

# THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FOREST

OR

Hunting for Plume Birds in the Florida Everglades.

## CHAPTER I.

NIGHT had fallen upon a wild Florida forest, and all was still save for the hooting of a distant owl and the occasional plaintive call of a whip-poor-will. In a little clearing by the side of a faint bridle-path a huge fire of fat pine knots roared and crackled, lighting up the small cleared space and throwing its flickering rays in amongst the dark, gloomy pines.

At the edge of the clearing, two wiry little Florida ponies, tethered with rawhide ropes, browsed upon the short, dry wire-grass.

Nearer to the fire lay a neatly done-up pack, and beside it a high-pommeled Mexican saddle, while the firelight gleamed on the polished barrels of a fine shotgun and rifle leaning against the pack.

Close to the blaze a heap of glowing coals had been raked a little to one side, and upon them rested a coffee-pot and large frying-pan from which stole forth appetizing odors of steaming coffee and frying bacon.

#### 4 THE YOUNG PLUME HUNTERS

The man bending over the coals was heavily bearded and past middle age, but his broad shoulders and huge frame still gave evidence of great strength and endurance. There was about him an air of anxious expectancy, and from time to time he rose from his crouching position and with hand to ear listened intently.

"I sort o' wonder if they'll all fail me," he muttered, as he removed the frying-pan from the coals but set it near enough to keep the contents hot.

As if in answer to his soliloquy, there rose above the crackling of the fire, the muffled distant thud of galloping hoofs. A few moments later a well-built, sturdy lad astride a mettlesome pony dashed into the circle of firelight.

Throwing the reins over the pony's head, the rider leaped from the saddle and with a rush had the elderly man clasped in his arms in an affectionate hug.

"Captain Westfield!" he shouted in boyish delight.

"Charley West," cried the man, "glad to see you, lad, glad to see you. My! you have grown. How are you, boy?"

"Fine, Captain, couldn't be better. But wait 'till I 'tend to my pony, and we will have a good, long powwow."

With sure swift movements, the newcomer re-

moved saddle, pack, and guns, and staked his pony out near the others. This done he returned to the fire.

“What’s in the wind?” he began, firing in the questions with the speed of a Maxim. “Something worth while, judging from that mysterious letter of yours. What is the scheme? Why this secret meeting in the forest instead of in town? Why”—but the man he called captain interrupted him with a chuckle.

“Hold a minute, lad. Just bowse your jib for a bit. You must be hungry, boy.”

“Starved as a wolf. I could even eat a razor-back, if I didn’t have to see it before it was cooked.”

The captain forked out a quantity of crisp bacon upon a tin plate and filled a big granite cup with fragrant coffee, for Charlie West, and from his saddle-bags brought out a bag of hardtack. Helping himself also, both fell to with a will.

“What were you doin’ when you got my letter, Charley?” asked the captain between mouthfuls.

“Nothing, just kicking myself and brooding away in the city.” The lad’s bright, clear eyes looked frankly into the captain’s as he continued. “I have been making a fool of myself, Captain. Got into some mischief with a crowd of fellows at school. Of course, I got caught and had to bear the whole blame for the silly joke we had played. The faculty has suspended me for a term. I would have got off

with only a reprimand if I would have told the names of the other fellows, but I couldn't do that, you know."

"No," nodded the captain, approvingly, "that would have been sneakish. But how are you fixed for money, Charley?"

The lad's face fell. "I spent it at first as though there was no end to my little pile," he said. "I had pulled up when your letter came, but I only had enough left to pay my way back to Florida, buy this pony, and the outfit you suggested. There's nothing left. The fellows tried to get me to stay and work in the city until the next school term opens, but I told them, no! that I was going back to the best friend a boy ever had, back to the man who had been just as good as a father to me ever since my own folks died and left me a young boy alone in Florida. I told them of some of the adventures we had been through together, and what dandy chums we've been for such a long time."

