

CHAPTER XX.

SAVED.

DARKNESS, black as night, floated over Walter's reeling brain; darkness, pierced by a thousand gleaming, twinkling lights, brilliant as stars, then came a void and nothingness. Slowly at last he felt himself struggling up out of the void, battling, fighting for consciousness, then came a delicious sort of languor. If this was dying, it was very pleasant. Forms seemed to be flitting before his half-opened eyelids and the hum of voices seemed to float in his ears. One voice irritated him greatly; it was faintly familiar in its loud joyousness. What was it saying?

"Golly, Massa Captain, bless de Lawd, he ain't dead."

Another voice responded, "No, thank God, he's goin' to live, Chris. Bear a hand and we'll get him into the wigwam."

There was a sensation of being borne through the air, and Walter surrendered to the delicious languor, —and slept.

When he opened his eyes again an ebony face was bending over him and Chris' voice demanded, "Golly, don't you know me, Massa Walt?"

"It's Chris," Walter said, smiling feebly, and the little darky danced about in joy.

Walter raised his head with an effort and looked about him. He was lying on a bed of soft moss with a pillow of blankets under his head. He seemed to be surrounded by walls of bark which met in a point far above his head; opposite him lay another figure on a bed similar to his own.

"Where am I, and how did I get here?" he demanded confusedly, "the last I remember was being in the canoe a few minutes ago and everything getting dark before me."

"A few minutes ago," cried Chris, excitedly. "Why, it's dun been two days since Massa Captain come on you when he was paddlin' around the lake. You was layin' in the bottom of the canoe like you was dead."

"Two days," exclaimed Walter in astonishment; then, with a sudden note of dread in his voice, he cried, "Charley?"

"He's gettin' along pretty well," said the little darky cheerfully, "he's lyin' right across from you thar. Now you jus' keep still an' doan' talk no more," he commanded. "Massa Captain out fixing

up some soup. Reckon he'll let you talk some more after you drink it."

The captain soon appeared with a gourd full of steaming liquid. He was overjoyed at finding Walter conscious, but firmly insisted that he should remain quiet, and he fed him liberally with the hot soup. Indeed, Walter felt little desire to talk; a few swallows of the warm liquid made him very drowsy, and he quickly sank into a deep sleep from which he awoke feeling much stronger and almost like his old self again.

To his great joy, he found Charley conscious, and without fever, although still very weak. He sat down on the edge of the invalid's bed and the two talked over the thrilling adventures through which they had passed.

They were interrupted by the entrance of the captain and Chris, the captain bearing an armful of yams and Chris a string of fresh fish. "We are layin' in a stock of provisions against the appetite I reckon you lads will have now you are gettin' better," explained the captain, cheerfully.

Walter caught the old sailor by the sleeve and held him tightly. "Now you have got to sit right down and tell us your story before I will let you go," he said. "First, Charley and I want to know where we are."

The captain filled his old black pipe, and got it to drawing good before he answered.

"You're on an island about two miles inside the Everglades, as near as I can calculate."

"Did you build this shelter since you have been here?" asked Charley eagerly.

A shade of sadness passed over the captain's open face. "No," he said slowly, "this island belonged to the chief an' this wigwam was where he lived, an' it was here we brought him to die."

"To die?" echoed both boys together.

"Aye, lads, he passed away the same day we reached here," said the captain, sadly. "He was a white man clean through, if his color was red. I got to know him powerful well on the trip here, an' he sure had all of a white man's feelings."

The boys remained silent in face of the captain's evident grief, and the old sailor, after a pause, continued. "We buried him under a big oak tree, with his gun and plenty of food by his side, just as he had directed, an' I reckon his spirit is up in his happy hunting-grounds now."

"And the young chief, his son, what has become of him?" Walter asked after a pause.

"Gone to gather his people together an' swoop down with them on the murderin' convicts. He found out from signs, that I couldn't make nothin' of,

that his tribe had divided into two parties, one going towards a hunting-ground called Big Cypress, an' the other to another place where deer an' bear are thick. As soon as the chief was buried, he jumps into his dugout an' starts to round 'em up. If he gets back with them in time to catch them outlaws, may the Lord have mercy on their murderin' sin-stained souls, for the young chap will have 'em slowly tortured to death if he catches them."

"Tell us all about your trip," Walter urged, "how did we get separated, I wonder?"

