

CHAPTER XX

AN ALLIGATOR AND HIS MYSTERIOUS ASSAILANT

LATE that same evening the watchers of Osceola's camp in the great swamp were startled by the sudden appearance of a human form almost within their lines. He was instantly surrounded and led to the camp-fire in front of the chieftain's lodge, that his character might be determined. The surprise of the Indians upon discovering him to be Louis Pacheco, whom they supposed to be a long day's journey from that place, was forgotten in that caused by his tidings.

It seemed incredible that, while they had just destroyed one army of white men, another should already be on the confines of their country and about to invade it. But Louis had seen and counted them. Coacoochee's plan was a wise one, and they would follow it. So the bustle of preparation was immediately begun. The fight of the day before had nearly exhausted their ammunition. Bullets must be moulded, and powder-horns refilled from a keg brought from a distant, carefully hidden magazine, a supply of provisions must be prepared, for on the war-trail no fires could be lighted and no game could be hunted.

When all was ready, Osceola caused his men to take a few hours' sleep; but with the first flush of daylight they were on the march, swiftly but silently threading the dim and oftentimes submerged pathways of the swamp. There were two hundred and fifty in all, of whom the greater number were warriors under Osceola, and the balance were negroes led by Alligator.

On the following morning they reached the appointed place, and concealed themselves in the forest growth lining the bank on the south side of the ford. As this was the only point along that part of the river at which it was possible to cross without boats, they were satisfied that the attempt to enter the Indian country would be made here, and that here the expected battle must take place.

Still, the troops should have arrived by this time, and as yet there was no sign of them. Neither had Coacoochee appeared, though this was where he had promised to meet them. Osceola had just decided to send a scouting party to the ferry to make sure that Coacoochee had completed his self-imposed task, when a remarkable incident arrested his attention and caused him to withhold the order.

A green bush was floating slowly down the river toward the ford, and several of the Indians were commenting on a peculiarity of its motion. Instead of floating straight down with the current of the stream, it was unmistakably moving diagonally

across the river toward them. When first noticed it had been in the middle of the channel, but now it was decidedly nearer their side.

The Withlacoochee abounded in alligators that grew to immense size, and just at this time one of the largest of these seemed strangely attracted toward the floating bush. His black snout, and the protruding eyes, set back so far from it as to give proof of his great length, were all that he showed above the surface. These, however, were observed to be moving cautiously nearer and nearer to the bush, until finally they almost touched it.

All at once the monster sprang convulsively forward, throwing half his length from the water. For a moment his huge tail lashed the waves into a foam that appeared tinged with red. At the same time, a hideous bellowing roar of mingled rage and pain woke the forest echoes. Then, with a sullen plunge, the brute sank and was seen no more.

The strangest thing of this whole remarkable performance was not the disappearance of the great reptile, but the sudden appearance close beside it, at the very height of the flurry, of a round black object that looked extremely like a human head.

It was only seen for a second; then the sharp report of a rifle rang out from across the river, and the object instantly disappeared. With this, a white man, tall, gaunt, and clad in the uniform of a United States dragoon, stepped from the thick

growth, and scanned intently the surface of the water as he carefully reloaded his rifle. He stood thus for several minutes, and then, apparently satisfied that his shot had been effective, he turned and vanished among the trees.

It would have been an easy matter for the concealed warriors to kill him while he stood in plain view, and several guns were raised for the purpose, but Osceola forbade the firing of a shot. The appearance of that one soldier satisfied him that the others would soon arrive, and he did not wish to give them the slightest intimation of his presence until they should begin crossing the river.

Suddenly he and those with him were startled by the cry of a hawk twice repeated in their immediate vicinity. They recognized it as the signal of Coacoochee; but where was he? As they gazed inquiringly about them, there was a rustling among the flags and lily-pads growing at the river's edge. Then, so quickly that he was exposed to view but a single instant, Coacoochee, naked except for a thong of buckskin about his waist, sprang from the water to the shelter of the bushes on the bank and stood among them.

