

CHAPTER IV

CAPTURE AND ESCAPE OF NITA PACHECO

FOR a minute Nita, trembling with excitement and terror, stood irresolute. Then, noticing that a few embers still smouldered on the hearth, she found a sliver of fat pine and thrust it among them. As it flared up with a bright blaze, its light disclosed a scene that filled the girl with despair and told the whole sad story — the child with whom her mother was to watch that night lay dead on the only bed in the room. The rest of the scanty furniture was overturned and broken ; while the whole appearance of the place denoted that it had been the scene of a fierce struggle.

In vain did Nita seek for any trace of her mother. It was only too evident that the slave-catchers had been here, made captives of all the living inmates, and removed them to a place of safe keeping before visiting the Pacheco house. Sick at heart and undecided as to her course of action, the poor girl left the cabin. As she emerged from its shattered doorway, she was rudely clasped in a pair of strong arms, and with a hoarse chuckle of satisfaction a voice, that she recognized as belong-

ing to one of the men she had left with Louis, exclaimed :

“ So, gal, ye thought ye was gwine to give us the slip, eh ? and maybe bring help to your brother ? We uns is up to them games though, and ye’ve got to be oncommon s pry to git ahead of us. I suspicioned whar ye’d gone the minit I found ye’d lit out without so much as saying by your leave, and I was on to yer trail in less’n no time. Now ye might as well give in and go along quiet with us. We’ll find ye a nice easy place whar ye won’t hev much to do, and whar ye kin live happier than ye ever could in this here forsaken wilderness.”

While thus talking, the man, with a firm grasp of the girl’s arm, was leading her back along the trail they had come. She had not spoken since uttering a cry of terror when he first seized her, and she now walked beside him so quietly and unresistingly that he imagined her spirit to be broken beyond further thought of escape.

The darkness of the hammock was intense, and being unaccustomed to the narrow path, Ruffin found difficulty in following it. All at once, as he swerved slightly from the trail, his foot caught in a loose root, and he pitched headlong to the ground, releasing the girl’s arm as he fell. In an instant she was gone. Her light footfall gave back no sound to indicate the direction she had taken, and only the mocking forest echoes answered

the man's bitter curses which were coupled with commands that she return to him.

Time was precious with the slave-catchers, and to pursue the girl would be a hopeless task. Ross Ruffin realized this, and so, baffled and raging, he made his way to that point on the river where, in a small boat, with Louis still bound and helpless, Troup Jeffers impatiently awaited his coming. The latter upbraided his confederate in unmeasured terms for allowing the girl to escape, and so fierce was their quarrel that it seemed about to result in bloodshed. Finally their interests, rather than their inclinations, led them to control their anger and to reflect that with the captives already secured, including Louis, his mother, and the family of their negro neighbors, the venture promised to be very profitable, after all. So they pulled down the dark river and out to a small schooner that, in charge of two other white men, lay off its mouth, awaiting them.

Louis had listened eagerly to Ruffin's report of his sister's flight, and thus assured of her escape, he became more reconciled to the fate in store for himself. As the boat in which he lay glided from the river's mouth, there came to him the sound of a dear voice that in all probability he would never hear again. It was a passionate cry of farewell from the sister whom he loved better than all the world beside. With a mighty effort the captive raised himself to a sitting posture.

“Good-bye, Nita!” he shouted; “God bless —”

Then he was silenced and struck down by a blow in the face. At the same instant a flash of fire leaped from the boat, and a rifle bullet sped angrily through the forest in the direction from which Nita’s voice had come. It did not harm her, but she dared not call again. Nor did she dare remain longer in that vicinity.

Returning to her deserted home, the poor girl hastily gathered a slender store of provisions and then set forth, fearfully and with a breaking heart, to thread the shadowy trails leading to the only place of refuge that she knew, — the village of Philip Emathla the Seminole. For two days she travelled, guided by instinct rather than by a knowledge of the way, and at the end of the second she came to the place where Coacoochee was standing. As her presence was betrayed by Ul-we, and the young Indian sprang to her side, the girl sank into his arms, faint and speechless from exhaustion. Her dress hung in rags, her feet were bare and bleeding, and her tender skin was torn by innumerable thorns.

