeard. The dim path led us for several miles along a narrow meadow that resembled a winding river, whose border was everywhere lined by immense trees and under-jungles. Finally we reached a point from which we could see the upper end of this meadow and stopped to look and listen.

"We must be approaching a puzzle, Dave."

"Why?" he asked.

"We can see," I explained, "all over the upper end of the meadow but discover no elephant or road in the under-jungle along which he could have gone. So be cautious."

Inching along under the overhanging moss 'till we reached the upper end of the meadow, we came to a cluster of low, projecting live oak limbs that almost touched the grass on the open plain, but under these we discovered a dim trail leading onward.

"He has not been gone long for I see where

the elephant knocked the morning dew off the weeds and limbs," said Dave.

Then, like cats, we crept along the winding trail for about a mile and suddenly came to a small meadow, in the center of which lay a beautiful, sparkling lake fringed about with willows and palms.

"Dave, that is the sweetest little lake I ever saw and the shrubs on its border are covered with yellow jessamine."

"The perfume is glorious, Bill, but look! I see a much-used place on the beach just this side of the large live-oak."

"I guess it is a pleasant place where Tangle-beard waters his elephant," I said. "We ought to go to it, but I fear to expose ourselves to view on the open meadow."

Then we stole around and, getting a better view, saw that the place was much used and, taking the risk, ran across to the timber on the beach and crept up to the watering place under the old live-oak.

"Great Heavens, Bill! There lies the burnt and charred remains of a man by that stake."

"Oh, Dave, it is true and it has not been done two days."

"Some poor slave was burned for disobedience," said Dave.

"Here lies the hickory with which Tanglebeard beat him before he burned the poor wretch. Look how bloody it is," I observed.

"There is a shoe heel and a piece of shirt," said Dave, picking them up.

"That looks like the shoe heel that Charlie wore," I said.

"Yes, it does, and this cloth looks like the shirt that Charlie wore."

"Those are Charlie's remains. Tanglebeard captured him and burned him. Oh, how awful!" I moaned.

"And what dreadful news to take back to his old mother," said Dave, with tears in his eyes.

"I cannot bear that awful news to her," I said.

"Well, let's turn back, Bill, make a raft and go to Fort Myers."

"No, never, never," I raged. "I am blood-thirsty and bent on death and destruction, so make no excuse for we are off on his trail with bloody execution raging in our souls."