

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 red-skin. "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 our 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."