Filled with wonder and a premonition of evil tidings by this appearance of his friend’s sister so far from her home and in so sad a plight, Coacoochee bore her to the open space in which he had stood, and laid her gently down at the base of a great oak. Then, realizing that all his strength would not suffice to carry her over the mile or

more lying between that place and his father's village, he bade the great staghound stand guard over the fainting girl, and started off at a speed that he alone of all his tribe possessed, to seek assistance.

The peaceful village was startled by his appearance as he dashed breathlessly into it a few minutes later, and some of the men instinctively grasped their weapons. With a few words, Coacoochee assured them that there was no immediate cause for alarm, and then ordering three stalwart young warriors to follow him, he again entered the forest and hastened back to where he had left the exhausted girl.

A little later Nita Pacheco was borne into the village and given over to the skilful ministrations of the women belonging to King Philip's household. Under their kindly care the strength of the fugitive was so restored that within an hour after her arrival she was able to relate her sad story to the aged chief, who bent over her and listened to her words with breathless attention.

When she finished, and Philip Emathla was possessed of all the facts she had to communicate, he drew himself to his full height and stood for a moment silent, while his whole frame trembled with anger.

At length he said: "It is well, my daughter. I have heard thy words, and they have caused my heart to bleed. From this hour thou shalt be to

Philip Emathla as the child of his old age, and thy sorrows shall be his. Sleep now and regain thy strength while he takes counsel concerning this matter with his wise men, and in the morning he will speak further with thee."

When the old chief repeated Nita Pacheco's story to his warriors assembled about the council fire that night, his words were received in silence, but with fierce scowls, clinched hands, and twitching fingers. At its conclusion the silence was only broken by angry mutterings, but none knew what to advise. At length King Philip addressed Coacoochee, who, youngest of all present, had been allowed a seat at this council for the first time. Calling him by name, the old chief said:

"My son, on account of thy friendship with Louis Pacheco, thy interest in this matter is greater than that of any other among my councillors. What, then, is thy opinion concerning this tale of wrong and outrage?"

Standing bravely forth in the full glow of fire-light, with his athletic form and proud profile clearly outlined against it, the lad spoke vehemently and from a full heart as he replied:

"The words of my father have made the hearts of his children heavy. They tell us of the wickedness of the white man. That is nothing new. We have heard of it many times before. So many that we are weary with listening. But now this wickedness

has fallen on those who have the right to call upon us for vengeance. They are not of our blood, but they lived among us and trusted us to protect them. Louis Pacheco is my friend and brother. This maiden is as a daughter to my father. They were not born slaves. The Great Spirit created them free as the birds of the air or the deer of the forest. Of this freedom, the gift of the Great Spirit, the white man seeks to rob them. Are we dogs that we should suffer this thing? No; the Seminoles are men and warriors. Let the chief send a message to the white man, demanding that these our friends be set free and restored to us. Let him also send out those who will discover whither they have been taken. If they be dead or carried away so far that he cannot find them, then let him lead his warriors to battle with the palefaced dogs, that the fate of our friends may be avenged. Coacoochee has spoken, and to Philip Emathla has he made answer."

This brave speech, delivered with all the fire and enthusiasm of youth as well as with the eloquent gestures that Coacoochee knew so well how to use, was received with murmurs of satisfaction by the younger warriors, whose eyes gleamed with a fierce joy at the thought of battle. The breast of the young orator swelled with pride as, reseating himself in his appointed place, he glanced about him and noted the effect of his maiden effort at public speech-making. His whole soul was enlisted in the cause

of those oppressed ones for whom he had just pleaded so earnestly, and he longed with the earnestness of honorable, high-strung, and fearless youth to strike a telling blow in their behalf.

While he with the younger members of the band were thus animated by a spirit of resistance to injustice at any cost, the older warriors shook their heads. They could not but reflect upon their own weakness when they considered the power of the white man and the number of his soldiers.

The old chief who had called forth this manifestation of feeling noted shrewdly the varied expressions of those about him and then dismissed the council, saying that after sleeping he would announce his decision.