

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEMINOLES.

THE conversation on the part of the hunters had so far been conducted by Charley. Walter had remained silent, busily thinking over the wrongs that had been done them by the convicts. He could not forget the still, cold form in the hut that had been robbed of life by the murderers' bullets. He was not usually a vindictive boy, but, as he thought of Ritter's noble act and sudden death, his passion steadily grew and at last he turned scornfully to the young chief.

"Little Tiger speaks with the tongue of a man, but his deeds are those of a squaw," he declared, bitterly. "Are he and his braves afraid of the murderers of his people and the slayers of his father that they leave them to escape in peace and safety?"

"They will not escape," said the young Indian, his face darkening with anger at the savage taunt. "A man's death for a man, but jackals shall die like jackals. With hearts of terror and blood turned to water in their fear, they shall die a death more horrible than the palefaces can give them."

"You have offended him, Walter," said Charley, as the young savage walked proudly away. "Why couldn't you be more patient? I have felt all along that he had some plan for dealing with the convicts."

"I suppose I have put my foot in it," said Walter regretfully, "but it's no use crying about it now."

The Indians were already lighting fires and preparing breakfast, but the hunters had a task before them which they felt they must perform before they could touch food, and they immediately set about it.

In the shade of a majestic live oak, they dug a deep grave and in it laid to rest the body of the unfortunate Ritter. Their eyes were moist as the earth covered the remains of the young hero.

Little Tiger rose to meet them as they approached the group of Indians.

Walter walked up to him with outstretched hand. "I am sorry for my angry, foolish words," he said. "When sorrow bears heavy on the heart, the tongue grows bitter."

The young Seminole grasped the offered hand with evident pleasure. "Even squaws forgive and forget, and a warrior should be nobler than a squaw," he said, sagely. "The palefaces shall be seated and share the food of their red brothers."

The hunters would gladly have declined, but could not well do so without giving offense, so they seated

themselves in the circle surrounding the steaming kettle containing the food and with inward qualms partook lightly of the stew.

There was a kettle to every fifteen Indians, and their manner of eating left much to be desired. Spoons and forks they had none, but they solved the problem by dipping their hands into the pot and fishing out the portions desired. With true courtesy, the guests were given the first dip into the pot.

As they ate, the hunters had an opportunity to study their hosts more carefully than they had yet done.

They were all splendid specimens of savage manhood. Not one was less than six feet tall, and each was shaped and muscled like an athlete. All wore the usual Seminole dress, a long shirt belted in at the waist, moccasins, and turbans of tightly wound red handkerchiefs. They were extremely neat and cleanly in appearance, a virtue not common with Indian tribes.

There were a few squaws among the company, but they did not tempt a second glance. They were wooden-faced, slovenly-looking creatures almost disgusting in appearance. They were loaded with string upon string of colored beads forming a solid mass, like a huge collar, from the point of their chins down to their chests.

"Which one have you picked out for your own, Captain?" whispered Charley. "That big one over there seems to have her eye upon you."

The old sailor flushed with embarrassment. "Look out or they'll have you," he cautioned fearfully, "I kinder feel that big one has singled me out, an' I don't want to encourage her none."

The Indians seemed to regard the day as a holiday to celebrate the laying out of the spirits and the adding of a large fertile island to their domain.

The morning was given over to feasting and to running, jumping and wrestling matches. Only the young Indians indulged in these contests, the warriors sitting gravely looking on.

Our young hunters tried their strength and skill with the Indian lads, but, although they were stronger and more nimble than most boys of their age, they found that they were no match for the young Seminoles.

While the boys were enjoying the contests, the captain sat moodily apart, keeping a worried eye upon the squaws.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Charley drew aside one of the Seminole lads, whom he had found could speak English, and whispered eagerly to him.

The Indian lad's bright, beady eyes twinkled as he listened, and, when Charley concluded, he nodded his head and slipped away into the group around the fire.

"Look, Walt, oh, look," shouted Charley a moment later, "look at the captain, oh my, oh my," and Charley rolled on the grass in wicked glee.

