

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE VERGE OF THE WAHOO SWAMP

ON the afternoon of Christmas Day, Major Dade's little command of two companies of troops, numbering one hundred and ten souls, marched gaily out from Fort Brooke on Tampa Bay and started for Fort King, one hundred miles away, near where the city of Ocala now stands. Both officers and men were in the highest spirits, and regarded their present expedition as a pleasant relief from the monotony of garrison life. It was not at all likely they would be called upon to do any fighting; for, although the Indians had been acting suspiciously for some time, nobody believed they would dare come into open conflict with the whites. And what if they did! Was not one white man equal to five Indians at any time? To be sure, the soldiers were unfamiliar with the country, but then they had a guide who knew every foot of it.

Louis Pacheco was one of the most popular members of the expedition. He was not only a good guide, but he was polite, obliging, and attentive to the wants of the officers. He certainly was a

treasure, and they were fortunate to have secured his services. So the lieutenants said to one another.

For two days the command moved steadily forward, its one piece of light artillery and its one baggage wagon bumping heavily over the log-like roots of the saw-palmetto, and threatening to break down with each mile, but never doing so. They experienced no difficulty in crossing the dark, forest-shaded Withlacoochee; for Louis led them to the best ford on the whole river, and the officers agreed that they were making much better progress than could have been expected.

On the third night they had skirted the great Wahoo Swamp and were camped near its northern end. As this place was known to be a favorite Indian resort, the sentinels of that night were cautioned to be unusually vigilant. The corporal of the guard was instructed to inspect every post at least once an hour, and oftener than that towards morning, when an attack was supposed to be most imminent. As the officer of the day was equally on the alert, and visited the sentries many times during the night, the camp was deemed securely guarded.

All that day Louis, the guide, had been unusually silent. More than once he was observed to direct long, penetrating glances toward the dense forest growth of the great swamp, as though it held some peculiar fascination for him. It seemed as though he were conscious of the keen eyes, that, peering

from its dark depths, watched so exultingly the march of the troops. It seemed as though he must see the lithe figures that, gliding silently from thicket to thicket, or from one mossy covert to another, so easily kept pace with the slow-moving column.

In waiting on the officers' mess that evening, Louis was so absent-minded that he made innumerable blunders, and drew forth more than one angry rebuke from those whom he served.

At last one of these remarked that, if the nigger was not more attentive to his duties, he would be apt to make an acquaintance with the whipping-post before long.

Then there flashed into the man's face for an instant the same look that Lieutenant Mudge had detected once before, and from that moment his demeanor changed. He was no longer absent-minded. He was no longer undecided. The time of his irresolution was passed.

That night he slept apart from any other occupant of the camp, beyond the line of tents and on the side nearest the swamp hammock. For hours after rolling himself in his blanket the man lay open-eyed and thinking. This was either the last night of his life or the last of his slavery, he knew not which. On the morrow he would be either dead or free. On the morrow, if he lived, he would learn the fate of the dear sister from whom he had heard no word since that terrible night on the Tomoka. On the

morrow would be struck a blow for liberty that should be felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, and on the morrow his score against the white man would be wiped out. The account would be settled.

Louis had expected the attack to be made that day, and from each hammock or clump of timber they passed, had dreaded, and hoped to hear, the shrill war-whoop mingled with the crack of rifles. Now, he thought it might be made during the night or just at dawn. At all events, it must be made, if made at all, before the following sunset, for at that hour the command expected to reach Fort King.

As he lay thinking of these things, the querulous cry of a hawk suddenly broke the stillness of the night. It came from the swamp. Again it sounded, and this time with a slight difference of tone. The weary sentinels wondered for a moment at the strangeness of such a cry at that hour, and then dismissed it from their minds.

Not so with Louis Pacheco. The second cry had confirmed the suspicion aroused by the first. It was long since he had heard the signal of Coacoochee; but he recognized and answered it. The gentle, quavering cry of a little screech owl, though coming from the camp, alarmed no one. It went straight to the ears of Coacoochee, however, as he lay hidden in the saw-palmettoes, only a few rods beyond the tents, and he was content to wait

patiently, knowing that his friend had heard and understood his signal.

All the old forest instincts, long suppressed and almost forgotten, were instantly aroused in Louis. No Indian could have crept more cautiously or silently toward the line of sentries than he, and none could have slipped past them more deftly. A few minutes later the owl's note was sounded at the edge of the hammock and immediately answered from a spot but a short distance away. Then there came a rustle beside the motionless figure and a whispered :

“Louis, my brother?”

“Coacoochee, is it you?”

For a few minutes they whispered only of their own affairs, and Louis learned of Nita's escape from the slave-catchers, of her flight to Philip Emathla's village, and of her betrothal to Coacoochee, all in a breath. He longed to fly to her at that very moment; but a weary journey lay between them, and before he could undertake it a stern and terrible duty remained to be performed. He must return to the camp of soldiers and remain with them to the bitter end. Otherwise the plan for their destruction might yet miscarry.

Coacoochee told him the reason why the attack had not already been made was that the Indians had awaited the arrival of Osceola and Micanopy. The latter had come in that evening, and it was

decided to wait no longer, but to begin the fight at daylight.

Louis opposed this plan, saying that Major Dade expected an attack to be made at daylight, if made at all, and would be particularly on guard at that time. He also seemed to feel that if he were attacked, it would be from that swamp. Therefore, the mulatto advised that the attack be made at a point some miles beyond the swamp, where nothing of the kind would be anticipated.

Coacoochee acknowledged the soundness of this advice, and agreeing to follow it, the two separated, one to lead his warriors to the appointed place and prepare them for battle, the other to work his way with infinite caution back into the camp of sleeping soldiers. Fortunately for him the night was intensely dark, and though at one time a sentry passed so close that he could have touched him, by lying flat and almost holding his breath he escaped discovery.

He had barely reached his sleeping-place and rolled himself again in his blanket, when an officer came along, and stumbling over his prostrate form, exclaimed:

“Hello, Louis! Is that you?”

Upon receiving an affirmative answer, he continued: “Well, I must confess that it is a great relief to find you. I missed you, and have been searching for you. I really began to think you

had deserted and left us to find our own way out of this wilderness. Where have you been?"

"The major's horse got loose, sir, and came very near stepping on me," replied Louis. "And I just took him over to the cart, where I tied him up again. Sorry to have caused you any anxiety, sir."

"Oh, that's all right," answered the officer. "I'm glad your excuse is such a good one, for these are times when we can't be too careful, you know."

With this he walked away to visit the line of sentries, while Louis, bathed in a profuse perspiration in spite of the chill of the night, shuddered as he realized the narrowness of his escape.