

CHAPTER V

A FOREST BETROTHAL

PHILIP EMATHLA was an old man and a wise one. He had visited the great white Father at Washington, and had thus gained a very different idea of the power and number of the palefaces from that generally held by his tribe. He loved his land and his people. He was determined not to submit to injustice if he could help it, but he shrank from plunging the Seminoles into a war with the powerful and arrogant invaders of their country. He knew that such a war could only result in the utter defeat of the red man, no matter how long or how bravely he might fight. Thus Coacoochee's fiery speech at the council was a source of great anxiety to the old man and caused him to pass a sleepless night. By morning, however, he had decided upon a course of action, and again summoning his councilors, he unfolded it to them.

As the money value of Louis Pacheco and his mother had already been doubly paid by the Indians through the relinquishment of their annuity, Philip Emathla would himself go to the agent at Fort King, claim them as his slaves, and demand their

return to him as such. At the same time he would send scouts to St. Augustine to discover if the captives were in that city and what chance there was of rescuing them in case the agent should refuse to recognize his claim. Until these things were done there must be no thought or mention of war. It could only be considered after all else had failed.

As Coacoochee listened to these words, his face assumed a look of resolve, and he eagerly awaited an opportunity to speak. He was no longer content to be considered a dreamer, but was anxious to prove himself the worthy son of a great chief and entitled to the proud rank of warrior. When, therefore, his father finished what he had to say and signified that any who chose might speak, the lad, after waiting for a few minutes out of deference to his elders, rose with a modest but manly bearing and requested that two favors might be granted him. One was that he might be allowed to go alone on the scout to St. Augustine and there learn the fate of his friend. The other, asked with that confusion of manner which all youths, savage as well as civilized, manifest on such occasions, was that he might have his father's permission to make Nita Pacheco a daughter of the tribe, in fact as well as in name, by taking her to be his wife.

After regarding the lad fixedly and in silence for nearly a minute, the old chief made reply as follows :

“ My son, although thou hast attained the stature

of a man, and it has been permitted thee to speak in council, thou art still but a boy in knowledge as well as in years. That thou may speedily prove thyself worthy the name of warrior is my hope and desire. Therefore that thou may not lack opportunity for gaining distinction, I hereby grant the first of thy requests on condition that six of my well-trying braves shall go with thee. They may be left in concealment outside the city, and thou may enter it alone ; but it is well to have friends at hand in case of need. It is also well that a young warrior should be guided by the counsel of those who are older and wiser.

“Thy second request will I also grant upon conditions. Gladly will I accept the maiden whom thou hast named, as a daughter in truth as well as in name ; but it seems to have escaped thy mind that no son of the Seminoles may take to himself a wife until he has won the title of warrior and proved himself capable of her support. Again, there is but one time for the taking of wives, which may only be done at the great green corn dance of thy people. If it pleases the maiden to plight thee her troth, to that I will give consent, provided the ceremony shall take place ere the setting of this day’s sun. Then when thou art gone on thy mission to discover the fate of her mother and her brother, she will be doubly entitled to the love and protection of thy people. Let, then, a solemn betrothal satisfy thee for the present, and at some future time will the

question of thy marriage be considered. Thus speaks Philip Emathla."

Coacoochee had loved the sister of his friend longer than he could remember, and believed that Nita entertained a similar feeling toward him, though no words of love had ever passed between them. Now they were to exchange a promise of marriage! The mere thought gave him a more manly and dignified bearing. And then he was to be immediately separated from her. How hard it would be to leave her! Doubly hard, now that she was in sorrow, and suffering the keenest anxiety. Still, if he could only bring back tidings of the safety of her dear ones, or perhaps even return them to her, how happy it would make her! How proud she would be of him!

To Nita the proposition that she should participate in a ceremony of betrothal to Coacoochee, which among the Seminoles is even more solemn and important than that of marriage itself, was startling but not unwelcome. She loved the handsome youth. In her own mind that had long ago been settled. Now she was homeless and alone. Where could she find a braver or more gallant protector than Coacoochee? Besides, was he not going into danger for her sake, and the sake of those most dear to her? Yes, she would give him her promise in the presence of all his people freely and gladly.

Again the sun was near his setting, and all nature was flooded with the golden glory that waited on his departure. The cluster of palmetto-thatched huts nestled beneath tall trees on the shore of blue Ahpopka Lake wore an expectant air, and their dusky inhabitants, gathered in little groups, seemed to anticipate some event of importance.

