

CHAPTER V.

THE 'GATOR HUNTERS.

THE captain was laboriously spelling out the scare-head articles by the flickering firelight.

“Desperadoes at large.”

“Last night twelve convicts, all of them life prisoners, escaped from E. B. Richardson’s turpentine camp near Turnbull. The escape was effected by their overpowering the guards while their supper was being served them. One guard was killed and the balance were gagged and tied up to posts in the barracks. The revolvers stripped their prisoners of arms, ammunition and what money they had. Next they broke into the commissary, taking a large amount of clothing and provisions and wantonly destroying the rest. They then made their escape on horses belonging to the guards. As soon as their absence was discovered, bloodhounds were put upon the trail which led towards the interior. The dogs were soon completely baffled, however, for the fugitives had evidently taken to water whenever they came near a pond or creek. This ruse, as well as the whole up-

rising, is believed to have been the headwork of 'Indian Charley,' one of the escaped prisoners, who, it will be remembered, was drummed out of his tribe and sentenced by the courts for the murder of a white settler last spring. Small outlying settlements will rejoice when this body of hardened desperate men are once more in the grasp of the law."

"I've got it!" exclaimed Charley, so suddenly that the captain looked up in mild surprise.

"Got what?" he inquired.

"A pretty bad attack of sleepiness," Charley said with assumed lightness. "I feel all done up to-night. Guess I'll turn in."

But although he was first to turn in, it was along in the wee small hours of morning before slumber crept in on his tired brain.

He was awakened by Walter shaking him vigorously.

"Get up, you lazy rascal, get up. The sun is half an hour high, and breakfast is ready. Get up and gaze upon the beautiful St. Johns."

"What does it look like?" inquired Charley, sleepily, as he buckled on his heavy leggins and strapped on his pistol belt.

"For a dismal, wretched, man-forsaken stretch of country it beats anything I ever saw," Walter exclaimed in disgust. "The river itself is about a half

mile wide, but it twists, turns, and forks every few yards so as to puzzle a corporation lawyer. The shores for half a mile back from the water are nothing but boggy marsh, with here and there a wooded island. Ugh, the sight of it is enough to make a man homesick."

"Not giving out already, Walt," Charley said, cheerfully, as he made his way through the boggy marsh to the water to wash, followed by his chum.

"Not much," said Walter grimly, "I for one am not going back empty-handed after coming so far. But I'm beginning to realize that this is not going to be all a pleasure trip. You noticed the article that the captain read last evening about the convicts escaping. Can it be they are the party you saw signs of?"

"I believe they are," agreed his chum as they turned back towards the camp where the captain and Chris were patiently waiting breakfast. "I may be wrong, but I thought it all over last night and I decided it was only fair to tell the others what I suspect."

"The captain will want us all to pack right back home," said Walter, glumly.

His fears proved true, for when Charley related his suspicions over the frugal breakfast, the captain was visibly worried.

“I’m the cause of leading you into trouble again, boys,” he reproached himself. “However, I reckon thar ain’t nothing to be gained by regrets. As soon as we have finished eating, we’ll pack up and head back for the coast.”

But Charley opposed the plan of returning decidedly. “They have had plenty of chance to kill us off easily on the way here if they had wanted to,” he argued. “Why they haven’t done so puzzles me. Perhaps they fear a searching party would be sent after us if we do not return promptly. I have a feeling, though, that they are after bigger game, although I have not the slightest idea what it can be. Anyway, I am not going back, now, empty-handed, if there were twice as many jail-birds at my heels.”

“I am with you, Charley,” Walter said quickly.

“Me too, Massa,” grinned Chris, who was plucky enough when he understood the nature of the threatened danger. “Golly, I jest reckon dis nigger got to stay and look out for you chillens.”

The captain, whose only concern had been for the boys, brought his hand down on his knee earnestly. “Then I’m with you, lads, till the last mast carries away. You’re the pilot in these waters, Charley. What course shall we steer now, lad?”

“I think,” suggested Charley, modestly, “that the first thing is to fix up a shelter in case of rain.

We must be careful, and if we come into contact with any of those fellows we must not let them see that we suspect what they are. That would cause trouble right away, I am sure."

"Go ahead and give your orders, lad; we will carry them out."

"Then I'll deputize Chris to see if he can't get us some fresh fish," said Charley with a smile.

Chris, his face beaming, darted away to his saddlebags after his fishing-tackle. If there was one thing the little darky liked above all others it was fishing, and wherever he might be, his tackle was never far away.

As soon as he had departed, Charley, accompanied by the others, set about selecting a site for their permanent camp.

"You see," Charley explained, "we want a place that we can stand a show of defending if we should be attacked, and at the same time a place from which we can escape by water if we have to."

They did not have to go far before they found the very place they were hunting for, a long, narrow, scantily grassed point that penetrated through the marsh far out into the river.

"It's just the thing," Charley declared. "We will lead the ponies out to the end and then fell a few pines across the neck here. That will form a

kind of a fence and keep them from straying away. There's grass enough on the point to keep them busy for a week at least."

Within half an hour the three eager workers had felled enough pines across the neck of the point to form a kind of rude stockade. Then they moved out to the end of the point and began the erection of their shelter. It was quite primitive and simple. Two saplings about twelve feet apart were selected as the uprights, and to them, about eight feet from the ground, two poles were lashed securely with buckskin thongs, the other ends of the pole being imbedded in the ground. Other smaller saplings were trimmed and laid across the slanting poles, and on them were piled layer after layer of fan-like palmetto leaves. In a short space of time they had completed a lean-to which would protect them from any storm they were likely to experience at this season of the year.

"Have you noticed that, Charley?" inquired Walter, as they placed the last leaves on the lean-to. He pointed to a point, similar to their own, scarce two thousand yards away, from which rose a thick column of smoke.

"Yes, I've been watching it for some time," Charley said. "I guess it's our friends, the convicts. They are late risers. Somehow or other, Walt, I've got what prospectors call a 'hunch' that they are not

after us and will not bother us as long as they think we are ignorant of their true character."

"I'll never trouble trouble 'till trouble troubles me," hummed Walter, cheerfully.

"A good motto," said his chum gravely, "but nevertheless it's better still to be ready for trouble if it does come. Now we must provide a means of retreat. Come, let's open packs one and two, we'll need their contents soon anyway."

Packs one and two, when opened, revealed bundles of numbered pieces of tough, thin flexible steel and packages of thick water-proofed canvas. Under the captain's skilled direction, the steel was quickly framed together, the canvas stretched over it, and in a short time two canvas canoes were floating lightly at their painters at the end of the point.

All had been too engrossed in their labors to note the passage of time until the captain snapped open his old-fashioned silver watch.

"One o'clock," he exclaimed in surprise.

Charley and Walter looked at each other apprehensively. "What can be keeping Chris?" Walter cried.

"Maybe he is having good luck and hates to quit," suggested Charley. "Let's give him a while longer."

But two o'clock came and no Chris appeared.

"Get your guns, boys," commanded the captain. "We must go hunt him. Something's the matter."