

CHAPTER XXVI

TWO SPIES AND THEIR FATE

COACOOCHEE had fulfilled his promise, and conducted the sister of his friend to a place of safety. As he entered the village followed closely by the first white girl that many of its inmates had ever seen, they gazed wonderingly and in silence at the unaccustomed spectacle. Even the voices of the children were so suddenly hushed that Ralph Boyd, tossing wearily on his narrow couch in one of the enclosed huts, noted the quick cessation of sounds to which he had become wonted, and awaited its explanation with nervous impatience. The old Indian woman who acted as his nurse stepped outside, and for the moment he was alone. Filled with an intense desire to know what was taking place, the wounded man strove to rise, with the intention of crawling to the door of the hut; but ere he could carry out his design, the curtain of deerskins that closed it was thrust aside, and Coacoochee stood before him.

With a feeble shout of joy at sight of his friend, the sufferer exclaimed tremulously: "Is she safe? Have you brought a token from her?"

“The white maiden is safe, and I have brought a token,” answered the young Indian, proudly.

As he spoke, he moved aside, and in another moment Anstice Boyd, sobbing for joy, was kneeling beside her brother, with her arms about his neck.

From that moment Ralph Boyd's recovery was sure and rapid, for there are no more certain cures for any wound than careful nursing and a relief from anxiety. Within a week he was not only able to sit up, but to take short walks about the village, the strange life of which he studied with never-failing interest. So well ordered and peaceful was it, so filled with cheerful industry, that it was difficult to believe it a dwelling-place of those who were even then engaged in fighting for their homes and rights. But evidences that such was the case were visible on all sides. War-parties were constantly going and coming. Osceola, now head chief of this particular band, and one of the leading spirits of the war, was away most of the time, hovering about the flanks of some army, cutting off their supplies, killing, burning, and destroying; here to-day, and far away to-morrow, spreading everywhere the terror of his name.

Coacoochee would fain have been engaged in similar service; but his own band of warriors under the temporary leadership of Louis Pacheco, was operating far to the eastward, between the St. John's and the coast, while he felt pledged to remain with his

white friends until Ralph Boyd could be removed to a place of greater safety. He feared to leave them ; for among the inmates of the camp were certain vindictive spirits who so hungered for white scalps that they made frequent threats of what would happen to the brother and sister, whom they regarded as captives, in case they had their way with them. So the young war-chief restrained his longings for more active service, and devoted himself to collecting great quantities of corn and other supplies, which he stored in this swamp stronghold for future use.

When not waiting on her brother, Anstice amused herself by observing the domestic life of the village and in cultivating an acquaintance among its women and children. The former were so shy that she made but little headway with them. In fact, her maid Letty was far more popular among the Indian women than she. With the children, however, Anstice became an object for adoration almost from the moment of her appearance among them. So devoted were they to her that she could not walk abroad without an attendant throng of sturdy urchins or naked toddlers.

One drowsy afternoon, leaving her brother asleep in a hammock woven of tough swamp grasses, Anstice, accompanied by her usual escort of children and with a slim little maiden clinging to each hand, visited a dense thicket near the pathway leading out to the great swamp, in search of bead-

like palmetto berries, which she proposed to string into necklaces. Seating herself on the edge of the forest growth, she despatched several of the children in search of the coveted berries. Diving under the bushes and threading their tangled mazes like so many quail, these quickly disappeared from view, though shouts of laughter plainly indicated their movements.

Suddenly a scream of childish terror was uttered close at hand, and a little lad, trembling with fright, came running back to where Anstice was sitting. Filled with a dread of wild beasts or deadly serpents, the girl sprang to her feet, and making use of the few Seminole words she had acquired while in the village, called loudly :

“At-tess-cha, che-paw-ne! At-tess-cha, mas-tchay!” (Come here, boys! come here quickly!)

