

CHAPTER XIX

The Last Search For Tanglebeard

"But before we leave, Aunt Nellie, I want to ask you one more question," I said. "Do you know of any other captives on this island?"

"I have known hundreds of them in time, and used to live and work with some English captives, but now Tanglebeard will not allow us to go beyond one mile from our homes, so of late I have not seen but a few slaves."

"Well, who have you seen of late?" I asked.

"One afternoon, last fall, I walked over towards Pirate's Lake and came, suddenly, upon a beautiful lady sitting on a log. She was ragged, sad and crying as if her heart would break.

"I knew I was disobeying orders, but I said:

'What is the matter, honey?' She looked up, surprised, pleased and horrified.

'Tanglebeard has got me,' she said. 'He has set my lungs on fire twice, but I do not fear him now for I want to die. I wish he would come and kill me and put me out of my misery.'

'Don't talk that way, honey,' I said, 'for maybe we all will get out some day, yet, for Tanglebeard, they say, is going back home the first time his world comes passing by.'

When I said that the poor soul seemed to be comforted, and coming up, wanted to put her arms around me, but as I was only an old negro, I would not let her do it. Then I said:

'Who are you, honey?'

'I am the Czarina of Russia. I am in trouble. I don't know whether my husband and my children are dead or alive.'

'What kind of looking folks are they, honey?' I asked, and when she told me I said:

'Good Lord, child, I have seen every one of

them. They are right now at work in this island. Tanglebeard loves to catch big folks.'

"When I told her this the poor creature liked to have a fit of joy."

Continuing her story, the old negro said:

'I know another big, tall white gentleman too, from your country, if I could just call his name.

'Was it the Grand Duke Nicholas?' she asked,

'That is the name, honey sure as the world,' said I. 'I know it is. I remember it. I have seen him a number of times and he lives on the Creeping Brook over yonder ridge.'

"When I told her all this, the poor child to be hoped up no little, and thanking me a heap too much, turned and ran off towards her home.'"

"Think of it, Bill! Did anyone ever hear the like?"

"It is wonderful and awful, both," I said.

"A great many Russians," said Dave, "believe these nobles dead, but won't they be surprised when they hear that those grand-dees

are still alive?"

"Yes," I said, "but would it not be great to kill Tanglebeard and set his slaves all free."

"Well Aunt Nellie," I said, "are you acquainted with any other captives? If so tell us about them."

"I know a teacher and a soldier who now live over on the Tadpole. The teacher teaches and talks every chance he has and it seems like he can't get enough of it but the soldier is always sad. He seems to be worrying about something away back yonder."

"Who are they?"

"The teacher is a white man by the name of Socrates who came from a place called Athens. The other white gentleman came from the city of Rome beyond the water and this good man goes by the name of Marcus Brutus. He don't talk much but sits about so sad and forsaken."

"Bill, Bill," Dave exclaimed.

"But this can't be true, I said, for Socrates drank hemlock 496 years before Christ and died

and Brutus fell upon his own sword on the plains of Phillipi 2000 years ago.”

“Oh, I know all about that,” she said, “I have heard them tell it. Socrates took a harmless drug and pretending to be dead escaped towards Africa and was caught at sea by Tanglebeard.”

“The soldier had his servants to falsely report his death and to give the people a dead man who resembled himself. Then the poor soul ran away and in his flight from the plains of Phillipi to the land of Gaul, Tanglebeard captured him and brought him to the island of Bimini where he works and roves all the time.”

“Dave, I am stunned. What will the people say when this good news explodes?”

Speechless, dumb and amazed said he, “they will drink it in and beg for more.”

Then we told Aunt Nellie good-bye and set out, with a vim, in pursuit of the hellish old outlaw, from some other world.

Searching a few moments, we struck the trail again, and following it for several miles through

a jungle, we came to the foot of a tall ridge covered with a dense growth of cedar.

At the foot of the hill a tiny lake lay nestled in the solitude, and on its sandy beach we saw the demon's tracks.

He wore an old run-down pair of shoes twice the size of those used by an ordinary man, and the steps were five to six feet apart.

"What a giant," Dave whispered.

Turning up the ever-dimming trail to the crest, we saw a narrow, deep valley bordered by a range and cliff on the other side.

