

THE BEE HUNTER



A hot coal laid on a piece of comb, which rested on a cypress-knee, called the bees and gave Bill his first line.



A few hundred yards to the side, bees were allowed flight to their main hive, giving the second line. At the angle of intersection the tree was found.

CHAPTER IX

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SMITH loved solitude, when he could share it with his friends. So he urged us to join him at his camp in the Big Cypress, which he described as a land flowing with (tinned) milk and (wild) honey. He was fattening himself on venison and wild turkey, wrote of bear and panther, recommended a 30.30 Winchester, a 12-bore pump-gun with smokeless cartridges, and sent Bill, his "guide, philosopher and friend," to pilot us into his wilderness. We had long known Bill as an all-around hunter and trapper whose specialty was bee-hunting, and as a bee campaign was on our program we armed ourselves with modern cameras and plate ammunition, in place of the archaic weapons suggested by our friend, and with a compass, toothbrush and head-net each, together with some non-essential clothing, stowed ourselves away in Bill's skiff.

We threaded narrow channels that zizagged among keys of the Ten Thousand Islands, crossed wide, shallow bays with oyster bars over which the skiff had to be dragged, passed through openings which projecting mangrove bushes had closed to the eye, poled up creeks so crooked that snakes lost their way in them, until we reached Bill's shack, which was on

the mainland. Here we exchanged the skiff for a mule and cart. The water voyage had been dry, the journey by land was mostly through water, over boggy prairie, between web-footed cypress trees standing in pools of water, with occasional stretches of sandy pine land. We made slow progress along an invisible road, through a country which has been described as "not wet enough for frogs, but most too wet for folks." More frequently we carried the cart than rode in it. If we dodged the devil of a boulder on one side, we fell into the deep sea of a mudhole on the other. When the low-hanging axle brought up against a cypress knee and jarred the teeth out of our heads, we got out in the mud and boosted the cart over the trouble. Riding soon tired us and we waded for a rest, waded and walked, until night came and we had covered only fifteen of the twenty-three miles which lay between the shack we had left and the camp we were bound for. When the mule had been turned loose to forage for thistles or such other delicacies as were available, Bill started a fire with fat chunks of the pine that grew around us and cut the bud from a cabbage palmetto for our supper. We made beds of palmetto fans, lay down under the stars and listened to Bill's quaint stories of hunting adventures, of curious facts which he had learned and happenings which he had seen; then, as he wandered into other fields, inviting polemical discussion of religious dogmas which he had picked up or invented, we glided into dreamless slumber from which we awakened to see Bill and the mule



Cutting down the bee tree.

The Bee Hunter

ready to strike the trail. The sun had not risen and I was troubled to get my bearings, for every pine tree looked like its neighbor, every cypress strand was merely a replica of every other cypress strand, palmetto groups were alike as twins, expanses of open prairie bore to other expanses the mutual relation of peas in a pod, yet Bill walked in front of the mule, in a line that was straight, eight miles to Smith and his camp.

We were welcomed with a whoop to the campfire with its pot of grits which we proceeded to assimilate, while Bill and his brother broiled big chunks of wild turkey for our three overdue meals. When the after-dinner pipe had been smoked, the wild turkeys in the larder exhibited and post-mortems held after the manner of sportsmen, Bill put a coal from the fire on a piece of honeycomb which he laid on top of a curious up-thrusting growth called cypress knee, and before he had reached the end of his next story several bees had followed up the trail of the smoking honey and loaded themselves with the treasure trove. As they flew away, I failed to see whither, Bill said they were from two hives, one of which was from some tree almost due south from us and the other in one about northeast. After watching the honey bait for a few minutes he said the hive to the south was nearest. I asked him how he knew and he replied, "Bees get back sooner." I didn't believe him, but refrained from telling him so. He put the smoking bait in a little box with a sliding glass top in which he captured several bees. He then moved

about a hundred yards to the east and released a bee which took a course something west of south. Bill said we would find the hive "in them cypress over 'n that swamp 'bout a quarter off." We walked to the swamp and waded in, swerving from a bee line only to avoid impenetrable tangles and keep out of deep holes. Squirrels looked down on us from the branches of tall trees, wading birds flew flabbily before us and once Bill kicked aside a moccasin that seemed about to strike. As we walked farther in the swamp Bill moved more and more slowly, gazing intently upward and studying the top of every big tree. After we had gone a quarter of a mile he turned loose another bee which flew to the north. Bill said we had gone past the hive and asked me where my eyes had been. Then he exclaimed, "There it is!" and pointing out a big cypress about fifty yards away tried to make me see a knot-hole fifty feet from the ground which he said was the door to the hive. I told him that I could see the tree all right, that it might have a knot-hole, though it would take a telescope to prove it, but as to seeing bees at that distance it couldn't be done. He tried to show me the yellow stain of wax left around the hole by the feet of the bees and promised me a view at short range the next morning.

