

## CHAPTER XXIII

### SHAKESPEARE IN THE FOREST

LIKE a fire sped by strong winds across a prairie of brown and sun-dried grasses, so did the flames of war sweep across the entire breadth of Florida. For a year had the Indians been preparing for it. Now they were ready to gather in numbers, and fight armies, or scatter in small bands, to spread death and destruction in every direction. The Seminole was about to make a desperate defence of his country, and to teach its invaders that they might not steal it from him with impunity.

Express riders carried news of the war in every direction. Everywhere cabins, farms, and plantations were abandoned, while their owners flocked into forts and settlements for mutual protection and safety.

One day, some two weeks after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, a novel procession was to be seen wending its slow, dusty way along one of the few roads of those times that led from the St. John's River to St. Augustine. The procession presented a confused medley of horsemen, pedestrians, wheeled vehicles, and cattle, and might

have reminded one of the migration of a band of Asiatic nomads.

It was indeed a migration, though one directed rather by force of circumstances than by choice. It was a white household, with its servants, cattle, and readily portable effects, fleeing from an abandoned plantation towards St. Augustine for safety against the Indians. None of the party had seen an Indian as yet, but they were reported to be ravaging both banks of the river from Mandarin to Picolata.

At first the young mistress of this particular estate had discredited the reports, for it was only rumored as yet that the Seminoles had really declared war. Her brother being absent from home, she for some time resolutely declined to abandon the house in which he had left her. The neighboring places on either side had been deserted for several days, and their occupants had entreated her to fly with them, but without avail.

"No," she replied; "here Ralph left me, and here I shall stay until he comes again, or until I am driven away by something more real than mere rumors."

At length that "something" came. All night the southern sky was reddened by a dull glow occasionally heightened by jets of flame and columns of sparks.

At daylight a frightened negro brought word that the Indians were but a few miles away, and had

burned the deserted buildings on three plantations during the night.

Now was indeed time to seek safety in flight, and "Missy" Anstice, as the servants called her, ordered a hurried departure. Her own preparations were very simple. A small trunk of clothing and a few precious souvenirs were all that she proposed to take. With only herself, Letty her maid, and these few things in the carriage that old Primus would drive, and the servants in carts or on muleback, they ought to travel so speedily as to reach St. Augustine some time that same night.

But while Anstice was quite ready to start, she found to her dismay that no one else was. Confusion reigned in the quarters; there was a wild running hither and thither, a piling on the carts of rickety household furniture, bedding, and goods of every description; a loud squawking of fowls tied by the legs, and hung in mournful festoons from every projecting point, and a confused lowing, bleating, and grunting from flocks and herds.

In vain did the young mistress command and plead. All the servants on that plantation were free. Many of them owned the carts they were loading, and nothing short of the appearance of Indians on the spot could have induced them to relinquish their precious household treasures. "Lor, Missy Anstice!" one would say reproachfully, "yo

wouldn' tink ob astin' a ole ooman to leab behine de onliest fedder bed she done got?"

"But I am going to leave all mine, aunty."

"Yah, honey; but yo'se got a heap ob 'em, while I've ony got jes' dis one."

And so it went. Useless articles taken from overloaded carts, at Anstice's earnest solicitation, were slyly added to others when she was not looking. Her brother acted as his own overseer, so there were no whites on the plantation to aid her. She alone must order this exodus, and beneath its responsibilities she found herself well-nigh helpless.

