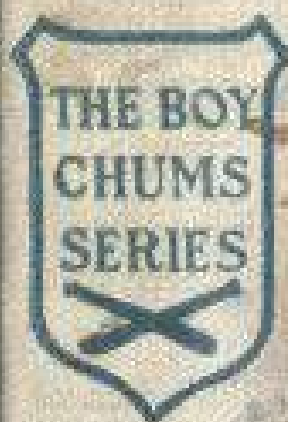


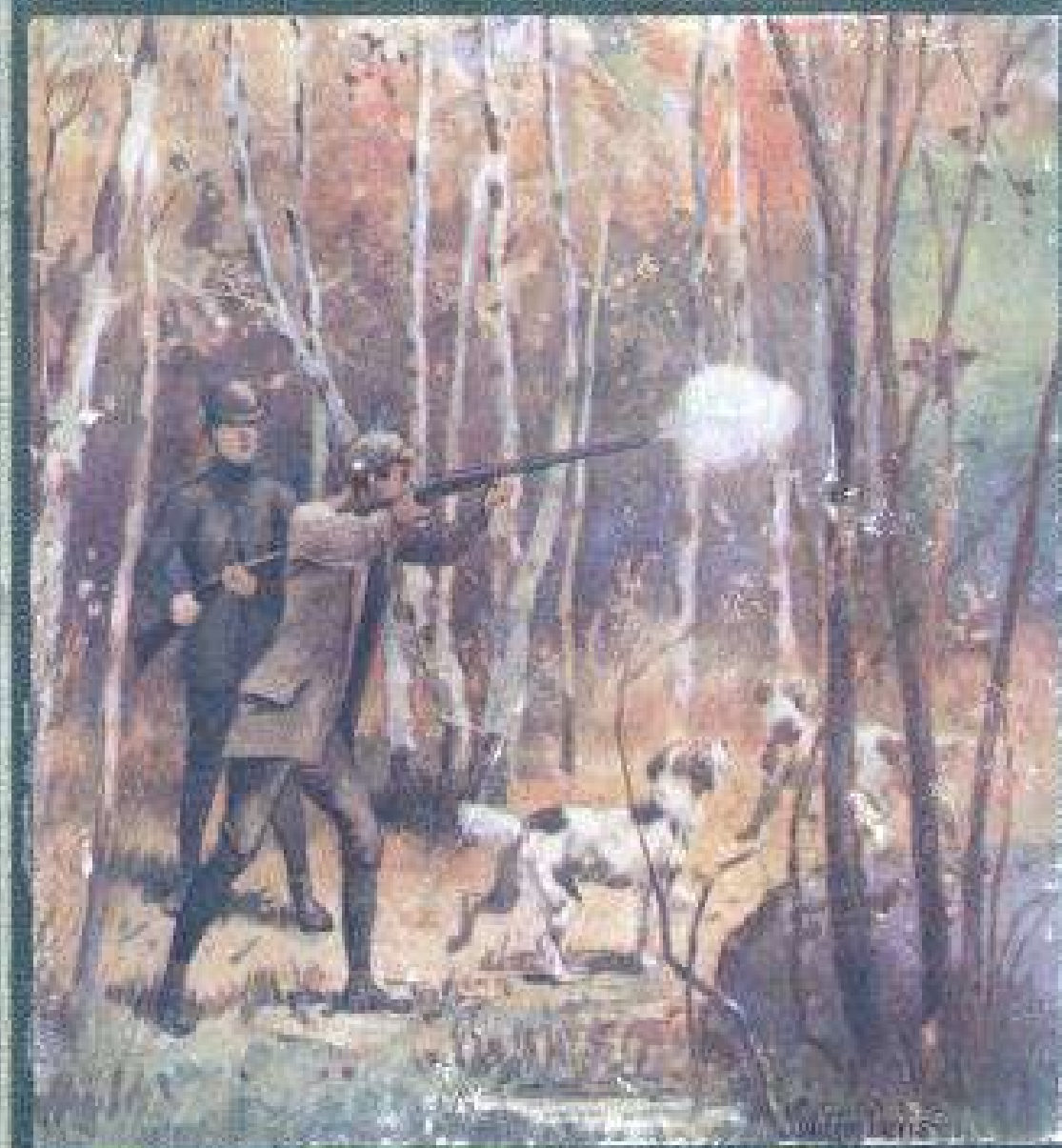
THE BOY
CHUMS
IN
THE
FOREST

ELY



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COMPANY

THE BOY CHUMS
IN THE FOREST



WILMER M. ELY

The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Boy Chums in the Forest, by Wilmer M. Ely

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FOREST ***

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The Boy Chums In the Forest

OR

Hunting for Plume Birds in the Florida Everglades

BY WILMER M. ELY

**Author of "The Boy Chums on Indian River," "The Boy
Chums on Haunted Island," "The Boy Chums'
Perilous Cruise," "The Boy Chums in the
Gulf of Mexico."**

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THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FOREST**

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THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FOREST

OR

Hunting for Plume Birds in the Florida Everglades.

CHAPTER I.

Night had fallen upon a wild Florida forest, and all was still save for the hooting of a distant owl and the occasional plaintive call of a whip-poor-will. In a little clearing by the side of a faint bridle-path a huge fire of fat pine knots roared and crackled, lighting up the small cleared space and throwing its flickering rays in amongst the dark, gloomy pines.

At the edge of the clearing, two wiry little Florida ponies, tethered with rawhide ropes, browsed upon the short, dry wire-grass.

Nearer to the fire lay a neatly done-up pack, and beside it a high-pommeled Mexican saddle, while the firelight gleamed on the polished barrels of a fine shotgun and rifle leaning against the pack.

Close to the blaze a heap of glowing coals had been raked a little to one side, and upon them rested a coffee-pot and large frying-pan from which stole forth appetizing odors of steaming coffee and frying bacon.

The man bending over the coals was heavily bearded and past middle age, but his broad shoulders and huge frame still gave evidence of great strength and endurance. There was about him an air of anxious expectancy, and from time to time he rose from his crouching position and with hand to ear listened intently.

"I sort o' wonder if they'll all fail me," he muttered, as he removed the frying-pan from the coals but set it near enough to keep the contents hot.

As if in answer to his soliloquy, there rose above the crackling of the fire, the muffled distant thud of galloping hoofs. A few moments later a well-built, sturdy lad astride a mettlesome pony dashed into the circle of firelight.

Throwing the reins over the pony's head, the rider leaped from the saddle and with a rush had the elderly man clasped in his arms in an affectionate hug.

"Captain Westfield!" he shouted in boyish delight.

"Charley West," cried the man, "glad to see you, lad, glad to see you. My! you have grown. How are you, boy?"

"Fine, Captain, couldn't be better. But wait 'till I 'tend to my pony, and we will have a good, long powwow."

With sure swift movements, the newcomer removed saddle, pack, and guns, and staked his pony out near the others. This done he returned to the fire.

"What's in the wind?" he began, firing in the questions with the speed of a Maxim. "Something worth while, judging from that mysterious letter of yours. What is the scheme? Why this secret meeting in the forest instead of in town? Why"—but the man he called captain interrupted him with a chuckle.

"Hold a minute, lad. Just bowse your jib for a bit. You must be hungry, boy."

"Starved as a wolf. I could even eat a razorback, if I didn't have to see it before it was cooked."

The captain forked out a quantity of crisp bacon upon a tin plate and filled a big granite cup with fragrant coffee, for Charlie West, and from his saddle-bags brought out a bag of hardtack. Helping himself also, both fell to with a will.

"What were you doin' when you got my letter, Charley?" asked the captain between mouthfuls.

"Nothing, just kicking myself and brooding away in the city." The lad's bright, clear eyes looked frankly into the captain's as he continued. "I have been making a fool of myself, Captain. Got into some mischief with a crowd of fellows at school. Of course, I got caught and had to bear the whole blame for the silly joke we had played. The faculty has suspended me for a term. I would have got off with only a reprimand if I would have told the names of the other fellows, but I couldn't do that, you know."

"No," nodded the captain, approvingly, "that would have been sneakish. But how are you fixed for money, Charley?"

The lad's face fell. "I spent it at first as though there was no end to my little

pile," he said. "I had pulled up when your letter came, but I only had enough left to pay my way back to Florida, buy this pony, and the outfit you suggested. There's nothing left. The fellows tried to get me to stay and work in the city until the next school term opens, but I told them, no! that I was going back to the best friend a boy ever had, back to the man who had been just as good as a father to me ever since my own folks died and left me a young boy alone in Florida. I told them of some of the adventures we had been through together, and what dandy chums we've been for such a long time."

"You told them city fellows all that?" exclaimed the delighted captain, "you talked to 'em like that, Charley?"

"Certainly, it was only the truth," said the lad, stoutly. "But it is your turn now, Captain. I am wild with curiosity."

"Lay to for a while, lad; I am expectin' another member for our crew any time now, and it's no use spinnin' the same yarn twice."

Charley's open face clouded a trifle, and he hesitated before he said, "I am not questioning your judgment, Captain, but you and I have camped out enough to know that a good camp-mate is about the scarcest article to be found. If we take in a stranger on this trip, which I surmise from the outfits is going to be a long one, the chances are more than even that he will turn out a quitter or a shirker."

The captain knocked the ashes from his pipe as he inquired, "Now who would you select for a third member, Charley?"

"I do not know anyone in Florida I would want to take a chance on for a long trip. I only know two fellows I would like to have along, and we can't get them. One is Walter Hazard, the Ohio boy who chummed with us down here for so long. The other is that little Bahama darky, Chris, whom Walter insisted on taking back north with him and putting in a school. There wasn't a yellow streak in either one, and Chris was a wonderful camp-fire cook."

"I wrote to Walt two days afore I wrote to you," observed the captain, calmly.

Charley stared at the simple old sailor in frank amazement. "You surely don't imagine he'll drop whatever he is doing and travel a thousand miles just for a trip with you and I?" he at last recovered himself enough to demand.

The captain nodded complacently. "I've sort of got a feelin' that way, an' if I ain't mistaken, them's his pony's hoofs comin' now—someway they sound different from what yours did, though."

Both adventurers rose to their feet and stood eagerly peering into the darkness from which there came the thud of rapidly approaching hoofs.

A moment later and two ponies were reined up in the circle of fire-light. As Charley recognized one less robust than himself, he gave a shout of delight and with a rush dragged him from his saddle in an affectionate embrace, while the captain, his eyes dancing with pleasure, was wringing the hand of a widely-grinning little darky who had dismounted from the other animal.

"Go easy, Charley," said the newcomer with a happy grin, "you're squeezing all the wind out of my body, and that is all there is in it now. Chris and I had to hustle to make connections and get here on time. We haven't had a bite to eat to-day."

"Walter Hazard, you are the one person I would have picked out for this trip," Charley cried joyfully, "and Chris, too, it seems almost too good to be true. But come over to the fire, and we will cure that empty feeling in a minute. The captain is helping Chris put the ponies up."

Charley quickly routed out a clean plate, and heaped it up with bacon and hardtack, reserving, however, a generous portion for Chris.

"Fall to and don't wait," he commanded, and Walter lingered for no second bidding.

In a few minutes they were joined by the captain and the little negro, who was quickly helped to the balance of the bacon and coffee.

As the two munched away, the captain and Charley plied them with questions which the hungry newcomers answered between mouthfuls.

"How was you gettin' along when that thar letter of mine reached you, Walt," asked the captain, gravely.

"Good and bad both," said the youth, draining his cup with a sigh of satisfaction. "Some time before I had bought up the mortgage on the farm

without saying a word to father or mother. I was selfish, I guess, but I wanted the pleasure of their surprise." His eyes sparkled moistly. "My! it was great. It was worth every cent, although it took nearly every dollar of my little pile. You had ought to have been up there to see them the morning the mortgage fell due. Their faces were sad, enough to have made you cry. Thirty years they had worked and lived on that farm, and I guess there is no spot on earth quite the same to them. When mother lifted up her plate and saw the canceled mortgage underneath, it was some time before she grasped its meaning, and then she just broke down and cried. There were tears of joy in father's eyes, too, and I began to feel a lump in my throat, so I just got up and streaked it out for the barn, where I stayed until things calmed down a bit. But I am making a long story out of how my money went. I went to work in a store after that, but it wasn't long before I began to run down and the doctor would have long talks with father and mother. Then your letter came, and—well, here I am."

"And Chris, how did he happen to come?" inquired Charley.

"Trace chains couldn't have held him back when he heard I was coming back to join you. They wouldn't give him a vacation, but they would not keep him in the school after he began to have regular violent fits," said Walter, dryly.

"Fits," exclaimed Charley, with a glance at the grinning ebony face, the very picture of health. "He never had a real fit in his life."

"Maybe not, Massa Charley," admitted the vain little darky, "but, golly, I couldn't let you chillens go off alone widout Chris to look after you. Dey was powerful like real fits, anyway. I used to get berry sick, too, chewin' up de soap to make de foam. Reckon dis nigger made a martyr of hisself just to come along and look out for you-alls."

Charley turned to the captain to hide his grin. "It's your turn now, Captain. We've all showed our colors, even to Chris. It's up to you now to explain this business."

The captain knocked the ashes from the bowl of his pipe before remarking sagely, "I've noticed as how fish will bite at a good many kinds of bait, but if you want to make sartin sho' of a boy, thar's only one bait to use, and that's a good big chunk of mystery."

He glanced around at the suddenly crestfallen faces about him, and hastened

to continue, "Don't look so down, lads. I ain't brought all of you so fer just for a joke. I just wanted to make sure of you and I didn't want the town people nosin' around and askin' questions, that's why I named this meetin' place."

The three faces brightened again. "Go on, Captain, come to the point," urged Walter, eagerly.

But the captain was enjoying their suspense, and with a twinkle in his eye proceeded slowly, "I was sort of loafin' around town one day about two weeks ago when I come across a Seminole, who, I reckon, had been sent in by his squaw to trade for red calico and beads," he paused for a moment and Charley exclaimed impatiently—

"Bother the Indian, we are not bound for the Everglades to fight them, are we?"

"He was about the drunkest brave I ever saw," continued the captain, calmly ignoring the interruption. "When I came across him he was sittin' on the end of a waterin' trough declaimin' what a great Injun he was, givin' war-whoops, an' cryin' by turns. One of his remarks sorter interested me and I didn't lose no time in makin' friends. Lads, I couldn't have stuck no closer to that redskin if he had been my long lost brother. I kept him away from other folks, an' by an' by I tipped him into the waterin' trough, kinder accident-like. The water sorter sobered him up a little an' pretty soon he began to want to hit the trail for home. I helped him out of town an' started him back for camp, where, I reckon, his old lady was waitin' to give him fits for forgettin' the calico and beads." The captain paused as if his tale was completed.

"For goodness' sake, Captain, what has your drunken Indian got to do with us?" demanded Charley, his patience at an end.

The captain lowered his voice dramatically. "Lads, that Seminole was carryin' around on him over five hundred dollars' worth of white and pink aigret plumes."

"Whew!" whistled the boys, half incredulously.

"Yes," affirmed the captain, "an' I found out where he got them, too. He let out that he bagged them all out by the Upper St. John's River, due west of here. He declared the birds were as thick as the stars at night, but I reckon some

allowance has to be made for poetic license and the red liquor he had in him."

Three boyish faces were shining, now, and questions and answers mingled in eager confusion.

"How far is it to the river?"

"Two long days' travel."

"What kind of birds bear the plumes?"

"The blue heron, and the pink and white egret."

"What are the plumes worth?"

"Five dollars an ounce for perfect ones."

"Whew, it will be just like finding money."

Likely the eager young hunters would have talked the entire night away, but the captain soon interrupted their flow of questions.

"Plenty of time to talk to-morrow, lads. Get to bed now, for we want to start at daybreak."

The boys promptly obeyed. Blankets were spread out near the fire, and with their saddles for pillows the little party were soon in the land of dreams, blissfully unaware of the terrible experiences through which they were soon to pass.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE WAY.

It seemed to the boys that they had only just fallen asleep when a crash like that of mighty thunder brought them startled out of the land of dreams.

Instinctively both reached for their belts and pistols, which they had placed close to their hands on retiring. There was no need for their use, however, for the author of the deafening racket was only Chris who, with a grin on his face, was beating on a tin-pan close to their heads.

"You little imp, I thought it was an earthquake," cried Charley as he hurled a shoe at the little darky, who dodged it nimbly.

"Just couldn't wake you no other way," grinned Chris. "Time to get up, Massas, daylight dun come."

The sky in the east was glowing rosy-red, and the boys lost no time in slipping into their outer clothes and strapping on their pistol belts, which completed their attire.

The captain was already astir, busily engaged in strapping the packs on the animals, while, early as it was, Chris had breakfast ready.

"I tell you what it is," declared Charley, while munching his hardtack and bacon, "we'll soon tire of this fare. We must get some fresh meat very soon."

"A wild turkey roasted over the coals would go pretty well," suggested Walter.

"Deer foah dis nigger," declared Chris, "you-alls just ought to taste de venison steaks when I dun broil 'em."

"I like bear steaks, sizzling brown," said Charley, thoughtfully.

"Oh, keep still, you gluttons," laughed the captain. "We ain't likely to get any of those things unless we stop and have a regular hunt, an' I don't like to take the time for it. Maybe we'll pick up somethin' or other on our way. But now hurry up, boys, it's time we were startin'."

After taking the precaution to cover their fire with sand, all were soon in the saddle, and with Charley in the lead, took up the trail just as the sun rose above the distant tree-tops.

After half an hour's riding, Charley reined in his pony. "Trail's come to an end," he announced.

"Good!" cried Walter, with all of a boy's delight in the unknown, "that means we are getting beyond the range of hunters. Hurrah for the land beyond."

The captain produced a small compass and handed it to Charley. "Steer due west as near as you can," he directed.

Then followed hours of twisting and winding in and out amongst the big trees, now headed one way, now another, but keeping the general westerly direction. All hands kept their guns ready, but, although they saw evidences of big game on every hand, the noise of their advance must have frightened the wild creatures to their hiding-places long before our hunters came in sight.

As the party advanced the forest grew denser, the trees closer together. At last, when they began to fear that further progress would be impossible, they burst suddenly into a stretch of open country extending as far as the eye could see.

"Isn't it great!" exclaimed Walter; "just look at those pretty little lakes, you can see one no matter in what direction you look."

"It is pretty," agreed Charley, "but I am thinking more of dinner than scenery. I suppose it has got to be bacon and hardtack again. I'm—" but Charley did not finish the sentence. His pony had put its foot in a hole and stumbled, while Charley, taken unawares, pitched over the animal's head and landed on all fours in a little heap of sand beside the hole that had caused the mischief. To the surprise of his companions, he did not rise, but remained in the position in which he had fallen, staring at the hole.

"Are you hurt, Charley?" cried the captain, anxiously.

"Not a bit," grinned Charley as he regained a sitting position on the sand-heap. "I'm just holding down our dinner," he added calmly. "Get off, gents, and help me finish the job."

"Now, Chris," he directed, when they had dismounted, "do you see that tall slender sapling over there? It's just the thing I want. Please take the axe and get it for me, and don't cut off all the limbs."

Chris obeyed with alacrity, for experience had taught him that Charley never made useless demands. In a few minutes he was back dragging the sapling after

him.

With a few strokes of the axe, Charley lopped off all the branches save one close to the small end of the trunk. This one he cut off so as to leave a projecting stub of about four inches, thus making of the end of his sapling a sort of rude harpoon.

His companions looked on with curiosity, but asked no questions, for they knew their chum delighted in surprises.

The pole finished, Charley poked the barbed end down into the hole. Down, down it went, fifteen, twenty feet, then struck with a dull thud. He began twisting the sapling over and over, then drew it slowly and gently up, but the end came into view with nothing adhering to it. Again and again was the fruitless operation repeated, and a look of disappointment had begun to settle on Charley's face when at last his harpoon came into view with a dark mass clinging to it.

"A turtle," exclaimed Walter in delight.

"No, a gopher, but I'll admit it is a kind of land turtle, although it feeds entirely on grass and never goes near the water," explained Charley, proud of his capture. "Chris, ride on to that first little lake yonder and get a fire started. We'll be there in a few minutes."

Charley fastened a buckskin thong to one of the gopher's flippers and hung it from his saddle-horn, then all remounted and turned their ponies toward the place where Chris had disappeared among the trees fringing the lake.

They had covered part of the distance when there came a yell and Chris' pony broke from the trees and bore down upon them at a run. The little darky was clinging to its back, his face ashen and his eyes bulging with terror.

"Go back, Massas," he shouted, "hit's a lake of blood, hit's a lake of blood!"

Walter grabbed the flying pony's rein and brought the animal to a halt. "Nonsense," he said, roughly, "you're crazy, Chris. Come on all, let's see what's scared him so." He spurred forward followed by the others and still retaining his hold upon the bridle of Chris' pony, in spite of the little darky's chattering, "Let me go, Massa Walt. Please let me go."

In a few moments the little party entered the fringe of timber and reined in their horses on the shore of the tiny lake. For a moment they sat speechless in their saddles, and truly there was in the sight excuse for Chris' chattering teeth. The little wavelets which broke at their feet were the color of blood, while the lake itself lay like a giant ruby in its setting of green; glistening and sparkling in the sun's bright rays.

Charley dismounted from his horse and from his saddle-bags produced a small medicine glass, which he filled with the liquid and held up to the light. The fluid sparkled clear as crystal and of a beautiful crimson hue.

"It beats me," he announced, "I thought it might be the bottom gave it that color, but whatever it is, it is in the water itself."

Walter wheeled his horse and studied the encircling trees carefully. "I've got it," he announced, "do you notice all these trees are of one kind?"

"You're right," Charley exclaimed, "they are all red bays. It's their roots that color the water."

The boys turned to chaff Chris, but he had slipped away at the first words of the explanation. Soon he reappeared with an armful of dry wood. His face was still ashen, but his teeth had stopped chattering.

"Golly," he exclaimed, pompously, "reckon dis nigger had you-alls scart dis time. Dis nigger shore had de joke on you dis time."

The boys glanced at each other and grinned. "I wouldn't try it again, Chris," Charley chuckled; "you might throw a fit next time, you act so real."

While Chris was making a fire and preparing a bed of coals, Charley cleaned the gopher.

This animal is very much like a turtle, but the tissue which unites the upper and lower shells is so hardened as to be impervious to a knife. Charley solved the problem by wedging it in the fork of a fallen tree, and after two or three attempts he succeeded in separating the shells with an axe.

"Let me finish hit, Massa Charley," pleaded Chris; "dis nigger knows just how to fix him now you got him open."

Charley was nothing loath to turn over the disagreeable task of cleaning to the little darky, who swiftly completed it. He removed the meat from the shell, skinned the edible portions, and threw the offal far from the fire. Next he washed both meat and shells carefully, salted and peppered the meat, and replaced it in the shell, laying on top of it a few thin slices of pork. Then, he bound both shells tightly together with wisps of green palmetto leaves. Lastly, he wrapped another green leaf around the shell and buried it in the bed of glowing coals now ready.

"That's a new idea," grinned Walter, "making your game supply its own cooking-pot. My! but it smells good, though."

In a very short time, Chris pronounced the gopher done and it was lifted from the coals and the shells cut apart revealing the steaming, juicy meat within.

Our hungry party pronounced the meat far sweeter and more tender than chicken, and the empty shells soon bore evidence to their sincerity.

After a brief rest, they mounted and again took up the trail, soon leaving behind their halting-place, which the boys named Lake Christopher, much to the vain little darky's chagrin. He had a shrewd suspicion that he would not hear the last of his fright for many a day.

CHAPTER III.

WOODCRAFT.

For a while the little party rode forward in silence, winding in and out between pretty lakes and bunches of timber, with no path to guide them, but with the help of the compass, managing to edge slowly to the west. Charley still maintained the lead, but in the open country through which they were traveling it was possible to ride abreast, and Walter soon spurred up beside his chum.

"Do you know, Charley, I begin to feel like a babe in the woods," he confessed. "I suspect you are the only one of us who knows anything about woodcraft. I know nothing about it, I am sure Chris doesn't, and I suspect the

captain is far more at home reefing a top-sail. You have got to be our guide and leader, I guess."

"I have hunted a good deal, and a fellow can't help but learn a few things if he is long in the woods," said Charley, modestly, "but I've never been so far into the interior before. I wish, Walt," he continued gravely, "that there was someone along with us that knew the country we are going to better than I, or else that we were safely back in town once more."

"Why?" demanded Walter in astonishment.

"I dread the responsibility, and," lowering his voice so the others could not hear, "I have seen something I do not like."

"What?" queried his chum, eagerly.

Charley produced a square plug of black chewing tobacco from his pocket. "I picked that up in the edge of the clearing this morning," he explained. "It wasn't even damp, so it must have been dropped after the dew settled last night."

"Some lone hunter passed by in the night," suggested Walter, cheerfully.

"I wish I could think so," said Charley anxiously. "But you know as well as I that there are some gangs of lawless men in Florida, gathered from all quarters of the globe, and, Walter," lowering his voice to a whisper, "I saw signs that there was more than one man near our camp last night."

"What kind of signs?" his chum demanded.

"Broken bushes, the marks of horses' hoofs, and a dozen other little things of no importance when considered separately."

"A fig for your signs, you old croaker," laughed Walter, "you'll be seeing ghosts next. I didn't see any of the signs you talk about. Besides, if anyone had wished to do us harm they could have done so without hindrance last night."

"I know it," Charley admitted, "and that's what puzzles me. As for the signs, your not noticing them proves nothing. It's the little things that make up the science of woodcraft. The little things that one does not usually notice."

"My eyes are pretty good, and I don't go around with them shut all the time," began Walter hotly, but Charley only smiled.

"Look around and tell me what you see, Walt," he requested.

"A flat, level country, covered with saw palmetto, dotted with pretty little lakes, what looks like a couple of acres of prairie ahead, and, oh yes, a lot of gopher holes all around us like the one you robbed this morning."

"We'll begin with the gopher holes," Charley said with a smile. "Tell me what is in each hole as we pass it."

"Why, gophers, I suppose."

Charley reined in his horse before four large holes and pointed at them with his riding-whip. "Gopher in that one," he declared without hesitation. "Mr. Gopher is away from the next one, out getting his dinner likely; a coon lives in the next, but he is away from home. Rattlesnake, and a big one, lives in the fourth, but he is also away from home, I am glad to say."

Chris and the captain had ridden up to the boys, and they with Walter, stood staring at Charley in silent wonder.

"It's easy to see," explained the young woodsman. "When a gopher goes down his hole, he simply draws in his flippers and slides, but when he wants to get out he has to claw his way up. You'll see the first hole has the sand pressed smooth at the entrance, while the sand in the other hole shows the mark of the flippers. That third hole is easy, too; you can see the coon tracks if you look close, and you will notice that the claws point outward. The last hole is equally simple, you can see the trail of the snake's body in the soft sand and those little spots here and there made by his rattles show which way he was traveling."

The captain brought his hand down on his knee with a hard slap. "I reckon I can handle any ship that was ever built," he said, "but I'm a lubber on land, boys. Charley's our pilot from now on, an' we must mind him, lads, like a ship minds her helm."

"If I'm going to be pilot, I'll make you all captains on the spot," laughed Charley, as he spurred forward again into the lead.

"Do those wonderful eyes see anything more?" mocked Walter, as he once more ranged alongside.

"Don't make fun of me, Walt," said his chum, seriously. "What I have done is nothing. It's just noting little things and putting two and two together. You can easily do the same if you will train yourself to observe things closely."

"Do you really think I could?" asked Walter, eagerly.

"Certainly you can, and now for the first lesson. Look closely at all the bushes as we pass them and see if you notice anything out of the way."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes, Walter scanning the scrub in passing with a puzzled expression growing upon his face.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Charley asked.

"I don't know what to make of it," Walter confessed. "Every few hundred feet there are branches partly broken off and left hanging. Queer, isn't it?"

"Look closer and see if you can notice anything peculiar about those branches."

"They haven't been broken off very long, for they are not very much withered. I should say it was done about ten days ago."

"Good," exclaimed Charley, approvingly, "notice anything else?"

"Yes," declared Walter, his wits sharpening by his success, "although those boughs seem to be broken accidentally, yet all are caught in amongst other twigs so that each one points in the same direction—the way we are going. What does it mean, Charley, if it means anything?"

"My color is wrong to tell you all that those broken branches mean, but I can tell you a little. About ten days ago a party of Indians passed through this way bound in the same direction we are. They expected another party of their people to follow later so they marked the way for them as you have seen. If I were a Seminole, I could tell from those broken twigs the number of the first party, whither they were bound, what was the object of their journey, and a dozen other things hidden from me on account of my ignorance of their sign language."

"Indians, Seminoles," said Walter, bewildered, "I had almost forgotten there were any in the state."

"There isn't, legally. Years ago the United States rounded them all up and started to transport them out west to a reservation. But at St. Augustine a few hundred made their escape and fled back to the Everglades, where they have lived ever since without help or protection, and ignored by the United States government."

"What kind of a race are they?" asked Walter, curiously.

"The finest race of savages I ever saw," declared Charley, warmly; "tall, splendidly-built, cleanly, honest, and with the manners of gentlemen—look out!" he shouted, warningly.

Walter's horse had reared back upon his haunches with a snort of terror. Walter, though taken by surprise, was a good horseman, and slipped from the saddle to avoid being crushed by a fall.

A few feet in front of the frightened pony lay coiled a gigantic rattlesnake, its ugly head and tail raised and its rattles singing ominously. Two more steps and the pony would have been upon it.

"Don't shoot," pleaded Walter as Charley drew his revolver. "I know where I can sell that skin for \$25.00, if there's no holes in it."

"Let me shoot it, Walt," pleaded Charley, anxiously, "they're awfully dangerous."

"Aye, lad," seconded the captain, who, with Chris, had reached the spot, "better let him shoot it, those things are too dangerous to take chances with."

But Walter's obstinacy was roused. "Keep back, I'll fix him," he declared confidently. "I'm going to have that skin and that \$25.00."

Breaking off a dead bough from a scrub oak he approached the snake cautiously while the rest sat in their saddles silently anxious, and Charley edged his restive pony a little closer to the repulsive reptile.

Slowly Walter moved forward, his gaze fixed intently upon the slowly

waving head before him with its glistening little diamond eyes. Nearer and nearer he crept till only a few feet separated him from that venomous head with its malignant unwinking eyes.

"Strike, boy, strike, you're getting too close," shouted the captain.

"Oh, golly," shrieked Chris, "look at him, look at him."

Walter had stopped as though frozen in his tracks. His face had gone deathly pale, and great drops of sweat stood on his forehead. The hand that held the stick unclasped, and it rattled unheeded to the ground.

"He's charmed," cried the captain.

