

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 saddle-bags," 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.