

CHAPTER II.

ON THE WAY.

IT seemed to the boys that they had only just fallen asleep when a crash like that of mighty thunder brought them startled out of the land of dreams. Instinctively both reached for their belts and pistols, which they had placed close to their hands on retiring. There was no need for their use, however, for the author of the deafening racket was only Chris who, with a grin on his face, was beating on a tin-pan close to their heads.

“You little imp, I thought it was an earthquake,” cried Charley as he hurled a shoe at the little darky, who dodged it nimbly.

“Just couldn’t wake you no other way,” grinned Chris. “Time to get up, Massas, daylight dun come.”

The sky in the east was glowing rosy-red, and the boys lost no time in slipping into their outer clothes and strapping on their pistol belts, which completed their attire.

The captain was already astir, busily engaged in

strapping the packs on the animals, while, early as it was, Chris had breakfast ready.

"I tell you what it is," declared Charley, while munching his hardtack and bacon, "we'll soon tire of this fare. We must get some fresh meat very soon."

"A wild turkey roasted over the coals would go pretty well," suggested Walter.

"Deer foah dis nigger," declared Chris, "you-alls just ought to taste de venison steaks when I dun broil 'em."

"I like bear steaks, sizzling brown," said Charley, thoughtfully.

"Oh, keep still, you gluttons," laughed the captain. "We ain't likely to get any of those things unless we stop and have a regular hunt, an' I don't like to take the time for it. Maybe we'll pick up somethin' or other on our way. But now hurry up, boys, it's time we were startin'."

After taking the precaution to cover their fire with sand, all were soon in the saddle, and with Charley in the lead, took up the trail just as the sun rose above the distant tree-tops.

After half an hour's riding, Charley reined in his pony. "Trail's come to an end," he announced.

"Good!" cried Walter, with all of a boy's delight in the unknown, "that means we are getting beyond

the range of hunters. Hurrah for the land beyond."

The captain produced a small compass and handed it to Charley. "Steer due west as near as you can," he directed.

Then followed hours of twisting and winding in and out amongst the big trees, now headed one way, now another, but keeping the general westerly direction. All hands kept their guns ready, but, although they saw evidences of big game on every hand, the noise of their advance must have frightened the wild creatures to their hiding-places long before our hunters came in sight.

As the party advanced the forest grew denser, the trees closer together. At last, when they began to fear that further progress would be impossible, they burst suddenly into a stretch of open country extending as far as the eye could see.

"Isn't it great!" exclaimed Walter; "just look at those pretty little lakes, you can see one no matter in what direction you look."

"It is pretty," agreed Charley, "but I am thinking more of dinner than scenery. I suppose it has got to be bacon and hardtack again. I'm—" but Charley did not finish the sentence. His pony had put its foot in a hole and stumbled, while Charley, taken unawares, pitched over the animal's head and landed

on all fours in a little heap of sand beside the hole that had caused the mischief. To the surprise of his companions, he did not rise, but remained in the position in which he had fallen, staring at the hole.

"Are you hurt, Charley?" cried the captain, anxiously.

"Not a bit," grinned Charley as he regained a sitting position on the sand-heap. "I'm just holding down our dinner," he added calmly. "Get off, gents, and help me finish the job."

"Now, Chris," he directed, when they had dismounted, "do you see that tall slender sapling over there? It's just the thing I want. Please take the axe and get it for me, and don't cut off all the limbs."

Chris obeyed with alacrity, for experience had taught him that Charley never made useless demands. In a few minutes he was back dragging the sapling after him.

With a few strokes of the axe, Charley lopped off all the branches save one close to the small end of the trunk. This one he cut off so as to leave a projecting stub of about four inches, thus making of the end of his sapling a sort of rude harpoon.

His companions looked on with curiosity, but asked no questions, for they knew their chum delighted in surprises.

The pole finished, Charley poked the barbed end

down into the hole. Down, down it went, fifteen, twenty feet, then struck with a dull thud. He began twisting the sapling over and over, then drew it slowly and gently up, but the end came into view with nothing adhering to it. Again and again was the fruitless operation repeated, and a look of disappointment had begun to settle on Charley's face when at last his harpoon came into view with a dark mass clinging to it.

