

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHAPEL.

THE boys worked with the utmost swiftness, expecting every moment to see the captain and Chris appear, but, luckily, those two, wearied by their hard work, had paused to rest before returning with their load.

“Thirty-one,” counted Walter as he lowered the last grinning skeleton into the pit. “There seems a kind of stern justice in their present position, Charley,” he continued. “Now, they are resting side by side with those whom they tortured and enslaved while living.”

“They paid terribly for their cruelty,” said his chum, fingering the flint arrow-heads he had found by the skeletons. “The whole story is as plain as print. The thirty men whose bones we have just disposed of, enslaved and tortured members of what was at that time a great race, working them as slaves in building these walls, and in that terrible quarry. I confess to a feeling of admiration for them, in spite of their cruelty. They must have been great

warriors, though so few in numbers, to hold at bay one of the bravest of the Indian tribes."

"I wonder why they remained in this awful swamp," said Walter, musingly.

"Case of necessity, perhaps," Charley replied, thoughtfully. "They had probably lost many men by the time they reached this island, and had concluded that to continue on meant utter annihilation, while here they, with their superior arms and suits of mail, could stand off the enemy. So they decided to remain and make the best of it. With the labor of the Indians they captured from time to time they proceeded to fortify the island and make it more secure."

Walter gazed at his chum admiringly. "You talk as though you saw it all in front of your eyes," he declared.

Charley did not heed the interruption. "Years went by," he continued, musingly, like one in a dream, "years in which they grew more and more confident of their own power, and learned to despise their red foes. But the Seminoles were only waiting with the patience of their race. Mark the cunning of the savage. There comes a day and night of feasting and rejoicing in the Spaniards' religious calendar. Work and worry is laid aside and they gather in their homes to feast and rejoice. Night comes and as the

sun sets the sentries cast a look around. Nothing is in sight. There is nothing to fear. They join the merry-makers, and care and their suits of mail are laid aside, and merriment prevails. The Indians' hour has come. Over the walls swarm a red horde, creeping towards the unsuspecting feasters. One long war-whoop, a shower of arrows, cries of agony, and all is over."

Charley stopped. "I've been talking like a five cent novel," he said, sheepishly.

"I'll bet that is just the way it really happened," his chum declared. "That explains why the fort was empty."

"Perhaps," Charley said, "but here comes Chris and the captain, and we'll have to change the subject."

"I 'spect you-all don't pay no 'tention 'tall to dis dinner," grumbled Chris. "De fire's all out, mighty nigh."

"We are not good cooks like you, Chris," said Charley soothingly, and the vain little darky grinned at the compliment.

"Golly, I reckon dat's so," he declared pompously, "you chillens sho' don't know nothin' 'bout cookin'. Spect you-all mighty near starve to death if it warn't for dis nigger. You chillens jes' get out, an' I'll finish gettin' de dinner."

The boys, relieved of the cooking, turned their attention to other tasks. They carried the two canoes into the empty fort and placed them bottom up in one corner. The other goods they piled up in the shade of a tree.

Charley then disappeared but soon came back with a large kettle he had noticed when removing the skeletons. "It's copper," he said, exhibiting it proudly, "with a little cleaning it will be as good as when it was made. We need it for boiling water, for we have got to clean house this afternoon."

While he carried the copper to the spring and scrubbed lustily away with sand to remove the green verdigris with which it was thickly coated, Walter attempted the manufacture of a mop. Selecting a straight piece of the root of a scrub palmetto, which grew in abundance around the wall, he trimmed it with his knife into the desired shape and size. Laying the piece, thus prepared, upon a large stone, he pounded one side of it lustily with a piece of rock. A few minutes sufficed to pound out the pith and leave the harsh fiber exposed.

By the time the two lads had completed their respective tasks, Chris announced that dinner was ready and all fell to with appetites sharpened by the morning's work.

As soon as dinner was finished, the copper kettle

was filled with water and placed upon the fire. By the time the water had come to a boil, the party was sufficiently rested to attack the house cleaning.

The building nearest the fort was selected as their future abode, and never did mansion receive a more thorough scouring. Walter plied the brush, while the captain dashed the water about, and Chris wiped the floor dry with armfuls of Spanish moss. Charley, on account of his still lame shoulder, was excused from this labor.

Leaving his companions thus busily employed, Charley took his way to the building that had aroused his curiosity in the morning, the one in which they had found no skeletons.

This building was a trifle larger than its fellows and differed very little from them in external appearance, except that from its roof projected a little tower. It was the inside, however, which had excited our young hunter's curiosity. At one end was a kind of raised platform and the space between it and the entrance was filled with benches of stone. Charley reverently removed his hat as he entered, for he had guessed the character of the place during his morning visit. It was a chapel that the hardy adventurers of long ago had erected for the worship of their Maker.

Upon the stone altar stood several vessels, likely of gold or other precious metal for they were appar-

ently untouched by the ravages of time. Charley gave them hardly a glance but passed on to the end of the building until he stood beneath the tiny tower.

