

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREPARATIONS.

AT dawn Charley arose, feeling unrefreshed after his broken rest, lit the camp-fire, started breakfast, and then awakened the others.

“We had better divide the duties for the day,” he said, as they dispatched their light breakfast. “The two things most pressing, are to secure more food and make our windows and door bullet-proof. I suggest that we divide into two parties for the day, one to hunt, and the other to keep camp and work on our building. Suppose we call for volunteers for each party.”

“I stay an’ do de cookin’, an’ maybe catch some fish for supper,” said Chris, promptly.

“I reckon I had better stay with Chris,” decided the captain, who had in a measure recovered from his scare of the night. “You lads are nimbler an’ better shots, an’ consequently, likely to have better luck in the hunting.”

This arrangement delighted Charley and Walter who were eager to explore the island. Pistols were oiled, cleaned and carefully examined. Their own

guns being at the bottom of the river, the boys had to borrow arms of Chris and the captain.

Walter took Chris' light shotgun while Charley shouldered the heavy rifle belonging to the captain. Thus equipped they were prepared for either small or big game.

Leaving the clearing, the boys plunged into the forest and headed for the interior of the island. Their progress was at first very slow, the forest being almost as tangled and thickly grown as that which they had encountered near the water. As they advanced, however, the trees gradually grew fewer and further apart until, after a half hour's slow traveling, they emerged from the forest into a kind of prairie country, consisting of stretches of flat grassy land broken by clumps of timber.

"This is just the place for game," declared Charley, "this grass seems to be a kind of wild rice, there had ought to be birds here without number."

As he spoke there was a whirl of wings, Walter's shotgun spoke twice, and a brace of plump partridges struck the ground with a thud.

The report of the firearm woke the prairie into life. Hundreds of birds rose from amongst the tall grass. For the next few minutes, Walter was busy with his gun, while Charley with his heavy rifle could only stand idle watching.

"Never mind, my turn will come," he declared. "That little popgun you have will not be any good against big game."

When the frightened birds had at last passed beyond range, the boys gathered up those that had fallen victims; four partridges, three doves, and a full dozen of black and red rice-birds.

"Good," approved Charley, as he surveyed the feathered heap. "Those are all fine eating and will provide us with a couple of dandy meals. The only fault I have to find is that they use up too much ammunition. If we use it up at this rate, we will have none when the outlaws come."

"We can make traps for the birds," Walter suggested. "I know how to rig up a figure-four trap that will fool the wisest of them."

"Well, we will not bother with traps this trip," Charley said. "We have got enough birds for the present. We can come again to-morrow and fix up for them."

"What shall we do with these?" Walter inquired. "We don't want to turn back yet, and they are too heavy to carry with comfort."

"Leave them tied up in the first tree we come to and get them on our way back," his chum answered.

With this object in view, the two boys turned their steps towards the nearest clump of timber. At their

first step amongst its dry twigs and branches, there was a crash amongst the bushes and a form of yellowish brown shot past them like an arrow.

Charley's rifle flew to his shoulder and its sharp crack woke the echoes in the little wood. "It's a deer and I have got it," he exclaimed, dashing off after the animal which was staggering and wavering as it ran.

Walter paused only to hang his birds high up in the crotch of a big tree, and followed after his chum.

But the deer, though wounded and losing blood at every step, was really running faster than either of the boys calculated. It soon became evident to both that they would have to work hard to overhaul the wounded creature before it entered the main forest on the other side of the prairie. Once amongst the dense growth, it would soon lose its pursuers.

Walter was only a few feet in the rear of his chum and running at the top of his speed when Charley stopped so short and unexpectedly that he collided with him with such force as to bring both to the ground.

"Look," exclaimed Charley breathlessly, as he pointed ahead, "did you ever see such a repulsive sight?"

Charley had stopped just in time, not fifteen feet from where the two had fallen, was a deep, saucer-

like depression in the ground. In its center, where the ground was soft, and muddy, was a writhing, twisting, tangled mass of snakes of dozens of kinds, though the dirty, sickening-looking, stump-tailed moccasin predominated. There must have been thousands of serpents in the mass which covered a space twenty by thirty feet, from which came the sibilant hiss of puff adders, and a strong, nauseating odor.

"It's an awful sight," shuddered Walter after one glance, "and just think how close you were to running into that mass. You would never have got out alive."

"I would never know what struck me," Charley agreed. "I expect there's a full quart of the deadliest of poisons distributed among those beauties."

"Ugh," said Walter, "the sight of them makes me sick. Come away, Charley."

