



This much was clear to the Kentuckian: food had been taken to some one in the shed—to Betty and the boy—more likely to George.

He waited now for the night to come, and to him the sun seemed fixed in the heavens. At Belle Plain Tom Ware was watching it with a shuddering sense of the swiftness of its flight. But at last the tops of the tall trees obscured it; it sank quickly then and blazed a ball of fire beyond the Arkansas coast, while its dying glory spread aslant the heavens, turning the flanks of the gray clouds to violet and purple and gold.

With the first approach of darkness Carrington made his way to the shed. Hidden in the shadow he paused to listen, and fancied he heard difficult breathing from within. The door creaked hideously on its wooden hinges when he pushed it open, but as it swung back the last remnant of the day's light showed him some dark object lying prone on the dirt floor. He reached down and his hand rested on a man's booted foot.

"George—" Carrington spoke softly, but the man on the floor gave no sign that he heard, and Carrington's questioning touch stealing higher he found that George—if it were George—was lying on his side with his arms and legs securely bound. Thinking he slept, the Kentuckian shook him gently to arouse him.

"George?" he repeated, still bending above him. This time an inarticulate murmur answered him. At the same instant, the woolly head of the negro came under his fingers and he discovered the reason of his silence. He was as securely gagged as he was sound.

"Listen, George—it's Carrington—I am going to take off this gag, but don't speak above a whisper—they may hear us!" And he cut the cords that held the gag in place.

"How yo' get here, Mas'r Ca'ing-



He Was as Securely Gagged as He Was Bound.

ton?" asked the negro guardedly, as the gag fell away.

"Around the head of the bayou."

"Lard!" exclaimed George, in a tone of wonder.

"Where's Miss Betty?"

"She's in the cabin yonder—fo' the love of God, cut these here other ropes with yo' knife, Mas'r Ca'ington—I'm perishin' with 'em!" Carrington did as he asked, and growling, George sat erect. "I'm like I was gone to sleep all over," he said.

"You'll feel better in a moment. Tell me about Miss Malroy?"

"They done fetched us here last night. I was drivin' Missy into Raleigh—her and young Mas'r Hazard—when fo' men stop us in the road."

"Who were they, do you know?" asked Carrington.

"Lard—what's that?"

Carrington, knife in hand, swung about on his heel. A lantern's light

flashed suddenly in his face and Bess Hicks, with a low startled cry breaking from her lips, paused in the doorway. Springing forward, Carrington seized her by the wrist.

"Hush!" he grimly warned.

"What are you doin' here?" demanded the girl, as she endeavored to shake off his hand, but Carrington drew her into the shed, and closing the door, set his back against it. There was a brief silence during which Bess regarded the Kentuckian with a kind of stolid fearlessness. She was the first to speak. "I reckon you-all have come after Miss Malroy," she observed quietly.

"Then you reckon right," answered Carrington. The girl studied him from her level brows.

"And you-all think you can take her away from here," she speculated. "I ain't afraid of yo' knife—you-all might use it fast enough on a man, but not on me. I'll help you," she

added. Carrington gave her an incredulous glance. "You don't believe me? That would fetch our men up from the keel boat. No—yo-all's knife wouldn't stop me!"

"Don't be too sure of that," said Carrington sternly. The girl met the menace of his words with soft, full-throated laughter.

"Why, yo' hand's shakin' now, Mr. Carrington?"

"You know me?"

"Yes, I seen you once at Boggs." She made an impatient movement. "You can't do nothing against them fo' men unless I help you. Miss Malroy's to go down river tonight; they're only waiting fo' a pilot—you-all's got to act quick!"

Carrington hesitated.

"Why do you want Miss Malroy to escape?" he said.

The girl's mood changed abruptly. She scowled at him.

"I reckon that's a private matter. Ain't it enough fo' you-all to know that I do? I'm showing how it can be done. Them four men on the keel boat are strangers in these parts, they're waiting fo' a pilot, but they don't know who he'll be. I've heard you-all was a river-man; what's to hinder yo' taking the pilot's place? Looks like yo' was willing to risk yo' life fo' Miss Malroy or you wouldn't be here."

"I'm ready," said Carrington, his hand on the door.

"No, you ain't—jest yet," interposed the girl hastily. "Listen to me first. They's a dugout tied up 'bout a hundred yards above the keel boat; you must get that to cross in to the other side of the bayou, then when yo're ready to come back yo're to whistle three times—it's the signal we're expecting—and I'll row across fo' you in one of the skiffs."

