

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTURED.

FROM the expression on their faces, Walter judged that the other four convicts were in doubt as to which of the two plans they should lend their support to. "Are you sure we'll catch 'em, Cap?" inquired one, doubtfully, "there are so powerful many forks to this river, it's like hunting for a needle in a haystack."

"If we don't get 'em, Injin Charley will," declared the leader, confidently. "I wouldn't be surprised to see him show up with 'em any minute now. He's an Injin and knows just what course them redskins in the dugout will be likely to take."

Still the outlaws seemed to waver, and the leader shifted his arguments. "If you fellows take up with Salino's fool idea, just think what shape you'll be in, even if you don't get caught. You won't have no money and will have to go around like a hobo until you make a strike. Now if we catch this chief, I reckon we can torture him, till he tells us where his plumes are hid. Then when things have quieted

down a bit we can send a man in to dispose of 'em and walk out of here like gentlemen with money in our pockets."

This argument seemed to appeal to his companions, and the murmuring ceased.

Walter decided that he had heard enough, and turning, started to retrace his way back to the canoe. His second movement forward, however, was his undoing. A large limb upon which he had trusted his weight broke noisily under him, and he was precipitated forward into a huge clump of briars. Before he could regain his feet, strong hands seized him and dragged him, still vainly struggling, out into the clearing.

"One of 'em," cried the leader triumphantly, "I reckon the rest ain't far off. Scatter and search the point for 'em, boys,—but wait a bit, maybe this young cub can save us trouble."

But Walter had been thinking rapidly. If he was to save his chum it was no time for nice scruples. With a silent prayer for forgiveness, he waited the outlaws' questions.

The leader drew a revolver, cocked it, and presented it at the lad's head. "You can tell me the truth now or I'll blow your head off," he growled.

Walter's face took on an expression of fear and cringing terror far greater than he was really feeling.

The brutal ruffian eyed this appearance of fear with every evidence of satisfaction. "Now I guess you'll answer my questions truthfully," he said threateningly. "First, where are your companions?"

"They left us in the darkness and we could not catch up with them. They must be way up the river by now," Walter stammered.

His questioner swore loudly. "Got past us, did they? Well, no matter, we'll get them easily now, we know for sure which stream they took."

Walter could hardly conceal his delight at having put the ruffian upon a false trail, but he was ready for the next question, which came quickly.

"How did you get here?"

"The canoe struck a log, capsized, and sank. I swam ashore."

"What became of the fellow in the boat with you?"

"Drowned, I guess," said Walter with a sob.

The leader turned to the others. "I reckon he's too scairt to be lying," he said, "however, you had better take a look around the point. Be quick about it, though, for we will have to hurry to catch up with those other chaps. Here, tie this fellow up before you go."

Walter was seized, his hands tied behind him, and

he was lashed with his back to a small satinwood tree.

He watched the departure of the ruffians with sinking heart. If they searched thoroughly, Charley and the canoe were sure to be discovered.

The outlaws soon returned, however, after a very careless search and reported nothing in sight. Truth to tell, tired as they were, they had quickly wearied of trying to force their way through the dense jungle.

After a hasty breakfast, the leader gave the order to mount. "You two stay here and wait for Injin Charley," he commanded, indicating two of the gang. "We have got to let him know what we've learned. I reckon we'll be back by night, if we ain't, you follow us in the morning."

"What shall we do with the kid?" inquired one of the men.

"Turn him over to Injin Charley when he comes in. I reckon he'll know what to do with him," said the leader with a grin so evil and suggestive that it made the helpless lad's blood run cold.

The four outlaws and their leader mounted their ponies and soon were lost to sight among the trees. The two left behind proceeded to make themselves comfortable without a thought for the exhausted lad whose tight bonds cut cruelly into arms and legs. They raked up beds of leaves upon which they spread

their blankets and then proceeded to make up for the sleep they had lost during the night.

Walter was not only suffering much physically, but was in great mental distress as well. He feared that at any moment Charley, alarmed by his long absence, might call or fire off one of the guns and bring the outlaws to his hiding-place. How could he warn him of the danger he was in? Suddenly the bound lad was seized by an ingenious idea. Assuring himself by their deep breathing, that his captors were fast asleep, he began to whistle, softly at first, then gradually louder and louder till the weird, mournful strains of the "Funeral March" filled the air.

One of the guards tossed restlessly and woke up cursing. "Shut up that whistling," he shouted, "that blooming thing gets on my nerves."

Walter had no option but to obey, but the awesome tune had carried its doleful message. The mournful notes had reached the ears of the wounded lad in the canoe. Its message was plain to him. Walter was a captive, or in great danger. And now began a contest between will-power and pain and weakness from which many a man would have shrunken.