We returned to camp and learned that Smith had gone into the near-by hammock to find out what was exciting his dog, which could still be heard barking angrily. A little later we heard two shots from the thick woods where he had gone, followed by the



The home of the bees laid bare.

savage barking of a very much agitated dog, which Bill said must be in a mix-up with a wild-cat. Our surmising was cut short by the hunter's signal for help, two shots in quick succession followed by a third after a brief interval. Bill and his brother started on a run in the direction of the sound and remained away so long that we were considering a relief expedition when "three men and a dog," covered with mud and glory and bearing the carcass of a panther that from tip to tip measured ninety-four inches, returned to camp. Smith had followed his dog into a thicket where he was barking at something which Smith supposed was a coon. When he found himself looking into the eyes of a panther that crouched on a limb twenty feet above him, he was reminded unpleasantly of the fact that, instead of a rifle, he held in his hand a fowling piece loaded with small shot. The time seemed long, as he stood within a single bound of the most dangerous of wild animals, with eyes fixed upon his, slowly feeling out bird cartridges from his gun and pressing shells loaded with buckshot in their places, but there was surely neither haste nor nervousness in the cautious motion that lifted the weapon to his shoulder, and when the flame streamed from it the sights were in accurate alignment with the brain of the savage beast. The panther partly sprang and partly fell to the ground, receiving a second shot which was fired from precaution rather than necessity. It isn't every day that a hunter gets a panther, nor is it every hunter that ever gets one, and we sympathized with Smith

in his struggle to maintain before the campfire, as we talked far into the night, the air of nonchalance which he at first assumed. But there was a fly in the ointment of the Camera-man when he heard of the pose of the panther.

For the hunt of the next morning we arrayed ourselves in defensive armor of head-nets, padded gloves, coat sleeves tied at the wrists, and trousers at the ankles. The professionals, Bill and his brother, without gloves or netting, attacked with axes the big cypress, which the bees had homesteaded, but when the tree fell they protected themselves from the enraged insects by the smoke of burning palmetto fans which they carried in their hands as they quickly plugged up the front door of the bee habitation. They were not afraid of the bees, but were mindful of the monition of Mohammed and tied their camels before trusting them to God. The bee-hunters sounded the trunk of the fallen tree with their axes and began splitting off a big chip six feet long and including about one-fourth of the circumference of the tree. Just before the axe broke through into the cavity where the bees were making merry music, Bill started a smudge under the tree and within its friendly refuge split off the chip and laid open the store of accumulated honey. The hunters retired, the bees swarmed forth filling the air with their angry buzzing and the hour of the Camera-man had come. He found the bees and the bees found him. There were crevices in his armor, bare wrists, thinly covered sections of sensitive skin and exposed spots, and the insects



The comb and bees.

located them with accuracy. His head-net prevented accurate focusing and he tore it off; he couldn't press the bulb with padded gloves so he laid them aside, for otherwise the expedition would be a failure and it was better to return on his shield than without it. Thereafter the chivalrous bees lit on his face and hands and crawled over them but never again stung him. He photographed them, as well as the honey-filled comb, of which full fifty pounds rested within the hollow of the cypress, built there in rows overlapping each other, arranged with an architectural skill worthy of their repute as the primal geometricians. He photographed groups of bees as they clustered on adjacent logs or cypress knees and contemplated the ruins of their heritage. When the Camera-man rested from his labors he refreshed himself with big mouthfuls of honeycomb, illustrating the economic policy of transferring goods "direct from the producer to the consumer." After the bees had quieted down, the bee-hunters robbed them of the property they had accumulated, tearing away with bare hands great pieces of comb over which scores of bereaved bees were crawling and unconcernedly brushed aside the rightful owners as they put their honey into big pails provided to contain the plunder. For hours after the destruction of their home many of the bees remained, crawling over the log and mourning their misfortunes as they ate crumbs of scattered comb, while even a week later a few could still be found contemplating the ruins.

The wild bee like his tame brother has his favorites

among human kind. He confers his friendship on some and extends enmity to others without discoverable reasons. In general, steady nerves and slow motions will save one from trouble with bees even when they light on his bare face and hands, but there are persons for whom bees seem to have a reasonless antipathy and whom they sting at sight.

In the frozen North, to rob a bee tree is often to destroy its population, but in this land of everlasting summer with ever blooming flowers it only gives the community a lesson, worthy of more extended application, on the folly of hoarding beyond one's needs. Bill told us of a bee tree which he had marked some months before, containing, he thought, a big lot of honey. He guided us three miles in a bee line, through swamp and forest, straight to the tree, only to find after felling it, that a colony of ants had forestalled us and robbed the bees with a thoroughness that left nothing to console their successors.

The life of the bee hunter is not strenuous along modern lines. Starting with a bit of honey and a few cartridges for his rifle, he will spend weeks in the woods, living on the country, eating venison and wild turkey and sleeping under the stars. For his few civilized requirements of clothing, coffee, ammunition and utensils he draws on his banks in the hollow trees and the Big Cypress. You can go with him and find rest and zest in the great wilderness, if the true spirit of the campfire possesses you. He is your peer by virtue of his better knowledge of the things that count in the primitive life you must lead. The



Protected only by a little smoke the bee hunters take out the comb with bare hands.



Smith, in gloves and head-net, inspects the honey.

The Bee Hunter

wider your experience in the great world outside, the keener will be your enjoyment of the simplicity of his environment.

When Bill was struck by a rattlesnake, which sunk its fangs deep in his flesh, Smith, who happily was with him, instantly put his lips to the wound and sucked out as much of the deadly venom as possible. For a time the issue was uncertain, yet in a few weeks Bill was again tramping the woods and swamps as unconcernedly as if he had not so lately looked deep into the eyes of Death.



The next day the cavity was filled with bees.