"Can you see Miss Malroy in the meantime?"

"If I want to, they's nothin' to hinder me," responded Bess sullenly.

"Tell her then—" began Carrington, but Bess interrupted him.

"I know yo' nothin'. She ain't to cry out or nothin' when she sees you-all. I got sense enough fo' that."

Carrington looked at her curiously. "This may be a serious business for your people," he said significantly, and watched her narrowly.

"And you-all may get killed. I reckon if yo' want to do anything bad enough you don't mind much what comes after," she answered with a hard little laugh, as she went from the shed.

"Come!" said Carrington to the negro, when he had seen the cabin door close on Bess and her lantern; and they stole across the clearing. Reaching the bayou side they began a noiseless search for the dugout, which they quickly found, and Carrington turned to George. "Can you swim?" he asked.

"Yes, Mas'r."

"Then go down into the water and drag the canoe farther along the shore—and for God's sake, no sound!" he cautioned.

They placed a second hundred yards between themselves and the keel boat in this manner, then he had George bring the dug-out to the bank, and they embarked. Keeping within the shadow of the trees that fringed the shore, Carrington paddled silently about the head of the bayou.

"George," he at length said, bending toward the negro; "my horse is tied in the woods on the right-hand side of the road just where you were taken from the carriage last night—you can be at Belle Plain inside of an hour."

"Look here, Mas'r Ca'ington, those folks yonder is kin to Boss Hicks. If he gets his hand on me first don't you reckon he'll stop my mouth? I been here heaps of times fatchin' letters fo' Mas'r Tom," added George.

"Who were the letters fo'?" asked the Kentuckian, greatly surprised.

"They was fo' that Captain Murrell; seems like him and Mas'r Tom was mixed up in a sight of business."

"When was this—recently?" inquired Carrington. He was turning over this astonishing statement of the slave over in his mind.

"Well, no, Mas'r; seems like they ain't so thick here recently."

"I reckon you'd better keep away from the big house yet a while," said Carrington. "Instead of going there, stop at the Belle Plain landing. You'll find a raft tied up to the shore; it belongs to a man named Cavendish. Tell him what you know—that I've found Miss Malroy and the boy; tell him to cast off and drift down here. I'll run the keel boat around the first chance I get, so tell him to keep a sharp lookout."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Keel Boat.

A few minutes later they had separated, George to hurry away in search of the horse, and Carrington to pass

back along the shore until he gained a point opposite the clearing. He whistled shrilly three times, and after an interval of waiting heard the splash of oars and presently saw a skiff steal out of the gloom.

"Who's there?" It was Bess who asked the question.

"Carrington," he answered.

"Lucky you ain't met the other man!" she said as she swept her skiff alongside the bank.

"Lucky for him, you mean. I'll take the oars," added Carrington, as he entered the skiff.

Slowly the clearing lifted out of the darkness, then the keel boat became distinguishable; and Carrington checked the skiff by a backward stroke of the oars.

"Hello!" he called.

There was no immediate answer to his hail, and he called again as he sent the skiff forward. He felt that he was risking all now.

"What do you want?" asked a surly voice.

"You want Slosson!" quickly prompted the girl in a whisper.

"I want to see Slosson!" said Carrington glibly and with confidence, and once more he checked the skiff.

"Who be you?"

"Murrell sent you," prompted the girl again, in a hurried whisper.

"Murrell—!" And in his astonishment Carrington spoke aloud.

"Murrell?" cried the voice sharply.



"Who's There?" It Was Bess Who Asked the Question.

"—sent me!" said Carrington quickly, as though completing an unfinished sentence. The girl laughed nervously under her breath.

"Row cloister!" came the sullen command, and the Kentuckian did as he was bidden. Four men stood in the bow of the keel boat, a lantern was raised aloft and by its light they looked him over. There was a moment's silence broken by Carrington, who asked:

"Which one of you is Slosson?" And he sprang lightly aboard the keel boat.

"I'm Slosson," answered the man with the lantern. The previous night Mr. Slosson had been somewhat under the enlivening and elevating influence of corn whisky, but now he was his own cheerless self, and rather jaded by the passing of the hours which he had sacrificed to an irksome responsibility. "What word do you fetch from the captain, brother?" he demanded.

"Miss Malroy is to be taken down river," responded Carrington. Slosson swore with surpassing fluency.

