

CHAPTER XXVII

ANSTICE BOYD SAVES THE LIFE OF A CAPTIVE

WHILE Coacoochee was engaged in his fierce pursuit of the traitor Seminole across the black causeway, Irwin Douglass was led to the village, where he was securely bound to one of the great trees by which it was shaded. Here his captors left him, and seizing their rifles hastened back to the edge of the swamp.

The moment Anstice realized that the young soldier, though a captive, was not doomed to instant death, she flew back to the hut occupied by her brother, whom she found still quietly sleeping in his grass-woven hammock. Roused into a startled wakefulness by her abrupt entrance, the convalescent was for some moments at a loss to comprehend what she was saying or what had caused her excitement.

“Who do you say is captured? and what has happened, dear, to frighten you?” he asked, in a bewildered tone.

“Irwin Douglass, and they are going to kill him, and the village is about to be attacked, and we shall all be murdered!” cried the terrified girl.

“Douglass captured and about to be killed? Impossible!” exclaimed Boyd, rising and starting toward the doorway. “But I will go and see. Surely Coacoochee would never murder a prisoner in cold blood. As for ourselves, you know we are safe so long as we are his guests. Wait here, sister, and I will bring Douglass back with me, if, as you say, he is in the village.”

But the frightened girl clung to him and would not be left. So they set forth together, and had hardly gained the outer air before a sound of firing from the causeway warned them that fighting of some sort was begun. The same sounds created vast excitement among the inmates of the village, and the crowd of negroes, who, at the first note of alarm, had come swarming up from the fields. These so occupied the entire foreground that the brother and sister could get no sight of him whom they sought. Neither was their friend the young war-chief to be seen. They attempted to make way through the throng, but were impatiently pushed back, the crowd scowling and muttering at them angrily.

One huge, coal-black negro even advanced upon them with a drawn knife and so ugly an expression, that Ralph Boyd instinctively thrust his sister behind him, and nerved himself to receive an attack. Unarmed and weakened by illness as he was, the outcome of such a struggle could readily be foreseen,

and the white man cast a despairing glance about him in search of some weapon. There was none, and the gleaming knife was already uplifted for a deadly stroke, when, with a shrill cry, a black woman sprang betwixt the two, snatched the knife from the negro's hand, and flourishing it in his face, poured out such a furious torrent of angry, scornful, and threatening words, that the brute slunk away from her, completely cowed.

Now, turning and almost pushing Boyd and his sister before her, Letty — for the black Amazon was no other than Anstice's own maid — succeeded in getting them back inside the hut before their assailant had time to rally from his discomfiture. Then, still clutching the knife she had so adroitly captured, the black girl stood guard before the entrance, deaf alike to those of her own color, who taunted her with being a traitor to her race, and to the entreaties of her young mistress, that she should attempt a rescue of the prisoner about whom the crowd of Indian women and negroes still swarmed.

"Cayn't do it, Miss Anstice," replied the black girl, firmly, but without turning her head. "I'se powerful sorry for Marse Douglass, but when it's him or you, I know which one I'se bound to look after."

"But, Letty, they will murder him!"

"No, Miss Anstice, not till Coacoochee says so. They das'n't kill him, not till the chief gives the word."

“But supposing Coacoochee does not come? He may be killed or captured himself, you know.”

“There ain’t no use speculating on that, Miss Anstice, because he’s come already. I can see him out there now, talking to the crowd. Looks like he’s in a powerful hurry, too, and I spec’s the end of time has come for poor Marse Douglass. Oh Lord, Miss Anstice! Stop up your ears, quick!”

At these ominous words, the brave English girl, instead of complying, darted from the hut so swiftly, that ere Letty could interfere to prevent her, she had gained the centre of the village. There she came upon a scene well calculated to freeze the blood in her veins. Irwin Douglass, bound to a tree, with his pale, resolute face turned toward the setting sun, gazed with unflinching calmness into the black muzzles of four levelled rifles, that in another moment would pour their deadly contents into his body. The pitiless warriors who held them, and only awaited a signal from their young chief to press the fatal triggers, scanned the face of their victim in vain for the faintest trace of fear. There was none; and they were filled with regrets that so brave a man could not be reserved for a more lingering and trying form of death. But there was no time to spare. The soldiers were even now upon them, and whatever was to be done must be done quickly. Already murmurs of impatience could be heard among the spectators.

