

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RETREAT.

A FEW words gave his companions the substance of the conversation. "Now," he continued, "I wish we could all get together in the camp for a few minutes to talk this thing over, and decide on our next move, but it's too risky to leave the wall unguarded, although I don't believe they will try another assault before dark."

The young Seminole spoke up, "when the Big Tiger speaks, the whelp is silent, I will stay."

"Golly, I reckon dis nigger ain't no good at planning, spec I better stay here, too," observed Chris.

A parting volley was fired into the forest, and under cover of the smoke the rest retired quickly to the lean-to.

The wounded man was lying awake on his couch, his keen, black eyes burning with an unnatural light.

Although he must have been suffering intense pain from his wound, his features were calm and composed. He tried to rise as the hunters entered, but could not raise himself even on his elbow.

"Don't try to move," exclaimed Charley, hurrying of his size.

"How," said the sufferer, in greeting, extending a hand surprisingly small and well-formed for a man of his size.

Charley gave it a hearty shake and his companions crowding around, gravely followed his example.

The wounded man lay silent for a moment surveying the little party with shrewd, appraising eyes. A friendly gleam shone in his beady orbs as they lingered for a second on the captain's kindly, weather-beaten face. He looked a trifle longer at Walter's eager, open countenance, but his glance came back to rest on Charley's face, and to him his words were addressed.

"He, whom his people call the Big Tiger, was made as weak as a tiny papoose by the bullet of a jackal," he began in broken English. "The Little tiger has told me all; how the jackals would have taken their prey but for your coming in the canoe of cloth and bringing the helpless ones here. The jackals' bullet has sped true, and the Big Tiger will lead his followers no more in the hunt, but the son of a chief will remain and his life will be at the young white chieftain's command."

The stricken man burst into a fit of coughing, and Charley noted with pity that flecks of scarlet stained

the sufferer's lips. "Shot through the lungs," he decided, but he allowed no trace of pity to show on his face.

"A chief of the Seminoles must be wise with the wisdom of the owl in council," he said, as soon as the fit of coughing had left its victim. "Payment from father or son we desire not, only the counsel of wisdom now. We are but braves in the hunt or fight, and great danger threatens, now, but the ripe wisdom of a great chief may be able to point out a path to safety."

Clearly and in few words, he described their present desperate position and the demands and threats of the outlaws.

The Indian listened in impassive silence and for some time after Charley finished, remained buried in profound meditation.

"The young white chief carries an old head on young shoulders," at last he said approvingly. "He speaks truly when he says that the air is thick with danger. When the blackness of night comes, then will come, also, those who make war from behind the trees of the forest. In the darkness, how is the young white and his friends to tell enemies from friends? The jackals will wriggle through and over the wall of trees like snakes through tall grass. After what they

have seen, can my white friends expect mercy at hands already stained red?"

Charley shook his head. "Thou speakest my thoughts, but are we to be murdered in the dark by creatures such as those?"

"The mind of the young is ever quick and hasty in its flights," reproved the wounded chief, gravely. "What use for the medicine man to point out the sickness, unless he has the proper barks and plants?"

"Well," said Charley, "let the wisdom of one grown wise in councils tell us of the cure for this disease."

The wounded savage was again seized with a fit of coughing, and it was some moments before he could reply. "Between the glades and here—a swift half day's journey—a small island lies in the middle of the river. There, four men could stand off an army.

"If I commanded the paleface friends as I do my tribe, I would say, bury all things too heavy to carry away in the canoes of cloth, while it is yet light, turn the ponies loose that they may not starve. Put all else in the cloth boats. Let some keep up a noise and fire from the wall of trees to convince the white men without hearts that you are going to stay and fight. With the first darkness of night let all take to the boats. I with the Little Tiger will lead the way, then may come him you call captain with the little one

whose face is like the night, lastly, may come you and the one with the eager face (Walter). Without noise must we go, and keep close to each other, for the river has many arms stretched out for the unwary stranger. At the island of which I spoke, you may camp in safety while we go on alone. I stop at my wigwam to die, alone, in peace and quietness with the great spirit, as becomes a chief of a long line of chiefs, but he, who will soon be chief, will travel quickly on gathering together my people. With them he will return, and of the twelve who murder from behind trees not one shall return to boast of his deeds. When the buzzards are feeding off their bones, then, may you return and secure that which you have buried, the ponies, and all of that which is yours. That is the counsel of one of a race of chiefs. What is the answer of the young white chief?"