"Say, we're five able-bodied men risking our necks to oblige him! You can get married a damn sight easier than this if you go about it right—I've done it lots of times." Not understanding the significance of Slosson's allusion to his own matrimonial career, Carrington held his peace. The tavern-keeper swore again with unimpaired vigor. "You'll find mighty few men with more experience than me," he asserted, shaking his head. "But if you say the word—"

"I'm all for getting shut of this!" answered Carrington promptly, with a sweep of his arm. "I call these pretty close quarters!"

Still shaking his head and muttering, the tavern-keeper sprang ashore and mounted the bank, where his slouching figure quickly lost itself in the night.

Carrington took up his tation on the flat roof of the cabin which filled the stern of the boat. It was remembering that day in the sandy Barony road—and during all the weeks and months that had intervened, Murrell, working in secret, had moved steadily toward the fulfillment of his desires! Unquestionably he had been back of the attack on Norton, had inspired his subsequent murder, and the man's sinister and mysterious power had never been suspected. Carrington knew that the horse-thieves and slave stealers were supposed to maintain a loosely knit association; he wondered if Murrell were not the moving spirit in some such organization.

"If I'd only pushed my quarrel with him!" he thought bitterly.

He heard Slosson's shuffling step in the distance, a word or two when he spoke gruffly to some one, and a moment later he saw Betty and the boy, their forms darkly silhouetted against the lighter sky as they moved along the top of the bank. Slosson, without any superfluous gallantry, helped his captives down the slope and aboard the keel boat, where he locked them in the cabin, the door of which fastened with a hasp and wooden peg.

"You're boss now, pardner!" he said, joining Carrington at the steering oar.

"We'll cast off then," answered Carrington.

Thus far nothing had occurred to mar his plans. If they could but quit the bayou before the arrival of the man whose place he had taken the rest would be, if not easy of accomplishment, at least within the realm of the possible.

"I reckon you're a river-man?" observed Slosson.

"All my life."

The line had been cast off, and the crew with their setting poles were forcing the boat away from the bank. All was quietly done; except for an occasional order from Carrington no word was spoken, and soon the unwieldy craft glided into the sluggish current and gathered way. Mr. Slosson, who clearly regarded his relation to the adventure as being of an official character, continued to stand at Carrington's elbow.

"What have we between here and the river?" inquired the latter. It was best, he felt, not to give Slosson an opportunity to ask questions.

"It narrows considerably, pardner, but it's a straight course," said Slosson. "Black in yonder, ain't it?" he added, nodding ahead.

The shores drew rapidly together; they were leaving the lake-like expanse behind. In the silence, above the rustling of the trees, Carrington heard the first fret of the river against its bank. Slosson yawned prodigiously.

"I reckon you ain't needing me?" he said.

"Better go up in the bow and get some sleep," advised Carrington, and Slosson, nothing loath, clambered down from the roof of the cabin and stumbled forward.

The ceaseless murmur of the rushing waters grew in the stillness as the keel boat drew nearer the hurrying yellow flood, and the beat of the Kentuckian's pulse quickened. Would he find the raft there? He glanced back over the way they had come. The dark ranks of the forest walked off the clearing, but across the water a dim point of light was visible. He fixed its position as somewhere near the head of the bayou. Apparently it was a lantern, but as he looked a ruddy glow crept up against the skyline.

From the bow Bunker had been observing this singular phenomenon. Suddenly he bent and roused Slosson, who had fallen asleep. The tavern-keeper sprang to his feet and Bunker pointed without speaking.

"Mebby you can tell me what that light back yonder means?" cried Slosson, addressing himself to Carrington; as he spoke he snatched up his rifle.

"That's what I'm trying to make out," answered Carrington.

"Hell!" cried Slosson, and tossed his gun to his shoulder.

What seemed to be a breath of wind lifted a stray lock of Carrington's hair, but his pistol answered Slosson in the same second. He fired at the huddle of men in the bow of the boat and one of them pitched forward with his arms outspread.

"Keep back, you!" he said, and dropped off the cabin roof.

His promptness had bred a momentary panic, then Slosson's bull-like voice began to roar commands; but in that brief instant of surprise and shock Carrington had found and withdrawn the wooden peg that fastened the cabin door. He had scarcely done this when Slosson came tramping aft supported by the three men.

