

CHAPTER XIV

OSCEOLA SIGNS THE TREATY

THE group of white men on the opposite side of the table had left their seats before Osceola stepped toward it. General Clinch exchanged a few words with the agent and gave an order to the officer in command of the troops. These were moved forward a few paces, though, blinded by the intensity of his feelings, the half-breed failed to notice their change of position.

Now, in obedience to a signal from the agent, they sprang forward with fixed bayonets, and in an instant Osceola, cut off from his friends, was hedged in by a wall of glittering steel. At the same moment a sharp rattle of drums was heard within the fort, and the light battery, dashing out from the gateway in a cloud of dust, was wheeled into position with its murderous muzzles trained full on the startled Indians.

With one forward movement the pitiless storm of death would have swept through their crowded ranks. They knew this and stepped backward instead.

Within two minutes after the council was so sum-

marily dissolved, not an Indian was to be seen. Within five minutes Osceola, heavily ironed, was thrust into the strongest cell of the guard-house and the door locked behind him. By this time, also, the troops had retired, and General Thompson was inquiring in every direction what the crazy half-breed meant by demanding a wife from him. He knew nothing about the fellow's wife. Did not even know he had a wife, and was inclined to think that Osceola was drunk, or else had trumped up this demand for the purpose of exciting the Indians to resistance.

Finally, however, through Rogers, the trader, he discovered the real facts of the case. Then he realized the awkward position in which his careless giving of an order for the recovery of a runaway slave had placed not only himself, but all the whites in that part of the country.

He visited the prisoner in his cell, and tried to quiet him by explaining that it was all a mistake, and by assuring him that every effort should be made to recover Chen-o-wah and bring her back; but all to no purpose.

Osceola replied that his wife alone had been seized of all those who visited the trader's store. Moreover, she had been seized upon a written order from himself, for the paper had been read aloud in the presence of several persons. No, there was no mistake, and as for the agent's promise to restore Chen-

o-wah to him, he would believe it when he saw her, but not before.

For six days the forest warrior who had been struck this deadly blow paced hopelessly up and down his narrow cell, dragging his clanking chains behind him. During this time he hardly touched food nor would he speak to a human being. No one save himself knew the bitterness of his heart, or the terrible thoughts that seethed in his mind during those six days. He appeared like one consumed by an inward fire, and it even seemed as though his haughty spirit was about to escape from the imprisoned body.

At length he sent for General Thompson, and expressed a willingness to sign the paper that should commit him to emigration. "My spirit is broken," he said; "your irons have entered my soul. I can hold out no longer. By these chains I am disgraced in the eyes of my people, and my influence over them is gone. It is better that I should go away and die in a strange land. Bring me your paper; I will sign it."

But that was not sufficient. The paper must be signed in the presence of other Seminoles, that they might be witnesses to the act, and spread the great news abroad throughout the nation. Even to this humiliation Osceola consented, and a messenger was despatched to bring in the first band of Indians he should meet. This messenger was given a token by

Osceola, and thus provided, he had no difficulty in persuading Coacoochee and some forty warriors, thirty of whom belonged to the captive's own band, to again visit the fort.

Although they came to the fort, Coacoochee's caution would not allow them to pass within its gates, and so the ceremony of signing was of necessity performed outside.

General Clinch and his staff had returned to Tampa, but there still remained enough of officers at Fort King to escort the agent and lend an imposing effect to the ceremony.

Osceola was led to the place of signing, under guard and with the irons still upon his ankles. He approached the table with downcast eyes, apparently unmindful of the presence of either friends or foes. As he took the pen preparatory to signing, the agent asked :

“Powell, do you acknowledge in the presence of these witnesses, that you are about to sign this paper of your own free will, without fear or compulsion?”

The half-breed regarded his questioner with a curious expression for a moment, and then answered :

“I have no fear. No one could compel me. I sign because it pleases me to do so.”

Thus saying, he affixed his signature to the hated paper, with a steady hand. Immediately afterwards his irons were struck off, and he was once more a free man.

The agent now asked Coacoochee if he would not also sign, but that wily young Indian refused to do so at that time. "When I have spoken with Ah-ha-se-ho-la, and learned his reasons for signing, perhaps I may also touch the white man's talking stick," he said.

When Osceola had retired with his friends to their camp, General Thompson turned to one of his companions, and rubbing his hands complacently, remarked :

"That is a capital stroke of business. I have been all along regretting the unfortunate affair of that fellow's wife. Now, though, I begin to think it was one of the best things that could have happened for us. It has brought him to terms as I don't believe anything else would, and though he is not a chief, his influence is the most powerful in the tribe."

