

CHAPTER XIII

“WILEY THOMPSON, WHERE IS MY WIFE?”

WHILE the wife of Osceola was thus being kidnapped and consigned to slavery, he, ignorant of the blow in store for him, was participating in a far different scene. Just outside the gateway of the fort, in an open space of level sward, the great council upon which so much depended was assembled. At one side of a long table sat General Clinch, commanding the army in Florida, with the officers of his staff standing behind him. Beside him sat General Wiley Thompson, the agent, red-faced and pompous, Lieutenant Harris, the United States disbursing agent, who was to conduct the Indians to their western homes, and several commissioners. All the officers were in full uniform, and presented a brave appearance. Behind them were two companies of infantry, resting at ease on their loaded muskets, but ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Just inside the gateway of the fort the guns of its light battery were charged to the muzzle with grape and canister, ready for instant service. This was one side of the picture.

On the opposite side of the table from the whites sat or stood a group of Indian chiefs, sullen, determined, and watchful. Too many times already had the white man cheated them. They would take care that he should not do so again. They had learned by bitter experience how lightly he regarded such treaties as conflicted with his interests. They knew the value of his false promises and fair words.

A little in front of the others sat Micanopy, head chief of the tribe, and close behind him, so that they could whisper in his ear, stood Coacoochee and Osceola. Grouped about them were Otee the Jumper, Tiger Tail, Allapatta Tustenugge, the Fighting Alligator, Arpeika, or Sam Jones, Black Dirt, Ya ha Hadjo, the Mad Wolf, Coa Hadjo, Halatoochee, Abram, the negro chief, Passac Micco, and many others. Behind them stood one hundred warriors, tall, clean-built fellows, lithe and sinewy, their bare legs as hard and smooth as those of bronze statues. Concealed in a hammock, but a short distance away, was another body of warriors held in reserve by Coacoochee, who had thought it best not to display the full strength of his force at once.

The old men, women, and children had been left in camp not far from the trader's store. Here everything was prepared for instant flight in case the council should terminate in an outbreak.

The proceedings were opened by General Thompson, who stated that he had thus called the Indians

together that they might decide upon a day when they would fulfil their promise contained in the treaty of Payne's Landing, and set forth for their new home in the west. He had prepared a paper setting forth the conditions of removal, which he now wished all the chiefs to sign.

Then Otee the Jumper, who was one of the most fluent speakers of the tribe, arose and calmly but firmly stated that his people did not consider themselves as bound by that treaty to remove from their country, and had decided in solemn council not to do so.

At this point the Seminole speaker was rudely interrupted by General Thompson, who, flushed and furious, sprang to his feet and demanded by what right the Indians interpreted the treaty differently from the whites by whom it was drawn up. He accused them of treachery and double-dealing, and ended by declaring that it made no difference whether they were willing to remove or not, for they would be made to go, alive or dead, and he for one did not care which.

This speech drew forth angry replies from the chiefs, and to these the agent retorted with such bitterness that General Clinch was finally obliged to interpose his authority to calm both sides. He told the Indians how useless it would be for them to struggle against the power of the United States, and how greatly he would prefer that they should

remove peaceably rather than oblige him to remove them by force.

At this the Indians smiled grimly and exchanged contemptuous glances. They knew that there were only seven hundred soldiers in all Florida, and the idea of compelling them to do anything they did not choose, with a little army like that, was too absurd. It almost made them laugh, but their native dignity prevented such a breach of decorum.

General Clinch talked long and earnestly and was listened to with respect and close attention. The agent regarded his arguments as so unanswerable that at their conclusion he called on the chiefs by name to step forward and sign the paper he had prepared.

"Micanopy, you are head chief. Come up and sign first at the head of the list."

"No, Micanopy will never sign."

"Then Coacoochee may sign first. He comes, I believe, as representative of the wise and brave King Philip."

"No, Coacoochee will not sign either for his father or himself."

"Jumper, then; and when he signs, I will make him head chief."

"No."

"Alligator?"

"No."

"Sam Jones?"

“No.”

“Abram?”

“By golly. No.”

At these repeated refusals to comply with his request, and the evident contempt with which his offers of promotion were regarded, the fat agent became so angry as to entirely lose his self-control.

“If you will not sign,” he shouted, “you are no longer fit to hold your positions. I therefore declare that Micanopy, Coacoochee, Jumper, Alligator, Sam Jones, and Abram, shall cease from this minute to be chiefs of the Seminole nation, and their names shall be struck from the roll of chiefs.”

At this an angry murmur ran through the ranks of the Indians, who considered that a grievous insult had thus been offered them. Those chiefs who had been sitting sprang to their feet and fell back a few paces. The warriors behind them moved up closer, and Coacoochee, slipping unnoticed through the throng, hurried back to the hammock to direct the flight of the women and children, and bring up his reserve force of warriors.

In the meantime an Indian who had come from the camp was talking with low, hurried words to Osceola, who listened to him like one in a dream or who does not fully comprehend what he hears.

Suddenly he sprang forward, his face livid with passion, and crying in a loud voice, “I will sign!



IT SUNK DEEP INTO THE WOOD OF THE TABLE AND STOOD QUIVERING AS THOUGH WITH RAGE.

I, Osceola the Baton Rouge, will sign this paper of the white man."

Then stepping up to the table, while both whites and Indians watched him with breathless interest, the fierce warrior plucked the scalping-knife from his girdle and drove it with furious energy through the outspread paper. It sunk deep into the wood of the table, and stood quivering as though with rage.

"There is my signature, General Wiley Thompson," he cried in a voice that trembled with the intensity of his emotion. "There is the signature of Osceola, and I would that it were inscribed on your cowardly heart. Where is my wife? What have you done with her? Give her back to me, I say, and as safe as when I left her in yonder grove. If you do not, I swear by the white man's God, and by the Great Spirit of my people, that not only your own vile life, but that of every white man who comes within reach of Osceola's vengeance, shall be forfeited. As you have shown no mercy, so shall you receive none. The word shall be unknown to the Seminole tongue. You taunt me with being a half-blood. I am one; but I am yet a man, and not a slave. With my white blood I defy you, and with my Indian blood I despise you. Wiley Thompson, where is my wife?"