

CHAPTER XIX

RALPH BOYD AND THE SLAVE-CATCHER

THE army so unexpectedly discovered by Coacoochee was under the immediate command of General Clinch, and was largely composed of Florida volunteers. Most of these were land-hunters, slave-hunters, or other reckless adventurers, who had taken advantage of this opportunity for gaining a safe entrance into the Indian country and examining its best lands before it should be thrown open to general occupation. The majority of them had no idea that the Indians would dare resist this occupation by the whites, or that they would be called upon to do any fighting. At the same time they expressed a cheerful willingness to kill any number of redskins, and loudly declared their belief in the policy of extermination.

This motley throng of freebooters, together with four companies of regular troops, having been collected at Fort Drane, some twenty-five miles from Fort King, General Clinch decided to march them into and through the Indian country for the purpose of hastening the movements of the Seminoles, and show them how powerful a force he could bring

against them. Even he had no idea that any armed resistance would be offered to his progress.

While Coacoochee and Louis watched in breathless silence the passing of this army of invaders, whose openly declared object was to rob them of their homes, they were startled by the sound of voices immediately beneath their tree. Looking down, they saw two men who had straggled from the main body and sought relief from the noontide heat of the sun, in the tempting shade.

At first our friends did not recognize the newcomers; but all at once a familiar tone came to the ears of Louis Pacheco; then he knew that the man whom he hated most on earth, the man who had sold him and his mother into slavery, the dealer, Troup Jeffers, had once more crossed his path.

The two men had not ridden up to the tree in company, but had approached it from different divisions of the passing column, though evidently animated by a common impulse. It was quickly apparent that they did not even know each other; for Mr. Troup Jeffers, who reached the tree first, greeted the other with:

“Good-day, stranger. Light down and enjoy the shade. Hit’s powerful refreshing after the heat out yonder.”

As the other dismounted from his horse, and, still retaining a hold on the bridle, flung himself at full

length on the scanty grass at the foot of the tree, Jeffers continued:

"This appears to be a fine bit of country."

"Yes."

"But they tell me it ain't a circumstance to the Injun lands on the far side of the Withlacoochee."

"No?"

"No. Them is said to be the best lands in Floridy. I reckon you're land-hunting. Ain't ye, now?"

"No."

"Must be niggers, then?"

"No sir. I am after neither land nor negroes; I have come merely to see the country."

"Wal, that seems kinder curious," remarked Jeffers, reflectively. "Strange that a man like you should take all this trouble and risk his life—not that I suppose there's a mite of danger—just to look at a country that he don't kalkilate to make nothing out of."

"Yet some people have the poor taste to enjoy travel for travel's sake," replied the other. "But I suppose you have come on business?"

"You bet I have," answered Mr. Jeffers. "I've come after niggers, and I don't care who knows it. Hit's a lawful business, and as good as another, if I do say it. You see, thar's lots of 'em among the Injuns, and they're all described and claimed. Now I've bought a lot of these claims cheap, and the gin-

eral has promised that jest as soon as the Injuns is corralled for emigration, all the claimed niggers shall be sorted out, and restored to their lawful owners. Owing to my claims, I'm the biggest lawful owner there is. So I thought I'd jest come along with the first crowd, and be on hand early to see that I wasn't cheated."

"A most wise precaution," remarked the stranger, sarcastically.

"Yes," continued Jeffers, unmindful of his companion's tone; "you see there is niggers *and* niggers. While some of them is worth their weight in silver as property, I wouldn't have some of the others as a gift. There's Injun niggers, for instance — half-bloods, you know; they're so wild that you have to kill 'em to tame 'em. Why, I lost more'n a hundred dollars in cash, besides what I reckoned to make, on a half-blood that I got up to Fort King a few months ago. She was wild as a hawk, and fretted, and wouldn't eat nothing, and finally died on my hands afore I got a chance to sell her."

"Certainly a most inconsiderate thing to do," remarked the stranger.

"Wasn't it, now? The only kind I want to deal with is the full bloods or them as is mixed with white. The best haul I ever made from the Injuns was about a year ago over on the east coast. He was wild and ugly as they make 'em when I first got him, but I soon tamed him down and sold him

for one thousand dollars. I've heard that he hain't never showed a mite of spirit since I broke him in, and he makes one of the best all-round servants you ever see. Louis is his name, and I'd like to get hold of a dozen more just like him. What! you ain't going to start along so soon, be ye?"

From the moment that Louis recognized this man and realized that his cruellest enemy was at last completely within his power, it had been difficult to refrain from sending a rifle bullet through the brute's cowardly heart. It is doubtful if he could have withheld his hand had it not been for a warning look from Coacoochee and a gentle pressure of his hand. The young Indian himself was visibly affected as he listened to the cold-blooded tone with which the ruffian told of the death of Chen-o-wah, the beautiful wife of Osceola, and his hand twitched nervously as he fingered the handle of his scalping-knife; but he was able to restrain his own inclinations, even as he had restrained those of his companion. He knew that he had a duty to perform vastly more important than the punishment of the slave-catcher, and that for its sake even this enemy must be allowed to escape for the present.

In reply to Mr. Jeffers' exclamation of surprise at his sudden departure from the cool shade in which they rested, the stranger answered:

"Yes, Mr. Slave-catcher, I am going; for I have no desire to cultivate the further acquaintance of a

scoundrel. You are therefore warned to keep your distance from me so long as we both accompany this expedition."

With this, the speaker sprang into his saddle, and as his horse started, he took off his hat with a profound bow of mock courtesy, saying: "I am very sorry to have met you, sir, and I hope I may never have the misfortune to do so again."

As the young man dashed away, the slave-trader gazed after him in open-mouthed amazement. Then he muttered, loud enough for Coacoochee to hear: "Wal, if that don't beat all! You're a nice, respectable, chummy sort of a chap, ain't you, now? Jest a leetle too nice to live, and I shouldn't be surprised if you was to get hurt by some one besides Injuns, if ever we have the luck to get into a scrimmage with the red cusses."

These remarks were particularly interesting to Coacoochee; for, as the stranger removed his hat on riding away, the mystery of his voice, which had haunted the young chief with a familiar sound, was explained. The face, as revealed by the lifting of the drooping sombrero, was that of his acquaintance and preserver, Ralph Boyd the Englishman.

It is more than likely that Coacoochee would have seized the present opportunity for rendering Mr. Troup Jeffers forever powerless to injure any man, white, red, or black, but for an interruption that came just as he was contemplating a sudden

descent from the tree. It appeared in the form of a lieutenant of regulars, who commanded the rear guard of the little army, and whose duty it was to drive in all stragglers.

So Mr. Troup Jeffers rode away, utterly unconscious of the imminent danger he had just escaped. He was, however, full of an ugly hate against the man who a few minutes before had treated him with such scorn, and was determined to discover his identity at the first opportunity.

As the rear guard of the army disappeared from the view of the two watchers, they slipped to the ground from their hiding-place, more than glad of an opportunity to stretch their cramped limbs. Coacoochee was the first to speak, and he said :

“They go to the Withlacoochee, and will seek to cross at Haney’s ferry. They must be delayed until our warriors can be brought to meet them. We are two. One must return to the Wahoo Swamp, tell Osceola of this thing, and bid him hasten with all his fighting men to the ford that is by the Itto micco [magnolia tree]. This shall be your errand, Louis my brother, and I pray you make what speed you may, for our time is short. I will hasten to reach the ferry before the soldiers, and in some way prevent their using the boat. Then must they go to the ford, for there is no other place to cross.”