

## CHAPTER IX

### A DEPUTY WARDEN

It was not, however, until early morning of the day after the start that Jeppson and Bob reached Flamingo Island. There had been no air at all, and most of their progress had been accomplished by hard work at the sweeps. They were thoroughly tired when dawn broke and revealed the heavily-wooded island close ahead.

"There's Braithe now," said Jeppson. "Seining a few mullet for breakfast I reckon. I could get away with one or two myself."

Braithe, up to his knees in the water, saw them at the same moment and straightened with a jerk. Letting the net swing away in a long line, he stared fixedly at the boat, as interested as a wild animal is in some unfamiliar object. But, when the distance between them had lessened, and he was able to recognize Jeppson, he took an easier posture and drew in his net. There were fish

in it, as the breaking out of quick swellings and flashes of half-veiled silver testified.

"Hello, Braithe!" called Jeppson. "Can you spare a few of those? We're hungry as sharks."

"Sure I can and welcome," said Braithe. "What brings you-all down this way?"

"The plumers have been up to their old tricks," said Jeppson. "Haven't seen any suspicious characters round, have you?"

Braithe turned, with his net bagging behind him, and followed the slowly moving boat as Jeppson steered her toward a narrow lagoon that ran deep into the heart of the islet.

"I did see a small white craft the other day, with a patched jib," he said. "There was two men in her so far's I could tell. Going over to the rookeries today?"

"We'll have a bite and a smoke first," said the warden. "This afternoon 'll do I reckon. We'll take the tender and row over to Crooked Island. That's the nearest. Better come along."

"Don't know but what I will," responded Braithe. "Company ain't so common I want to get shut of it the first day."

The bite and the smoke were followed on the

warden's part by a solid nap; but, tired as Bob was, the novelty of the place and of their quest kept him wide awake. He waited impatiently for the heavy-eyed Jeppson to bestir himself. It was past the hour of three before this happened, but at last the tender was unhitched and drawn alongside. Bob and Braithe sat at the oars while the warden, as became his superior station, directed their course from the stern.

It was one of those windless afternoons when sky and sea are as opaque and hard in hue as paint. The skiff with its three occupants slid along without a feather in her wake toward one of the outer clumps of mangroves. A flat of pinkish blue mud ran out like a lip from the stained sedge to meet the deeper blue of the water, and on this threshold the rowers presently drove the boat.

As it ran deep into the viscid substance the tops of the mangroves bristled with what seemed a spike-like bloom, which unfolded to a floating cloud of herons so dense that wing touched wing. The birds hung a moment in confusion, then drifted off in the direction of the mainland.

“Little Blues and some Reddish,” said Jeppson,

skating forward over the ooze. "Not a pair of Snowys there so far's I could see."

"That means they've been here," said Braithie. "You're a day behind the fair, sheriff."

"I can't arrest a man before he's committed a crime, can I?" Jeppson snorted. "My job's just begun. Phew! I smell their work."

A mat of decaying fish and other offal is always one of the most salient features of a large heronry. But here the odor was more arresting than usual. It was choking in its rankness. Once through the collar of sedge that ringed the grove the cause was visible. Scores of rotting egrets lay scattered over the punk and stained ooze, vivid and ghastly in their dead whiteness.

Jeppson picked up one long body and silently inspected the back. The filamented plumes, the characteristic ornament of the big snowy bird, were gone. He tossed the body back among the roots. It was unnecessary to examine the others. It was evident that all had been shot and shorn by the same greedy hands.

"Oh, lovely woman-folks," said the warden with amiable cynicism. "When you're marching down Fifth Avenue I reckon you-all don't know

the whole price of the new hats you're wearing."

Braithe picked up a black limb, and thrusting it up into a mangrove, overturned a matted platter of twigs. Two dead and fuzzy fledglings spat into the mud.

"There's two items in the bill," he said. "Plumb starved to death."

Bob stirred them gently with his foot.

"Well, the account ain't settled yet." Jeppson's tone was official again. "You see the damage, you-all. This job's about three days old, seems to me."

Braithe and Bob sniffed appraisingly.

"Yes, sheriff, and maybe four," said Braithe. "Old enough sure so this place couldn't be called a pleasure resort."

"She ain't really fragrant. Well, I reckon we've seen enough. Three or four days. Hm! They may be off to the coast by now to get clear of the plumes. Those milliners' agents will likely meet 'em there. But they'll be back for the rest. There's some good colonies they haven't touched. Two men you say in a white boat with a brown jib?"



"Running to westward day befo' yesterday," said Braithe. "I took notice because boats ain't so thick as they might be about yere."

"There ought to be footmarks in the mud," ventured Bob. "It's low course tides now and it hasn't rained for a long spell. We could tell whether it was two, or how many."

