

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PREPARATIONS.

“SIT down, Charley,” said the captain sternly, “are you crazy, lad? You can do nothing in your present state, and if you go and make yourself sick, you will cause us all a deal of trouble and worry.”

Charley sank back upon his couch. “But there is so much to be done, Captain,” he protested.

“Now look here, lad,” said the old sailor, “say those fellows have got their boat finished and start for that island we left this morning, it will take them quite a while to get there and I expect they will look it over a bit before following us. Take the time spent there and the time it will take them to reach here, an’ I reckon it will be late in the afternoon before we see anything of them.”

“It won’t do to take any chances, Captain. We had ought to be ready now.”

“Go ahead and say what you want done and we will do it while you sleep,” said the captain. “But if you persist in getting up, I’ll be hanged if I’ll do a stroke of work, outlaws or no outlaws.”

"Me neither," chimed in Chris.

"Better go to sleep, Charley," advised his chum. "I am going to get a nap, myself. I know I'll be able to work better for it."

Charley gave in with an unwilling sigh. "All right, I suppose I'll have to do as you all say."

"Tell us your plans and we will see that they are carried out," the captain said.

"We cannot keep those fellows from landing on the island," said the young leader, thoughtfully. "There are so many places where they can come ashore, and we are too few to guard the entire coast. I do not think we can even hold the walls against so many. There are more gaps in them than we could defend. I have thought it all over and I believe that all we can do is to confine the defense to this house. We ought to be able to hold this place until the Indians come."

"My ideas exactly," approved the captain.

"It's the only sensible thing to do," Walter agreed.

"To be successful, it is necessary for us to have a good supply of food and water. I intended to dry the venison, but there is not time to do that, you will have to cut it into thin strips and smoke it, that will not take long and it will keep for several days. That big copper and all the gourds should be filled with

water and brought inside. When that is all done, we will have food and drink to last us a week with care."

"Chris and I will see to it all," said the captain arising. "Is that all, lad?"

"We had ought to keep a lookout at the landing so as to know when they come and be ready for them."

"We'll 'tend to that when we get the other chores done. It's too early to expect them yet, anyway. Now you lie down and get a nap, lads, and don't worry, Chris and I will look out for everything."

Charley laid back and closed his eyes, obediently, while Chris and the captain passed out of the hut to attend to the tasks set them.

The two boys were soon fast asleep.

It was noon before Walter awoke, sat up, and looked around him. He noted that the workers had already completed their tasks; long strings of smoked venison strips were hung down from the roof, gourds and copper kettle were brimming full of sweet, clean water, and all of the guns had been freshly cleaned and oiled.

Treading softly so as not to awaken his chum, Walter passed out of the hut.

The captain and Chris were busily engaged in trying to dispatch a pot of venison stewed with yams, and Walter lost no time in joining them.

"Well, we are all through," observed the captain as he took a second helping of stew. "We would have called you to dinner, but I reckoned the sleep would do you more good. How do you feel now?"

"All right," Walter answered. "You should have left some of that work for us to do, Captain."

"I reckon you will have enough to do before we get a chance to leave this island," said the old sailor with a sigh. "If you are through, Chris, take your gun and go down to the landing and keep a sharp lookout. Those fellows had ought to be here this afternoon, some time. I will come down and spell you in a couple of hours."

"You had better go in and get a nap yourself, Captain, while there is nothing doing," said Walter. "It may be all hands on deck to-night."

"I reckon I'll take your advice, lad. I was awake all last night worrying about you boys and I can't stand loss of sleep now like you young fellows. I will just take forty winks. Call me when it is time to spell Chris."

Walter sat waiting until the old sailor's loud snoring proclaimed he was asleep. Then filling a small gourd with water from the spring, he made his way into the fort, where he righted one of the overturned canoes and fished out a large package

from under the stern and undid its fastenings. "I wonder they did not notice it when they carried the canoe up," he muttered.

For a long time he was busily engaged with the contents of the package and the gourd of water. At last he gave a sigh of triumphant satisfaction which died away as he heard Charley's voice calling his name from the hut.

With an exclamation of impatience, he emptied out the water, quickly bound up the package again, and thrust it back in its old place under the canoe's stern deck, then turning the canoe again bottom up, he passed out of the fort whistling, carelessly.

Charley in the door of the hut eyed him curiously as he approached. "What has happened to you?" he exclaimed, "you look as happy as if you had discovered a gold mine."

"Well, I haven't," laughed his chum, "how's your leg now?"

