

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE PAWPAWS.

THREE more torches of palmetto leaves were quickly made, lighted up, and, with extra handfuls of the green leaves, our party advanced towards the tree where they had first seen the bear. They were met by a buzzing horde of the workers who swarmed out to defend their homes, but these were soon silenced by the pungent smoke of the torches and our hunters soon stood by the tree where bruin had met his Waterloo.

A few feet from the ground was a massive limb and a little above it was a cavity in the trunk itself, around which more bees buzzed industriously. A few waves of the smoke torches quieted these, and Charley swung himself up on the limb beside the hole. A little more smoke completed the job and with his hunting-knife he dug out great squares of the clear, dripping comb, which he passed down to his companions who had stripped off a slab of hickory bark for its reception.

"That is more than we can eat," he at last de-

clared, slipping to the ground, "besides I've got a 'hunch' that Chris has got that bear meat ready for us and I am hungry as a wolf."

"It may be cooked all right but it will still be too tough to eat," mourned Walter.

"Don't you believe it," chuckled Charley, "those bear steaks are going to be as tender as chicken. If you will not give me away to Chris, I will show you the reason why."

The captain and Walter eagerly gave the promise of secrecy.

"See that shrub?" said the instructor, pointing to a banana-like stalk of a tree-like shrub without branches, but from which protruded large, round glossy leaves with short stems. Close to its trunk near the crown hung a close cluster of golden fruit about the size of an apple.

Walter plucked one of the ripe fruit and bit into it hungrily, but spat out the mouthful in disgust.

"You have to acquire a taste for it, the same as you have to for turtle eggs, olives, and a dozen other things that taste unpleasant at first," Charley said. "You'll find that little tree scattered all over Florida where the soil is at all rich. It is called pawpaw by the natives, who regard it highly for the sake of its one peculiar virtue. A few drops of the juice of its ripe fruit spread over a tough Florida steak will in

a few minutes, make it as tender as veal. The same results can be attained by wrapping the steak in the leaves and letting it lay a slightly longer time. The best of it is that meat treated in this manner is not injured in the slightest. In fact it seems to gain in flavor from the treatment. But there is Chris waving to us. Keep quiet about the pawpaws. I want to hear his explanation."

They were too hungry to lose any time in obeying Chris' signals. The little darky had arranged a kind of tablecloth of moss on the ground and had put upon it slabs of clean cut bark for plates, while upon each rude plate reposed a thick, juicy, bear steak, done to a turn. The steak was delicious and tender as chicken and with a taste all its own.

"You're a born cook, Chris," declared Walter, as he paused to take a full breath. "What makes it so tender, now? that which we cooked was tough as leather."

"You chillens doan know how to cook like dis nigger," declared the vain little darky, proudly. "Hit's all in de cookin', Massa Walter, "hit's all in de cookin'."

Charley turned over a morsel of his steak, examined it closely and sniffed it critically, while Chris watched him with anxious suspicion, and Walter with mischief dancing in his eyes.

Slowly Charley's eyes took on an absent, far-away look, his arms and legs seemed to stiffen, and a tremor ran through his limbs. Chris watched him with distending eyeballs.

"I see," Charley said, in a low, hollow voice, "I see a tree, not a big tree, but a small one. It has round, green leaves and a cluster of golden fruit near the top. What is it I see creeping toward the tree, a monkey? No, not a monkey, though it looks like one. It's a boy, a small black boy. He nears the tree. He looks around to see if anyone is watching. He shins up the tree and breaks off several of the leaves. I see him again near a big fire. He still has the leaves. He is wrapping them around pieces of meat. As he does it, I can hear him chuckling to himself. I see"——

"Oh golly, stop him, stop him! He's got de 'haunts'!" cried Chris in terror, as he grabbed Charley by the shoulder and shook him wildly.

Charley seemed to come to with a start. "Where was I, what was I saying?" he murmured.

