

CHAPTER VII

COACOCOCHEE IN THE CLUTCHES OF WHITE RUFFIANS

As the young chief, obeying the stern command to halt, faced about, he found himself covered by a rifle in the hands of his most vindictive enemy. He knew in a moment that a crisis in their intercourse had been reached, and almost expected to be shot down where he stood, so malignant was the expression of the white man's face. Still, with the wonderful self-control in times of danger that forms part of the Indian character, he betrayed no emotion nor trace of fear. He only asked :

“Why should Coacoochee halt at the command of a white man?”

“Because, Coacoochee, if such is your outlandish name, the white man chooses to make you do so, and because he wants to see your pass,” replied Salano, sneeringly.

In the meantime the other riders had come up, and two of them, dismounting, now stood on either side of the young Indian. In obedience to an almost imperceptible nod from their leader, these two seized him, and in a moment had pinioned his arms behind

him. Coacoochee could have flung them from him and made a dash for liberty even now. He did make one convulsive movement in that direction; but like a flash the thought came to him that this was precisely what his enemies desired him to do, that they might thus have an excuse for killing him. So he remained motionless, and quietly allowed himself to be bound.

At this a shade of disappointment swept over Salano's face, and he muttered an oath. The truth was that, terrified by Coacoochee's recent threat to have his life in exchange for that of Ul-we, which he had so cruelly taken, the bully had determined to get rid of this dangerous youth without delay, and had hit upon the present plan for so doing. He had calculated that his victim would attempt to escape, or at least offer some resistance. In either case he would have shot him down without compunction, and afterwards if called to account for the act, would justify himself on the ground that the Indian was transgressing a law recently passed by the Legislature of Florida, which he, in his character of Justice of the Peace, was attempting to enforce.

Still, his plan had not wholly failed, and he now proceeded to carry it to an extremity.

"So you acknowledge that you hain't got no pass, do you, Injun? And are roaming about the country, threatening white folks' lives, and doing Lord knows what other deviltry on your own responsibility," he

said. "Now, then, listen to this." Drawing a paper from his pocket as he spoke, the man read as follows :

"An Act to prevent Indians from roaming at large throughout the Territory : Be it enacted by the Governor and Legislative Council of the Territory, that from and after the passing of this act, if any Indian, of the years of discretion, venture to roam or ramble beyond the boundary lines of the reservations which have been assigned to the tribe or nation to which said Indian belongs, it shall and may be lawful for any person or persons to apprehend, seize, and take said Indian, and carry him before some Justice of the Peace, who is hereby authorized, empowered, and required to direct (if said Indian have not a written permission from the agent to do some specific act) that there shall be inflicted not exceeding thirty-nine (39) stripes, at the discretion of the Justice, on the bare back of said Indian, and, moreover, to cause the gun of said Indian, if he have any, to be taken away from him and deposited with the colonel of the county or captain of the district in which said Indian may be taken, subject to the order of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs."

"Now, Mr. Injun, what have you got to say to that?" demanded Salano, as he folded the paper and restored it to his pocket.

Although Coacoochee had not understood all that had just been read to him, he comprehended that by a white man's law, an Indian might be whipped like

a slave or a dog, and his blood boiled hotly at the mere thought of such an outrage. Still he replied to Salano's last question with dignity and a forced composure.

"The Iste-chatte has not been told of this law. It is a new one to him, and he has had no time to learn it. It was not put into the treaty. Coacoochee is the son of a chief. If you lift a hand against him, you lift it against the whole Seminole nation. If you strike him, the land will run red with white men's blood. If you kill him, his spirit will cry for vengeance, and no place can hide you from the fury of his warriors. They will not eat nor drink nor sleep till they have found you out, and torn the cowardly heart from your body."

"Oh come!" interrupted Salano, with an oath, "that will do. We don't want to hear any more from you. This Injun is evidently a dangerous character, gentlemen, and as a Justice of the Peace I shall deal with him according to the law. We'll whip him first, and if that isn't enough, we'll hang him afterwards."

The three men who accompanied Salano were his boon companions, and were equally ready with himself to perform any deed of cruelty or wickedness. They regarded an Indian as fair game, to be hunted and even killed wherever found. Nothing would please them better than a declaration of war against the Seminoles, and they were determined to leave

nothing undone to hasten so desirable an event. To whip an Indian under cover of the law was rare sport, and the prospect of hanging him afterwards filled them with a brutal joy. So they readily obeyed the commands of their leader, and after fastening their horses by the roadside, they threw a slip-noose over Coacoochee's head, and drawing it close about his neck, led him a short distance within a grove of trees, to one of which they made fast the loose end of the rope. He was thus allowed to step a couple of paces in each direction. Ripping his tunic from the neck downward with a knife, they stripped it from his back, and all was in readiness for their devilish deed. Their rifles had been left hanging to their saddles, but each man had brought a raw-hide riding-whip with him, and these they now proposed to apply to the bare back of their silent and unresisting victim.

“Ten cuts apiece, gentlemen!” cried Salano, with a ferocious laugh. “That’ll make the thirty-nine allowed by law, and one over for good measure. I take great credit to myself for the idea of making the prisoner fast by the neck only, and that with a slip-noose. He’s got plenty of room to dance, and if he looses his footing and hangs himself, why, that’ll be his lookout and not ours. At any rate, it will be a good riddance of the varmint, and will relieve us from further responsibility in the matter. I claim the first cut at him; so stand back and give me room.”

