

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT.

A SHRILL piercing scream, like the cry of a tortured soul, rang out of the forest, rising clear and trembling above the tolling of the bell and the noises of the night.

The boys looked at each other with white, frightened faces.

"A panther," Charley cried, "a panther, and we penned up her helpless as babes."

"Look," said Walter, eagerly, "look at the boars."

The great animals were stirring uneasily and their hoarse, threatening grunts had dropped to a kind of frightened whine. Again the scream rose shrill and clear, and, with a grunt of fear, the big leader charged into the forest followed by the rest.

"They are afraid of the panther, and I don't blame them," Charley exclaimed, "Come, we must get out of here in a hurry."

The boys slid to the ground as fast as their stiffened limbs would permit, picked up Charley's rifle, and hastily cutting down the venison, plunged out of the forest onto the prairie.

The screams, rapidly drawing nearer, hastened their footsteps, but, fast as they traveled, the sound continued to draw closer.

“It has got a sniff of the venison and is following us up,” Charley declared. “We can never get away from it, and there is small chance of our being able to kill it in the dark. We may as well stop right here where there is a little wood and build a fire, that is our only chance.”

Charley had chosen this halting place wisely, for a large dead tree lay on the ground, where he had stopped.

Hastily the boys tore up a heap of dry grass and piling broken limbs on it, lit the pile with a match.

The dry stuff roared up with a flame not a minute too soon, the flickering light revealed a crouching form not thirty feet away. With a snarl of rage the creature retreated from the blaze and began circling the fire from a distance. The soft pattering footfalls could be easily heard.

The boys crouched close to the fire filled with apprehension that gradually decreased as they saw the panther feared to approach. Thrice Charley fired at the dim skulking form, but, in the darkness, his bullets went wide of the mark, and he stopped wasting more ammunition.

“Let’s set fire to the tree itself,” Walter suggested, “it will make a bigger fire, last a long time, and save us the trouble of gathering wood.”

“Good,” exclaimed Charley, and seizing a couple of blazing brands he thrust them under the tree’s trunk. The dry wood caught like tinder and soon the whole tree was aflame.

“I hope they will see it at the camp,” Walter said. “If they do, they will know we are still alive.”

As their fear of the panther decreased, the boys began to feel hungry and tired. The venison was unwrapped and some thick steaks were cut off and broiled over the fire, and from them the lads made a hearty meal.

They felt greatly refreshed after their hearty repast but they were still very tired and sleepy. They strove to converse together and keep awake but the fatigue of the day, the heavy meal, and the warmth of the fire proved too much for them and every now and then one would catch the other nodding.

“There’s no use of both of us sitting up all night, when one is all that is necessary to keep an eye on the fire,” said Charley, sleepily. “Let’s make up a bed of the prairie grass and take turn about sleeping and keeping watch.”

Walter heartily agreed to the suggestion and they proceeded to make up their couch without loss of

time. They did not have to go outside the circle of firelight for their mattress, for the wild rice grew all around the blazing tree. All they had to do was to pull it up in great handfuls and stack it before the fire.

Suddenly Charley gave an exclamation and leaped back out of the grass. "Come out of that grass, Walt," he cried, "I have been bitten by a puff adder. I heard it hiss."

"Oh, Charley," cried his chum in terror, "what can we do?"

"Quick," commanded Charley, "open one of your shotgun shells and take out the shot." While he had been speaking the lad had slipped one leg out of his pants and exposed the wound to view. It was only a tiny red puncture of the skin midway between knee and hip, but the bitten one knew that tiny place was more dangerous than a rifle ball. Like a flash, he drew his hunting-knife and cut out a chunk of flesh as big as a hen egg where the wound had been. "Give me that cartridge," he commanded, his teeth gritting with pain.

Walter passed over the open shell and Charley emptied its contents of powder into the open cut. Quickly, he applied a match to the black grains and they caught with a hiss, there was a tiny cloud of black smoke and a whiff of burning flesh.

Walter sprang to his chum's side and caught him, as he staggered and reeled under the awful pain.

"Gee, but that was a plucky thing to do," he cried.

"I guess I got it done in time," murmured Charley, through pale lips. "It was the only thing to do. I would have been dead in half an hour otherwise—and such a death. But I guess I've got the best of it, I cut out that piece before the poison had a chance to get into the circulation, I think. Give me a hand to bind up the cut before anything gets into it."