Three times Charley struggled to rise to his feet, only to sink back exhausted with great beads of sweat standing out on his brow. At last, abandoning

the attempt, he began to wriggle back towards the stern of the canoe. His progress was slow and painful, and even in the short distance to be covered, he had often to lay quiet and rest. At last he succeeded in reaching the stern, but here his difficulties were by no means ended. Working awkwardly with his left hand he managed to draw his hunting-knife and slash open the pack of provisions they had brought with them. From these he selected a can of milk. It was slow work opening it with one hand, but at last he succeeded in removing the top. Part of the contents he swallowed as it was, the balance he diluted with water and broke hardtack up in it. By the time he had finished the food, a little color had crept back into his face. He was still very weak, however, and another attempt to rise met with failure. For a few minutes he lay quiet thinking, then rummaging in the pack he brought forth a pint bottle of brandy. With repugnance written on his face, he took several swallows of the fiery liquor. It ran through his veins like fire. Shoving the bottle into his pocket, he succeeded in staggering to his feet and slowly pulled himself up on one of the mangrove's roots, and, pausing frequently to rest, gradually worked his way to the shore.

Walter's captors slept heavily until the noon hour, when they awoke, stirred up the fire, and prepared

some dinner; but they offered none of it to the unfortunate lad, who watched its preparation with hungry eyes. Their repast finished, the two ruffians enjoyed a long smoke, after which they played a few games of cards which ended in a violent dispute that nearly resulted in blows.

As the afternoon wore on without the appearance of the party they were expecting, they again composed themselves to slumber. Slowly the afternoon wore away and the two outlaws still slept on. The sun went down and night began to fall and still the two showed no signs of awakening.

Suddenly Walter felt the bonds that held him slip to the ground and Charley's voice whispered, "Drop on all fours, Walt, and work your way back into the thicket."

Walter did as he was bid as quickly as his stiffened limbs would permit and soon caught up with his chum, who had begun to retrace his steps as soon as he had severed the captive's bonds. In fact, he dared not wait or tarry, for the false strength engendered by the brandy was fast leaving him. To give out on the way would be fatal to both. He must reach the canoe before the last remnant of his strength gave out or all was lost.

Slowly the two boys wormed their way through the jungle, expecting every second to hear the sounds that

would indicate that the prisoner was missed and pursuit begun.

At last they reached the clump of mangroves that concealed the canoe. Here outraged nature claimed its due and Charley sank on the edge of the shore unable to go further. It required nearly all of Walter's remaining strength to drag his insensible chum over the roots and lower him into the canoe. Precious as was each moment lost, Charley demanded instant attention, his wound had broken open again from his exertions and his tattered shirt was wet with blood. Walter stuffed bits of cloth into the hole and bound it up as well as he could in the darkness. This labor completed, he cast loose the canoe, and with a few strokes of the paddle sent her over to the other side of the stream. Here he laid aside his paddle and sank back to rest and think. The friendly darkness completely hid them from the gaze of anyone on the point. Until the moon rose they were as safe there as any place on the river. The plucky lad sorely needed rest and refreshment. For two days and a night he had been without sleep and for twenty-four hours without food. This, with the strenuous labor and excitement through which he had passed, had rendered him nearly as weak as his unconscious companion. Sleep was out of the question until they were safe from their enemies, but food was handy and

he lost no time in making a hearty meal on a can of corned beef, crackers and a tin of milk. The repast brought fresh strength and courage, although his head felt very heavy and he could hardly keep his eyes open.

With the outlaws ahead and behind them, there was little choice of the direction in which they should flee, and Walter paddled steadily on up the river, keeping close to the opposite shore from the convicts.

Hour after hour passed and found him still paddling wearily onward, every muscle and nerve in his body aching with fatigue. At last a brightening of the sky in the east warned him of the rising of the moon. As its bright beams lit up the gloomy river and desolate marshes, Walter gave a cry of joy; directly ahead, right in the middle of the stream, lay a small island, its shores fringed with a dense growth of mangroves. As the canoe drew nearer, Walter surveyed it with increasing delight. Here was surely a safe place of refuge where they might stay as long as their provisions lasted and until their enemies tired of the pursuit. Where the island lay, the river had widened out into a fair sized lake and the nearest shore was out of gunshot. There was no way that the outlaws could reach them except by boat, and they had none with them.

With lightened heart, Walter ran the canoe far up

into the mangroves and fastened it securely to a large root. Making his way ashore he soon found a small space of cleared ground, to which he speedily conveyed their blankets which he spread out on the dry sand. Returning to the boat he endeavored in vain to rouse Charley from the stupor into which he had fallen. At last he gave up the attempt and half carried and half dragged his chum ashore and laid him on his blanket, then quickly stretching himself out by his side, was soon fast asleep.

Once in the night Walter was awakened by a loud splashing. With pistol in hand he stole to the water's edge. Many dark masses were slowly gliding to and fro on the surface of the stream. "Alligators," he exclaimed with a sigh of relief and returned to his blanket and sleep, from which he was only aroused again by the rising of the sun.