Calling to Betty and Hannibal to escape in the skiff which was towing astern the Kentuckian rushed toward the bow. At his back he heard the door creak on its hinges as it was pushed open by Betty and the boy, and again he called to them to escape by the skiff. The fret of the current had grown steadily and from beneath



He Launched Himself Nimble and With Enthusiasm into the Fight.

the wide-flung branches of the trees which here met above his head, Carrington caught sight of the star-specked arch of the heavens beyond. They were issuing from the bayou. He felt the river snatch at the keel boat, the buffeting of some swift eddy, and saw the blunt bow swing off to the south as they were plunged into the black shore shadows.

But what he did not see was a big muscular hand which had thrust itself out of the impenetrable gloom and clutched the side of the keel boat. Coincident with this there arose perfect babel of voices, high-pitched and shrill.

"Sho—I bet it's him! Sho—it's Uncle Bob's nevy! Sho, you can hear 'em! Sho, they're shootin' guns! Sho!"

Carrington cast a hurried glance in the direction of these sounds. There between the boat and the shore the dim outline of a raft was taking shape. It was now canopied by a wealth of pale gray smoke that faded from before his eyes as the darkness lifted. Turning, he saw Slosson and his men clearly. Surprise and consternation was depicted on each face.

The light increased. From the flat stone hearth of the raft ascended a tall column of flame which rendered visible six pigmy figures, tow-headed and wonderfully vocal, who were tolling like mad at the huge sweeps. The light showed more than this. It showed a lady of plump and pleasing presence smoking a cob-pipe while she fed the fire from a tick stuffed with straw. It showed two black shanties, a line between them decorated with the never-ending Cavendish wash. It showed a rooster perched on the ridge-pole of one of these shanties in the very act of crowing lustily.

Hannibal, who had climbed to the roof of the cabin, shrieked for help, and Betty added her voice to his.

"All right, Nevy!" came the cheerful reply, as Yancy threw himself over the side of the boat and grappled with Slosson.

"Uncle Bob! Uncle Bob!" cried Hannibal.

Slosson uttered a cry of terror. He had a simple but sincere faith in the supernatural, and even with the Scratch Hiller's big hands gripping his throat, he could not rid himself of the belief that this was the ghost of a murdered man.

"You'll take a dog's licking from me, neighbor," said Yancy grimly. "I been saving it fo' you!"

Meanwhile Mr. Cavendish, whose proud spirit never greatly inclined him to the practice of peace, had prepared for battle. Springing aloft he knocked his heels together.

"Whoop! I'm a man as can slide down a thorny locust and never get scratched!" he shouted. This was equivalent to setting his triggers; then he launched himself nimbly and with enthusiasm into the thick of the fight. It was Mr. Bunker's unfortunate privilege to sustain the onslaught of the Earl of Lambeth.

The light from the Cavendish hearth continued to brighten the scene, for Polly was recklessly sacrificing her best straw tick. Indeed her behavior was in every way worthy of the noble alliance she had formed. Her cob-pipe was not suffered to go out and with Connie's help she kept the six small Cavendishes from risking life and limb in the keel boat, toward which they were powerfully drawn. Despite these activities she found time to call to Betty and Hannibal on the cabin roof.

"Jump down here; that ain't no fittin' place for you-all to stop in with them gentlemen fightin'!"

An instant later Betty and Hannibal stood on the raft with the little Cavendishes flocking about them. Mr. Yancy's quest of his nevy had taken an enduring hold on their imagination. For weeks it had constituted their one vital topic, and the fight became merely a satisfying background for this interesting restoration.

"Sho, they'd got him! Sho—he wa'n't no bigger than Richard! Sho!"

"Oh!" cried Betty, with a fearful glance toward the keel boat. "Can't you stop them?"

"What fo'?" asked Polly, opening her black eyes very wide. "Bless yo' tender heart—you don't need to worry none, we got them strange gentlemen licked like they was a passel of children! Connie, you-all mind that fire!"

She accurately judged the outcome of the fight. The boat was little better than a shambles with the havoc that had been wrought there when Yancy and Carrington dropped over its side to the raft. Cavendish followed them, whooping his triumph as he came.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Raft Again.

Yancy and Cavendish threw themselves on the sweeps and worked the raft clear of the keel boat, then the turbulent current seized the smaller craft and whirled it away into the night; as its black bulk receded from before his eyes the Earl of Lambeth spoke with the voice of authority and experience.

"It was a good fight and them fellows done well, but not near well enough." A conclusion that could not be gainsaid. He added, "No one ain't hurt but them that had ought to have got hurt. Mr. Yancy's all right, and so's Mr. Carrington—who's mighty welcome here." The earl's shock of red hair was bristling like the mane of some angry animal and his eyes still flashed with the light of battle, but he managed to summon up an expression of winning friendliness.

