

## CHAPTER X.

### SHOOTING A THIEF.

“ARE you working one of your little surprises on us?” Walter inquired eagerly of his chum as the little party again advanced in the direction Chris indicated. “Come, confess now that you know what is ahead of us.”

“I am all at sea this time,” admitted Charley. “I heard just what Chris described, but I can’t fit the sounds to any animal I know. It’s getting plainer now, surely you can hear it.”

“Yes,” said Walter, with a puzzled frown, but what under the sun, moon, and stars can it be?”

“A few minutes will settle the question. It’s only a little ways off now. My! it’s getting to be a terrible din, we must be close at hand.” Charley’s prophecy soon proved true for they suddenly came out of the forest into a space which had evidently been fire-swept years before, for it was bare of undergrowth and of the former mighty pines nothing remained but the white, lifeless trunks.

For a moment the hunters stood in the edge of the

clearing, gazing in speechless astonishment at the sight before them.

Close to one of the largest of the dead pines was a large black bear, reared back on his haunches and striking with both paws viciously at some unseen foe. The hair of muzzle, head and paws was matted and plastered with some thick liquid, giving him a curious frowsy appearance. He was evidently in a towering rage but it was also apparent that he was suffering great pain, his ferocious growls being interspersed with long, low, pathetic whines.

"He acts as though he had gone crazy," exclaimed Walter, recovering his speech.

At sound of his voice, the bear's head turned in their direction. With a growl of fury he dropped to all fours and with incredible speed made for the hunters.

Charley had been quick to take in the meaning of the strange scene.

"Shoot and run," he shouted, as the maddened animal charged.

He, Walter and the captain shot almost at once. The shots struck home but the sorely wounded beast still lumbered forward at a rapid pace.

"Run," shouted Charley, striking into the forest at the top of his speed, closely followed by the captain and Walter. They had run but a few paces before

Walter, who was in the rear, stopped suddenly. "Chris has stayed," he shouted to the others, "we can't leave him."

Almost as rapidly as they had fled, the three retraced their steps to the edge of the clearing.

"Stay where we are and watch," commanded Charley, with a grim smile. "The bear's too badly hurt to be dangerous. Watch him, fellows, just watch."

Chris had knelt where he had been standing when the bear charged, had rested his rifle on his knee, and was taking careful aim at the advancing beast. There was a look of stubborn determination on his little ebony face while his heart was beating with pride and exultation. Here was his great chance to turn the tables on his white companions. No longer would they dare tease him about running from the eel or about his adventure after the crane. He would be able now to twit them all, even the captain, with running away while he, Chris, stood his ground.

"Run, Chris, run," shouted Charley from the edge of the clearing, but the little darky ignored the warning.

His keen eyes could see that the bear was badly wounded and liable to drop at any minute. Already it was swaying drunkenly from side to side.

Now it was forty feet away, now thirty and almost

ready to drop. Ten feet more and he would fire, Chris resolved. But that ten feet proved the ambitious little darky's undoing. A concentrated drop of buzzing liquid fire struck him above the eye, while hand and legs seemed splashed with molten fire. Down went the rifle with a thud and with a shrieked "Oh golly, oh golly, oh golly!" a black streak cleared the open ground with kangaroo-like leaps and shot into the forest.

"Run for the marsh and roll in the mud, Chris," shouted Charley after the streak.

The bear stumbled forward a few feet further, then sank slowly to the ground. Charley looked after the flying Chris, shaking with laughter, while the others stood beside him in silent amazement.

"Hold on a minute," said Charley, as the captain stepped forward toward the bear which was kicking out in the last convulsive throes of death.

"Aye, aye," agreed the captain cheerfully, stopping short, "you're the pilot in these waters, lad."

"I promise you I will not keep you at anchor long, Captain," laughed Charlie, as with his hunting-knife he began hacking at a clump of scrub-palmetto.