"Jump to one side, Walt, jump," Charley shouted, "for God's sake, jump. It's going to strike."

CHAPTER IV.

A LESSON.

The reptile's swaying head had drawn back and the huge snake launched itself forward from its coils straight for the dazed lad only a few feet in front of it.

Quick as was its spring, Charley was quicker. He dug his spur cruelly into his little pony's flank. With a neigh of pain the animal leaped forward. For a moment there was a tangle of striking hoofs and wriggling coils of the foiled reptile, while Charley leaning over in his saddle struck with the butt-end of his riding whip at the writhing coils. Though it seemed an eternity to the helpless watchers it was really only a few seconds ere the pony sprang away from its loathsome enemy and Charley with difficulty reined him in a few paces away. The snake with a broken neck lay lifeless on the ground, while Walter, sobbing dryly, had sunk into the arms of the captain, who had flung himself from his horse with surprising agility for a man of his age.

With a glance at the group, Charley dismounted, and petting and soothing his trembling horse, ran his keen eyes over the animal's legs and flanks. From the little pony's left foreleg trickled a tiny stream of scarlet.

"Bring up the packhorse, quick, Chris," he commanded, with a break in his usually steady voice.

Quickly he removed pack, saddle and bridle from his mount. Rapidly as he worked, he had only just removed the bridle when the pony sank to its knees, struggled for a moment to rise, then sank slowly to the ground, where it lay looking up at its master with dumb appealing eyes.

Something welled up in Charley's throat. He flung himself on the ground beside his pony and put his arms around its neck.

"Good-bye, Billy," he whispered. "We haven't known each other long but I've got mighty fond of you, Billy, and when the time came you didn't fail me. You acted like a gentleman, old man."

Poor Billy's legs kicked restlessly to and fro as the tremors went through him.

With a mist in his eyes, Charley arose and looked down on the faithful animal. The wounded leg had already swollen to twice its natural size, the body was twitching with spasms, and the large brown eyes were eloquent with pain and suffering.

"I've got to do it, Billy. It's to save you torture, old fellow, just to save you useless suffering, Billy." He drew his pistol from his belt, took careful aim just behind the pony's ear, and, turning his head away, pulled the trigger.

With never a backward glance at the still form, he strode over to the pack pony and removing the pack transferred his own saddle to the animal.

The pack was quickly broken up into smaller packages and distributed equally amongst the party, and soon all were moving forward again on their westerly course.

It was a still, white, and shaken Walter who once more rode beside his silent chum.

"You saved my life, Charley, and it's a poor return to merely thank you," he said earnestly.

"Don't say anything about it," protested Charley, cheerfully. "The shoe may be on the other foot next time, and I know you will do the same for me then."

But Walter had not finished. "I want to say," he continued, "that you are the only one of us qualified to lead this party. Hereafter, what you say goes with me. I know it will with Captain Westfield too."

"There's Chris," said Charley with a smile. "I fear he will have to have his little lesson before he gets in that frame of mind. Walt," he continued earnestly, "I do not want the responsibility but I am not going to shirk it now that it is thrust upon me. Frankly, though, I can't help wishing that this trip was over and we were safe back in town once more."

"Thinking about our visitors of the other night!" Walter inquired.

Charley nodded. "If they meant any good to us, why did they not make their presence known to us," he reasoned. "Mark my words, we have not seen the last of them,—but hush, here comes the captain and Chris, there is no need to worry them with vague conjectures."

"See that prairie ahead, Charley?" asked the captain. "Chris says there's a big bird in the middle of it, but I can't see anything but grass."

The party was now only a few hundred yards from the small prairie-like patch. Charley rose in his stirrups and scanned it carefully.

"Chris is right," he said. "It's a big sand-hill crane."

"Good to eat, Massa Charley?" demanded the little darky, eagerly.

"I have eaten some that were equal to the finest turkey."

"Dat settles it," Chris shouted. "Golly, I reckon dis nigger goin' to show you chillens how to shoot some. My shot, I seed him first."

"Don't shoot, Chris," said Charley, gently, "you can't get it and it won't be fit to eat if you do."

But Chris' obstinacy and pompous vanity were aroused. "Tink dis nigger can't shoot, eh? You-alls just watch an' Chris will show you chillens somfin'."

Charley said nothing more but his mouth set in a grim line. "Time for his lesson," he murmured to Walter.

Chris waited until they had come within a hundred yards of the crane when he unslung his rifle and dismounted while the others reined in to watch the outcome.

The little darky rested his gun on his saddle and took careful aim. The crack of his rifle was followed by a hoarse squawk and the tall bird tumbled over lifeless.

Chris danced with delight. "I got 'em, I'se got 'em," he cried. Like a flash he was on his pony and galloping towards the dead bird.

"Come back, Chris," shouted Charley, but the little darky galloped on unheeding.

And now the rest of the party beheld a curious thing. Chris' pony had reached the edge of the grass and had stopped so suddenly as to nearly throw its rider over its head. In vain did the little negro apply whip and spur. Not a step further would the animal budge. They saw Chris at last throw the reins over the pony's head and leaping from his saddle plunge into the grass. Only the top of his head was visible but they could trace his progress by that and it was very, very slow. At last he reached the crane and slinging it over his shoulder began to retrace his footsteps. His return was infinitely slow, but at last he regained his pony and dragging himself and his burden into the saddle headed back towards the group of curious watchers. As he drew nearer they stared in silent amazement. He was wet from head to foot, his clothing was in tatters, and the blood flowed freely from a hundred cuts on face, hands and arms.

He rode up to Charley with a sickly smile. "I got 'em, Massa Charley," he boasted weakly.

Without a word Charley reached over and took the crane from him. Stripping away the feathers, he exposed the body of the great bird and held it up to view. The captain and Walter gave an exclamation of disgust. The body was merely a framework of bones with the skin hanging loosely from it.

"It's their moulting season," he explained simply.

"Why you doan tell me dat place full of water, dat grass cut like knife, an' dat ole mister crane wasn't no good nohow," Chris demanded, hotly.

Charley gazed at the pathetic, wretched, little figure and his conscience smote him.

"I told you not to go, Chris," he said gently, "but you would do it. This time there was plenty of time to explain to you that what you thought was merely a plot of grass was really a saw-grass pond, and that sand-hill cranes are not fit for use this season of the year; but suppose that a danger suddenly threatened us. Is it likely, Chris, that I would always have time to stop and explain just why I wanted you to do this or that?"

But Chris was suffering too much pain and humiliation to be soothed by Charley's explanation. With a snort of anger he dug the spurs into his pony's flanks and soon was far ahead of the rest of the party. In a few minutes he came tearing back to them, his face shining with excitement.

"River ahead, river ahead," he shouted.

"It's the St. Johns," declared Captain Westfield, scarcely less excited. "There's no other river in these parts."

Although they spurred forward their jaded steeds the animals were so worn out that it was dusk before they reached the river bank, and they went into camp immediately.

After the supper was over, Chris approached Charley, who was sitting apart from the rest, grave, silent, and evidently buried in deepest thought. The little darky began awkwardly, "Massa Charley, Massa Cap say you de leader an' he going to do just what you say widout axin' no questions, Massa Walt say same ting, an' I guess Chris better say same, now. Golly, I jus' reckon dis nigger made a big fool of hisself over dat bird."

But although he answered Chris lightly and kindly, Charley was not elated over his unsought leadership. Vague suspicions were flitting through his mind, and his new responsibility was weighing heavily upon his young shoulders. As the evening wore on he still sat silent, buried in thought. The captain was reading

aloud from an old newspaper he had brought along. Suddenly Charley straightened up, and a swift glance passed between him and Walter.

CHAPTER V.

THE 'GATOR HUNTERS.

The captain was laboriously spelling out the scare-head articles by the flickering firelight.

"Desperadoes at large."

"Last night twelve convicts, all of them life prisoners, escaped from E. B. Richardson's turpentine camp near Turnbull. The escape was effected by their overpowering the guards while their supper was being served them. One guard was killed and the balance were gagged and tied up to posts in the barracks. The revolvers stripped their prisoners of arms, ammunition and what money they had. Next they broke into the commissary, taking a large amount of clothing and provisions and wantonly destroying the rest. They then made their escape on horses belonging to the guards. As soon as their absence was discovered, bloodhounds were put upon the trail which led towards the interior. The dogs were soon completely baffled, however, for the fugitives had evidently taken to water whenever they came near a pond or creek. This ruse, as well as the whole uprising, is believed to have been the headwork of 'Indian Charley,' one of the escaped prisoners, who, it will be remembered, was drummed out of his tribe and sentenced by the courts for the murder of a white settler last spring. Small outlying settlements will rejoice when this body of hardened desperate men are once more in the grasp of the law."

"I've got it!" exclaimed Charley, so suddenly that the captain looked up in mild surprise.

"Got what?" he inquired.

"A pretty bad attack of sleepiness," Charley said with assumed lightness. "I

feel all done up to-night. Guess I'll turn in."

But although he was first to turn in, it was along in the wee small hours of morning before slumber crept in on his tired brain.

He was awakened by Walter shaking him vigorously.

"Get up, you lazy rascal, get up. The sun is half an hour high, and breakfast is ready. Get up and gaze upon the beautiful St. Johns."

"What does it look like?" inquired Charley, sleepily, as he buckled on his heavy leggins and strapped on his pistol belt.

"For a dismal, wretched, man-forsaken stretch of country it beats anything I ever saw," Walter exclaimed in disgust. "The river itself is about a half mile wide, but it twists, turns, and forks every few yards so as to puzzle a corporation lawyer. The shores for half a mile back from the water are nothing but boggy marsh, with here and there a wooded island. Ugh, the sight of it is enough to make a man homesick."

"Not giving out already, Walt," Charley said, cheerfully, as he made his way through the boggy marsh to the water to wash, followed by his chum.

"Not much," said Walter grimly, "I for one am not going back empty-handed after coming so far. But I'm beginning to realize that this is not going to be all a pleasure trip. You noticed the article that the captain read last evening about the convicts escaping. Can it be they are the party you saw signs of?"

"I believe they are," agreed his chum as they turned back towards the camp where the captain and Chris were patiently waiting breakfast. "I may be wrong, but I thought it all over last night and I decided it was only fair to tell the others what I suspect."

"The captain will want us all to pack right back home," said Walter, glumly.

His fears proved true, for when Charley related his suspicions over the frugal breakfast, the captain was visibly worried.

"I'm the cause of leading you into trouble again, boys," he reproached himself. "However, I reckon thar ain't nothing to be gained by regrets. As soon

as we have finished eating, we'll pack up and head back for the coast."

But Charley opposed the plan of returning decidedly. "They have had plenty of chance to kill us off easily on the way here if they had wanted to," he argued. "Why they haven't done so puzzles me. Perhaps they fear a searching party would be sent after us if we do not return promptly. I have a feeling, though, that they are after bigger game, although I have not the slightest idea what it can be. Anyway, I am not going back, now, empty-handed, if there were twice as many jail-birds at my heels."

"I am with you, Charley," Walter said quickly.

"Me too, Massa," grinned Chris, who was plucky enough when he understood the nature of the threatened danger. "Golly, I jest reckon dis nigger got to stay and look out for you chillens."

The captain, whose only concern had been for the boys, brought his hand down on his knee earnestly. "Then I'm with you, lads, till the last mast carries away. You're the pilot in these waters, Charley. What course shall we steer now, lad?"

"I think," suggested Charley, modestly, "that the first thing is to fix up a shelter in case of rain. We must be careful, and if we come into contact with any of those fellows we must not let them see that we suspect what they are. That would cause trouble right away, I am sure."

"Go ahead and give your orders, lad; we will carry them out."

"Then I'll deputize Chris to see if he can't get us some fresh fish," said Charley with a smile.

Chris, his face beaming, darted away to his saddlebags after his fishing-tackle. If there was one thing the little darky liked above all others it was fishing, and wherever he might be, his tackle was never far away.

As soon as he had departed, Charley, accompanied by the others, set about selecting a site for their permanent camp.

"You see," Charley explained, "we want a place that we can stand a show of defending if we should be attacked, and at the same time a place from which we

can escape by water if we have to."

They did not have to go far before they found the very place they were hunting for, a long, narrow, scantily grassed point that penetrated through the marsh far out into the river.

"It's just the thing," Charley declared. "We will lead the ponies out to the end and then fell a few pines across the neck here. That will form a kind of a fence and keep them from straying away. There's grass enough on the point to keep them busy for a week at least."

Within half an hour the three eager workers had felled enough pines across the neck of the point to form a kind of rude stockade. Then they moved out to the end of the point and began the erection of their shelter. It was quite primitive and simple. Two saplings about twelve feet apart were selected as the uprights, and to them, about eight feet from the ground, two poles were lashed securely with buckskin thongs, the other ends of the pole being imbedded in the ground. Other smaller saplings were trimmed and laid across the slanting poles, and on them were piled layer after layer of fan-like palmetto leaves. In a short space of time they had completed a lean-to which would protect them from any storm they were likely to experience at this season of the year.

"Have you noticed that, Charley?" inquired Walter, as they placed the last leaves on the lean-to. He pointed to a point, similar to their own, scarce two thousand yards away, from which rose a thick column of smoke.

"Yes, I've been watching it for some time," Charley said. "I guess it's our friends, the convicts. They are late risers. Somehow or other, Walt, I've got what prospectors call a 'hunch' that they are not after us and will not bother us as long as they think we are ignorant of their true character."

"I'll never trouble trouble 'till trouble troubles me," hummed Walter, cheerfully.

"A good motto," said his chum gravely, "but nevertheless it's better still to be ready for trouble if it does come. Now we must provide a means of retreat. Come, let's open packs one and two, we'll need their contents soon anyway."

Packs one and two, when opened, revealed bundles of numbered pieces of tough, thin flexible steel and packages of thick water-proofed canvas. Under the

captain's skilled direction, the steel was quickly framed together, the canvas stretched over it, and in a short time two canvas canoes were floating lightly at their painters at the end of the point.

All had been too engrossed in their labors to note the passage of time until the captain snapped open his old-fashioned silver watch.

"One o'clock," he exclaimed in surprise.

Charley and Walter looked at each other apprehensively. "What can be keeping Chris?" Walter cried.

"Maybe he is having good luck and hates to quit," suggested Charley. "Let's give him a while longer."

But two o'clock came and no Chris appeared.

"Get your guns, boys," commanded the captain. "We must go hunt him. Something's the matter."

CHAPTER VI.

SOME SURPRISES.

Loosening their pistols in their holsters, and grabbing up their guns, the little party struck out in the direction in which Chris had disappeared.

They were proceeding almost at a run when Charley checked their headlong speed.

"Let's go slow," he panted, "it may be that the convicts have got him and we may be running right into an ambush."

He but voiced the fear in the minds of the others, and they slackened their advance to a slow walk, keeping a cautious eye on every bush or tree large enough to conceal an enemy.

Trampled marsh grass and broken twigs gave them an easy trail to follow, and in a few minutes they were in sight of the river bank. Charley, who was in the lead, suddenly stopped short with an exclamation of relief and disgust.

"Just look at that," he said.

On a little grassy knoll close to the water was Chris flat on his back, his mouth open, fast asleep. A half dozen fine bass lay on the grass beside him, the end of his fishing line was tied to one ebony leg, and a coil of slack line lay upon the turf.

"Let's give him a scare for causing us so much worry," Walter suggested.

"Wait a minute," cautioned the captain, "he's gettin' a bite, let's see what he will do."

The little party drew in behind some bushes, where they could peep out at the slumbering little darky.

The slack was running out rapidly, and at last the line tauted with a jerk on the sleeper's leg.

Chris sat up with a start, rubbed his eyes and looked at the sun, then at the pile of fish beside him. The continued jerking of the line at his leg seemed to bring him out of his drowsiness. With a broad grin he began pulling in the line, hand over hand.

The three watchers stood peeping eagerly through the bushes, expecting to see another fine bass appear.

As the hooked victim was drawn in close to the knoll, Chris gave a hearty yank and landed it on the grass beside him.

But the result was not what the watchers expected. With a howl of terror the little darky leaped to his feet and dashed away at a bounding, leaping run, breaking through the undergrowth as though it were reeds. One glance, as he flew by the watchers without seeing them, caused them to hold their sides and double up with laughter. The line was still fastened to Chris' leg, and drew after it the captive of his hook. One glance behind and Chris began to holler, "Help, help, Massa Walt, help, Massa Charley. De snake's goin' to get dis nigger. Oh

golly, oh golly!"

The line caught on a bush and broke short off, but Chris was making for the lean-to with championship speed and knew it not.

Charley picked up the severed line and held up the prize to view.

"The biggest, fattest eel I ever saw," he declared exultantly. "Guess it must have been the first one Chris ever saw. They certainly do look like snakes."

"Keep it out of sight till we hear what he says," Walter said, and Charley with a smile agreed.

The captain gathered up the fish and stringing them upon a cord slung them over his shoulder.

In a few minutes they were back at the camp, where they found Chris stretched out on the ground breathing heavily, his face an ashen hue.

"Why you-alls doan come when Chris hollers for help?" he demanded indignantly. "'Pears like you don't care if dis nigger's killed."

"We came as soon as we could, Chris," said Walter, soothingly, "what was the trouble, anyway?"

Chris, mollified, sat up. "Done got into nest ob snakes," he declared, "reckon I killed fifty of 'em, but more and more kept coming so I had to run. Golly, I 'spect thar was mighty nigh a hundred chased me most to camp. Dat's why I yells for you-alls."

The captain smilingly laid down the string of fish, and Chris' countenance fell.

Charley swung the eel into view. "It isn't a snake, Chris," he explained, "it's an eel; they are not poisonous, and are mighty good eating."

For once the little darky was fairly caught without chance of evasion. Without a word he started building a fire, gutted the fish, washed them clean, and without removing head or scales, thrust them into the glowing coals. In twenty minutes they were done, the heads were cut away, the skin with its load of scales peeled

off, and our hungry hunters sat down to a dish fit for a king.

They were in the midst of the meal when Charley arose and getting his rifle put it down by his side. "Get your guns quick and keep them close to you. We are going to have visitors," he said.

The bushes were crackling loudly at the neck of the point and a moment later a body of men came into view. As they clambered over the barricade, Charley counted them. They were twelve in number, one of them an Indian, his face disfigured by a long scar that gave to it a sinister, malignant expression.

"Keep close together and your guns handy," counseled Charley, as the band approached. "I declare, if they aren't all unarmed," he added.

"What in the world is the matter with them?" whispered Walter in amazement; "see, some of them can hardly walk."

As the men drew nearer, our little party's wonder grew. Most of them dragged themselves forward with stumbling footsteps. Their faces were haggard, their hands moving restlessly and their features twitching. They looked like men who had been for days undergoing severe mental and physical strain and were on the verge of collapse.

Our hunters drew close together with their guns, close to hand and awaited the convicts' coming with lessened apprehension as they saw that they carried no guns.

The leader staggered in front, the balance following him like starved sheep. He stopped before the captain and sank to a seat on a stump. The perspiration stood in great drops on his face and he was breathing heavily.

"Strangers," he said hoarsely, "if you've got any tobacco, fer mercy' sake, loan us some. We haven't had a scrap for two days."

The boys had hard work to restrain a laugh, but the captain hastily unbuckled the flap of his saddle-bags and brought out a huge package of plug tobacco which he passed over to the spokesman.

"I brought it along to give to the Indians in case we met any, but I reckon you need it a heap sight worse," he said mildly.

Without a word of thanks the man tore the package open and distributed the plugs amongst his followers, and in a moment jaws and pipes were going vigorously on the enslaving weed.

In five minutes a change was visible; slouching backs began to straighten, dull eyes commenced to brighten, and the color to steal back into haggard faces.

"I'm glad I never got into the habit of using it, now I have seen what a slave it can make of a strong man," whispered Walter in disgust.

"Some of our soldier boys in Cuba went crazy for a while when deprived of the use of it," said Charley. "None of it for me. It doesn't do a young growing fellow any good."

As his muscles and nerves relaxed under the influence of the powerful narcotic, the leader of the convicts removed his pipe from his mouth with a sigh of relief.

"You sho' saved our lives that time, partner," he cried; "we done forgot the bacca when we was getting up our supplies, an' didn't find it out until we'd come too far to go back. Jim thar," (with a glare at the culprit,) "had a sizeable piece, but he had to go and lose it on the way."

"Out for a hunt?" inquired the captain politely.

"Gators. We're just plain, honest 'gator hunters, working powerful hard for a mighty poor living," declared the ruffian. "An' you-alls, I reckon one guess will hit it, arter plumes, I allow."

"We haven't said so," said Charley quickly.

The ruffian favored him with an appraising leer. "Don't have to say so," he drawled, "if you ain't, what have you-alls got them dinky little canoes for, an' if you were after 'gators you'd be packing big rifles 'stead of them fancy guns. You ain't got no call to deny it, for I was aiming to give you a bit of neighborly advice."

"What is it?" inquired Walter curiously.

"That it ain't no use for you-alls to stop here. The Injuns have got this section combed out clean. You couldn't get enough plumes around here to pay for your bacon. Now, I knows of a tidy little island 'bout twelve miles south of here where there's stacks of the birds. If you start right now you'll hit it before them pesky varmints of redskins find it. I'm telling you in pay for that tobacco. Max Hilliard ain't the kind of man to take nothing without paying for it," he concluded, grandly.

"Them Indians don't seem to be bringing many plumes into town," said the captain.

"'Cause why? 'Cause they have to turn the bulk of what they get over to their chiefs for tribute, an' them varmints are getting so foxy they just hoards 'em up. They know the price is goin' up right along. Oh, them pesky varmints are getting cunning these days. But come, boys, we must be getting back to camp."

The reinvigorated gang of cut-throats arose and with awkward, surly thanks stamped away.

Their leader lingered behind for a moment. "Better pack right up and get out for that island right now, partners," he advised. "Thar's a gang of Injins coming down the river day after to-morrow, an' they'll be sure to clean it out." His voice grew low and menacing. "Anyway, you fellows want to get out of here afore day after to-morrow."

Before any of the hunters could question him, he was gone.

"He seems set on our leaving here," said Walter, anxiously.

"I reckon it was sort of an error of judgment that we didn't tie them fellows up while we had the chance. They was too plum wore out to put up much of a fight," said the captain, regretfully.

Charley said nothing, but his expression was that of one who after long puzzling has solved a troublesome problem, and has found the solution not that which he desired. The outlaws' statement that there was a party of Indians on their way *from* the Everglades had given him the key.

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 legging.

"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 foil 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."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BATTLE.

All around the quagmire were the skeletons of what had once been great lusty trees with far-spreading limbs. As Charley uttered his defiance, his glance rested for a moment on the most advanced of these and a gleam of hope lit up his face. Although this dead giant of the island was many feet from the sinking lad, yet in its youth it had sent out nearly over him one long, slender, tapering limb. In a second Charley's quick eyes had taken in the possibility and the risk, the next moment he had skirted round the quagmire at the top of his speed and was swinging up the giant trunk.

The captain was not slow in divining his intention, "Come back, Charley," he called wildly. "It'll break with you, lad. Come back, come back."

Walter managed to twist his head around until he obtained a glimpse of what was going on. "Don't try it, Charley," he implored, "or there will be two of us gone instead of one."

But Charley was smiling now and confident. He knew the kind of tree he was climbing up. It was a black mangrove and among the toughest of woods when well seasoned. To him it had become merely a question of reaching the end of that limb before the mire closed over his chum's head. Never did sailor go aloft more quickly than he swung himself up from branch to branch. Quickly he reached the overhanging bough. At its juncture with the trunk he paused for a second to catch his breath, then swung himself out on it cautiously, hand over hand. The bough creaked and cracked ominously, but did not break. Near the end of the limb he stopped, and throwing a leg over to free his hands, he knotted one end of the rope to the branch and flung the other end to his chum.

"You'll have to pull yourself out, Walt," he sang down cheerily, "this limb will not bear two."

Fortunately Walter had managed to keep his arms above the mire. He caught the rope and began to pull. He had occasion now to bless the years of hard work that had made his body vigorous and his muscles hard and strong. Slowly he drew himself up out of the clinging ooze which closed behind him with a sickening, sucking sound. Once clear of the mud, it was an easy feat to go up the rope hand over hand and soon he was standing beside Charley at the foot of the tree where they were speedily joined by the delighted captain.

"Let us thank God, boys, for your wonderful escape. He put that plan into Charley's head and gave him the courage and daring to carry it out," the captain said.

Devoutly the two boys knelt at the foot of the tree, while the old sailor in simple, uncouth speech, offered up a little prayer of humble thanks for the deliverance of the two lads he loved so well.

As they arose from their knees, Walter caught Charley's hand and wrung it vigorously. "You saved my life again, old chum," he cried.

But Charley, embarrassed and blushing like a girl, pulled his hand away. "I guess we'd better be getting back to camp," he stammered, eager to change the subject.

"Ever modest are the brave," quoted Walter with a laugh. "But you are right about getting back to camp. I, for one, have had enough slaughter and adventure for one night."

The guns and plumes were quickly gathered together and, guided by the light of the camp-fire, the two canoes were soon made fast again at the point and their occupants were soon busy removing their rubber boots and drying themselves before the roaring fire.

Chris' eyes shone with delight when they spread out to view the beautiful feathery pink, white and blue plumes.

"Sixty-three of 'em," he announced after a hurried count. "Golly, guess dis nigger goin' to be a rich man afore we get back home."

The captain rummaged in his saddle-bags and brought out a small pair of steelyards. The plumes were tied carefully together in a bunch and suspended from the hook.

"Twenty ounces," he announced. "At five dollars an ounce that makes one hundred dollars, lads. That ain't half bad for our first night's work."

But in spite of their success the boys' faces were grave and depressed.

The captain glanced shrewdly from one to the other. "I reckon you-alls are thinkin' now of just what I've been studyin' on. You're thinkin' of all them poor innocent birds we've killed to get them feathers. You're thinkin' of them and of the dozens you only wounded which are bound to die a lingerin', sufferin' death, poor things."

Charley shuddered, "I killed one and it didn't fall," he explained, "I climbed up and looked, and it was resting on a nest containing five, cute, little fluffy ones."

"We can't go on with it," declared Walter with deep feeling. "It's fit work for brutes like those convicts but not for us."

"Pulling out the plumes won't kill 'em, an' I don't think it hurts 'em much," said the captain, thoughtfully. "Maybe we can rig up some sort of trap that will do the work without killin' 'em. It's time for bed, now, lads, but think it over and, perhaps, we can hit on some scheme. Had we better take turns at keeping watch, Charley?"

"I don't think we'll be bothered for a while yet, at any rate," said Charley, thoughtfully, as he stretched out on his couch and pulled his blanket over him. "Good-night, all; here goes for the land of dreams."

Although he closed his eyes and endeavored to sleep, it was a long time before it visited his excited brain. He was only a boy in years and the responsibility for the safety of the little party now trustfully thrust upon him bore heavily upon his young shoulders. It would not have been so bad were it not for the close proximity of that band of twelve, armed, desperate, escaped murderers. Their attitude towards the hunters, together with scraps of conversation they had uttered, had bred in Charley's active mind a theory for their actions and object, a theory involving a crime so vile and atrocious as to stagger belief.

"I'll be getting flighty if I keep brooding on this thing by myself much longer," Charley mused. "I am beginning to fear my own judgment is wrong. I'll confide it all to someone else to-morrow and see if their opinion agrees with mine." With little reflection, he decided on Walter as the fittest one to tell. This resolve lifted a burden from his mind and he soon drifted off into healthy slumber.

"I've got something I want to talk over with you, Walt," he found a chance to whisper while breakfast was cooking next morning. "Let's get away somewhere where the captain and Chris will not hear us," he cautioned.

Their chance came soon after breakfast while Chris was cleaning up the things and the captain was engaged in sorting out and packing away the plumes in the tin boxes they had brought with them.

The two boys strolled off slowly and carelessly together, but did not stop until they had reached the grassy knoll by the river.

"Hurry up, tell me what it is, you have got me half wild with curiosity," cried Walter, flinging himself at full length upon the turf.

Charley smiled as he pointed at a thin wisp of smoke rising from the convicts' camp. "It is about our neighbors," he said.

"Have you learned anything new?" Walter demanded eagerly.

"No, but I've been putting two and two together concerning them again and again until I'm uncertain whether I've got the proper answer or have got everything distorted by long brooding over them. I want to know what the conclusion would be to a mind that is fresh."

"Good," said Walter, gleefully, "sounds just like a lawyer, go ahead, I'll be the judge."

"First," said Charley, gravely, "we can admit as an undisputed fact, that those fellows over there were either close behind or ahead of us at least part of the way here."

Walter nodded assent, too interested to interrupt.

"From the closeness with which they tally to that newspaper account, even down to the renegade Indian, we are, I think, justified in assuming that they are the escaped convicts."

"Their faces would convict them without any evidence," Walter declared.

Charley was now so absorbed in his chain of reasoning that he scarcely heeded the interruption. "Twelve life convicts, which by the laws of this state means twelve murderers, men without mercy, who would hesitate at nothing, are for several days and nights close to a party of four who do not even keep a watch at night. Why do they not kill off the four and help themselves to several things that would make them more comfortable?"

"I give it up," said his puzzled chum.

"Again," said Charley following his line of reasoning, "what do bodies of men who have broken prison always do when they escape? Separate as soon as possible, and scatter in all directions, make their way to small, isolated places, change their appearance as much as possible, and each shift for himself. To remain together increases the risk of capture for each and all. There must be some powerful motive to make them take such risks. Such men risk nothing

except for money. But there are no banks here to be looted, no strangers to be waylaid in dark alleys, not even a blind beggar to steal pennies from."

"Then, for goodness' sake, what is their object?" demanded the mystified Walter.

Charley's voice lowered in its seriousness. "I know there is a party of Indians on the river now. I found traces on the shore, where they had embarked in boats, they are likely the same party that were hunting in the woods and have now returned to the Everglades. By the signs I pointed out to you there is another party following. I told you I could tell but little from the signs, but there is among the convicts one of their race who can read their signs like an open book."

"But the Indians are poor," Walter objected. "I don't see the connection."

"Remember what the leader of the convicts said yesterday, that each Indian had to give the larger portion of his plumes to his chief as tribute. Consider a party of expert hunters after a long hunt of weeks; why, the chief's share must run up into the hundreds of dollars to say nothing of each brave's individual portion."

"What a diabolical scheme!" cried Walter in horror, "they mean to slaughter the Indians for their plumes as they come down the river from the 'Glades.'"

"That's the conclusion I reached," said Charley coolly. "I am glad that you prove I am not going crazy brooding over the matter."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BEES AND THE BEAR.

Walter's first feeling was of horror and indignation, mingled with frank admiration for the cleverness with which Charley had reasoned the matter out to its logical conclusion.

