

CHAPTER XVIII

COACOOCHEE'S FIRST BATTLE

THE next morning's sun ushered in one of the fairest of Floridian days ; the air was clear, cool, and bracing. It was filled with the aromatic odors of pines and vibrant with the songs of birds. All was life and activity in the camp of soldiers, who were preparing for an early start on the long day's march that they hoped would bring them to their destination that same evening.

"We are past all the bad places now, boys," cried Major Dade, cheerily, as he rode to the head of the column. "This swamp is our last danger point, and beyond this there is nothing to apprehend. The cowardly redskins have let a good chance slip by, and it will be long before they will be given another."

Then the bugles sounded merrily, and with light hearts the command resumed its march. But the Indians had moved earlier than they.

At daylight that morning one hundred and eighty warriors glided like shadows out from the dark recesses of the swamp, and, following the lead of Coacoochee, advanced some four miles beyond it. Where

they finally halted in the open pine woods there was a thick growth of scrub or saw-palmetto.

A pond bounded the road on the east at this point, and the entire body of Indians took positions on the opposite or western side. Each warrior selected his own tree or clump of palmetto, and sank out of sight behind it. Three minutes after their arrival nothing was to be seen nor heard save the solemn pines and the sighing of the wind through their branches.

There was so little to arouse suspicion that a small herd of deer fleeing before the advancing troops and coming down the wind dashed in among the Indians before discovering their presence. Even then the hidden warriors made no sign, and the terrified animals pursued their flight unmolested.

Besides Coacoochee, the chiefs in command of the Seminole force were Micanopy, Jumper, and Alligator. It had been determined that Micanopy, as head chief, should fire the first shot of the contest, and as the old man was timid and undecided, Coacoochee stood beside him to strengthen his courage.

At length about nine o'clock the troops appeared in view. They marched easily in open order, the bright sunlight glinted bravely on their polished weapons, and many were the shouts of light-hearted merriment that rose from their ranks. Louis, the guide, was not to be seen, as on some trifling pretext he had dropped behind the column.

The advanced guard reached the pond and passed

it unmolested. It was not until the main body was directly abreast the Indian centre that the wild war-whoop of Otee the Jumper rang through the forest. The next instant Micanopy's trembling fingers, guided by Coacoochee's unflinching hand, pulled the trigger of the first rifle. With its flash a great sheet of flame leaped from the roadside, and half of Major Dade's command lay dead, without having known from where or by whom the fatal blow was struck.

The survivors, confused and demoralized by the suddenness and unexpectedness of this attack from an unseen foe, still made a brave effort to rally and return the pitiless fire that seemed to leap from every tree of the forest. Their one field-piece, a six-pounder, was brought up and discharged several times, but its gunners presented an attractive target to the hidden riflemen, and it was speedily silenced.

A small company of soldiers managed to fell a few trees in the form of a triangular barricade. Behind this they took shelter, and from it maintained a stout fire for some hours; but early in the afternoon their last gun was silenced, and only the shadows of death brooded over the terrible scene.

During the fight the Indians had kept up an incessant yelling, but now they appeared stunned at the completeness of their success and contemplated their victory in silence.

With Louis Pacheco, who had joined the Indians immediately after the first fire, Coacoochee walked

slowly and thoughtfully over the battle-field. He sternly forbade his warriors to mutilate or rob the dead, and speedily withdrew them to their encampment in the great swamp, from which they had emerged with such mingled hopes and apprehensions that morning.

Soon after their departure a band of fifty negroes, who had been summoned from a distance to take part in the battle, rode up to the scene of slaughter. Disappointed at having arrived too late to participate in it, they made an eager search among the heaps of slain, for any who should still show signs of life. If such were discovered, they were immediately put to death, while even the dead bodies were mutilated and stripped. After thus gratifying their blood-thirsty instincts, these, too, laden with scalps and plunder of every description, followed their Indian allies to the swamp, and on the blood-soaked field an awful stillness succeeded the wild tumult of battle.

As darkness shrouded the pitiful scene, two human figures, the only living survivors of "Dade's Massacre," slowly disengaged themselves from the dead bodies by which they were surrounded. They were wounded, and faint from the loss of blood, but they dragged themselves painfully away and were lost in the night shadows of the forest. Five days later they reached Fort Brooke and there gave the first notice of the terrible blow by which the despised Seminole had defied the power of the United States.

