

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fading Trail

Examining the watering place we saw the fresh tracks of the great beast that stood and drank an hour before.

From this point we tracked the elephant through grass, waist-high, to the north border of the little meadow, and there found a well-beaten trail that led to the north through a jungle.

"He is making for the high hills in the north end of the island and there we will find his cabin on the head waters of the creeks that flow from that unexplored region," I said.

Then we set out on the trail again like two cats and, creeping some two miles, crossed over

a low cedar ridge and, descending to the narrow valley on the other side, stopped to look and listen.

"Hush Dave, hush. I heard something."

"What was it, Bill?"

"I don't know. It was a strange noise."

Then we waited in silence for some time but heard nothing, so we crept a few yards further on and saw another opening in the timber.

Inching up to the edge we saw, on a little four-acre meadow, the huge unbridled beast grazing on tall grass that grew on the edge of a beautiful little lake.

"Tanglebeard has dismounted, left the elephant, and has proceeded on foot," Dave said.

"The forest is too thick," I suggested, "to let the elephant in; so I guess this meadow is his pasture and home."

"We must not let the elephant see us for he might trumpet, give the signal and let Tanglebeard know of our approach," said Dave.

Then we crept around to the north end of the

opening which was bordered by a creek, and examining, saw where the outlaw had crossed the stream on a foot-log.

"Now, Dave, cock your gun and be instant, for we are liable to see him any moment."

"If we find his house, Bill, what will we do?"

"If he is walking about I will plant a bullet in his old, shaggy head, but if he is asleep in his cabin I will slip in and drive this dagger in his heart."

Then we started upon the well-beaten trail and, creeping along for about one hour, crossed a low, cedar ridge and, reaching the valley on the other side, stopped again to look and listen.

Discovering nothing, we continued to a point near a brook in the tall timber that made twilight at noon, and sat down for a moment to rest.

"What was that," Dave asked, "a dog or a wolf?"

"It sounded like a strange dog to me," I replied.

"It may be Tanglebeard's watch dog, and if so, I fear we are gone, Bill."

Waiting for an hour we heard nothing, and rising crept some ten steps and saw another opening in the timber.

Drawing a little nearer, we discovered a very small garden whose surface was almost overshadowed by the tall, leaning trees that stood on the border, and it was full of cabbage, potatoes and onions.

Creeping a few steps further we saw, under the drooping limbs of a shaggy oak, a small, dingy, rock cabin whose roof was covered by the dangling moss.

"Bill, that is his house."

"Hush, hush," I said. "I hear someone cooking in the old cabin."

"That is Tanglebeard," Dave whispered.

"Yes, and now, Dave, you must be cool, collected and true, and show the blood of your mother. This is the supreme moment of our lives. Come, be instant."

Stealing a few steps further we heard a pan fall and saw a strange little light pass the door.

"He is cooking breakfast, Bill."

In a few moments someone threw out a pan of dishwater, and a strange looking dog walked up to it and, eating something, turned and lay down near the door.

As we stood breathless, watching and listening, we heard someone in the cabin begin to snore.

"He has gone to sleep, Bill."

"Oh, that dog, that dog!" I inwardly exclaimed.

"Dave, you slip to the dog, and if he wakes, stab him before he barks, and I will creep inside the cabin and plant my dagger in Tanglebeard's heart."

Then I cocked my gun and took out my dagger, and looking Dave in the eyes said: "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Then, like two cats, Dave started for the dog and I for the cabin.

Inching up to the door I looked in. It was dark but I discovered an old bed in the corner, behind the door, and I saw the impression of feet under an old quilt.

"Snore, snore, snore," he went.

My hair stood like bristles.

I crept to the bed; I drew my dagger; the dog barked.

"Don't stab me, master! Don't stab me!" exclaimed an old, white-headed negro woman.

"Oh, Heavens!" I exclaimed. "I thought you were Tanglebeard."

"No, Master, no. He lives somewhere further on. Don't hurt me. I have tried to be a good old negro."

Then I stepped out into the yard and she followed me to the door.

At this moment Dave walked up, amazed.

"Who are you, auntie?" I asked.

"I am Nellie Cheops."

"Are you after Tanglebeard?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Turn back, honey, turn back. You cannot hurt him. It will take a great army to kill him."

"You may be wrong," I said, "but where were you born and reared, Aunt Nellie?"

"Away back in old Egypt across the water."

"Have you ever been married?"

"Yes, master. I married Shewbread Cheops."

"Great stars, Bill! She is the wife of old Shewbread we found on the lake the other day."

"Isn't it wonderful?" I exclaimed.

"Did you find my husband, honey?"

"Yes, and he is old, feeble and lives not over four or five miles southwest of here."

"Oh, good Lord! Master take me to him. I am willing to be burned to see him once more.

"Be content, Aunt Nellie," I said, "for we are going to kill Tanglebeard, set you free and take you to your husband."

"Oh, honey, you cannot hurt him. Go and get a large army and kill him or run him off."

"Why do you say we cannot kill him, Aunt Nellie?" I asked. "Look at these guns and knives."

"He never walks in daytime and, therefore, you cannot hurt him," said she.

