

CHAPTER XII

CHEN-O-WAH IS STOLEN BY THE SLAVE-CATCHERS

THE aged chieftain rose slowly and for a moment gazed lovingly and in silence at those gathered about him; then he said: "My children, we have listened to the words of Ah-ha-se-ho-la, and we know them to be true. But he has spoken with the voice of a young man. He sees with young eyes. My eyes are old, but they can look back over many seasons that a young man cannot see. They can also look forward further than his, and see many things. I have seen the great council of the white man, and his warriors. I have seen his villages. His lodges are more numerous than the trees of the forest, and his numbers are those of the leaves of countless trees. To fight with him would be like fighting the waves of the great salt waters that reach to the sky. If we should kill one, ten would spring up to take his place. For a hundred who may fall, a thousand will stand. He is strong, and we are weak. Let us then live at peace with him while we may. Let us meet him in council and tell him how little it is that we ask. There is a land beyond Okeechobee, the great sweet water, that the white man

can never want, but where the red man could dwell in peace and plenty. Let him leave this to us, and we will ask no more.

“If he will not do this, then let us fight. Never will Philip Emathla consent to go to the strange and distant land of the setting sun. If it is a better land than this, as the white man tells us, why does he not go there himself and leave us alone? It is a cold country. My people would die there. It is better to die here and die fighting.

“The white chief at Fort King calls us together for one more talk with him. Philip is old. He cannot travel so far, but Coacoochee shall go in his place. He will speak wisely, and if peace can be had, he will find it. If there is no peace, if the Seminole must fight, then who will fight harder or more bravely than Coacoochee? At his name the white man will tremble, and his squaws will hide their faces in fear. The enemies of Coacoochee will fall before him as ripe fruit falls before the breath of Hu-la-lah (the wind). He will kill till he is weary of killing. His footsteps will be marked with blood. Rivers of blood shall flow where he passes. I am old and feeble, but Coacoochee is young and strong. From this day shall he be a war-chief of the Seminoles. Philip Emathla has spoken.”

At this announcement there came a great shout of rejoicing, and as the council broke up, the warriors crowded about Coacoochee to tell him how

proud they would be to have him lead them in battle.

After the tumult had somewhat subsided, Osceola, who had not hitherto spoken directly to Coacoochee, stepped up to him. The two young men grasped each other's hands, and gazed earnestly in each other's face. Finally Osceola, apparently satisfied with what he saw, broke the silence, and said:

"We are brothers?"

"We are brothers," answered the young war-chief, and thus was made a compact between the two that was only to be broken by death.

The following morning, Coacoochee, with a small escort of warriors, set forth, in company with Osceola and Chen-o-wah, to travel to the village of Micanopy, head chief of the Seminoles, there to hold another council before going to Fort King for a talk with the agent.

In Micanopy's village they found assembled a large number of Seminole warriors, and many of the sub-chiefs of the tribe. This council was a grave and momentous affair. It was to decide the fate of a nation, and its deliberations were prolonged over two days. Micanopy, the head chief, was old, corpulent, and fond of his ease. He loved his land and hated the thought of war. He was greatly disinclined to remove to the west, but it was not until urged and almost compelled by the younger men,

especially Coacoochee and Osceola, that he finally declared positively that he would not do so.

His utterance decided the majority of the council. They would fight before submitting to removal, but on one pretext and another they would gain all possible time in which to prepare for war.

It was also announced at this council that any Seminole who should openly advocate removal, and should make preparations for emigrating, should be put to death.

In all the council there was but one dissenting voice. It was that of a sub-chief named Charlo, who had been raised to the head of a small band by the agent, in place of an able warrior who was an uncompromising enemy of the whites. This petty chief spoke in favor of removal, and ridiculed the suggestion that the tribe could hold out for any length of time against the overwhelming power of the white man. He was listened to with impatience, and many dark glances were cast at him as he resumed his seat.

Three days later some fourteen chiefs, accompanied by a large number of their people, were encamped near Fort King, and active preparations were going forward for the great talk that was to be held that afternoon.

