

CHAPTER XXI

BATTLE OF THE WITHLACOOCHEE

THE man who had been so rudely roused from his sleep slowly climbed the ladder leading to the loft, and began cautiously to feel his way across the uneven flooring. The place in which the Indian crouched and awaited his coming was still shrouded in utter darkness; but by the uncertain light coming up from below, the approaching figure was faintly outlined.

This man had proved himself Coacoochee's friend, and the young chief had no intention of harming him. Still, he could not allow himself to be captured, even by Ralph Boyd. He dared not trust himself in the hands of the whites after what had so recently happened. Besides, it was now more than ever necessary that he should be at liberty to communicate with Osceola and inform him of the proposed movements of the troops. These thoughts flashed through his mind during the few seconds occupied by Boyd in groping his way toward the dark corner.

Suddenly from out of it a dim figure sprang upon the white man, with such irresistible force that he

was hurled breathless to the floor. With one bound it reached the aperture through which the ladder protruded, and slid to the room below. The half-awakened men who occupied this, startled by the crash above them, were scrambling to their feet, and, as Coacoochee dashed through them toward the open door, several hands were stretched forth to seize him. They failed to check his progress, and in another moment he was gone.

With the swiftness of a bird he darted across the open space behind the house, and disappeared in the forest beyond. So sudden and unexpected was this entire performance that not a shot was fired after him, and the young Indian could hardly realize the completeness of his escape as he found himself unharmed amid the friendly shadows of the trees.

Had he chosen to continue his flight directly away from the river, it would have been an easy matter to gain a position of absolute safety, so far as any pursuit was concerned. But he must reach the ford and those whom he supposed to be there awaiting him. Therefore, after making a long detour through the forest, he again approached the Withlacoochee, at a point several miles above where he had left it.

In the meantime, the presence of an Indian in the very heart of their camp had occasioned the greatest excitement throughout General Clinch's army. He was the first they had encountered, and

his boldness, together with the manner in which he had eluded them, invested him with an alarming air of mystery. It was the general opinion that there must be others on that side of the river in the immediate vicinity, and scouts were sent out in all directions to ascertain their whereabouts. At the same time the crossing of the Withlacoochee by means of the single canoe was begun and prosecuted with all possible rapidity.

Coacoochee was greatly embarrassed in his attempt to gain the ford by the presence of the scouting parties, and was more than once on the eve of being discovered by them. Even though he might reach the river without attracting their notice, he feared they would detect him in the act of crossing it.

Finally he hit upon an expedient that he believed might prove successful. Cautiously gaining the bank at some distance above the ford, he hastily bound together four bits of dry wood in the form of a square by means of slender withes of the wild grape. For this purpose he choose green vines that were covered with leaves. He also cut a number of leafy twigs, and inserting their ends beneath the lashing of vines produced a fair imitation of a green bush. The deception was heightened as he carefully placed his rude structure in the water, where it floated most naturally.

Then concealing his rifle and clothing, and thrust-

ing the trusty knife, which was now to be his only weapon, into the snakeskin sheath that depended from a buckskin thong about his waist, the youth slipped gently into the water and sank beneath its surface. When he rose, his head was inside the little square of sticks and completely screened from view by its leafy canopy. Thus floating, and paddling gently with his hands, he caused the mass of foliage to move almost imperceptibly out from the shore, while at the same time he and it were borne downward with the sluggish current.

Coacoochee had no fear of alligators. He had been familiar with them ever since he could remember anything, and was well acquainted with their cowardly nature. Thus when he had successfully passed the middle of the river, and was gently working his way toward its opposite bank, the near approach of one of these monsters did not cause him any uneasiness. He knew that he could frighten the great reptile away, or even kill it, though he feared that by so doing he might expose himself to a shot from those who still scouted along the bank he had so recently left.

Finally the monster approached so close that he was sickened by its musky breath, and it became evident that he was about to be attacked. Drawing his long knife, the young Indian allowed himself to sink without making a sound or a movement. A single stroke carried him directly beneath the huge

beast, and a powerful upward thrust plunged the keen blade deep into its most vulnerable spot through the soft skin under one of the fore-shoulders.

In spite of the danger from the creature's death flurry, Coacoochee was compelled to rise for breath close beside it.