Jeppson winked at Braithe.

"How's he for a deputy! Ain't he a Sherlock Holmes?"

"Deputy for you? Is that so!" Braithe looked with amused interest at Bob, whose cheeks were bright with sudden color. "He's sure husky, anyway."

"Yes, sah, he's deputy warden, deputy cook and deputy dish washer," laughed Jeppson. "You're all right, Bob, and there's something in your idea, but I don't see as it would pay us to go back. It was those fellows with the brown jib sure enough."

Bob could stick to an idea in a diffident way. He said no more about it, but as they rowed back to the sloop it returned persistently to his mind that it might be a good plan to examine the flat. He had been so pleased and proud over his

appointment, and he wanted to be something else besides deputy cook and deputy dish washer.

After supper he sat in the cock-pit, leaving Jeppson and Braithe below in the little cabin foul with tobacco smoke. He could hear the warden questioning his companion concerning his lonely life on the key, and he judged from the answers that Braithe led a lazy existence, fishing and shooting and occasionally dredging for sponges and other marketable products of the sea which he could exchange on the mainland for such luxuries as coffee and tobacco.

But the talk did not long interest Bob. The sloop lay in a small bayou screened by mangroves, a place more intimate and fascinating than the wider water outside, and especially so at night, when it was so full of phosphorescent life that it seemed trembling on the edge of ignition.

The least disturbance of the surface kindled a dancing ring of sparks, and now and then a porpoise or a crevalle rushed by trailing a wake so vivid that it dazzled Bob's eyes. And once some predatory fish gave chase to a school of mullet. Their swift movements etched on the black surface a maze of glittering lines and pools of greenish

flame that broke out now here, now there, with the uncertainty of tropical lightning, and made Bob tingle from head to foot with a pleasure he could not define.

This was only one of its phases. In the screening dark the ducks chattered under the banks; sociable talk, quite different from the flock calls and alarm signals of the day. Coons came down among the mangrove roots and cried tremulously. Subdued splashings made the shadows doubly mysterious. It was nature free from the repressive influence of Bob and Company.

By and by Braithe went home, stilling the cove by his foot-falls on the bank. Then Jeppson, yawning, suggested that they turn in.

It was a different world the next morning in which Bob was important again. After breakfast the warden swung himself to the mangrove knees to which the sloop was made fast, saying that he meant to search the key and would not be back before dinner. The prospect of freedom sent Bob energetically to work, and when the dishes were dried and the cabin tidied, he got into the skiff and slipped down the cove.

Beyond the mangrove walls light and warm



color met him. The sea sparkled cheerfully and the clean keys stretched away on either hand like a school of sunning leviathans. The bright, barren region had been once the favorite rendezvous of pirate vessels. The undisturbed sand of its keys had been trampled by the bare feet of hundreds of buccaneers and lighted by the fires at which they roasted their beef and counted their rich spoils.

The color of those days still lingered for Bob. As he rowed along he conjured up one picture after another; the rakish schooners scudding in with black flags flapping; the bands of bullies leaping in their rough games; the bonfires painting the night skies; the wild carousals in which fortunes passed from one reckless hand to another; and finally the rapacious seaward plunge again. Against this background of faded history Bob himself and Jeppson and the lazy Braithe seemed dull and wooden figures.

The shock of the skiff grounding on the flat scattered the pictures and Bob stepped out smiling half regretfully. Those had been stirring if dangerous days. Life was a little too placid now.

The flat, full of small animalculae, was good feeding ground for shore birds. Near the edge of the water a band of footprints made an intricate lace-like pattern, but higher up there were no tracks in the sun-crustured surface until Bob reached the place where they had walked the day before.

The marks were unmistakable and Bob passed on toward the eastern end of the flat. There was nothing in that direction. Turning, he retraced his steps, and west of the skiff he found a single line of prints defined in the firm mud.

He looked around, conscious of a buccaneerish feeling, and humoring it while his gray eyes twinkled. His imagination made the moment dramatic. But after all, this might be the trail of some harmless fisherman drawn to the swamp by the need of firewood, and he followed it with soberer second thoughts until he reached a crushed and yellowish break in the reeds strewn with empty cartridges.

The cartridges told the story. He picked up one and examined it. The plume hunter had used black powder and a twelve gauge gun. Such a load and such a bore were so common that the fact was of small importance. If the swamp could give

no further clue to the identity of the law-breaker Bob would have little news for the warden.