"Mr. Carrington's kin to me, Polly," explained Yancy to Mrs. Cavendish. His voice was far from steady, for Hannibal had been gathered into his arms and had all but wrecked the stolid calm with which the Scratch Hiller was seeking to guard his emotions.

Polly smiled and dimpled at the Kentuckian. Trained to a romantic point of view she had a frank liking for handsome, stalwart men. Cavendish was neither, but none knew better than Polly that where he was most lacking in appearance he was richest in substance. He carried scars honorably earned in those differences he had been prone to cultivate with less generous natures; for his scheme of life did not embrace the millennium.

"Thank God, you got here when you did!" said Carrington.

"We was some pushed fo' time, but we done it," responded the earl mod-

estly. He cried, "What now?—us we make a landing?"

"No—unless it interferences with your plans not to. I want to get around the next bend before we tie up. Later we'll all go back. Can I count on you?"

"You shorley can. I consider this here as sociable a neighborhood as I ever struck. It pleases me well. Folks are up and going herabout."

Carrington looked eagerly around in search of Betty. She was sitting on an upturned tub, a pathetic enough figure as she drooped against the wall of one of the shanties with all her courage quite gone from her. He made his way quickly to her side.

"La!" whispered Polly in Chills and Fever's ear. "If that pore young thing yonder keeps a widow it won't be because of any encouragement she gets from Mr. Carrington. If I ever seen marriage in a man's eye I seen it in his this minute!"

"Bruce!" cried Betty, starting up as Carrington approached. "Oh, Bruce, I am so glad you have come—you are not hurt?" She accepted his presence without question. She had needed him and he had not failed her.

"We are none of us hurt, Betty," he said gently, as he took her hand.

He saw that the suffering she had undergone during the preceding twenty-four hours had left its record on her tired face and in her heavy

eyes. She retained a shuddering con-



"I Was Quite Peevish After He Threw Me in the River.

sciousness of the unchecked savagery of those last moments on the keel boat; she was still hearing the oaths of the men as they struggled together, the sound of blows, and the dreadful silences that had followed them. She turned from him, and there came the relief of tears.

"There, Betty, the danger is over now and you were so brave while it lasted. I can't bear to have you cry!"

"I was wild with fear—all that time on the boat, Bruce—" she faltered between her sobs. "I didn't know but they would find you out. I could only wait and hope—and pray!"

"I was in no danger, dear. Didn't the girl tell you I was to take the place of a man Slosson was expecting? He never doubted that I was that man until a light—a signal it must have been—on the shore at the head of the bayou betrayed me."

"Where are we going now, Bruce? Not the way they went—" and Betty glanced out into the black void where the keel boat had merged into the gloom.

"No, no—but we can't get the raft back up-stream against the current, so the best thing is to land at the Bates' plantation below here; then as soon as you are able we can return to Belle Plain," said Carrington.

There was an interval broken only by the occasional sweep of the great steering oar as Cavendish coaxed the raft out toward the channel. The thought of Charley Norton's murder rested on Carrington like a pall. Scarcely a week had elapsed since he quitted Thicket Point, and in that week the hand of death had dealt with them impartially, and to what end? Then the miles he had traversed in his hopeless journey up-river translated themselves into a division of time as well as space. They were just as much further removed from the past with its blight of tragic terror. He turned and glanced at Betty. He saw that her eyes held their steady look of wistful pity that was for the dead man; yet in spite of this, and in spite of the bounds beyond which he would not let his imagination carry him, the future, enriched with sudden promise, unfolded itself. The deep sense of recovered hope stirred within him. He knew there must come a day when he would dare to speak of his love, and she would listen.

"It's best we should land at Bates' place—we can get teams there," he went on to explain. "And, Betty, wherever we go we'll go together, dear. Cavendish doesn't look as if he had any very urgent business of his own, and I reckon the same is true of Yancy, so I am going to keep them with us. There are some points to be cleared up when we reach Belle Plain—some folks who'll have a lot to explain or else quit this part of the state! And I intend to see that you are not left alone until—until I have the right to take care of you for good and all—that's what you want me to do one of these days. Isn't it, darling?" and his eyes, glowing and infinitely tender, dwelt on her upturned face.

But Betty shrank from him in involuntary agitation.

"Oh, not now, Bruce—not now—we mustn't speak of that—it's wrong—"