

## CHAPTER XVI

### OSCEOLA'S REVENGE

IN the meantime, Osceola had carried out his part of the arrangement with Coacoochee in regard to the traitor, Charlo Emathla. Although warned of the fate in store for him in case he persisted in disregarding the wishes of his people and the commands of the other chiefs, this Indian, dazzled by sight of the white man's gold, flattered by his praise, and assured of his protection, persisted in his course.

Osceola waited until certain that he had accepted a considerable sum of money from the agent, and then prepared an ambush beside a trail along which the doomed man must return to his camp. It was completely successful; the victim fell at the first fire, and covering his face with his hands, received the fatal blow without a word. Tied up in his handkerchief was a quantity of gold and silver. This, Osceola declared was the price of red men's blood, and, sternly forbidding his followers to touch it, he flung it broadcast in every direction.

When news of this summary punishment of a renegade was received at Fort King, it created a serious feeling of anxiety and alarm for the future.

This was shared by all except the agent, who declared, in his pompous manner, that he knew the Indians too well to fear them. They might murder one of their own kind here and there, but they would never muster up courage to attack a white man. Oh no! the rascals were too well aware of the consequences of such an act.

Another report that reached the fort about the same time increased the uneasiness of its inmates. It was of six Indians who had been brutally and wantonly set upon by a party of white land-grabbers. The Indians were in camp, quietly engaged in cooking their supper, when the whites rode up, made them prisoners, took away their rifles, and examined their packs, appropriating to their own use whatever they fancied, and destroying the rest. Then they tied the Indians to trees and began whipping them.

While they were thus engaged, four other Indians appeared on the scene and opened an ineffective fire upon the aggressors. The whites answered with a volley from their rifles that killed one Indian and wounded another. Both parties then withdrew from the field, the whites carrying with them the rifles and baggage that they had stolen.

This outrage was termed an Indian encroachment, and a company of militia was at once ordered out to chastise the Indians and protect citizens.

By such acts as these the land-grabbers hoped to

hasten the movements of the Seminoles and compel them to evacuate the coveted territory the more rapidly.

It was with gloomy forebodings that the little garrison of Fort King, who, from long experience, had gained some knowledge of the Indian character, heard of these and similar brutalities. They knew that such things would drive the savage warriors to acts of retaliation, and precipitate the crisis that now appeared so imminent. Their fears were heightened by the fact that early in December the Indians ceased visiting the fort, and it was reported that all their villages in that part of the country were abandoned.

So the month dragged slowly away. Christmas Day was passed quietly and without the usual festivities of the season. The anxiety of the garrison would have been still further increased had they known that on that very day Osceola and a band of picked warriors took up a position in a dense hammock from which they could watch every movement in and about the fort.

Osceola's object was the killing of the agent, whom he believed to be directly implicated in the abduction of Chen-o-wah. So determined was he to accomplish this, that he had decided if no better opportunity offered to venture an attack against the fort itself, desperate as he knew this measure to be.

Coacoochee at this time was gathering the warriors of the tribe and preparing them for battle in the



depths of the great Wahoo Swamp, the hidden mysteries of which no white man had ever explored. It lay a day's journey from Fort King, and to it were hastening many chiefs with their followers.

On the morning of Christmas Day a negro runner, well-nigh exhausted with the speed at which he had travelled, reached the swamp encampment and asked to be led at once to Coacoochee, the war-chief. The moment he had delivered his message the young warrior, trembling with excitement, sought the other chiefs and made known to them the wonderful news he had just received.

"This very day," he said, "the white soldiers have left Tampa to march through the Seminole country. At the end of four days they hope to reach Fort King. They are guided by one whom I thought dead, but who sends word that he is alive. He is my friend and may be trusted. He will bring them by this road. Shall we allow them to pass by us and join their friends? Or shall we meet them in battle and prove to them that our words were not empty boastings, when we said the Seminole would fight for his land? The white man laughs at us and whips us as though we were dogs. He takes from us that which pleases him, and gives us nothing but blows in return. The Indian and the wolf together are marks for his rifle. Let us show him that we are men and warriors. Let us strike a blow that he will never forget. It may be that when he

finds the Seminole ready to fight, he will let us alone to dwell peaceably in our own land. Are the words of Coacoochee good in the ears of the tribe? Are his warriors glad when they hear them?"

A long discussion followed; but when it was ended, the counsel of the young war-chief had been accepted.

Then through the dim forest aisles echoed the hollow booming of the kasi-lalki, or great war-drum. Fleet runners were despatched in all directions, some to hasten the incoming bands, and some to watch the movements of the advancing troops. One was sent to bear the great news to Osceola, and bid him hasten if he would take part in the first battle of the war.

When this messenger reached those secreted in the hammock near Fort King, and delivered his tidings, Osceola bade him return and tell Coacoochee that if at the end of one more day his purpose had not been accomplished, he would abandon it for the present and hasten to join him.

On the following afternoon two figures were seen by the eager watchers to leave the fort and stroll toward the trader's store a mile away. Osceola's keen eye was the first to recognize them, and he knew that the hour of his vengeance had arrived.

The two who strolled thus carelessly, apparently unconscious of danger, were the agent, General Wiley Thompson, and his friend, Lieutenant Con-

stantine Smith. They were smoking their after-dinner cigars and talking earnestly. Their subject was the rights and wrongs of the Indian. As they reached the crest of a slight eminence, these words, uttered in Wiley Thompson's most emphatic tone, reached the ears of Osceola, who, with flashing eyes and compressed lips, peered at the speaker from a thicket not ten yards away.

"I tell you, sir, the Indian is no better than any other savage beast, and deserves no better treatment at our hands."

They were the last words he ever spoke; for at that instant there burst from the thicket a blinding flash and the crashing report of thirty rifles, discharged simultaneously. Both men were instantly killed, and with yells of triumph the Indians rushed from their hiding-place, each intent upon procuring a scalp or some other trophy of the first event of the contest so long anticipated and now so sadly begun.

But Osceola's vengeance did not rest here. There were others within reach who had aided in the stealing of his wife, and he bade his warriors follow him to the store of the trader. A few minutes later Rogers and his two clerks had been added to the list of victims. After helping themselves to all the goods they could carry, the Indians set fire to the store and started toward the Wahoo Swamp, where they hoped to join Coacoochee in time to

participate in the battle of which he had sent them notice.

The little garrison of fifty men at Fort King heard the firing and the war-cries, and saw the smoke from the blazing store rise above the hammock. They knew only too well what these things meant; but supposing the Indians to be in force and about to attack the post, they dared not venture beyond its limits. They waited anxiously for the coming of the promised reinforcements from Tampa, but weary days passed, and no word came from them.