"You may be right," replied Lieutenant Smith, the young army officer to whom this remark was addressed, "but it was an outrageous thing, all the same, to steal the poor chap's wife. It makes me feel ashamed to be mixed up in this wretched business, and if I were not dependent on my profession for a living, and so forced to obey the orders of my superiors who have sent me here, I'd have nothing more to do with it. The idea of stealing a man's wife and selling her into slavery! I don't wonder it drove him so nearly crazy that he was willing to

sign or do anything else. Under the circumstances I wouldn't give a fig for his signature."

"Nonsense!" replied the agent; "you don't know these people as I do. He is only an Indian in spite of his mixture of white blood, and they don't feel about such things as we do. I'll guarantee that in less than a month he will have forgotten all about this wife and will have taken another or maybe two of them, in her place."

At this same time Coacoochee and Osceola were walking apart from the other Indians and talking earnestly.

"Was there no way for my brother to save his life but by signing the white man's paper?" inquired the former.

At this Osceola broke into a hard and bitter laugh. "Does my brother regard me so meanly as to think that to save my life alone, or to save a thousand lives such as mine, I would have signed?" he asked. "No. It was not to save life that Osceola put pen to paper, but to take it. It was that he might be revenged on those who have wronged him far deeper than by killing him, that he did it. When his vengeance is accomplished, then will he gladly die; but he will never go to the western land."

"Listen," he continued, noting the other's look of bewilderment at these words: "once the Indian fought with bows and arrows, while the white man fought with guns. Did he continue to do this

when he found that his weapons were no match for those of the white man? No; he threw away his bows and arrows, and got guns in their place. Once Osceola was honest, his tongue was straight, he would not tell a lie. Are the white men so? No, their tongues are crooked; they say one thing and mean another; they have cheated the Indian and lied to him from the first day that they set foot on his land. They have laughed at his honesty and said, 'The Indian is a fool who knows no better.' Now Ah-ha-se-ho-la is fighting them with their own weapons. For them his tongue is no longer straight. It is as crooked as their own. Does my brother now understand why I signed?"

This style of reasoning was new to Coacoochee, and he pondered over it for a minute before replying. "It is true," he thought, "that the white man gains many advantages over the Indian by cheating and lying to him. If they do those things, why should not the Indian do them as well? In the present instance how could Osceola have gained his liberty by any other means? Yes, it must be right to fight the white man with his own weapons."

So Coacoochee acknowledged that Osceola was justified in the course he had pursued, and congratulated him on his escape from the white man's prison. He was also rejoiced to learn that his friend was to remain and aid them in the coming war rather than to leave them and go to the far-off western land.

Thus answered Coacoochee. At the same time deep down in his heart the young war-chief hoped that he might never find it necessary to fight any enemy with so dangerous a weapon as a crooked tongue.

Now the two young men laid their plans for the future. They agreed that as much time as possible should be gained before open hostilities were declared, in order that the Indians might make all possible preparations for war. With this end in view, Osceola was to remain near the fort, and while still expressing a willingness to emigrate whenever the others of his tribe should come in, was to procure such supplies as he could, especially ammunition, that might be stored for the coming struggle.

Coacoochee was to visit the scattered bands and induce them to provide safe hiding-places for their women and children, that the warriors might be free to fight.

While confined in the fort, Osceola had learned that the chief Charlo, who styled himself "Charlo Emathla," was disposing of his cattle preparatory to emigrating, and now the young men agreed that in his case it was necessary to show both whites and Indians the earnestness of their purpose by carrying out the decisions of the chiefs and putting him to death.

This, Osceola undertook to do, and Coacoochee was glad to be relieved of the unpleasant duty.

Thus matters being arranged, the friends separated; and while Coacoochee with his ten warriors took their departure, Osceola with his thirty followers remained near the fort, to carry out his plan for averting war as long as possible, and to watch for the revenge against those who had robbed him of his wife, that had now become the object of his most intense desire.

Thus matters stood for several months. At the end of that time, the agent becoming suspicious of the Indians on account of their purchasing such quantities of powder, peremptorily forbade the further sale of ammunition to them. Thereupon Osceola sent out runners to carry the news to every Seminole band from the Okeefenokee to the Everglades, and from the Atlantic to the Gulf, that the time for action had arrived, and that the first blow of the war was about to be struck.