

CHAPTER XXV

A SWAMP STRONGHOLD OF THE SEMINOLES

ON the morning following that midnight tragedy of the wilderness, the Indians made haste to retreat to that portion of the country which they still called their own. The flat-boats were used to carry themselves, their negro allies, and such of the plunder as could be readily transported to the opposite side of the river; the cattle and horses were made to swim across. Such of the plunder collected by the white renegades as must be left behind was burned. Among all the property thus acquired by the Indians, none was more highly prized than the gorgeous costumes of the theatrical company. The unfortunate actors had been forced to abandon these in their hurried flight, and now Coacoochee's grim-faced warriors wore them with startling effect.

Anstice Boyd could not help smiling at the fantastic appearance thus presented by her escort, though feeling that the circumstances in which she was placed warranted anything rather than smiles or light-heartedness. Was her brother really wounded, and was she being taken to him, or were those only

plausible tales to lure her away beyond chance of rescue?

"Can we trust him, Letty? Has he told us the truth?" she asked of her maid, indicating Coacoochee with a slight nod.

"Law, yes, Miss Anstice! You can always trust an Injun to tell you the truth, for they hasn't learned how to lie; that is, them as has kept away from white folks hasn't. As for that young man, he has an honest face, and I believe every word he says. He'll take us straight to Marse Ralph, I know he will."

Comforted by this assurance, Anstice crossed the river with a lighter heart than she had known for days. When, on the other side, and mounted on a spirited pony she was allowed to dash on in advance of the strange cavalcade that followed her, she began to experience an hitherto unknown thrill of delight in the wild freedom of the forest life unfolding before her.

Soon after leaving the river, the Indians began to divide into small parties, each of which took a different direction, thus making a number of divergent trails well calculated to baffle pursuit. The negroes also separated into little companies, all of which were to be guided to a common rendezvous, where, under the leadership of old Primus, they promised to remain until "Marse" Boyd should again return to the plantation and send for them.

Thus Anstice and her maid finally found themselves escorted only by Coacoochee and two other warriors. Pushing forward with all speed, this little party reached, at noon of the second day, the bank of a dark stream that flowed sluggishly through an almost impenetrable cypress swamp. One of the Indians remained here with the horses, while the rest of the party embarked in one of several canoes that had been carefully hidden at this point.

Urged on by the lusty paddles of Coacoochee and his companion, this craft proceeded swiftly for nearly a mile up the shadowy stream. Not even the noon-day sun could penetrate the dense foliage that arched above them. Festoons of vines depended like huge serpents from interlacing branches, and funereal streamers of gray moss hung motionless in the stagnant air. The black waters swarmed with great alligators, that showed little fear of the canoe, and gave it reluctant passage. Strange birds, water-turkeys with snake-like necks, red-billed cormorants, purple gaulinules, and long-legged herons, startled from their meditations by the dip of paddles, flapped heavily up stream in advance of the oncoming craft, with discordant cries.

Upon such slender threads hang the fate of nations and communities as well as that of individuals, that, but for these brainless water-fowl, flying stupidly up the quiet river and spreading with harsh voices the news that something had frightened them, the whole

course of the Seminole war might have been changed. As it was, a single Indian, who was cautiously making his way down stream in a small canoe, hugging the darkest shadows, and casting furtive glances on all sides, was quick to make use of the information thus furnished.

As the squawking birds redoubled their cries at sight of him, he turned his canoe quickly and drove it deep in among the cypresses at one side, so that it was completely hidden from the view of any who might pass up or down the river.

This Indian, who was known as Chitta-lustee (the black snake), had hardly gained the hiding-place from which he peered out with eager eyes, before the craft containing Coacoochee and his little party swept into view around a bend, and slipped swiftly past him. The keen eye of the young war-chief did not fail to note the floating bubbles left by the paddle of the spy, but attributed them to an alligator, or to some of the innumerable turtles that were constantly plunging into the water from half-submerged logs as the canoe approached. So he paid no attention to them, but a minute later guided his slender craft across the river, and into an opening so concealed by low-hanging branches, that one unfamiliar with its location might have searched for it in vain.

This was what Chitta-lustee had been doing, and for the discovery, made now by accident, he had

been promised a fabulous reward in *whiskey*. There were renegades among the Seminoles as well as among the whites, and of these the Black Snake was one. Seduced from his allegiance to those of his own blood by an unquenchable thirst for the white man's fire-water, he had sold himself, body and soul, to the enemies of his race.

General Scott, who had succeeded to the command of the army in Florida, was bending all his energies toward breaking up the Indian strongholds amid the swampy labyrinths of the Withlacoochee. Of these, the most important was that of Osceola. No white man had ever seen it, and but few Seminoles outside of the band occupying it had penetrated its mysteries. Therefore the entire force of renegades, *friendly Indians* the whites called them, some seventy in number, drawn from the band of that traitor chief who had been bribed to agree to removal, were now engaged in a search for these secluded camps, while liberal rewards had been promised for the discovery of any one of them. Goods to the amount of one hundred dollars, and one of the chiefships from which General Wiley Thompson had deposed the rightful holders, would be given to him who should lead the troops to the stronghold of Osceola. Chitta-lustee cared little for the honor of chiefship, but dazzled by a vision of one hundred dollars' worth of fire-water, which was the only class of white man's goods for which he longed, he made up his

mind to discover the hidden retreat of the Baton Rouge, or perish in the attempt.