One glance upwards, and he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Directly above his head in the little tower hung a large ship's bell. A part of the mystery of the tolling was solved, but the most puzzling part remained.

Charley sat down on one of the stone benches and fell into a deep study. There was the bell but where was the mysterious ringer? The bell rope had long ago rotted away. The walls had once been plastered and were still too smooth to offer a foothold to the most expert climber. How then to account for the regular nightly tolling? The mystery had in reality deepened instead of lightened.

When Charley at last left the building, he was still puzzled in mind and had decided to say nothing about his discovery to his companions. Chris and the captain would be sure to view the matter in its most supernatural light.

On his return, he found the house scrubbed sweet and clean and the workers taking a rest after their labors. Feeling that he had not performed his just share of the work of the day, Charley took upon himself the carrying in and arranging of their posses-

sions. With these unpacked and arranged, the room looked less bare and much more cozy and home-like.

But Charley viewed their scanty possessions with a trace of dissatisfaction. Two rifles, two shotguns, a half of their ammunition, and a half of their scanty stock of provisions had been lost when the canoe upset. Of their original outfit, the two boys retained only their pistols and ammunition and the tattered clothes they were wearing. The captain and Chris still had their four guns but their clothing was as rent and tattered as the two boys'. Of the provisions there only remained a little sugar, a few pounds of flour, and a small strip of bacon.

"I tell you what it is," said Charley, as he joined his companion outside, "we have got to do some tall hustling the next two days. We have got to lay in a stock of food sufficient to last us for at least a week, and we have got to make some kind of windows and doors for that building, besides, which, we have got to manufacture some kind of clothing for ourselves—mine are almost dropping from me."

"My, what a list of impossibilities!" groaned Walter. "Frankly, I do not feel as though I could do another stroke of work to-day."

"No, we are all too tired for further effort to-day," Charley agreed, "but we must get an early start in

the morning. We will get some boughs for beds, have supper, and knock off for the day."

"I know just the stuff we want for beds," Walter declared, "there are lots of the bushes growing just outside the wall."

The bush Walter referred to, proved to be a species of myrtle with small leafy boughs of a delicious, spicy fragrance. It grew so abundantly, that in a few minutes the boys had gathered a large quantity, which they carried back to the building and spread in four great heaps on the floor. Upon these their blankets were spread, and the room took on a cozy, homelike appearance.

Supper was cooked over the camp-fire outside and by the time it was eaten, night had begun to fall. The little party at once repaired to their room. They know that the night air of the great swamp was peculiarly unhealthy. Already they had exposed themselves far too much to its baneful influence.

They stretched out on their soft, fragrant couches and talked cheerily over the events of the day and their present situation. Not since they had left the camp on the point, had the boys felt so bright and hopeful. They were well housed, none were sick, they were all together once more, and even the threatened danger from the convicts did not cause them great uneasiness. They felt confident of their

ability now to keep the outlaws at bay until help arrived.

But their content was not to last long, for soon, harsh, and menacing in its nearness, rang out the tolling of the bell.

The captain, brave as the bravest in most any kind of danger, turned a sickly white and sunk to his knees in prayer, while Chris, trembling in every limb, buried his face in the blanket to shut out the awful sounds.

"Come, Walt," whispered Charley, and the two boys stole out into the darkness of the night. A few steps brought them to the chapel, and pistols in hand they circled around it in opposite directions, but their eager eyes caught no sight of moving forms.

"It must be on the inside," declared Charley, as they met near the door. "Let's go in and see."

It took all their courage to venture into that dim, mysterious interior, but the boys never hesitated, but stepped boldly in. Back and forth they paced the grim interior, searching every nook and corner, and found nothing. Not even a sound fell on their strained hearing, save only the strong, steady tolling above their heads.

Charley stood under the little tower and gazed longingly up into its darkness where the bell, under some mysterious power, swayed steadily to and fro.

"I wish I could get up there, I'd tie the thing down," he declared. "If this keeps up, we will have our hands full to keep Chris and the captain on the island."

"Come away, Charley," said Walter, nervously, "this thing is getting positively uncanny. I declare I am beginning to feel a sympathy for Chris' terrors."

The two lads retraced their steps to the hut where they found the captain, in spite of his superstitious fears, preparing to sally out in search of them.

For long the two boys sat trying to argue the captain and Chris out of their superstitious fears. They might as well have tried to argue against fate itself.

"Aye, lads," the captain would say in reply to their logic, "I know spirits seem against reason to shore-staying folks, but sailors know better. Now there was Tom Bowling who took to hearing bells during his watch on deck, an' not two days later, poor old Tom was missing."

"Went crazy and jumped over-board," muttered Charley, but the captain shook his head with the air of a man who had no doubt as to the nature of his friend's fate.

It was not long after the bell ceased tolling that the last of the little party fell into a troubled sleep.