

CHAPTER VI.

SOME SURPRISES.

Loosening their pistols in their holsters, and grabbing up their guns, the little party struck out in the direction in which Chris had disappeared.

They were proceeding almost at a run when Charley checked their headlong speed.

"Let's go slow," he panted, "it may be that the convicts have got him and we may be running right into an ambush."

He but voiced the fear in the minds of the others, and they slackened their advance to a slow walk, keeping a cautious eye on every bush or tree large enough to conceal an enemy.

Trampled marsh grass and broken twigs gave them an easy trail to follow, and in a few minutes they were in sight of the river bank. Charley, who was in the lead, suddenly stopped short with an exclamation of relief and disgust.

"Just look at that," he said.

On a little grassy knoll close to the water was Chris flat on his back, his mouth open, fast asleep.

A half dozen fine bass lay on the grass beside him, the end of his fishing line was tied to one ebony leg, and a coil of slack line lay upon the turf.

"Let's give him a scare for causing us so much worry," Walter suggested.

"Wait a minute," cautioned the captain, "he's gettin' a bite, let's see what he will do."

The little party drew in behind some bushes, where they could peep out at the slumbering little darky.

The slack was running out rapidly, and at last the line tauted with a jerk on the sleeper's leg.

Chris sat up with a start, rubbed his eyes and looked at the sun, then at the pile of fish beside him. The continued jerking of the line at his leg seemed to bring him out of his drowsiness. With a broad grin he began pulling in the line, hand over hand.

The three watchers stood peeping eagerly through the bushes, expecting to see another fine bass appear.

As the hooked victim was drawn in close to the knoll, Chris gave a hearty yank and landed it on the grass beside him.

But the result was not what the watchers expected. With a howl of terror the little darky leaped to his feet and dashed away at a bounding, leaping run, breaking through the undergrowth as though it were reeds. One glance, as he flew by the watchers without seeing them, caused them to hold their sides and

double up with laughter. The line was still fastened to Chris' leg, and drew after it the captive of his hook. One glance behind and Chris began to holler, "Help, help, Massa Walt, help, Massa Charley. De snake's goin' to get dis nigger. Oh golly, oh golly!"

The line caught on a bush and broke short off, but Chris was making for the lean-to with championship speed and knew it not.

Charley picked up the severed line and held up the prize to view.

"The biggest, fattest eel I ever saw," he declared exultantly. "Guess it must have been the first one Chris ever saw. They certainly do look like snakes."

"Keep it out of sight till we hear what he says," Walter said, and Charley with a smile agreed.

The captain gathered up the fish and stringing them upon a cord slung them over his shoulder.

In a few minutes they were back at the camp, where they found Chris stretched out on the ground breathing heavily, his face an ashen hue.

"Why you-alls doan come when Chris hollers for help?" he demanded indignantly. "'Pears like you don't care if dis nigger's killed."

"We came as soon as we could, Chris," said Walter, soothingly, "what was the trouble, anyway?"

Chris, mollified, sat up. "Done got into nest ob snakes," he declared, "reckon I killed fifty of

'em, but more and more kept coming so I had to run. Golly, I 'spect thar was mighty nigh a hundred chased me most to camp. Dat's why I yells for you-alls."

The captain smilingly laid down the string of fish, and Chris' countenance fell.

Charley swung the eel into view. "It isn't a snake, Chris," he explained, "it's an eel; they are not poisonous, and are mighty good eating."

For once the little darky was fairly caught without chance of evasion. Without a word he started building a fire, gutted the fish, washed them clean, and without removing head or scales, thrust them into the glowing coals. In twenty minutes they were done, the heads were cut away, the skin with its load of scales peeled off, and our hungry hunters sat down to a dish fit for a king.

They were in the midst of the meal when Charley arose and getting his rifle put it down by his side. "Get your guns quick and keep them close to you. We are going to have visitors," he said.

The bushes were crackling loudly at the neck of the point and a moment later a body of men came into view. As they clambered over the barricade, Charley counted them. They were twelve in number, one of them an Indian, his face disfigured by a long scar that gave to it a sinister, malignant expression.

"Keep close together and your guns handy," counseled Charley, as the band approached. "I declare, if they aren't all unarmed," he added.