"You told them city fellows all that?" exclaimed the delighted captain, "you talked to 'em like that, Charley?"

"Certainly, it was only the truth," said the lad, stoutly. "But it is your turn now, Captain. I am wild with curiosity."

"Lay to for a while, lad; I am expectin' another

member for our crew any time now, and it's no use spinnin' the same yarn twice."

Charley's open face clouded a trifle, and he hesitated before he said, "I am not questioning your judgment, Captain, but you and I have camped out enough to know that a good camp-mate is about the scarcest article to be found. If we take in a stranger on this trip, which I surmise from the outfits is going to be a long one, the chances are more than even that he will turn out a quitter or a shirker."

The captain knocked the ashes from his pipe as he inquired, "Now who would you select for a third member, Charley?"

"I do not know anyone in Florida I would want to take a chance on for a long trip. I only know two fellows I would like to have along, and we can't get them. One is Walter Hazard, the Ohio boy who chummed with us down here for so long. The other is that little Bahama darky, Chris, whom Walter insisted on taking back north with him and putting in a school. There wasn't a yellow streak in either one, and Chris was a wonderful camp-fire cook."

"I wrote to Walt two days afore I wrote to you," observed the captain, calmly.

Charley stared at the simple old sailor in frank amazement. "You surely don't imagine he'll drop whatever he is doing and travel a thousand miles

just for a trip with you and I?" he at last recovered himself enough to demand.

The captain nodded complacently. "I've sort of got a feelin' that way, an' if I ain't mistaken, them's his pony's hoofs comin' now—someway they sound different from what yours did, though."

Both adventurers rose to their feet and stood eagerly peering into the darkness from which there came the thud of rapidly approaching hoofs.

A moment later and two ponies were reined up in the circle of fire-light. As Charley recognized one in the circle of firelight. As Charley recognized one less robust than himself, he gave a shout of delight and with a rush dragged him from his saddle in an affectionate embrace, while the captain, his eyes dancing with pleasure, was wringing the hand of a widely-grinning little darky who had dismounted from the other animal.

"Go easy, Charley," said the newcomer with a happy grin, "you're squeezing all the wind out of my body, and that is all there is in it now. Chris and I had to hustle to make connections and get here on time. We haven't had a bite to eat to-day."

"Walter Hazard, you are the one person I would have picked out for this trip," Charley cried joyfully, "and Chris, too, it seems almost too good to be true. But come over to the fire, and we will cure that empty

feelings in a minute. The captain is helping Chris put the ponies up."

Charley quickly routed out a clean plate, and heaped it up with bacon and hardtack, reserving, however, a generous portion for Chris.

"Fall to and don't wait," he commanded, and Walter lingered for no second bidding.

In a few minutes they were joined by the captain and the little negro, who was quickly helped to the balance of the bacon and coffee.

As the two munched away, the captain and Charley plied them with questions which the hungry newcomers answered between mouthfuls.

"How was you gettin' along when that thar letter of mine reached you, Walt," asked the captain, gravely.

"Good and bad both," said the youth, draining his cup with a sigh of satisfaction. "Some time before I had bought up the mortgage on the farm without saying a word to father or mother. I was selfish, I guess, but I wanted the pleasure of their surprise." His eyes sparkled moistly. "My! it was great. It was worth every cent, although it took nearly every dollar of my little pile. You had ought to have been up there to see them the morning the mortgage fell due. Their faces were sad, enough to have made you cry. Thirty years they had worked and lived

on that farm, and I guess there is no spot on earth quite the same to them. When mother lifted up her plate and saw the canceled mortgage underneath, it was some time before she grasped its meaning, and then she just broke down and cried. There were tears of joy in father's eyes, too, and I began to feel a lump in my throat, so I just got up and streaked it out for the barn, where I stayed until things calmed down a bit. But I am making a long story out of how my money went. I went to work in a store after that, but it wasn't long before I began to run down and the doctor would have long talks with father and mother. Then your letter came, and—well, here I am."

