

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MARK OF THE WILDCAT

IN vain did the soldiers ransack the empty huts of the village, and scour the island from end to end. Not a single human being or evidence of life did they discover, nor were they fired upon from the belt of timber surrounding the cleared fields. The hundreds of men, women, and children, Indians and negroes, who had been at home in this place less than an hour before, had vanished as mysteriously and completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them. Even the secret place of exit through the swamp, provided for just such an emergency as the present, had not been discovered when darkness put an end to the search, and the troops camped in and about the Indian village for the night.

The officer commanding the expedition was furious. He had expected to destroy or capture the entire force of the enemy gathered at this point. Instead of so doing, he had not only failed to capture a single prisoner, but could not discover that his fire had resulted in the killing or even wounding of a single warrior. On the other hand, the dead of his own command numbered seven,

while a score of others were more or less severely wounded. His anger was in nowise diminished by what he was pleased to term the culpable ignorance of Lieutenant Douglass concerning the strength and movements of the Indians.

When questioned on these points, the young officer, with a delicacy that forbade the part taken by Anstice Boyd in his rescue becoming common talk of the camp, would only say that, having been confined in a closed hut, he had no opportunity of knowing what was taking place outside.

“Were you bound, blind-folded, or in any other way deprived of the use of your faculties?” demanded the commander.

“No, sir, I was not.”

“In that case it is incredible that you could not have found some opportunity for making observations of what was taking place about you; and that you failed to do so, must be regarded as a grave neglect of duty. The very fact that the savages, having you in their power, presented you with both life and liberty, would seem to argue a closer sympathy between you and them than is permissible between an officer of the United States army and the enemies of his Government. Therefore, sir, I shall take it upon myself to suspend you from duty, and shall prefer charges against you which you will be allowed to meet before a court martial. That is all, sir—*as may go.*”

“Very good, sir,” replied the younger officer, bowing, and retiring with a pale face, and a mind filled with bitter thoughts.

That night the island seemed a very abode of malicious spirits. Low-hanging clouds covered it with a veil of darkness so intense as to be oppressive. A strong wind moaned among the forest trees, and borne on it from the surrounding swamp came blood-chilling shrieks and yells, weird and foreboding, but whether produced by wild beasts or wild men, the shuddering listeners, gathered closely about flaring camp-fires, could not determine. So terrible were some of these wind-borne cries, that certain among those who listened declared them to be the despairing accents of lost souls; for which sentiment they were derided by the bolder of their comrades. But when the midnight relief went its round of the outposts, and found four of them guarded only by corpses, even the scoffers were willing to admit that in the rush of the night wind they had heard the wings of the angel of death.

As, one after another, the dead sentinels were brought in to the firelight, they were found to be without wounds, unless a scratch of five fine lines on each pallid forehead could be called such. In each case the cause of death was a broken neck. From this and the scratches, that looked as though they might have been made by the brushing of a mighty paw, it was at first thought that

the unfortunate soldiers might have been done to death by one of the more powerful beasts of the forest.

This belief was, however, quickly upset by an old frontiersman who accompanied the troops as a scout. Pointing out that all the scratches were located in the same place, and all had been made with equal lightness of touch, he declared them to be the mark of Coacoochee the Wildcat.

Already the terror of this name had spread so far, that when Ralph Boyd asserted that Coacoochee was indeed leader of the band just driven from that stronghold, a great fear fell upon the soldiers, and to a man they refused to perform outpost duty beyond the limit of firelight.

To enlarge this lighted circle, one hut after another was set on fire, until the whole village, including the great storehouses full of provisions and the granaries of corn, was one roaring, leaping mass of flame. The leafy crowns of the giant oaks that had shaded it, shrivelled, crackled, and burst into a myriad tongues of fire; while to render the destruction of the forest monarchs more certain, some of the soldiers seized axes and girdled their trunks.

So bright was the circle of light in which the troops foolishly sought for safety, that had Coacoochee been leader of one hundred warriors at that moment, he could have wiped out the entire force of invaders;

but he was alone, and from the black recesses of a thicket he gazed upon the scene of destruction in impotent wrath.

Having seen the band intrusted to his care safely across the great swamp, and well on their way to another place of refuge, he had returned alone to watch the invasion of Osceola's stronghold. With the noiseless movements of a gliding shadow he had skirted the camp of the soldiers, and four times had he left silent but terrible witnesses of his presence. With a heavy heart he now watched the burning of the great stores of food that he had gathered for the support of his people during months of fighting; for he knew that with this destruction a heavy blow had been dealt against the Seminole cause.

With the earliest coming of daylight, the troops, impatient to finish their task and leave that place of terror, began to destroy the growing crops beyond the village. Safe hidden among the spreading branches of a live-oak, where he was screened by great clusters of pale-green mistletoe, Coacoochee watched them tear up acres of tasselled corn, and laden vines, cut down scores of trees heavy with ripening fruit, and burn broad areas of waving cane.

At length, the work of destruction was completed, all stragglers were called in by a blast of bugles, a parting volley was fired over the single long grave, in which a dozen dead soldiers lay buried; and, taking their wounded with them, the blue-coated col-

umn marched gladly away from the place they had so little reason to love.

Descending from his post of observation, the young Indian followed them, until he had seen the last trooper disappear along the narrow causeway, amid the sombre cypresses of the Great Swamp. Then slowly and thoughtfully he retraced his steps, walking now in the full glare of sunlight, until he stood again beneath the clump of dying trees that, but a few hours before, had shaded the peaceful village. As he gazed about him on charred embers, and smoking ruins, deserted fields, and prostrate orchards, the bold heart of the young war-chief sank like a leaden weight within him.