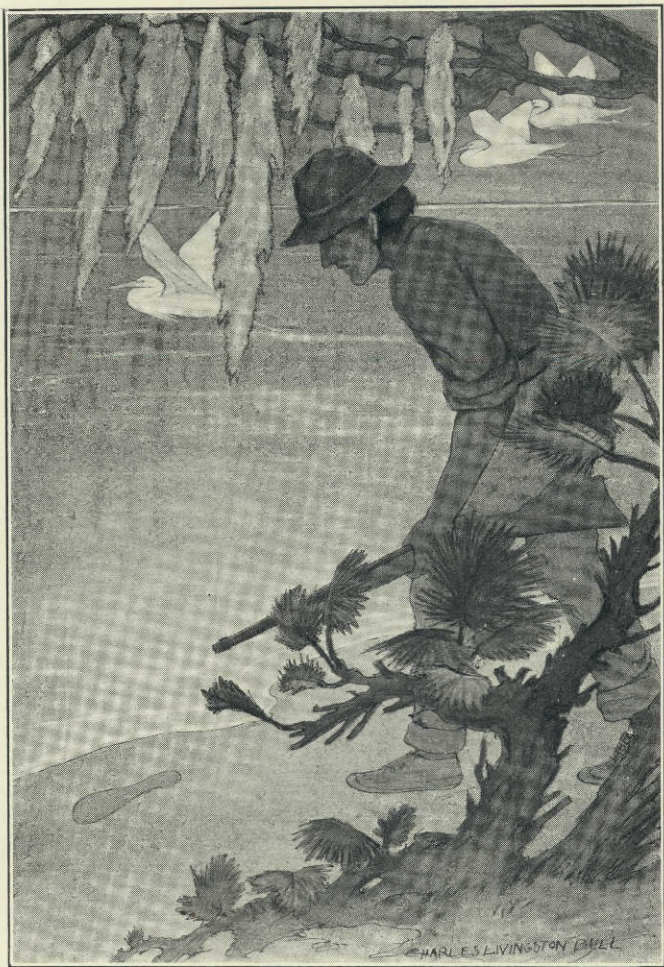
The swamp gave out nothing but the bitter odor of the slain egrets, but on retracing his steps Bob noticed that the right boot of the hunter had a bar-shaped patch across the sole that left a distinct impression in the mud. Here at last was something significant. It was a broad, thick patch. Bob, with forehead wrinkled, could see it in his mind's eye; but somehow he could not rise above it. Study the tracks as he might he could construct no figure of a man from them.

"I reckon that fellow Holmes could have made something out of this," he thought. "It wasn't the men with the brown jib, anyway. Leastways there was only one at this job. He used a twelve gauge and had a patch on his right boot and stepped kinder long. Hm!"

He scratched his puzzled head.

"And I can't figure out the answer any better than what I could this morning."

It was still two hours before noon when he reached the sloop again. He stopped only long enough to tie the skiff to her stern and then swung himself across the mangrove knees to firm soil.



“ HERE AT LAST WAS SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT.”







Here he struck upon a path which wound like a deer trail through the cabbage palms and scrub, and brought him presently to Braithe's shack of whitened driftwood thatched with a thick crust of palmetto fans.

He drew the pin from the staple and stepped in. It was a man's nest. Everything there spoke of a life reduced to the simplest terms; a life of physical effort purely. With a cutlass and a pile of pieces of eight on the table it might have passed as the retreat of some buccaneer, Bob thought. But those picturesque days had gone.

The room was lighted by a large rectangular opening in the wall opposite the unkempt bunk, which had the stale and matted look of the form of a hare. As Bob stood examining the place with curious eyes the doorway was suddenly darkened by Braithe's figure. He had a cast net and a string of mullet in his hands, and a handkerchief tied about his black hair.

"Hullo!" he said with an air that dispelled Bob's sudden consciousness of being a trespasser. "Hit's lucky I got back early. Where's the sheriff? Got any more ideas about those fellows yet?"

"Haven't had much time," replied Bob. "Been fishing?"

Braithe tossed the string on to the greasy table.

"Hit's mullet, day in and day out, with me. There ain't much variety in any way to this place. You fellows are a Godsend. Set down. The bunk's as soft as anything, I reckon."

He himself took one of the rough stools and crossing his legs began to unlace his boots. After much tugging and grunting he relieved himself of the salt-dampened leather.

"D' you mind tossing me those moccasins, under the bunk there? At the foot. Thanks. Hm! Hit shorely does feel good to get your feet into light gear. I'd wear 'em right along this weather, but I cut my toe on a horse-winkle and I have to favor it."

He kicked the heavy shoes into the centre of the floor and stretched out his legs luxuriously.

"So the sheriff ain't got any new ideas. Where'd you say he was?"

"Somewhere round here," said Bob. He got up and stared absently about the room. "He said he'd patrol the island and be back to dinner. You've got a right smart house here."