"And Chris, how did he happen to come?" inquired Charley.

"Trace chains couldn't have held him back when he heard I was coming back to join you. They wouldn't give him a vacation, but they would not keep him in the school after he began to have regular violent fits," said Walter, dryly.

"Fits," exclaimed Charley, with a glance at the grinning ebony face, the very picture of health. "He never had a real fit in his life."

"Maybe not, Massa Charley," admitted the vain little ducky, "but, golly, I couldn't let you chillens go off alone widout Chris to look after you. Dey was powerful like real fits, anyway. I used to get



berry sick, too, chewin' up de soap to make de foam. Reckon dis nigger made a martyr of hisself just to come along and look out for you-alls."

Charley turned to the captain to hide his grin. "It's your turn now, Captain. We've all showed our colors, even to Chris. It's up to you now to explain this business."

The captain knocked the ashes from the bowl of his pipe before remarking sagely, "I've noticed as how fish will bite at a good many kinds of bait, but if you want to make sartin sho' of a boy, thar's only one bait to use, and that's a good big chunk of mystery."

He glanced around at the suddenly crestfallen faces about him, and hastened to continue, "Don't look so down, lads. I ain't brought all of you so fer just for a joke. I just wanted to make sure of you and I didn't want the town people nosin' around and askin' questions, that's why I named this meetin' place."

The three faces brightened again. "Go on, Captain, come to the point," urged Walter, eagerly.

But the captain was enjoying their suspense, and with a twinkle in his eye proceeded slowly, "I was sort of loafin' around town one day about two weeks ago when I come across a Seminole, who, I reckon, had been sent in by his squaw to trade for red calico

and beads," he paused for a moment and Charley exclaimed impatiently—

"Bother the Indian, we are not bound for the Everglades to fight them, are we?"

"He was about the drunkest brave I ever saw," continued the captain, calmly ignoring the interruption. "When I came across him he was sittin' on the end of a waterin' trough declaimin' what a great Injun he was, givin' war-whoops, an' cryin' by turns. One of his remarks sorter interested me and I didn't lose no time in makin' friends. Lads, I couldn't have stuck no closer to that redskin if he had been my long lost brother. I kept him away from other folks, an' by an' by I tipped him into the waterin' trough, kinder accident-like. The water sorter sobered him up a little an' pretty soon he began to want to hit the trail for home. I helped him out of town an' started him back for camp, where, I reckon, his old lady was waitin' to give him fits for forgettin' the calico and beads." The captain paused as if his tale was completed.

"For goodness' sake, Captain, what has your drunken Indian got to do with us?" demanded Charley, his patience at an end.

The captain lowered his voice dramatically. "Lads, that Seminole was carryin' around on him over five hundred dollars' worth of white and pink aigret plumes."

"Whew!" whistled the boys, half incredulously.

"Yes," affirmed the captain, "an' I found out where he got them, too. He let out that he bagged them all out by the Upper St. John's River, due west of here. He declared the birds were as thick as the stars at night, but I reckon some allowance has to be made for poetic license and the red liquor he had in him."

Three boyish faces were shining, now, and questions and answers mingled in eager confusion.

"How far is it to the river?"

"Two long days' travel."

"What kind of birds bear the plumes?"

"The blue heron, and the pink and white egret."

"What are the plumes worth?"

"Five dollars an ounce for perfect ones."

"Whew, it will be just like finding money."

Likely the eager young hunters would have talked the entire night away, but the captain soon interrupted their flow of questions.

"Plenty of time to talk to-morrow, lads. Get to bed now, for we want to start at daybreak."

The boys promptly obeyed. Blankets were spread out near the fire, and with their saddles for pillows the little party were soon in the land of dreams, blissfully unaware of the terrible experiences through which they were soon to pass.