"You have got a great head on you, old chap," he said, affectionately. "It certainly seems as though you have hit the nail on the head this time. I understand, now, why their leader was so anxious to have us move away. They expect to encounter the Indians somewhere in this neighborhood and they do not want any witnesses. What shall we do, Charley?"

"We are in an unpleasant fix," said his chum, musingly. "The only safe thing to do, I guess, is to take that convict's advice and move away at once. If we interfere with their plans or even let on that we know what they are, it will mean fight, with us outnumbered three to one."

"But we can't leave here and let those fiends ambush and murder those unsuspecting Indians," said Walter indignantly.

"Certainly not," said his chum, heartily. "But we must be prepared to take some risks. We can't fight that crowd in the open, they are too many for us. We'll have to outwit them and put the Indians on their guard without letting the convicts suspect that we have had a finger in the pie. It would be an easy trick to turn if it were not for that renegade Indian with them. I guess there isn't anything much that escapes those black, beady eyes of his."

"You have a plan then?" said Walter eagerly.

"One, such as it is. You see, we are between those fellows over there and the Everglades. A party of savages coming from the Glades would have to pass us before coming in rifle range of the convicts' camp. Now we could halt them here and explain matters, but that would give us dead away to the enemy."

Walter's face fell. "They would be sure to catch on," he admitted.

Charley pointed far to the south where, half a mile distant, another long point jutted out through the marsh into the river. "That is the key to the situation," he declared. "The Seminoles are not expected until to-morrow, if that man's remarks are true. Well, beginning to-morrow morning early, one of us will be on that point while daylight lasts,—Indians do not generally travel at night, and when we sight them we will signal and warn them, and the convicts will be none the wiser. The Seminoles are no cowards and we can join them and wipe that scum of humanity off the face of the earth."

"Splendid," approved Walter enthusiastically. "But let's head for camp now."

The others will be wondering what has become of us."

At the camp a surprise awaited the two boys. The captain was stumping back and forth near the fire, his usually good-natured face nearly purple with suppressed anger, while, squatting on his heels before the fire, sat Indian Charley, his face impassive but his keen beady eyes watching the irate sailor's slightest movement.

At the sight of the boys, the captain lumbered towards them, waving a dirty piece of paper. "Read that," he roared, "just brought in by that copper-faced, shoe-button-eyed son of a sea cook."

It was a piece torn evidently from a paper bag and on it was scrawled in big, almost undecipherable characters.

"The shootin' an' racket you-alls are doin' air drivin' the 'gators away. You-alls have got to move. This is our huntin' ground. For sake of that tobacco, which comes mighty handy, we'll give you-alls 'till to-morrow noon to move peaceable afore we comes down on you, hands and feet."

"How's that for gall?" demanded the captain, his wrath increasing, but Charley silenced him with a shake of his head and turned to the impassive redskin. "Tell your leader, that we are figuring on making a move to-morrow," he said, courteously. The Seminole's beady orbs met his in a suspicious glance, then he turned without a word and glided noiselessly away among the bushes.

Walter and Charley exchanged significant glances. "That means they do not expect them before to-morrow afternoon," Charley commented.

"Who! expecting who? Don't talk in riddles, lads," exclaimed the captain, testily, his temper still suffering from the unaccustomed restraint he had put upon it.

In a few words Charley related his suspicions to him and Chris, and detailed the plan he and Walter had agreed upon.

The captain's face beamed with unenvious admiration as he gave Charley a hearty thump on the back that well-nigh drove the breath out of the lad's body.

"Reasoned out plain an' fair as day," he exclaimed, "I reckon you've hit it

right plum center first shot, lad. You bet we'll be on the watch to warn them poor Indians, an' if there's any fightin' we'll sho' help to rid this country of them ornary, low-down, murderin', cut-throats. It's a great head you've got for young shoulders, Charley. You've reasoned it out like a detective and made your plans like a general."

Charley blushed with pleasure. "It looks logical and I hope it will work out all right," he said, secretly pleased at the tribute to his mental powers. But, as a great detective or general sometimes does, Charley had passed over the simple, vital, obvious point that was the most important of all and from its omission, destined to be far reaching and terrible to hunters, Indians and convicts.

"There's nothing special to do this morning," said Walter, "so let us make a trip to that point and pick out a good place for our lookout."

"Judging from their actions and their note, our neighbors don't intend to make a move against us until to-morrow, so I guess it will be safe for all of us to go," said Charley. "We will take the guns and make a kind of all day hunting trip."

"Den, I spect dis nigger's got to rustle around an' fix up some lunch," said Chris, his face falling. "Golly, I spect you-alls going to be powerful hungry nigh noon."

"No, this is going to be a holiday for all of us," declared Walter with boyish enthusiasm. "For one day let's all be just like the Indians, get our food with out guns and not even take a frying-pan with us."

To Chris' great delight the others gave ready assent to the plan. The horses were watered and staked in fresh spots, and, with guns over shoulders, our party followed their point in to shore, then struck off southward along the margin of the marsh toward the distant point, destined to be Point Lookout.

They found it much like their own point, but somewhat more heavily wooded.

"Here's the very place for our lookout," exclaimed Walter, pausing beside a clump of great oaks. "See, it couldn't be better if it had been made to order. This knoll commands a good view of the marshes and river towards the Everglades, while those trees will hide the watcher from our point, and of course from the convicts' camp. I have got a big, red, bandanna handkerchief which we can use

as a flag. When the one on watch sees the Indians coming, he can fasten it to that dead sapling further out. That will be a signal to those in camp to get ready for a hot time."

"Bravo," said the captain approvingly. "You have got the right course logged out to a point by the compass. Steer as you are going, lad, and you'll have stored in your head as well packed and sorted a cargo as good as Charley's here."

"Or me, or me, Massa Captain," chimed in Chris. "Golly, I reckon you-alls don't know what a smart nigger I is when I gets de chance."

"We are all wonders, in our own minds," laughed Charley. "We have got a chance to show our smartness right now. I, for one, am getting mighty hungry and we haven't bagged anything for dinner yet."

"We are for the woods, then," cried Walter, "on, noble leader. Shall we separate or go together?"

"We must stick together, provided you will try to keep that mouth of yours closed and quit guying me," Charley retorted. "If not, I shall feel it my duty to take you across my knee and give you a good spanking."

Walter checked the ready sally which was on his tongue's end, for they had been moving on while talking and Charley was now leading them into the dense forest where silence was absolutely necessary if they hoped to secure any game.

For some time they picked their way carefully through the forest, warily avoiding dry twigs, and maintaining an absolute silence. But although they saw numerous signs of game, both large and small, not a glimpse of even a rabbit or squirrel rewarded their eager watchfulness.

At last when all were beginning to get a bit discouraged, Charley called a halt. "Now, all of you listen hard as you can for a few minutes and then tell me what you hear," he said.

For a full minute his companions listened intently, then the captain gave an exclamation of disgust. "Can't hear anything out of the usual," he declared.

"Once or twice I thought I heard something, but I guess it was only my imagination," said Walter.

"And you, Chris?" inquired Charley of the little darky, whose face wore a puzzled expression.

"Golly, dis nigger hear something powerful plain but he can't just make it out. Don't sound like anything he ever heard, afore. Now hit sounds like a big dog growling an' then again hit sounds like one whinin'."

"Your ears are pretty good, Chris," Charley commented. "I guess we'll follow up that sound for a little while."

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. "It's 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 chillen'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.

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 declared, 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 to-morrow."

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.

CHAPTER XII.

CHARLEY'S MISTAKE.

All were awake early next morning, in fact, the captain and Charley had slept but little during the night. They were worried and anxious as to what the coming day would bring forth. As he lay awake during the long silent hours, Charley felt his burden of responsibility grow heavy indeed and doubts began to assail him as

to the wisdom of the course he was pursuing. After all, there was yet time to retreat. He had only to say the word and his companions would willingly follow. His plans in remaining were built largely on guesswork and theory. If they worked out as he had reasoned, the Indians would be warned. With their aid the convicts could be surrounded, captured, and sent back to a coast town under guard. Some blood would likely be shed but not as much as if they were left free to run at large. But if his reasoning were wrong, if his plan for some unforeseen reason, failed,—the boy shuddered as he thought of himself and three companions pitted against twelve desperate ruffians, far away from any help or assistance. Deep down in his active brain some awakened cell was trying to send a message of warning, but it would not rise to his consciousness, he could not quite grasp it or its meaning. Thus tortured and worried, our young leader passed a weary night, and was relieved when dawn began to break and his companions to awaken.

As soon as it was light enough, they made their way back cautiously to the camp, where they found everything as they had left it. Evidently they had had no visitors during the night.

"Well, it was just as well to be on the safe side," Charley announced, "anything is liable to happen now. I guess while you make some coffee, Chris, I will stand guard at our wall. Walt, you make up two packages of provisions, say enough to do for a couple of days and put one in each of the canoes. Captain, if you will, please look over the outfits and pick out what we will be able to carry and what would be most useful to us if we should have to take to the canoes in a hurry. Don't be alarmed," he said cheerily, noting the grave look on the others' faces. "Things are going to go all right, but a good general always looks to it that he has a way of retreat ready. Now, as soon as Chris has coffee ready, we will have one last talk together about this thing." Shouldering his rifle, he made his way to the breastwork of fallen trees, where he paced back and forth until Chris came to relieve him for breakfast.

During the meal, Charley went over the whole puzzle again, explaining freely his doubts and fears, and the possibility of his whole chain of reasoning being wrong. "Now you know all I know about it," he concluded. "There is yet time to escape. If you say the word, we'll start in half an hour."

The captain shook his head gravely. "Your reasoning seems clear as print to me, lad. You have just brooded over it so long that it's natural you should begin

to have doubts and fears. To me it's as sound as when you first gave it. That being so, we can't run an' leave them poor ignorant savages to be shot down maybe like snipe. It wouldn't be Christian like to go when that chance remains."

"Those are my sentiments exactly," said Walter eagerly.

"Good," Charley sighed in relief, "this shifts at least part of the responsibility from my shoulders. Now for our plans. Walter, I am going to put you to watch at Lookout Point to-day. If you see the Indians, signal them in and tell them of the whole plot against them,—there's sure to be one or more of them who understands English. As soon as you make them understand, lead them back through the woods till you get to the neck of the convicts' point, then post them behind trees and stumps so the convicts cannot get by them. Then fire two shots close together and we will be with you in ten minutes, and our birds will be caged. Have Chris fix you up a lunch, for the Indians are not likely to pass the point until afternoon." His voice sank from the crisp tone of command to a softer note, and his hand for a moment rested affectionately on his chum's shoulder as he continued. "I hate to send you out there alone, old chap, but I have got to stay here. The convicts may try to drive us out of this place this morning. No matter how much shooting you may hear, don't desert your post."

"But, if for some reason you want me, how am I to know?"

Charley reflected for a moment. "I have a couple of rockets in my saddlebags," he said; "if I send up one, you may know it's a signal to come back. Now be sure to keep your eyes out for trouble as you near the point. No one can tell, now, what the situation may be."

The two chums silently clasped hands in a hearty, farewell grip, and Walter, picking up his rifle and some of the remnants from breakfast, vaulted the tree breastwork and with a cheery nod and wave of his hand to those left behind, quickly vanished in the forest.

Charley stood for a moment gazing after him with something like a mist in his honest brown eyes. "Dear old fellow," he murmured, "God grant that all will turn out well and that we may be safe together again before night falls."

The captain's voice brought him back from his musing. "Well, Charley," he sung out cheerily, "I've got together the things we can't well spare and distributed them between the canoes. I reckoned that was where you wanted 'em. What's the

next orders, General?"

"Nothing, but to get our guns and all the spare ones, and take stands along the wall. Those fellows may try to drive us off this morning."

The captain grinned with satisfaction as he took his place behind the barricade.

"I reckon they'll have to be pretty smart to get on this point," he commented. "There's a tidy stretch of right open ground to be crossed before they reach here."

"I picked it out just for that reason," Charley admitted. "We can stand them off here during the day, but at night we cannot stop them, I fear."

"Aye, aye," nodded the captain thoughtfully, "that's the reason for fixing up the canoes."

Charley nodded in turn. "I hope we won't have to take to them," he said. "It would come hard to lose our ponies, our packs, and all that helps to make our camp life comfortable."

"We won't lose 'em," declared the captain, cheerfully. "This time to-morrow night we'll be safe and hearty sitting around the fire figuring up our share of the rewards they must be offering by this time for those pretty jail-birds."

This ended the conversation, for each took his position behind the tree barricade with all senses alert for any indications of an attack.

For long Charley kept shifting his gaze from the woods before him to the tall sapling on Lookout Point. At last a smudge of red showed near the sapling's top for a minute, then disappeared, and he gave a shout of relief. "Walter's there all right," he called to his companions, "I saw his signal."

The morning wore slowly away without a sign of their enemies.

"What have you figured out is the reason they ain't troubling us, Charley?" the captain called when the noon hour was at last reached.

"I have been studying over it for a long time, sir," the lad answered, "and

have come to the conclusion that they have decided to postpone finishing us up until they have disposed of the Indians. I guess they are afraid that the noise of firearms would put the Seminoles on their guard if they happen to be within hearing. Anyway, I guess, we can spare Chris long enough to get us a lunch."

Chris lost no time in getting together a hasty dinner, which was as quickly disposed of by the sentinels.

From now on Charley kept his eyes anxiously on the distant point and sapling, hoping, longing, and expecting to catch a glimpse of the fluttering square of red which would wave the welcome news that Walter had sighted the Indian fleet.

One o'clock passed, two o'clock, three, and still no signal.

"Take it calm, lad, they'll be along soon," the captain said soothingly, to Charley, who was nervously pacing back and forth, his face drawn and anxious.

"For de Lawd sake, look over there by dem convicts' point. Oh, golly, oh golly!" cried Chris, suddenly.

Charley gave one glance and buried his face in his hands to shut out the coming horror. "Fool, fool that I was," he moaned. "Not to know that it would be the home-bound Indians loaded with plumes they would be laying for, not the empty handed ones coming out of the glades."

The captain was by his side in a second. "Don't take it hard, lad," he said, gently. "You done your best. We all stumbled into the same mistake. Look away for a minute, lad. It will soon be over, I dare say."

But Charley, though torn with regrets, took his hands from his face and gazed steadily at the tragedy nearing its climax.

Winding past the convicts' point in single file, came a long line of some thirty canoes, uncouth, shapeless things, each hewed out of a great cypress log. In the end of each an Indian stood erect plying a long pole which sent their clumsy looking crafts forward at surprising speed. Magnificent savages they were, not one less than six feet tall, framed like athletes, and lithe and supple as panthers.

One man in each boat was the rule, but in the leading canoe a young Indian

lad was also squatted, in the bow.

With breathless suspense our hunters stood helpless to warn or help as the long line glided on to its fate.

Ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen stole past the point. Then the horror of horrors happened.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BATTLE.

From the point burst out a sudden cloud of flame and smoke. Six of the canoes in the lead and six in the rear of the long procession came to a sudden halt. Of their occupants, some crumpled up where they had stood like bits of flame-swept paper. Others pitched forward in the bottom of their crafts, while still others stood for a minute swaying from left to right like drunken men, to finally crash over the sides like fallen trees, taking their cranky crafts over with them in their plunge of death.

Only for a second was there confusion amongst the remaining canoes. Before the volley could be repeated, they had drawn closer together. Each Indian had dropped his pole, and seizing his rifle crouched low in the bottom of his craft, his keen eyes searching the point.

"They're heroes, that's what they are," cried Charley, his eyes flashing and cheeks aflame, "they are as good as dead if they stay, and yet they will not flee."

"Suicide, I call it," said the captain harshly, to conceal his emotion of horror and admiration. "But there's one there who is going to save his skin. See that young lad who was in the first canoe. He is poling away now that his companion has fallen."

"But not willingly," said Charley, who had been watching the little by-play, "did you see him pick up his gun? He wanted to fight, but the rest shouted and

made signs to him till he put it down. I've got it," he exclaimed, "it was the chief in that canoe. They are trying to cover his retreat, poor fellows. They are what I call men."

There had been no cessation in the fighting while the captain and Charley were talking; flame and smoke continued to burst out from the point in almost a continuous stream, while those in the canoes were not inactive. Where an arm or leg showed to their hawk-like eyes, their rifles cracked sharply, to be generally rewarded with a howl of pain from some cutthroat who had been winged. But there could be but one end to such a battle. The convicts were well protected behind big trees, while the flimsy sides of their canoes afforded the brave little band of Seminoles almost no protection. Still they fought stubbornly on, answering shot with shot until the point and canoes were shrouded in a fog of smoke.

"They see the young Indian, they see him," cried Charley in an agony of suspense. "Look, look, they are all shooting at him."

The young Indian had passed out of the smoke pall, but his flight had not been undetected; some of the convicts, with an eye out for just such escapes, had drawn back to higher ground where they could see above the smoke which hung close to the water. These at once gave the alarm, and a shower of bullets began to rain around the dugout.

The Indian lad stood stoically at his poling, not even glancing back, and paying no more attention to the hail of bullets than if they were so many flies. The little Seminole seemed to bear a charmed life, bullets struck the pole he was handling, and again and again they sent out splinters flying from the sides of the dugout itself, but still he shoved steadily ahead.

"By the ghost of the Flying Dutchman," shouted the captain, "he is going to get away from them. Two hundred feet more and their bullets won't hurt if they hit."

"He's hit," cried Charley, a second later; "watch him."

The Indian lad had given a sudden, involuntary start and one hand went to his head, he sank to his knees, struggled to rise, then slowly and gently slipped down; a huddled heap in the bottom of his canoe, while an exultant yell rose from the convicts' camp.

Charley's face was white and haggard, but his voice was steady and cool as he turned to the captain. "Please go to my saddle-bags. You'll find two rockets there. Set them both off; that will bring Walter, and we will have need of him soon. I am going after that Indian and bring him in dead or alive. You and Chris had better mount guard again at the wall; those cut-throats will be here soon."

One look at Charley's face convinced the captain that remonstrances were useless, so, with a hearty squeeze of the lad's hand, he turned away to his duties.

Charley unmoored one of the canvas canoes and, taking his place in the stern, with a mighty shove of the paddle drove it far out into the stream.

"Massa Charley, my own Massa Charley, going to be killed," wailed Chris, giving way to his fears and grief with the emotionalism of his race.

The captain shook him vigorously. "Shut up," he said, roughly, partly to hide his own feelings, "Charley's comin' back without a scratch. The good Lord, I reckon, don't make lads as true and white as he to be killed off by a pack of jail vermin. Come to the wall as he told us to. Maybe we'll get a shot at those murderers before the day is done. Come along an' stop that blubberin'," and he grabbed the soft-hearted little darky by the arm and dragged him to the post.

The convicts were quick to see and interpret Charley's action, and their guns were quickly turned upon his frail craft. As he drew nearer the drifting dugout and came within range, a perfect hail of bullets splashed the water into foam around him. He did not falter or hesitate, but with long clean strokes of the paddle, sent his light little craft flying towards his goal. Perhaps it was this very speed that saved his life. Bullet after bullet pierced the thin canvas sides and one struck a corner of his paddle, tingling his arm and side like an electric shock. A few minutes of this furious paddling brought him to the bow of the dugout. Seizing its rawhide painter, he fastened the end to a seat in his own boat. Then taking the paddle again, he headed back to the point. The leaden hail fell as thickly as ever, but by crouching low he was shielded somewhat by the high sides of his tow. His return progress was now slow, but gradually he worked the two crafts out of the range of the convicts.

Walter had lost no time in getting back to camp at the call of the rockets, and was waiting at the water's edge to receive his chum.

"Haul both boats in and make them fast," Charley ordered as he wearily

paddled in.

Walter waded out knee deep, and seizing the bow of each boat as it came in reach, drew it up on the shore, and taking the painter, quickly made them fast to a nearby pine.

"We have got some heavy, quick work ahead of us," Charley said quickly enough to forestall the volley of eager questions on the tip of his excited chum's tongue. "Every minute counts now. I dare not call either Chris or the captain away from their posts. Help me into the lean-to with these poor fellows, then get your gun and join the captain. Those murderers may be over here any minute now. They are bound for their own safety to let no witness of their horrible crime escape."

As he rose from his cramped crouching position, Charley got his first glance of the interior of the dugout and his face grew dark with anger towards those who had brought this thing to pass.

Prone on his face in the bottom lay a magnificent specimen of savage manhood. His height, when standing, could not have been less than six feet three. His shoulders were broad and clothed with great, powerful muscles. His body sloped away gracefully to a slim waist and straight, muscular limbs—the ideal body, striven for by all athletes. His dress was that usual to Seminoles on a hunt—a long calico shirt belted in at the waist, limbs bare, moccasins of soft tanned deer-skin, and a head-dress made of many tightly-wound crimson handkerchiefs bound together by a broad, thin band of polished silver. In the turban, now dyed a richer hue from the blood flowing from the warrior's shoulder, was stuck a large eagle feather, the insignia of a chief. At his feet, where he had crumpled down under the enemy's bullets, lay the Indian lad in a huddled heap. It did not need the tiny eagle feather in the diminutive turban to convince Charley's observant eye that it was a case of father and son, a chief and son of a chief.

All that we have taken so long to describe, Charley had taken in at one swift glance.

"Both are still living," he declared. "Run to the lean-to, Walt, and get a blanket. We will have to drag that big one up to the camp. It will be pretty rough, but it's our only way. We cannot carry him."

In a minute Walter was back with a thick, strong horse-blanket, which he spread out on the turf close to the water.

It took every ounce of strength the two lads possessed to lift the heavy body from the dugout to the blanket, then each taking a forward end of the blanket, they drew it gently after them sled-wise up to the lean-to, avoiding rough places as much as possible. There, they had to exert themselves to the limit of their strength to lift their burden from the blanket to one of the couches.

Their second trip was easier. The Indian lad, though showing promise of great future strength, was still only a stripling, and they bore his limp body in their arms without difficulty.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VICTIMS.

"Hurry back to the captain, Walt," urged his chum as soon as the Indian boy was laid on another conch. "He may need you any minute. Those demons will be here as soon as they finish off the Seminoles. Thank the Lord, the firing is still going on. I will do what I can for these poor chaps and be with you as soon as possible." His eye flashed and his face darkened as he added, "Tell the captain everyone must shoot at anything that shows itself—and shoot to kill."

As soon as his chum had gone, Charley turned his attention to the Seminole chief. From the clotted mass of blood, he guessed the location of the main wound, and with his hunting-knife he rapidly cut away the shirt, exposing the warrior's chest and back. As he drew back the blood-soaked cloth, he gave a sigh of relief. The bullet had passed clear through the body close to the lungs,—a serious wound, but one which perhaps with proper care need not prove fatal. The amateur surgeon had no antiseptic except common salt, but with that and water he quickly cleansed and sterilized the wounds and tearing up one of his own clean shirts, he first scraped a strip with an old case knife until he had a quantity of soft lint with which he stopped both the ugly holes made by the bullet, and then with other strips of the same, he neatly bandaged the wounds. Next he drew on one of the captain's shirts in the place of the one he had cut away. Lastly, he broke open a pack and took out a quart bottle of brandy. Pouring out a large drink he let it trickle slowly down between the Indian's set teeth.

The effect was noticeable at once. Slowly the warm blood flowed back into the dusky cheeks, the limbs began to twitch, the breathing grew audible, and the wounded man began to show signs of returning consciousness.

Before turning to his other patient, whom he reckoned as good as dead, Charley stepped outside the wigwam and cast a quick look around. A smile of satisfaction parted his lips as he noted the distant figures of his companions behind the tree barricade, each at his post, gun in hand, nervously alert. From them, his glance went on to the point, where the battle was still going on. To even an unobserving person, it was clear that the firing from the canoes was slackening rapidly, and with a sigh of regret and anxiety, the lad turned back into the lean-to.

When he bent over the Indian lad, he uttered an exclamation of joy; from the matted hair and abundance of blood he had believed him shot through the head. A closer examination showed, however, that the bullet had only ploughed a neat little furrow down to the skull. Charley washed the wound clean, forced some of the brandy down the boy's throat, and dashed a cup of cold water in his face. The effect was startling. In a few minutes the little Indian was sitting up, swaying drunkenly and in a half dazed way staring about the little shelter.

"You arc coming around all right, old chap," said Charley, cheerily.

His voice and face brought back to the Indian lad with a rush the memory of the recent ordeal he had been through. He gave one glance at the unconscious form on the other couch and his hand darted to the hunting-knife at his hip as he staggered, dizzily, to his feet.

"Stop, you are among friends," cried Charley, holding up both empty hands palm upward as a token of peace. "You were grazed on the head by a rifle bullet and it knocked you out for a few minutes, so I went out in my canoe and towed you in. Your father is hurt pretty bad, but I have fixed him up good as I can and I think he will pull through with care."

The little Indian lad's keen, beady eyes searched the white lad's open, smiling face, his hand dropped from his knife, and he sunk back weakly on the couch.

"My father over there, heap big chief," he declared proudly, in guttural English. "Name Big Tiger. Me, they call Little Tiger." A shade of suspicion crept over his face. "You white you say you friend. More whites hid behind trees and shoot and kill many of Big Tiger's braves," he said with an ironical smile.

Charley saw that now, if ever, was the time to clear his little party from the natural suspicion of the Seminole. He sat down on the couch opposite and his honest blue eyes met the other's keen, black ones unwaveringly. "The Seminoles, once a mighty people, have grown as few in number as the deer in the forest," he began, falling naturally into the speech of the Indians. "Yet, few though they became, there walked among them, at least, one of their race whose heart and mind was like the night when the moon shines not and clouds have hid the stars. One day this evil one rose up and slew a harmless white settler. The wise men of the tribe took counsel together, saying, 'times are changing, we will turn him over to the law of the white men.' The ears of the Little Tiger may have heard

whispered the name of the white settler's slayer."

The Indian's eyes were gleaming with scorn and hatred. "Injun Charley," he hissed.

"The white men judged the slayer of the settler according to their laws. They sent him to be shackled with chain and iron ball and do heavy, squaw-work in misery the balance of his years. They did not say because this Indian was bad that all Seminoles were slayers of white men."

The young Indian started up and began to speak, but Charley silenced him with a gesture and gravely continued.

"No, these judges were not fools to believe that a whole people should be judged by the crimes of one, or a few of its race. Among the paleface race were brother, squaw, and father murderers, in great numbers, not because the white race is worse than the red, but because they exceed the red men in number as the leaves exceed the trunks of the tree."

"With the bad Indian, serving out a lifetime of work and exile, were eleven white men just as bad. When those that watched them had their eyes turned away, the twelve plotted. One night they rose up and murdered the guards, took their guns and ponies, and, under the lead of the bad Indian, came as the crow flies for here, where were camped myself and three companions, seeking only the bird that bears plumes upon its back. The balance you know," he concluded, gravely. "As brother to brother, should the Seminoles be judged by the slayer of whites, or the white hunters by lawless murderers whose color is the same as theirs?"

During Charley's short argument, the suspicion had fled from the young chieftain's face. At the conclusion, he drew himself up proudly erect and extending his hand spoke the one English word he knew that stood with him for friendship and confidence,— "How."

"How," said Charley cheerfully, giving the offered hand a hearty shake. "Now let's get outside and take a look. As soon as they have finished with your followers, I expect the bad men to come down upon us."

Short as had been the time they had spent in the lean-to, a great change had taken place at the scene of the battle. The firing had ceased from all the canoes

but one, and even as they looked, a rifle cracked, the canoe's occupant half rose, then crashed down over its side, and the last Seminole rifle was silenced.

The pall of smoke had drifted away from the point, revealing a terrible sight, twenty-nine canoes or dugouts drifted on the quiet water at the mercy of wind or current, some floated bottom upward, others' sides were punctured and splintered with innumerable bullets. Here and there was one splotted and spotted with the crimson life-blood of its heroic defender. Not a sign of life was visible amongst the little squadron. As Charley looked, one of the convicts ventured out from his place of concealment and with a long branch, drew the nearest canoe in to shore. With a coil of rope in one hand, he jumped in and shoved out amongst the drifting craft. His errand was easy to be guessed, to make fast to the drifting canoes and tow them all in to shore.

At the sight of the wiping out of the last of his comrades, the young Indian had sunk to a seat on a log and buried his face in his hands. Now, Charley tapped him gently on the shoulder. "It is not a time for the son of a chief to be grieving like a squaw," he said, "his followers are gone, but they died like brave men. Paleface history tells of no braver stand than they made to-day. It's not meet for the son of a chief to sit repining. His thought should be of punishment for the doers of the evil."

The young Indian sprang to his feet, his eyes gleaming fiercely. "How?" he demanded. "They have slain the pack. Will they not soon come for the leaders? Has the young white chieftain magic to work against their many guns and canoes?"

"When the blood runs hot is not the time to reason coolly," said Charley, calmly. "I go now to help my comrades. Go you into the wigwam and watch by your father; when he awakens tell him all. As soon as we may, we will all meet here in council, and the counsel of a chief will shed a light in the dark around us."

Without a word the young Seminole whirled on his heels and disappeared in the lean-to, while Charley hurried in to the barricade, where his presence was now sorely needed.

CHAPTER XV.

A FLAG OF TRUCE.

From the woods beyond the barricade the convicts were pouring in a rapid fire upon its defenders. Luckily the little band of hunters were so placed that the shower of bullets pinged harmlessly against the thick logs. Whenever a convict showed an arm or leg one of the defenders' rifles cracked and a howl of pain from the forest sometimes followed the report.

Charley crept to where Walter was crouching, his face flushed and eyes shining as he peered eagerly through a crack between the logs watching for a chance to shoot. "Gee, this is great sport," he exclaimed as he caught sight of his chum. "They are afraid to cross that open space and are hiding amongst the trees just wasting powder and lead on these logs."

Charley looked up thoughtfully at the sun, which was now less than two hours high. "You saw the killing of those innocent Indians," he said gravely. "It was terrible."

"It was grand the way they stayed to the last man and died that their chief might escape," declared Walter with boyish enthusiasm.

"Grand but terrible," his chum agreed. "But we must look out for ourselves, now. They are not going to let us get back to town, now, with our tale of their crime and whereabouts. We can keep them off from this barricade until night, but what then? They have boats now, and can attack by land and water at the same time. We are too few in numbers to defend both ends of the point."

"What can we do, then?" demanded the other.

Charley smiled grimly. "I am not going to trust my own judgment alone this time, after the terrible mistake I've made. We must scare those fellows off for a bit and then hold a council to decide on the wisest course. Thank goodness we have cartridges to burn. Fill your magazine full, and when you see me raise my hand pour all sixteen shots into the wood. I'll have the captain do the same at the same time. Chris and I will fire while you two are reloading. If we keep that up

for a few minutes, I think we will drive them off long enough to talk over the situation."

