

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PARLEY.

ONLY once during the night were the watchers disturbed. Two convicts endeavored to worm their way up to the hut unseen but were quickly spotted by the captain who emptied his revolver at them without any other effect than to cause them to take to their heels. Aside from this incident the besieged were not disturbed.

The convicts were evidently keeping as keen a watch as the besieged to guard against the possibility of any of them escaping. A hat which Chris squeezed out through a crack between the posts was promptly riddled with bullets.

Morning found the hunters and their new friend weary with suspense and their long inactivity. All longed for a stroll in the open air, a chance to stretch their legs, and an unlimited supply of water to drink. It almost seemed that their meager allowance of a pint and a half each for the twenty-four hours did little more than increase their thirst. They could not safely alter their unpleasant situa-

tion, however, and they wisely made the best of it and did not grumble.

They had one great consolation in Charley's rapid progress towards health. He was gaining with astonishing rapidity and bid fair to be completely recovered in a few days.

With the coming of another day, the convicts opened an irregular fire upon the doors and windows of the hut. Many of their bullets passed between the cracks in the post barricades and imbedded themselves in the walls. The defenders husbanded their ammunition, firing only when a convict exposed arm or leg. They were satisfied now of the impregnability of their building and their main concern was to keep out of the way of chance bullets.

The morning was well advanced when Walter, who was watching at a window, felt a curious sensation in the soles of his feet, and, startled, looked down to find that he was standing in a tiny pool of water. With a cry of alarm he sprang to where the big copper sat. A glance confirmed his worst fears; a stray bullet had torn a great hole in the vessel near the bottom, and of their precious store of water barely a cupful remained.

It was a staggering blow to all. Food they could exist without for several days, but in that warm, humid climate life could not be sustained without

water for any length of time. Before forty-eight hours had passed they would be confronted by the alternatives of surrendering to the convicts, or to suffering the awful tortures of thirst.

"We must hold out as long as we can," declared Ritter, "something may turn up. Even death by thirst would be better than torture at the hands of those fiends. What little water is left, I would suggest that we save for the sick lad. We can stand thirst longer than he."

The rest agreed heartily to this proposal and the little water remaining was poured into an empty gourd and placed where it would be safe from bullets. By tacit consent they agreed that their loss should be concealed from Charley, who had slept throughout the incident. They knew him well enough to be sure that he would not touch the little water remaining if he knew they were suffering from thirst.

To add to the troubles of the little party, the day proved very hot and sultry, not a breath of air stirring. By noon all were very thirsty, and when night came without bringing any relief from the heat, they began to suffer severely for lack of water.

The hot night dragged slowly away to bring another breathless sultry day, the close of which found the little party almost at the limits of their endurance. Since the night before they had been unable

to eat the dry venison as it greatly increased their thirst. Their tongues and throats were dry and swollen and every nerve and atom of their heated bodies clamored for water.

As night fell, Ritter got out the punctured copper and busied himself in plugging up the hole.

"What are you doing that for?" Walter inquired.

"I'll tell you when the rest are asleep," whispered the young outlaw, "there is no use alarming them."

It was late in the night before the others, tortured by fear and thirst, fell into uneasy slumber, and Walter and Ritter were free to continue their conversation.

"We are in a desperate condition," declared Ritter. "In this heat we cannot exist very much longer without water. Something has got to be done at once if we are to hold out another forty-eight hours."

"But what can we do?" said Walter, hopelessly. "It's sure death to venture outside."

"I am not so sure about that," said the other, "anyway, I am going to try it, anything is better than the tortures we will soon be suffering."

"You'll be killed," exclaimed Walter, "I'll go, Ritter, I can be spared better than you."

"Death by bullet is better than death by thirst," said his companion coolly, "and you cannot be

spared as well as I. Your companions are fond of you and your death would be a terrible blow to them, while I am only an unknown convict whom no one will miss. But I am getting tragic," he continued, lightly. "I really think there is a good chance of success, the night is dark, and the very boldness of the attempt will be in its favor. They will not dream of one of us venturing right under the shadow of their fort."

Although he spoke with apparent sincerity, Walter was not deceived. Both knew the hopelessness of such an attempt. In vain did Walter attempt to dissuade the other, Ritter remained firm.

"We will remove a post from the doorway as quietly as possible and you do your best to protect me with your rifle," he said.

