

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SWAMP.

WALTER'S first thought on awakening was for his chum. Charley was tossing restlessly on his blanket, his face and hands flushed and hot with fever. All of Walter's attempts to rouse him met only with unintelligible words and phrases. The exertion of the previous day in his weak state, the opening of his wound afresh, and the unhealthy river water he had drunk, had all combined to bring him to a dangerous condition.

Walter removed the bandages and looked at the wound. It was of an angry red and greatly swollen, and its changed appearance frightened him. "Charley," he called, shaking him gently, "don't you know me?"

Reason gleamed for a moment in the sufferer's eyes. "Sure, it's Walt," he muttered.

"Listen and do try to understand," begged Walter, earnestly. "We are safe, Charley. The convicts cannot get at us now. We can stay here and rest up as long as we want to and you can lay quiet and get well again. Now, I am going to light a fire and get you some broth and strong coffee, and, after you have

taken them, I am going to heat some water and give that wound a good cleansing. Do you understand, old chap?"

"Yes," murmured the sufferer, wearily.

After putting his own blanket under Charley's head for a pillow and making the sick lad as comfortable as possible, Walter began his preparations for breakfast. Selecting a spot where the ground seemed soft and free from roots, he dug a hole about two feet deep to contain his fire. It required only a few minutes to make one large enough for his purpose, and his next step was to bring up the provisions and cooking utensils from the canoe.

It was only a short distance to where the little craft lay moored amongst the mangroves and a few steps carried Walter to the spot, but on the edge of the bank he paused with a cry of surprise and dismay.

The canoe lay bottom side up in the water.

With the strength of despair, Walter succeeded in righting the overturned craft and pulled it up on shore where he quickly tipped the water out of it.

One glance at the interior confirmed his worst fears, nothing remained inside but the paddle, which had been wedged under the seats; provisions, guns, and ammunition were all gone.

Walter sank down on the bank in despair and buried his face in his hands. He understood now, the

meaning of the splash he had heard during the night. A curious alligator had upset the light craft with its nose or a flirt of its powerful tail.

For a long time Walter sat silent and still, pondering on their now desperate situation. One fact stood out clear in the mind of the sorely tried and unhappy boy; they must, without delay, leave the island, which only a few hours before had promised them a safe and comfortable refuge. Their only chance lay in finding their friends before he became helpless from lack of food. It needed no great medical knowledge to tell him that Charley was fast sinking into a critical condition. Without food or proper medicine, the injured lad was not likely to last long and every moment they tarried on the island lessened their chances, which were already very slight, of escaping with their lives.

When he had arrived at this conclusion, Walter arose and made his way back to his companion, who was lying as he had left him, tossing restlessly from side to side.

"I'm sorry, Charley, but you'll have to wait a little longer for your broth," he said, cheerfully. "I have decided we had better waste no more time here but hurry on and catch the captain; he has medicines that will soon fix you up and make you all right again."

His explanation was wasted so far as Charley was concerned, for the wounded lad was beginning to rave in the delirium of fever. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Walter abandoned the effort to rouse him to consciousness, and, leaving him as he lay, proceeded to make ready for their departure. He cut a pile of small myrtle boughs which he carried down to the canoe and spread out upon the bottom and upon these he stretched their blankets, making a soft and comfortable bed for his chum to lie upon. Now came his hardest task, the getting of the sick boy down to, and aboard of, the canoe. Fortunately the hearty meal and rest of the night before had so far restored his strength, that he was able, by half carrying and half dragging him, to get Charley, at last, upon the bed prepared for him. Then pausing only long enough to get his breath again, Walter took his old place in the stern and paddled out into the stream, where he headed once more for the south, and with long, steady strokes sent their little craft flying towards the unknown.

As they slid over the water, leaving the miles rapidly behind them, Walter kept a sharp watch on either bank for signs of the outlaws. That they were still hunting for him and his friends, he felt no doubt, but he cherished faint hopes that he had distanced them during the night. He consoled himself with

the thought that even were they captured, death by a bullet would be far quicker and less painful than a slow, lingering death from fever and starvation.

All day the despairing lad paddled ahead, pausing only at noon for a brief space to rest his wearied arms and drink sparingly of the river water, which, black and foul as it was, reeked with fever.

Charley, on his bed in the bow, tossed and muttered incessantly. Every once in a while, Walter would crawl forward and sprinkle cold water on the lad's hot face; it was all he could do to relieve the sufferer, whose ravings fell heavily on his anxious heart.

