

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE FLIGHT BY NIGHT.

As the canoes glided silently towards the convicts' camp the paddle strokes of the fugitives grew slower and more guarded, the blades of the paddles were no longer lifted clear of the water lest the falling drops from them should be heard by those on shore. The river narrowed suddenly opposite the point, and the canoes would be compelled to pass within a hundred feet of the enemy's camp. All of the convicts might be in the woods surrounding the hunters' camp, waiting to close in on their supposed victims, but there was a chance that they had had the foresight to count upon this very attempt at escape and had left some of their number on the point to cut off the retreat.

Charley thought of all this as he knelt in the stern of his little craft and plied the paddle slowly and with infinite caution, his every nerve tense, and sight and hearing strained to catch any sound of movement on the rapidly nearing point. Were it white men only that they were seeking to elude, he would have felt far less apprehension, but he recognized

that in the person of Indian Charley they had to deal with a mind crafty and cunning, that would be likely to provide against the very move they were making. Even in his anxiety, Charley could not but notice and admire the marvelous skill with which the young Indian in the dugout handled his clumsy craft. He hugged close to the farther shore and glided along its border as noiselessly as a shadow. The captain, although but little used to the paddle, was also doing surprisingly well and was following closely in the wake of the dugout. Silently the dugout at last glided past the dangerous point, and a moment later the captain's canoe also slipped gently by.

Charley gave a sigh of relief. They were safely past and could laugh at any attempted pursuit in the clumsy dugouts the convicts possessed.

But that one unguarded moment of relief was disastrous in its result. In a deep, careless stroke, his paddle struck a submerged log and the slender blade snapped short off with a loud crack, the ticklish canoe careened suddenly to one side, then righted again with a sullen splash. At the sound the silent point quickly stirred with life. There was the hum of excited voices and a blinding flash of flame lit up the darkness, followed by the sharp crack of rifles and the hum of bullets,—they were discovered.

“Give way all,” shouted Charley, as he fumbled in

the darkness for the spare paddle, which he at last succeeded in finding. "Are you hurt, Walt?" he called anxiously to his companion.

"Not a bit," answered his chum cheerfully, "but hurry up or we will be getting another volley."

The canoe had drifted beyond the point before her way died out, but was still less than a hundred yards from it. By the splashing of water the boys could tell that the convicts were launching one of the dug-outs in pursuit. With vigorous strokes Charley sent their light craft flying ahead; a few minutes and they would be out of rifle-shot and out of danger, but again there was the crack of rifles and Charley called to his chum with a voice hoarse with pain, "You'll have to take her, Walt, they got me that time."

"Bad?" cried Walter anxiously, as they changed places.

"In the shoulder," weakly, "but don't mind about me. Shove her ahead as fast as you can, the others have got quite a start of us, and we've got to catch them."

For half an hour Walter paddled silently on, putting all his strength into the strokes that sent the light craft leaping ahead, leaving the pursuing dug-out far behind.

"Charley," he called at last, "isn't it time we were up with at least the chief's dugout?"



But only silence greeted his question, his plucky chum had fainted from pain and the loss of blood.

For a few moments Walter let the canoe drift, while he pondered as to what he should do. He felt sure that they had passed the captain and his companions—but how? In the excitement of the pursuit he must have passed unnoticed a point where the river branched and had taken the wrong fork. There were, he knew, dozens of such forks to the river and the mistake was one that might easily have been made under any circumstances. The question now was what to do about it. To return was to run the risk of falling into the hands of the convicts, and the chance of finding the stream the others had taken was exceedingly small. There might be a dozen tributaries between him and the convicts' point, and how was he to tell which was the right one? In desperation he crawled forward to his unconscious companion and sprinkled his face again and again with water from the river.

At last Charley opened his eyes with a moan of pain.

"We're lost," shouted Walter eagerly. "I can't find the captain or chief, what shall I do?" He bent his head to catch the feeble answer from the wounded lad's lips.

"Keep on, keep on. When the river forks, take

the largest stream, and—" but Charley had fainted again.

With a heavy heart, Walter crept back to his place in the stern and resumed the paddle. It was a terrible situation for a young, inexperienced lad; lost on a great river in a frail canoe, pursued by relentless enemies, and alone, except for a wounded, and perhaps dying companion. It was enough to strike terror into one much older than our boy hunter.

Throughout the long night the despairing lad paddled steadily on, praying for the day to break. At last it came with a blaze of glory in the east. When it grew light enough to see, he rose cautiously and gazed around him.