As the others moved back a few paces, the chief ruffian stepped up to the young Indian, and laying the raw hide across the bared shoulders as though to measure the width of the blow he was about to inflict, he lifted it high above his head, saying as he did so :

“You’ll cut my heart out, will you, Injun? We’ll see now who is going to do the cutting.”

Then with a vicious hiss, the raw hide swept down with the full force of the arm that wielded it.

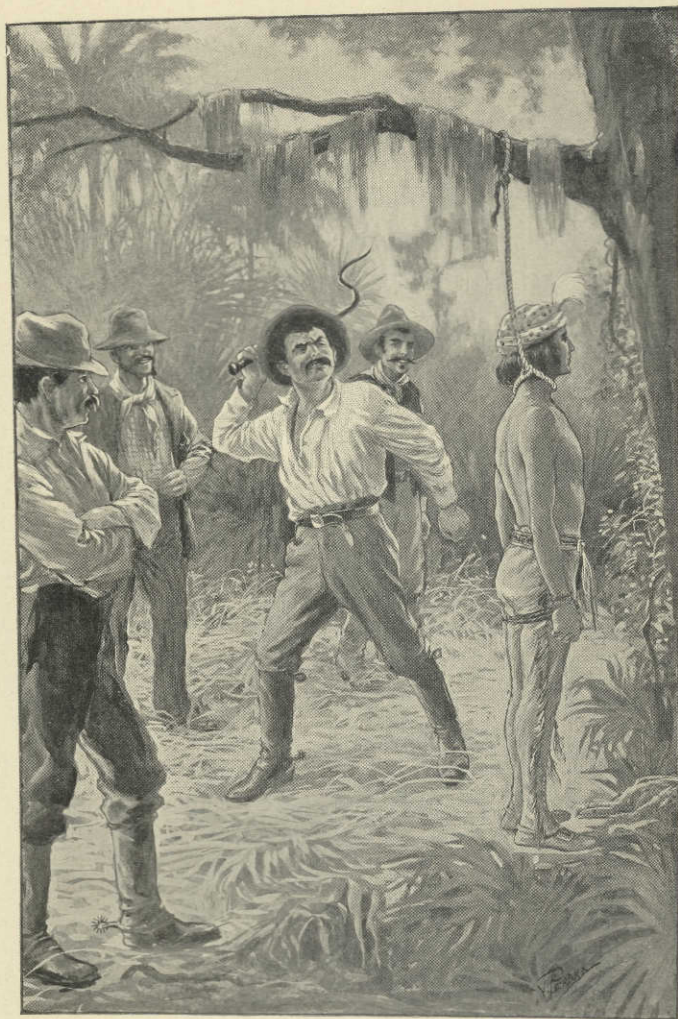
There was no outcry and no movement on the part of the Indian, only his flesh shrunk and quivered beneath the cruel blow, which left a livid stripe across his shoulders.

That blow was to be paid for with hundreds of innocent lives, and millions of dollars. It was to be felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, and was to be atoned by rivers of blood. In a single instant its fearful magic transformed the young Indian who received it, from a quiet, peace-loving youth, with a generous, affectionate nature, into a savage warrior, relentless and pitiless. It gave to the Seminoles a leader whose very name should become a terror to their enemies, and it precipitated one of the cruellest and most stubbornly contested Indian wars ever waged on American soil.

Again was the whip uplifted, but before it could descend for a second blow, the wretch who wielded it was dashed to the ground, and a white man with

blazing eyes stood over his prostrate figure. The newcomer presented a cocked rifle at the startled spectators of the proceedings, who had been too intent upon the perpetration of their crime to take notice of his approach.

“Cowards!” he cried, in ringing tones. “Does it take four of you to whip one Indian? Is this the way you continue a private quarrel and gratify your devilish instincts? Bah! Such wretches as you are a disgrace to manhood! You make me ashamed of my color, since it is the same as your own. Did you not hear me give my word to this youth that he should go in safety? How dared you then even contemplate this outrage? Perhaps you thought that the word of an Englishman might be defied with impunity. From this moment you will know better; for if any one of you ever dares cross my path again, I will shoot him in his tracks as I would any other noxious beast that curses the earth. Now get you gone from this spot ere my forbearance is tempted beyond its strength. Go back to the town, and there proclaim your iniquity, if you dare. You will find few sympathizers in your attempt to precipitate an Indian war, and deluge this fair land with blood. Go, and go on foot. Your horses have already taken the road. Go, and if you even dare to look back until out of my sight, a bullet from this rifle shall spur your lagging pace. And you, Fontaine Salano, you brute of brutes, you pariah dog, do you



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go with them. Away out of my sight, I say, lest I cause this Indian to flay your bare back with the lashes you intended for him."

Whether the four men imagined that they were confronted by one bereft of his senses, or whether they were indeed the cowards he called them, it is impossible to say. Certain it is that they received the young man's scathing words in silence, and, when ordered to leave, they took their departure with a precipitate haste that would have been comical under less tragic circumstances.

The stranger followed them to the edge of the wood, and watched them until they disappeared in the direction of the town. Then he returned to where Coacoochee, who had not yet seen the face of his deliverer, still remained bound to the tree. As with a keen-edged knife he cut the thongs confining the young Indian's arms, and the rope about his neck, thus allowing the latter to face him, Coacoochee gave a start of surprise. His new friend was the same who, but an hour or so before, had saved him from Fontaine Salano's pistol in the streets of St. Augustine.