

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RETURN.

THE hunters soon withdrew from the circle around the fire and made their way to their hut.

"This has been a queer trip," said Charley musingly, "I do not believe I care to make another like it. Look at all we have been through, and what have we gained by it? Nothing."

"We might stop on the St. Johns on our way back and hunt again for plumes," suggested Walter.

But the others negatived the proposal decidedly.

"It would be like tempting Providence, after the dangers we have been spared from," the captain declared.

"Dis nigger wants to get out ob a kentry where a black Englishman is called a nigger," said Chris.

"Don't mention plumes to me," exclaimed Charley, "I am sick of everything connected with this trip."

Walter smiled. "I am quite sure that I would not feel at all bad if I knew we were carrying back several thousand dollars' worth of plumes with us," he said.

“Oh, quit your dreaming and go to bed,” exclaimed Charley, testily, “instead of carrying back a few thousand dollars’ worth of plumes with us, we will all have to hunt for a job, when we get to the coast.”

But in spite of Charley’s dire prophecy, Walter was smiling as he undressed in the dark.

The hunters were astir at break of day and preparing for an early start. They cooked and ate a hasty breakfast and then carried their canoes down to the water.

The Indian whom the chief had assigned as their guide was already patiently waiting in his dugout.

It did not take the hunters long to stow away their few belongings and they were soon ready for their departure.

The chief followed them to the water accompanied by all his band.

The hunters parted with the young Seminole with genuine regret, and he, for his part, seemed greatly affected.

“The Little Tiger hopes that his white brothers will return again to the Glades,” he said as he shook hands with each. “His wigwam will be always open to them. Will not he with the hair like the Spanish moss, consider again, and choose from among them one of the squaws to cheer his wigwam?”

“No, thank ye, chief,” said the old sailor hastily, “it would only make the rest of ’em jealous.”

The rest of the Indians gathered around and each shook hands with the little party, gravely saying “How,” the only English many of them knew.

The hunters stepped aboard their canoes, and took up their paddles. The Indian guide in his dugout took the lead and with flashing blades the hunters followed closely in his wake.

As they passed the little island where the convicts had met their death, the hunters could not repress a shudder of horror. Around it lay the repulsive-looking crocodiles, placidly sleeping on the water, and amongst them floated a man’s straw hat. It was all that remained of the cruel, merciless band.

“They deserved death, but the death they met was too awful for any human being,” Charley murmured.

“I wonder what became of Indian Charley,” said Walter. “He was not with the others.”

Their guide’s quick ears had caught the question. “He tied to tree in swamp for mosquitoes to eat,” he volunteered pleasantly.

“I think,” remarked Charley, after a long pause, “I think I would rather be a Seminole’s friend than his enemy.”

"Aye, lad," agreed the captain, "they are savages still in their loves and hates."

The Seminole guide led them out of the Everglades by a short cut, and the hunters sighed with relief when the great swamp was left behind.

For two days they traveled while daylight lasted, making camp at night on some convenient point. On the morning of the third day they reached their old camp where their things were buried. Here they went into camp again while the Seminole scoured the woods for their ponies. He returned triumphant the second day riding one of the horses and driving the others. The animals were sleek and fat from rich feeding and long inactivity.

The hunters made their guide presents of a couple of clasp knives and a revolver with its ammunition and sent him away delighted.

"I wanted to wait until we got home to give you a big surprise, but I can't keep it concealed any longer," said Walter regretfully, as his companions began to take the canoes apart preparatory to stowing them in the packs.

While the others gazed at him in surprise, he drew out a bundle from under the thwart of one of the canoes. Undoing it he took out a long feathery plume.

“Where did you get that?” exclaimed Charley in surprise.

“It’s one of those we dug up on the chief’s island,” explained Walter. “You see I used to work in a store where they used to handle such things, and I got an idea when we first opened the package that those plumes were not in as bad shape as they appeared. I did not say anything about it, because I did not want to run the risk of possibly causing more disappointment, but I put the box in the canoe and the first chance I got on the island I took a weak solution of vinegar and water and went to work on them. I had only time to clean two or three, but I am sure that at least three-fourths of them can be made saleable.”

“Walter, you’re a trump,” exclaimed Charley in delight, and the others were not much behind in expressing their admiration and joy.

Owing to Walter’s thoughtfulness, it was a gay, happy party that took up the trail back for the coast.

The return trip was made without any uncommon incident and the little party arrived safely at the little seacoast town of Shelbourne. Here they sold their ponies and arms, and renting a little house, went busily to work cleaning and preparing the damaged plumes for market. When the task was finished and the last plume sold, they found them-

selves the happy possessors of the not insignificant sum of \$3,200, which divided between them gave each a capital of \$800.

With the first money they received from their plumes, they purchased a handsome repeating rifle which they despatched to their friend, Little Tiger, by an Indian who had come into town to trade.

A couple of weeks after, the hunters received a visit from the Seminole who had acted as their guide. He was the bearer of a bundle of beautifully tanned deer-skins, a present from the chief.

"The Little Tiger mourns for his white brothers," said the chief's messenger, "the beautiful rifle speaks to him like a message from them. He bids them when they will to return and end their days in the shelter of his wigwam. He says, if the gray-haired one desires, the offer of a squaw is still open."

The joke on the captain was too good to keep, and the boys have told it to the widow lady whom the captain is interested in. She sometimes tasks him with having given the dusky ladies too great encouragement, and the old sailor gets very red and protests that such was not the case; that he couldn't help it; that he always was a great favorite with the ladies. At first, he used to call upon Walter and Charley to prove the truth of his statements, but they

would only shake their heads ominously and remain gravely silent.

Upon their return the hunters had prepared a full statement of the death of the convicts and mailed it to the proper authorities, but, much to their indignation, their story was not believed but was regarded as an attempt to secure the reward money that had been offered.

Chris is just now greatly incensed over a song that every one seems to be humming. We believe the chorus runs, "Coon, coon, coon, how I wish my color would fade." He regards "coon" as a much more offensive title even than nigger, and contends that it is no name to be applied to a free-born black English gentleman.

Just now all our hunters are resting up from their terrible experiences. One would think that they had passed through enough to discourage them from undertaking another hazardous trip, but adventures breed a love for adventure, and the free, open air calls loudly to those who have followed stream and forest.