

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ATTACK.

"HE has a bare chance yet," declared the outlaw, noting their looks of grief. "I will do what I can for him, but I wish I'd been here an hour sooner."

He took a little package from the bosom of his shirt and spread the contents out upon the table. "I couldn't bring much without arousing suspicion," he said regretfully, "but I guess I can make out with what I've brought."

With deft fingers, the newcomer measured out a powder from one of his packages and administered it to the unconscious lad and next turned his attention to the wounded leg. Emptying a spoonful of liquid from one of his bottles into a gourd of water he began to bathe the inflamed limb.

The hunters could not but admire the deftness and skill with which the stranger worked. His long tapering fingers seemed to have the suppleness and deftness of a woman's and his whole attention seemed concentrated upon his patient.

The hours passed slowly away, each seeming a day in length to the anxious hunters. The convicts re-

mained hidden behind the wall and there was nothing to do but to keep a sharp lookout. At noon the watchers made a light lunch on the smoked venison and water, but the young outlaw waved away the offered food and remained engrossed by the patient's side. At intervals of a few minutes all during the afternoon, he administered medicine to the sufferer and repeatedly bathed the wounded leg with the solution he had prepared.

The sun was barely an hour high, when he arose from the side of the couch with a weary sigh. "I think he will live," he announced, "he was almost gone for a while, though. I gave him enough strychnine during the first few hours to have killed a normal man, but his heart had weakened so that the stimulant hardly raised his pulse a single beat. The heart action is better now, and with close attention he had ought to pull through."

"How can we ever repay you for what you have done?" said the old sailor, with tears of thankfulness in his eyes, while Walter wrung the stranger's hand warmly.

"The saving of many lives will hardly atone for one I took once, though the deed was done in self-defense," said the outlaw gravely. "I am glad to have been of help in this case." He glanced around the room with a return of his former light careless

manner and nodded approvingly as he noted the stores of provisions and water. "Good," he exclaimed, "you are better prepared than I expected and certainly in much better shape than my former gentle companions dream. Why, it will be impossible for them to take this place by force."

"Can you tell us of their plans, Mr. ——," inquired Walter, hesitating for want of a name.

"You may call me Ritter, James Ritter," supplied the outlaw promptly, "I am not ashamed of my real name but my relatives had cause to be ashamed of its owner in his present condition. Their plans are almost self-evident, my lad. They will wait until dark and then slip over the wall, some will stop in that big building while the balance will make their way around to a building on the other side of you. They will then have you surrounded and have only to watch and wait to starve you out. They have plenty of provisions with them and can get that spring behind the fort without exposing themselves. It is only a question of time before you will have to give up, and then may the Lord grant us all a speedy death."

"Don't be too sure of it, friend," observed the captain. "The Lord never deserts those who fully believe and trust him. Those villains may be defeated yet."

The outlaw grinned as he looked around the room. "My dear friends are badly fooled," he chuckled with glee. "They believe the chief is with you, and he is not here. Why, they have already spent, in imagination, the money that they are going to derive from the sale of his plumes. What a shock it will be to them when they learn that the bird has flown. I wish I could see their faces when they hear the news."

"The chief is dead," said Walter, "do you think they would go away if they knew the truth?"

"No, I do not," replied Ritter, after a moment's thought, "in spite of all you might say, they would have a suspicion that you had secured the plumes yourselves, and, anyway, they are so mad that they will not leave until they have finished the job."

The hunters were favorably impressed with the frankness of the former outlaw. He had the speech and the manners of a gentleman, and his earnestness and apparent sincerity went far towards removing their suspicions, and, much to their surprise, they found themselves soon talking to him with the freedom of old acquaintances.

Ritter chuckled with delight when they told him of the young chief going for aid. "That gives us a fighting chance," he declared, joyfully. "We must put ourselves on short rations and try to hold out until they come."

"Where is Indian Charley?" asked Walter, "is he with the others?"

"No, they could not induce him to set foot on the island. The place evidently has a bad name among the Indians and I am not surprised after what I have seen. Even the convicts are puzzled and a little alarmed by the walls, courts, and buildings. They none of them know enough about history to lay them to the Spaniards as you folks have probably done. Charley, the Indian, swears that there is a mysterious bell which tolls every night. Have you heard anything of the kind?"

Walter briefly related their adventure with the bell-ringer, omitting any reference to the captain's superstitious fears, much to the old sailor's relief.

Further conversation was interrupted by darkness and preparations for the night.