"You was filled wid de haunts," declared Chris solemnly. "You was jes' tellin' to yourself how dis shiftless, lying nigger got dem pawpaw leaves to make dis bar meat tender."

Walter and the captain were roaring with laughter, but Chris went on solemnly with his confession.

"Golly, but dis nigger's been a powerful liar lots ob times, but you doan ketch him at it any more. You sho' is got de conjerer eye, Massa Charley, else how you know dat lake wid de crane on it was full of grass like knives, else how you see bees round dat bear when you is too far off to see 'em, else how you see Chris getting dem pawpaw leaves when you is clean out ob sight. I guess dis nigger doan lie any more when you is round, Massa Charley."

"Well, if you are all through, we had better make back for camp for the sun is getting low," said Charley, hurriedly, to forestall a lecture on the wickedness of lying, which he saw by the working of the captain's features, he was preparing to deliver to the little culprit.

Their things were quickly collected together and they were soon headed back to their point. With the passing of the excitement of the day, they all began to have vague alarms as to what might have happened during their absence, and to reproach themselves for leaving the place so long unguarded.

Their reproaches were wasted, however, for they found everything as they had left it, save stuck in the bark of a pine tree near the fire, was the badly scrawled notice. "Don't forget to pull out from these diggin's afore to-morrow noon."

"They evidently mean business," said Walter,

as the hunters stood together reading the dirty, ill-written paper.

"And I'm not so sure but what we would be wiser if we obeyed their warning, but I hate to run away from such a crowd," observed Charley gravely.

"I feel the same way," agreed Walter, "but it would be cowardly to go now and leave the Seminoles to their fate."

"Aye, aye, lad, truly spoken," said the captain, firmly, "stay we must."

"Golly, I jis guess dis nigger ain't none scairt of their threatenings," chimed in Chris.

"Well, we seem to be pretty well agreed," Charley said, trying in vain to shake off the vague feeling of impending evil, that had suddenly settled over him. "Speaking for myself, I feel too keyed up and anxious to do anything much until we get this thing over with. I move we get all our gear into shape and try to plan some way to get the plume birds hereafter without killing. That will take us until dark, I guess. Then let's quietly take our blankets and move back into the forest a ways. Our neighbors may take a notion to pay us a visit without waiting for tomorrow."

The others readily agreed to this proposal and were soon busy trying to scheme out some means to take their feathered prey alive.

It was Chris who at last solved the problem.

"You know dat stuff we used puttin' dem boats together?" he demanded.

"A quick drying glue," exclaimed Charley, catching the idea at once.

"Golly, I should say hit was," grinned Chris, "hit dun stick my fingers together so tight that it peared like I'd never get 'em apart. Now doan you reckon by spreading hit thick-like on dem limbs whar dem birds roosts dat hit would hold 'em down till we-alls got ready to pry 'em off?"

"The lad's got the right idea, I reckon," allowed the captain. "We could fix the limbs up just before dusk and needn't bother about 'em any more until it was broad daylight."

The boys were unstinted in their praise of Chris' suggestion until the little darky forgot the humiliation of the day and was once more his bright, vain, cheery self.

As night shut down on the point, more wood was heaped upon the fire, a hasty lunch was made from the remains of dinner, and, taking their guns and blankets with them, our hunters stole off into the depths of the wood. They soon reached a little open spot that they had noted during the day. Their blankets were spread out upon the moss-covered ground close together so as to be encircled with the

hair rope which Charley had brought to protect them from snakes while sleeping.

Before they wrapped themselves in their blankets, the captain offered up a fervent, simple prayer of thanks for past protection and a plea for blessings on the work before them on the morrow.

"How much of that glue stuff is there, Chris?" whispered Walter as they stretched out to rest.

"'Bout two quarts, I reckon."

"Pshaw, that will not last us any time," said Walter in disappointment. "It will be all gone in a week."

It was well for the lad's peace of mind that he could not look forward into the future and see how little of Chris's discovery was destined to be used.