

## CHAPTER III

### THE SLAVE-CATCHERS AT WORK

THE following day was also passed by Coacoochee and Louis in pleasant wanderings about the quaint little city whose every sight and sound was to them so full of novel interest. At length in the early dusk of evening they set forth on their return to Philip Emathla's camp, conversing eagerly as they walked concerning what they had seen. So occupied were they that they paid little heed to their immediate surroundings, and as they gained the outskirts of the town were startled at being commanded to halt by a man who had approached them unobserved. It was Troup Jeffers, the slave-catcher, who had been watching the lads for some time and awaiting just such an opportunity as the present for carrying out his evil designs.

"What's your name?" he demanded, placing himself squarely in front of the young creole.

"Louis Pacheco."

"Just so. Son of old Pacheco and a nigger woman. Nigger yourself. My nigger, sold to me by your dad just afore he died. Hain't wanted you up to this time. Now want you to come along with me."

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" cried the lad, hotly. "When you say that I am your slave, or the slave of any one else, *you lie*. My mother was a free woman, and I was born free. To that I can take my oath, and so can my friend here. So stand aside, sir, and let me pass."

"Ho, ho! my black fighting cock," answered the trader, savagely; "you'll pay sweetly for those words afore I'm through with ye. And you'll set up a nigger's oath and an Injun's oath agin that of a white man, will ye? Why, you crumbly piece of yellar gingerbread, don't you know that when a white man swears to a thing, his word will be taken agin that of all the niggers and Injuns in the country? Cattle of that kind can't testify in United States courts, as you'll find out in a hurry if you ever try it on. Now you're my property, and the sooner you realize it, the better it will be for you. I've filed my sworn claim with the agent, and it's been allowed. Here's his order for the Injuns to deliver you up. So I'd advise you to go along peaceably with me if you don't want to get yourself into a heap of trouble. Grab him, Ross!"

Mr. Troup Jeffers had only talked to detain the lads until the arrival of his burly confederate, who was following at a short distance behind him. As the moment for action arrived, he seized Louis by one arm, while Ross Ruffin grasped the other.

Coacoochee, knowing little of the ways of the

whites, had not realized what was taking place until this moment; but with the seizure of his friend the horrid truth was made clear to him. He was called a dreamer, but no one witnessing the promptness of his action at this crisis would have supposed him to be such. Ross Ruffin was nearest him, and at the very moment of his laying hands on Louis there came a flash of steel. The next instant Coacoochee's keen-bladed hunting-knife was sunk deep into the man's arm just below the shoulder.

With a yell of pain and terror, the "jackal" let go his hold. Louis tore himself free from the grasp of his other assailant, and in a twinkling the two lads were running with the speed of startled deer in the direction of their own camp, while an ineffective pistol shot rang out spitefully behind them.

A few minutes later they had gained the camp, secured their rifles, told King Philip of what had just taken place, crossed the San Sebastian, and were lost to sight in the dark shadows of the forest on its further side.

They had hardly disappeared before St. Augustine was in an uproar. An Indian had dared draw his knife on a white man who was only exercising his legal rights and claiming his lawful property. An Indian had actually aided in the escape of a slave, when by solemn treaty he was bound to use every effort to deliver such persons to their masters. The

act was an intolerable outrage and must be promptly punished.

Within an hour, therefore, an angry mob of armed citizens headed by Troup Jeffers had surrounded Philip Emathla's encampment. They were confronted by his handful of sturdy warriors, ready to fight with the fury of tigers brought to bay, and but for the determined interference of the Indian agent, who had hastened to the scene of disturbance, a bloody battle would have ensued then and there. This officer begged the whites to leave the affair with him, assuring them that the Indians should be made to afford ample satisfaction for the outrage, and taught a lesson that would prevent its repetition. At first the citizens would not listen to him; but the cupidity of the slave-catcher being aroused by the promise of a handsome pecuniary compensation for his loss, he joined his voice to that of the agent, and finally succeeded in persuading the mob to retire.

Two thousand dollars of government money due King Philip's band was in that agent's hands and should have been paid over on the following day. Now that official gave the aged chieftain his choice of delivering Coacoochee up for punishment, and Louis Pacheco to the man who claimed him as his property, or of relinquishing this money and signing for it a receipt in full.

The alternative thus presented was a bitter one.

The loss of their money would involve Philip Emathla and his band in new difficulties with the whites, to whom they were in debt for goods that were to be paid for on the receipt of their annuity. The old man knew that his creditors would have no mercy upon him, but would seize whatever of his possessions they could attach. Nor could mercy be expected for his son and Louis Pacheco should they be delivered into the hands of their enemies.

