

CHAPTER X

FONTAINE SALANO'S TREACHERY AND ITS REWARD

ANOTHER mysterious happening of that first night out was well calculated to exercise a depressing effect on the men and to transform the contempt they had hitherto felt for Indians into a profound respect not unmixed with fear. Fontaine Salano slept rolled in his blanket not far from the lieutenant in command of the party, and within the full light of a camp-fire. Toward morning, however, this fire had burned so low that it shed but little light, and the place where Salano lay was buried in shadow.

When he awoke at the first peep of dawn, he was puzzled by the appearance of a number of strange objects that rose from the ground close by his head. He examined them curiously, but his curiosity was in an instant changed to horror when he discovered them to be seven blood-stained Indian arrows thrust into the ground, three on each side of where his head had lain and one at the upper end of his couch. This one bore impaled on its shaft the bloody heart of a recently killed deer, the significance of which was so plain that no one could fail to understand it.

The mere fact that the Indians had thus been able to penetrate undetected to the very centre of a guarded camp invested them in the eyes of the men with supernatural powers. The effect on Salano was precisely what Coacoochee had intended it should be. To feel that he had been completely within the power of one who had sworn to have his life and had only been spared as a cat spares a mouse, that she may prolong its torture for her own pleasure, filled the wretch with a terror pitiful to behold.

He begged Lieutenant Douglass to return at once to St. Augustine or at least to send him back under escort. The officer politely regretted his inability to comply with either of these requests, saying that it would be contrary to his duty to retire from that part of the country until satisfied that the Indians had left it, and that he dared not weaken his little force by detailing any men for escort duty.

The man displayed such abject cowardice that finally, more out of disgust than pity, Ralph Boyd offered to accompany him back to the city, and to his surprise, Salano accepted the offer eagerly. As they were both volunteers, Douglass had no authority for detaining them, though he protested against the undertaking, and tried to persuade them of its dangers. Ralph Boyd only laughed, and even Salano intimated a belief that the Indians would devote themselves to watching the movements of the scout-

ing party, so that to remain with them would be to remain in the vicinity of greatest danger.

The lieutenant said that he should remove his command only a short distance, to a better and more secure camping-ground that he knew of not very far from Boyd's plantation, over which he promised to keep especial watch. He intended to remain at that place until he learned something definite regarding the movements of the Indians, and there Boyd promised to rejoin him on the following day.

Camp was broken, and the clear bugle notes of "boots and saddles" were ringing on the still morning air as Boyd and Salano rode away from the camp on the return trail to St. Augustine. They rode in silence; for one entertained too great a contempt for the other to care to talk with him, and Salano was perfecting a plan for obtaining one portion of the revenge upon which his mind was intent.

They had not proceeded thus more than two miles, when they came to a narrow gully through which they were obliged to ride in single file, and here Salano, with an exaggerated show of politeness, dropped behind, allowing Boyd to take the lead.

The latter rode unsuspectingly ahead for a few rods, and then, not hearing the sound of the other's horse behind him, turned to see if he were not coming.

The sight that met his eyes was so unexpected

and terrible that for an instant it rendered him incapable of thought or action. Salano, dismounted from his horse, was slowly raising a rifle and taking deliberate aim at him. He could see the cruelly triumphant expression on the swarthy face. In that instant of time he also saw a flashing figure with uplifted arm leap from the underbrush behind Salano. Then all became a blank.

When next Ralph Boyd was able to take an interest in the affairs of this world, he was lying in the shade of a tree, two horses were cropping the grass near him, and a strange, wild-looking figure was dashing water in his face.

“What does this mean? What has happened?” Boyd inquired faintly.

“Wal, cap’n,” answered the stranger, in unmistakable English, pausing in his occupation and drawing a long breath. “I’m almighty glad you ain’t dead. The Injun said you warn’t, but I wouldn’t be sure of it myself till this very minute. As to what’s happened, I’m a leetle mixed myself, but it’s something like this: Some red villians was about to do for me when you come along and stopped ’em. Then a white villian was about to do for you, when one of the red villians stopped him, or at any rate he stopped the worst of it; then the red villian did for the white villian, and did it almighty thorough too.”