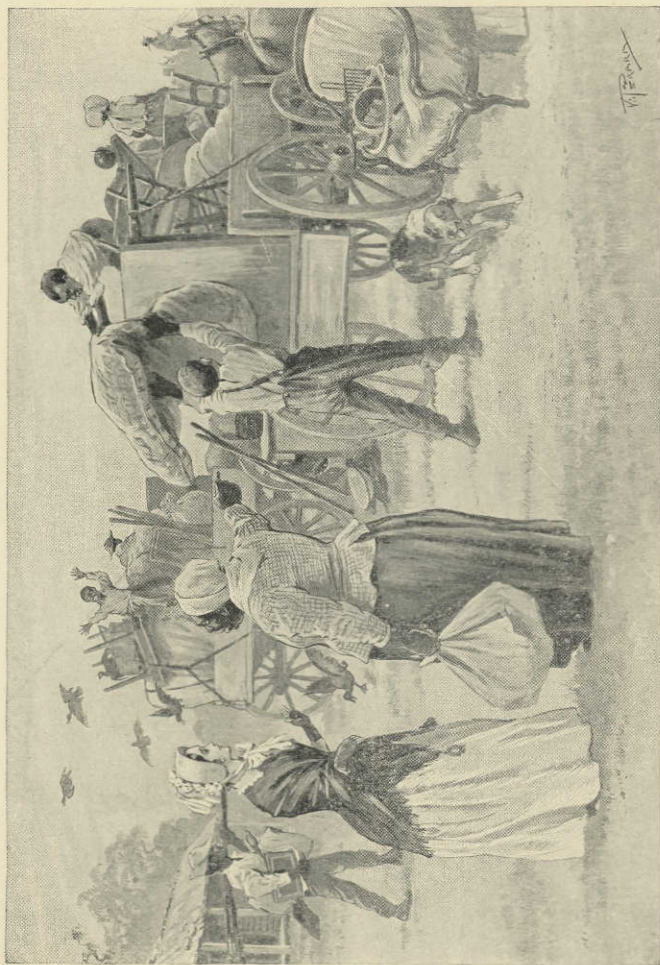
At length, in despair, and having wasted most of the morning in useless expostulations, she entered the heavy, old-fashioned coach, with Letty the maid, and gave Primus the order to set forth.

As the carriage passed the quarters, there was a great cry of:

"Don' yo leab us, Missy Anstice! Don' yo gway an' leab us to de Injins! We'se a comin'."

So Primus was ordered to drive slowly, and under other circumstances the English girl would have been vastly amused at the motley procession that began to straggle along behind her; but the danger was too imminent and too great to admit of any thoughts save those of anxiety and fear.

An hour or more passed without incident. The sun beat down fiercely from an unclouded sky, and the shadows of the tall pines seemed to nestle close



“TO LEAB BEH, NE DE ONLIEST FEDDER BED SHE DONE GOT.”



to the brown trunks in an effort to escape his scorching rays. A sound of locusts filled the air. The grateful sea-breeze that would steal inland an hour later was still afar off, and but for the urgency of their flight, the slow-moving cavalcade would have rested until it came. The tongues of the cattle hung from their mouths, and a cloud of dust enveloped them. The heads of horses and mules were stretched straight out, and their ears drooped. Old Primus nodded on the carriage seat. Letty was fast asleep, and even her young mistress started from an occasional doze.

Unobserved by a single eye in all that weary throng, another cloud of dust, similar to that hanging above and about them, rose in their rear. It approached rapidly, until it was so close that the clouds mingled. Then from out the gray canopy burst a whirlwind of yells, shots, galloping horses, and human forms with wildly waving arms.

In an instant the fugitives were roused from their drowsiness to a state of bewildered terror. Men shouted and beat their animals, women screamed, horses plunged, mules kicked, and carts were upset.

The first intimation of this onset that reached the occupants of the carriage, was in the form of madly galloping cattle that, with loud bellowings, wild eyes, and streaming tails, began to dash past on either side. Then their own horses took fright, and urged on by old Primus, tore away down the road.

All at once the terrified occupants of the flying vehicle looked up at the sound of a triumphant yell, only to behold fierce eyes glaring at them from hideously painted faces at either door. The muzzle of a rifle was thrust in at one of the open windows, and at sight of it Anstice Boyd hid her face in her hands, believing that her last moment had come.

When she recovered from her terror sufficiently to look about her once more, Letty was sobbing hysterically on the floor, but there was no motion to the carriage, and all was silent around them. Primus was no longer on the box, and the carriage was not in the road.

Determined to discover their exact situation, Anstice opened one of the doors, with a view to stepping out. At that moment a loud and significant "ugh!" coming from beneath the carriage, caused her to change her mind and hastily reclose the door, as though it were in some way a protection.

A few moments later two mounted Indians rode up to the carriage, and each leading one of its horses, it began to move slowly through the trackless pine forest. As it started, the Indian who had been left to guard it sprang to the seat lately occupied by old Primus.

For hours the strange journey was continued, and it was after sunset when it finally ended near



the great river at a place some miles below the plantation they had left that morning. Now the wearied prisoners were allowed to leave their carriage, and were led to where several negro women were cooking supper over a small fire.

Anstice was provided with food, but she could not eat. Terror and anxiety had robbed her of all appetite, and she could only sit and gaze at the strange scene about her, as it was disclosed by the fitful firelight.