Walter hastened to comply and bound up the gaping cut as well as he could with the means at his command. While Charley lay back and gritted his teeth to keep back the moans of pain.

"Strange the place don't bleed any," said Walter, curiously.

"The heat of the powder flash cauterized the cut ends of the veins and closed them up," Charley explained. "I have seen the same thing done before and the wound never bled."

"Is it always a good thing to do?" his chum inquired.

"It is useless in some cases. It all depends upon the kind of snake and where the person is struck. I never knew a case of a person recovering when bit

by a genuine Florida rattlesnake. Puff adders and moccasins are deadly enough, but they are mild beside the rattler. The rattler's fangs are so long that they strike deep and the quantity of venom injected is enormous, some of it is almost instantly taken up by the veins punctured. I do not believe that anything but instant amputation would save the life of one struck. But all bitten do not die equally soon. I have known a man struck in the ankle where the circulation was poor, to live for several hours, while another struck in the neck while bending over a flower, died almost instantly. The poor fellow did not have time to straighten up even. But he was lucky in dying quickly. There is no death more painful and horrible than that from a rattlesnake bite."

"What loathsome creatures," shuddered Walt, "and the state is accursed with them."

"They are few in number compared with what they used to be," Charley remarked, "and I'll bet you can't guess what has thinned them out so."

"The clearing up of the state and their wholesale destruction by settlers," Walter suggested.

Charley smiled in spite of his pain. "What settlers destroy in a year do not amount to a ten thousandth part of the number born. Each mother snake has upward of twenty-five little ones at a time.

Birds, especially the blue jay, kill a great many but their worst enemy is the Florida hog."

"The hog?" exclaimed Walter, in surprise.

"Yes," Charley affirmed. "If you want to clear a patch of ground of snakes, just turn in a drove of hogs, they will do the work for you in short order. They kill and eat the most poisonous snakes without the slightest hurt to themselves. Either their thick hide saves them, or else they are immune from the venom."

"No more Florida pork on my bill-of-fare," declared Walter in disgust.

Pain and excitement had driven all thought of sleep from both boys' minds and they sat close together by the fire and talked the night away.

As the slow minutes slipped away, Walter watched his chum's face in an agony of apprehension for any sign that the subtle venom was getting in its deadly work. But the hours passed by and, although Charley was suffering considerable pain, there was no indication that any of the poison had passed into his system—the lad's prompt act had saved his life.

Dawn came at last and found two weary waiting boys, one of them weak, pale, and haggard.

As soon as it was light enough to see, Walter made his way back to the edge of the forest, and cut a strong forked limb to serve as a crutch for his chum.

Before leaving the fire, the boys cooked and ate a couple more venison steaks which gave them fresh strength and courage.

Walter shouldered the guns and venison and staggered on in the lead under his heavy load, while Charley hobbled painfully on behind.

They had just crossed the remainder of the prairie and were resting a bit before plunging into the forest on the other side, when Chris and the captain broke out from the clump of trees and hailed them with shouts of joy.

Chris relieved Walter of a part of his load while the captain assisted Charley forward, and the little party made good time on their homeward way and before long reached the clearing.

Chris' and the captain's haggard faces showed they had passed as sleepless a night as the two lads.

"Golly," said Chris, gravely, "when night comes an' you chillens don't show up, an' de haunts begin a-tollin' dat bell, I spects Massa Captain an' dis nigger went most crazy. When we seed you-all's fire a little later, we feels some better, but, Massas, I jes' tell you dat daylight seemed powerful long comin' to dis nigger."

Amid the others' breathless interest, Walter related the adventures of the night. When the captain learned of Charley's accident, he brought out the

brandy bottle and insisted on his drinking what remained of the liquor. His wound was then bathed, clean and bandaged again and he was made to lay down upon his couch in the hut, while Walter stretched out on his own bed for a nap.

“Good,” exclaimed Charley, as he caught sight of the windows and door, “you and Chris made a good job of those, captain.”

The captain nodded in satisfaction. “I reckon it will take some battering to get in there,” he observed.

Inside the hut, the two workers had planted large posts of palmetto that effectually blocked the windows save for the cracks between the posts. The door was similarly barricaded, save for one post left out for present ingress and egress. It stood close to hand, however, ready to be slipped into the hole provided for it, at an instant's notice.

Charley suddenly staggered to his feet. “I can't waste time lying here,” he exclaimed. “Why, this is the day we expect the outlaws.”