Walter nodded comprehension and began stuffing shells into the magazine of his Winchester.

From him, Charley passed on to the captain and Chris, to whom he gave the same explanations and instructions. As he took his own place behind the barricade, the young Indian crawled quietly up beside him.

"Why did you not stay with your father?" said Charley, impatiently. The little Indian drew himself up proudly and recklessly to his full height, inviting a storm of bullets, all of which happily missed their mark. Before the volley could be repeated, Charley pulled him down on the turf beside him out of danger.

"The chief has awakened from his sleep," said the young Seminole with dignity. "Of the things you had told me and I had seen, I told him all and he believed. Then he bade me come forth, saying, 'Where the bullets sing is the place for the son of a chief.'"

"Then keep close to me and shoot when I do," Charley ordered. He raised his right hand in the air and the captain's and Chris' rifles sent thirty-two bullets zipping and singing in amongst the trees. Before the convicts recovered from their surprise, forty-eight more leaden messengers whined through the air above them. The effect was magical, the convicts ceased their fire, and puzzled and alarmed by the sudden leaden hail, sought shelter behind the largest trees they could find.

For ten minutes the hunters poured volley after volley of lead into the forest. Suddenly a white rag tied to a stick was thrust out from behind a tree.

Instantly Charley gave the signal to stop firing. As it ceased, a man stepped out into the open, bearing the flag of truce in his hand.

Charley laid down his smoking rifle and leaped lightly over the barricade.

"Don't go to meet him, Charley," Walter implored, "anyone of those murderers are likely to take a pot shot at you. Do come back."

"Better listen to the lad, Charley," said the captain, earnestly. "You can't count

on that gang respecting a truce flag. Don't go, my boy."

But Charley only smiled determinedly. "I want to hear what he has to say, and I don't want him to see the weak points in our barricade," he said, "besides, the other day, I was noticing that fellow coming. Criminal he may be, but he is far too good for the company he's in. I've got a feeling that he would not stand to be a decoy. Here goes, anyway. Don't worry."

Midway of the open space the two met. The convict was a young man, with a dark, handsome face and bold, reckless eyes. He greeted the young hunter as coolly as though they were meeting for a pleasant social chat.

"I came because the rest were afraid," he explained, cheerfully, eyeing the other from head to foot with cool assurance. "They are so crooked and treacherous themselves that they think that your companions will do as they would do,—not hesitate to fire on the bearer of a white flag."

"They have a good chance at me now," said Charley with a smile.

The stranger grinned as he skilfully rolled a cigarette with one hand. "I gave them to understand before I left that they would have to reckon with me if they tried any such trick," he remarked, cheerfully. "I guess that will keep the brutes quiet for a while. But let's get down to business. I have," he said ironically, "the distinguished honor to be their messenger, but first let me say that, although with that gang of beasts, I am not of them. I've killed my man, but it was in fair fight, and not by a knife in the back. I have no kick coming over what the law dealt out to me. Furthermore, if I had known the animals, I would have to travel with, I would not have let my longing for freedom draw me away from the turpentine camp. Lord knows, I wish I was back there now." His voice, which had grown earnest, dropped again into a sarcastic note. "But I am wandering, as I said before, my noble, gallant friends have made me their messenger and agent. It will help you to understand their demands if I state that the afternoon's work has been far from satisfactory. So many of the canoes were overturned that the plumes secured will not amount to more than seven hundred dollars where my friends expected to reap as many thousand as the fruit of their labor."

"Come to the point," said Charley, impatiently, his eyes shifting anxiously to the declining sun.

The other's tone grew still more bitterly sarcastic. "We have been bitterly

disappointed," he declared. "My brave, valiant companions have suffered sorely in body and spirit. You saw them engage a mighty fleet of a race whose color was an offense in their eyes. It was also rumored that the fleet contained many thousands of dollars in bird plumes which it was clearly wrong to leave in the possession of those who would not know how to spend the money intelligently.

"It is true my dear companions kept in the shelter of the largest trees, but the incautious ones,—there was an arm barked here and a leg scratched there, and pain stalked abroad in our midst. Then, when the battle was over, judge of the bitterness of mind of my noble comrades when they searched the canoes not overturned and found less than seven hundred dollars' worth of plumes, barely enough for one good right's drunk and carouse in town."

Charley was interested in spite of himself in this gay, humorous young outlaw, who was so evidently superior to his brutal companions, and he would have liked to let him come to the point in his own amusing way, but the sun was getting low, and he feared to waste more time. "Cut out your nonsense and come to the point," he said curtly. "What do you want with us?"

The other dropped his mocking tone. "We want that chief and his boy, whom you are harboring in your camp. According to our Indian companion, they own, or know of the hiding-place of, a fortune in plumes. If the plumes are not to be easily reached, we can still hold the chief and boy for a big ransom. His people will raise it quick enough, for he is a big man among them." He hesitated and then went on. "The gang said for me to tell you, if the chief and boy were given up, your party would not be troubled further."

Charley smiled incredulously. "And what do you say?" he demanded.

"That whether you give them up or not, you are all as good as dead," exclaimed the other in a burst of frankness. "Good Lord, boy, do you dream that they figure on letting any eyewitness escape to a town and set the officers of law on their trail? You can hold them off here until night, but when darkness comes you'll be wiped out like the blowing out of a candle."

Charley laid his hand on the other's arm. "You are too good for that gang, better come over to our side," he said, earnestly.

The young outlaw hesitated for the fraction of a second, then shook off the hand roughly. "No matter how bad they are, they are my comrades, and I am no

traitor," he said curtly. "Your answer, please."

"Tell them we will not give up the chief or boy," said the young envoy earnestly. "Tell them that they have not got us yet by a long shot. Tell them that the one object we are going to work for from now on, is to get them back into the hands of the law."

The young outlaw gave him a look of admiration. "You've got the nerve, all right," he said. "Well, so long, till we meet again," and whirling around he sauntered slowly off in the direction of the forest, merrily whistling as he went.

Charley for a moment looked after him regretfully, then turning, he quickly rejoined his companions behind the barricade.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RETREAT.

A few words gave his companions the substance of the conversation. "Now," he continued, "I wish we could all get together in the camp for a few minutes to talk this thing over, and decide on our next move, but it's too risky to leave the wall unguarded, although I don't believe they will try another assault before dark."

The young Seminole spoke up, "when the Big Tiger speaks, the whelp is silent, I will stay."

"Golly, I reckon dis nigger ain't no good at planning, spec I better stay here, too," observed Chris.

A parting volley was fired into the forest, and under cover of the smoke the rest retired quickly to the lean-to.

The wounded man was lying awake on his couch, his keen, black eyes burning with an unnatural light.

Although he must have been suffering intense pain from his wound, his features were calm and composed. He tried to rise as the hunters entered, but could not raise himself even on his elbow.

"Don't try to move," exclaimed Charley, hurrying to his side.

"How," said the sufferer, in greeting, extending a hand surprisingly small and well-formed for a man of his size.

Charley gave it a hearty shake and his companions crowding around, gravely followed his example.

The wounded man lay silent for a moment surveying the little party with shrewd, appraising eyes. A friendly gleam shone in his beady orbs as they lingered for a second on the captain's kindly, weather-beaten face. He looked a trifle longer at Walter's eager, open countenance, but his glance came back to rest on Charley's face, and to him his words were addressed.

"He, whom his people call the Big Tiger, was made as weak as a tiny papoose by the bullet of a jackal," he began in broken English. "The Little tiger has told me all; how the jackals would have taken their prey but for your coming in the canoe of cloth and bringing the helpless ones here. The jackals' bullet has sped true, and the Big Tiger will lead his followers no more in the hunt, but the son of a chief will remain and his life will be at the young white chieftain's command."

The stricken man burst into a fit of coughing, and Charley noted with pity that flecks of scarlet stained the sufferer's lips. "Shot through the lungs," he decided, but he allowed no trace of pity to show on his face.

"A chief of the Seminoles must be wise with the wisdom of the owl in council," he said, as soon as the fit of coughing had left its victim. "Payment from father or son we desire not, only the counsel of wisdom now. We are but braves in the hunt or fight, and great danger threatens, now, but the ripe wisdom of a great chief may be able to point out a path to safety."

Clearly and in few words, he described their present desperate position and the demands and threats of the outlaws.

The Indian listened in impassive silence and for some time after Charley finished, remained buried in profound meditation.

"The young white chief carries an old head on young shoulders," at last he said approvingly. "He speaks truly when he says that the air is thick with danger. When the blackness of night comes, then will come, also, those who make war from behind the trees of the forest. In the darkness, how is the young white and his friends to tell enemies from friends? The jackals will wriggle through and over the wall of trees like snakes through tall grass. After what they have seen, can my white friends expect mercy at hands already stained red?"

Charley shook his head. "Thou speakest my thoughts, but are we to be murdered in the dark by creatures such as those?"

"The mind of the young is ever quick and hasty in its flights," reproved the wounded chief, gravely. "What use for the medicine man to point out the sickness, unless he has the proper barks and plants?"

"Well," said Charley, "let the wisdom of one grown wise in councils tell us of the cure for this disease."

The wounded savage was again seized with a fit of coughing, and it was some moments before he could reply. "Between the glades and here—a swift half day's journey—a small island lies in the middle of the river. There, four men could stand off an army. If I commanded the paleface friends as I do my tribe, I would say, bury all things too heavy to carry away in the canoes of cloth, while it is yet light, turn the ponies loose that they may not starve. Put all else in the cloth boats. Let some keep up a noise and fire from the wall of trees to convince the white men without hearts that you are going to stay and fight. With the first darkness of night let all take to the boats. I with the Little Tiger will lead the way, then may come him you call captain with the little one whose face is like the night, lastly, may come you and the one with the eager face (Walter). Without noise must we go, and keep close to each other, for the river has many arms stretched out for the unwary stranger. At the island of which I spoke, you may camp in safety while we go on alone. I stop at my wigwam to die, alone, in peace and quietness with the great spirit, as becomes a chief of a long line of chiefs, but he, who will soon be chief, will travel quickly on gathering together my people. With them he will return, and of the twelve who murder from behind trees not one shall return to boast of his deeds. When the buzzards are feeding off their bones, then, may you return and secure that which you have buried, the ponies, and all of that which is yours. That is the counsel of one of a race of chiefs. What is the answer of the young white chief?"

"I must consult with those who share my dangers, Chief," said Charley gravely. "We talk not like squaws, and in five minutes you shall have our answer."

The Seminole rolled over on his side exhausted from his long speech and frequent coughing spells, while Charley beckoned the captain and Walter out of earshot.

"You have heard it all, now I want your opinion," he said simply. "After this last terrible mistake of mine, it will be long before I trust to my judgment again."

"We all fell into the same error, lad," said the captain, kindly. "The blame, if any, belongs to us all. Forget it, Charley, and don't let it weaken your self-confidence. Now what do you think of the plan of our red-skinned friend?"

"I believe it's our only chance for life," he answered regretfully, "those cut-throats have got us foul. It's run away or be killed."

"Then I'm for running. But, think you, he can be trusted to pilot us aright?"

"He will not pilot us far, I fear," said Charley, sadly. "I doubt if he will reach his wigwam. That bullet touched a lung all right. If he dies on the way we must look to the son; he is of the same spirit as the father, or I am no judge of character."

"They both speak English wonderfully well," said Walter musingly.

"So do most of the Seminoles," explained Charley. "They come in to the outlying towns at rare intervals to exchange their venison and skins for ammunition and cloth, and it's wonderful how quickly they pick up the language. But I am rambling. The question before us is, shall we abandon all our things and run away with a fair chance of escaping with whole skins, or stay and fight it out with the certainty of being killed, sooner or later?"

"Run," said the captain decisively, "and trust to luck and the chief to recover our things."

"Retreat," voted Walter regretfully.

Without another word, Charley turned back to the bedside of the suffering

savage, whose pain-tortured eyes had never strayed from their faces during the conference.

"Chief, we have decided that your plan is the only one to follow," Charley said, simply.

Exultation showed for a second on the Indian's, set features. "Good," he exclaimed, "listen, young white chief. Do not mourn the loss of ponies and things such as you must leave behind. To-day you risked your life to save a stranger Indian and his boy. Great shall be your reward when this trouble is over. That with which to trade for many ponies shall be yours."

In his excitement the wounded man had partly raised himself on his elbow, but the exertion was too much; there was a rush of blood from his lips and he sank back on his couch in a dead faint. In a second Charley was by his side forcing down more brandy between the clenched teeth. The powerful stimulant acted quickly. In a moment the sufferer again opened his eyes to consciousness. Charley beckoned to his chum. "Go relieve his boy," he whispered, "and send him here. I want him to get his instructions from his father before there comes another attack. The captain and I will fix for our departure."

"Good," exclaimed the chief, whose keen ears had caught the low-whispered conversation, "we won't die yet, though. Die in our own wigwam when Great Spirit tolls the bell of mystery."

Walter was off like a shot, and the young Seminole soon stood by his father's couch. While the two indulged in earnest conversation in their own tongue, the captain and Charley worked hastily, for the sun was already setting. What things they dared risk carrying were hustled into the frail canoes. One of the couches was conveyed to the dugout and spread out in the bottom and two of the thickest blankets spread on top of the leaves. The ponies were cast loose to shift for themselves. Their remaining stuff was shoved into the water-proof bag and buried in a high spot. By the time this was done, the first shades of night had fallen. At Charley's suggestion, all hurried into the barricade, and for fifteen minutes poured a hail of bullets into the forest to convince the outlaws that they were still there and on the alert.

Then all hurried back to the camp. Many hands made easy and gentle work of conveying the wounded man from his couch to the comfortable bed in the

dugout. The young Indian took his place in the stern of the ticklish craft, and with a single shove of his long pole sent it far out into the stream. The captain, with Chris, followed a few yards behind, paddling with soft noiseless strokes. A few yards in their wake came the last canoe containing Walter and Charley, and quickly the outline of the point was lost in the darkness behind.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FLIGHT BY NIGHT.

As the canoes glided silently towards the convicts' camp the paddle strokes of the fugitives grew slower and more guarded, the blades of the paddles were no longer lifted clear of the water lest the falling drops from them should be heard by those on shore. The river narrowed suddenly opposite the point, and the canoes would be compelled to pass within a hundred feet of the enemy's camp. All of the convicts might be in the woods surrounding the hunters' camp, waiting to close in on their supposed victims, but there was a chance that they had had the foresight to count upon this very attempt at escape and had left some of their number on the point to cut off the retreat.

Charley thought of all this as he knelt in the stern of his little craft and plied the paddle slowly and with infinite caution, his every nerve tense, and sight and hearing strained to catch any sound of movement on the rapidly nearing point. Were it white men only that they were seeking to elude, he would have felt far less apprehension, but he recognized that in the person of Indian Charley they had to deal with a mind crafty and cunning, that would be likely to provide against the very move they were making. Even in his anxiety, Charley could not but notice and admire the marvelous skill with which the young Indian in the dugout handled his clumsy craft. He hugged close to the farther shore and glided along its border as noiselessly as a shadow. The captain, although but little used to the paddle, was also doing surprisingly well and was following closely in the wake of the dugout. Silently the dugout at last glided past the dangerous point, and a moment later the captain's canoe also slipped gently by.

Charley gave a sigh of relief. They were safely past and could laugh at any

attempted pursuit in the clumsy dugouts the convicts possessed.

But that one unguarded moment of relief was disastrous in its result. In a deep, careless stroke, his paddle struck a submerged log and the slender blade snapped short off with a loud crack, the ticklish canoe careened suddenly to one side, then righted again with a sullen splash. At the sound the silent point quickly stirred with life. There was the hum of excited voices and a blinding flash of flame lit up the darkness, followed by the sharp crack of rifles and the hum of bullets,—they were discovered.

"Give way all," shouted Charley, as he fumbled in the darkness for the spare paddle, which he at last succeeded in finding. "Are you hurt, Walt?" he called anxiously to his companion.

"Not a bit," answered his chum cheerfully, "but hurry up or we will be getting another volley."

The canoe had drifted beyond the point before her way died out, but was still less than a hundred yards from it. By the splashing of water the boys could tell that the convicts were launching one of the dugouts in pursuit. With vigorous strokes Charley sent their light craft flying ahead; a few minutes and they would be out of rifle-shot and out of danger, but again there was the crack of rifles and Charley called to his chum with a voice hoarse with pain, "You'll have to take her, Walt, they got me that time."

"Bad?" cried Walter anxiously, as they changed places.

"In the shoulder," weakly, "but don't mind about me. Shove her ahead as fast as you can, the others have got quite a start of us, and we've got to catch them."

For half an hour Walter paddled silently on, putting all his strength into the strokes that sent the light craft leaping ahead, leaving the pursuing dugout far behind.

"Charley," he called at last, "isn't it time we were up with at least the chief's dugout?"

But only silence greeted his question, his plucky chum had fainted from pain and the loss of blood.

For a few moments Walter let the canoe drift, while he pondered as to what he should do. He felt sure that they had passed the captain and his companions—but how? In the excitement of the pursuit he must have passed unnoticed a point where the river branched and had taken the wrong fork. There were, he knew, dozens of such forks to the river and the mistake was one that might easily have been made under any circumstances. The question now was what to do about it. To return was to run the risk of falling into the hands of the convicts, and the chance of finding the stream the others had taken was exceedingly small. There might be a dozen tributaries between him and the convicts' point, and how was he to tell which was the right one? In desperation he crawled forward to his unconscious companion and sprinkled his face again and again with water from the river.

At last Charley opened his eyes with a moan of pain.

"We're lost," shouted Walter eagerly. "I can't find the captain or chief, what shall I do?" He bent his head to catch the feeble answer from the wounded lad's lips.

"Keep on, keep on. When the river forks, take the largest stream, and—" but Charley had fainted again.

With a heavy heart, Walter crept back to his place in the stern and resumed the paddle. It was a terrible situation for a young, inexperienced lad; lost on a great river in a frail canoe, pursued by relentless enemies, and alone, except for a wounded, and perhaps dying companion. It was enough to strike terror into one much older than our boy hunter.

Throughout the long night the despairing lad paddled steadily on, praying for the day to break. At last it came with a blaze of glory in the east. When it grew light enough to see, he rose cautiously and gazed around him.

The prospect was disheartening enough. The river had narrowed to less than a hundred yards in width and wound and twisted amongst the waste of marsh that stretched desolately ahead and astern as far as the eye could see. To the east and west the marsh extended back at least a mile before it met solid timbered land, here and there, and an occasional long point jutted out until it met the stream. Although the weary lad strained his eyes in all directions, not a sign could he see of the other canoes or of any human life. With a sigh of despair, he sank again to

his knees and crawled forward to where his chum lay half unconscious and moaning in pain.

Dipping his handkerchief over the side, he gently sponged Charley's pale face with it.

The contact of the cold water seemed to revive the wounded lad. He opened his eyes and attempted to smile, although his lips were twitching with pain. "What a nuisance I am, old chap," he said faintly.

"Not a bit," declared Walter, cheerfully, overjoyed at his return to consciousness. "Here, take a drink of this cold water, and then I am going to have a look at your wound."

With his hunting-knife, Walter cut away the bloody shirt from the shoulder and exposed the gaping hole to view. It was still bleeding slightly, but he noted with satisfaction that the bullet had passed completely through the fleshy part of the shoulder without touching the bone, a painful wound, but not a fatal one. He washed it clean with river water and bound it up with strips from his own shirt. "You'll be all right in a few days," he declared cheerfully. "Now just lay quiet. I am going to paddle in to the nearest point and start a fire and make you some broth."

Walter's heart was lighter than it had been in many hours as he again resumed his paddle. Day had brought fresh hope and courage. Charley was getting along far better than he had dared to hope during the night. He soon would be well enough to take command, and then, thought Walter, they would soon find their friends. He had great confidence in Charley's ability to get them out of their present predicament.

Suddenly Walter paused in his paddling and sat staring at the point, which was now scarce a hundred yards distant. A thin wisp of smoke curled up above the thick growth of palmettos with which the point was covered.

"Charley," he called softly, "there is someone on the point; they have just started up a fire."

"Better sheer off and give it a wide berth, then," counseled his chum. "If it were the captain or the chief, you would see the canoes."

"But the boats may be pulled up among the mangrove bushes," Walter objected. "If it should be the captain and Chris, just think what our passing by them would mean. We might never see them again, Charley. I am going to have a look."

"All right," agreed his chum, "but be very careful, Walt."

The fire was located well in on the point, and Walter steered to land some distance out from it. A few strokes of the paddle sent the light canoe gliding in amongst the mangrove bushes that fringed the shore. Climbing out upon the curious gnarled roots, Walter pulled the canoe far enough in to effectually screen it from sight. Next he examined his pistols to see that they were properly loaded, and with a parting word of cheer for his chum, he made his way slowly and cautiously over the intervening roots to the shore.

He soon found that it was no easy task he had set himself. Between himself and the fire fifty yards away, intervened the heaviest growth of timber he had ever seen; palms, sweet gums, satinwoods, and pines mingled in close and wild confusion, while the ground beneath them was a matted mass of vines and creepers.

For a moment Walter hesitated. Some of the vines and creepers, he knew, were poisonous. To touch them meant sores, swellings, and suffering. But it was only for a moment he paused. The thought of how much might depend on his errand drove him on. Tearing two strips from his already tattered shirt, he wrapped them around either hand, and dropping on hands and knees he cautiously wound his way towards the fire.

His progress was slow and painful. Dangling brier vines drew blood from arms and face, and sharp thorns repeatedly lacerated hands and knees. At each move forward he had to pause and remove the dead branches and twigs from his path lest their cracking should betray him to the campers. At last, however, he could catch the sound of voices, and wriggling forward with infinite caution, he reached a place from which he could get a glimpse between the trees at the group gathered around the fire.

The sight was not reassuring. Near the blaze a half dozen of the convicts lay lounging at their ease, while another one was busily engaged in making coffee and frying bacon. The neighing of ponies in the background told the watcher

how they had arrived at the point before him. They must have ridden most of the night to have covered the distance, and Walter felt a sinking of heart as he realized the determination of their pursuit. The conversation that came to his ears did not tend to reassure him.

The convicts were evidently tired and in bad humor, and a hot argument was raging.

"I tell you it's all foolishness, this losing sleep and wearing ourselves out," declared a tall, thin, pasty-faced individual. "Here's my plan: just break up into parties of two or three and each party strike out for a different town and catch a freight out of the state. I 'low we're just wasting time and making trouble for ourselves by following up them chaps."

"Bill Salino, you've got as little sense as courage," declared a man whom Walter recognized as the leader of the gang. "The time for scattering and getting out of the state has gone by. There will be men watching for us at every point, and to be caught means hanging for all hands now. We've got to lay quiet here for six months or so until they give up watching for us. We're safe enough here unless them chaps get away and bring the Indians or a sheriff's posse down on us; and they won't get away if I have to follow them into the heart of the Everglades," he declared vindictively.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTURED.

From the expression on their faces, Walter judged that the other four convicts were in doubt as to which of the two plans they should lend their support to. "Are you sure we'll catch 'em, Cap?" inquired one, doubtfully, "there are so powerful many forks to this river, it's like hunting for a needle in a haystack."

"If we don't get 'em, Injin Charley will," declared the leader, confidently. "I wouldn't be surprised to see him show up with 'em any minute now. He's an Injin and knows just what course them redskins in the dugout will be likely to take."

Still the outlaws seemed to waver, and the leader shifted his arguments. "If you fellows take up with Salino's fool idea, just think what shape you'll be in, even if you don't get caught. You won't have no money and will have to go around like a hobo until you make a strike. Now if we catch this chief, I reckon we can torture him, till he tells us where his plumes are hid. Then when things have quieted down a bit we can send a man in to dispose of 'em and walk out of here like gentlemen with money in our pockets."

This argument seemed to appeal to his companions, and the murmuring ceased.

Walter decided that he had heard enough, and turning, started to retrace his way back to the canoe. His second movement forward, however, was his undoing. A large limb upon which he had trusted his weight broke noisily under him, and he was precipitated forward into a huge clump of briars. Before he could regain his feet, strong hands seized him and dragged him, still vainly struggling, out into the clearing.

"One of 'em," cried the leader triumphantly, "I reckon the rest ain't far off. Scatter and search the point for 'em, boys,—but wait a bit, maybe this young cub can save us trouble."

But Walter had been thinking rapidly. If he was to save his chum it was no time for nice scruples. With a silent prayer for forgiveness, he waited the outlaws' questions.

The leader drew a revolver, cocked it, and presented it at the lad's head. "You can tell me the truth now or I'll blow your head off," he growled.

Walter's face took on an expression of fear and cringing terror far greater than he was really feeling. The brutal ruffian eyed this appearance of fear with every evidence of satisfaction. "Now I guess you'll answer my questions truthfully," he said threateningly. "First, where are your companions?"

"They left us in the darkness and we could not catch up with them. They must be way up the river by now," Walter stammered.

His questioner swore loudly. "Got past us, did they? Well, no matter, we'll get them easily now, we know for sure which stream they took."

Walter could hardly conceal his delight at having put the ruffian upon a false trail, but he was ready for the next question, which came quickly.

"How did you get here?"

"The canoe struck a log, capsized, and sank. I swam ashore."

"What became of the fellow in the boat with you?"

"Drowned, I guess," said Walter with a sob.

The leader turned to the others. "I reckon he's too scairt to be lying," he said, "however, you had better take a look around the point. Be quick about it, though, for we will have to hurry to catch up with those other chaps. Here, tie this fellow up before you go."

Walter was seized, his hands tied behind him, and he was lashed with his back to a small satinwood tree.

He watched the departure of the ruffians with sinking heart. If they searched thoroughly, Charley and the canoe were sure to be discovered.

The outlaws soon returned, however, after a very careless search and reported nothing in sight. Truth to tell, tired as they were, they had quickly wearied of trying to force their way through the dense jungle.

After a hasty breakfast, the leader gave the order to mount. "You two stay here and wait for Injin Charley," he commanded, indicating two of the gang. "We have got to let him know what we've learned. I reckon we'll be back by night, if we ain't, you follow us in the morning."

"What shall we do with the kid?" inquired one of the men.

"Turn him over to Injin Charley when he comes in. I reckon he'll know what to do with him," said the leader with a grin so evil and suggestive that it made the helpless lad's blood run cold.

The four outlaws and their leader mounted their ponies and soon were lost to sight among the trees. The two left behind proceeded to make themselves comfortable without a thought for the exhausted lad whose tight bonds cut

cruelly into arms and legs. They raked up beds of leaves upon which they spread their blankets and then proceeded to make up for the sleep they had lost during the night.

Walter was not only suffering much physically, but was in great mental distress as well. He feared that at any moment Charley, alarmed by his long absence, might call or fire off one of the guns and bring the outlaws to his hiding-place. How could he warn him of the danger he was in? Suddenly the bound lad was seized by an ingenious idea. Assuring himself by their deep breathing, that his captors were fast asleep, he began to whistle, softly at first, then gradually louder and louder till the weird, mournful strains of the "Funeral March" filled the air.

One of the guards tossed restlessly and woke up cursing. "Shut up that whistling," he shouted, "that blooming thing gets on my nerves."

Walter had no option but to obey, but the awesome tune had carried its doleful message. The mournful notes had reached the ears of the wounded lad in the canoe. Its message was plain to him. Walter was a captive, or in great danger. And now began a contest between will-power and pain and weakness from which many a man would have shrunk.

Three times Charley struggled to rise to his feet, only to sink back exhausted with great beads of sweat standing out on his brow. At last, abandoning the attempt, he began to wriggle back towards the stern of the canoe. His progress was slow and painful, and even in the short distance to be covered, he had often to lay quiet and rest. At last he succeeded in reaching the stern, but here his difficulties were by no means ended. Working awkwardly with his left hand he managed to draw his hunting-knife and slash open the pack of provisions they had brought with them. From these he selected a can of milk. It was slow work opening it with one hand, but at last he succeeded in removing the top. Part of the contents he swallowed as it was, the balance he diluted with water and broke hardtack up in it. By the time he had finished the food, a little color had crept back into his face. He was still very weak, however, and another attempt to rise met with failure. For a few minutes he lay quiet thinking, then rummaging in the pack he brought forth a pint bottle of brandy. With repugnance written on his face, he took several swallows of the fiery liquor. It ran through his veins like fire. Shoving the bottle into his pocket, he succeeded in staggering to his feet and slowly pulled himself up on one of the mangrove's roots, and, pausing frequently

to rest, gradually worked his way to the shore.

Walter's captors slept heavily until the noon hour, when they awoke, stirred up the fire, and prepared some dinner; but they offered none of it to the unfortunate lad, who watched its preparation with hungry eyes. Their repast finished, the two ruffians enjoyed a long smoke, after which they played a few games of cards which ended in a violent dispute that nearly resulted in blows.

As the afternoon wore on without the appearance of the party they were expecting, they again composed themselves to slumber. Slowly the afternoon wore away and the two outlaws still slept on. The sun went down and night began to fall and still the two showed no signs of awakening.

Suddenly Walter felt the bonds that held him slip to the ground and Charley's voice whispered, "Drop on all fours, Walt, and work your way back into the thicket."

Walter did as he was bid as quickly as his stiffened limbs would permit and soon caught up with his chum, who had begun to retrace his steps as soon as he had severed the captive's bonds. In fact, he dared not wait or tarry, for the false strength engendered by the brandy was fast leaving him. To give out on the way would be fatal to both. He must reach the canoe before the last remnant of his strength gave out or all was lost.

Slowly the two boys wormed their way through the jungle, expecting every second to hear the sounds that would indicate that the prisoner was missed and pursuit begun.

At last they reached the clump of mangroves that concealed the canoe. Here outraged nature claimed its due and Charley sank on the edge of the shore unable to go further. It required nearly all of Walter's remaining strength to drag his insensible chum over the roots and lower him into the canoe. Precious as was each moment lost, Charley demanded instant attention, his wound had broken open again from his exertions and his tattered shirt was wet with blood. Walter stuffed bits of cloth into the hole and bound it up as well as he could in the darkness. This labor completed, he cast loose the canoe, and with a few strokes of the paddle sent her over to the other side of the stream. Here he laid aside his paddle and sank back to rest and think. The friendly darkness completely hid them from the gaze of anyone on the point. Until the moon rose they were as

safe there as any place on the river. The plucky lad sorely needed rest and refreshment. For two days and a night he had been without sleep and for twenty-four hours without food. This, with the strenuous labor and excitement through which he had passed, had rendered him nearly as weak as his unconscious companion. Sleep was out of the question until they were safe from their enemies, but food was handy and he lost no time in making a hearty meal on a can of corned beef, crackers and a tin of milk. The repast brought fresh strength and courage, although his head felt very heavy and he could hardly keep his eyes open.