"What in the world is the matter with them?" whispered Walter in amazement; "see, some of them can hardly walk."

As the men drew nearer, our little party's wonder grew. Most of them dragged themselves forward with stumbling footsteps. Their faces were haggard, their hands moving restlessly and their features twitching. They looked like men who had been for days undergoing severe mental and physical strain and were on the verge of collapse.

Our hunters drew close together with their guns close to hand and awaited the convicts' coming with lessened apprehension as they saw that they carried no guns.

The leader staggered in front, the balance following him like starved sheep. He stopped before the captain and sank to a seat on a stump. The perspiration stood in great drops on his face and he was breathing heavily.

"Strangers," he said hoarsely, "If you've got any tobacco, fer mercy' sake, loan us some. We haven't had a scrap for two days."

The boys had hard work to restrain a laugh, but the captain hastily unbuckled the flap of his saddle-

bags and brought out a huge package of plug tobacco which he passed over to the spokesman.

"I brought it along to give to the Indians in case we met any, but I reckon you need it a heap sight worse," he said mildly.

Without a word of thanks the man tore the package open and distributed the plugs amongst his followers, and in a moment jaws and pipes were going vigorously on the enslaving weed.

In five minutes a change was visible; slouching backs began to straighten, dull eyes commenced to brighten, and the color to steal back into haggard faces.

"I'm glad I never got into the habit of using it, now I have seen what a slave it can make of a strong man," whispered Walter in disgust.

"Some of our soldier boys in Cuba went crazy for a while when deprived of the use of it," said Charley. "None of it for me. It doesn't do a young growing fellow any good."

As his muscles and nerves relaxed under the influence of the powerful narcotic, the leader of the convicts removed his pipe from his mouth with a sigh of relief.

"You sho' saved our lives that time, partner," he cried; "we done forgot the bacca when we wus getting up our supplies, an' didn't find it out until

we'd come too far to go back. Jim thar," (with a glare at the culprit,) had a sizeable piece, but he had to go and lose it on the way."

"Out for a hunt?" inquired the captain politely.

"'Gators. We're just plain, honest 'gator hunters, working powerful hard for a mighty poor living," declared the ruffian. "An' you-alls, I reckon one guess will hit it, arter plumes, I allow."

"We haven't said so," said Charley quickly.

The ruffian favored him with an appraising leer. "Don't have to say so," he drawled, "if you ain't, what have you-alls got them dinky little canoes for, an' if you were after 'gators you'd be packing big rifles 'stead of them fancy guns. You ain't got no call to deny it, for I was aiming to give you a bit of neighborly advice."

"What is it?" inquired Walter curiously.

"That it ain't no use for you-alls to stop here. The Injuns have got this section combed out clean. You couldn't get enough plumes around here to pay for your bacon. Now, I knows of a tidy little island 'bout twelve miles south of here where there's stacks of the birds. If you start right now you'll hit it before them pesky varmints of redskins find it. I'm telling you in pay for that tobacco. Max Hilliard ain't the kind of man to take nothing without paying for it," he concluded, grandly.

"Them Indians don't seem to be bringing many plumes into town," said the captain.

"'Cause why? 'Cause they have to turn the bulk of what they get over to their chiefs for tribute, an' them varmints are getting so foxy they just hoards 'em up. They know the price is goin' up right along. Oh, them pesky varmints are getting cunning these days. But come, boys, we must be getting back to camp."

The reinvigorated gang of cut-throats arose and with awkward, surly thanks stamped away.

Their leader lingered behind for a moment. "Better pack right up and get out for that island right now, partners," he advised. "Thar's a gang of Injins coming down the river day after to-morrow, an' they'll be sure to clean it out." His voice grew low and menacing. "Anyway, you fellows want to get out of here afore day atter to-morrow."

Before any of the hunters could question him, he was gone.

"He seems set on our leaving here," said Walter, anxiously.

"I reckon it was sort of an error of judgment that we didn't tie them fellows up while we had the chance. They was too plum wore out to put up much of a fight," said the captain, regretfully.

Charley said nothing, but his expression was that

of one who after long puzzling has solved a troublesome problem, and has found the solution not that which he desired. The outlaws' statement that there was a party of Indians on their way *from* the Everglades had given him the key.