With a heavy heart, Walter assisted the other to remove the post. He had grown very fond of Ritter in the few days they had been together. He admired him for his bravery and the cheeriness and sweetness of his disposition under trials and suffering. He gave the outlaw's hand a long, friendly clasp at parting.

"May God bring you back safe and sound," he whispered, brokenly.

With a return pressure of the hand, Ritter dropped to his hands and knees and wound his way out of the

doorway into the darkness. Walter watched his progress from the doorway with an anxious heart. He saw him crawl a considerable distance from the hut, then rise to his feet and saunter carelessly towards the fort. The very boldness of the act made it successful. The convict on guard no doubt thought the figure one of his companions, needlessly exposing himself to a bullet from the hut, and only wondered vaguely at his taking needless risks and perhaps speculated dully as to what was the nature of the large object he bore.

Carelessly, Ritter sauntered slowly past the fort and approached the spring. There was no guard posted on that side of the fort and he partly filled the copper and kneeling by the cool water took a deep drink and bathed his feverish face in the refreshing liquid. Half of his mad task was performed, but, as he fully realized, the riskiest part was yet to come.

Taking another long drink, he lifted the heavy copper and, bearing it in front of him so as to conceal it as much as possible by his person, he walked slowly back towards the hut.

Two-thirds of the return was covered in safety when the convict guard shouted with an oath,

“Come back, you fool, do you want to get the daylight shot out of you?”

Ritter's answer was a taunting laugh as he bounded towards the hut.

The guard's rifle cracked and the fleeing man staggered drunkenly but sped on, while the convict working the lever of his Winchester with remorseless cruelty, emptied its contents after the fleeing figure.

At the doorway of the hut, Ritter crumpled to his knees.

"Take the copper," he cried to Walter, "I'm hit." Walter quickly placed the vessel inside, then, heedless of the rain of bullets, dragged the wounded man inside.

The others had been awakened by the noise and were quickly at his side.

"Chris, give me a hand to lay him on my bed; Captain, replace the post in the doorway," Walter commanded with heartsore calmness.

The wounded man opened his eyes as they laid him gently on the couch.

"It's no use bothering with me, old chap," he said, quietly. "I'm hit in a dozen places and I'm doctor enough to know that I'm going fast."

Walter buried his head by the dying man's side and sobbed dryly.

"There, there," the other said, soothingly, "don't feel bad about it. It's just what I wished for. I'm going to die like a gentleman."

Walter hushed his sobs with an effort to catch the feebly spoken words.

The wounded man's eyes closed, and Walter held his breath for a second thinking him dead, but in a moment he opened them again and smiled faintly, "There's nothing to a race but the finish," he whispered.

A little longer he lay still breathing heavily. Suddenly by a mighty effort he raised himself on his elbow, his eyes shining with a strange light. "Not guilty, your honor," he said in a firm voice, then sank back still and white.

"He's dead," said Walter, brokenly. "He had his wish; he died like a hero."

They covered the still form reverently with a blanket, and the silence of bitter grief settled on the little party. The others had not become so intimate with the dead man as Walter, but they had grown to admire him greatly, and the thought that he had given up his life in their service added to their grief.

Walter's suffering was intense and it was well that his mind was of necessity soon forced into other channels.

The convicts, exasperated at the way they had been outwitted, opened a heavy continuous fire upon the hut, under cover of which several attempts were made

to carry the hut by assault. But the assaulting parties were easily discouraged by the steady fire that met them at each attempt.

"It looks as if they were getting desperate," said the captain, "I reckon they know now that we can hold out for a long time yet, and they are gettin' discouraged," and his companions agreed with him.

Towards morning the convicts' fire slackened and gradually ceased.

Just as day was breaking, the distant report of a rifle was borne to the ears of the besieged.

Charley, who was now able to leave his bed, listened eagerly. "It's Indian Charley's rifle. I know the sound," he declared, "ten shots; I wonder what it means."

From the fort came an answering volley of ten rifle shots.

"It's a signal," cried Walter, "I wonder what it's for."

"Hallo there in the hut, we want a parley," hailed a rough voice from the fort.

"All right," answered Charley, "send forward one man, unarmed."

A convict emerged from the fort and advanced towards the hut with fearful, hesitating footsteps.

"Don't be afraid, we won't hurt you," Walter called to him encouragingly.