At length there came the sound of singing from a leafy bower on the outskirts of the village, and then appeared a bevy of young girls wreathed and garlanded with flowers. In their midst walked one whose face, fairer than theirs, still bore traces of recent suffering. She was clad in a robe of fawn-skin, creamy white and soft as velvet. Exquisitely embroidered, it was fit for the wear of a princess, and had indeed been prepared for the gentle Allala, King Philip's only daughter, shortly before her death. Now, worn for the first time, it formed the betrothal dress of Nita Pacheco. In the tresses of her rippling hair was twined a slender spray of snow-white star jasmine. She wore no other ornament, but none was needed for a beauty so radiant as hers.

So, at least, thought Coacoochee, as, escorted by a picked body of young warriors, gaudy in paint and feathers, he entered the village at this moment, but from its opposite side, and caught a glimpse of her.

Both groups advanced to the centre of the village and halted, facing each other, before the chief's lodge. There for some moments they stood amid

an impressive silence that was only broken by the glad songs of birds in the leafy coverts above them. At length the curtain screening the entrance was drawn aside, and Philip Emathla, followed by two of his most trusted councillors, stepped forth. The head of the aged chieftain was unadorned save by a single roseate feather plucked from the wing of a flamingo. This from time immemorial had been the badge of highest authority among the Indians of Florida, and was adopted as such by the latest native occupants of the flowery land. The chief's massive form was set off to fine advantage by a simple tunic and leggings of buckskin. Depending from his neck by a slender chain was a large gold medallion of Washington, while across his breast he wore several other decorations in gold and silver.

Standing in the presence of his people, and facing the setting sun, the chieftain called upon the group of flower-decked maidens to deliver up their sister, and as Nita stepped shyly forth, he took her by the hand. Next he called upon the group of young warriors to deliver up their brother, whereupon their ranks opened, and Coacoochee walked proudly to where his father stood.

Taking him also by the hand, the old chief asked of his son, in a voice that all could plainly hear, if he had carefully considered the obligation he was about to assume. "Do you promise for the sake of this maiden to strive with all your powers to attain the

rank of a warrior? Do you promise, when that time comes, to take her to your lodge to be your squaw? to protect her with your life from harm? to hunt game for her? to see that she suffers not from hunger? to love her and bear with her until the Great Spirit shall call you to dwell with him in the Happy Hunting-grounds?"

"Un-cah" (yes), answered Coacoochee so clearly as to be heard of all. "I do promise."

Turning to Nita, the chieftain asked: "My daughter, are you also willing to make promise to this youth that when the time comes for him to call thee to his lodge, you will go to him? Are you willing to promise that from then until the sun shall no longer shine for thee, till thine eyes are closed in the long sleep, and till the music of birds no longer fill thy ears, Coacoochee shall be thy man, and thou shall know no other? Are you willing to promise that from that time his lodge shall be thy lodge, his friends thy friends, and his enemies thy enemies? Are you willing to promise that from the day you enter his lodge you will love him and care for him, make his word thy law, and follow him even to captivity and death? Consider well, my daughter, before answering; for thy pledged word may not be lightly broken."

Lifting her head, and smiling as she looked the old man full in the face, Nita answered, in low but distinct tones:

“Un-cah. I am willing to promise.”

With this the chieftain placed the girl's hand in that of Coacoochee, and turning to the spectators, who stood silent and attentive, said:

“In thy sight, and in hearing of all men, this my son and this my daughter have given to each other the promise that may not be broken. Therefore I, Philip Emathla, make it known that whenever Coacoochee, after gaining a warrior's rank, shall call this maiden to his lodge, she shall go to him. From that time forth he shall be her warrior, and she shall be his squaw. It is spoken; let it be remembered.”

With these words the ceremony of betrothal was concluded, and at once the spectators broke forth in a tumult of rejoicing. Guns were discharged, drums were beaten, great fires were lighted, there was dancing and feasting, and in every way they could devise did these simple-minded dwellers in the forest express their joy over the event that promised so much of happiness to the well-loved son of their chief.

In these rejoicings Coacoochee did not take part, glad as he would have been to do so. He had a duty to perform that might no longer be delayed. The fate of his friend, who was now become almost his brother, must be learned, and it rested with him to discover it.

So on conclusion of the betrothal ceremony he led Nita into his father's lodge, bade her a tender fare-

well, and promising a speedy return, slipped away almost unobserved. Followed only by Ul-we, the great staghound, he entered the dark shadows of the forest behind the village, and was immediately lost to view.