Things seemed strange, but descending the ridge to the valley, we came to a point where the trail forked into many paths.

We followed one but, winding around many times, came back to the starting point. In like manner we tested each trail and got the same results.

"This is a puzzle, Dave, constructed by Tanglebeard to deceive his pursuers and thereby prevent them from finding his house and home. I

believe he is close at hand, so be careful, look and listen."

We waited for some time in the jungles but, hearing nothing, and the sun being low, we started again to find the trail that we believed led from the puzzle to his cabin, and, making a big detour, we struck a dim path that led towards the cliff on the other side.

Then we sneaked and inched along until we came to the foot of the cliff. There we saw a plain trail lead up through the dense cedars towards the cliff, which stood about one-third of the way from the valley to the crest.

"Dave, I see an overhanging cliff and I do believe he lives in a cave instead of a cabin."

"Bill, I feel curious."

"Well, come on," I said. "It is nearly sundown and it will never do to spend the night in this dark cave, where twilight prevails at noon-time. It is almost time now for him to start on his night errands. So come on."

"I am ready, Bill, go on."

"Cock your gun, draw your knife, be cool and instant," I whispered.

Then we crept cautiously up to a point about fifty steps from the cliff and stopped. We saw an overhanging rock and beneath it a dark, deep hole large enough for a man to walk in and out.

Leaving the path we crept a few steps to the west and concealed ourselves in the low, swinging moss and stood ready.

Just as the sun was setting a strange dog came out and, looking in all directions and sniffing the air, turned and walked back into the cave.

In a few moments a rattle snake, with a head the size of a dog, crawled out and lifting his head aloft, looked in all directions and licking out its forked tongue, raised its tail and began to rattle.

Instantly rattle snakes began to rattle all around us and the hair stood like bristles up on our heads.

The snake turned and looked back, and we saw the dim outline of a great giant move to the front and, hesitating for a second, vanish.

The next moment a great black shaft of mist poured out of the cave towards us.

"Sleepy gas and lung fire!" Dave exclaimed in a whisper, and down the hill we broke head-long and, reaching the valley, we turned on our searchlights and frantically made for home. But, reaching the crest of the first ridge, we fell, exhausted, upon the ground to rest.

Lying upon the ridge we heard Tanglebeard, in a few moments, blow a strange horn from his gloomy cliff and instantly the wolves began to howl and assemble towards his den.

"Dave, Tanglebeard is calling up his wolves to put on our trail."

"What will we do, Bill? Our time has come."

At this moment the snorting deer came flying by in frantic leaps and bounds.

"Lung fire," I exclaimed, and up we sprang

and started again at full speed in the bright moonlight.

Fleeing about one hour, we heard a great pack of wolves coming on our trail.

"Oh, Bill, what will we do?" Dave asked.

"Come," said I, "and let's back track like rabbits and throw them off the trail."

Then we ran for about one-half mile and, returning the way we came, swung up into a tree and wrapped ourselves in moss and sat down.

In a moment the vicious pack passed beneath us in full blast and, upon coming to the point where we had turned back, lost our trail, became confused and ceased to bark.

We sat there till sun-up, but did not hear a wolf or anything else unusual.

"Dave, rabbits lick their feet to prevent dogs from tracking them so let's spit on our shoes and maybe the wolves can't track us."

So we did, and, coming down, made for the boat landing where we had planned to make a raft and go to Fort Myers.

We ran and walked all day 'till a little after sunset and, hearing something, looked back.

We saw the wolves turn over a ridge in full blast, and Tanglebeard, sitting veiled on his elephant, bounding like an avalanche.

Amazed, we dashed forward one hundred yards and, back tracking some distance, ran to the beach and made down it for the boat landing like one gone mad.

In a moment the wolves lost the track and hushed, but on we fled in the shallow water, with desperation wild.

The next moment they struck our tracks like a tornado. We looked back. They were rounding a curve like a volcanic blast.

"Oh, Heaven, we are gone! We are gone!" Dave cried.

Frightened, headlong and amazed we dashed around a curve and there sat Charlie and the boat he had rescued.

"Raise the anchor, Charlie. Raise it, raise it," we whooped.