With the outlaws ahead and behind them, there was little choice of the direction in which they should flee, and Walter paddled steadily on up the river, keeping close to the opposite shore from the convicts.

Hour after hour passed and found him still paddling wearily onward, every muscle and nerve in his body aching with fatigue. At last a brightening of the sky in the east warned him of the rising of the moon. As its bright beams lit up the gloomy river and desolate marshes, Walter gave a cry of joy; directly ahead, right in the middle of the stream, lay a small island, its shores fringed with a dense growth of mangroves. As the canoe drew nearer, Walter surveyed it with increasing delight. Here was surely a safe place of refuge where they might stay as long as their provisions lasted and until their enemies tired of the pursuit. Where the island lay, the river had widened out into a fair sized lake and the nearest shore was out of gunshot. There was no way that the outlaws could reach them except by boat, and they had none with them.

With lightened heart, Walter ran the canoe far up into the mangroves and fastened it securely to a large root. Making his way ashore he soon found a small space of cleared ground, to which he speedily conveyed their blankets which he spread out on the dry sand. Returning to the boat he endeavored in vain to rouse Charley from the stupor into which he had fallen. At last he gave up the attempt and half carried and half dragged his chum ashore and laid him on his blanket, then quickly stretching himself out by his side, was soon fast asleep.

Once in the night Walter was awakened by a loud splashing. With pistol in hand he stole to the water's edge. Many dark masses were slowly gliding to and fro on the surface of the stream. "Alligators," he exclaimed with a sigh of relief and returned to his blanket and sleep, from which he was only aroused again by the rising of the sun.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SWAMP.

Walter's first thought on awakening was for his chum. Charley was tossing restlessly on his blanket, his face and hands flushed and hot with fever. All of Walter's attempts to rouse him met only with unintelligible words and phrases. The exertion of the previous day in his weak state, the opening of his wound afresh, and the unhealthy river water he had drank, had all combined to bring him to a dangerous condition.

Walter removed the bandages and looked at the wound. It was of an angry red and greatly swollen, and its changed appearance frightened him. "Charley," he called, shaking him gently, "don't you know me?"

Reason gleamed for a moment in the sufferer's eyes. "Sure, it's Walt," he muttered.

"Listen and do try to understand," begged Walter, earnestly. "We are safe, Charley. The convicts cannot get at us now. We can stay here and rest up as long as we want to and you can lay quiet and get well again. Now, I am going to light a fire and get you some broth and strong coffee, and, after you have taken them, I am going to heat some water and give that wound a good cleansing. Do you understand, old chap?"

"Yes," murmured the sufferer, wearily.

After putting his own blanket under Charley's head for a pillow and making the sick lad as comfortable as possible, Walter began his preparations for breakfast. Selecting a spot where the ground seemed soft and free from roots, he dug a hole about two feet deep to contain his fire. It required only a few minutes to make one large enough for his purpose, and his next step was to bring up the provisions and cooking utensils from the canoe.

It was only a short distance to where the little craft lay moored amongst the

mangroves and a few steps carried Walter to the spot, but on the edge of the bank he paused with a cry of surprise and dismay.

The canoe lay bottom side up in the water.

With the strength of despair, Walter succeeded in righting the overturned craft and pulled it up on shore where he quickly tipped the water out of it.

One glance at the interior confirmed his worst fears, nothing remained inside but the paddle, which had been wedged under the seats; provisions, guns, and ammunition were all gone.

Walter sank down on the bank in despair and buried his face in his hands. He understood now, the meaning of the splash he had heard during the night. A curious alligator had upset the light craft with its nose or a flirt of its powerful tail.

For a long time Walter sat silent and still, pondering on their now desperate situation. One fact stood out clear in the mind of the sorely tried and unhappy boy; they must, without delay, leave the island, which only a few hours before had promised them a safe and comfortable refuge. Their only chance lay in finding their friends before he became helpless from lack of food. It needed no great medical knowledge to tell him that Charley was fast sinking into a critical condition. Without food or proper medicine, the injured lad was not likely to last long and every moment they tarried on the island lessened their chances, which were already very slight, of escaping with their lives.

When he had arrived at this conclusion, Walter arose and made his way back to his companion, who was lying as he had left him, tossing restlessly from side to side.

"I'm sorry, Charley, but you'll have to wait a little longer for your broth," he said, cheerfully. "I have decided we had better waste no more time here but hurry on and catch the captain; he has medicines that will soon fix you up and make you all right again."

His explanation was wasted so far as Charley was concerned, for the wounded lad was beginning to rave in the delirium of fever. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Walter abandoned the effort to rouse him to consciousness, and, leaving him as he lay, proceeded to make ready for their

departure. He cut a pile of small myrtle boughs which he carried down to the canoe and spread out upon the bottom and upon these he stretched their blankets, making a soft and comfortable bed for his chum to lie upon. Now came his hardest task, the getting of the sick boy down to, and aboard of, the canoe. Fortunately the hearty meal and rest of the night before had so far restored his strength, that he was able, by half carrying and half dragging him, to get Charley, at last, upon the bed prepared for him. Then pausing only long enough to get his breath again, Walter took his old place in the stern and paddled out into the stream, where he headed once more for the south, and with long, steady strokes sent their little craft flying towards the unknown.

As they slid over the water, leaving the miles rapidly behind them, Walter kept a sharp watch on either bank for signs of the outlaws. That they were still hunting for him and his friends, he felt no doubt, but he cherished faint hopes that he had distanced them during the night. He consoled himself with the thought that even were they captured, death by a bullet would be far quicker and less painful than a slow, lingering death from fever and starvation.

All day the despairing lad paddled ahead, pausing only at noon for a brief space to rest his wearied arms and drink sparingly of the river water, which, black and foul as it was, reeked with fever.

Charley, on his bed in the bow, tossed and muttered incessantly. Every once in a while, Walter would crawl forward and sprinkle cold water on the lad's hot face; it was all he could do to relieve the sufferer, whose ravings fell heavily on his anxious heart.

As the afternoon wore away, Walter's strength began to fail; the mental strain, steady work, the blistering sun, and lack of food, were fast telling on him. The temptation to stop and rest and sleep grew almost irresistible, but he bravely fought off the weakness. Their only hope lay in pushing on and on until they found their friends or came out upon civilization. Whither the river led he knew not, but was in hopes that it might at last bring them out into a settled country. To stop now meant certain death.

As night settled down, his tired eyes caught the gleam of a fire on the shore not far ahead. A wild hope possessed him that it might prove to be the captain and his companions, but, warned by his previous experience, he approached the blaze cautiously.

Slowly he drifted in towards the fire, against which he could soon distinguish moving figures. At last, he approached near enough to recognize the forms against the bright firelight, and hope fled. It was another party of the outlaws, four in number, and, the disappointed lad swung the canoe around to the further shore and paddled safely past without being discovered.

The night passed slowly away, and through the long hours the lad in the canoe urged it steadily forward into the darkness. His tired, aching brain was now possessed of but one thought, to paddle on, and on, and on. His hands had cramped to the paddle handle, and the strokes were feeble as a child's, but the blade still rose and fell regularly, and the canoe still moved slowly ahead.

Daybreak found him in the same position, the paddle still slowly moving, and his bloodshot, staring eyes still fixed ahead.

The rising sun brought him staggering to his feet, a cry of hope on his lips.

Dead ahead, and more than a mile away, the river disappeared in a great forest of strange-looking trees. Amongst its shelter might be found food and friends, thought Walter, and the hope gave him fresh courage and strength.

Before sinking back into his seat he carefully surveyed the further shore. His gaze was arrested at a point about a mile behind the canoe. There for about a half mile, the shore lay comparatively clear of timber, very likely having been swept by fire at some time in the past. It was not the character of the shore, however, that arrested Walter's attention. His gaze was fixed upon four objects moving swiftly across the open space and headed towards him. It required no great reasoning to tell him that the four figures were mounted outlaws and that they had sighted the canoe. It was to be a race between ponies and canoe, as to which should reach the forest first.

With the strength born of desperation, Walter forced the light canoe ahead. Behind him the riders spurred their ponies on at the top of their speed. Walter could see, by glancing over his shoulder from time to time, that the outlaws were steadily gaining, but the canoe was moving swiftly, also, and was rapidly drawing near to the strange forest, and Walter decided with a thrill of joy that the enemy would not arrive in time to cut him off from the shelter of the trees.

The outlaws were not slow to recognize this fact. Their rifles began to crack and the bullets to whistle around the canoe. Fortunately the motion of their

mounts made their aim uncertain, and the bullets did but little damage, only one touching the canoe, and it passed harmlessly through the side far above the water line. Before the pursuers could draw near enough to make their fire certain, the canoe had passed in amongst the trees and the outlaws reined in their mounts swearing loudly.

As he neared it, Walter had watched the forest with growing amazement. The river seemed to end at its edge, but as he drew closer the reason for the anxiety of the outlaws to prevent his entering it was plain. No horse could travel through that dark, gloomy expanse. It was a floating forest. Great cypress and giant bays reared their mighty stems from the surface of black scummy water. Amongst their boughs bloomed brilliant orchids and from limb to limb stretched tangled masses of creeping vines and briers.

The trees with their huge spreading roots grew so closely together that it was with difficulty that Walter forced the canoe in and out between them. His exultation at his escape from their enemies had given way to a settled despair. From descriptions he had heard, he recognized this mighty floating forest as the fringe which surrounds that greatest of all mysterious, trackless swamps, the Everglades. Before him lay the mighty unknown, unexplored morass, reeking with fever, and infested with serpents; behind him waited sure death at the hands of the outlaws.

One faint hope alone remained to him. If his strength held out, he might in time come upon a camp of the Seminoles, the only human beings in this unknown land.

Considering the small numbers of the Indians and the vastness of the swamp, it was a faint chance indeed that he or his companion would live to see any of the tribe, but, faint as it was, no other hope remained and Walter sent the canoe onward with feeble strokes.

Gradually the trees grew further and further apart until at last the canoe passed out from their shadows into a lake, surrounded by tall growing grass and reeds. Far as the eye could reach stretched the dismal swamp, broken here and there by lakes or creeks and now and then by an island of higher ground rising from the rotting mud.

Under the heat of the blazing sun there rose around the canoe thick vapors

from the scum-covered water and rotting vegetation, bearing in their foul embrace a sickening, deadly stench.

The paddle strokes grew slower and slower, and gradually ceased, Walter's eyes slowly closed, and he sank down unconscious. His paddle fell from his nerveless hand and floated away on the stagnant water just as a dark, shapeless mass crept out of a bunch of reeds and struck the canoe with a gentle thud.

CHAPTER XX.

SAVED.

Darkness, black as night, floated over Walter's reeling brain; darkness, pierced by a thousand gleaming, twinkling lights, brilliant as stars, then came a void and nothingness. Slowly at last he felt himself struggling up out of the void, battling, fighting for consciousness, then came a delicious sort of languor. If this was dying, it was very pleasant. Forms seemed to be flitting before his half-opened eyelids and the hum of voices seemed to float in his ears. One voice irritated him greatly; it was faintly familiar in its loud joyousness. What was it saying?

"Golly, Massa Captain, bless de Lawd, he ain't dead."

Another voice responded, "No, thank God, he's goin' to live, Chris. Bear a hand and we'll get him into the wigwam."

There was a sensation of being home through the air, and Walter surrendered to the delicious languor,—and slept.

When he opened his eyes again an ebony face was bending over him and Chris' voice demanded, "Golly, don't you know me, Massa Walt?"

"It's Chris," Walter said, smiling feebly, and the little darky danced about in joy.

Walter raised his head with an effort and looked about him. He was lying on a bed of soft moss with a pillow of blankets under his head. He seemed to be surrounded by walls of bark which met in a point far above his head; opposite him lay another figure on a bed similar to his own.

"Where am I, and how did I get here?" he demanded confusedly, "the last I remember was being in the canoe a few minutes ago and everything getting dark before me."

"A few minutes ago," cried Chris, excitedly. "Why, it's dun been two days since Massa Captain come on you when he was paddlin' around the lake. You was layin' in the bottom of the canoe like you was dead."

"Two days," exclaimed Walter in astonishment; then, with a sudden note of dread in his voice, he cried, "Charley!"

"He's gettin' along pretty well," said the little darky cheerfully, "he's lyin' right across from you thar. Now you jus' keep still an' doan' talk no more," he commanded. "Massa Captain out fixing up some soup. Reckon he'll let you talk some more after you drink it."

The captain soon appeared with a gourd full of steaming liquid. He was overjoyed at finding Walter conscious, but firmly insisted that he should remain quiet, and he fed him liberally with the hot soup. Indeed, Walter felt little desire to talk; a few swallows of the warm liquid made him very drowsy, and he quickly sank into a deep sleep from which he awoke feeling much stronger and almost like his old self again.

To his great joy, he found Charley conscious, and without fever, although still very weak. He sat down on the edge of the invalid's bed and the two talked over the thrilling adventures through which they had passed.

They were interrupted by the entrance of the captain and Chris, the captain bearing an armful of yams and Chris a string of fresh fish. "We are layin' in a stock of provisions against the appetite I reckon you lads will have now you are gettin' better," explained the captain, cheerfully.

Walter caught the old sailor by the sleeve and held him tightly. "Now you have got to sit right down and tell us your story before I will let you go," he said. "First, Charley and I want to know where we are."

The captain filled his old black pipe, and got it to drawing good before he answered.

"You're on an island about two miles inside the Everglades, as near as I can calculate."

"Did you build this shelter since you have been here?" asked Charley eagerly.

A shade of sadness passed over the captain's open face. "No," he said slowly, "this island belonged to the chief an' this wigwam was where he lived, an' it was here we brought him to die."

"To die?" echoed both boys together.

"Aye, lads, he passed away the same day we reached here," said the captain, sadly. "He was a white man clean through, if his color was red. I got to know him powerful well on the trip here, an' he sure had all of a white man's feelings."

The boys remained silent in face of the captain's evident grief, and the old sailor, after a pause, continued. "We buried him under a big oak tree, with his gun and plenty of food by his side, just as he had directed, an' I reckon his spirit is up in his happy hunting-grounds now."

"And the young chief, his son, what has become of him?" Walter asked after a pause.

"Gone to gather his people together an' swoop down with them on the murderin' convicts. He found out from signs, that I couldn't make nothin' of, that his tribe had divided into two parties, one going towards a hunting-ground called Big Cypress, an' the other to another place where deer an' bear are thick. As soon as the chief was buried, he jumps into his dugout an' starts to round 'em up. If he gets back with them in time to catch them outlaws, may the Lord have mercy on their murderin' sin-stained souls, for the young chap will have 'em slowly tortured to death if he catches them."

"Tell us all about your trip," Walter urged, "how did we get separated, I wonder?"

"It puzzled me for a bit as to what had become of you, but the chief soon explained it by saying that you likely had taken another stream. Chris an' I was

for turnin' back an' huntin' you, but the chief reasoned us out of it, by saying that you might have taken any one of a dozen forks and that there would be mighty little chance of our hitting on the right one, while we would be almost sure to run right into the convicts' hands again. But what influenced us most, was his explainin' that all streams thereabout ran into, or from, the Everglades, an' that all we had to do was to get here first and keep a sharp lookout along the cypress for you, and you'd soon show up. The chief had great confidence in your good sense, Charley, an' seemed to feel certain that you would reason that the only safe thing to do was to keep right on up the stream you had taken. 'Course, we never suspected that you had been shot."

"Well, I guess my successor in command did all I would have done and perhaps more," remarked Charley with a smile.

"It was just by luck that I happened to do the right thing," said Walter, modestly.

"You didn't appear like as though luck had helped you much when I found you, Walt," remarked the captain, dryly. "It sorter looked to me like only hard work an' an amazin' lot of pluck an' grit had brought you that far."

"Now don't you go trying to make a hero out of me," said Walter, hotly, "I won't have it. I only did what anyone would have done, and I made a whole lot of foolish blunders besides."

"Well, you can have it your own way, lad," agreed the captain, with a glance of affection at the embarrassed young hunter. "I reckon that's about all of our story worth tellin'," he concluded. "We made the best speed we could so as to get here before you. We caught sight of parties of the convicts searchin' for us now an' then, but the chief was more than a match for them an' they never caught sight of us. Since we got here, Chris and I have patrolled the rivers' mouths for sight of you every day, but we had begun to despair when we came upon your canoe day before yesterday. And now, that's all, my lads, except that I feel we had all ought to join in thankin' our Heavenly Father for deliverin' us from our enemies an' bringin' us together again."

With hearts full of gratitude, the young hunters sat with bowed heads while the kindly old sailor offered up a simple, fervent prayer of thanksgiving for the mercies they had received from the One who heeds even the sparrow's fall.

"Thar's one thing more to tell you, an' then I'm through," said the captain, breaking the thoughtful silence that had followed the prayer. "The chief seemed to set great store by you, Charley. I reckon it came from your savin' his life at the risk of your own. Anyway, he spoke right often of the 'young white chief', as he called you, an' once he said you should be honored with riches. Not an hour before he died, he gave me this an' charged me to give it to you."

Charley took with wonder the object the captain handed him. It was a piece of exquisitely dressed doe-skin about six inches square. On the smooth side was traced in a reddish sort of ink a kind of rude sketch of a lone palm tree, amongst

the leaves of which a large bird was perched. Resting against the foot of the palm was an object that bore a faint resemblance to a paddle.

"It is sign language, but I cannot make out what it means," said Charley in perplexity. "I wonder why he wanted me to have it and what he wanted me to do with it."

"I've puzzled over it some myself," said the captain slowly, "an' I can't make anythin' out of it. From what the chief let fall from time to time, though, I gathered he wanted to make you a valuable present, an' I've been kinder thinkin' that picture tells what an' where it is."

Charley folded the piece of doe-skin and put it carefully away in an inner pocket. "I will try to find out what it means when my head is clearer," he said. "Just now, all I can think of is something to eat."

"And you shall have something to eat right off," said the captain, heartily, "it's about time for supper anyway. Hustle up, Chris, an' get them fish cleaned. I reckon it won't hurt the lad to have a bit of solid food, now, providin' it's well cooked."

The sun was just setting when the captain and Chris reappeared bearing gourds full of smoking fish, and sweet sugary yams, and ears of curious small kernelled Indian corn.

The boys made merry over the delicious meal, but a curious constraint seemed to rest upon the captain and Chris. Once Walter surprised them exchanging glances full of a strange, expectant uneasiness. The circumstance aroused his curiosity, but he refrained from asking any questions, deciding that the captain would explain the trouble in his own good time.

As the evening wore away, the change in the captain's manner became more and more marked. All his cheeriness of the day had departed, leaving him glum and silent. He took no part in the lively conversation going on between the boys, but sat apart answering their questions in monosyllables. His manner, Walter decided, was that of a man who faces some great impending evil.

With the coming of darkness the air was filled with the noises of the swamp; the croaking of multitudes of frogs, the hooting of owls, and the hoarse bellowing of many alligators.

Suddenly the boys sat up erect and stared at each other in amazement. "What is it?" Walter cried.

Clear and sweet above the noises of the night rang the tolling of a silver-toned bell.

"It's the bell of the spirits callin' us," said the captain gloomily, while Chris sat ashen-faced trying vainly to control his terror.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREASURE.

"Nonsense, there are no such things as spirits," cried Charley, hotly. "That tolling is made by a big bell, and a remarkably sweet-toned one, too."

"It's over a hundred miles to the nearest settlement," said the captain gloomily, "do you reckon you could hear the biggest bell made that far?"

"No," the lad admitted, "but that bell is not over two miles away. Some Indian has traded for a bell and tolls it for his own amusement."

The captain lowered his voice to a superstitious whisper. "It's a mystery to the Indians," he declared, "and they avoid the sound like it were an evil spirit. Even the chief could not tell me what it was, although all his life he had heard its tolling. He wasn't so much afraid of it as are the other Indians an' he built this wigwam here so as to be within sound of it." The captain's voice dropped still lower as he added impressively, "It tolled all the night after he died."

"Have you tried to follow up the sound and discover where it comes from?" demanded Charley, sharply.

"Not me," declared the captain, solemnly, "I ain't got any call to interfere with the doings of the dead. I tell you, lad, this is a land of mystery, an' a man's got no call to fool with what he can't understand."

Charley checked the angry reply rising to his lips. He bethought himself that the captain had spent his life in a calling that often makes the strongest minded superstitious, while Chris inherited a belief in ghosts and spirits from his race. Though he lapsed into silence, Charley resolved that as soon as he was able to get around, the mystery should be solved.

For about an hour the air rang with the sweet chiming notes, then they ceased as suddenly as they had begun and the boys dropped off to sleep to dream of this strange incident in this mysterious swamp.

Walter was astir early, apparently as well as he had ever been. Hastily dressing he lifted up the bark flap which covered the doorway and stepped out of the wigwam.

The captain was busy cooking breakfast over a rude fireplace of stones, a few feet away, while Chris on the bank by the water was industriously fishing.

The island upon which they were camped was only a couple of acres in extent but rose high above the water. It was barren of timber, except for a large live oak and one lonely palm which Walter noted with an increasing interest. Some attempt had been made to cultivate the loamy soil, and flourishing little patches of yams, sugar-cane, gourds, and Indian corn testified to its fertility.

"Well, Captain, it doesn't look as if we ran much risk of starving to death," remarked Walter, approaching the old sailor.

"No, thar ain't much danger of that, I allow," said the captain with a heartiness from which all depression of the night before had fled. "Over thar is the place you come in at, Walt," he continued, pointing to the distant fringe of cypress.

Walter looked long and earnestly in the direction indicated. "I can see a thin line of smoke above those tree-tops," he declared finally.

"Aye, I noticed it too," agreed the captain. "'Pears like them friends are going to hang at our heels until they get another chance at us. I wouldn't borrow any uneasiness if it weren't for that Injin bein' in the party. I warrant he's found out already that the Injins are all gone, an' is layin' his plans accordingly."

"Well, they can't get to us without boats," said Walter, hopefully.

"No, but they can make one if they are determined enough," observed the captain, gravely. "I sorter calculate to paddle up near enough to them to-day to learn what kind of mischief they are up to."

"I'll go with you," said Walter, eagerly.

"No, you ain't strong enough yet. Jes' keep quiet for a day or two, I reckon that will be a plenty to keep you busy. Wall, I guess this stew is done an' we might as well have breakfast."

The kettle with its contents was carried into the wigwam, and from a cake, made of pounded Indian corn, and the stew, our hunters made a hearty breakfast.

After the meal, a council of war was held. The captain outlined their situation in a few simple words. "We are fairly comfortable here at present, lads, but it's goin' to be a week or ten days before Young Tiger gets back with his people. We've got plenty of food to last a good while, but I reckon this swamp is about the most unhealthy place on earth an' we run a good big risk of being sick with fever before the Indians come. On the other hand, it's risky to try to get out of here any way but the one we came in. We'd be about sure to get lost in the swamp, an' there's no tellin' what might happen to us. We can't get out the way we come in as long as those fellows are standin' guard outside waitin' for us."

"I vote to stay where we are," said Walter, promptly. "We may be able to escape the fever if we take good care of ourselves."

Charley and Chris quickly agreed with Walter.

"I guess it's the wisest thing to do," admitted the captain, "although I will be mighty glad to get out of this creepy place. I tell you this ain't no place for white men, lads. But I've got to leave you now, boys. Make yourself as comfortable as you can, an' keep out of the sun during the heat of the day. I reckon I'll be back long before sundown."

Walter accompanied the captain down to the canoe and begged hard to go with him, but the old sailor was firm in his refusal and Walter watched him paddle out of sight with a dim foreboding of evil at his heart.

On his way back to the wigwam, Walter paused a moment on the island's highest elevation to take a more careful survey than he had yet done of the

surrounding country. He discovered nothing new, however, save what was apparently a large island lying some two miles to the west of their own. It seemed to rise far above the surrounding swamp and was evidently very heavily timbered.

Passing on into the wigwam, he was greeted with an exultant cry from Charley.

"I've solved it," he shouted.

"Solved what?" demanded Walter in amazement.

"This," cried his chum excitedly, extending the square of doe-skin with its red ink tracings. "It's really absurdly simple," he continued. "According to the captain, the chief talked about leaving me riches of some sort. I took that circumstance for my key and tried to think what a race as poor as the chief and his people would consider as riches. The picture of that bird answered the question. Plumes are their only form of wealth, hence plumes must be the treasure of which he spoke."

"Reasoned like a detective," approved Walter, scarcely less excited than his chum.

"The rest was simple. The picture of the tree was to show where it was hidden and the object at its base is intended as a shovel to tell that I would have to dig for the treasure, but," and his face fell, "how are we to find that identical tree?"

"There's only one palm on the island," Walter assured him.

"Then all we have to do is to go there and dig and we'll find the treasure," Charley declared. "But we must wait for the captain, we must all be present when it is unearthed."

The morning slipped away quickly, the boys amusing themselves by exploring their little island, fishing from the bank, and loafing in the shade of the solitary palm, at whose base was supposed to lie the buried treasure.

Dinner time came and the meal was eaten without the captain, who had not returned. As the afternoon wore away without any sign of the old sailor, the boys

began to feel a vague uneasiness which increased as the sun set and night began to fall. Walter, who alone knew the real object of the captain's trip, was greatly worried. Long after the others had retired to the wigwam for the night, he sat alone straining eye and ear for sight or sound that would herald the absent one's return. As the night wore away, anxiety deepened into certainty with the troubled lad. Something must have happened to the captain. Impatiently the lad waited for daylight, determined to set off at the first break of dawn in search of the missing one. Suddenly, the lad started up from the reclining position weariness had caused him to assume. Full and deep upon the still night air rang out the tolling of the mysterious bell. To the anxious watcher, its tones no longer rang full and sweet as upon the previous evening, but sounded slow and threatening, as if freighted with an ominous meaning.

A step sounded behind him and the overwrought lad sprang to his feet, every nerve a-tingle.

"Where are you, Walt?" called Charley's voice from out of the darkness.

"Here," answered Walter, with a sigh of relief.

"The captain not here yet?" asked his chum, fearfully, as he found his way to his side.

"No," said Walter sadly, "and I am sure something must have happened to him. I am off to search for him as soon as it's light enough to see."

"And I am going with you," Charley declared.

"You are not," said his chum, decidedly. "You are too weak for such a trip yet. You would only make my task harder. You have no business even to be out in this night air and dew. It may bring your fever back on you."

"I could not rest inside when I saw your bed and the captain's empty and heard the tolling in the air."

"What do you suppose it really is, Charley?" asked his chum, eagerly. "It cannot be produced by anything human. Remember the captain's saying that it had been tolling this way longer than the oldest Indian could remember back."

"It's a bell," declared his chum, a trifle uneasily. "Nothing else could produce

those tones and that regular tolling."

"Charley," and Walter's voice lowered with the horror of the thought, "the captain said it tolled all night when the chief died, and now the captain himself is gone and the awful thing goes on as though it would never stop."

Charley, with an effort shook off the feeling of dread that was fast stealing over him.

"Nonsense," he said, cheerfully, "you are getting as bad as Chris and the captain. I repeat, it is a bell: listen how regularly it tolls."

As though in mockery at his words, the long, even reverberations changed to a quick, harsh, discordant clatter and suddenly ceased.

For awhile both boys sat silent, Walter striving to overcome the superstitious dread tugging at his heart, and Charley searching his active brain for some explanation of the mysterious sound, that would harmonize with common sense and reason.

At last Walter, by sheer will, regained his mental balance. "I am tired and nervous, or I would never imagine such foolish things," he said. "Of course it is as you say, produced by natural causes, and I will likely laugh at my fears as soon as we stumble on the key to the mystery. And now I am going to insist upon your going back inside, Charley. It won't do for us to have you down with the fever again. For our sakes, as well as your own, you must be very careful."

Reluctantly, Charley retired to the wigwam and Walter once more was left alone.

With the first hint of gray in the east, he began to prepare for his departure. What cooked food was on hand he stored in the bow of the canoe, and casting off the painter took his seat in the stern. Then he paused for one last look around before dipping his paddle.

Away in the distance a moving speck on the water caught his eye. For a few minutes he watched it in suspense, then gave a cheer of delight.

It was the captain's canoe.

CHAPTER XXII.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

As the speck drew nearer all doubt vanished, it was the captain's canoe with the old sailor himself in the stern paddling with slow, weary strokes.

Walter's cheer had brought forth his companions from the wigwam, and all now gathered on the bank to welcome the wanderer.

Slowly the canoe drew in to the shore, and Walter at last was able to catch the painter and haul the light craft's bow up on the sand. Its occupant sat still in the stern unable to move. His clothes were stained and tattered, his hands torn and bleeding from many scratches, and his pale, haggard face told of hardship and suffering.

"Don't look scairt, lads," he called out cheerily, "I ain't hurt none; jes' scratched up a bit, an' powerful tired. I reckon you'll have to give me a hand to get me out. I'm cramped that bad I can't move a leg."

Walter and Chris flew to the old sailor's help and between them assisted him out of the canoe and up into the wigwam. Then Chris quickly kindled a fire and soon presented the weary man with a gourd of steaming coffee and the cold food which Walter hastened to bring from the canoe.

The captain ate like one famished, while the boys stood around eager to hear his story.

"I'll spin my yarn as soon as I've rested a hit, lads," he said, as he finished the last morsel of food. "I'm clean spent, now, and want to stretch out for a while."

The boys helped him up and onto his bed, which he had no sooner touched than he was fast asleep.

It was noon before the old sailor awoke to find a hot dinner ready and the

boys patiently waiting. He was surprised to find that his stiffness had nearly all disappeared, and, except for the cuts on hands and face, he was as well as ever again.

"My, this grub tastes good," he exclaimed, attacking the smoking fish and yams. "I didn't have a bite to eat all day yesterday. But I reckon I had better start at the beginning of my yarn. I reckon you boys are some curious how I happened to turn up again in such shape. Wall, after I left here I paddled on, till I came to that fringe of cypress right opposite where the smoke was curling up. When I got that far I got mighty careful, an' the way I coaxed that little craft in between them cypresses was so quiet that I didn't even wake up the water moccasins asleep on the roots. When I came near the outer edge of the cypress, I fastened the canoe to a root and crept forward on hands an' feet from one cypress tussock to another, sorter calculatin' that I'd make less noise that way than in the boat. At last, I got where I could glimpse out between the trees and get a view of the fire. There was the whole twelve of them rascals workin' away as hard as honest men. I watched them quite a while afore I caught on to what they was doing, an', when I found out, it didn't make me feel any easier. Lads, they was hollowing out the biggest dugout you ever seed. They had got a giant of a cypress chopped down, hewed it sharp at both ends and were burning it out inside with fire. While I was watchin', that varmint of an Injin, Charley, left the gang an' struck into the cypress an' passed by so close to where I was hid that I was sartin sure he'd see me, but he didn't. I lay still there for hours, afeard to move for fear I'd meet him comin' back. It was most sundown when he returned, and I stayed on quite a bit after that listenin' to the conversation. As I guessed, he had been out scouting an' had found out that we were on the island an' that his tribe was too far away to interfere with any plans he had in his head. Cute as he was, though, he hadn't learned that the old chief was dead and the young one gone for help. When I had learned all I could, I crawled back to the canoe and struck out for the island. It was being cramped up so long in one position in the cypress and in the canoe, that made me so stiff and sore."

