

CHAPTER IX

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF A SENTINEL

FOR a full minute Ralph Boyd stood bewildered in the middle of the road. In vain did he look for some sign and listen for some sound that would betray the whereabouts of those who, but a moment before, had stood with him. The tall grasses waved and the flowers nodded before a gentle breeze, but it was not strong enough to move the stiff leaves of the palmetto scrub, nor was there any motion that might be traced to the passing of human beings among their hidden stalks. From the feathery tips of the cabbage palms came a steady fluttering that rose or fell with the breathings of the wind, and in far-away thickets could be heard the cooing of wood doves, and the occasional cheery note of a quail, but no other sound broke the all-pervading silence.

All at once from a hammock growing at a considerable distance from where the young man stood there came to his ears the thrilling sound of a Seminole war-cry:

“Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-che !”

It was followed by another and another, until the listener counted seven of the ominous cries in as

many distinct voices, and knew that they were uttered by the seven Indians who had stood with him in the road.

Unaccustomed to the ways of red men, Boyd could not understand how they had glided so noiselessly and swiftly away from him.

"It is like magic," he muttered, "and gives one a creepy feeling. What a terrible thing a war with such as they would be in this country, where everything is so favorable to them and so unfavorable to the movements of troops. And yet war is the very thing toward which the reckless course of politicians, slave-hunters, and land-grabbers is hurrying the government. Well, I shan't take part in it, that's certain, though my present duty as a white man is plainly to ride back to St. Augustine and give the colonel information of this present band of Indians. I wouldn't think of doing so, only for fear that, smarting under the insult to that fine young fellow Coacoochee, they will seek revenge and visit the sins of the guilty upon innocent heads. If Coacoochee has only followed my advice and gone directly back to the reservation, and to his own place, there won't be any trouble; but if he is going to hang around here, trying to lift a few scalps, as I am afraid he is, he may get himself into a fix from which I can't help him."

It must not be supposed that Ralph Boyd had been standing in the middle of the road all this

time. He was in the saddle even before the sound of the Indian war-cries informed him of the direction they had taken and where they were. Directly afterwards he put spurs to his horse, and during the latter part of his soliloquy was galloping rapidly back over the road he had just come.

Although Boyd knew Salano to be a bitter and unscrupulous enemy, he had no hesitation in returning to St. Augustine on his account, or for fear of the others with whose cruel sport he had so summarily interfered. He did not believe they would dare publish what they had done, or care to acknowledge that they had been driven off and compelled to forego their intentions by a single man.

To satisfy himself on this point, he made a few inquiries on reaching the city, and finding that nothing was known of the recent adventure, he went to the colonel commanding the small garrison stationed in the city and informed him of the presence near it of an armed band of seven Indian warriors. He also expressed his fear that they intended mischief to some of the plantations along the St. John's.

The colonel listened attentively to all that he had to say and thanked him for the information. Darkness had fallen by this time, and it was too late to do anything that night, but the officer promised to send out a scouting party of twenty troopers at daylight. In the meantime he begged that Boyd would remain as his guest over night, and in the morning

consent to guide the troops to the place where he had seen the Indians, which the latter readily agreed to do. He did this the more willingly because he had learned that the scouting party was to be commanded by Irwin Douglass, a young lieutenant with whom he had formed a pleasant acquaintance, and who had already visited him at the plantation.

When, after an early and hurried cup of coffee with the colonel and Douglass the following morning, Boyd joined the soldiers, to whom for a short distance he was to act as guide, he was amazed to find that Fontaine Salano had applied for and received permission to accompany them. He wondered at this as the troop clattered noisily with jingling sabres and bit-chains out of the quiet old town. Was Salano's hatred of the young Indian whom he had so cruelly wronged so bitter that he was determined to seize every opportunity for killing him? Boyd could think of no other reason why the man, naturally so indolent, should undertake this forced march with all the discomforts that must necessarily attend it.

The spring morning was just cool enough to be exhilarating. The fresh air was laden with the perfume of orange groves, and from their green coverts innumerable birds poured forth their choicest melody. The cavalry horses, in high spirits from long idleness, pranced gaily along the narrow streets and were with difficulty reined to a decorous trot.

Once free from the town and out in the broad plain of sand and chaparral that lay beyond, the pace was quickened, and for several miles the troop swung cheerily along at a hand gallop, with polished weapons and accoutrements flashing brightly in the rays of the newly risen sun.

A halt was called at the place where Boyd had encountered the Indians, and scouts were sent in search of signs. These easily found the camp from which Coacoochee had started on his visit to town the morning before, and finally discovered a fresh trail leading to the west or toward the St. John's.

It was not easy for the troops, inexperienced in Indian warfare, to follow this on horseback, and they soon lost it completely. This did not greatly disturb Lieutenant Douglass; for, being satisfied that the plantations along the river were the objective points of those whom he was pursuing, he determined to push on toward them without losing any time in attempting to rediscover the trail.

That evening they reached the great river and encamped near it without having discovered any further Indian sign, or finding that the few widely scattered settlers had been given any cause to suspect the presence of an enemy.

During that night, however, two startling incidents occurred. The first of these was the complete and mysterious disappearance of one of the sentinels who guarded the camp. He had been stationed not

far from the edge of the forest, but within easy hail of his sleeping comrades. The sergeant had given him particular cautions regarding the dangers of his post, and warned him to be keenly alert to every sound, even the slightest. He had answered with a laugh, that his ears were too long to permit anything human to get within a rod of him without giving him warning, and he declared his intention of firing in the direction of any suspicious sound.

So they left him, and an hour later the corporal of the guard, visiting the post, found it vacant. In the darkness it was useless to hunt for the missing sentry, and so, without giving a general alarm, the corporal detailed another sentinel to the place of the missing man, and remained with him on the post until morning. They neither saw nor heard anything to arouse their suspicions, but as soon as daylight revealed surrounding objects, they could readily note signs of a struggle at one end of the beat paced by their unfortunate predecessor.

There were no traces of blood, nor in the trail of moccasined feet leading away from the spot could any imprint of the heavy cavalry boots worn by the missing soldier be found. The trail led to a small creek that emptied into the river just above the camp, but there it ended. Both banks of this creek were carefully examined for a mile up and down, but they revealed no sign to denote that they had ever been trodden by human feet.

There was nothing more to be done. The man was reported as missing, and a riderless horse was led by one of the troopers on that day's march,— but this mysterious disappearance and unknown fate of their comrade served to open the eyes of the soldiers to the dreadful possibilities of Indian warfare.