

CHAPTER XXIV

BOGUS INDIANS AND THE REAL ARTICLE

As Anstice Boyd fled blindly from the presence of the savage who had just struck down her faithful servant, she had no idea of the direction she was taking, nor of what haven she might hope to reach. She knew only that she was once more free to make her way to friends, if she could, and her greatest present fear was that the savages might repent their generosity, and seek to recapture her. So, as she ran, she listened fearfully for sounds of pursuit, and several times fancied that she heard soft footfalls close at hand, though hasty glances over her shoulder disclosed no cause for apprehension.

At length, she came to the end of her strength, and sank wearily to the ground at the foot of a giant magnolia. Almost as she did so, a low cry of despair came from her lips, for with noiseless step the slender form of a young Indian stood like an apparition beside her. She had not then escaped, after all, but was still at the mercy of the savages whose cruelty she had so recently witnessed. This one had doubtless been sent to kill her. Thus thinking, the trembling girl covered her face with her hands,

and, praying that the fatal blow might be swift and sure, dumbly awaited its delivery. Seconds passed, and it did not fall. The agony of suspense was intolerable. She was about to spring up as though in an effort to escape, and thus precipitate her fate, when, to her amazement, she became aware that the Indian was speaking in a low tone, and in her own tongue.

“My white sister must not be afraid,” he said. “Coacoochee has come far to find her and take her to a place of safety. Ralph Boyd is his friend, his only friend among all the millions of white men. He is wounded, and lies in a Seminole lodge. After a little we will go to him. There is no time now to tell more. I have that to do which must be done quickly. Let my sister rest here, and in one hour I will come again.”

As he concluded these words, which had been uttered hurriedly, and in a voice but little above a whisper, the Indian turned and disappeared as noiselessly as he had come, seeming to melt away among the woodland shadows.

The bewildered girl, thus again left alone, tried to collect her dazed senses and fix upon some plan of action. Should she still attempt to escape, or should she trust the youth who had just announced himself to be Coacoochee, the friend of her brother? Of course, he must belong to the band that had recently held her captive, though she had not seen

him among them. What should she do? Which way should she turn?

In her terror, Anstice was unconsciously asking these questions aloud, though her only answers were the night sounds of the forest. Suddenly there came to her ears the crash of rifles, accompanied by the blood-chilling Seminole war-cry, and followed by fierce yells, shrieks of mortal agony, and the other horrid sounds of a death-struggle between man and man, that was evidently taking place but a short distance from her.

The girl sprang to her feet, but, bound to the spot by the horror of those sounds, she listened breathlessly and with strained ears. Had the savages been attacked by a party of whites? It might be. She knew that troops of both regulars and militia were abroad in every direction. Had not she and her brother entertained one of these small war-parties hastening from St. Augustine to join the western army only a short time before? It had been commanded by their friend, Lieutenant Irwin Douglass, who had easily persuaded Ralph Boyd to accompany him as far as Fort King, that he might learn for himself the true state of affairs in the Indian country. Might it not be that one of these detachments, even, possibly, that of Douglass himself, had tracked this band of savages to their hiding-place, and were visiting upon them a terrible but well-merited punishment?

In that case, to fly would be folly; for, with the Indians defeated, as of course they must be, she would find safety among the victors.

Thus thinking, and filled with an eager desire to learn more of the tragedy being enacted so near her, the girl began to advance, fearfully and cautiously, in the direction of those appalling sounds. As she approached the scene of conflict, its noise gradually died away, until an occasional shout and a confused murmur of voices were borne to her on the night air. The short battle was ended, and one side or the other was victorious; which one, she must discover at all hazards. A gleam of firelight directed her steps, and she continued her cautious advance to a point of river bank, from which, though still concealed by dark shadows, she could command a full view of the beach below. There, by the light of the rising moon, aided by that of the fires, she beheld a scene so strange that for some minutes she could make nothing of it.

Two large flat-boats, such as were used by planters along the river for the transportation of produce to waiting vessels at its mouth, lay moored to the bank. One of them seemed to be piled high with plunder, while the other was filled with a dark mass of humanity, from which came a medley of voices speaking with the unmistakable accent of negroes. Anstice could see that these had been captives, as, two at a time, they stepped ashore, where the ropes

confining them were severed by flashing knives in the hands of dusky figures, apparently Indians. A number of motionless forms lay on the beach, and some of the others seemed to be examining these, going from one to another, and spending but a few moments with each one.

The girl gazed anxiously, but full of bewilderment and with a heavy heart, at these things. Where were the whites she had so confidently expected to see? She could not discover one. All of those on the beach, dead as well as living, appeared to be either Indians or negroes. What could it mean? Did Indian fight with Indian? She had never heard of such a thing in Florida.