"They surely can't be so reckless as to think of entering this swamp!" exclaimed Charley.

"'Tain't so very reckless, the way they look at it," observed the captain. "You see they think that the Indians are all far off an' ain't likely to come back for some weeks. When the redskins started on their hunt they left plenty of signs behind to tell where they had gone, and them signs are plainer than print to Injin

Charley. Now, them fellows figures they can drop down on this island, kill off all hands but the chief, an' torture him 'till he gives up the plumes he's counted on havin', an' be off, an' safe out of reach afore the Seminoles return from their hunt. No, it ain't such a foolish sort of undertaking after all."

"How long will it take them to finish the canoe?" Walter inquired.

"I calculate it will take at least three days more," said the captain, reflectively. "You see, the cypress is green an' burns pretty slowly."

"Three days," mused Charley, "and it will be at least a week before help can come. We have got to count on meeting this danger by ourselves."

"I don't see nothin' to do but push on into the swamp," said the captain disconsolately. "They outnumber us three to one. An' this island ain't got no shelter for us to find cover behind."

"Let's not worry about it now," urged Walter cheerfully. "The captain says it will be three days at least before the canoe is finished so we have plenty of time. If we decide to leave the island, we can easily keep ahead of a clumsy dugout in our light canoes."

"I am of Walter's opinion," agreed Charley. "Something may turn up in the next two days, and, anyway, there are some things I want to investigate before I vote to leave this neighborhood. I can promise you one thing, captain, those fellows will never handle the plumes that belonged to the chief."

The captain listened in admiring astonishment as Charley recounted his solution of the chief's legacy. "We have been wild to dig for the treasure," Charley concluded, "but we would not touch a spadeful of earth until you could be with us to share in the excitement."

"Then you needn't wait another minute," cried the old sailor, who was nearly as excited as the boys. "Get your spade an' we'll start right in."

"We haven't got one," confessed Charley, suddenly crestfallen. "What a fool I was not to think of that."

"Golly, I reckon dis nigger goin' to fix up somethin' to dig with mighty quick," cried Chris, whose eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

Running down to the canoe, the little darkey was back in a moment with one of the paddles. "Reckon dis will do," he said, "got to be mighty careful not to break it, though."

Armed with the implement, which Chris' thoughtfulness had provided, they lost no time in making their way to the lone palm.

The next perplexing question was on which side of the tree to dig.

"It's as likely to be on one side as the other," Charley declared. "We might as well start in at random and dig a circle around the tree until we come to it."

The others had no better plan to suggest, and Walter, seizing the paddle, began to throw the dirt away. Luckily the soil was not packed hard, for even, loose as it was, progress was very slow with the rude implement he was wielding. At the end of an hour, he was content to surrender the paddle to the captain, who, when tired, turned it over to Chris.

It was slow work and the sun was getting low in the west when the circle around the palm was at last completed, and the diggers stood looking at each other with disappointment written on their faces.

"We must go deeper," Charley declared, "I am certain that this is the right spot, and the chief would have had no interest in deceiving or misleading us."

"We have gone down two feet already," said Walter, in a discouraged voice, as he started wielding the paddle again. "I guess there is something wrong with our calculation, Charley." He stopped suddenly and looked up with a comical look of surprise and anticipation.

"I struck something," he announced breathlessly, "something kind of soft and yielding."

"Go on," Charley shouted in his excitement, and Walter bent to his task again.

The removal of a few more shovelfuls of earth exposed to view a large, dark, hairy object. Stooping, Walter with difficulty lifted it out of the hole.

All clustered close around it in their eagerness.

What had looked at first glance like a large, dead animal, proved to be a deer-hide stretched on framework, the hairy side out. A few slashes of Charley's hunting-knife laid open this rude leather box and revealed to their eager gaze a smaller similar box inside. Charley lifted it out and cut away the top.

By the now dim light, they could only see the tapering shapes of hundreds of long plumes carefully packed inside.

"There must be all of fifty pounds of them," said Walter, in an awe-struck voice, "why, they'll make us rich men."

"Give me a hand to carry them up to the wigwam," said Charley. "Run ahead, Chris, and stir up the fire so we can see what we have got."

The excited captain swung the box upon his shoulder and strode forward hard upon Chris' heels. He laid his burden down close to the fire and all crowded around.

One look and a loud murmur of disappointment broke from every lip.

What the dim twilight had hid, the firelight revealed in all its disheartening truth. What had been once a beautiful heap of valuable plumes, now lay an ugly mass of mildew and mould.

For a moment no one spoke, so keen was their disappointment. At last, Charley summoned up a feeble smile.

"Well, we are no worse off than we were before," he remarked with a voice that he endeavored to render cheerful.

"That's the way to take a disappointment, lad," said the captain, heartily. "A pound of meat is worth more to us now than a hundred pounds of plumes, anyway. Now, Chris, quit your grieving an' see if you can't rustle up some supper. I reckon we'll all feel better after a warm bite."

"What shall I do with them, Charley?" asked Walter, who had remained kneeling by the ruined treasure.

"Throw them away, they are valueless," exclaimed his chum somewhat testily, for his disappointment was almost more than he could bear cheerfully.

Walter lifted the leather box and disappeared in the darkness toward the water. He did not throw it into the stream, however, but after a moment's hesitation on the bank, descended to his canoe and, shoving his burden far up under the stern deck, retraced his steps to the fire.

In spite of their attempts at cheerfulness, the gloom of their disappointment hung heavy upon them, and it was rather a silent group that gathered in the wigwam after supper. Chris and the captain soon sought their beds and ere long their loud, regular breathing told that they had found solace for the disappointment of the day. The two boys felt too excited to sleep and sat long talking over their still perilous situation.

Suddenly, as on the other two nights, began the now familiar tolling of the mysterious bell.

The captain stirred uneasily in his sleep and Chris opened his eyes drowsily but soon fell off to sleep again.

"Come outside, Walt, where we can talk without the chance of being overheard," Charley whispered.

The two lads stole softly out of the wigwam and down to the water's edge where they sat down on the grassy bank.

"Now listen closely," Charley commanded.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MORE MYSTERY.

The two boys remained quiet for several minutes listening to the bell's deep toned tolling. At last Walter remarked, "It don't sound as though it was very far away from us, not over two miles, I should say."

"Good," exclaimed Charley with satisfaction, "I was about to ask you what

you thought the distance was. Two miles is about what I had estimated. We can't say very exactly, for sound is likely to travel far in this still air. But let us make a liberal allowance for the stillness. I think we are safe in saying that the sound comes from a point not more than four miles distant from this island. Now, the next question is, from what direction does it come?"

"It's hard to tell exactly, the sound seems to fill the air so, but I should say that it came from the westward," said Walter after another moment of careful listening.

"We agree again," declared Charley, "it is not likely that we are both mistaken. Now that we have settled the distance and the direction from which the sound comes, what do you say to starting out in the morning and trying to solve the mystery?"

"The captain will not let us go," Walter objected.

"For this once, I do not intend to consult him," Charley said. "We will get off before he is awake. We can leave a note saying that we will be back before dark."

"Good," exclaimed his chum, "even if we accomplish nothing else, we may find an island that can be defended better than this one."

So it was settled and the boys crept back to bed eager for the coming of the morrow.

The eastern sky was just beginning to lighten a little when the boys got up and dressed, collected what cold food they could find, and, leaving a note where the captain could not fail to find it, stole down to the canoe and quietly embarked.

Charley's shoulder was still too sore to permit of his using the paddle so he made himself comfortable in the bow while Walter in the stern wielded the blade.

The canoe was headed around to the westward, as near as they could determine, for the point from whence had come the tolling of the bell. "I noticed what looked like a large island, from our camp, about two miles off and in the direction we are headed," observed Walter as they glided swiftly away.

"I noticed it too," Charley answered, "and I do not think we can do better than start our search there, if it proves to be an island. We will be there in an hour at this rate. I wish I could spell you, Walt, but it don't seem right for you to be doing all the work."

"Nonsense, I am enjoying it," his chum protested, "everything about this swamp is so novel and strange. See those cute little turtles on every log, and those curious looking smoke-birds, and did you ever see anything more beautiful than those trees with their hanging moss and with every bough full of orchids of every color of the rainbow?" Walter ceased his paddling for several minutes and the canoe drifted slowly on while the two boys gazed with delight at the novel beauty that surrounded them. The dark, stagnant water through which they drifted was nearly hidden from view by great white and gold water-lilies and the butterfly flowers of water hyacinths, the trees on either side stood like beautiful gray ghosts under their festoons of Spanish moss through which flashed the blazing hues of flowering orchids. Brilliant-hued paroquets and other birds flitted amongst the tree-tops, while to finish the delicious languor of the scene the air hung heavy with the subtle, drowsy scent of wild jasmine.

"It is the great swamp in its happiest mood," observed Charley, "but even here under all this beauty are hidden countless serpents and crawling things, while everywhere under this fair appearance lurks fever and disease."

Walter resumed his paddle with a sigh of regret and sent the canoe flying around a point and away from the scene of beauty. Here the stream widened out to about half a mile in width and increased in breadth as they advanced. Half a mile ahead lay the island they were seeking, its banks rising high above the great lagoon in which it lay. It was about four hundred acres in extent and its shores were covered with a dense tropical growth. Between it and the canoe was another tiny island about two hundred yards distant from its big sister. Between the boys and the smaller island floated a score of dark masses like the roots of trees.

"Alligators," declared Walter as they drew nearer to the floating objects.

"I am not so sure about that," said Charley, who was watching the objects with closest attention. "Sheer off, Walt, and give them as wide a berth as possible."

He watched with anxiety as two or three of the strange creatures, as though impelled by curiosity, swam lazily out towards the canoe. "Give way, Walt," he cried, "paddle as fast as you can."

Under Walter's vigorous strokes the canoe shot past the lazily swimming creatures whose curiosity did not appear to be great enough to induce them to increase their exertions.

When they were left behind Charley heaved a sigh of relief. "They are crocodiles," he explained, seeing his chum's look of surprise. "Alligators are harmless, generally speaking, but if one of those fellows should upset you, you'd be chewed up into mince meat in a jiffy. But here's island number one. I guess we do not care about landing there now, do we? The bigger one looks far more promising, let's try it first."

Walter gave ready assent, and they passed by the little island with only a casual glance.

In a few minutes more they had left it behind and had drawn close to its bigger sister. Choosing a place at which the timber seemed thinnest they ran the canoe up on shore and fastened it securely.

With guns in hand they scrambled up the high bank and stood for a moment surveying the surroundings. From that elevation, they could see quite clearly for a couple of miles in each direction. Save for the little island they had passed they could see no other solid land within the range of their vision.

Charley noted the fact with satisfaction. "The solution of our mystery must lie on one of these two islands," he declared, "and the chances are in favor of this one, so here goes to discover it," and he plunged into the timber with Walter close at his heels. He had taken no more than twenty steps when he stopped with an exclamation of surprise and astonishment, his way was barred by a great wall of stone that towered several feet above his head. It had once been a fortification of considerable strength, but growing trees had made breaches in it here and there, their thrusting, up-growing trunks tumbling its blocks to the ground, where they lay hidden by covering vines.

"Whew," whistled Walter as he readied his chumps side, "who could have built this? It could hardly have been done by the Seminoles."

"No," said Charley, who was examining the strange wall carefully, "this stone is all limestone, which is found only along the coast or at a great depth. It has been brought here from a considerable distance. Indians may have done the work, but they never did it willingly. If they did it at all, it was as slaves. But we have no time for idle speculation. Let's walk along it and see how far it extends."

But after forcing their way along the wall for almost a quarter of a mile, at the expense of a good deal of exertion, they gave up the task.

"I believe it extends clear around the island," Walter declared, "we can't spare any more time to follow it up; it's noon already. Let's see what is inside."

Charley offered no objection, and the two boys climbed through a gap in the wall and reached the great enclosure.

At first glance, they could see but little difference between the dense growth amongst which they stood and that outside the wall, but a closer examination showed that, while the timber was very thick, it was of smaller size than that which they had left behind.

"This was a clearing at one time, years and years ago," Charley said, "see, there is an ironwood stump there that still shows the signs of an axe. It takes generations and generations for one of those stumps to rot."

"Look, Charley," cried his chum who had pushed a little ahead, "just see this."

A couple of strides brought Charley to his side, "A road," he cried in amazement.

Straight as an arrow, it extended before them into the depth of the forest. So well and carefully had its smooth surface been laid that even the assaults of time and the forest had been unable to dislodge the great blocks of stone of which it was composed. Vines and creepers had grown over its surface and the forest trees had met in solid mass above it, but still it lay intact, a triumph of road building, as solid and strong as when built.

With a feeling of awe, the boys moved forward over its hard surface. They had to stoop continually to avoid branches and the tangled vines and briars had often to be cut away, but their progress was easier and far more rapid than it

would have been through the forest itself.

They had proceeded perhaps a quarter of a mile when the road ended suddenly at the base of another wall. A break in the wall told of an ancient gateway but the gate itself was gone, probably rotted into dust by the passage of time.

The boys pushed through the gap and stopped short with a cry of wonder. Before them lay an inclosure of perhaps two acres, and in its center stood a half dozen buildings of stone, all in a fair state of preservation. Near the building closest to the boys, a sparkling little spring gushed forth and flowed away down a gentle incline towards a corner of the wall.

"Someone must be living here," Walter cried, "see, there are no trees or vines growing here."

But Charley stooped and scratched away the dead leaves blown in from the trees of the forest. "As I suspected," he said, after a moment's inspection, "this enclosure is paved like the road. My, what workmen those fellows that did this job must have been for their work to continue so perfect down to this day! I tell you this thing makes me feel creepy, Walt."

"And me too," agreed his chum. "Instead of solving a mystery, we have discovered a greater one."

But the young hunters were not the kind of boys to remain long under a superstitious dread, and they were soon approaching the buildings before them.

The first building was the largest of the group. It was constructed entirely of stone and had been little hurt by the passage of time. Its doors and windows had, of course, rotted away, but otherwise it appeared uninjured. Passing through the arched doorway the boys found themselves in a large apartment divided into two by a stone partition. Small holes here and there in the walls left little doubt as to the character of the building.

"It was their strong house or fort," Charley declared, as he gazed around. "Here was where they used to gather when danger threatened. The other buildings are no doubt dwelling-houses where they lived in time of peace. You take one side and I will take the other and we will search this one over carefully."

But although the boys searched closely they could discover nothing to tell them who had been the builders of this little city in the swamp.

By the time they had completed their search of the larger building, it was nearly noon and they sat down in the shade in the great arched doorway and ate the lunch they had brought with them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MORE SURPRISES.

"What do you make of it, Charley?" Walter inquired, as he munched away at his fish and yams.

"The roads, walls, and these buildings were undoubtedly built by the Spaniards," said his chum, decidedly. "I have seen lots of their work in St. Augustine, and the West Indian islands, and there is no mistaking its character. They are the greatest road-builders since the Romans."

"But history contains no mention of such a place as this," Walter objected.

"Yet here it is, history or no history," Charley replied. "Perhaps all the voyages of gentlemen adventurers following Columbus were not known to the historians of the time. Perhaps this place may have been built by a detachment of De Soto's expedition. We must bear in mind that Florida was long the favorite land amongst the Spaniards. From the small number of buildings, I should say that this place was very likely built by a comparatively small party, using, no doubt, the Indians for slaves."

"And the slaves at last destroyed their masters," Walter suggested.

"I am not so sure about that," replied his chum. "I expected to find bones in the fort but we discovered none. Perhaps the builders abandoned this place even after going to so much trouble to fortify it."

"Maybe we can find something to throw light upon it in the other buildings," Walter remarked. "While you are finishing your dinner, I am going to see where that spring goes to."

Walter followed the little rivulet to where it disappeared in a small gully under a corner of the wall. Climbing the stones the lad dropped down lightly on the other side.

Charley finished his lunch, washed his hands at the spring, and resuming his seat in the doorway, leaned back upon one of the great pillars to wait for his chum. The air was soft and warm and the noises of the swamp stole to the tired lad's ears with a gentle lulling sound. His eyes slowly closed and his head dropped forward upon his breast and he slept.

Quickly the hours slipped away and the sun was getting low in the west, when Charley awoke. One glance at the declining sun brought him to his feet, anxiety and dread in his heart. What could have become of Walter? It took the thoroughly alarmed lad but a moment to reach the wall where his chum had disappeared. He swarmed up it like a monkey and dropped down on the other side. But no solid ground met his descending feet. Instead, he crashed through leafy boughs and landed in a tangled mass of vines. In the second before the vines gave way under his weight, Charley succeeded in grasping a limb and swinging himself in to the trunk of the tree where he found a safe resting-place between two branches. Below him yawned a gigantic pit, its edge hidden from view by the clustering trees.

"Walter," he called anxiously, "are you down there?"

"Yes," growled his chum's voice, "and I have been here for hours. You're a nice companion for a man when he gets in trouble."

"I fell asleep," confessed Charley, sheepishly.

"Well, don't sleep any longer," said his chum sharply. "Help me out of this, quick. It is awful down here."

"All right, be patient a minute and I will have you out," Charley answered as he climbed nimbly up his tree and reached the edge of the pit. A moment's search and he found what he wanted, a long, stout grape vine strong as a rope. He cut off a piece some forty feet in length, fastened one end to the tree, and dropped

the other down into the pit. "You'll have to pull yourself out, Walt," he called.

With the help of the grape vine and the aid of foot holds on the trees growing up from the sides of the pit, Walter succeeded in scrambling out. His face was pale and there was a look of horror in his eyes.

"I believe I would have died if I had been compelled to stay down there all night," he declared in a voice that trembled.

"What is there down there?" asked Charley regarding his chum curiously.

"The demon work of the fiends who built this wall," said Walter fiercely, "It's their old stone quarry. They didn't bring rock from the coast, they just dug down till they found the kind they wanted. And Charley, all around the sides, chained to the solid rock, are the skeletons of the workers."

"I am right about the Spaniards building this place then," Charley observed. "That's the way that most Christian nation always used to treat its captives."

"Let's go," his chum urged, "I guess my nerve is shaken from being down there with those skeletons so long. The sun is getting low, anyway. We will not have time to more than get back home before dark."

"You're right, we must go, but I wish we had time to go through the balance of those buildings," said Charley, regretfully.

The two boys soon regained the canoe and paddled safely past the floating crocodiles.

"We haven't solved the mystery, after all," remarked Walter, as he urged the canoe forward.

"No, but we have done far better," declared Charley, enthusiastically, "we have found a place where we will have ample protection in case we are attacked by the outlaws. I am in favor of moving our camp there to-morrow morning."

"Of course that is the wisest plan," Walter agreed, "but since my experience in that pit I have a dread of the place."

"That will wear off in time. Hallo, there's our island and there's the captain

and Chris on the bank waiting for us."

"I expect we will get a good lecture," grinned Walter, "I guess we deserve it, too."

But the captain was so delighted over their safe return, that he let both off with a light scolding.

Over the supper, the boys related the story of their discoveries amid exclamations from the captain and Chris.

The captain readily agreed to their proposal to move camp to the larger island. "The young chief showed me how to fix signs that would tell him which way we had gone in case we left the island before he returned," the captain observed.

This removed the only possible objection to the plan, and early next morning the hunters prepared to shift camp.

The little patch of yams was dug up, yielding several bushels of the sugary tubers, the remaining ears of Indian corn were plucked from the stalks, and a large quantity of dry gourds gathered, these, together with the little that remained of their stock of provisions, were conveyed to the canoes and our hunters were ready to depart. Before leaving, the captain arranged the signs agreed upon with the young chief. These were very simple, consisting merely of twigs partly broken off and laid to point in the direction they had gone.

"I reckon he'll see those," observed the captain, "The worst of it is, though, that Injin Charley ain't likely to overlook them either."

"That can't be helped," said Charley, "and once we are in our new home, we will stand some show of being able to defy them. I only wish we had the two rifles that were lost when the canoe upset. I wouldn't fear the outlaws at all then."

"I wish we had more provisions," Walter added. "Chris used the last of the coffee this morning, and there is not much of anything else left."

"It ain't no use wishing, lads," declared the captain, "we had ought to be thankful for what we have. The Lord will provide. Jes' think of the trials an'

dangers He has brought us through already."

A thoughtful silence, that continued until they reached the island, followed the old sailor's gentle reproof.

Although they had been partly prepared by the boys' account of their discoveries, the captain and Chris were astonished at the sight of the great wall, the road, and the group of stone buildings. It was plain, too, that there was a good deal of superstitious dread mingled with their wonder.

Charley was quick to note this in their faces and gave them no time to brood upon their fears. "We have got a lot of work to do," he declared, as they deposited the loads they had brought up from the canoes. "I think, we will get along better if we divide it up and go at it with some system. Now, the captain and I will bring up the balance of the things, and the canoes,—it will not do to leave them where the outlaws can find them if they pay us a visit. While we are doing that, Walt, you pick out one of the buildings for us to occupy—the fort is too big, we would be lost in it; and you, Chris, light up a fire and get us something to eat."

The two addressed, accepted Charley's suggestions, cheerfully, and he and the captain departed to carry out their own task. When they returned laden with the balance of the canoe's cargo, Walter was standing idly by the fire watching Chris prepare the dinner.

"What, through already?" demanded Charley in surprise.

"No, just resting," smiled his chum. But the moment the captain's back was turned, his face became grave, and he gave a warning shake of his head in Chris' and the captain's direction.

Charley was quick to catch its significance. "I am afraid that carrying is too much for my shoulder," he said, quietly, "Chris, you give the captain a hand with the canoes, and I will look after the dinner."

No sooner had the two disappeared, than Charley turned to his chum. "What's the trouble?" he demanded eagerly.

"Come and see," said Walter soberly.

He led the way quickly to the first building and entered the open doorway, followed closely by Charley. At the threshold, Charley paused in horror. The room in which he looked was about twenty by fourteen feet in size. In the center a great slab of stone rested on four large blocks of the same material. It had evidently once done duty as a table for at one side of it was a bench of stone, and upon the bench sat, or rather lolled, four white, ghastly, grinning skeletons. Death had evidently come to the sitters like a bolt from the sky. One rested, leaning forward, with the bony claws clinching the table, while yet another held a pewter mug as if about to raise it to his grinning jaws. They had evidently been feasting when the grim visitor came, for before them on the table sat a great stone jug and dishes of crockery stained and discolored with age.

"You acted wisely, Walt," declared Charley, recovering his composure. "If Chris and the captain had caught sight of them, we would never have been able to keep them on the island. We will have to work quickly and get them out of sight before they return."

With deep repugnance the boys immediately began the gruesome task of removing the bodies.

"We have no time to bury them now," said Walter, "let's lower them into the pit; they will not be seen there, and we can bury them at the first opportunity."

The lads did not linger any over their task, but quickly bore their ghastly burdens to the wall. With the aid of grape vines, the whitened bones were hoisted to the top of the wall and lowered into the pit.

They had only time to get back to the fire and pretend to be busy with the dinner when the captain and Chris appeared bearing the first canoe.

"Now for the other buildings," said Charley, sharply, as the two again disappeared, "we have got to work lively if we are to finish before they return."

From building to building the lads swiftly passed. In all but one they found ghastly occupants, some stretched out in the posture of sleep, some sitting at table like the first seen, but all showing that death had come suddenly and unexpectedly.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHAPEL.

The boys worked with the utmost swiftness, expecting every moment to see the captain and Chris appear, but, luckily, those two, wearied by their hard work, had paused to rest before returning with their load.

"Thirty-one," counted Walter as he lowered the last grinning skeleton into the pit. "There seems a kind of stern justice in their present position, Charley," he continued. "Now, they are resting side by side with those whom they tortured and enslaved while living."

"They paid terribly for their cruelty," said his chum, fingering the flint arrow-heads he had found by the skeletons. "The whole story is as plain as print. The thirty men whose bones we have just disposed of, enslaved and tortured members of what was at that time a great race, working them as slaves in building these walls, and in that terrible quarry. I confess to a feeling of admiration for them, in spite of their cruelty. They must have been great warriors, though so few in numbers, to hold at bay one of the bravest of the Indian tribes."

"I wonder why they remained in this awful swamp," said Walter, musingly.

"Case of necessity, perhaps," Charley replied, thoughtfully. "They had probably lost many men by the time they reached this island, and had concluded that to continue on meant utter annihilation, while here they, with their superior arms and suits of mail, could stand off the enemy. So they decided to remain and make the best of it. With the labor of the Indians they captured from time to time they proceeded to fortify the island and make it more secure."

Walter gazed at his chum admiringly. "You talk as though you saw it all in front of your eyes," he declared.

Charley did not heed the interruption. "Years went by," he continued, musingly, like one in a dream, "years in which they grew more and more confident of their own power, and learned to despise their red foes. But the

Seminoles were only waiting with the patience of their race. Mark the cunning of the savage. There comes a day and night of feasting and rejoicing in the Spaniards' religious calendar. Work and worry is laid aside and they gather in their homes to feast and rejoice. Night comes and as the sun sets the sentries cast a look around. Nothing is in sight. There is nothing to fear. They join the merry-makers, and care and their suits of mail are laid aside, and merriment prevails. The Indians' hour has come. Over the walls swarm a red horde, creeping towards the unsuspecting feasters. One long war-whoop, a shower of arrows, cries of agony, and all is over."

Charley stopped. "I've been talking like a five cent novel," he said, sheepishly.

"I'll bet that is just the way it really happened," his chum declared. "That explains why the fort was empty."

"Perhaps," Charley said, "but here comes Chris and the captain, and we'll have to change the subject."

"I 'spect you-alls don't pay no 'tention 'tall to dis dinner," grumbled Chris. "De fire's all out, mighty nigh."

"We are not good cooks like you, Chris," said Charley soothingly, and the vain little darky grinned at the compliment.

"Golly, I reckon dat's so," he declared pompously, "you chillens sho' don't know nothin' 'bout cookin'. Spect you-alls mighty near starve to death if it warn't for dis nigger. You chillens jes' get out, an' I'll finish gettin' de dinner."

The boys, relieved of the cooking, turned their attention to other tasks. They carried the two canoes into the empty fort and placed them bottom up in one corner. The other goods they piled up in the shade of a tree.

Charley then disappeared but soon came back with a large kettle he had noticed when removing the skeletons. "It's copper," he said, exhibiting it proudly, "with a little cleaning it will be as good as when it was made. We need it for boiling water, for we have got to clean house this afternoon."

While he carried the copper to the spring and scrubbed lustily away with sand to remove the green verdigris with which it was thickly coated, Walter attempted

the manufacture of a mop. Selecting a straight piece of the root of a scrub palmetto, which grew in abundance around the wall, he trimmed it with his knife into the desired shape and size. Laying the piece, thus prepared, upon a large stone, he pounded one side of it lustily with a piece of rock. A few minutes sufficed to pound out the pith and leave the harsh fiber exposed.

By the time the two lads had completed their respective tasks, Chris announced that dinner was ready and all fell to with appetites sharpened by the morning's work.

As soon as dinner was finished, the copper kettle was filled with water and placed upon the fire. By the time the water had come to a boil, the party was sufficiently rested to attack the house cleaning.

The building nearest the fort was selected as their future abode, and never did mansion receive a more thorough scouring. Walter plied the brush, while the captain dashed the water about, and Chris wiped the floor dry with armfuls of Spanish moss. Charley, on account of his still lame shoulder, was excused from this labor.

Leaving his companions thus busily employed, Charley took his way to the building that had aroused his curiosity in the morning, the one in which they had found no skeletons.

This building was a trifle larger than its fellows and differed very little from them in external appearance, except that from its roof projected a little tower. It was the inside, however, which had excited our young hunter's curiosity. At one end was a kind of raised platform and the space between it and the entrance was filled with benches of stone. Charley reverently removed his hat as he entered, for he had guessed the character of the place during his morning visit. It was a chapel that the hardy adventurers of long ago had erected for the worship of their Maker.

Upon the stone altar stood several vessels, likely of gold or other precious metal for they were apparently untouched by the ravages of time. Charley gave them hardly a glance but passed on to the end of the building until he stood beneath the tiny tower.

One glance upwards, and he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Directly above his head in the little tower hung a large ship's bell. A part of the mystery

of the tolling was solved, but the most puzzling part remained.

Charley sat down on one of the stone benches and fell into a deep study. There was the bell but where was the mysterious ringer? The bell rope had long ago rotted away. The walls had once been plastered and were still too smooth to offer a foothold to the most expert climber. How then to account for the regular nightly tolling? The mystery had in reality deepened instead of lightened.

When Charley at last left the building, he was still puzzled in mind and had decided to say nothing about his discovery to his companions. Chris and the captain would be sure to view the matter in its most supernatural light.

On his return, he found the house scrubbed sweet and clean and the workers taking a rest after their labors. Feeling that he had not performed his just share of the work of the day, Charley took upon himself the carrying in and arranging of their possessions. With these unpacked and arranged, the room looked less bare and much more cozy and home-like.

But Charley viewed their scanty possessions with a trace of dissatisfaction. Two rifles, two shotguns, a half of their ammunition, and a half of their scanty stock of provisions had been lost when the canoe upset. Of their original outfit, the two boys retained only their pistols and ammunition and the tattered clothes they were wearing. The captain and Chris still had their four guns but their clothing was as rent and tattered as the two boys'. Of the provisions there only remained a little sugar, a few pounds of flour, and a small strip of bacon.

"I tell you what it is," said Charley, as he joined his companion outside, "we have got to do some tall hustling the next two days. We have got to lay in a stock of food sufficient to last us for at least a week, and we have got to make some kind of windows and doors for that building, besides, which, we have got to manufacture some kind of clothing for ourselves—mine are almost dropping from me."

"My, what a list of impossibilities!" groaned Walter. "Frankly, I do not feel as though I could do another stroke of work to-day."

"No, we are all too tired for further effort to-day," Charley agreed, "but we must get an early start in the morning. We will get some boughs for beds, have supper, and knock off for the day."

"I know just the stuff we want for beds," Walter declared, "there are lots of the bushes growing just outside the wall."