The prospect was disheartening enough. The river had narrowed to less than a hundred yards in width and wound and twisted amongst the waste of marsh that stretched desolately ahead and astern as far as the eye could see. To the east and west the marsh extended back at least a mile before it met solid timbered land, here and there, and an occasional long point jutted out until it met the stream. Although the weary lad strained his eyes in all directions, not a sign could he see of the other canoes or of any human life. With a sigh of despair, he sank again to his knees and crawled forward to where his chum lay half unconscious and moaning in pain.

Dipping his handkerchief over the side, he gently sponged Charley's pale face with it.

The contact of the cold water seemed to revive the wounded lad. He opened his eyes and attempted to smile, although his lips were twitching with pain. "What a nuisance I am, old chap," he said faintly.

"Not a bit," declared Walter, cheerfully, overjoyed at his return to consciousness. "Here, take a drink of this cold water, and then I am going to have a look at your wound."

With his hunting-knife, Walter cut away the bloody shirt from the shoulder and exposed the gaping hole to view. It was still bleeding slightly, but he noted with satisfaction that the bullet had passed completely through the fleshy part of the shoulder without touching the bone, a painful wound, but not a fatal one. He washed it clean with river water and bound it up with strips from his own shirt. "You'll be all right in a few days," he declared cheerfully. "Now just lay quiet. I am going to paddle in to the nearest point and start a fire and make you some broth."

Walter's heart was lighter than it had been in many hours as he again resumed his paddle. Day had brought fresh hope and courage. Charley was getting along far better than he had dared to hope during the night. He soon would be well enough to



take command, and then, thought Walter, they would soon find their friends. He had great confidence in Charley's ability to get them out of their present predicament.

Suddenly Walter paused in his paddling and sat staring at the point, which was now scarce a hundred yards distant. A thin wisp of smoke curled up above the thick growth of palmettos with which the point was covered.

"Charley," he called softly, "there is someone on the point; they have just started up a fire."

"Better sheer off and give it a wide berth, then," counseled his chum. "If it were the captain or the chief, you would see the canoes."

"But the boats may be pulled up among the mangrove bushes," Walter objected. "If it should be the captain and Chris, just think what our passing by them would mean. We might never see them again, Charley. I am going to have a look."

"All right," agreed his chum, "but be very careful, Walt."

The fire was located well in on the point, and Walter steered to land some distance out from it. A few strokes of the paddle sent the light canoe gliding in amongst the mangrove bushes that fringed the shore. Climbing out upon the curious gnarled roots, Walter pulled the canoe far enough in to effectually

screen it from sight. Next he examined his pistols to see that they were properly loaded, and with a parting word of cheer for his chum, he made his way slowly and cautiously over the intervening roots to the shore.

He soon found that it was no easy task he had set himself. Between himself and the fire fifty yards away, intervened the heaviest growth of timber he had ever seen; palms, sweet gums, satinwoods, and pines mingled in close and wild confusion, while the ground beneath them was a matted mass of vines and creepers.

For a moment Walter hesitated. Some of the vines and creepers, he knew, were poisonous. To touch them meant sores, swellings, and suffering. But it was only for a moment he paused. The thought of how much might depend on his errand drove him on. Tearing two strips from his already tattered shirt, he wrapped them around either hand, and dropping on hands and knees he cautiously wound his way towards the fire.

His progress was slow and painful. Dangling brier vines drew blood from arms and face, and sharp thorns repeatedly lacerated hands and knees. At each move forward he had to pause and remove the dead branches and twigs from his path lest their cracking should betray him to the campers. At last,



however, he could catch the sound of voices, and wriggling forward with infinite caution, he reached a place from which he could get a glimpse between the trees at the group gathered around the fire.

The sight was not reassuring. Near the blaze a half dozen of the convicts lay lounging at their ease, while another one was busily engaged in making coffee and frying bacon. The neighing of ponies in the background told the watcher how they had arrived at the point before him. They must have ridden most of the night to have covered the distance, and Walter felt a sinking of heart as he realized the determination of their pursuit. The conversation that came to his ears did not tend to reassure him.

The convicts were evidently tired and in bad humor, and a hot argument was raging.

"I tell you it's all foolishness, this losing sleep and wearing ourselves out," declared a tall, thin, pasty-faced individual. "Here's my plan: just break up into parties of two or three and each party strike out for a different town and catch a freight out of the state. I 'low we're just wasting time and making trouble for ourselves by following up them chaps."

"Bill Salino, you've got as little sense as courage," declared a man whom Walter recognized as the leader of the gang. "The time for scattering and getting

out of the state has gone by. There will be men watching for us at every point, and to be caught means hanging for all hands now. We've got to lay quiet here for six months or so until they give up watching for us. We're safe enough here unless them chaps get away and bring the Indians or a sheriff's posse down on us; and they won't get away if I have to follow them into the heart of the Everglades," he declared vindictively.