"They have done us considerable damage anyway," Charley said, as they pressed on giving the snake-hole a wide berth. "I cannot see anything of the deer, can you?"

"No, I expect he got safe into the forest while we were delayed. We might as well follow up his tracks for a ways although I guess it's but little use."

The fugitive had left a thread of scarlet blood

behind him so the boys had no trouble in following the trail.

At the very edge of the forest, the boys stopped with a cry of delight. A motionless heap of yellowish brown lay half in half out of the fringe of trees, the shelter of which the poor creature had striven so gallantly to gain.

The boys wasted no time in rejoicing but at once fell to work with their hunting-knives to remove the skin. This done, they cut off the valuable parts of the carcass and bound them up in the hide for transportation back to camp. When the task was completed the noon hour had been reached and the boys kindled a fire and broiled some of the venison.

“That was a lucky kill for us,” observed Charley as he attacked another juicy steak. “It will give us fresh meat for several days. What we cannot use before it spoils, we can cut thin and dry. The hide properly prepared will furnish us with a couple of stout fishing lines and a shirt for one of us.”

After a brief rest the boys resumed their exploration. They had no present need for more game and were loath to waste any more ammunition. The wild folks of the forest seemed to be aware of the fact and showed themselves fearlessly.

“We won’t starve for lack of game,” declared

Walter, "in the last half mile, I have seen coons, possums, deer, and a wild-cat, to say nothing of the thousands of birds."

"Yes, it's a sportsman's paradise," agreed Charley, "it has probably not been hunted since the Spaniards' time. Likely these wild creatures have never seen a human being before."

The boys had been pushing onward into the forest as they talked. By the growing denseness of the jungle they surmised that they were approaching the island's shore. This surmise proved correct, for about a quarter of an hour after leaving their lunching place, they came out on the bank directly opposite where they had landed on the island.

This shore was very much like the other and the boys soon began to retrace their steps.

As they neared the place where they had left their venison hung in a tree, their ears were greeted with a curious sound of mingled grunt and growl.

With their guns ready for instant use, the boys crept cautiously forward. An exclamation burst from them as they came in sight of the tree. Squatted round it in an angry, eager circle was a drove of at least twenty wild boars; great, fierce-looking animals with dangerous looking tusks. They were sniffing longingly, and looking up at the suspended meat.

"Don't shoot, Walt," cried Charley, but his warning came too late.

Without pausing to think, Walter had discharged both barrels of his shotgun at the huddled animals.

The effect was not what he had anticipated. The shot glanced harmlessly off their thick hides, and with grunts of rage, the whole drove charged for the smoke and sound.

"Get up a tree," shouted Charley, as he noted the effects of the shot.

Walter did not wait for a second bidding but swung himself up the nearest tree which happened to be a huge spreading live oak. Charley swarmed up after him in such haste that he dropped his rifle at the foot of the tree. He was not a moment too soon for a large boar made a lunge for his legs just as he drew them up.

"Now we are in for it," he exclaimed in disgust as he found a comfortable seat in the fork of a limb.

"Oh, I guess they'll soon get tired and go away," Walter said cheerfully.

But the boars seemed to have no such intention, they ranged themselves around the foot of the tree as they had around the venison and sat looking longingly up among the branches.

"I am going to try a shot at that big fellow that seems to be the boss of the gang," said Walter after

an hour had dragged away without the animals showing any signs of leaving.

"Don't do it," Charley advised, "you can't kill him with that small calibered revolver, and it will only make them madder than ever."

Walter put back his revolver with a sigh. "I guess you're right," he admitted, "but, I declare, it makes me mad the way that big brute is leering up at me."

Wearily the hours dragged away, the boys getting cramped and weary in the tree, and the besiegers showing no sign of abatement in their interest.

The darkness found two, very tired, hungry boys seated in the tree while the boars still grunted in a circle around them.

With the rising of the moon came the distant tolling of the chapel bell and the boys looked worriedly at each other.

"The captain and Chris will be frightened to death with that thing tolling and we absent," Walter said.

"Yes, the captain will be sure to believe that we are all dead," Charley agreed. "There is something unearthly about that ringing, but of course there is a natural cause for it if we could only discover it."

"After our experience last night I am almost

ready to agree with the captain and Chris," said Walter.

"Except for its worrying those two, I would not mind it in the least," Charley declared. "I am more upset by our position here. I guess we will have to stay all night, those fellows below show no signs of leaving."

"What's that?" cried Walter, excitedly.