As the afternoon wore away, Walter's strength began to fail; the mental strain, steady work, the blistering sun, and lack of food, were fast telling on him. The temptation to stop and rest and sleep grew almost irresistible, but he bravely fought off the weakness. Their only hope lay in pushing on and on until they found their friends or came out upon civilization. Whither the river led he knew not, but was in hopes that it might at last bring them out into a settled country. To stop now meant certain death.

As night settled down, his tired eyes caught the gleam of a fire on the shore not far ahead. A wild hope possessed him that it might prove to be the captain and his companions, but, warned by his previous experience, he approached the blaze cautiously.

Slowly he drifted in towards the fire, against which he could soon distinguish moving figures. At last, he approached near enough to recognize the forms against the bright firelight, and hope fled. It was another party of the outlaws, four in number, and, the disappointed lad swung the canoe around to the further shore and paddled safely past without being discovered.

The night passed slowly away, and through the long hours the lad in the canoe urged it steadily forward into the darkness. His tired, aching brain was now possessed of but one thought, to paddle on, and on, and on. His hands had cramped to the paddle handle, and the strokes were feeble as a child's, but the blade still rose and fell regularly, and the canoe still moved slowly ahead.

Daybreak found him in the same position, the paddle still slowly moving, and his bloodshot, staring eyes still fixed ahead.

The rising sun brought him staggering to his feet, a cry of hope on his lips.

Dead ahead, and more than a mile away, the river disappeared in a great forest of strange-looking trees. Amongst its shelter might be found food and friends, thought Walter, and the hope gave him fresh courage and strength.

Before sinking back into his seat he carefully sur-

veyed the further shore. His gaze was arrested at a point about a mile behind the canoe. There for about a half mile, the shore lay comparatively clear of timber, very likely having been swept by fire at some time in the past. It was not the character of the shore, however, that arrested Walter's attention. His gaze was fixed upon four objects moving swiftly across the open space and headed towards him. It required no great reasoning to tell him that the four figures were mounted outlaws and that they had sighted the canoe. It was to be a race between ponies and canoe, as to which should reach the forest first.

With the strength born of desperation, Walter forced the light canoe ahead. Behind him the riders spurred their ponies on at the top of their speed. Walter could see, by glancing over his shoulder from time to time, that the outlaws were steadily gaining, but the canoe was moving swiftly, also, and was rapidly drawing near to the strange forest, and Walter decided with a thrill of joy that the enemy would not arrive in time to cut him off from the shelter of the trees.

The outlaws were not slow to recognize this fact. Their rifles began to crack and the bullets to whistle around the canoe. Fortunately the motion of their mounts made their aim uncertain, and the bullets did but little damage, only one touching the canoe,

and it passed harmlessly through the side far above the water line. Before the pursuers could draw near enough to make their fire certain, the canoe had passed in amongst the trees and the outlaws reined in their mounts swearing loudly.

As he neared it, Walter had watched the forest with growing amazement. The river seemed to end at its edge, but as he drew closer the reason for the anxiety of the outlaws to prevent his entering it was plain. No horse could travel through that dark, gloomy expanse. It was a floating forest. Great cypress and giant bays reared their mighty stems from the surface of black scummy water. Amongst their boughs bloomed brilliant orchids and from limb to limb stretched tangled masses of creeping vines and briars.

The trees with their huge spreading roots grew so closely together that it was with difficulty that Walter forced the canoe in and out between them. His exultation at his escape from their enemies had given way to a settled despair. From descriptions he had heard, he recognized this mighty floating forest as the fringe which surrounds that greatest of all mysterious, trackless swamps, the Everglades. Before him lay the mighty unknown, unexplored morass, reeking with fever, and infested with serpents; behind him waited sure death at the hands of the outlaws.

One faint hope alone remained to him. If his strength held out, he might in time come upon a camp of the Seminoles, the only human beings in this unknown land.

Considering the small numbers of the Indians and the vastness of the swamp, it was a faint chance indeed that he or his companion would live to see any of the tribe, but, faint as it was, no other hope remained and Walter sent the canoe onward with feeble strokes.

Gradually the trees grew further and further apart until at last the canoe passed out from their shadows into a lake, surrounded by tall growing grass and reeds. Far as the eye could reach stretched the dismal swamp, broken here and there by lakes or creeks and now and then by an island of higher ground rising from the rotting mud.

Under the heat of the blazing sun there rose around the canoe thick vapors from the scum-covered water and rotting vegetation, bearing in their foul embrace a sickening, deadly stench.

The paddle strokes grew slower and slower, and gradually ceased, Walter's eyes slowly closed, and he sank down unconscious. His paddle fell from his nerveless hand and floated away on the stagnant water just as a dark, shapeless mass crept out of a bunch of reeds and struck the canoe with a gentle thud.