"Stiff as a ramrod, and, whew, how it hurts," Charley said with a grimace of pain. "I can't bear my weight on it."

"You don't want to try to," said Walter, severely. "Just go back to your bunk and keep still. All the work is done, now, and I am going down to the landing right off to relieve Chris so that he can get a little sleep."

Charley obeyed and Walter made his way down to the landing where he found Chris sitting on a log watching intently.

Walter took the gun from the tired little darky and sent him up to the hut to rest.

The hours passed swiftly by without any signs of the outlaws. When darkness fell, Walter abandoned his now useless post and made his way up to the hut where he found his three companions gathered around the camp-fire outside.

"Have you seen anything of them?" Charley inquired anxiously as he came in sight. "Not a sign," Walter answered. "I think you have done wrong in lighting that fire," he continued gravely. "There was a bare chance that they would have given up the chase after not finding us at the chief's island. If they are anywhere near, though, that fire will give us dead away."

"They would not have given up the chance of getting the plumes they have worked so hard to obtain as easily as all that," said his chum decidedly. "Remember, they believe that Big Tiger and his son are still with us and that the rest of the Indians are far away. No, they would not have given up so easily after the trouble they have been to."

Walter said no more but helped himself to an ear of corn and a piece of fish and fell to eating.

The silence that had fallen upon the party was broken by an exclamation from Chris.

"Golly, dar dey is," he cried.

Far off in the direction of the chief's island, a tiny shaft of light pierced the darkness.

"They are on the island we left," exclaimed Charley, "that's their camp-fire."

"No, no," said Walter. "See, it is getting bigger, I bet they have fired the wigwam."

In a few minutes all the party agreed with Walter, there was no mistaking the cause of the pillar of flame that rose high in the air on the distant island.

They watched it in silence until it died down and nothing remained but a faint glare.

"Let's go to bed," said Charley at last. "If they are on the chief's island, they will not bother us to-night."

But after a short discussion, it was decided to stand guard and watch, Charley and Walter to stand on guard until midnight, and then to be relieved by Chris and the captain.

The two sentinels climbed up on a portion of the wall that lay in the shadow of a big tree and from which they could command a good view of the rest of the wall and inclosure itself.

"I have been thinking that the unsavory reputa-

tion of this island may keep those fellows from coming here," Walter observed in an undertone.

"It will likely keep Indian Charley away, and I am more afraid of him than all the balance. I do not think it will stop the rest though," Charley answered, and they lapsed again into cautious silence.

The minutes had lengthened into an hour when there fell upon their ears the now familiar tolling of the bell.

"I am going to have another look in that chapel," declared Walter, as he slipped down from his perch.

"I'd like to go with you," said Charley, wistfully, "but my game leg won't carry me that far." He watched his chum until he disappeared in the shadow of the church.

Walter hesitated for a moment at the chapel doorway. It required more courage to enter that gloomy, black, mysterious interior, alone, than it had when he and Charley were together. Summoning up all his resolution he passed through the gaping doorway into the blackness beyond. All was dark and still inside, the bright moonlight shining through the high little windows threw patches of ghostly light upon the white, ghastly walls. Walter felt his flesh creep as he made his way through the darkness up towards the bell.

He stumbled often and bruised his knees against the stone seats but at last he reached the little platform and stood beneath the little tower. He could not see up into its gloomy interior, but the great bell above him tolled mournfully on.

For a space Walter stood silent, a superstitious dread creeping over him. "Dreaming, dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." A horror grew upon him, a feeling that something, some being antagonistic, repugnant to his very nature was sharing the darkness with him. The strokes of the bell above him seemed to grow horribly menacing to his feverish fancy. He struggled with himself to throw off the mantle of terror descending upon him but the feeling grew and grew. With a rush of unreasoning anger he flung up his gun and fired at the swaying bell.

A shrill, human-like cry rang out, the bell ceased tolling, and a heavy body crashed down at the terrified lad's feet.

Throwing out his arms Walter sank to the floor in a dead faint.

He opened his eyes again to see Charley bending over, examining him by the light of a flaring torch.

"What, what was it?" he whispered.

Charley shifted the torch and held it close to a dark figure stretched out on the stone floor.

Its glare lit up a face strangely human, and bearing the apparent mark of centuries in its furrowed features and wrinkled skin.

“A big monkey,” gasped Walter in astonishment.

“Yes,” said Charley gently, “an old man monkey, old, old, very, very old.”