For many days had he skulked in the swamps, repeatedly passing the concealed entrance to which Coacoochee had now unwittingly guided him, without seeing it. As he noted the marks by which it might be identified, he gloated over the prize that seemed at length within his grasp and awaited impatiently the evening shadows that should enable him to make further explorations.

In the meantime, the canoe from which Anstice Boyd was casting shuddering glances at the sombre scenes about her, continued for a short distance up a serpentine creek, so narrow as to barely afford it passage, and was finally halted beside a huge, moss-grown log. This, half-buried in the ooze of the swamp, afforded a landing-place, at which the party disembarked. As they did so, Coacoochee turned to the English girl, and said:

“The eye of the Iste-hatke has never looked upon this place. Ralph Boyd knows it not, for he was brought here in darkness. Will my sister keep its secret hidden deep in her own bosom, where no enemy of the Iste-chatte shall ever find it?”

To this query Anstice replied: “Coacoochee, as you deal with me, so will I deal by you. Take me in safety to my brother, and your secret shall be safe with me forever.”

“Un-cah! It is good,” replied the young Indian

"Now let us go. Step only where I step, and let the black girl step only where you step, for the trail is narrow."

And narrow it proved. Other logs, felled at right angles to the first, and sunk so deep in treacherous mud that their upper surface was often under water, formed a precarious pathway to a strip of firmer land. This natural causeway, to step from which was to be plunged in mud as black and soft as tar, besides being almost as tenacious, led for nearly half a mile to an island that rose abruptly from the surrounding swamp.

This island was apparently completely covered with an impenetrable growth of timber and underbrush laced together by a myriad of thorny vines. The only trail by which the formidable barricade might be penetrated was not opposite the end of the causeway, but lay at some distance, to one side, where it was carefully concealed from all but those who would die rather than reveal its secret. Even when it was once entered, its windings were not easy to trace. But its perplexities were short, and after a few rods the pathway ended abruptly in a scene so foreign to that from which it started, that it seemed to belong to another world. Instead of the funereal gloom, the slime, the rank growth, and crowding horrors of the great swamp, here was a cleared space, acres in extent, bathed in sunlight, and alive with cheerful human activity.

On the highest point of land, beneath a clump of stately trees, stood a cluster of palmetto-thatched huts, some open on all sides, and others enclosed; but all raised a foot or two from the ground, so as to allow of a free circulation of air beneath them. In and about these swarmed a happy, busy population. Warriors, whose naked limbs exhibited the firm outlines of bronze statues, cleaned or mended their weapons. Groups of laughing women, cleanly in person, attractive to look upon, and modestly clad, prepared food or engaged in other domestic duties; while rollicking bands of chubby children shouted shrilly over games that differed little from those of other children all over the world. Stretching away from the village were broad fields of corn and cane, amid which yams, pumpkins, and melons grew with wonderful luxuriance. These fields were cared for by negroes, who dwelt in their own quarters, and worked the productive land on shares, that frequently brought larger returns to them than to the red-skinned proprietors of the soil.

This was the swamp stronghold of Osceola, to which Coacoochee and Louis had retreated after the battle of the Withlacoochee, bringing with them the unconscious form of Ralph Boyd, the Englishman friend of the enslaved and champion of the oppressed.

In common with most of the whites, this young man had underrated both the numbers and courage

of the Seminoles, and had not believed they would dare fight, even for their homes, against United States troops. It was only upon penetrating their country with General Clinch's army that Ralph Boyd realized how bitter was to be the struggle and that it was already begun. He had been shot down quite early in the battle at the river-crossing and lay on the field unnoticed until found by the one Indian who was inclined to save his life rather than take it.

When the wounded man next opened his eyes, he found himself lying on a couch of softest skins, amid surroundings so foreign to anything he had ever known that for awhile he was confident he was dreaming. Then as the well-remembered form of Coacoochee bent anxiously over him, a memory of recent events flashed into his mind. He realized that an Indian war with all its attendant horrors was sweeping over the land, and recalled the fact that his sister Anstice was alone and unprotected on the plantation by the St. John's. Weakly he strove to rise, but fell back with a groan.

"My brother must rest," said Coacoochee, chidingly. "He is among friends, and there is no cause for uneasiness. Here there is no white man to shoot him from behind."

"I care not for myself," murmured the sufferer. "It is my sister, left without one to protect her or guide her to a place of safety. I must go to her."

Again he attempted to rise, but was gently restrained by the young Indian, who said :

“Let not my brother be troubled. Coacoochee will go in his place and guide the white maiden to a safe shelter.”

“Will you, Coacoochee? Will you do this thing for me?” exclaimed Boyd, a faint color flushing his pale cheeks.

“Un-cah,” answered the young war-chief. “This very hour will I go, and when I come again I will bring a token from the white maiden who dwells by the great river.”