“Thus must it be to the end,” he said half aloud, as though his brimming thoughts were struggling for expression. “Ruin and destruction follow ever the tread of the Iste-hatke. He is strong, and we are weak. He is many, and we are few. We may kill his hundreds, and he brings thousands to devour us. We may plant, but he will gather the fruit. The Seminole may starve, and at the cry of his children for food the white man will make merry. My father was right when he said that to fight the white man was like fighting the waves of the great salt waters. What now shall be done? Shall we continue to fight, and die fighting in our own land, or shall we again trust to the lying tongue of the Iste-hatke, and go to the place in which he

says we may dwell at peace with him? Oh, Allala, my sister, hear me, and come to me with thy words of wisdom.”

At that moment, as though in answer to his prayer, Coacoochee caught sight of a figure advancing hesitatingly towards where he stood. It was that of a warrior, whom he recognized even at a distance as belonging to his own band. The newcomer cast troubled glances over the pitiful scene of ruin outspread on all sides. Until now he had not noted the presence of his chief; but, when the latter uttered the cry of a hawk, which was the familiar signal of his band, the warrior quickened his steps, and came to where the young man stood.

He proved to be a runner, sent out by Louis Pacheco, to notify Coacoochee that Philip Emathla with all the people of his village had been captured and conveyed to St. Augustine, whence it was proposed to remove them to the unknown land of the far west. The old chief had begged so earnestly for an interview with his eldest son, that the general in command had sent out a written safe-conduct for the latter to come and go again in safety. This the runner now delivered to Coacoochee, assuring him at the same time that Louis Pacheco had looked at it and pronounced it good.

The young chief took the paper, regarded it curiously, and thrust it into his girdle, then without delay, he set forth on his long journey to the east-

ern coast. The runner was able to inform him of the present location of Osceola, and accordingly he first directed his steps to the camp of that fiery young chieftain to apprise him of the destruction of his swamp stronghold.

Here he found a delegation of Cherokees, bearing an address from John Ross, their head chief, to Coacoochee and Osceola, who were regarded as the most important leaders of the Florida Indians. This address prayed the Seminoles to end their fruitless struggle against the all-powerful whites. It assured them that should they consent to removal, the promises made by the latter would be kept, and that the Cherokees, as their nearest neighbors in the western land, would ever be their firm allies in resistance to further oppression.

The conference was long and earnest. Osceola, discouraged by the loss of his stronghold, and by the destruction of its great store of provisions, which he foresaw would entail much suffering among his people during the coming winter, was inclined to make peace, though still resolutely opposed to removal.

Coacoochee, filled with thoughts of his aged father and Nita Pacheco held captives by the whites, was even more anxious to make an honorable peace than was his brother chieftain. So it was finally decided that he should take advantage of his safe-conduct, to visit St. Augustine, advise with Philip Emathla, talk with the general in command, so as to ascertain the

exact views of the whites, and return to Osceola with his report.

Thus, three days later the young war-chief, clad as befitted his rank, and bearing a superb calumet as a present from Osceola, presented himself boldly before the gates of St. Augustine, exhibited his safe-conduct, and demanded to be taken to the general.

The manly beauty of his features, his haughty bearing, and gorgeous costume attracted universal admiration, as he strode proudly through the narrow streets of the quaint old city. Before he reached the house in which the commandant was lodged, he was surrounded by a curious throng of citizens, through which the corporal's guard escorting him found some difficulty in clearing a passage.

The general greeted the son of Philip Emathla with honeyed words, and caused him to be treated with the consideration due his rank and importance. His father was brought to welcome him, and the two were allowed to depart together to the encampment of the captives, which was in the plaza, or central square of the city, where it was surrounded by a cordon of soldiers. Here, after a separation of many months, the young chief met her to whom he had plighted his troth by the blue Ahpopka Lake. In his eyes she appeared more lovely than ever, and he longed ardently for the time of peace that should enable him to make for her a home in which they might dwell together in safety.

So much was there to tell and to hear, and so many grave questions to be discussed, that the night was spent in talking, and the dawn of another day found them still seated about the cold embers of a small fire in front of King Philip's lodge.

The old man advised earnestly for peace, even at the cost of removal, though at the same time declaring that with leaving his own land his heart would break, so that he should never live to reach the strange place set apart for his people.

Nita, happily content to sit close beside her lover, only leaving him now and then to replenish the fire, refill the pipes, or to bring from the lodge some dainty morsel of food, had little to say; but such words as she uttered were in favor of peace.

Thus was the mind of Coacoochee the Wildcat turned from thoughts of fighting and vengeance, to those of peace and happiness for his loved ones, his oppressed people, and himself. So convinced was he that the war must be ended, that he readily consented to go again to Osceola, and persuade him to come in, with such other chiefs as could be gathered, to attend a solemn council, with a view to the speedy settlement of all existing troubles. On leaving the city, he was laden with presents, both for himself and Osceola, and promising to return in ten days, he set forth with a lighter heart than he had known for more than a year.

Alas for human nature, that they who trust most

should be most often deceived! By the swift turning of affairs that gave the army in Florida a new commanding general every few months during the Seminole War, General Scott had been succeeded by General Jesup. From him the commandant at St. Augustine had recently received a despatch which, could Coacoochee have known its contents, would have filled the young chief's heart with renewed bitterness, and turned his peaceful longings into a fierce resolve for a fight to the death.