

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREASURE.

“NONSENSE, there are no such things as spirits,” cried Charley, hotly. “That tolling is made by a big bell, and a remarkably sweet-toned one, too.”

“It’s over a hundred miles to the nearest settlement,” said the captain gloomily, “do you reckon you could hear the biggest bell made that far?”

“No,” the lad admitted, “but that bell is not over two miles away. Some Indian has traded for a bell and tolls it for his own amusement.”

The captain lowered his voice to a superstitious whisper. “It’s a mystery to the Indians,” he declared, “and they avoid the sound like it were an evil spirit. Even the chief could not tell me what it was, although all his life he had heard its tolling. He wasn’t so much afraid of it as are the other Indians an’ he built this wigwam here so as to be within sound of it.” The captain’s voice dropped still lower as he added impressively, “It tolled all the night after he died.”

“Have you tried to follow up the sound and dis-

cover where it comes from?" demanded Charley, sharply.

"Not me," declared the captain, solemnly, "I ain't got any call to interfere with the doings of the dead. I tell you, lad, this is a land of mystery, an' a man's got no call to fool with what he can't understand."

Charley checked the angry reply rising to his lips. He bethought himself that the captain had spent his life in a calling that often makes the strongest minded superstitious, while Chris inherited a belief in ghosts and spirits from his race. Though he lapsed into silence, Charley resolved that as soon as he was able to get around, the mystery should be solved.

For about an hour the air rang with the sweet chiming notes, then they ceased as suddenly as they had begun and the boys dropped off to sleep to dream of this strange incident in this mysterious swamp.

Walter was astir early, apparently as well as he had ever been. Hastily dressing he lifted up the bark flap which covered the doorway and stepped out of the wigwam.

The captain was busy cooking breakfast over a rude fireplace of stones, a few feet away, while Chris on the bank by the water was industriously fishing.

The island upon which they were camped was only a couple of acres in extent but rose high above the water. It was barren of timber, except for a large

live oak and one lonely palm which Walter noted with an increasing interest. Some attempt had been made to cultivate the loamy soil, and flourishing little patches of yams, sugar-cane, gourds, and Indian corn testified to its fertility.

"Well, Captain, it doesn't look as if we ran much risk of starving to death," remarked Walter, approaching the old sailor.

"No, thar ain't much danger of that, I allow," said the captain with a heartiness from which all depression of the night before had fled. "Over thar is the place you come in at, Walt," he continued, pointing to the distant fringe of cypress.

Walter looked long and earnestly in the direction indicated. "I can see a thin line of smoke above those tree-tops," he declared finally.

"Aye, I noticed it too," agreed the captain. "'Pears like them friends are going to hang at our heels until they get another chance at us. I wouldn't borrow any uneasiness if it weren't for that Injin bein' in the party. I warrant he's found out already that the Injins are all gone, an' is layin' his plans accordingly."

"Well, they can't get to us without boats," said Walter, hopefully.

"No, but they can make one if they are determined enough," observed the captain, gravely. "I

sorter calculate to paddle up near enough to them to-day to learn what kind of mischief they are up to."

"I'll go with you," said Walter, eagerly.

"No, you ain't strong enough yet. Jes' keep quiet for a day or two, I reckon that will be a plenty to keep you busy. Wall, I guess this stew is done an' we might as well have breakfast."

The kettle with its contents was carried into the wigwam, and from a cake, made of pounded Indian corn, and the stew, our hunters made a hearty breakfast.

After the meal, a council of war was held.

The captain outlined their situation in a few simple words. "We are fairly comfortable here at present, lads, but it's goin' to be a week or ten days before Young Tiger gets back with his people. We've got plenty of food to last a good while, but I reckon this swamp is about the most unhealthy place on earth an' we run a good big risk of being sick with fever before the Indians come. On the other hand, it's risky to try to get out of here any way but the one we came in. We'd be about sure to get lost in the swamp, an' there's no tellin' what might happen to us. We can't get out the way we come in as long as those fellows are standin' guard outside waitin' for us."

"I vote to stay where we are," said Walter,

promptly. "We may be able to escape the fever if we take good care of ourselves."

Charley and Chris quickly agreed with Walter.

"I guess it's the wisest thing to do," admitted the captain, "although I will be mighty glad to get out of this creepy place. I tell you this ain't no place for white men, lads. But I've got to leave you now, boys. Make yourself as comfortable as you can, an' keep out of the sun during the heat of the day. I reckon I'll be back long before sundown."

Walter accompanied the captain down to the canoe and begged hard to go with him, but the old sailor was firm in his refusal and Walter watched him paddle out of sight with a dim foreboding of evil at his heart.

