

CHAPTER XXXII.

HELP.

“SAY what you want and be quick about it,” said Charley sharply, as the convict halted close to the hut.

“Me and my mates want to know if you are ready to call this thing quits,” the man growled. “We agree to leave you the island all to yourselves right off if you won’t fire on us while we are leaving.”

Charley turned to the others for counsel. “There’s something in the wind,” he declared in a low tone. “This proposal coming so soon after that signal means something. Maybe the Indians are coming.”

“We can’t bank on that, it’s hardly time for them yet,” observed the captain. “Better agree to their offer, lads. I guess they are just tired of the game.”

“We can’t well stop them if they have taken a notion to leave,” said Walter. “I agree with the captain. Let them go.”

Charley turned to the man. “We agree, provided you leave at once,” he said.

The convict, with a surly growl, turned and rapidly retraced his steps to the fort.

The convicts were in evident haste to be gone, for their envoy had hardly got inside before they began to file out, each bearing his gun and other belongings.

Within ten minutes from the envoy's visit the last of the outlaws had scaled the walls and was lost to sight.

The hunters waited for half an hour before they removed the barricade from the door and let the fresh cool morning breeze into their stuffy prison. Even then they did not venture outside, for they still feared some trick on the part of the convicts. As the moments passed quietly by, however, without any sign of their foes, their fears began to decrease.

"I am going to find out what has become of them," Walter at last declared. "Unless we make certain now of what they are up to, we will be afraid to venture outside for a week to come."

His companions in vain tried to dissuade him from his rash project, his mind was made up and he turned a deaf ear to their words.

Shouldering one of the rifles, he made his way to the wall, clambered over it nimbly and disappeared on the other side.

It was over half an hour before Walter returned.

His companions had begun to feel uneasy about him when he appeared on the top of the wall and dropped down inside with a hearty cheer.

"Come out, all of you," he shouted, "there's nothing more to fear from the convicts."

The little party crowded around him with eager questions.

"I followed them down to the landing," he said. "They had just shoved off in their dugout and were headed back for their old camp and paddling away for dear life.

"I had not long to wait before I discovered the reason for their haste. Far up the stream was a big fleet of Indian dugouts coming down, there must have been forty of them at least. Then all was as plain as print: the convicts were aiming to get back to their ponies and make their escape on them. Likely they would have done so if Indian Charley had only warned them a little sooner, but they were too late."

"Go on," said Charley, eagerly, as Walter paused in his story.

"They had only got as far as that little island near this one, when another big fleet of canoes appeared just ahead of them. I guess they realized that they stood no show to make a successful fight for it, crowded up as they were in the dugout; anyway, they

ran ashore on that little island and threw up mounds of sand and are lying behind them."

"Have the Indians attacked them?" Charley demanded.

"Not a shot has been fired. The Indians have formed a circle around the island with their canoes just out of good gunshot and seem to be waiting."

"Let's all go down to the landing," proposed Charley, eagerly, as Walter concluded his account.

The others were as excited as Charley and readily agreed to the proposal.

They found the situation just as Walter had described, the little island with the band of convicts on it with the circle of canoes around it.

"They won't stand much show if the Indians attack them in earnest," observed the captain, "there ain't a bit of shelter on that island and it ain't hardly a foot above water."

As the little party gazed eagerly upon the scene, the next act in the grim tragedy occurred.

"Look," exclaimed Charley, "they didn't fasten their canoe and it is drifting away. They are so busy watching the Indians that they haven't noticed it yet."

A yell of dismay from the convicts soon told that they had discovered their loss. A few dashed down to the water as though they would plunge in after the

drifting craft, but they evidently lacked the courage to face the bullets that would surely greet them if they ventured the act, for they stopped at the water's edge and soon returned to the breastworks of sand.

An Indian paddled out from the circle of canoes and securing the drifting craft, towed it back to the others.

"Just look," exclaimed Walter, "I wonder what the Seminoles mean by that move."

The others gazed eagerly with many exclamations of astonishment.

The circle of besieging canoes was breaking up, first one dropped out of the circle, then another, until the whole fleet had formed in one long, unbroken line. Paddles flashed in the water and the long line came sweeping gracefully on past the little island.

"You may hang me to the cross-trees, if they ain't agoin' to let them scoundrels go," cried the captain in disgust.

"It certainly looks like it," admitted Charley, sadly. "All they have to do is to swim to shore and make their way out on foot."

The big fleet came sweeping steadily on, headed directly for the landing where the little party stood.