As Coacoochee was about to give the dread command, there came a quick rush, and the girlish figure of Anstice Boyd stood full in front of the cruel rifles, between them and their human mark. Her wonderful hair, half loosed from its coil, glinted like spun gold in the red sunlight. Her eyes were big with terror, and her face was bloodless, but her voice rang out clear and strong, as she cried:

“Coacoochee, you must not do this thing! You dare not!”

“He is an enemy,” answered the young chief, calmly; and without betraying his annoyance at this interruption. “If we should not kill him, he would kill us.”

“He might in battle or in fair fight, but he would never shoot down a helpless prisoner,” replied the girl, in scornful tones. “Set him free, place a weapon in his hands, and fight him man to man, if you dare.”

“Gladly would I,” answered the young Seminole, “if there was time, but there is not. Thy people have hunted us like wolves to our den, and even now are upon us. In another minute must we fly for our lives. Our friends we can leave to their friends. Our captive we cannot take, and dare not release. He is a spy. The white man puts a spy to death; why should not the Indian? Coacoochee has spoken. The spy must die. Let my white sister stand aside.”

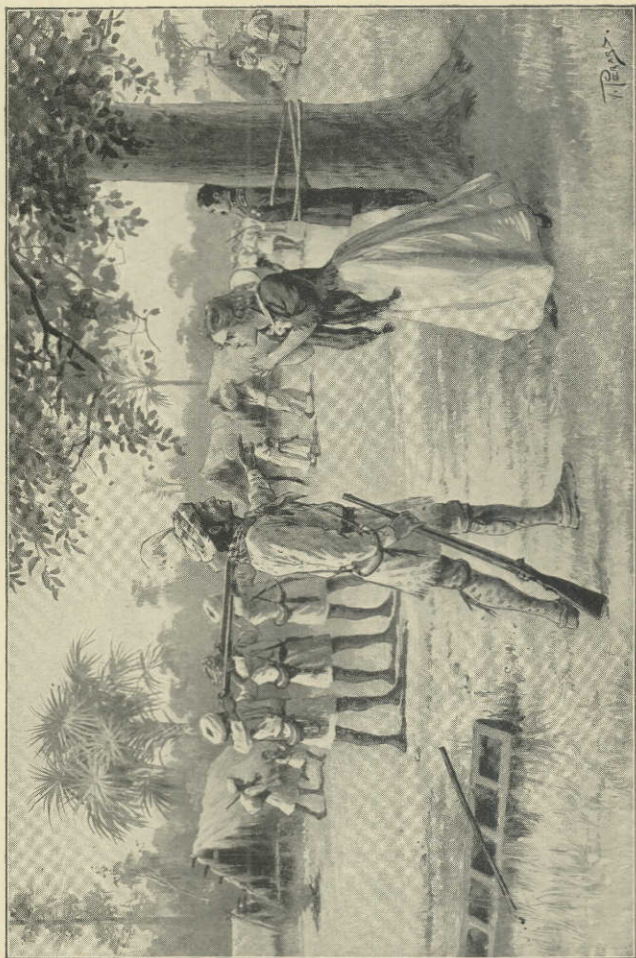
Very stern was the young war-chief, and very determined. A murmur of approbation rose from the dusky throng about him as his words fell upon their ears.

A wave of despair surged over Anstice Boyd. Her face flushed, then became deadly pale. Her voice was well-nigh choked as she answered :

“Then, oh, Coacoochee, if you will not yield to the dictates of humanity, still listen to me. In the name of Allala, thy spirit sister, in the name of her who still lives, and is most dear to thee, in the name of Ralph Boyd, who, by his deeds, has proved himself thy friend, I plead for this man’s life. If this is not enough, I demand it for yet another reason.” Here, with face crimsoned like the rising sun, the girl stepped close to the young chief, and spoke a few words in a tone so low that none but he could catch their import.

His stern face softened, and for a moment he looked curiously at her. Then drawing his own silver-mounted knife from its sheath, he handed it to her, saying :

“The words of the white maiden have sunk deep into the heart of Coacoochee. Let her lead him whom she has saved to the lodge of her brother. Keep him there, close hidden from my people, so long as a voice is heard in this place. Then, and not till then, will it be safe for the Iste-hatke to venture forth. Farewell, my sister ! Thank not



THE GIRL STEPPED CLOSE TO THE YOUNG CHIEF AND SPOKE A FEW WORDS.

the wild cat that his claws are sheathed. Thank rather Allala, Nita, and Ralph Boyd. *Hi-e-pas! Hi-e-pas!*"

The last two words were uttered in ringing tones of command to his own people, and, supplemented as they were by a crashing volley of musketry from the edge of the swamp, they produced an instant effect.