"It puzzled me for a bit as to what had become of you, but the chief soon explained it by saying that you likely had taken another stream. Chris an' I was for turnin' back an' huntin' you, but the chief reasoned us out of it, by saying that you might have taken any one of a dozen forks and that there would be mighty little chance of our hitting on the right one, while we would be almost sure to run right into the convicts' hands again. But what influenced us most, was his explainin' that all streams thereabout ran into, or from, the Everglades, an' that all we had to do was to get here first and keep a sharp lookout along the cypress for you, and you'd soon show up. The chief had great confidence in your good sense, Charley, an' seemed to feel certain that you would reason that the only safe thing to do was to keep right

on up the stream you had taken. 'Course, we never suspected that you had been shot."

"Well, I guess my successor in command did all I would have done and perhaps more," remarked Charley with a smile.

"It was just by luck that I happened to do the right thing," said Walter, modestly.

"You didn't appear like as though luck had helped you much when I found you, Walt," remarked the captain, dryly. "It sorter looked to me like only hard work an' an amazin' lot of pluck an' grit had brought you that far."

"Now don't you go trying to make a hero out of me," said Walter, hotly, "I won't have it. I only did what anyone would have done, and I made a whole lot of foolish blunders besides."

"Well, you can have it your own way, lad," agreed the captain, with a glance of affection at the embarrassed young hunter. "I reckon that's about all of our story worth tellin'," he concluded. "We made the best speed we could so as to get here before you. We caught sight of parties of the convicts searchin' for us now an' then, but the chief was more than a match for them an' they never caught sight of us. Since we got here, Chris and I have patrolled the rivers' mouths for sight of you every day, but we had begun to despair when we came upon your

canoe day before yesterday. And now, that's all, my lads, except that I feel we had all ought to join in thankin' our Heavenly Father for deliverin' us from our enemies an' bringin' us together again."

With hearts full of gratitude, the young hunters sat with bowed heads while the kindly old sailor offered up a simple, fervent prayer of thanksgiving for the mercies they had received from the One who heeds even the sparrow's fall.

"Thar's one thing more to tell you, an' then I'm through," said the captain, breaking the thoughtful silence that had followed the prayer. "The chief seemed to set great store by you, Charley. I reckon it came from your savin' his life at the risk of your own. Anyway, he spoke right often of the 'young white chief', as he called you, an' once he said you should be honored with riches. Not an hour before he died, he gave me this an' charged me to give it to you."

Charley took with wonder the object the captain handed him. It was a piece of exquisitely dressed doe-skin about six inches square. On the smooth side was traced in a reddish sort of ink a kind of rude sketch of a lone palm tree, amongst the leaves of which a large bird was perched. Resting against the foot of the palm was an object that bore a faint resemblance to a paddle.

"It is sign language, but I cannot make out what it means," said Charley in perplexity. "I wonder why he wanted me to have it and what he wanted me to do with it."

"I've puzzled over it some myself," said the captain slowly, "an' I can't make anythin' out of it. From what the chief let fall from time to time, though, I gathered he wanted to make you a valuable present, an' I've been kinder thinkin' that picture tells what an' where it is."

Charley folded the piece of doe-skin and put it carefully away in an inner pocket. "I will try to find out what it means when my head is clearer," he said. "Just now, all I can think of is something to eat."

"And you shall have something to eat right off," said the captain, heartily, "it's about time for supper anyway. Hustle up, Chris, an' get them fish cleaned. I reckon it won't hurt the lad to have a bit of solid food, now, providin' it's well cooked."

The sun was just setting when the captain and Chris reappeared bearing gourds full of smoking fish, and sweet sugary yams, and ears of curious small kernelled Indian corn.

The boys made merry over the delicious meal, but a curious constraint seemed to rest upon the captain and Chris. Once Walter surprised them exchanging

glances full of a strange, expectant uneasiness. The circumstance aroused his curiosity, but he refrained from asking any questions, deciding that the captain would explain the trouble in his own good time.

As the evening wore away, the change in the captain's manner became more and more marked. All his cheeriness of the day had departed, leaving him glum and silent. He took no part in the lively conversation going on between the boys, but sat apart answering their questions in monosyllables. His manner, Walter decided, was that of a man who faces some great impending evil.

With the coming of darkness the air was filled with the noises of the swamp; the croaking of multitudes of frogs, the hooting of owls, and the hoarse bellowing of many alligators.

Suddenly the boys sat up erect and stared at each other in amazement. "What is it?" Walter cried.

Clear and sweet above the noises of the night rang the tolling of a silver-toned bell.

"It's the bell of the spirits callin' us," said the captain gloomily, while Chris sat ashen-faced trying vainly to control his terror.