

## 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 cut-throat 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.