"A turtle," exclaimed Walter in delight.

"No, a gopher, but I'll admit it is a kind of land turtle, although it feeds entirely on grass and never goes near the water," explained Charley, proud of his capture. "Chris, ride on to that first little lake yonder and get a fire started. We'll be there in a few minutes."

Charley fastened a buckskin thong to one of the gopher's flippers and hung it from his saddle-horn, then all remounted and turned their ponies toward the place where Chris had disappeared among the trees fringing the lake.

They had covered part of the distance when there came a yell and Chris' pony broke from the trees and bore down upon them at a run. The little darky was clinging to its back, his face ashen and his eyes bulging with terror.

"Go back, Massas," he shouted, "hit's a lake of blood, hit's a lake of blood!"

Walter grabbed the flying pony's rein and brought the animal to a halt. "Nonsense," he said, roughly, "you're crazy, Chris. Come on all, let's see what's scared him so." He spurred forward followed by the others and still retaining his hold upon the bridle of Chris' pony, in spite of the little darky's chattering, "Let me go, Massa Walt. Please let me go."

In a few moments the little party entered the fringe of timber and reined in their horses on the shore of the tiny lake. For a moment they sat speechless in their saddles, and truly there was in the sight excuse for Chris' chattering teeth. The little wavelets which broke at their feet were the color of blood, while the lake itself lay like a giant ruby in its setting of green; glistening and sparkling in the sun's bright rays.

Charley dismounted from his horse and from his saddle-bags produced a small medicine glass, which he filled with the liquid and held up to the light. The fluid sparkled clear as crystal and of a beautiful crimson hue.

"It beats me," he announced, "I thought it might be the bottom gave it that color, but whatever it is, it is in the water itself."

Walter wheeled his horse and studied the encircling trees carefully. "I've got it," he announced, "do you notice all these trees are of one kind?"

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"You're right," Charley exclaimed, "they are all red bays. It's their roots that color the water."

The boys turned to chaff Chris, but he had slipped away at the first words of the explanation. Soon he reappeared with an armful of dry wood. His face was still ashen, but his teeth had stopped chattering.

"Golly," he exclaimed, pompously, "reckon dis nigger had you-alls scart dis time. Dis nigger shore had de joke on you dis time."

The boys glanced at each other and grinned. "I wouldn't try it again, Chris," Charley chuckled; "you might throw a fit next time, you act so real."

While Chris was making a fire and preparing a bed of coals, Charley cleaned the gopher.

This animal is very much like a turtle, but the tissue which unites the upper and lower shells is so hardened as to be impervious to a knife. Charley solved the problem by wedging it in the fork of a fallen tree, and after two or three attempts he succeeded in separating the shells with an axe.

"Let me finish hit, Massa Charley," pleaded Chris; "dis nigger knows just how to fix him now you got him open."

Charley was nothing loath to turn over the disagreeable task of cleaning to the little darky, who swiftly completed it. He removed the meat from the shell, skinned the edible portions, and threw the

offal far from the fire. Next he washed both meat and shells carefully, salted and peppered the meat, and replaced it in the shell, laying on top of it a few thin slices of pork. Then, he bound both shells tightly together with wisps of green palmetto leaves. Lastly, he wrapped another green leaf around the shell and buried it in the bed of glowing coals now ready.

“That’s a new idea,” grinned Walter, “making your game supply its own cooking-pot. My! but it smells good, though.”

In a very short time, Chris pronounced the gopher done and it was lifted from the coals and the shells cut apart revealing the steaming, juicy meat within.

Our hungry party pronounced the meat far sweeter and more tender than chicken, and the empty shells soon bore evidence to their sincerity.

After a brief rest, they mounted and again took up the trail, soon leaving behind their halting-place, which the boys named Lake Christopher, much to the vain little darky’s chagrin. He had a shrewd suspicion that he would not hear the last of his fright for many a day.