

CHAPTER XXII.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

As the speck drew nearer all doubt vanished, it was the captain's canoe with the old sailor himself in the stern paddling with slow, weary strokes.

Walter's cheer had brought forth his companions from the wigwam, and all now gathered on the bank to welcome the wanderer.

Slowly the canoe drew in to the shore, and Walter at last was able to catch the painter and haul the light craft's bow up on the sand. Its occupant sat still in the stern unable to move. His clothes were stained and tattered, his hands torn and bleeding from many scratches, and his pale, haggard face told of hardship and suffering.

"Don't look scairt, lads," he called out cheerily, "I ain't hurt none; jes' scratched up a bit, an' powerful tired. I reckon you'll have to give me a hand to get me out. I'm cramped that bad I can't move a leg."

Walter and Chris flew to the old sailor's help and between them assisted him out of the canoe and up into the wigwam. Then Chris quickly kindled a fire

and soon presented the weary man with a gourd of steaming coffee and the cold food which Walter hastened to bring from the canoe.

The captain ate like one famished, while the boys stood around eager to hear his story.

"I'll spin my yarn as soon as I've rested a bit, lads," he said, as he finished the last morsel of food. "I'm clean spent, now, and want to stretch out for a while."

The boys helped him up and onto his bed, which he had no sooner touched than he was fast asleep.

It was noon before the old sailor awoke to find a hot dinner ready and the boys patiently waiting. He was surprised to find that his stiffness had nearly all disappeared, and, except for the cuts on hands and face, he was as well as ever again.

"My, this grub tastes good," he exclaimed, attacking the smoking fish and yams. "I didn't have a bite to eat all day yesterday. But I reckon I had better start at the beginning of my yarn. I reckon you boys are some curious how I happened to turn up again in such shape. Wall, after I left here I paddled on, till I came to that fringe of cypress right opposite where the smoke was curling up. When I got that far I got mighty careful, an' the way I coaxed that little craft in between them cypresses was so quiet that I didn't even wake up the water moo-

casins asleep on the roots. When I came near the outer edge of the cypress, I fastened the canoe to a root and crept forward on hands an' feet from one cypress tussock to another, sorter calculatin' that I'd make less noise that way than in the boat. At last, I got where I could glimpse out between the trees and get a view of the fire. There was the whole twelve of them rascals workin' away as hard as honest men. I watched them quite a while afore I caught on to what they was doing, an', when I found out, it didn't make me feel any easier. Lads, they was hollowing out the biggest dugout you ever seed. They had got a giant of a cypress chopped down, hewed it sharp at both ends and were burning it out inside with fire. While I was watchin', that varmint of an Injin, Charley, left the gang an' struck into the cypress an' passed by so close to where I was hid that I was sartin sure he'd see me, but he didn't. I lay still there for hours, afeard to move for fear I'd meet him comin' back. It was most sundown when he returned, and I stayed on quite a bit after that listenin' to the conversation. As I guessed, he had been out scouting an' had found out that we were on the island an' that his tribe was too far away to interfere with any plans he had in his head. Cute as he was, though, he hadn't learned that the old chief was dead and the young one gone for help. When I had

learned all I could, I crawled back to the canoe and struck out for the island. It was being cramped up so long in one position in the cypress and in the canoe, that made me so stiff and sore."

"They surely can't be so reckless as to think of entering this swamp!" exclaimed Charley.

"'Tain't so very reckless, the way they look at it," observed the captain. "You see they think that the Indians are all far off an' ain't likely to come back for some weeks. When the redskins started on their hunt they left plenty of signs behind to tell where they had gone, and them signs are plainer than print to Injin Charley. Now, them fellows figures they can drop down on this island, kill off all hands but the chief, an' torture him 'till he gives up the plumes he's counted on havin', an' be off, an' safe out of reach afore the Seminoles return from their hunt. No, it ain't such a foolish sort of undertaking after all."

"How long will it take them to finish the canoe?" Walter inquired.

"I calculate it will take at least three days more," said the captain, reflectively. "You see, the cypress is green an' burns pretty slowly."

"Three days," mused Charley, "and it will be at least a week before help can come. We have got to count on meeting this danger by ourselves."

"I don't see nothin' to do but push on into the swamp," said the captain disconsolately. "They outnumber us three to one. An' this island ain't got no shelter for us to find cover behind."

"Let's not worry about it now," urged Walter cheerfully. "The captain says it will be three days at least before the canoe is finished so we have plenty of time. If we decide to leave the island, we can easily keep ahead of a clumsy dugout in our light canoes."

"I am of Walter's opinion," agreed Charley. "Something may turn up in the next two days, and, anyway, there are some things I want to investigate before I vote to leave this neighborhood. I can promise you one thing, captain, those fellows will never handle the plumes that belonged to the chief."