This was the moment waited for by a white scout on the further bank, who had for some time been directing keenly suspicious glances at the mysterious movements of the floating bush. More than once his rifle had been raised for the purpose of sending an inquiring leaden messenger into the centre of that clump of foliage, but each time it had been lowered as its owner determined to watch and wait a little longer.

Now the bullet was sped, and only the great commotion of the water caused it to miss its mark by an inch. As the head at which he had fired immediately disappeared, and was seen no more, the rifleman fancied that his shot had taken effect, and that there was one Indian less to be removed from the country.

Swimming under water with the desperation of one conscious that his life depends upon his efforts, Coacoochee did not again come to the surface until he touched the stems of the great "bonnets," or leaves of the yellow cow-lily on the further side of the river, and could rise for a breath of the blessed air beneath their friendly screen.

Here he lay motionless for several minutes, recov-

ering from his exhaustion. At length he ventured to give the hawk's call as a warning to his friends of his presence. Then, gathering all his strength, he made the quiet rush for safety that carried him among them.

It did not take many seconds to inform them that the enemy for whom they were watching so anxiously was even then crossing the river, unconscious of danger, a mile below that point.

The report had hardly been made before the eager warriors who crowded about the speaker were in motion. Coacoochee was quickly provided with clothing, a rifle, and ammunition, and fifteen minutes later the entire Indian force was within hearing of the sounds made by the soldiers as they crossed the river. Here a halt was made while Osceola himself crept forward with the noiseless movement of a serpent to discover the enemy's exact location and disposition.

To his dismay, he found that a force equal in number to his own had already crossed the river, with others constantly coming. There must not be a minute's delay if he would fight with the faintest hope of checking their advance.

Hastily the forest warriors chose their positions, and a crashing volley from their rifles was the first announcement given the soldiers of their presence. Although staggered for a moment, the regulars quickly recovered, fixed their gleaming bayonets, and

with a wild yell charged into the cloud of smoke. The Indians fell back; but only long enough to reload their guns, when they advanced in turn, pouring such a deadly fire into the white ranks that their formation was broken, and the soldiers were driven back to the river's bank.

Here they were reformed by the general himself, and led to a second charge with results similar to the first. This time the Indians did not give way so readily, nor fall back so far. Under the frenzied leadership of Alligator and Osceola, who urged them with wild cries and frantic gestures to stand firm, they contested with knives, hatchets, and clubbed rifles each step of the way over which they were slowly forced.

In order to shelter themselves against the Indian fire, the soldiers adopted their plan of fighting, and each, selecting a tree, took his position behind it. Here an exposure of the smallest portion of a body was certain to draw a shot, and the whites were soon made aware by their rapidly increasing number of wounded, that at this game they were no match for the Indian marksmen.

Coacoochee and half a dozen warriors had concealed themselves on the river bank above the ferry, so that their rifles commanded it, and their fire so effectually dampened the ardor of the five hundred volunteers remaining on the other side that not one of them crossed or took part in the battle, except

by firing a few scattering shots from their own side of the river.

For more than an hour the battle raged. Osceola was wounded, and the Indian ammunition was giving out. They were becoming discouraged and were about to retire. All at once Coacoochee, who, on hearing of Osceola's wound, had left his little band of sharpshooters to guard the crossing, appeared among them. The effect of his presence and inspiring words was magical. Loud and fierce rang out his battle cry:

“Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-chee!”

With the last grains of powder in their rifles and led by their dauntless young chief, the entire body of warriors, yelling like demons, dashed madly through the forest toward the line of troops.

“They must have been heavily reinforced,” shouted the bewildered soldiers to each other. “There are thousands of them!”

From every bunch of palmetto, from every tuft of grass, and from behind every tree, a yelling, half-naked, and death-dealing Indian seemed to spring forth. A heavy but ill-aimed fire did not check them in the slightest. The soldiers began to fall back from one tree to another. Some of them ran. The wounded were hurriedly removed to the river bank. Perhaps some were overlooked. There was no time to search for those who were not in plain view. The dead were left where they had fallen.

With the first sign of this yielding, the frenzied yelling of the Indians increased, until the whole forest seemed alive with them. The retreat of the soldiers became a flight. A scattering volley from behind hastened their steps. The battle of the Withlacoochee was ended.