On his way back to the wigwam, Walter paused a moment on the island's highest elevation to take a more careful survey than he had yet done of the surrounding country. He discovered nothing new, however, save what was apparently a large island lying some two miles to the west of their own. It seemed to rise far above the surrounding swamp and was evidently very heavily timbered.

Passing on into the wigwam, he was greeted with an exultant cry from Charley.

"I've solved it," he shouted.

"Solved what?" demanded Walter in amazement.

"This," cried his chum excitedly, extending the

square of doe-skin with its red ink tracings. "It's really absurdly simple," he continued. "According to the captain, the chief talked about leaving me riches of some sort. I took that circumstance for my key and tried to think what a race as poor as the chief and his people would consider as riches. The picture of that bird answered the question. Plumes are their only form of wealth, hence plumes must be the treasure of which he spoke."

"Reasoned like a detective," approved Walter, scarcely less excited than his chum.

"The rest was simple. The picture of the tree was to show where it was hidden and the object at its base is intended as a shovel to tell that I would have to dig for the treasure, but," and his face fell, "how are we to find that identical tree?"

"There's only one palm on the island," Walter assured him.

"Then all we have to do is to go there and dig and we'll find the treasure," Charley declared. "But we must wait for the captain, we must all be present when it is unearthed."

The morning slipped away quickly, the boys amusing themselves by exploring their little island, fishing from the bank, and loafing in the shade of the solitary palm, at whose base was supposed to lie the buried treasure.

Dinner time came and the meal was eaten without the captain, who had not returned. As the afternoon wore away without any sign of the old sailor, the boys began to feel a vague uneasiness which increased as the sun set and night began to fall. Walter, who alone knew the real object of the captain's trip, was greatly worried. Long after the others had retired to the wigwam for the night, he sat alone straining eye and ear for sight or sound that would herald the absent one's return. As the night wore away, anxiety deepened into certainty with the troubled lad. Something must have happened to the captain. Impatiently the lad waited for daylight, determined to set off at the first break of dawn in search of the missing one. Suddenly, the lad started up from the reclining position weariness had caused him to assume. Full and deep upon the still night air rang out the tolling of the mysterious bell. To the anxious watcher, its tones no longer rang full and sweet as upon the previous evening, but sounded slow and threatening, as if freighted with an ominous meaning.

A step sounded behind him and the overwrought lad sprang to his feet, every nerve a-tingle.

"Where are you, Walt?" called Charley's voice from out of the darkness.

"Here," answered Walter, with a sigh of relief.

"The captain not here yet?" asked his chum, fearfully, as he found his way to his side.

"No," said Walter sadly, "and I am sure something must have happened to him. I am off to search for him as soon as it's light enough to see."

"And I am going with you," Charley declared.

"You are not," said his chum, decidedly. "You are too weak for such a trip yet. You would only make my task harder. You have no business even to be out in this night air and dew. It may bring your fever back on you."

"I could not rest inside when I saw your bed and the captain's empty and heard the tolling in the air."

"What do you suppose it really is, Charley?" asked his chum, eagerly. "It cannot be produced by anything human. Remember the captain's saying that it had been tolling this way longer than the oldest Indian could remember back."

"It's a bell," declared his chum, a trifle uneasily. "Nothing else could produce those tones and that regular tolling."

"Charley," and Walter's voice lowered with the horror of the thought, "the captain said it tolled all night when the chief died, and now the captain himself is gone and the awful thing goes on as though it would never stop."

Charley, with an effort shook off the feeling of dread that was fast stealing over him.

"Nonsense," he said, cheerfully, "you are getting as bad as Chris and the captain. I repeat, it is a bell: listen how regularly it tolls."

As though in mockery at his words, the long, even reverberations changed to a quick, harsh, discordant clatter and suddenly ceased.

For awhile both boys sat silent, Walter striving to overcome the superstitious dread tugging at his heart, and Charley searching his active brain for some explanation of the mysterious sound, that would harmonize with common sense and reason.

At last Walter, by sheer will, regained his mental balance. "I am tired and nervous, or I would never imagine such foolish things," he said. "Of course it is as you say, produced by natural causes, and I will likely laugh at my fears as soon as we stumble on the key to the mystery. And now I am going to insist upon your going back inside, Charley. It won't do for us to have you down with the fever again. For our sakes, as well as your own, you must be very careful."

Reluctantly, Charley retired to the wigwam and Walter once more was left alone.

With the first hint of gray in the east, he began to prepare for his departure. What cooked food was on

hand he stored in the bow of the canoe, and casting off the painter took his seat in the stern. Then he paused for one last look around before dipping his paddle.

Away in the distance a moving speck on the water caught his eye. For a few minutes he watched it in suspense, then gave a cheer of delight.

It was the captain's canoe.