The bush Walter referred to, proved to be a species of myrtle with small leafy boughs of a delicious, spicy fragrance. It grew so abundantly, that in a few minutes the boys had gathered a large quantity, which they carried back to the building and spread in four great heaps on the floor. Upon these their blankets were spread, and the room took on a cozy, homelike appearance.

Supper was cooked over the camp-fire outside and by the time it was eaten, night had begun to fall. The little party at once repaired to their room. They know that the night air of the great swamp was peculiarly unhealthy. Already they had exposed themselves far too much to its baneful influence.

They stretched out on their soft, fragrant couches and talked cheerily over the events of the day and their present situation. Not since they had left the camp on the point, had the boys felt so bright and hopeful. They were well housed, none were sick, they were all together once more, and even the threatened danger from the convicts did not cause them great uneasiness. They felt confident of their ability now to keep the outlaws at bay until help arrived.

But their content was not to last long, for soon, harsh, and menacing in its nearness, rang out the tolling of the bell.

The captain, brave as the bravest in most any kind of danger, turned a sickly white and sunk to his knees in prayer, while Chris, trembling in every limb, buried his face in the blanket to shut out the awful sounds.

"Come, Walt," whispered Charley, and the two boys stole out into the darkness of the night. A few steps brought them to the chapel, and pistols in hand they circled around it in opposite directions, but their eager eyes caught no sight of moving forms.

"It must be on the inside," declared Charley, as they met near the door. "Let's go in and see."

It took all their courage to venture into that dim, mysterious interior, but the boys never hesitated, but stepped boldly in. Back and forth they paced the grim interior, searching every nook and corner, and found nothing. Not even a sound fell on their strained hearing, save only the strong, steady tolling above their

heads.

Charley stood under the little tower and gazed longingly up into its darkness where the bell, under some mysterious power, swayed steadily to and fro.

"I wish I could get up there, I'd tie the thing down," he declared. "If this keeps up, we will have our hands full to keep Chris and the captain on the island."

"Come away, Charley," said Walter, nervously, "this thing is getting positively uncanny. I declare I am beginning to feel a sympathy for Chris' terrors."

The two lads retraced their steps to the hut where they found the captain, in spite of his superstitious fears, preparing to sally out in search of them.

For long the two boys sat trying to argue the captain and Chris out of their superstitious fears. They might as well have tried to argue against fate itself.

"Aye, lads," the captain would say in reply to their logic, "I know spirits seem against reason to shore-staying folks, but sailors know better. Now there was Tom Bowling who took to hearing bells during his watch on deck, an' not two days later, poor old Tom was missing."

"Went crazy and jumped over-board," muttered Charley, but the captain shook his head with the air of a man who had no doubt as to the nature of his friend's fate.

It was not long after the bell ceased tolling that the last of the little party fell into a troubled sleep.

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.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT.

A shrill piercing scream, like the cry of a tortured soul, rang out of the forest, rising clear and trembling above the tolling of the bell and the noises of the night.

The boys looked at each other with white, frightened faces.

"A panther," Charley cried, "a panther, and we penned up here helpless as babes."

"Look," said Walter, eagerly, "look at the boars."

The great animals were stirring uneasily and their hoarse, threatening grunts had dropped to a kind of frightened whine. Again the scream rose shrill and clear, and, with a grunt of fear, the big leader charged into the forest followed by the rest.

"They are afraid of the panther, and I don't blame them," Charley exclaimed. "Come, we must get out of here in a hurry."

The boys slid to the ground as fast as their stiffened limbs would permit, picked up Charley's rifle, and hastily cutting down the venison, plunged out of the forest onto the prairie.

The screams, rapidly drawing nearer, hastened their footsteps, but, fast as they traveled, the sound continued to draw closer.

"It has got a sniff of the venison and is following us up," Charley declared. "We can never get away from it, and there is small chance of our being able to kill it in the dark. We may as well stop right here where there is a little wood and build a fire, that is our only chance."

Charley had chosen this halting place wisely, for a large dead tree lay on the ground, where he had stopped.

Hastily the boys tore up a heap of dry grass and piling broken limbs on it, lit the pile with a match.

The dry stuff roared up with a flame not a minute too soon, the flickering light revealed a crouching form not thirty feet away. With a snarl of rage the creature retreated from the blaze and began circling the fire from a distance. The soft pattering footfalls could be easily heard.

The boys crouched close to the fire filled with apprehension that gradually decreased as they saw the panther feared to approach. Thrice Charley fired at the dim skulking form, but, in the darkness, his bullets went wide of the mark, and he stopped wasting more ammunition.

"Let's set fire to the tree itself," Walter suggested, "it will make a bigger fire, last a long time, and save us the trouble of gathering wood."

"Good," exclaimed Charley, and seizing a couple of blazing brands he thrust them under the tree's trunk. The dry wood caught like tinder and soon the whole tree was aflame.

"I hope they will see it at the camp," Walter said. "If they do, they will know we are still alive."

As their fear of the panther decreased, the boys began to feel hungry and tired. The venison was unwrapped and some thick steaks were cut off and broiled over the fire, and from them the lads made a hearty meal.

They felt greatly refreshed after their hearty repast but they were still very tired and sleepy. They strove to converse together and keep awake but the fatigue of the day, the heavy meal, and the warmth of the fire proved too much for them and every now and then one would catch the other nodding.

"There's no use of both of us sitting up all night, when one is all that is necessary to keep an eye on the fire," said Charley, sleepily. "Let's make up a bed of the prairie grass and take turn about sleeping and keeping watch."

Walter heartily agreed to the suggestion and they proceeded to make up their couch without loss of time. They did not have to go outside the circle of firelight for their mattress, for the wild rice grew all around the blazing tree. All they had to do was to pull it up in great handfuls and stack it before the fire.

Suddenly Charley gave an exclamation and leaped back out of the grass. "Come out of that grass, Walt," he cried, "I have been bitten by a puff adder. I heard it hiss."

"Oh, Charley," cried his chum in terror, "what can we do?"

"Quick," commanded Charley, "open one of your shotgun shells and take out the shot." While he had been speaking the lad had slipped one leg out of his pants and exposed the wound to view. It was only a tiny red puncture of the skin midway between knee and hip, but the bitten one knew that tiny place was more dangerous than a rifle ball. Like a flash, he drew his hunting-knife and cut out a chunk of flesh as big as a hen egg where the wound had been. "Give me that cartridge," he commanded, his teeth gritting with pain.

Walter passed over the open shell and Charley emptied its contents of powder into the open cut. Quickly, he applied a match to the black grains and they caught with a hiss, there was a tiny cloud of black smoke and a whiff of burning flesh.

Walter sprang to his chum's side and caught him, as he staggered and reeled under the awful pain.

"Gee, but that was a plucky thing to do," he cried.

"I guess I got it done in time," murmured Charley, through pale lips. "It was the only thing to do. I would have been dead in half an hour otherwise—and such a death. But I guess I've got the best of it, I cut out that piece before the poison had a chance to get into the circulation, I think. Give me a hand to bind up the cut before anything gets into it."

Walter hastened to comply and bound up the gaping cut as well as he could

with the means at his command. While Charley lay back and gritted his teeth to keep back the moans of pain.

"Strange the place don't bleed any," said Walter, curiously.

"The heat of the powder flash cauterized the cut ends of the veins and closed them up," Charley explained. "I have seen the same thing done before and the wound never bled."

"Is it always a good thing to do?" his chum inquired.

"It is useless in some cases. It all depends upon the kind of snake and where the person is struck. I never knew a case of a person recovering when hit by a genuine Florida rattlesnake. Puff adders and moccasins are deadly enough, but they are mild beside the rattler. The rattler's fangs are so long that they strike deep and the quantity of venom injected is enormous, some of it is almost instantly taken up by the veins punctured. I do not believe that anything but instant amputation would save the life of one struck. But all bitten do not die equally soon. I have known a man struck in the ankle where the circulation was poor, to live for several hours, while another struck in the neck while bending over a flower, died almost instantly. The poor fellow did not have time to straighten up even. But he was lucky in dying quickly. There is no death more painful and horrible than that from a rattlesnake bite."

"What loathsome creatures," shuddered Walt, "and the state is accursed with them."

"They are few in number compared with what they used to be," Charley remarked, "and I'll bet you can't guess what has thinned them out so."

"The clearing up of the state and their wholesale destruction by settlers," Walter suggested.

Charley smiled in spite of his pain. "What settlers destroy in a year do not amount to a ten thousandth part of the number born. Each mother snake has upward of twenty-five little ones at a time. Birds, especially the blue jay, kill a great many but their worst enemy is the Florida hog."

"The hog?" exclaimed Walter, in surprise.

"Yes," Charley affirmed. "If you want to clear a patch of ground of snakes, just turn in a drove of hogs, they will do the work for you in short order. They kill and eat the most poisonous snakes without the slightest hurt to themselves. Either their thick hide saves them, or else they are immune from the venom."

"No more Florida pork on my bill-of-fare," declared Walter in disgust.

Pain and excitement had driven all thought of sleep from both boys' minds and they sat close together by the fire and talked the night away.

As the slow minutes slipped away, Walter watched his chum's face in an agony of apprehension for any sign that the subtle venom was getting in its deadly work. But the hours passed by and, although Charley was suffering considerable pain, there was no indication that any of the poison had passed into his system—the lad's prompt act had saved his life.

Dawn came at last and found two weary waiting boys, one of them weak, pale, and haggard.

As soon as it was light enough to see, Walter made his way back to the edge of the forest, and cut a strong forked limb to serve as a crutch for his chum.

Before leaving the fire, the boys cooked and ate a couple more venison steaks which gave them fresh strength and courage.

Walter shouldered the guns and venison and staggered on in the lead under his heavy load, while Charley hobbled painfully on behind.

They had just crossed the remainder of the prairie and were resting a bit before plunging into the forest on the other side, when Chris and the captain broke out from the clump of trees and hailed them with shouts of joy.

Chris relieved Walter of a part of his load while the captain assisted Charley forward, and the little party made good time on their homeward way and before long reached the clearing.

Chris' and the captain's haggard faces showed they had passed as sleepless a night as the two lads.

"Golly," said Chris, gravely, "when night comes an' you chillens don't show

up, an' de haunts begin a-tollin' dat bell, I spect Massa Captain an' dis nigger went most crazy. When we seed you-alls' fire a little later, we feels some better, but, Massas, I jes' tell you dat daylight seemed powerful long comin' to dis nigger."

Amid the others' breathless interest, Walter related the adventures of the night. When the captain learned of Charley's accident, he brought out the brandy bottle and insisted on his drinking what remained of the liquor. His wound was then bathed, clean and bandaged again and he was made to lay down upon his couch in the hut, while Walter stretched out on his own bed for a nap.

"Good," exclaimed Charley, as he caught sight of the windows and door, "you and Chris made a good job of those, captain."

The captain nodded in satisfaction. "I reckon it will take some battering to get in there," he observed.

Inside the hut, the two workers had planted large posts of palmetto that effectually blocked the windows save for the cracks between the posts. The door was similarly barricaded, save for one post left out for present ingress and egress. It stood close to hand, however, ready to be slipped into the hole provided for it, at an instant's notice.

Charley suddenly staggered to his feet. "I can't waste time lying here," he exclaimed. "Why, this is the day we expect the outlaw."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PREPARATIONS.

"Sit down, Charley," said the captain sternly, "are you crazy, lad? You can do nothing in your present state, and if you go and make yourself sick, you will cause us all a deal of trouble and worry."

Charley sank back upon his couch. "But there is so much to be done,

Captain," he protested.

"Now look here, lad," said the old sailor, "say those fellows have got their boat finished and start for that island we left this morning, it will take them quite a while to get there and I expect they will look it over a bit before following us. Take the time spent there and the time it will take them to reach here, an' I reckon it will be late in the afternoon before we see anything of them."

"It won't do to take any chances, Captain. We had ought to be ready now."

"Go ahead and say what you want done and we will do it while you sleep," said the captain. "But if you persist in getting up, I'll be hanged if I'll do a stroke of work, outlaws or no outlaws."

"Me neither," chimed in Chris.

"Better go to sleep, Charley," advised his chum. "I am going to get a nap, myself. I know I'll be able to work better for it."

Charley gave in with an unwilling sigh. "All right, I suppose I'll have to do as you all say."

"Tell us your plans and we will see that they are carried out," the captain said.

"We cannot keep those fellows from landing on the island," said the young leader, thoughtfully. "There are so many places where they can come ashore, and we are too few to guard the entire coast. I do not think we can even hold the walls against so many. There are more gaps in them than we could defend. I have thought it all over and I believe that all we can do is to confine the defense to this house. We ought to be able to hold this place until the Indians come."

"My ideas exactly," approved the captain.

"It's the only sensible thing to do," Walter agreed.

"To be successful, it is necessary for us to have a good supply of food and water. I intended to dry the venison, but there is not time to do that, you will have to cut it into thin strips and smoke it, that will not take long and it will keep for several days. That big copper and all the gourds should be filled with water and brought inside. When that is all done, we will have food and drink to last us

a week with care."

"Chris and I will see to it all," said the captain arising. "Is that all, lad?"

"We had ought to keep a lookout at the landing so as to know when they come and be ready for them."

"We'll 'tend to that when we get the other chores done. It's too early to expect them yet, anyway. Now you lie down and get a nap, lads, and don't worry, Chris and I will look out for everything."

Charley laid back and closed his eyes, obediently, while Chris and the captain passed out of the hut to attend to the tasks set them.

The two boys were soon fast asleep.

It was noon before Walter awoke, sat up, and looked around him. He noted that the workers had already completed their tasks; long strings of smoked venison strips were hung down from the roof, gourds and copper kettle were brimming full of sweet, clean water, and all of the guns had been freshly cleaned and oiled.

Treading softly so as not to awaken his chum, Walter passed out of the hut.

The captain and Chris were busily engaged in trying to dispatch a pot of venison stewed with yams, and Walter lost no time in joining them.

"Well, we are all through," observed the captain as he took a second helping of stew. "We would have called you to dinner, but I reckoned the sleep would do you more good. How do you feel now?"

"All right," Walter answered. "You should have left some of that work for us to do, Captain."

"I reckon you will have enough to do before we get a chance to leave this island," said the old sailor with a sigh. "If you are through, Chris, take your gun and go down to the landing and keep a sharp lookout. Those fellows had ought to be here this afternoon, some time. I will come down and spell you in a couple of hours."

"You had better go in and get a nap yourself, Captain, while there is nothing doing," said Walter. "It may be all hands on deck to-night."

"I reckon I'll take your advice, lad. I was awake all last night worrying about you boys and I can't stand loss of sleep now like you young fellows. I will just take forty winks. Call me when it is time to spell Chris."

Walter sat waiting until the old sailor's loud snoring proclaimed he was asleep. Then filling a small gourd with water from the spring, he made his way into the fort, where he righted one of the overturned canoes and fished out a large package from under the stern and undid its fastenings. "I wonder they did not notice it when they carried the canoe up," he muttered.

For a long time he was busily engaged with the contents of the package and the gourd of water. At last he gave a sigh of triumphant satisfaction which died away as he heard Charley's voice calling his name from the hut.

With an exclamation of impatience, he emptied out the water, quickly bound up the package again, and thrust it back in its old place under the canoe's stern deck, then turning the canoe again bottom up, he passed out of the fort whistling, carelessly.

Charley in the door of the hut eyed him curiously as he approached. "What has happened to you?" he exclaimed, "you look as happy as if you had discovered a gold mine."

"Well, I haven't," laughed his chum, "how's your leg now?"

"Stiff as a ramrod, and, whew, how it hurts," Charley said with a grimace of pain. "I can't bear my weight on it."

"You don't want to try to," said Walter, severely. "Just go back to your bunk and keep still. All the work is done, now, and I am going down to the landing right off to relieve Chris so that he can get a little sleep."

Charley obeyed and Walter made his way down to the landing where he found Chris sitting on a log watching intently.

Walter took the gun from the tired little darky and sent him up to the hut to rest.

The hours passed swiftly by without any signs of the outlaws. When darkness fell, Walter abandoned his now useless post and made his way up to the hut where he found his three companions gathered around the camp-fire outside.

"Have you seen anything of them?" Charley inquired anxiously as he came in sight. "Not a sign," Walter answered. "I think you have done wrong in lighting that fire," he continued gravely. "There was a bare chance that they would have given up the chase after not finding us at the chief's island. If they are anywhere near, though, that fire will give us dead away."

"They would not have given up the chance of getting the plumes they have worked so hard to obtain as easily as all that," said his chum decidedly. "Remember, they believe that Big Tiger and his son are still with us and that the rest of the Indians are far away. No, they would not have given up so easily after the trouble they have been to."

Walter said no more but helped himself to an ear of corn and a piece of fish and fell to eating.

The silence that had fallen upon the party was broken by an exclamation from Chris.

"Golly, dar dey is," he cried.

Far off in the direction of the chief's island, a tiny shaft of light pierced the darkness.

"They are on the island we left," exclaimed Charley, "that's their camp-fire."

"No, no," said Walter. "See, it is getting bigger, I bet they have fired the wigwam."

In a few minutes all the party agreed with Walter, there was no mistaking the cause of the pillar of flame that rose high in the air on the distant island.

They watched it in silence until it died down and nothing remained but a faint glare.

"Let's go to bed," said Charley at last. "If they are on the chief's island, they will not bother us to-night."

But after a short discussion, it was decided to stand guard and watch, Charley and Walter to stand on guard until midnight, and then to be relieved by Chris and the captain.

The two sentinels climbed up on a portion of the wall that lay in the shadow of a big tree and from which they could command a good view of the rest of the wall and inclosure itself.

"I have been thinking that the unsavory reputation of this island may keep those fellows from coming here," Walter observed in an undertone.

"It will likely keep Indian Charley away, and I am more afraid of him than all the balance. I do not think it will stop the rest though," Charley answered, and they lapsed again into cautious silence.

The minutes had lengthened into an hour when there fell upon their ears the now familiar tolling of the bell.

"I am going to have another look in that chapel," declared Walter, as he slipped down from his perch.

"I'd like to go with you," said Charley, wistfully, "but my game leg won't carry me that far." He watched his chum until he disappeared in the shadow of the church.

Walter hesitated for a moment at the chapel doorway. It required more courage to enter that gloomy, black, mysterious interior, alone, than it had when he and Charley were together. Summoning up all his resolution he passed through the gaping doorway into the blackness beyond. All was dark and still inside, the bright moonlight shining through the high little windows threw patches of ghostly light upon the white, ghastly walls. Walter felt his flesh creep as he made his way through the darkness up towards the bell.

He stumbled often and bruised his knees against the stone seats but at last he reached the little platform and stood beneath the little tower. He could not see up into its gloomy interior, but the great bell above him tolled mournfully on.

For a space Walter stood silent, a superstitious dread creeping over him. "Dreaming, dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." A horror grew upon him, a feeling that something, some being antagonistic, repugnant to his very

nature was sharing the darkness with him. The strokes of the bell above him seemed to grow horribly menacing to his feverish fancy. He struggled with himself to throw off the mantle of terror descending upon him but the feeling grew and grew. With a rush of unreasoning anger he flung up his gun and fired at the swaying bell.

A shrill, human-like cry rang out, the bell ceased tolling, and a heavy body crashed down at the terrified lad's feet.

Throwing out his arms Walter sank to the floor in a dead faint.

He opened his eyes again to see Charley bending over, examining him by the light of a flaring torch.

"What, what was it?" he whispered.

Charley shifted the torch and held it close to a dark figure stretched out on the stone floor.

Its glare lit up a face strangely human, and bearing the apparent mark of centuries in its furrowed features and wrinkled skin.

"A big monkey," gasped Walter in astonishment.

"Yes," said Charley gently, "an old man monkey, old, old, very, very old."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ENEMY.

Walter broke into a weak, hysterical laugh, "and I took that for a spirit," he exclaimed. "Well, our mystery is solved now."

"Yes," his chum admitted, looking down at the dead bell-ringer with a kind of regret, "still there are some points about it which still remain a mystery, and always will. There is no record of there ever being monkeys found in this state.

It must have been brought here by one of the Spanish gentlemen as a pet and taught the trick of ringing the bell, and yet, that theory is unbelievable. Consider, Walter, if such is the case, this creature has reached an incredible age."

Walter bent down and flashed the torch in the monkey's face. "He looks as though he had lived for centuries," he exclaimed, "his face is like that of a shriveled mummy, and see, that look of cunning and aged-wisdom in his features. Charley," continued the tender-hearted boy with a break in his voice, "I feel as badly about it as I would if I had shot a man. Think of the poor, harmless creature, remaining true year after year to the one task he knew how to perform, and then to be shot down at last while doing it."

"Nonsense, this is no time for sentiment. We must get back to our post, we have left it altogether too long. You will have to help me back, I guess, Walt," Charley said.

"How did you get here?" demanded his chum, the current of his thoughts suddenly changed. "Why, your trousers' leg is wet with blood and you are as pale as a ghost."

"I couldn't have walked a hundred feet under ordinary circumstances, but that scream brought me here on the run. Now that the excitement is over I feel weak as a kitten," Charley answered.

"You're going back to bed and stay there until that wound is completely healed," declared Walter as he put his arm around his chum and assisted him out of the chapel.

Before he could get the exhausted lad to the hut, he had become a dead weight in Walter's arms. Walter let him down gently upon the ground and ran to the hut where he aroused Chris and the captain, and the three bore Charley inside and laid him on his couch.

Captain Westfield bathed the wound and bandaged it afresh. His face was very grave as he examined the unconscious lad's skin and pulse. "He has a high fever," he declared anxiously. "I thought yesterday from the way he was yawning and stretching that he was in for an attack of swamp fever. With a dose of it on top of this hole in his leg it is likely to go hard with the poor lad. I'd give a sight now for some brandy and quinine." He glanced up at Walter's haggard face. "You get to bed this minute or we will have two on our hands," he commanded. "Chris

and I have had a good nap and we'll keep watch the balance of the night, though, I 'low, there ain't much use in doing it."

Walter was too near collapse, himself, to offer objections and dropping down on his couch was soon sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. He woke again just as the sun arose feeling rested and quite his old vigorous self, but his spirits soon fell as his chum's meanings fell upon his ears.

Charley was tossing restfully upon his couch in a high fever and the wounded leg was greatly swollen and flushed an angry red.

There was nothing he could do to relieve the sufferer, so Walter with a heavy heart stole out of the hut.

The captain and Chris were busy over the fire preparing breakfast. They greeted Walter with grave faces for Charley's condition was resting heavily upon them.

"If I only had some quinine I could check that fever," sighed the old sailor. "He is healthy and clean-blooded and I reckon he'd get over that bad leg in time, but he can't fight them both. How in the world did he come to start the wound to bleeding again?"

Sadly Walter recounted the adventures of the night. He told of their previous discovery of the bell, their first fruitless search of the chapel, and of his venturing in alone and the shooting of the bell-ringer.

As he proceeded with his narrative the captain's face grew crimson with mortification and chagrin, as he saw his much-asserted ghostly theories shattered.

The effect on Chris' humorous nature was different. The first expression of relief on his little ebony face was succeeded by a broad grin.

"Golly," he giggled, "an' me an' Massa Capt was scart nigh to death by a poor ole harmless monkey."

Few men like to be placed in a ridiculous position and the captain turned on the little darky in a rage.

"Shut up, you grinning little imp," he shouted, "or I'll thrash you so you can't sit down for a week. What call have you got to be giggling over the death of one of your ancestors?"

Chris checked the flow of words on his tongue, but sat rocking back and forth in glee muttering, "Golly, only a monkey. A poor, old, he-monkey," until the irate captain chased him out of ear-shot.

Leaving the captain and Chris to the settlement of their trouble, Walter took one of the canoes' paddles and proceeded to the chapel. Just outside its wall he dug a deep grave, and carrying the faithful old monkey to it he lowered him gently to the bottom and filling up the grave again, heaped a little pile of stones on the mound.

To the tender-hearted lad there was something pathetic and touching in the way the poor creature had met its death.

Charley's illness cast a gloom over even the irrepressible Chris, and breakfast was eaten in sad silence.

As soon as he had finished, Chris shouldered one of the rifles and headed for the landing to watch for the outlaws, while the captain and Walter repaired to the hut to attend to the stricken lad.

There was little they could do to relieve his sufferings beyond sponging his hot body with a wet cloth and giving him sparingly of the water that he called for incessantly. At last he sank into a kind of a stupor and the heavy-hearted watchers stole outside for a breath of fresh air.

Walter at last broke the silence that hung like a cloud upon them. "I've been thinking," he said, "that it might not be a bad plan to meet the outlaws at the landing. We could dispose of several before they could get on shore."

"No," said his companion decidedly, "they would only land in some other place and maybe cut us off from the hut. You mark my words, lad, Charley thought over every side of this question before he laid his plans an' we can't do better than follow them. The most we can hope to do is to hold this hut until Little Tiger comes with his people."

Their further discussion was cut short by the sudden appearance of Chris.

"Dey's comin', Massa, dey's comin'," shouted the excited little darky. "Dey ain't more dan a half mile away."

Gathering together the cooking utensils scattered around the fire, the three entered the hut and soon had the last post secured in its hole, effectually barring the doorway.

Through the cracks in the windows and door, the hunters watched for the appearance of the foe.

An hour of suspense passed slowly by, then suddenly there came the noise of a falling stone and an evil face peeped cautiously over the wall.

Walter fired quickly but missed, and the face disappeared with ludicrous haste.

For some minutes the outlaws remained quiet, no doubt conferring together, then a tiny square of white was hoisted above the wall, to be quickly followed by the youngest outlaw who dropped coolly down into the inclosure bearing the flag in his hand.

"We can't fire upon him," declared Walter as Chris raised his gun. "He bears a truce flag and is unarmed. You keep a sharp watch on the others and I will talk with this fellow. If I am not mistaken, it is the one Charley was so impressed by."

The young outlaw approached the hut at a careless sauntering walk, waving the flag jauntily in his hand. He noted the barred openings and protruding rifle barrel with a cool smile and strolled around to the door.

"Hallo in there," he called, cheerfully. "I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," Walter answered grimly, "we're listening."

"Come now, that's no way to receive a visitor," said the young fellow, lightly. "I want to talk with that bright-eyed chap I talked with before."

"You can't," Walter said, sadly. "He's dying of fever."

"Why don't you cure him up?" demanded the envoy, sharply, "the swamp fever is nothing if it's treated right."

"We haven't a grain of medicine," Walter replied. "But state your errand," he added sharply.

"Look here," said the young outlaw after a short pause. "I talked those fellows into this conference idea so as to get a good chance to speak with you fellows. I am sick of that gang. I am not as bad as they, and I am clean disgusted with them. I want to join forces with you fellows. I know they are bound to finish you sooner or later, but I would rather die with gentlemen than to live with murderers."

"We cannot afford to take any chances," Walter said decidedly.

"But you are taking chances, chances on the life of your friend," said the outlaw sharply. "I can cure him, I tell you. I studied medicine and I have a few things in my bag."

"Can we risk it?" said Walter, wavering, and turning to the captain for advice.

"We can risk anything for Charley's sake," said the old sailor, eagerly. "We can shoot him at the first sign of treachery. Let him in, Walt."

"I have got to go back for my things," interrupted the outlaw, whose keen ears had caught the low conversation. "I'll be back again in a minute. I'll fix up some excuse to return. I guess pretending that you are considering surrendering will do as well as anything else."

Walter gazed after the young fellow's retreating form with reluctant admiration. "He moves like a trained athlete and he hasn't got a bad face," he admitted. "I pray he does not prove to be our undoing."

"We must take the chance, lad," said the captain. "Better remove the post so he can get inside quick."

In a few minutes the outlaw strolled carelessly back towards the hut. A yell of rage went up from the convicts behind the wall as he darted through the opening into the building.

Walter quickly replaced the post and turned to watch the newcomer.

Without a word, he had marched over to where Charley lay and knelt by his

side with his finger on the lad's pulse and his keen eyes searching his face.

After a moment's examination he turned to face the others. "Your friend is nearly dead," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ATTACK.

"He has a bare chance yet," declared the outlaw, noting their looks of grief. "I will do what I can for him, but I wish I'd been here an hour sooner."

He took a little package from the bosom of his shirt and spread the contents out upon the table. "I couldn't bring much without arousing suspicion," he said regretfully, "but I guess I can make out with what I've brought."

With deft fingers, the newcomer measured out a powder from one of his packages and administered it to the unconscious lad and next turned his attention to the wounded leg. Emptying a spoonful of liquid from one of his bottles into a gourd of water he began to bathe the inflamed limb.

The hunters could not but admire the deftness and skill with which the stranger worked. His long tapering fingers seemed to have the suppleness and deftness of a woman's and his whole attention seemed concentrated upon his patient.

The hours passed slowly away, each seeming a day in length to the anxious hunters. The convicts remained hidden behind the wall and there was nothing to do but to keep a sharp lookout. At noon the watchers made a light lunch on the smoked venison and water, but the young outlaw waved away the offered food and remained engrossed by the patient's side. At intervals of a few minutes all during the afternoon, he administered medicine to the sufferer and repeatedly bathed the wounded leg with the solution he had prepared.

The sun was barely an hour high, when he arose from the side of the couch

with a weary sigh. "I think he will live," he announced, "he was almost gone for a while, though. I gave him enough strychnine during the first few hours to have killed a normal man, but his heart had weakened so that the stimulant hardly raised his pulse a single beat. The heart action is better now, and with close attention he had ought to pull through."

"How can we ever repay you for what you have done?" said the old sailor, with tears of thankfulness in his eyes, while Walter wrung the stranger's hand warmly.

"The saving of many lives will hardly atone for one I took once, though the deed was done in self-defense," said the outlaw gravely. "I am glad to have been of help in this case." He glanced around the room with a return of his former light careless manner and nodded approvingly as he noted the stores of provisions and water. "Good," he exclaimed, "you are better prepared than I expected and certainly in much better shape than my former gentle companions dream. Why, it will be impossible for them to take this place by force."

"Can you tell us of their plans, Mr.——," inquired Walter, hesitating for want of a name.

"You may call me Ritter, James Ritter," supplied the outlaw promptly. "I am not ashamed of my real name but my relatives had cause to be ashamed of its owner in his present condition. Their plans are almost self-evident, my lad. They will wait until dark and then slip over the wall, some will stop in that big building while the balance will make their way around to a building on the other side of you. They will then have you surrounded and have only to watch and wait to starve you out. They have plenty of provisions with them and can get that spring behind the fort without exposing themselves. It is only a question of time before you will have to give up, and then may the Lord grant us all a speedy death."

"Don't be too sure of it, friend," observed the captain. "The Lord never deserts those who fully believe and trust him. Those villains may be defeated yet."