"I must consult with those who share my dangers, Chief," said Charley gravely. "We talk not like squaws, and in five minutes you shall have our answer."

The Seminole rolled over on his side exhausted from his long speech and frequent coughing spells, while Charley beckoned the captain and Walter out of earshot.

"You have heard it all, now I want your opinion," he said simply. "After this last terrible mistake of

mine, it will be long before I trust to my judgment again."

"We all fell into the same error, lad," said the captain, kindly. "The blame, if any, belongs to us all. Forget it, Charley, and don't let it weaken your self-confidence. Now what do you think of the plan of our red-skinned friend?"

"I believe it's our only chance for life," he answered regretfully, "those cut-throats have got us foul. It's run away or be killed."

"Then I'm for running. But, think you, he can be trusted to pilot us aright?"

"He will not pilot us far, I fear," said Charley, sadly. "I doubt if he will reach his wigwam. That bullet touched a lung all right. If he dies on the way we must look to the son; he is of the same spirit as the father, or I am no judge of character."

"They both speak English wonderfully well," said Walter musingly.

"So do most of the Seminoles," explained Charley. "They come in to the outlying towns at rare intervals to exchange their venison and skins for ammunition and cloth, and it's wonderful how quickly they pick up the language. But I am rambling. The question before us is, shall we abandon all our things and run away with a fair chance of escaping with whole

skins, or stay and fight it out with the certainty of being killed, sooner or later?"

"Run," said the captain decisively, "and trust to luck and the chief to recover our things."

"Retreat," voted Walter regretfully.

Without another word, Charley turned back to the bedside of the suffering savage, whose pain-tortured eyes had never strayed from their faces during the conference.

"Chief, we have decided that your plan is the only one to follow," Charley said, simply.

Exultation showed for a second on the Indian's set features. "Good," he exclaimed, "listen, young white chief. Do not mourn the loss of ponies and things such as you must leave behind. To-day you risked your life to save a stranger Indian and his boy. Great shall be your reward when this trouble is over. That with which to trade for many ponies shall be yours."

In his excitement the wounded man had partly raised himself on his elbow, but the exertion was too much; there was a rush of blood from his lips and he sank back on his couch in a dead faint. In a second Charley was by his side forcing down more brandy between the clenched teeth. The powerful stimulant acted quickly. In a moment the sufferer again opened his eyes to consciousness. Charley

beckoned to his chum. "Go relieve his boy," he whispered, "and send him here. I want him to get his instructions from his father before there comes another attack. The captain and I will fix for our departure."

"Good," exclaimed the chief, whose keen ears had caught the low-whispered conversation, "we won't die yet, though. Die in our own wigwam when Great Spirit tolls the bell of mystery."

Walter was off like a shot, and the young Seminole soon stood by his father's couch. While the two indulged in earnest conversation in their own tongue, the captain and Charley worked hastily, for the sun was already setting. What things they dared risk carrying were hustled into the frail canoes. One of the couches was conveyed to the dugout and spread out in the bottom and two of the thickest blankets spread on top of the leaves. The ponies were cast loose to shift for themselves. Their remaining stuff was shoved into the water-proof bag and buried in a high spot. By the time this was done, the first shades of night had fallen. At Charley's suggestion, all hurried into the barricade, and for fifteen minutes poured a hail of bullets into the forest to convince the outlaws that they were still there and on the alert.

Then all hurried back to the camp. Many hands

made easy and gentle work of conveying the wounded man from his couch to the comfortable bed in the dugout. The young Indian took his place in the stern of the ticklish craft, and with a single shove of his long pole sent it far out into the stream. The captain, with Chris, followed a few yards behind, paddling with soft noiseless strokes. A few yards in their wake came the last canoe containing Walter and Charley, and quickly the outline of the point was lost in the darkness behind.