At this juncture Boyd again closed his eyes and

seemed about to lapse once more into unconsciousness, whereupon the stranger began again to dash water vigorously in his face.

There was a stinging sensation and a loud buzzing in the young man's head. Salano's murderous aim had been slightly disconcerted, at the moment of firing, by a fierce yell in his very ear. At the instant of pulling the trigger Coacoochee's terrible knife had been buried to the hilt in his body. The would-be murderer sank dead without a groan, while his intended victim escaped with a scalp wound which, though not dangerous, was sufficient to deprive him of his senses for some time.

When he had sufficiently recovered his strength to be able to sit up, and after he had listened to these details of his own narrow escape, he looked curiously at his companion and asked him who he was. It is no wonder that he did not recognize the strange figure; for though the man wore a pair of army trousers, he had Indian moccasins on his feet, was bare-headed, and naked to the waist. Half his face as well as half of his body was painted red and the other half black.

In this manner did the Seminoles prepare their bodies for death, and to those who understood its meaning, this combination of the two colors had a very grim significance. Fortunately for the man's peace of mind, he had not understood why this form of decoration was applied to him, though his fears

that his life was in danger had been very fully aroused.

In answer to Ralph Boyd's questions, he told his story as follows : "I'm not surprised that you don't recognize me, cap'n ; for I'm not quite sure that I'd recognize myself. Still, whatever I may be to-day, yesterday I was private Hugh Belcher of Company B, Second Regiment United States Dragoons."

"What!" exclaimed Boyd, "are you the sentry who disappeared last night?"

"That's who I am, sir," replied the other, "much as my present appearance would seem to point again its being true. How the Reds crept upon me without me hearing a sound of their coming is more than I can tell, for I've always bragged that my ears were as sharp as the next man's. However, they did it, and the first I knew of their presence was when a blanket was flung over my head and I was tripped up. I don't know how many of 'em had me, but there was enough, anyway, to hold me fast, and tie me and get a gag into my mouth, so that I couldn't make a sound. Then they pulled off my boots, put moccasins on my feet, and made me go along with them.

"After awhile we came to this place, and here, as soon as it got light, they stripped me and painted me and tied me to a tree, and was just getting ready to give me a thrashing with a lot of switches they'd cut, though Lord knows I hadn't done nothing to

rile 'em, when all of a sudden you and Mr. Salano hove in sight.

"I was faced that way and see Mr. Salano when he dropped off his horse and drew a bead on you. I'd a hollered, but the gag was still in my mouth, so I couldn't. When the head Injun see what was taking place though, he gave one spring out of the brush, and landed on Mr. Salano's back like a wildcat. At the same time he let loose a yell fit to raise the dead. The gun went off just as he yelled, and you tumbled out of the saddle like you was killed.

"When the head Injun saw that, he run up to you first and dragged you to this place. Then he run back to Mr. Salano and stooped over him like he was feeling of his heart to see if he was dead. When he riz up again, he fetched another yell and called out something in his own lingo about Ul-we. Then the rest crowded around him, and he talked to them for about a minute.

"After that they come back and cut me loose, and the head Injun, pointing to you, said in English, 'You are free. Care for him. He is not dead. Tell him Coacoochee's heart is no longer heavy. He will go to his own people. If the soldiers want him, let them seek him in the swamps of the Okeefenokee.' Then, without another word, they all disappeared, and I set to work to bring you to."

Thus was the death of Ul-we, the tall one, atoned for in heart's blood, and thus was the stripe on

Coacoochee's back washed out with the blood of him who had so wantonly inflicted it. Thus, also, did Coacoochee save the life of his friend and punish the would-be assassin who had so planned his cowardly revenge upon Ralph Boyd that the act would be credited to the Indians.

With the accomplishment of this deed of just retribution, Coacoochee and his warriors disappeared from that part of the country, nor were they again seen there for many months.