Although many glances of hate were flashed at the white girl and the prisoner, whom she freed from his bonds with two strokes of Coacoochee's keen knife, they were allowed to pass unharmed to the hut occupied by Ralph Boyd. He walked with them; for, without his sister's knowledge, he had stood close by her side while she pleaded for the life of Irwin Douglass, ready to strike a blow in her defence, or to share her fate.

The three entered the hut together, and as its curtain of deerskin was drawn so as to exclude all prying eyes, the overwrought girl fell into her brother's arms, weeping hysterically. The young soldier, who but a moment before stood within the shadow of death, gazed curiously and awkwardly for a second on this scene, and then turning away, sat down with his face buried in his hands.

Ralph Boyd sought to calm his brave sister with loving words. So filled was each of the three with crowding emotions that they took no note of time nor of outside sounds, until at length the girl

ceased her sobbing and gazed with a smile into her brother's face. Then, with a weight lifted from his heart, he began to talk to her in a cheerful strain.

"It was nobly done, sister mine," he said, "and as a special pleader I will name you before any barrister in the land. What argument, though, was it you used at the last? I failed to catch the words, but they must have been of powerful force."

Again a tide of crimson mantled the girl's fair cheeks, as she replied: "Coacoochee knows, and I know; but let it suffice you, brother, that they were effective; for more than that I can never tell."

At this juncture, the young soldier, looking as guilty as though he had been caught at eavesdropping, rose, drew aside the curtain at the entrance, and stepped outside. As he did so, he uttered an exclamation that quickly brought the others to his side.

The village, recently so populous and filled with busy life, was deserted. Not a soul was to be seen. Even the pigs and chickens had disappeared. An unbroken silence, as of an impending doom, brooded over the place, and, as the three who were now its sole occupants walked among the vacant habitations, they felt impelled to lower their voices, as though in presence of the dead. They had gone but a short distance when their attention was attracted by

the sound of many voices and the tramp of armed men. Turning in that direction, they beheld a body of troops pouring from the pathway leading to the swamp, and toward these they at once directed their steps.

As the three whose recent experiences had been so thrilling walked slowly down the grassy slope, Douglass strove to find words with which to thank Anstice Boyd for the gift of his life; but the girl interrupted him at the outset, and begged him never to mention the subject again.

"Very well," he replied, "since that is your desire, I will strive to obey. I do so the more readily that mere words fail to express my feelings; but I shall live in hope of the time when by some service I may be able to indicate my gratitude."

Whatever else the grateful young soldier might have said was interrupted by cheers from the troops, who at that moment recognized the comrade whom they had mourned as lost to them forever. As quiet was restored, his brother officers crowded about him with a hearty welcome and an avalanche of questions.

"That will do for the present, gentlemen," interposed Captain Chase. "Excuse a soldier's abruptness, madam," he added, bowing to Anstice, "but in this stern business of war, duty must precede even the ordinary courtesies of life. Now, Mr.

Douglass, since you are so happily restored to us, please tell me what to expect in yonder den of swamp devils? Are we to be attacked? Shall we charge. What force opposes us? What is the meaning of this ominous silence?"

"I hardly know how to answer you, sir," replied the lieutenant, "for I am as ignorant concerning the enemy's movements as yourself. So far as I know, there is not a soul in yonder village, though but a few minutes ago it was swarming with life."

"What has become of them, then?" demanded the officer, impatiently.

"I do not know, sir."

"You can at least tell in which direction they went."

"No, sir, I cannot even do that; for I did not see them go, nor do I know when they departed."

"Upon my soul, this is a most extraordinary state of affairs!" exclaimed the officer, flushing angrily. "I must confess that I had not heretofore credited you with blindness. Perhaps, sir, you can give us the desired information?" he added, turning to Ralph Boyd.

Upon the young Englishman claiming an equal ignorance with the lieutenant, the irate captain said in a tone of suppressed anger: "This matter shall be investigated at a more convenient time, but at present it seems that we must make dis-

coveries for ourselves. To your places, gentlemen. Forward! Double quick! March!"

With this the line of blue-coated troops advanced swiftly up the slope and charged the empty huts of the deserted village.