

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE QUAGMIRE.

IT was already late when the convicts departed, and our hunters immediately began their preparations for their first trial with the plume birds.

"I wonder where we had better strike in at first," said the captain, "there seems a powerful lot of them islands, an' they 'pear to me pretty much alike."

"I have been keeping a kind of eye out all day," Charley answered, "and it seems to me that there has been a lot of birds flying around that little island of dead trees in the marsh right across from us. Suppose we try that first."

The others readily agreed, and, while Chris was cooking supper, the boys prepared a number of torches from fat pitch pine and looked over their fowling-pieces carefully.

As soon as it was dark, Charley and Walter entered one of the canoes and the captain the other. Chris begged hard to be taken, but Charley was firm in his refusal.

"We will have to take turn about at tending camp,

and you'll have to stay to-night, Chris," he said. "It won't do to leave the camp alone. You'll have to keep a sharp lookout to guard against any possible surprise from wild animals or men. Keep up the fire so we can find our way back, and have some hot coffee ready. We'll need it when we get back. Keep a sharp eye out, Chris," he concluded. "It isn't everyone I would choose for such a responsible place."

"Golly, Massa Charley," exclaimed the little darky, the bald flattery tickling his great racial vanity, "I jus' reckon nothin' goin' to get past dis nigger, though I sure 'spects I'd ought to go along so as to watch out for you chillens."

"We'll be careful," Charley assured him gravely. "If anything troubles you or you see anything wrong, fire off your gun twice, and we will hustle back. Shove her off, Walt."

Walter obeyed with a vigor that nearly upset their frail craft. "My, but she's cranky," he exclaimed.

"She is pretty ticklish," Charley admitted, "but just the craft for our purpose. She's so light she will float on a good heavy dew, and then she's so easy to take to pieces and pack away. But we'd better stop our chattering, for we are getting near the island now."

The moon was shining brightly, giving to the dead

whitened trees on the little island a peculiar ghostly appearance. The canoes soon grounded in the marsh grass, and, fastening them to paddles, stuck down in the mud, our hunters shouldered their fowling-pieces and trudged ahead through the mire. They had prepared themselves well for the trip and each wore a pair of rubber boots reaching to the hip drawn on over their rawhide boots and leggins.

"I guess we are on the right track," grinned Charley, ere they had proceeded far.

"Goodness, it's awful," exclaimed Walter. "I wish I had a clothes-pin on my nose. Smells just like as island of Limburger cheese set in a lake of broken spoiled eggs."

"I reckon that's comin' it a little strong, Walt," chuckled the captain. "I guess though we've stumbled onto a good big rookery for sure. That smell comes mostly from the dead baby birds, broken eggs, an' such like. But let's keep quiet, lads, we're nearly there now."

A few minutes more and the hunters entered the fringe of dead trees. By the time they reached the center of the little island where the dead trees were thickest, the little party was nearly overcome by the horrible stench. At every step they crushed in nestfuls of decayed eggs which sent up their protests to high heavens.

At last Charley commanded a halt. "We've gone far enough," he whispered. "Let's light up our torches together and make as short work of it as possible. Gee, but I'm sick for a mouthful of sweet, fresh air."

The fat pine-sticks flared up as though saturated with oil, their flickering blaze lighting up a weird scene; the gaunt, bare, white trees, ghosts of a departed forest, the miry ground strewn with eggs of all sizes, shapes and colors, and dead birds of many kinds, in amongst which writhed and twisted dirty-looking, repulsive water moccasins and brilliant yellow and black swamp snakes, while overhead on the whitened limbs, roosted hundreds of birds partly roused from their sleep by the glare of the torches.

"We'll have to shoot with one hand and hold our torches with the other," said Charley.

The guns were very light fowling-pieces, and the birds were clustered too thickly together to be easily missed. The three guns belched out their deadly message almost together and a score of birds fell to the ground. Again and again were the volleys repeated before the dazed birds recovered their senses enough to take to their wings.

The hunters paused only long enough to pluck from the backs of the fallen birds the long, silky plumes, which they carefully placed in a stiff leather valise,

then hastened on to another part of the island where the same performance was repeated.

At first all three hunters stuck close together, but they soon separated, each picking out for himself what seemed to be choice places in the little wood. Yielding to the incessant firing the birds began to desert their roosts in great flocks until at last but few lingered on the barren limbs. Charley was about to call his companions together and propose a return to camp when a sudden cry sent the blood tingling through his veins. It was Walter's voice, and its tone was that of fear and horror unutterable. Pausing a second to locate the direction of the sound, Charley bounded away for it at the top of his speed. As he passed a thick clump of trees the captain broke out from among them and lumbered on in his wake.

"What's the trouble, Charley?" he panted.

"Something's happened to Walt," he shouted back, "something terrible, too—just hear him calling."

The cries rose again with redoubled vigor, a world of dread in their cadence.

The island was small, and in a few minutes Charley was close to the scene of the cries with the captain right at his heels. Suddenly they broke out of the underbrush into a small open space perhaps forty feet across. Near the center of this place was Walter, waving his torch frantically back and forth.

He ceased his cries as their lights flashed into view. "Stop, stop!" he shouted, "don't come a step further. I am sinking a foot a minute. The ground is rotten here. I guess it's up to me to say good-bye, chums," he continued in a voice he strove vainly to make steady. "You can't help me, and I'm sinking deeper every minute."

"Cheer up, lad, we'll find a way," declared the old sailor, with a hopefulness he was far from feeling, for he knew well, by hearsay, of the terrible swamp quagmires that swiftly suck their victims down to a horrible death in the foul mud.

Already Walter had sunk to his waist, and it was only a question of minutes ere the slimy ooze would close over his head. It was a situation that demanded instant action. For a moment Charley stood silent beside the captain gazing hopelessly at his doomed chum. Then he turned swiftly and darted away like an arrow.

"Throw branches, boughs, anything that is light," he shouted back; "I am going to get the canvas painters."

Frantically the old sailor tore down dead limbs and flung them to the entombed lad. His labor was in vain, for as each branch struck the quagmire its own weight sunk it out of sight in the liquid mud.

"Better give it up, Captain," advised Walter,

cheerfully. "They are doing no good, and Charley will soon be back with the ropes."

The captain measured the distance to the helpless lad with a practised eye, and groaned in despair. "They'll fall short by a dozen feet," he murmured hopelessly. "God forgive me, for bringing him to this plight."

In a moment Charley was back with the painters from the two canvas canoes knotted together. His first toss confirmed the captain's fears, the rope fell ten feet short.

Charley's face grew sickly pale under the torch light, and he stood for a space like one in a daze. The captain near him was kneeling praying fervently.

Of the three, Walter was the coolest. He had resigned himself to his fate at the failure of the first cast of the rope. Already the mire had sucked him down so that he had to throw his head far back to keep the filthy stuff from entering his mouth.

"Good-bye, old chums," he called cheerfully, "we've made our last camp together. Don't feel too down, Charley. Remember what the jockeys say, 'There's nothing to a race but the finish.'"

Charley roused from his momentary trance. "You shan't die," he cried wildly, "you shan't, you shan't,—you shan't."