The young Indian had done his work well. A dozen of the squaws had formed a ring around the old sailor and were slowly closing in. The captain had struggled to his feet and with red face and horrified eyes was waving his arms frantically, shouting, "Go away, go away," much as one would shoo a flock of chickens.

"Don't be afraid, captain," called Charley, "they only want to embrace you."

"I won't be embraced, I won't, I won't," cried the old sailor, frantically.

"Come, Captain, do the Hobson act," said Walter, "the ladies expect it."

"Help, help," shouted the captain appealingly, as the circle of grave-faced squaws steadily advanced, "I won't be embraced, I won't."

With a sudden howl of terror the squaws turned and fled.

In his fear, the captain had opened his mouth a little too far and his false teeth had tumbled out.

The old sailor caught them in his hand and continued to wave his arms. "I won't be embraced," he shouted.

But there was no need of the defiance; the squaws would not, for untold beads, have come near the strange being with the movable teeth.

"Shame, Captain," said Charley severely, as the two boys approached the old sailor. "You must have been flirting with those ladies to make them act like that."

"I guess they was just attracted by my appearance," said the captain modestly, "I always was a favorite with the ladies."

"Looks as if they were headed this way again," said Walter.

With a cry of fright the old sailor turned and dashed away for the shelter of the hut as fast as he could run.

The boys shouted with laughter, and even the grave warriors smiled at the scene.

After dinner the celebration was renewed, but this time the youths formed the audience while their elders held shooting matches and more sober contests of skill and strength.

The captain did not emerge from the hut until nearly sundown, and when he did appear he carried both upper and lower teeth in his hand. Whenever

a squaw approached anywhere near him he would open his mouth to its fullest extent and wave the teeth in the air.

"They will get used to seeing you without them and soon think you as beautiful as ever," Charley said to him, gravely.

"Charley," said the old sailor, solemnly, "for good or ill, we leave this island to-morrow. It ain't often them Injin women meets with a man of my looks, an' it has drove 'em plum crazy. It ain't safe for me to stay longer."

"I'm wondering what that widow lady in Shelbourne will say when she hears of this," said Walter musingly. "She will naturally think that you must have given them great encouragement."

"If either of you lads breathe a word of this in town, I'll throttle you," declared the apprehensive old sailor.

"We won't say a word," said Charley, severely, "but I must say you have been setting Walter and I a terrible example, captain."

After this parting shot, the two tormentors retired quickly, for the old sailor was almost at the exploding point with indignation.

The captain was not the only one to whom the afternoon had brought trials. Chris had not been without his share of troubles. The Seminoles treated

him with marked disdain and would not even permit him to eat with the others.

"The Indians consider the darky as an inferior being," Charley had confided to Walter in a whisper. "There are rumors that there is more than one negro slave in the heart of the Everglades. The Seminoles have a proverb, 'White man, Indian, dog, nigger,' which expresses their opinion of the colored race."

Chris' troubles reached their climax when the little party was seated around the fire with the Indians in the evening.

The chief, who had been watching the little darky closely all day, turned to Charley: "Me buy 'em," he said, indicating Chris with a wave of his hand. "Me buy nigger."

"I ain't no nigger," shouted Chris in a rage, "I'se a free-born black Englishman, dat's what I is."

Charley silenced the indignant little darky with a wave of his hand.

"He already has a master and is therefore not ours to sell," he said, while Chris bristled with indignation.

"Who master?" inquired the Seminole with an appraising glance at the sturdy little darky.

"A man called King Edward," said Charley gravely, and Chris' indignation subsided.

"Too bad," grunted the chief, and dropped the subject.

"What's that?" exclaimed Walter suddenly, as distant rifle shots echoed in the air, were repeated irregularly and finally ceased.

"The convicts, I guess," whispered Charley, "I don't understand why they are firing, though. All the Indians are here."

Significant glances passed between the Indians.

"Jackals are dead," said the chief, a fierce exultation in his face.

"Who killed them?" cried Charley.

"Crocodiles," said the Seminole, briefly.

The little party stared at each other in horror. They understood now why the Seminoles had not made an attack, and had showed so much confidence in the convicts not being able to escape.

Much as the hunters hated the men who had persecuted them, they felt shocked and horror-stricken at the horrible fate that had overtaken them.