The Indian loss in this battle was three killed and five wounded.

That same night, Osceola and his warriors, laden with trophies and plunder, reached the encampment in the Wahoo Swamp. They had much to tell as well as much to hear, and the whole night was devoted to feasting, dancing, drinking, and every species of savage rejoicing over their successes.

Coacoochee, though filled with a sense of exultation, took no part in these excesses. He preferred talking with Louis and several of the graver chiefs regarding the future conduct of the war, and the chances for its speedy termination. All were agreed that there would be no further fighting for some time, and as both the young men were most anxious to visit Philip Emathla's village, they determined to do so at once.

At daylight, therefore, they left the swamp and started on their journey. By noon they were threading an open forest many miles from their point of departure. They were proceeding in silence, with Louis following Coacoochee, and stepping exactly in his tracks. This precaution was taken as a matter of habit, rather than from any idea that there was an enemy within many miles of them.

Suddenly Coacoochee stopped, held up his hand in warning, and listened intently, with his head inclined slightly forward. "Does my brother hear anything?" he asked.

No; Louis heard nothing save the sound of wind among the tree-tops. His ears were not so sharp as those of Coacoochee, nor, for the matter of that, was any other pair in the whole Seminole nation. So marvellously keen was the young war-chief's sense of hearing, that his companions deemed it unsafe to utter a word not intended for his ears within sight of where he stood. They believed him to be able to hear ordinary conversation as far as he could see. Although this was undoubtedly an exaggeration, his powers in this respect were certainly remarkable, and excited astonishment in all who were acquainted with them.

Now, after standing and listening for a moment with bent head, he threw himself to the ground, and placing one ear in direct contact with the earth, covered the other with his hand. He also closed his eyes, the better to concentrate all his powers into the one effort of hearing.

He lay thus for several minutes, and then slowly regained his feet. There was now an anxious expression on his face. Louis could no longer restrain his curiosity. "What is it, Coacoochee? What do you think you hear?"

The asking of this question would have at once betrayed Louis to be of other than Indian blood; for no Seminole would have exhibited the slightest curiosity until the other was ready to disclose his secret of his own accord.

So Coacoochee smiled slightly at his comrade's impatience as he answered :

"I hear more white men coming from that way" — here he pointed to the north; "they are many. Some of them are soldiers, and some are not. They travel slowly, for they have much baggage. They fear no danger and are careless. They have no cannon, but they have many horses. They know nothing of yesterday's battle. Let us go and look at them, where my brother will see that Coacoochee has heard truly."

Louis gazed at his companion, in amazement. "How is it possible for you to hear these things when I can hear nothing at all?" he asked. "I am not deaf. My ears are as good as those of most men, but they detect no sound. You must be making game of me. Is it not so?"

For answer Coacoochee persuaded him to lay his ear to the ground and listen as he had done a moment before.

When Louis rose, he said: "I do indeed hear something in the ground, but it is only a confused murmur. I cannot tell what it is or where it comes from."

Coacoochee smiled, and said: "My brother's ears are good. He has heard more than would most men; but Coacoochee's are better. No sound is withheld from them. He can hear the grass grow and the flowers unfold. The murmur that my

brother hears is the sound of an army marching. They are white men because they tread so heavily. Some of them are soldiers because they blow bugles and because they keep step in their marching. More of them are not, for they walk as they please, and many of them ride on horses. They have much baggage, for I hear the sound of many wagons. They fear no danger and are careless, for they run races with their horses and fire pistols. They have not learned of yesterday's battle, or they would be sorrowful and quiet. Now they laugh and are merry."

Half an hour later, as Coacoochee and Louis occupied positions among the spreading, moss-enveloped limbs of a large tree, the eyesight of the latter confirmed all that his comrade's marvellous hearing had already told them.

From their perch they could overlook a broad savanna, across which slowly moved a small army of white men. They counted nearly one thousand, two hundred of whom were regular troops; the rest were ununiformed militia, many of them mounted and exhibiting but little discipline. These rode hither and thither, as they pleased, ran races, fired their pistols at stray birds, and shouted loudly. They were a cruel, rough set, and the heart of Coacoochee grew heavy with the thought of such a powerful and merciless invasion of the Seminole country.