The next moment we piled into the boat crying: "Fly! fly! fly! Charley, fly!"

The wolves dashed up, but the boat leaped like a flying fish and left the demons raging. The next moment Tanglebeard shot a blast of gas, but, bless the Lord, as it was flying over our heads the west wind beat it back, and we escaped unharmed. And, oh, how great, great, great was our joy!

But before we had time to catch a second breath, Tanglebeard pulled his hair down over his face and leaped into the lake astride the great beast. Frantic with rage, he charged like a locomotive run mad.

"Oh Heaven!" I cried. "Pull the throttle wide, Charlie, wide, wide, wide!"

The boat shot forward like a frog but all in vain. The demon, with his knife aloft, was at our heels.

"Turn, boys, turn, and fire," I raved.

Instantly we whirled and, taking aim at his head, fired—bang, bang, bang.

Hair flew, blood flowed; he raged. But as he rose suddenly to leap into the boat, we fired again—bang, bang, bang.

He gave an unearthly yell, convulsed, and dropped into the water, dead.

“Bless God!” we whooped, and sailing back to the sandy shore, we fell exhausted, the happiest trio under the sun. Wild with joy, we revelled and raved till the break of day.

“Now, boys,” said Dave, “let’s go back and tell the good news and gather the captives at the Fount of Perpetual Youth. And while they grow young, we will go to the outer world, get men and boats and, returning, take them home.”

“Charlie and I will be at your heels,” I exclaimed.

We went to the cabin of Joan—bless her happy heart—and taking her, we soon found Aunt Nellie and Uncle Shewbread. On the way to the spring, we met Marshal Ney and the Princess, who, hearing the good news, raved with frantic joy. Reaching the spring, we

found John Wilkes Booth and Charlie Ross, drinking the water of perpetual youth.

The third day after this, the little castle girl, her foster mother, Dr. Parkman and Theodosia Burr Alston appeared at the spring, all in a frenzy of delight. An hour later, Lord Kitchener, haggard, sad, happy all, walked into camp, shaking with joy.

The same day, the Czar and the Czarina and their children met again. What a scene! We all stood, choked and speechless.

But the saddest sight of all occurred as the sun went down. At that moment, we saw Mr. Booth and Marshal Ney supporting two old men on their way to the spring. Their long hair looked like wool and their beards like cotton. Stooped, sad and wrinkled, they trudged along.

The old men were Socrates, the Greek philosopher, and Marcus Brutus, the Roman Senator and conspirator. Once in sight of the spring, they staggered in haste to the fount and filled themselves full.

Turning, the great teacher, with a smile, said: "Tell me about Athens, Greece, and the Grecians."

I told him, and great was his joy. In the meantime, Brutus sat with his head down and seemed sad and forsaken, but when I had finished the answer, he humbly raised his careworn face and dejected eyes, and said: "Please tell me what became of Caius Cassius, young Cato and Marc Antony?"

Kindly and gently, I answered his question, but while he listened with intense interest, he showed but little sign of emotion. In a moment he looked down, off, and back at me again.

"What," he asked, "have the Romans and historians said of me?"

"They say Marcus Brutus loved Caesar, but Rome more, but all proclaim that Brutus was the noblest Roman of them all."

The old patriot sprang to his feet; he was wild, he was frantic with joy.

"The burden at last has gone! It has rolled away, bless the Lord," he cried.

We were happy to the last degree.

"Now," I said, "we will go to Fort Myers, get men and boats to carry you off and out."

"No, free, happy and content, we will remain here," they said, "till we get well and young again. After that, filled with youth, nimbleness and joy, we will go home—oh, blessed home!"

This said, Marshal Ney stood up and exclaimed: "Ten thousand thanks and a million cheers to the young explorers!"

The captives sprang to their feet in an uproar and whooped till their throats were sore. Then we told them Good-bye, one by one, and walked away in the sweet music of "Home, Sweet Home".

"Within twenty-six hours we reached the boat, raised anchor and started for the outer world. After many days of trials and troubles,

we reached Fort Myers tonight, and here we are.”

The story ending, the guests sprang to their feet and rushed over in confusion to congratulate the young adventurers.

THE END.