A few minutes was all the time needed to accumulate a heap of the big, fan-like leaves. These Charley made into three torch-like bundles, taking care to place a dead dry leaf between each two green

ones. Binding each bundle together with a wisp of green leaf, he struck a match and lit up the three, passing one to the captain and Walter, and keeping one himself.

The dry leaves blazed up like tinder but the green ones only smoldered, sending forth a volume of black, thick pungent smoke.

"Keep waving them about you," he cautioned, "that's the way. Now all ready. Forward, march."

As they drew nearer to the carcase of the bear, they became aware of a curious humming sound in the air. The cause was soon apparent and the mystery that had puzzled them was solved when they reached the beast. The carcase was covered with bees while close above it hummed a swarm of others watching for an exposed place to plant their stings.

A few minutes beating about with the smoking torches cleared the scene of the vicious little insects, those not stupefied by the smoke beating a hasty retreat back to their home in the hollow log which bruin had tried to despoil.

The hunters had now a chance to view their prize without being molested. It was only a common, black Florida bear, weighing not over four hundred pounds, but fat and in the pink of condition. Its thick, glossy fur had protected its body from the bees' assault, but swollen muzzle, eyes, and ears, told

of the penalty it had paid in playing robber for its favorite food,—honey.

All fell to work with their hunting-knives and speedily had the heavy skin removed.

Walter smacked his lips as he cut away a couple of huge steaks with a thick rim of fat. "Gee, those are fit for a king," he exclaimed. "I wonder where our cook is. Do you suppose he has stopped running yet?"

Charley chuckled. "Its mean," he admitted, "but I can't help but laugh when I think of how he looked kneeling there in stern resolve to be covered with glory, and the transformation when he was covered with bees."

The three laughed heartily at the recollection, but Walter's laugh ended in a hungry sigh. "I wish he was here to cook these steaks. If he comes back, don't let's tease him, fellows. He's suffered enough for one time."

"I bet he will be back by the time we get this fellow cut up and a fire going," Charley said.

But the big animal was all cut up, what was not wanted for immediate use cut into thin strips for drying, and a roaring fire going, and still no sign of the missing one.

"Well, I guess we will have to cook some of it the best we can, although I expect we'll make a sorry

mess of it without Chris. I guess broiling some of it will be the easiest way."

Each cut himself a long, green palmetto stem which would not take fire readily and sharpened one end to a point upon which he impaled a generous slice of steak. With flushed faces and singed fingers they kept turning the meat over and over before the blaze. It was an unsavory mess, burnt and ash covered, which they at last pronounced done and deposited upon a clean palmetto leaf. Hungry as wolves, each cut off a generous mouthful and began to chew. They chewed and chewed looking at each other with keen disappointment on their faces.

Walter at last spat out his mouthful in disgust. "It's tough as sole leather and about as tasteless. We even forgot the salt, too."

A little figure lurking behind a tree on the edge of the clearing evidently deemed this just the proper time to make its presence known, for it stepped boldly out from behind its shelter. Its right eye was closed tight by an enormous swelling, and its nose was twice its natural size, but it strode forward with head up and dignity in its tread.

"Chris," shouted in delight the three beside the fire.

The little darky looked down on the pile of burnt and ruined meat in disgust. "I knowed you chil-

len's would go an' spoil de best part ob my bear. Now you-all jis get out ob de way an' dis nigger goin' to show you how to cook b'ar meat."

"But it's so tough, Chris, that we can't chew it," Walter objected.

"You chillens jes get out of de way like I tells you," said the little negro vaingloriously. "Just come back in forty minutes an' dinner will be ready. Leave dis nigger alone 'till then 'cause he's powerful cross to-day."

Charley nudged the captain and Walter and the three withdrew to a little distance, leaving Chris in possession of the field.

"Chris will fix it up all right," Charley assured them. "While he's at it, let's have a try for some of the honey the bear was into," he suggested.

His two companions gave an eager assent.