The captain listened in admiring astonishment as Charley recounted his solution of the chief's legacy. "We have been wild to dig for the treasure," Charley concluded, "but we would not touch a spadeful of earth until you could be with us to share in the excitement."

"Then you needn't wait another minute," cried the old sailor, who was nearly as excited as the boys. "Get your spade an' we'll start right in."

"We haven't got one," confessed Charley, sud-

denly crestfallen. "What a fool I was not to think of that."

"Golly, I reckon dis nigger goin' to fix up some-thin' to dig with mighty quick," cried Chris, whose eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

Running down to the canoe, the little darkey was back in a moment with one of the paddles. "Reckon dis will do," he said, "got to be mighty careful not to break it, though."

Armed with the implement, which Chris' thoughtfulness had provided, they lost no time in making their way to the lone palm.

The next perplexing question was on which side of the tree to dig.

"It's as likely to be on one side as the other," Charley declared. "We might as well start in at random and dig a circle around the tree until we come to it."

The others had no better plan to suggest, and Walter, seizing the paddle, began to throw the dirt away. Luckily the soil was not packed hard, for even, loose as it was, progress was very slow with the rude implement he was wielding. At the end of an hour, he was content to surrender the paddle to the captain, who, when tired, turned it over to Chris.

It was slow work and the sun was getting low in the west when the circle around the palm was at last

completed, and the diggers stood looking at each other with disappointment written on their faces.

"We must go deeper," Charley declared, "I am certain that this is the right spot, and the chief would have had no interest in deceiving or misleading us."

"We have gone down two feet already," said Walter, in a discouraged voice, as he started wielding the paddle again. "I guess there is something wrong with our calculation, Charley." He stopped suddenly and looked up with a comical look of surprise and anticipation.

"I struck something," he announced breathlessly, "something kind of soft and yielding."

"Go on," Charley shouted in his excitement, and Walter bent to his task again.

The removal of a few more shovelfuls of earth exposed to view a large, dark, hairy object. Stooping, Walter with difficulty lifted it out of the hole.

All clustered close around it in their eagerness.

What had looked at first glance like a large, dead animal, proved to be a deer-hide stretched on framework, the hairy side out. A few slashes of Charley's hunting-knife laid open this rude leather box and revealed to their eager gaze a smaller similar box inside. Charley lifted it out and cut away the top.

By the now dim light, they could only see the

tapering shapes of hundreds of long plumes carefully packed inside.

"There must be all of fifty pounds of them," said Walter, in an awe-struck voice, "why, they'll make us rich men."

"Give me a hand to carry them up to the wigwam," said Charley. "Run ahead, Chris, and stir up the fire so we can see what we have got."

The excited captain swung the box upon his shoulder and strode forward hard upon Chris' heels. He laid his burden down close to the fire and all crowded around.

One look and a loud murmur of disappointment broke from every lip.

What the dim twilight had hid, the firelight revealed in all its disheartening truth. What had been once a beautiful heap of valuable plumes, now lay an ugly mass of mildew and mould.

For a moment no one spoke, so keen was their disappointment. At last, Charley summoned up a feeble smile.

"Well, we are no worse off than we were before," he remarked with a voice that he endeavored to render cheerful.

"That's the way to take a disappointment, lad," said the captain, heartily. "A pound of meat is worth more to us now than a hundred pounds of

plumes, anyway. Now, Chris, quit your grieving an' see if you can't rustle up some supper. I reckon we'll all feel better after a warm bite."

"What shall I do with them, Charley?" asked Walter, who had remained kneeling by the ruined treasure.

"Throw them away, they are valueless," exclaimed his chum somewhat testily, for his disappointment was almost more than he could bear cheerfully.

Walter lifted the leather box and disappeared in the darkness toward the water. He did not throw it into the stream, however, but after a moment's hesitation on the bank, descended to his canoe and, shoving his burden far up under the stern deck, retraced his steps to the fire.

In spite of their attempts at cheerfulness, the gloom of their disappointment hung heavy upon them, and it was rather a silent group that gathered in the wigwam after supper. Chris and the captain soon sought their beds and ere long their loud, regular breathing told that they had found solace for the disappointment of the day. The two boys felt too excited to sleep and sat long talking over their still perilous situation.

Suddenly, as on the other two nights, began the now familiar tolling of the mysterious bell.

The captain stirred uneasily in his sleep and Chris opened his eyes drowsily but soon fell off to sleep again.

"Come outside, Walt, where we can talk without the chance of being overheard," Charley whispered.

The two lads stole softly out of the wigwam and down to the water's edge where they sat down on the grassy bank.

"Now listen closely," Charley commanded.