The quality of terror in her voice rather than the words themselves must have attracted attention, for while there came no answer, the children's shouts were suddenly hushed. Each embryo warrior dropped to the ground where he was, and like hunted rabbits, lay motionless, but keenly alert, until they should learn from which direction danger might be expected. Those who had remained with Anstice clung to her skirts, and the urchin who had given the alarm glanced fearfully behind him.

As the girl stood irresolute, there came a move-

ment in the bushes close at hand. Then to her amazement, her name was called softly, but in a voice whose accents she would have recognized anywhere and under all circumstances. It needed not the parting of the leafy screen and a glimpse of the anxious face behind it, to tell her that Irwin Douglass, the lieutenant of dragoons, who had so often shared the hospitality of her brother's table, had, by some inconceivable means, penetrated the secrets of this Indian stronghold and ventured within its deadly confines.

“Oh, Mr. Douglass!” she cried, in a voice trembling with apprehension. “How came you here? Do you not realize your awful peril? You will be killed if you stay a minute longer! Fly, then! Fly, I beg of you, while there is yet time.”

“But, Miss Boyd! Anstice! why are you here instead of safe in Augustine as we thought? Are you not in equal, or even in greater, peril? Come with me, and I will gladly beat a retreat, but I cannot leave you to the mercy of the savages. This place is infested by an overwhelming force of troops, who only await my return to make an attack. The Indians will surely kill you rather than allow you to be rescued.”

“No! No! I am in no peril!” replied the agitated girl. “I am here of my own free will, and shall be safe in any event. But you! If you value your life! If you love —”

Just then two grim warriors appeared as though they had dropped from the sky, one on either side of Douglass, and in spite of a mighty struggle for freedom, made him their prisoner. One of the children had sped to the village. Coacoochee, with several followers, had taken the trail, and closed in from two sides on Anstice and the lieutenant, while they were too full of amazement at each other's presence in that place to note the stealthy approach.

As two of the Indians seized the young officer, the others sprang after a retreating form they had just discovered skulking through the forest. It was that of Chitta-lustee, the spy, who had carried the news of his finding of this stronghold to Fort King. From there he had guided a body of troops back to the log landing, whence he had been sent, in company with Lieutenant Douglass, to note the exact state of affairs in the village before an attack should be ordered. Together they had crept undetected to a place from which they could command a fair view of the village, and estimate the force of its defenders, which at that moment did not number more than a dozen warriors.

The spies were about to retire from their dangerous position when prevented by the approach of Anstice and her retinue of children. One of these had chanced upon their hiding-place, and while Douglass pleaded with the English girl to seize this opportunity for escape from what he imagined to be

a terrible captivity, his companion was trying to secure his own safety by slowly and noiselessly creeping away. He had gained a fair distance, and was beginning to move more rapidly, when discovered by Coacoochee, who, followed by the other warriors, immediately sprang in pursuit.

Down to the edge of the swamp and out on the narrow causeway fled the spy, and after him, like hound in full view of his quarry, leaped the avenger. It was a terrible race along that slender path, slippery with slime and water. Chitta-lustee flung away his rifle, and, with breath coming in panting gasps, ran for his life. A few rods more, and he would be safe.

Coacoochee, reckless of consequences, and filled with a fierce determination to destroy, at all hazards, this most dangerous enemy of his people, only clenched his teeth more tightly, and leaped forward with an increase of speed, as he detected a glint of weapons directly ahead, and realized that the farther end of the causeway was already occupied by troops. He bore only a light spear that he had snatched up at the first alarm, and, with all his skill, he must be at least within twenty yards of a mark ere he could hurl it effectively.

He was still one hundred yards away, and now he could distinguish the uniforms of those who were advancing to meet the panting fugitive. Those who followed the young chief were halting doubt-

fully. To them it seemed that he was rushing toward certain destruction. They could not restrain him. To follow his example and throw their lives away uselessly would be worse than folly. So they stayed their steps, and watched the fearful race with fascinated gaze.