As she looked and wondered with ever-sinking heart, and filled with despairing thoughts, she was attracted by the voice of an Indian who, near one of the fires, was evidently issuing an order to the others. She imagined him to be the one who had appeared to her a short time before, and called himself "Coacoo-chee," but she could not be certain. In striving to obtain a better view of his face, she incautiously stepped forward to a projecting point of the bank. In another moment the treacherous soil had loosened beneath her weight, and with frantic but ineffective efforts to save herself, she slid down the sandy face of the bluff to its bottom.

At her first appearance, the startled savages seized their guns, and nerved themselves for an attack;

but, on discovering how little cause there was for alarm, they remained motionless, though staring with amazement at the unexpected intruder.

Poor Anstice was not only filled with fresh terrors, but was covered with confusion at the absurdity of her situation. Ere she could regain her feet, the Indian who seemed to be in command sprang forward and assisted her to rise.

“My white sister came too quickly,” he said gravely; “she should have stayed in the shadow of the itto micco [magnolia] till the time for coming. It is not good for her to see such things.” Here the speaker swept his arm over the battle-ground. “Since she has come,” he continued, “Coacoochee will deliver the words of Ralph Boyd—”

At this moment he was interrupted by a joyful cry, a rush of footsteps, and Letty, the maid, sobbing and laughing in a breath, came flying up the beach, to fling her arms about the neck of her beloved young mistress. She was followed by old Primus, hobbling stiffly, and uttering pious ejaculations of thankfulness. Behind him crowded the entire force of the plantation, men, women, and children, all shouting with joy at the sight of “Missy Anstice.”

The stern-faced warriors watched this scene with indulgent smiles, for they knew that the sunny haired girl, looking all the fairer in contrast with the sable-hued throng about her, was the sister of

the white man who had so befriended their young war-chief.

“What does it all mean?” cried Anstice, at length disengaging herself from Letty’s hysterical embrace. “What was the cause of the firing I heard but a short while since? Who are those yonder?” Here she pointed with a shudder at the motionless forms lying prone on the sands. “Surely they must be Indians, and yet, I knew not that the hand of the red man was lifted against his fellows.”

“They are not of the Iste-chatte [red man], but belong to the Iste-hatke [white man],” answered Coacoochee, gravely.

“Dey’s white debbils painted wif blackness,” muttered old Primus.

“They are white men, Miss Anstice, disguised like Injuns,” explained Letty, whose style of conversation, from long service as lady’s maid, was superior to her station. “And oh, Miss Anstice! they were going to take us down the river to sell us into slavery. We wouldn’t believe they could be white men, but the paint has been washed from the faces of some of them, and now we know it is so.”

Gradually, by listening to one and another who volunteered information, Anstice Boyd learned that the supposed savages, whose prisoner she had been, were indeed a party of white slave-catchers, disguised in paint and feathers, so that their deeds of

rascality might be laid to the Seminoles. Coacoochee, to relieve the anxiety of Ralph Boyd, who lay wounded and helpless in an Indian village, had set forth with a small band of warriors to escort his friend's sister to a place of safety, among people of her own race. He found the plantation deserted, and, coming across the trail of the marauders who had captured its occupants, quickly discovered their true character by many unmistakable signs.

When they encamped for the night, the vengeful eyes of his warriors were upon them; and when, for their own safety, they freed their white prisoners and drove them away to spread the report of this fresh *Indian* outrage, these were allowed to pass through the Seminole line without molestation. Coacoochee alone followed Anstice Boyd beyond ear-shot of the camp, to assure her of friendly aid and safety; then he returned to deal out to the white ruffians their well-deserved punishment.

He would not fire on them while they and the blacks whom they proposed to turn into property were mingled together; but when the latter were bound and driven into the boats, he gave the terrible signal. More than half the painted band fell at the first fire; the remainder, with the exception of the leader and two others, who escaped in a canoe, were quickly despatched, and the deed of vengeance was completed.

In view of these occurrences, and with the cer-

tainty that troops would be sent in pursuit of Coacoochee's band, to which all the recent aggressions would of course be credited, the young chief no longer deemed it prudent to attempt to escort his friend's sister to the vicinity of any white settlement. He proposed instead to carry her to her brother.

The girl accepted this plan, provided she might be accompanied by her maid Letty, a condition to which the young Indian readily agreed.

During the few hours that remained of the night, Anstice and her maid slept the sleep of utter weariness in the carriage that had brought them to that place, and with the earliest dawn were prepared to start toward the Seminole stronghold, deep hidden among Withlacoochee swamps.