

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 around 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."

the foot of the tree where they were speedily joined by the delighted captain.

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

“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.

Devotly 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 con-

victs 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."