Only for a moment, and then all was over. Chittalustee slipped and stumbled on one of the water-soaked logs at the end of the causeway. As he recovered himself, there came a flash of darting steel, and the keen blade of a hurtling spear, flung with the utmost of Coacoochee's nervous strength, sunk deep between his shoulders. With a choking cry, and out-flung arms, the traitor pitched headlong into the black waters, and disappeared forever, while cries of horror came from the advancing soldiers whose protection he had so nearly gained.

Even as the young war-chief delivered his deadly blow, and without waiting to note its effect, he turned and fled toward his own people. A dozen angry rifles rang out behind him, and the whole swamp echoed with fierce yells from the enraged soldiers, but no bullet struck him, and no taunt served to stay his steps.

The three Indians fled swiftly as hunted deer, back along the treacherous trail, while the troops followed with what speed they might. It was so difficult a path, and so dangerous, and the heavy-booted soldiers slipped from its narrow verge so often, that

those whom they pursued reached the island and disappeared among its thickets ere they had more than started. Then back through the heavy air came mockingly and defiantly the Seminole war-ery:

“Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-chee!”

Thus they knew that a surprise of the stronghold they had so labored to gain was no longer possible.

Still with a courage worthy of a nobler cause the troops pushed forward, unguided save by instinct and a burning desire to avenge the death of their well-loved lieutenant, whom they supposed the savages had already killed. With all their efforts it was a full half-hour ere the advance drew near to the wooded island that rose silent and mysterious before them, and they began to feel firmer ground beneath their feet.

Before they reached its encircling forest wall, flashes of flame began to leap from the dark thickets, and before the deadly fire of an unseen foe the advance was staggered and halted. It was only for a moment, and then they sprang forward with a cheer to charge the fatal barricade.

A dozen troopers had fallen ere the Indian fire was silenced, and as yet the soldiers had not caught a glimpse of their foe. In the thickset undergrowth they were tripped and flung to the ground by snake-like roots, encircled and held fast by tough vines,

clutched and drawn backward by stout thorns curved and sharp as a tiger's claws. No human being save a naked Indian could thread that forest maze, and as the soldiers could discover no opening through it, they decided to make one. Swords, axes, and knives were called into requisition. Every now and then a rifle shot from the unseen foe proved the Indians to be still watchful and defiant.

It was not until another half-hour had been expended in this exhausting effort at road-cutting that the trail lying well to one side was discovered.

Wearied by their futile efforts, made furious by opposition, and galled by the fire from unseen rifles that had been steadily thinning their numbers ever since they reached the island, the troops rushed with fierce shouts to the opening, streamed through it, and gained the central, cleared space in which stood the Seminole village. Here, for a moment, the tumultuous advance was checked, and each man clutched his weapon with a closer grip, in expectation of an attack.

But none was made. The peaceful village, all aglow with the light of a setting sun, was silent and deserted. No voices came from it, nor from the broad fields that lay clothed in luxuriant verdure beyond. There was no sound of busy workers, no laughter of children. A raven with glossy plumage, iridescent in the sunlight, croaked a hoarse challenge from a lofty tree-top, and a solitary buzzard circled

overhead on motionless pinions, but no other signs of life were to be detected.

After a minute of irresolution Captain Chase, the officer in command of the expedition, deployed his men as skirmishers, and was about to give the order "Forward!" when this strange thing happened:

From one of the thatched huts of the village three human beings emerged and advanced slowly toward the motionless line of soldiers. Two were men, evidently white men, and one of these wore a uniform. Between them walked a young girl whose shapely head was crowned with a mass of gold-red hair. As she drew near, a murmur of admiration at her beauty passed along the stern line of blue-coated troops. Then an irrepressible tumult of cheers rent the air, for in one of the girl's companions the soldiers recognized their own beloved lieutenant, Irwin Douglass. But curiosity got the better of enthusiasm, and as the noise subsided, each trooper waited in breathless silence for an explanation of this strange encounter.