On the morning of that day, a thick-set, evil-looking man, whom the reader would at once recognize as his old acquaintance Mr. Troup Jeffers the slave-

trader, sat in the agent's office engaged in earnest conversation with General Wiley Thompson.

"Thar ain't no doubt about it, ginerel," he was saying. "She's easy enough identified, and I'll take my affidavy right here that she's the gal Jess who run away from old Miss Cooke's place two year ago. You've got a list of all them niggers and their description, as well as the order from Washington for their capture and deliverin' up. You know you have, and when I tell you what this gal looks like, you see if she don't answer the description exactly."

"Yes, sir, I've no doubt," answered the agent, wearily, for of the many trials of his difficult position, the importunities of the slave-hunters who besieged him at all hours were the greatest. "I don't doubt what you say, and I'll give you an order for the girl which you can present to the chiefs. If they give her up, well and good; but if they won't, why they won't, that's all, and matters are too critical just now for us to attempt to force them."

"All right, ginerel," replied Mr. Jeffers, with a triumphant glitter in his cruel little eyes. "The order is all I want, and I'll get the gal without putting you or anybody else to a mite of trouble."

Thus saying, the trader took the slip of paper handed him by the agent, and left the office.

Like a vulture scenting the carnage from afar, the slave-trader hearing that the Seminoles and their

negro allies were about to be removed, had hastened to the scene of action, determined in some way to secure a share of the peculiar property in which he dealt, before it should be placed beyond his reach.

In the Indian camp he had seen several good-looking young women in whose veins he was convinced flowed negro blood, and he decided that his purpose would be served by securing one or more of these. Going to the agent with the trumped-up story of having thus discovered a runaway slave girl, he obtained the coveted order for her restoration to her lawful owner. Armed with this, he proceeded to carry out his wicked design.

His plan was very simple, and to put it into operation, he repaired to the store of the post trader. It was located in a grove of live oaks, some distance beyond the stockade, and was hidden from view of those in or near the fort. To it, groups of Indians, men, women, and children, found their way at all times for the purchase of such supplies as they needed and could afford.

Rogers, the storekeeper, whose conscience from a long dealing with and cheating of Indians was as calloused and hardened as that of Mr. Jeffers himself, was not above turning what he called an honest penny by any means that came in his way. Therefore when the slave-trader explained his business, showed the agent's order, and offered Rogers ten

dollars to assist him in recapturing his alleged property, the latter readily consented to do so.

Troup Jeffers was almost certain that one or more of the young women whom he had noticed in the Indian camp would visit the store at some time during the day, and so he waited patiently the advent of a victim.

At length, late in the afternoon, when most of the Indians were attracted to the scene of the council, then in session, a squaw was seen to approach the store. She was one of those whom Mr. Jeffers had selected as suitable for the slave market, and the instant he observed her he exclaimed to the storekeeper :

“Here comes the very gal I’m after—old Miss Cooke’s Jess. I’ll just step into the back room, and if you can persuade her to come in there to look at something or other, we’ll have her as slick as a whistle.”

“All right,” responded Rogers, who a minute later was waiting on his customer with infinitely more politeness than he usually vouchsafed to an Indian.

She desired to purchase some coffee and sugar with which to surprise and please her husband when he returned to his lodge after the council should be ended, and the storekeeper easily persuaded her to enter the other room, where he said his best goods were kept.

As the unsuspecting woman bent over a sugar barrel, she was seized from behind, and her head was enveloped in a shawl, by which her cries were completely stifled.

A few minutes later, bound and helpless, she was lifted into a light wagon and driven rapidly away.

Half an hour afterwards, a boy who worked for the storekeeper remarked to his employer :

“I should think you would be afraid of Powell.”

“What for?” asked Rogers.

“Why, for letting that man carry off his wife,” was the reply.

Thus did the storekeeper receive his first intimation that the alleged runaway slave girl was Chen-o-wah, the adored wife of Osceola.