The outlaw grinned as he looked around the room. "My dear friends are badly fooled," he chuckled with glee. "They believe the chief is with you, and he is not here. Why, they have already spent, in imagination, the money that they are

going to derive from the sale of his plumes. What a shock it will be to them when they learn that the bird has flown. I wish I could see their faces when they hear the news."

"The chief is dead," said Walter, "do you think they would go away if they knew the truth?"

"No, I do not," replied Ritter, after a moment's thought, "in spite of all you might say, they would have a suspicion that you had secured the plumes yourselves, and, anyway, they are so mad that they will not leave until they have finished the job."

The hunters were favorably impressed with the frankness of the former outlaw. He had the speech and the manners of a gentleman, and his earnestness and apparent sincerity went far towards removing their suspicions, and, much to their surprise, they found themselves soon talking to him with the freedom of old acquaintances.

Ritter chuckled with delight when they told him of the young chief going for aid. "That gives us a fighting chance," he declared, joyfully. "We must put ourselves on short rations and try to hold out until they come."

"Where is Indian Charley?" asked Walter, "is he with the others?"

"No, they could not induce him to set foot on the island. The place evidently has a bad name among the Indians and I am not surprised after what I have seen. Even the convicts are puzzled and a little alarmed by the walls, courts, and buildings. They none of them know enough about history to lay them to the Spaniards as you folks have probably done. Charley, the Indian, swears that there is a mysterious bell which tolls every night. Have you heard anything of the kind?"

Walter briefly related their adventure with the bell-ringer, omitting any reference to the captain's superstitious fears, much to the old sailor's relief.

Further conversation was interrupted by darkness and preparations for the night.

Chris built a little fire near the door where the smoke would pass out through the cracks and prepared a stew of venison and some broth for Charley.

Taking turns the besieged made a hearty meal which did wonders in renewing hope and courage.

It was decided that they should take short shifts of watching during the night, two in each watch. It fell to Walter to share the watch with the young outlaw, for which he was not at all displeased, for he was greatly interested in the strange character, and their turns at the watch passed quickly in pleasant conversation.

The outlaw spoke freely of the incident that had brought him to the convict gang, claiming firmly that the deed which had made him a felon had been done in self-defense, but, owing to lack of witnesses and to a well-known enmity between him and the dead man, the jury had brought in a verdict of murder in the second degree.

Walter, under the spell of the man's attractive, strong personality, could not but believe his assertion.

At the end of their watch, Walter awoke Chris and the captain and stretched out for a nap, but the outlaw never closed his eyes during the long uneventful night. When not watching, he was hovering over Charley's bedside administering medicine or working over the bitten leg. Yet daylight found him as cool and fresh as ever, apparently unaffected by his long vigil.

To the hunters' great delight, day found Charley visibly improved. He had fallen into a deep sleep, his body was wet with profuse perspiration, and the swelling of the limb had greatly decreased.

They showered thanks upon the outlaw until he was visibly embarrassed and begged them to say no more.

The morning passed as had the night, without any hostile demonstration by the convicts. Smoke curling up from the fort and from a building on the other side of them told the besieged that the enemy had taken up their positions during the night as Ritter had prophesied. Evidently they were willing to wait for their triumph rather than risk any lives by trying to take their victims by assault.

When Chris started to make a stew for dinner, Ritter stopped him. "We can't spare any more water for cooking," he declared. "I have used a good deal on the patient, and the gourds are already almost empty. Our only hope of life is in husbanding our water and it would be wise to put ourselves on an allowance

now. I figure that there is enough in that big copper to allow each of us a pint and a half per day for ten days."

The others saw the wisdom of his proposal and immediately agreed to it, and they made their dinner of roasted yams, smoked venison broiled before the fire, and a few swallows of water.

Once during the afternoon a convict tried a shot at a crack between the posts barricading the window. The bullet passed through, missing Ritter's head by a scant two inches. The former outlaw never winced but began singing mockingly, "Teasing, teasing, I was only teasing you."

A perfect storm of bullets answered his taunt.

"The rascals don't appreciate good singing," he said with a grin.

Charley's condition continued to steadily improve under the outlaw's careful ministrations and by nightfall, he was conscious once more and comparatively free from pain.

Night brought no change in the condition of the besieged. Watches were arranged as on the night before, and those off duty retired as soon as darkness had fallen.

"Do you believe in premonitions," asked Ritter, gravely, as he and Walter stood peering out of the windows. "Do you believe that coming events cast their shadows before them?"

"I hardly know," answered Walter, thoughtfully, "sometimes I almost believe that we are given warnings of coming events, but I can never quite convince myself that the happenings confirming, for instance, say a dream, are anything more than coincidences."

"A few days ago I would have laughed at such an idea, but all day I have had a vague presentiment of coming evil which I have found impossible to shake off," explained his companion.

"It's your liver, I dare say," said Walter cheerfully, "for my part, I feel that we are going to get out of this hole all right, and live happy ever after as the story books say."

"There can be but little happiness for me in the future, however, if we come out of this affair," said his companion sorrowfully. "Death, I sometimes think, would be the best thing that could befall me. I am a life convict, you remember, found guilty by a jury, and condemned to pass a life at hard, degrading labor in company with ruffians of the lowest, most debased type. It is not a future to look forward to with pleasure!"

Walter remained silent, he could not but admit the truth of the man's words and reflect upon the misery of such a life would naturally bring to a man of education and refinement like this one. "You might escape, go to some other state, and begin life anew," he at last suggested. "After what you have done for us, and believing you innocent as we now do, we should do all we could to help you to get away."

"The life of a fugitive would be worse than that of a convict," declared the other bitterly. "In every face I would read suspicion, and dread of detection and arrest would haunt me all the time."

Walter could say nothing more to encourage this strange, unfortunate character, and with an effort the other shook off the black mood that had fallen upon him.

"I guess you're right, it must be my liver," he said lightly. "After all there is something in the old jockey saying, 'There is nothing to a race but the finish.' If I live a convict I can at least die a gentleman."

A sympathetic silence fell upon the two that lasted unbroken until their watch ended.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PARLEY.

Only once during the night were the watchers disturbed. Two convicts endeavored to worm their way up to the hut unseen but were quickly spotted by

the captain who emptied his revolver at them without any other effect than to cause them to take to their heels. Aside from this incident the besieged were not disturbed.

The convicts were evidently keeping as keen a watch as the besieged to guard against the possibility of any of them escaping. A hat which Chris squeezed out through a crack between the posts was promptly riddled with bullets.

Morning found the hunters and their new friend weary with suspense and their long inactivity. All longed for a stroll in the open air, a chance to stretch their legs, and an unlimited supply of water to drink. It almost seemed that their meager allowance of a pint and a half each for the twenty-four hours did little more than increase their thirst. They could not safely alter their unpleasant situation, however, and they wisely made the best of it and did not grumble.

They had one great consolation in Charley's rapid progress towards health. He was gaining with astonishing rapidity and bid fair to be completely recovered in a few days.

With the coming of another day, the convicts opened an irregular fire upon the doors and windows of the hut. Many of their bullets passed between the cracks in the post barricades and imbedded themselves in the walls. The defenders husbanded their ammunition, firing only when a convict exposed arm or leg. They were satisfied now of the impregnability of their building and their main concern was to keep out of the way of chance bullets.

The morning was well advanced when Walter, who was watching at a window, felt a curious sensation in the soles of his feet, and, startled, looked down to find that he was standing in a tiny pool of water. With a cry of alarm he sprang to where the big copper sat. A glance confirmed his worst fears; a stray bullet had torn a great hole in the vessel near the bottom, and of their precious store of water barely a cupful remained.

It was a staggering blow to all. Food they could exist without for several days, but in that warm, humid climate life could not be sustained without water for any length of time. Before forty-eight hours had passed they would be confronted by the alternatives of surrendering to the convicts, or to suffering the awful tortures of thirst.

"We must hold out as long as we can," declared Ritter, "something may turn

up. Even death by thirst would be better than torture at the hands of those fiends. What little water is left, I would suggest that we save for the sick lad. We can stand thirst longer than he."

The rest agreed heartily to this proposal and the little water remaining was poured into an empty gourd and placed where it would be safe from bullets. By tacit consent they agreed that their loss should be concealed from Charley, who had slept throughout the incident. They knew him well enough to be sure that he would not touch the little water remaining if he knew they were suffering from thirst.

To add to the troubles of the little party, the day proved very hot and sultry, not a breath of air stirring. By noon all were very thirsty, and when night came without bringing any relief from the heat, they began to suffer severely for lack of water.

The hot night dragged slowly away to bring another breathless sultry day, the close of which found the little party almost at the limits of their endurance. Since the night before they had been unable to eat the dry venison as it greatly increased their thirst. Their tongues and throats were dry and swollen and every nerve and atom of their heated bodies clamored for water.

As night fell, Ritter got out the punctured copper and busied himself in plugging up the hole.

"What are you doing that for?" Walter inquired.

"I'll tell you when the rest are asleep," whispered the young outlaw, "there is no use alarming them."

It was late in the night before the others, tortured by fear and thirst, fell into uneasy slumber, and Walter and Ritter were free to continue their conversation.

"We are in a desperate condition," declared Ritter. "In this heat we cannot exist very much longer without water. Something has got to be done at once if we are to hold out another forty-eight hours."

"But what can we do?" said Walter, hopelessly. "It's sure death to venture outside."

"I am not so sure about that," said the other, "anyway, I am going to try it, anything is better than the tortures we will soon be suffering."

"You'll be killed," exclaimed Walter. "I'll go, Ritter, I can be spared better than you."

"Death by bullet is better than death by thirst," said his companion coolly, "and you cannot be spared as well as I. Your companions are fond of you and your death would be a terrible blow to them, while I am only an unknown convict whom no one will miss. But I am getting tragic," he continued, lightly. "I really think there is a good chance of success, the night is dark, and the very boldness of the attempt will be in its favor. They will not dream of one of us venturing right under the shadow of their fort."

Although he spoke with apparent sincerity, Walter was not deceived. Both knew the hopelessness of such an attempt. In vain did Walter attempt to dissuade the other, Ritter remained firm.

"We will remove a post from the doorway as quietly as possible and you do your best to protect me with your rifle," he said.

With a heavy heart, Walter assisted the other to remove the post. He had grown very fond of Ritter in the few days they had been together. He admired him for his bravery and the cheeriness and sweetness of his disposition under trials and suffering. He gave the outlaw's hand a long, friendly clasp at parting.

"May God bring you back safe and sound," he whispered, brokenly.

With a return pressure of the hand, Ritter dropped to his hands and knees and wound his way out of the doorway into the darkness. Walter watched his progress from the doorway with an anxious heart. He saw him crawl a considerable distance from the hut, then rise to his feet and saunter carelessly towards the fort. The very boldness of the act made it successful. The convict on guard no doubt thought the figure one of his companions, needlessly exposing himself to a bullet from the hut, and only wondered vaguely at his taking needless risks and perhaps speculated dully as to what was the nature of the large object he bore.

Carelessly, Ritter sauntered slowly past the fort and approached the spring. There was no guard posted on that side of the fort and he partly filled the copper

and kneeling by the cool water took a deep drink and bathed his feverish face in the refreshing liquid. Half of his mad task was performed, but, as he fully realized, the riskiest part was yet to come.

Taking another long drink, he lifted the heavy copper and, bearing it in front of him so as to conceal it as much as possible by his person, he walked slowly back towards the hut.

Two-thirds of the return was covered in safety when the convict guard shouted with an oath, "Come back, you fool, do you want to get the daylights shot out of you?"

Ritter's answer was a taunting laugh as he bounded towards the hut.

The guard's rifle cracked and the fleeing man staggered drunkenly but sped on, while the convict working the lever of his Winchester with remorseless cruelty, emptied its contents after the fleeing figure.

At the doorway of the hut, Ritter crumpled to his knees.

"Take the copper," he cried to Walter, "I'm hit." Walter quickly placed the vessel inside, then, heedless of the rain of bullets, dragged the wounded man inside.

The others had been awakened by the noise and were quickly at his side.

"Chris, give me a hand to lay him on my bed; Captain, replace the post in the doorway," Walter commanded with heartsore calmness.

The wounded man opened his eyes as they laid him gently on the couch.

"It's no use bothering with me, old chap," he said, quietly. "I'm hit in a dozen places and I'm doctor enough to know that I'm going fast."

Walter buried his head by the dying man's side and sobbed dryly.

"There, there," the other said, soothingly, "don't feel bad about it. It's just what I wished for. I'm going to die like a gentleman."

Walter hushed his sobs with an effort to catch the feebly spoken words.

The wounded man's eyes closed, and Walter held his breath for a second thinking him dead, but in a moment he opened them again and smiled faintly, "There's nothing to a race but the finish," he whispered.

A little longer he lay still breathing heavily. Suddenly by a mighty effort he raised himself on his elbow, his eyes shining with a strange light. "Not guilty, your honor," he said in a firm voice, then sank back still and white.

"He's dead," said Walter, brokenly. "He had his wish; he died like a hero."

They covered the still form reverently with a blanket, and the silence of bitter grief settled on the little party. The others had not become so intimate with the dead man as Walter, but they had grown to admire him greatly, and the thought that he had given up his life in their service added to their grief.

Walter's suffering was intense and it was well that his mind was of necessity soon forced into other channels.

The convicts, exasperated at the way they had been outwitted, opened a heavy continuous fire upon the hut, under cover of which several attempts were made to carry the hut by assault. But the assaulting parties were easily discouraged by the steady fire that met them at each attempt.

"It looks as if they were getting desperate," said the captain. "I reckon they know now that we can hold out for a long time yet, and they are gettin' discouraged," and his companions agreed with him.

Towards morning the convicts' fire slackened and gradually ceased.

Just as day was breaking, the distant report of a rifle was borne to the ears of the besieged.

Charley, who was now able to leave his bed, listened eagerly. "It's Indian Charley's rifle. I know the sound," he declared, "ten shots; I wonder what it means."

From the fort, came an answering volley of ten rifle shots.

"It's a signal," cried Walter. "I wonder what it's for."

"Hallo there in the but, we want a parley," hailed a rough voice from the fort.

"All right," answered Charley, "send forward one man, unarmed."

A convict emerged from the fort and advanced towards the hut with fearful, hesitating footsteps.

"Don't be afraid, we won't hurt you," Walter called to him encouragingly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HELP.

"Say what you want and be quick about it," said Charley sharply, as the convict halted close to the hut.

"Me and my mates want to know if you are ready to call this thing quits," the man growled. "We agree to leave you the island all to yourselves right off if you won't fire on us while we are leaving."

Charley turned to the others for counsel.

"There's something in the wind," he declared in a low tone. "This proposal coming so soon after that signal means something. Maybe the Indians are coming."

"We can't bank on that, it's hardly time for them yet," observed the captain. "Better agree to their offer, lads. I guess they are just tired of the game."

"We can't well stop them if they have taken a notion to leave," said Walter. "I agree with the captain. Let them go."

Charley turned to the man. "We agree, provided you leave at once," he said.

The convict, with a surly growl, turned and rapidly retraced his steps to the fort.

The convicts were in evident haste to be gone, for their envoy had hardly got inside before they began to file out, each bearing his gun and other belongings.

Within ten minutes from the envoy's visit the last of the outlaws had scaled the walls and was lost to sight.

The hunters waited for half an hour before they removed the barricade from the door and let the fresh cool morning breeze into their stuffy prison. Even then they did not venture outside, for they still feared some trick on the part of the convicts. As the moments, passed quietly by, however, without any sign of their foes, their fears began to decrease.

"I am going to find out what has become of them," Walter at last declared. "Unless we make certain now of what they are up to, we will be afraid to venture outside for a week to come."

His companions in vain tried to dissuade him from his rash project, his mind was made up and he turned a deaf ear to their words.

Shouldering one of the rifles, he made his way to the wall, clambered over it nimbly and disappeared on the other side.

It was over half an hour before Walter returned. His companions had begun to feel uneasy about him when he appeared on the top of the wall and dropped down inside with a hearty cheer.

"Come out, all of you," he shouted, "there's nothing more to fear from the convicts."

The little party crowded around him with eager questions.

"I followed them down to the landing," he said. "They had just shoved off in their dugout and were headed back for their old camp and paddling away for dear life.

"I had not long to wait before I discovered the reason for their haste. Far up the stream was a big fleet of Indian dugouts coming down, there must have been forty of them at least. Then all was as plain as print: the convicts were aiming to get back to their ponies and make their escape on them. Likely they would have done so if Indian Charley had only warned them a little sooner, but they were too

late."

"Go on," said Charley, eagerly, as Walter paused in his story.

"They had only got as far as that little island near this one, when another big fleet of canoes appeared just ahead of them. I guess they realized that they stood no show to make a successful fight for it, crowded up as they were in the dugout; anyway, they ran ashore on that little island and threw up mounds of sand and are lying behind them."

"Have the Indians attacked them?" Charley demanded.

"Not a shot has been fired. The Indians have formed a circle around the island with their canoes just out of good gunshot and seem to be waiting."

"Let's all go down to the landing," proposed Charley, eagerly, as Walter concluded his account.

The others were as excited as Charley and readily agreed to the proposal.

They found the situation just as Walter had described, the little island with the band of convicts on it with the circle of canoes around it.

"They won't stand much show if the Indians attack them in earnest," observed the captain, "there ain't a bit of shelter on that island and it ain't hardly a foot above water."

As the little party gazed eagerly upon the scene, the next act in the grim tragedy occurred.

"Look," exclaimed Charley, "they didn't fasten their canoe and it is drifting away. They are so busy watching the Indians that they haven't noticed it yet."

A yell of dismay from the convicts soon told that they had discovered their loss. A few dashed down to the water as though they would plunge in after the drifting craft, but they evidently lacked the courage to face the bullets that would surely greet them if they ventured the act, for they stopped at the water's edge and soon returned to the breastworks of sand.

An Indian paddled out from the circle of canoes and securing the drifting

craft, towed it back to the others.

"Just look," exclaimed Walter, "I wonder what the Seminoles mean by that move."

The others gazed eagerly with many exclamations of astonishment.

The circle of besieging canoes was breaking up, first one dropped out of the circle, then another, until the whole fleet had formed in one long, unbroken line. Paddles flashed in the water and the long line came sweeping gracefully on past the little island.

"You may hang me to the cross-trees, if they ain't agoin' to let them scoundrels go," cried the captain in disgust.

"It certainly looks like it," admitted Charley, sadly. "All they have to do is to swim to shore and make their way out on foot."

The big fleet came sweeping steadily on, headed directly for the landing where the little party stood.

An exultant yell burst from the convicts as they saw the dreaded attack so quickly abandoned.

A hundred yards from the landing, the fleet of canoes seemed to slacken speed, many of the Indians stopped paddling, and the long line was thrown into confusion.

An Indian in the leading canoe stood up and seemed to be haranguing the others.

"That's Little Tiger," said Walter eagerly, as he recognized the orator. "He's making a speech."

The hunters could, of course, make nothing of the speaker's words, but the tone of his voice told him that the young Indian was terribly in earnest. His clear, resonant voice seemed to now ring with despairing scorn, now sink to touching appeal.

"My, but he's a born orator!" exclaimed Charley in admiration. "It sounds as though he was lashing them up to some desperate undertaking."

The Indian at last ceased speaking and resuming his paddle sent his craft forward, his companions following in his wake.

He grounded his rude canoe at the hunters' feet and sprang out with the light, lithe leap of a panther.

"How," he said, gravely, extending his hand to each in turn.

The hunters shook the small, shapely hand with genuine pleasure. They were all struck by the change in the young Indian. In the short time since they had seen him last he had changed from a care-free stripling to a thoughtful chief whose word was law with his people. His manner had become grave and reserved, and there was about him an air of conscious power that well became his manly bearing.

He glanced from one to the other of the little party with keen eyes. "It is well," he said, in his clear, musical voice. "All here, none missing, not even the little one with a face like night. The Little Tiger's heart was heavy with fear lest he should come too late. But neither the jackal's tribe nor the spirits of the night have harmed his friends."

"Did not the young chief fear to land on the island of the spirits?" asked Charley with a smile.

The Indian drew himself up proudly. "Shall a Seminole fear to follow where the paleface dares to tread?" he demanded.

"Even the palefaces were filled with fear," said Charley, quickly, regretting his attempt at pleasantry, "but they found that they had been only children frightened at shadows. They have slain that which made the noises full of mystery."

"Does the young white chief speak with the tongue of truth?" asked the Seminole, eagerly.

"Even as he would be spoken to," answered Charley, gravely. "If the Little Tiger will come with his paleface friends, they will show him many wonderful things."

For a moment the young Indian hesitated, the fears bred in him by tradition struggling with his curiosity, but curiosity conquered. Turning to his followers, who had all drawn in to the landing, he gave some sharp commands in his own language. They stepped ashore with evident reluctance and there was considerable murmuring amongst them. The chief looked them over with a scornful eye.

"Some of my warriors are not men, but squaws in men's clothing," he said, bitterly. "Their blood is like water in their veins with fear."

The murmuring Seminoles grew silent under their chief's scornful gaze, and when he moved forward with his white friends they followed closely in the rear.

On the way up to the wall, Charley explained to the young Indian about the bell and its nightly ringer.

The chief listened with relief and satisfaction on his face and quickly communicated the news in his own tongue to his followers. Immobile as were the Indians' faces, they could not conceal entirely their relief and pleasure at the explanation of what had been to them a life-long, fearful mystery.

Little Tiger was astonished when he saw the ancient road through the forest,

and, at the sight of walls and buildings of stone, he exhibited a childish delight. "This is an island worthy of being the home of a great chief," he declared. "In the big wigwam of stone (the fort) the Little Tiger will rest in peace when not on the hunt, and the squaws shall make of this dirt of black, great fields of yams and waving corn. It is good, that which the palefaces have done; how can their red brother reward them?"

"By lending them one of his warriors to guide them back to where their ponies and goods are waiting," answered Charley, promptly.

"It shall be done," said the chief, "though the hearts of their red brothers will be heavy at parting. Their hearts were filled with gladness with the hope that the palefaces would bide with them and take unto them squaws from among the Seminoles."

The captain was on the point of exploding with indignation at the thought of an Indian squaw, but Charley spoke up quickly.

"Little Tiger does his friends great honor, yet, though their hearts are heavy at the thought of parting, they must go." Charley glanced at the captain and added mischievously, "He with the gray hair on face and head has, without doubt, many squaws amongst his people whose hearts are longing for his return."

The old sailor glared at the speaker in speechless indignation.

"There cannot be too many hands to till the fields," observed the chief, gravely. "I will give him another squaw to take back with him to his wigwam."

Charley silenced the embarrassed captain with a shake of his head. "The chief is kind," he said, "but squaws are not as men, there would be great enmity and hair-pulling between the white squaws and the red, and when squaws quarrel the wigwam is sad for the warrior."

The chief nodded gravely. "The young white chief speaks truly," he said.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEMINOLES.

The conversation on the part of the hunters had so far been conducted by Charley. Walter had remained silent, busily thinking over the wrongs that had been done them by the convicts. He could not forget the still, cold form in the hut that had been robbed of life by the murderers' bullets. He was not usually a vindictive boy, but, as he thought of Ritter's noble act and sudden death, his passion steadily grew and at last he turned scornfully to the young chief.

"Little Tiger speaks with the tongue of a man, but his deeds are those of a squaw," he declared, bitterly. "Are he and his braves afraid of the murderers of his people and the slayers of his father that they leave them to escape in peace and safety?"

"They will not escape," said the young Indian, his face darkening with anger at the savage taunt. "A man's death for a man, but jackals shall die like jackals. With hearts of terror and blood turned to water in their fear, they shall die a death more horrible than the palefaces can give them."

"You have offended him, Walter," said Charley, as the young savage walked proudly away. "Why couldn't you be more patient? I have felt all along that he had some plan for dealing with the convicts."

"I suppose I have put my foot in it," said Walter regretfully, "but it's no use crying about it now."

The Indians were already lighting fires and preparing breakfast, but the hunters had a task before them which they felt they must perform before they could touch food, and they immediately set about it.

In the shade of a majestic live oak, they dug a deep grave and in it laid to rest the body of the unfortunate Ritter. Their eyes were moist as the earth covered the remains of the young hero.

Little Tiger rose to meet them as they approached the group of Indians.

Walter walked up to him with outstretched hand. "I am sorry for my angry, foolish words," he said. "When sorrow bears heavy on the heart, the tongue grows bitter."

The young Seminole grasped the offered hand with evident pleasure. "Even squaws forgive and forget, and a warrior should be nobler than a squaw," he said, sagely. "The palefaces shall be seated and share the food of their red brothers."

The hunters would gladly have declined, but could not well do so without giving offense, so they seated themselves in the circle surrounding the steaming kettle containing the food and with inward qualms partook lightly of the stew.

There was a kettle to every fifteen Indians, and their manner of eating left much to be desired. Spoons and forks they had none, but they solved the problem by dipping their hands into the pot and fishing out the portions desired. With true courtesy, the guests were given the first dip into the pot.

As they ate, the hunters had an opportunity to study their hosts more carefully than they had yet done.

They were all splendid specimens of savage manhood. Not one was less than six feet tall, and each was shaped and muscled like an athlete. All wore the usual Seminole dress, a long shirt belted in at the waist, moccasins, and turbans of tightly wound red handkerchiefs. They were extremely neat and cleanly in appearance, a virtue not common with Indian tribes.

There were a few squaws among the company, but they did not tempt a second glance. They were wooden-faced, slovenly-looking creatures almost disgusting in appearance. They were loaded with string upon string of colored beads forming a solid mass, like a huge collar, from the point of their chins down to their chests.

"Which one have you picked out for your own, Captain?" whispered Charley. "That big one over there seems to have her eye upon you."

The old sailor flushed with embarrassment. "Look out or they'll have you," he cautioned fearfully, "I kinder feel that big one has singled me out, an' I don't want to encourage her none."

The Indians seemed to regard the day as a holiday to celebrate the laying out of the spirits and the adding of a large fertile island to their domain.

The morning was given over to feasting and to running, jumping and wrestling matches. Only the young Indians indulged in these contests, the

warriors sitting gravely looking on.

Our young hunters tried their strength and skill with the Indian lads, but, although they were stronger and more nimble than most boys of their age, they found that they were no match for the young Seminoles.

While the boys were enjoying the contests, the captain sat moodily apart, keeping a worried eye upon the squaws.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Charley drew aside one of the Seminole lads, whom he had found could speak English, and whispered eagerly to him.

The Indian lad's bright, beady eyes twinkled as he listened, and, when Charley concluded, he nodded his head and slipped away into the group around the fire.

"Look, Walt, oh, look," shouted Charley a moment later, "look at the captain, oh my, oh my," and Charley rolled on the grass in wicked glee.

The young Indian had done his work well. A dozen of the squaws had formed a ring around the old sailor and were slowly closing in. The captain had struggled to his feet and with red face and horrified eyes was waving his arms frantically, shouting, "Go away, go away," much as one would shoo a flock of chickens.

"Don't be afraid, captain," called Charley, "they only want to embrace you."

"I won't be embraced, I won't, I won't," cried the old sailor, frantically.

"Come, Captain, do the Hobson act," said Walter, "the ladies expect it."

"Help, help," shouted the captain appealingly, as the circle of grave-faced squaws steadily advanced, "I won't be embraced, I won't."

With a sudden howl of terror the squaws turned and fled.

In his fear, the captain had opened his mouth a little too far and his false teeth had tumbled out. The old sailor caught them in his hand and continued to wave his arms. "I won't be embraced," he shouted.

But there was no need of the defiance; the squaws would not, for untold beads, have come near the strange being with the movable teeth.

"Shame, Captain," said Charley severely, as the two boys approached the old sailor. "You must have been flirting with those ladies to make them act like that."

"I guess they was just attracted by my appearance," said the captain modestly, "I always was a favorite with the ladies."

"Looks as if they were headed this way again," said Walter.

With a cry of fright the old sailor turned and dashed away for the shelter of the hut as fast as he could run.

The boys shouted with laughter, and even the grave warriors smiled at the scene.

After dinner the celebration was renewed, but this time the youths formed the audience while their elders held shooting matches and more sober contests of skill and strength.

The captain did not emerge from the hut until nearly sundown, and when he did appear he carried both upper and lower teeth in his hand. Whenever a squaw approached anywhere near him he would open his mouth to its fullest extent and wave the teeth in the air.

"They will get used to seeing you without them and soon think you as beautiful as ever," Charley said to him, gravely.

"Charley," said the old sailor, solemnly, "for good or ill, we leave this island to-morrow. It ain't often them Injin women meets with a man of my looks, an' it has drove 'em plum crazy. It ain't safe for me to stay longer."

"I'm wondering what that widow lady in Shelbourne will say when she hears of this," said Walter musingly. "She will naturally think that you must have given them great encouragement."

"If either of you lads breathe a word of this in town, I'll throttle you," declared the apprehensive old sailor.

"We won't say a word," said Charley, severely, "but I must say you have been setting Walter and I a terrible example, captain."

After this parting shot, the two tormentors retired quickly, for the old sailor was almost at the exploding point with indignation.

The captain was not the only one to whom the afternoon had brought trials. Chris had not been without his share of troubles. The Seminoles treated him with marked disdain and would not even permit him to eat with the others.

"The Indians consider the darky as an inferior being," Charley had confided to Walter in a whisper. "There are rumors that there is more than one negro slave in the heart of the Everglades. The Seminoles have a proverb, 'White man, Indian, dog, nigger,' which expresses their opinion of the colored race."

Chris' troubles reached their climax when the little party was seated around the fire with the Indians in the evening.

The chief, who had been watching the little darky closely all day, turned to Charley: "Me buy 'em," he said, indicating Chris with a wave of his hand. "Me buy nigger."

"I ain't no nigger," shouted Chris in a rage, "I'se a free-born black Englishman, dat's what I is."

Charley silenced the indignant little darky with a wave of his hand.

"He already has a master and is therefore not ours to sell," he said, while Chris bristled with indignation.

"Who master?" inquired the Seminole with an appraising glance at the sturdy little darky.

"A man called King Edward," said Charley gravely, and Chris' indignation subsided.

"Too bad," grunted the chief, and dropped the subject.

"What's that?" exclaimed Walter suddenly, as distant rifle shots echoed in the air, were repeated irregularly and finally ceased.

"The convicts, I guess," whispered Charley, "I don't understand why they are firing, though. All the Indians are here."

Significant glances passed between the Indians.

"Jackals are dead," said the chief, a fierce exultation in his face.

"Who killed them?" cried Charley.

"Crocodiles," said the Seminole, briefly.

The little party stared at each other in horror. They understood now why the Seminoles had not made an attack, and had showed so much confidence in the convicts not being able to escape.

Much as the hunters hated the men who had persecuted them, they felt shocked and horror-stricken at the horrible fate that had overtaken them.

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 themselves 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.

THE END.

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