The young war-chief had taken a long circuit around General Clinch's army, and reached the ferry toward which they were evidently marching, well in advance of them, the evening before. He already knew that the ferryman, alarmed by the

impending Indian troubles, had abandoned his post and removed with his family to a place of safety.

What he did not know, however, was that the great scow used as a ferryboat lay high and dry on the bank, where a recent fall in the waters of the river had left it. He had expected to find it afloat and to either set it adrift, or sink it in the middle of the stream.

Now he was at a loss what to do. He could not move the clumsy craft from its muddy resting-place. His time was limited, and he had no tools, not even a hatchet, with which to destroy it. There was but one thing left, and that was fire. As he looked at the massive, water-soaked timbers of the scow, Coacoochee realized that to destroy it by fire would be a tedious undertaking. However, he set resolutely to work, and within an hour flames were leaping merrily about the stranded boat. He had torn all the dry woodwork that would yield to his efforts from the ferryman's log cabin which stood at some distance back from the river. He had gathered a quantity of lightwood from dead pine trees, and had built three great fires, one at each end of the scow and one in the middle.

When all this was accomplished to his satisfaction, the youth became conscious that he was faint and weak from hunger, as he had eaten nothing that day. Visiting the ferryman's deserted cabin, he finally discovered half a barrel of hard bread and a small

quantity of uncooked provisions secreted in a dark corner of the little loft that had served the family as a storeroom.

As he was selecting a few articles of food to carry away and eat at his leisure in some snug hiding-place from which he might also watch the operations of the expected troops, the young chief was alarmed by the sound of voices.

The next moment several soldiers entered the cabin, calling loudly upon its supposed occupants, of whose recent departure they were evidently unaware. Receiving no reply to their shouts, they ransacked the two lower rooms. One even climbed the rude ladder leading to the little loft and peered curiously about him. Crouched in its darkest corner and hardly breathing, Coacoochee escaped observation, and the trooper descended to report that no one was up there. "It's clear enough that the folks have lit out," he added.

"There must be somebody around to start that smoke down by the river," said another voice.

"Well, I reckon we'd best go and see what's burning as well as who's there," was the reply.

With this they left the house, and Coacoochee heard some one order two of them to stay and look after the horses; while the others went to ascertain the cause of the fire.

He determined to make a bold dash for liberty, and risk the shots that the two men would certainly

fire at him ; but when he was half-way down the ladder, the sound of fresh voices caused him hurriedly to regain his hiding-place. Now there was much talking, and he knew that the main body of troops had arrived.

As it was nearly sunset, the soldiers went into camp between the house and the river, and a number of them took possession of the house itself. Fortunately the hot, stuffy little loft did not offer sufficient attractions to tempt any of them to occupy it, though several peered into its gloom from the ladder. As they did not discern the crouching form in the corner, the young Indian began to fancy that he might remain there in safety so long as he chose.

He was rejoiced to learn, from fragments of conversation that his fires had rendered the scow useless. He also learned to his dismay that an old canoe had been discovered, and was even then being patched up so that it would float. In it the troops would cross the river, a few at a time, on the following morning.

Coacoochee passed a weary night, not daring to sleep, lest he should make some movement that would betray his presence to those in the rooms below. Occasionally he was forced by the pains in his cramped limbs to change his position, but he did this as seldom as possible and with the utmost caution.

At length, just as daylight was breaking, and cer-

tain sounds indicated that the camp was waking up, one of these cautious movements dislodged a hard biscuit that lay on the floor beside him. Slipping through a crevice in the rude flooring, it fell plump on the face of one of the sleepers below.

The man thus suddenly wakened sprang up with a cry of alarm. He laughed when he discovered the cause of his fright, and exclaimed in Ralph Boyd's well-remembered voice :

"Hello! There's hard bread up-stairs, boys, and the rats are at work on it. I'm going to stop their fun, and secure my share."

With this he started toward the ladder, and Coacoochee nerved himself for the discovery that he knew was now unavoidable.