An exultant yell burst from the convicts as they saw the dreaded attack so quickly abandoned.

A hundred yards from the landing, the fleet of

canoes seemed to slacken speed, many of the Indians stopped paddling, and the long line was thrown into confusion.

An Indian in the leading canoe stood up and seemed to be haranguing the others.

"That's Little Tiger," said Walter eagerly, as he recognized the orator. "He's making a speech."

The hunters could, of course, make nothing of the speaker's words, but the tone of his voice told him that the young Indian was terribly in earnest. His clear, resonant voice seemed to now ring with despairing scorn, now sink to touching appeal.

"My, but he's a born orator!" exclaimed Charley in admiration. "It sounds as though he was lashing them up to some desperate undertaking."

The Indian at last ceased speaking and resuming his paddle sent his craft forward, his companions following in his wake.

He grounded his rude canoe at the hunters' feet and sprang out with the light, lithe leap of a panther.

"How," he said, gravely, extending his hand to each in turn.

The hunters shook the small, shapely hand with genuine pleasure. They were all struck by the change in the young Indian. In the short time since they had seen him last he had changed from a care-free stripling to a thoughtful chief whose word was law

with his people. His manner had become grave and reserved, and there was about him an air of conscious power that well became his manly bearing.

He glanced from one to the other of the little party with keen eyes. "It is well," he said, in his clear, musical voice. "All here, none missing, not even the little one with a face like night. The Little Tiger's heart was heavy with fear lest he should come too late. But neither the jackal's tribe nor the spirits of the night have harmed his friends."

"Did not the young chief fear to land on the island of the spirits?" asked Charley with a smile.

The Indian drew himself up proudly. "Shall a Seminole fear to follow where the paleface dares to tread?" he demanded.

"Even the palefaces were filled with fear," said Charley, quickly, regretting his attempt at pleasantry, "but they found that they had been only children frightened at shadows. They have slain that which made the noises full of mystery."

"Does the young white chief speak with the tongue of truth?" asked the Seminole, eagerly.

"Even as he would be spoken to," answered Charley, gravely. "If the Little Tiger will come with his paleface friends, they will show him many wonderful things."

For a moment the young Indian hesitated, the

fears bred in him by tradition struggling with his curiosity, but curiosity conquered. Turning to his followers, who had all drawn in to the landing, he gave some sharp commands in his own language. They stepped ashore with evident reluctance and there was considerable murmuring amongst them. The chief looked them over with a scornful eye.

“Some of my warriors are not men, but squaws in men’s clothing,” he said, bitterly. “Their blood is like water in their veins with fear.”

The murmuring Seminoles grew silent under their chief’s scornful gaze, and when he moved forward with his white friends they followed closely in the rear.

On the way up to the wall, Charley explained to the young Indian about the bell and its nightly ringer.

The chief listened with relief and satisfaction on his face and quickly communicated the news in his own tongue to his followers. Immobile as were the Indians’ faces, they could not conceal entirely their relief and pleasure at the explanation of what had been to them a life-long, fearful mystery.

Little Tiger was astonished when he saw the ancient road through the forest, and, at the sight of walls and buildings of stone, he exhibited a childish delight. “This is an island worthy of being the

home of a great chief," he declared. "In the big wigwam of stone (the fort) the Little Tiger will rest in peace when not on the hunt, and the squaws shall make of this dirt of black, great fields of yams and waving corn. It is good, that which the palefaces have done; how can their red brother reward them?"

"By lending them one of his warriors to guide them back to where their ponies and goods are waiting," answered Charley, promptly.

"It shall be done," said the chief, "though the hearts of their red brothers will be heavy at parting. Their hearts were filled with gladness with the hope that the palefaces would bide with them and take unto them squaws from among the Seminoles."

The captain was on the point of exploding with indignation at the thought of an Indian squaw, but Charley spoke up quickly.

"Little Tiger does his friends great honor, yet, though their hearts are heavy at the thought of parting, they must go." Charley glanced at the captain and added mischievously, "He with the gray hair on face and head has, without doubt, many squaws amongst his people whose hearts are longing for his return."

The old sailor glared at the speaker in speechless indignation.

"There cannot be too many hands to till the

fields," observed the chief, gravely. "I will give him another squaw to take back with him to his wigwam."

Charley silenced the embarrassed captain with a shake of his head. "The chief is kind," he said, "but squaws are not as men, there would be great enmity and hair-pulling between the white squaws and the red, and when squaws quarrel the wigwam is sad for the warrior."

The chief nodded gravely. "The young white chief speaks truly," he said.