Chris built a little fire near the door where the smoke would pass out through the cracks and prepared a stew of venison and some broth for Charley.

Taking turns the besieged made a hearty meal which did wonders in renewing hope and courage.

It was decided that they should take short shifts of watching during the night, two in each watch. It fell to Walter to share the watch with the young outlaw, for which he was not at all displeased, for he was greatly interested in the strange character,

and their turns at the watch passed quickly in pleasant conversation.

The outlaw spoke freely of the incident that had brought him to the convict gang, claiming firmly that the deed which had made him a felon had been done in self-defense, but, owing to lack of witnesses and to a well-known enmity between him and the dead man, the jury had brought in a verdict of murder in the second degree.

Walter, under the spell of the man's attractive, strong personality, could not but believe his assertion.

At the end of their watch, Walter awoke Chris and the captain and stretched out for a nap, but the outlaw never closed his eyes during the long uneventful night. When not watching, he was hovering over Charley's bedside administering medicine or working over the bitten leg. Yet daylight found him as cool and fresh as ever, apparently unaffected by his long vigil.

To the hunters' great delight, day found Charley visibly improved. He had fallen into a deep sleep, his body was wet with profuse perspiration, and the swelling of the limb had greatly decreased.

They showered thanks upon the outlaw until he was visibly embarrassed and begged them to say no more.

The morning passed as had the night, without any

hostile demonstration by the convicts. Smoke curling up from the fort and from a building on the other side of them told the besieged that the enemy had taken up their positions during the night as Ritter had prophesied. Evidently they were willing to wait for their triumph rather than risk any lives by trying to take their victims by assault.

When Chris started to make a stew for dinner, Ritter stopped him. "We can't spare any more water for cooking," he declared. "I have used a good deal on the patient, and the gourds are already almost empty. Our only hope of life is in husbanding our water and it would be wise to put ourselves on an allowance now. I figure that there is enough in that big copper to allow each of us a pint and a half per day for ten days."

The others saw the wisdom of his proposal and immediately agreed to it, and they made their dinner of roasted yams, smoked venison broiled before the fire, and a few swallows of water.

Once during the afternoon a convict tried a shot at a crack between the posts barricading the window. The bullet passed through, missing Ritter's head by a scant two inches. The former outlaw never winced but began singing mockingly, "Teasing, teasing, I was only teasing you."

A perfect storm of bullets answered his taunt.

"The rascals don't appreciate good singing," he said with a grin.

Charley's condition continued to steadily improve under the outlaw's careful ministrations and by nightfall, he was conscious once more and comparatively free from pain.

Night brought no change in the condition of the besieged. Watches were arranged as on the night before, and those off duty retired as soon as darkness had fallen.

"Do you believe in premonitions," asked Ritter, gravely, as he and Walter stood peering out of the windows. "Do you believe that coming events cast their shadows before them?"

"I hardly know," answered Walter, thoughtfully, "sometimes I almost believe that we are given warnings of coming events, but I can never quite convince myself that the happenings confirming, for instance, say a dream, are anything more than coincidences."

"A few days ago I would have laughed at such an idea, but all day I have had a vague presentiment of coming evil which I have found impossible to shake off," explained his companion.

"It's your liver, I dare say," said Walter cheerfully, "for my part, I feel that we are going to get out of this hole all right, and live happy ever after as the story books say."

“There can be but little happiness for me in the future, however, if we come out of this affair,” said his companion sorrowfully. “Death, I sometimes think, would be the best thing that could befall me. I am a life convict, you remember, found guilty by a jury, and condemned to pass a life at hard, degrading labor in company with ruffians of the lowest, most debased type. It is not a future to look forward to with pleasure!”

Walter remained silent, he could not but admit the truth of the man's words and reflect upon the misery of such a life would naturally bring to a man of education and refinement like this one. “You might escape, go to some other state, and begin life anew,” he at last suggested. “After what you have done for us, and believing you innocent as we now do, we should do all we could to help you to get away.”

“The life of a fugitive would be worse than that of a convict,” declared the other bitterly. “In every face I would read suspicion, and dread of detection and arrest would haunt me all the time.”

Walter could say nothing more to encourage this strange, unfortunate character, and with an effort the other shook off the black mood that had fallen upon him.

“I guess you're right, it must be my liver,” he

said lightly. "After all there is something in the old jockey saying, "There is nothing to a race but the finish." If I live a convict I can at least die a gentleman."

A sympathetic silence fell upon the two that lasted unbroken until their watch ended.