

## 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 ex-

plained, 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 night'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.