“ She holds me alright and no taxes to pay. Sit down, suh, and make yo’self comf’able. Don’t you fret about dinner. We’ll eat hit right yere and I’ll cook hit. The sheriff’ll shorely drop in bye-m-by.”

Bob looked at Braithe’s hospitable, smiling face and his eyes flickered.

“ Alright, sir,” he said; but instead of resuming his seat he moved slowly about the room examining the implements with which its walls were decorated. He paused finally in front of a pair of well-oiled guns, and Braithe, though his back was turned, hit instinctively upon the attraction.

“ You won’t find another pair like that in South Fluridy,” he boasted. “ That top one she can crack bone at seventy-five yards. I don’t have to do no stretching when I fire her. She just naturally reaches out to ’em. Yes, sah, she throws shot plenty hard.”

His face softened with the true gunner’s love for his implements, and the little stir of pleasurable emotion sent his hand into his pocket for pipe and tobacco.

Bob lifted the gun from its peg and threw the top-lever over. The breech tilted and he saw the

brass bases and undented caps of a pair of cartridges.

"Look out, she's loaded," said Braithe. He held a match to the black tobacco and glanced over his shoulder. "I reckon I wouldn't be good for much if I got her charge in the back at this range."

"You ain't good for much right now!" Bob's tone, oddly raucous, stripped the words bare of any possibly humorous suggestion.

Braithe's hand with the dead match in it hung over the bowl and the lips that had started to curve amusedly round the stem of the pipe flattened with a twitch. Bob closed the gun gently. The resonant click of the breech falling into its bed rang in the silence with something of the solemnity of a clock striking in the night.

"What!" cried Braithe in a rather high voice. His hand dropped limply. Everything save his eyes expressed a sort of numbed wonder, but they were fixed and very bright.

"There's a patch on your boot," said Bob, shaking a little. "I saw it right now. And I found this on the blanket."

He opened his hand and displayed a silvery

barb from an egret's plume, hardly coarser than a hair.

"I went back to the flat this morning and I found where you walked. I know it was you now, 'count of the patch. There were forty shells there — and what have you got to show for 'em here? 'Hit's mullet, day in and day out, with me,' you say. You wasn't after meat. It was plumes!"

He paused, breathless. Braithe's throat pulsed.

"You lie!" he said. "You —"

"Sit still!" The dropped muzzle of the gun lent emphasis to Bob's order, and Braithe, rigid, sat poised on the stool. The frank and welcoming warmth had been struck from his face, leaving it as hard and aggressive as the beak of a hawk. His coarse hair looked longer and blacker than before; the yellow handkerchief bound about it seemed all at once barbaric and completed the resemblance dawning in Bob's mind. Yesterday and to-day had their likeness after all, and Braithe was at heart a buccaneer with as little regard for anything except weapons or superior strength as the men who had once divided their violently acquired gold here on this very key. Bob's anger rose.



“You’d have jumped at me, would you! It’s lucky I had the gun. And you’d pretend you ain’t the man we want!”

“Pretend!” Braithe’s voice was harsh with scorn and indignation. “I don’t have to. Put up that gun. What — Ha! Yere’s the sheriff. He’ll — ”

“He’ll listen to me,” said Bob, as Jeppson stepped into the room. “Warden, I’ve got our man. The plumes are here somewheres. In this room. Look for ’em, warden. Try the bunk first.”

Jeppson blinked from one to the other, his puckered face showing the effort of his slow mind to grasp the situation.

“What right have you-all to search my house?” said Braithe. “Where’s yere warrant for hit?”

“Warrant!” The familiar word seemed to bring the warden out of his fog. His expression assumed some of its customary placid self-conceit. “I don’t need a warrant to search a squatter’s house.”

He stepped to the bunk and tossed back the wad of blankets and mattress.

"Hold on there!" snarled Braithe.

"Hold on yourself," replied the warden.

He drew out a long, stiff pasteboard box and threw the cover aside. His cheeks puffed out like apples.

"Ha! Ah ha!" he exclaimed, and his big face expanded in a sort of ogreish enjoyment. "Keep the gun on him, deputy."

There they were, the delicate, spraying plumes. The box was full of them, some so fresh that their nibs were still as white and waxy as clots of milk.

"You're shore a cute one," said Jeppson, shaking his head. "The ladies of New York, God bless their unthinking little hearts, will miss you some."

He drew a pair of steel bracelets from his pocket and advanced majestically toward Braithe. The detected culprit winced when he felt them snap about his wrists, but he tossed his head defiantly and pressed his lips together.

"The last item on the bill, my man," said the warden. "So you thought you could snap your fingers under my nose, eh!"

Braithe looked at him with a wry grin.

“Yes, and so I might have,” he said. “But that deputy dishwasher of yours has got something on each side of his nose, and that’s eyes.”