Piles of plunder were scattered on all sides. A lowing of cattle, grunting of hogs, cackling and crowing of fowls, the spoils of many a ravaged barnyard, rose on the night air. There was much laughing and talking, both in a strange Indian language that still seemed to contain a number of English words, and in the homely negro dialect.

As the bewildered girl crouched at the foot of a tree, and recalling tale after tale of savage atrocities, trembled at the fate she believed to be in store for her, she started at the sound of a heavy footfall close at hand.

"Bress yo heart, honey! hit's ony me!" exclaimed the well-known voice of old Primus, who, after a long search, had just discovered his young mistress. "Hyar's a jug o' milk an' a hot pone, an' I'se come to 'splain dere hain't no reason fo' being scairt ob dese yeah red Injuns. Ole Primus done fix it so's dey hain't gwine hut yo. Dey's mighty frienly to

de cullud folks, and say ef we gwine long wif 'em, we stay free same like we allers bin; but ef we go ter Augustine, de white folks cotch us an' sell us fo payin de oxpenses ob de wah.

"Same time I bin makin' 'rangement wif 'em dat ef we'se gwine long er dem, dey is boun ter let yo go safe to Augustine, whar Marse Boyd'll be looking fer yo. Yes'm, I'se bin counckillin' wif 'em an' settle all dat ar."

"But, Primus, I thought you were scared to death of the Indians, and didn't understand a word of their language," interrupted Anstice.

"Who? me! Sho, Missy Anstice, yo suttently don't reckon I was scairt. No'm, I hain't scairt ob no red Injin, now dat I onerstan'in deir langwidge an deir 'tenshuns. Why, missy, deir talk's mighty nigh de same as ourn when yo gits de hang ob hit. So, honey, yo want to chirk up and quit yo mo'nin', an' eat a bit, and den come to de theayter, foh it sholy will be fine."

"What do you mean by the theatre?" asked the bewildered girl; whereupon Primus explained that at one of the plantations raided by the Indians a company of actors on their way to St. Augustine had been discovered, captured, and brought along with all their properties. These people were at first informed that they were to be burned to death at the stake. Afterwards it was decided that they should be given their lives and freedom if they

would entertain their captors with an exhibition of their art that very evening. This contract stipulated that the performance should be as complete and detailed as though given before a white audience, and that any member of the company failing to act his part in a satisfactory manner would render himself liable to become a target for bullets and arrows.

Under the circumstances it is doubtful if a play was ever presented under more extraordinary conditions, greater difficulties, or by actors more anxious to perform creditably their respective parts, than was this one given in the depths of a Florida wilderness. The stage was an open space, roofed by arching trees, and lighted by great fires of pine knots constantly replenished. The wings were two wagons drawn up on either side.

The play selected for this important occasion was Hamlet, and for awhile everything proceeded smoothly. Then the audience began to grow impatient of the long soliloquies, and to the intense surprise of the captives, a gruff voice called out :

“Oh, cut it short an’ git to fightin’!”

“No, give us a dance,” shouted another, “an’ hyar’s a chune to dance by.”

With this a pistol shot rang out, and a ball struck the ground close to Horatio’s feet. The frightened actor bounded into the air, and as he alighted, another shot, coupled with a fierce order to *dance*, assured him that his tormentors were in deadly

earnest. So he danced, and the others were compelled to join him. To an accompaniment of roars of laughter from the delighted savages, the terrified actors, clad in all the bravery of tinsel armor and nodding plumes, were thus compelled to cut capers and perform strange antics until some of them fell to the ground from sheer exhaustion.

The humor of the savages now took another turn, and with fierce oaths, mingled with threats of instant death if the players were ever seen in that country again, they drove them from camp and bade them make their way to St. Augustine.

As these fugitives disappeared in the surrounding darkness, a big, hideously painted savage who wore on his face the uncommon adornment of a bristling beard, advanced to Anstice Boyd, and in a jargon of broken English bade her follow them if she valued her life.

As the frightened girl started to obey this mandate, old Primus interfered and began to remonstrate with the savage, whereupon he was struck to the ground with so cruel a blow that blood gushed from his mouth. Filled with horror at these happenings, and believing her life to be in peril if she lingered another minute, the fair English girl sprang away, and was quickly lost to sight in the black forest shadows.