"I will shoot him at night," I said.

"Well, that would not hurt him unless you could catch his eye, and this you cannot do at night."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"When you look at him straight in the eye he is no more than any other man, but the instant you take your eye off of his he is a man and more. So he hates and dreads the human eye, and rambles only at night."

"Well, I want to get one shot at his bushy old head," I said.

"You will never see him, honey, until you are his. He will put you to sleep before you know it, and then you are gone forever."

"We will shoot him before he puts us to sleep," said I.

“The snake dog and old Whitehead will see you long before you see them, and report your coming to Tanglebeard, who will be ready before you arrive.”

“What is the snake dog?” I asked.

“It is an animal, from the passing world, with a head and neck like a snake, and a body half dog and half wolf. He always watches Tanglebeard’s home and goes before him on his errands to spy out the woods and country before his master arrives. Tanglebeard brought him from Africa and he is cunning, dangerous, cruel and vile.”

“Well, I will risk it, Aunt Nellie.” I said.

“Poor man!” she exclaimed. “But Shewbread had a snake-stone when I last saw him. If you had it, and with it rub your feet and legs, the snake dog could not smell you and the snakes could not bite you. So go and see Shewbread, get the stone and rub before you go on. I know he has the stone for he prized it very highly.”

“Dave, let’s go and get it. It is foolish not to.”

"All right," said Dave, and off we started.

"Master, take me with you to see Shewbread. Let me go and come with you. I can walk four miles in two hours, and I am willing to die to see Shewbread once more."

"All right, Aunt Nellie, come," I said.

So she made ready and in a few moments we were off. We helped her along the best we could and, in about two hours, we reached the edge of the meadow in which Shewbread lived.

"Do you see that clump of trees, on yonder lake?" I asked.

"Yes, master."

"Well, right there," I said, "is your husband's house, home and garden."

Then we started across the meadow, but we could hardly keep up with the old woman who now seemed full of youth and nimbleness.

In a few moments we turned through a sort of hedge and saw Uncle Shewbread hoeing in his garden.

"Shewbread! Shewbread!" she exclaimed.

He looked up amazed, stunned and mute for a moment.

"Oh, Nellie, is that you?"

"Yes, Shewbread, yes."

Then the old lovers, separated for two thousand years, rushed like youths, to each other, embraced and stood speechless.

Turning, Dave and I walked on down the lake and lay down for four hours, to rest and look at swans and ducks and wading birds play in the water.

After this we went back to the cabin and found the two old lovers sitting under a live-oak talking.

He got down on his knees to thank us for our kindness, and rubbed our feet and legs with the snake stone saying: "The snake dog cannot smell you now and the rattler will rise, but cannot bite you."

"Well, we must go," said I.

Then the ancient lovers embraced, and off we went, but the old man followed us to the edge

of the meadow and stood gazing as long as he could see us.

We returned long before sundown, and Aunt Nellie begged us to eat supper and, she being neat and clean, we decided to do so.

Just before sundown I was sitting in the front yard looking, watching and waiting, when suddenly I saw the snake dog thrust his black, earless head and neck out into the garden and begin to peep, and sniff the air.

Enraged, I let drive and sent a bullet crashing into his head and dropped him dead in his tracks.

"Hide him!" exclaimed Aunt Nellie. "Hide him!"

Then we took the strange looking beast up the creek and, tying a rock about his neck, threw him into a deep hole and returned for supper, and while we sat feasting on the best cabbage I ever ate, Aunt Nellie exclaimed: "Yonder is Tanglebeard, with his veil on, peeping at the cabin. Raise a plank and go under the floor."

We obeyed instantly, and she began to wash up the dishes and to hide the extra food.

About dark we heard someone walk up to the door and stop.

"Slave," said a voice like a cow talking, "have you seen any strangers on this island of late?"

"No, master, no."

"Blindfold yourself," said he. "I am coming in to see if anyone is here."

I prayed for the nose of a salamander and the feet of a mole.

"Now, come in, master, I am blindfolded."

Then the demon came in with a strange light, and began to examine the house. He looked up into the loft and, coming to a point immediately above us, he kneeled down. My heart went like a motor-cycle, but, looking under the bed, he rose and examined the dishes.

"Why have you got so much dishwater, and why have you so much food cooked?" he asked.

"I cooked the extra food for your dog, master."

"Rub your old mouth with this stone, for I am going to spray your house with lung fire."

Then she rubbed her mouth and nose with the stone, and he turned loose his lung fire and walked out, but the instant the outlaw was out of sight Aunt Nellie began to fan out the gas with all her might.

But in a few moments we breathed a small quantity of the vile stuff and it set our lungs on fire, and oh, kind friends, no one on earth knows the agony we suffered for fourteen days. If our lungs had been in the fire they could not have pained us more.

And we would have died had it not been for the kindness of Aunt Nellie, who doctored and fed us with a mother's care, but after a time we were up and about and ready to go.

"Now, Aunt Nellie, the snake dog is dead and we are going to hunt Tanglebeard down, kill him and rescue you, Shewbread and all," said I.

"I beseech you, young master, not to go, but if you do, may the good Lord take care of you both."