Long did the perplexed chieftain sit silent and with bowed head, considering the situation. His warriors, grouped at a short distance, watched him with respectful curiosity. At length he submitted the case to them and asked their advice.

With one accord, and without hesitation, they answered: "Let the Iste-hatke (white man) keep his money. We can live without it; but if one hair of Coacoochee's head should be harmed, our hearts would be heavy with a sadness that could never be lifted."

So Philip Emathla affixed his mark to the paper that the agent had prepared for him, and was allowed to depart in peace the next day. Of the money thus obtained from the Indians two hundred dollars served to salve the wound in Ross Ruffin's arm, and eight hundred satisfied for the time being the claim of Mr. Troup Jeffers, the slave-trader. What became of the balance is unknown, for the agent's books contain no record of the transaction.

Coacoochee and Louis had halted within friendly shadows on the edge of the forest, and there held themselves in readiness to fly to the assistance of their friends, should sounds of strife proclaim an attack upon the encampment. Here they remained during the night, and only rejoined Philip Emathla on his homeward march the following day. When they learned from him the particulars of the transaction by which their liberty had been assured, both of them were bitterly indignant at the injustice thus perpetrated.

The indignation of the young creole was supplemented by a profound gratitude, and he swore that if the time ever came when it should lie in his power to repay the debt thus incurred, he would do so with interest many times compounded. Now, feeling secure in the freedom for which so great a price had been paid, he returned to his home on the Tomoka, where for several months he devoted himself assiduously to labor on the little plantation that afforded the sole support of his mother, his sister, and himself. During this time of diligent toil, though he found no opportunity for communicating with his Indian friends of the lake region, they were often in his thoughts, and his heart warmed toward them with an ever-increasing gratitude as he reflected upon the awful fate from which they had saved him.

While the busy home life of the family on the Tomoka flowed on thus peacefully and happily, there

came one evening a timid knock at the closed door of their house, and a weak voice, speaking in negro dialect, begged for admittance.

Louis, holding a candle, opened the door, and as he did so, was struck a blow on the head that stretched him senseless across the threshold. As Nita, who was the only other occupant of the house at that moment, witnessed this dastardly act, she uttered a piercing scream and was about to fling herself on her brother's body, but was roughly pushed back by two white men, who entered the room, and dragging Louis back from the door, closed it behind them.

One of the men, who were those precious villains Troup Jeffers and Ross Ruffin, bound the wrists of the unconscious youth behind him, while the other ordered Nita to bring them food, threatening to kill her brother before her eyes in case she refused. The terrified girl hastened to obey; but, as with trembling hands she prepared the table with all that the house afforded in the way of provisions, her mind was filled with wild schemes of escape and rescue. Her mother was absent, having gone to sit with the dying child of their only near neighbors, a negro family living a short distance down the river.

While the girl thus planned, and strove to conceal her agony of thought beneath an appearance of bustling activity, the slave-catchers dashed water in her brother's face and used other means to restore

him to consciousness. In this they were finally successful.

The moment that he was sufficiently recovered to realize his situation and recognize the men who had treated him so shamefully, he demanded to be set at liberty, claiming that he was free by birth, and that even if he were not, the price of his freedom had been paid several times over by the annuity that Philip Emathla had relinquished on his account.

“Oh no, you’re not free, my lad, as you’ll soon discover,” replied Mr. Troup Jeffers, with a grin. “You’re property, you are. You was born property, and you’ll always be property. Just now you’re my property, and will be till I can get you to a market where your value will be appreciated. As for the cash handed over by that old fool of an Injun, it warn’t more than enough to pay for the cut that young catamount give my friend here, and for my injured feelings. It warn’t never intended to pay for you. So shut your mouth and come along quietly with us, or we’ll make it mighty oncomfortable for ye. D’ye hear?”

“But my father was a white man, my mother was a free woman, and I was born —”

“Shut up! I tell ye!” shouted the trader, angrily.

Determined to be heard, the youth again opened his mouth to speak, when, with a snarl of rage, the brute sprang forward and dealt him several savage



kicks with a heavy cowhide boot that proved effective in procuring the required silence.

While the attention of both men was thus engaged, Nita managed to slip unobserved from a back door of the house. With the swiftness of despair she fled along the shadowy forest trail that led to the neighbor's cabin, a quarter of a mile away. There she hoped to obtain help for her brother's rescue. When she reached it, she found to her dismay that it was dark and empty. Its door stood wide open, and the poor girl received no answer to her terrified callings.