

## CHAPTER III.

### WOODCRAFT.

FOR a while the little party rode forward in silence, winding in and out between pretty lakes and bunches of timber, with no path to guide them, but with the help of the compass, managing to edge slowly to the west. Charley still maintained the lead, but in the open country through which they were traveling it was possible to ride abreast, and Walter soon spurred up beside his chum.

“Do you know, Charley, I begin to feel like a babe in the woods,” he confessed. “I suspect you are the only one of us who knows anything about woodcraft. I know nothing about it, I am sure Chris doesn’t, and I suspect the captain is far more at home reefing a top-sail. You have got to be our guide and leader, I guess.”

“I have hunted a good deal, and a fellow can’t help but learn a few things if he is long in the woods,” said Charley, modestly, “but I’ve never been so far into the interior before. I wish, Walt,” he continued gravely, “that there was someone along with us that

knew the country we are going to better than I, or else that we were safely back in town once more."

"Why?" demanded Walter in astonishment.

"I dread the responsibility, and," lowering his voice so the others could not hear, "I have seen something I do not like."

"What?" queried his chum, eagerly.

Charley produced a square plug of black chewing tobacco from his pocket. "I picked that up in the edge of the clearing this morning," he explained. "It wasn't even damp, so it must have been dropped after the dew settled last night."

"Some lone hunter passed by in the night," suggested Walter, cheerfully.

"I wish I could think so," said Charley anxiously. "But you know as well as I that there are some gangs of lawless men in Florida, gathered from all quarters of the globe, and, Walter," lowering his voice to a whisper, "I saw signs that there was more than one man near our camp last night."

"What kind of signs?" his chum demanded.

"Broken bushes, the marks of horses' hoofs, and a dozen other little things of no importance when considered separately."

"A fig for your signs, you old croaker," laughed Walter, "you'll be seeing ghosts next. I didn't see any of the signs you talk about. Besides, if anyone

had wished to do us harm they could have done so without hindrance last night."

"I know it," Charley admitted, "and that's what puzzles me. As for the signs, your not noticing them proves nothing. It's the little things that make up the science of woodcraft. The little things that one does not usually notice."

"My eyes are pretty good, and I don't go around with them shut all the time," began Walter hotly, but Charley only smiled.

"Look around and tell me what you see, Walt," he requested.

"A flat, level country, covered with saw palmetto, dotted with pretty little lakes, what looks like a couple of acres of prairie ahead, and, oh yes, a lot of gopher holes all around us like the one you robbed this morning."

"We'll begin with the gopher holes," Charley said with a smile. "Tell me what is in each hole as we pass it."

"Why, gophers, I suppose."

Charley reined in his horse before four large holes and pointed at them with his riding-whip. "Gopher in that one," he declared without hesitation. "Mr. Gopher is away from the next one, out getting his dinner likely; a coon lives in the next, but he is away from home. Rattlesnake, and a big one, lives

in the fourth, but he is also away from home, I am glad to say."

Chris and the captain had ridden up to the boys, and they with Walter, stood staring at Charley in silent wonder.

"It's easy to see," explained the young woodsman. "When a gopher goes down his hole, he simply draws in his flippers and slides, but when he wants to get out he has to claw his way up. You'll see the first hole has the sand pressed smooth at the entrance, while the sand in the other hole shows the mark of the flippers. That third hole is easy, too; you can see the coon tracks if you look close, and you will notice that the claws point outward. The last hole is equally simple, you can see the trail of the snake's body in the soft sand and those little spots here and there made by his rattles show which way he was traveling."

The captain brought his hand down on his knee with a hard slap. "I reckon I can handle any ship that was ever built," he said, "but I'm a lubber on land, boys. Charley's our pilot from now on, an' we must mind him, lads, like a ship minds her helm."

"If I'm going to be pilot, I'll make you all captains on the spot," laughed Charley, as he spurred forward again into the lead.

"Do those wonderful eyes see anything more?" mocked Walter, as he once more ranged alongside.

"Don't make fun of me, Walt," said his chum, seriously. "What I have done is nothing. It's just noting little things and putting two and two together. You can easily do the same if you will train yourself to observe things closely."

"Do you really think I could?" asked Walter, eagerly.

"Certainly you can, and now for the first lesson. Look closely at all the bushes as we pass them and see if you notice anything out of the way."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes, Walter scanning the scrub in passing with a puzzled expression growing upon his face.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Charley asked.

"I don't know what to make of it," Walter confessed. "Every few hundred feet there are branches partly broken off and left hanging. Queer, isn't it?"

"Look closer and see if you can notice anything peculiar about those branches."

"They haven't been broken off very long, for they are not very much withered. I should say it was done about ten days ago."

"Good," exclaimed Charley, approvingly, "notice anything else?"

"Yes," declared Walter, his wits sharpening by

his success, "although those boughs seem to be broken accidentally, yet all are caught in amongst other twigs so that each one points in the same direction—the way we are going. What does it mean, Charley, if it means anything?"

"My color is wrong to tell you all that those broken branches mean, but I can tell you a little. About ten days ago a party of Indians passed through this way bound in the same direction we are. They expected another party of their people to follow later so they marked the way for them as you have seen. If I were a Seminole, I could tell from those broken twigs the number of the first party, whither they were bound, what was the object of their journey, and a dozen other things hidden from me on account of my ignorance of their sign language."

"Indians, Seminoles," said Walter, bewildered, "I had almost forgotten there were any in the state."

"There isn't, legally. Years ago the United States rounded them all up and started to transport them out west to a reservation. But at St. Augustine a few hundred made their escape and fled back to the Everglades, where they have lived ever since without help or protection, and ignored by the United States government."

"What kind of a race are they?" asked Walter, curiously.

"The finest race of savages I ever saw," declared Charley, warmly; "tall, splendidly-built, cleanly, honest, and with the manners of gentlemen—look out!" he shouted, warningly.

Walter's horse had reared back upon his haunches with a snort of terror. Walter, though taken by surprise, was a good horseman, and slipped from the saddle to avoid being crushed by a fall.

A few feet in front of the frightened pony lay coiled a gigantic rattlesnake, its ugly head and tail raised and its rattles singing ominously. Two more steps and the pony would have been upon it.

"Don't shoot," pleaded Walter as Charley drew his revolver. "I know where I can sell that skin for \$25.00, if there's no holes in it."

"Let me shoot it, Walt," pleaded Charley, anxiously, "they're awfully dangerous."

"Aye, lad," seconded the captain, who, with Chris, had reached the spot, "better let him shoot it, those things are too dangerous to take chances with."

But Walter's obstinacy was roused. "Keep back, I'll fix him," he declared confidently. "I'm going to have that skin and that \$25.00."

Breaking off a dead bough from a scrub oak he approached the snake cautiously while the rest sat in

their saddles silently anxious, and Charley edged his restive pony a little closer to the repulsive reptile.

Slowly Walter moved forward, his gaze fixed intently upon the slowly waving head before him with its glistening little diamond eyes. Nearer and nearer he crept till only a few feet separated him from that venomous head with its malignant unwinking eyes.

"Strike, boy, strike, you're getting too close," shouted the captain.

"Oh, golly," shrieked Chris, "look at him, look at him."

Walter had stopped as though frozen in his tracks. His face had gone deathly pale, and great drops of sweat stood on his forehead. The hand that held the stick unclasped, and it rattled unheeded to the ground.

"He's charmed," cried the captain.

"Jump to one side, Walt, jump," Charley shouted, "for God's sake, jump. It's going to strike."