

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE DUNGEONS OF THE ANCIENT FORTRESS

THE capture of Coacoochee and Osceola created an extraordinary degree of excitement in St. Augustine, where the news of this most important event was hailed with extravagant joy and openly expressed sorrow. Those who rejoiced were of that class who wanted the war ended, and the Seminoles removed by any means, fair or foul, they cared not which. To such persons an Indian was only a species of noxious animal, for the trapping of which any deception was justifiable. On the other hand were many honorable men and women whose indignation, at the deed of treachery by which the fair name of the Government had been smirched, knew no bounds. Of all these, none was so filled with righteous wrath as were Ralph and Anstice Boyd.

“I was not wholly unprepared for some such rascality,” said the former, “and I tried to convey my suspicions to Coacoochee yesterday; though, knowing nothing definite, I dared not speak plainly. He, poor fellow, is so entirely honest and incapable of such a cowardly act himself, that he failed to comprehend what I was driving at. To his simple mind,

a great chief must be an honorable man ; otherwise he would not be a great chief, or, indeed, a chief of any degree. Rather different from the idea prevailing in most white communities, is it not ? ”

“ I should say so, judging from what we have seen lately,” cried Anstice. “ But I am too furious to talk about it. I am almost ashamed of being white. I only wish I were a man ! ”

“ What would you do in that case ? ” inquired her brother curiously.

“ Do ? I would fight, and devote my life to fighting just such outrageous wrongs as this. That’s what I would do. ”

“ I don’t doubt you would, you precious little spitfire, and a mighty plucky fight you’d put up. You’d lose, though, every time ; for, besides pluck and pugnacity, it takes coolness and infinite patience to fight the battle of right against might. But, to return to practical matters, what is to become of our guest, now that Coacoochee is no longer in a position to elope with her, or afford her other protection than that of his prayers ? ”

“ She is to stay with us, of course, for just as long as we can keep her. In the meantime, we must manage in some way to get him out of that terrible prison. Poor fellow ! How he must be suffering at this minute. I only hope he remembers that he still has some friends, and that there are still a few faint sparks of honor and gratitude glowing in the bosoms

of the 'Iste-hatke,' as he calls us. We must get Irwin Douglass to help us, and I only hope he will call to-day, so that we can begin to plan at once."

"Hold hard, sister! Remember that the awkward situation Douglass is already in is largely owing to us. If you take my advice, you will not mention to him our desire that Coacoochee should escape, or disclose to him the identity of our guest. I agree with you, that we are bound to do whatever we can to aid our Indian friend, and that the forest maiden shall make her home with us so long as she chooses to do so; but, for the present, I beg that no one else, not even Irwin Douglass, be admitted to our secret."

"Very well, Mr. wise man, I will let you have your own way for a time; but don't try my patience too far, lest I do something desperate. Red-headed girls aren't expected to be cool-headed as well, you know, and so when I have once set my heart on having a thing done, I want it done without delay."

Thus it happened that, when Lieutenant Douglass called on the Boyds that evening, and was formally presented to a Miss Annette Felipe, he did not, for a moment, doubt that she belonged to one of the old Spanish-American families of the Territory. She had a darkly beautiful face, was quietly but stylishly dressed, and was demurely silent. That she spoke so little was explained by Anstice on the ground that Spanish was her native tongue, and that she was visiting her in order to improve her English.

As the lieutenant did not speak nor understand Spanish, he was more than content to devote himself to Miss Anstice, leaving the stranger to be entertained by Ralph Boyd. Douglass and the English girl discussed his present prospects, and wondered how long he would be obliged to wait in idleness before a court-martial could be convened to hear his case, and of course dismiss the absurd charges preferred against him. They talked of their recent exciting experiences, and finally Anstice said :

“By the way, Mr. Douglass, I wish you would take us to visit the prisoners in the old fort. I am so anxious to see that splendid Osceola. Besides, we want to do everything we can to make Annette’s visit pleasant, and there is so little to amuse one in this stupid place. I am sure she would be so interested in those Indians. Won’t you please arrange it, like a dear man ?”

“Certainly, I will if I can,” replied the young officer. “At the same time, I am not at all sure that the general will regard with favor an application for a permit from one in my peculiar position.”

“Oh, I fancy he will. At any rate, you manage it for us somehow, and make as early a date as possible ; for Annette may be compelled to leave us at any time, and I wouldn’t have her miss seeing the interior of the fort. She has never seen anything like it, you know. We are going to take a walk

to-morrow morning just to show her the outside of it, and you may come with us if you choose."

So Douglass promised to do what he could, and when he joined the walking party on the morrow, he announced that he had thought of a plan which he believed would work. "You see," he said, "Mrs. Canby, wife of Canby of the Rifles, has just arrived from the North, and as she has never seen any Indians, of course she will be anxious to visit the fort. So I will get Canby to secure the permit, and invite us all to join his party."

While discussing this plan and deciding that it would be the very thing, they reached the ancient fortress, and as they skirted its frowning walls, Miss Felipe, who had hardly spoken since starting, and then only to Anstice, became so visibly affected, that the English girl threw an arm protectingly about her, exclaiming, "Annette is so tender-hearted that she can't bear the thought of captives being shut up in that gloomy place."

"It is tough luck," agreed the young officer. "And there is not the slightest chance of their escaping either, for the only openings into the cells are those small embrasures through which even a boy would find it difficult to squeeze. They are some eighteen feet above the floor, too, so that it would be impossible to reach them without a ladder."

A few days later, a permit for a party of six to visit the fort having been secured, Mrs. Canby, the

Boyd, their guest, and Douglass set forth, Mr. Canby being detained by urgent duty, and excusing himself at the last moment. After passing the strong guard stationed at the gateway, the sight-seers found themselves in a large, open space, where many of the captives were lounging or walking about. In these, the Spanish girl showed not the slightest interest, but seemed inclined to hasten on. She carried a light shawl thrown over her arm, of which slight burden Douglass had politely but in vain attempted to relieve her.

"Your friend seems very odd, and not at all like other girls," he confided to Anstice Boyd.

"Yes. Isn't she?" replied the English girl, readily. "But then you must remember her bringing up. I wonder if Osceola is among these Indians?"

"Oh no, miss," answered the sergeant who had been detailed to act as guide. "The chiefs are only allowed out, one at a time, under guard, after the others have gone in. They are in their cells now."

"Well, take us to them, then," said Anstice, for they are the ones we care most to see. Don't you think so, Mrs. Canby?"

"Yes, indeed," agreed that lady; "only I hope they will prove better looking and more interesting than these creatures out here."

So the party was guided to the cell occupied by Osceola, in front of which paced a sentry, and its massive door was swung back on creaking hinges.

The haughty chieftain, still clad in his most splendid costume, was seated on a stool, gazing blankly at the opposite wall. He roused slightly as the sergeant said :

“Here’s some ladies come to visit you, Powell,” and when Mrs. Canby and Anstice expressed a wish to shake hands with him, he extended his hand to them mechanically. When, however, the lieutenant also offered to shake hands, a fierce flash of anger leaped into the eyes of the forest warrior, and he drew back haughtily, exclaiming as he did so :

“No, sir! Never again shall the hand of Ah-ha-se-ho-la meet in friendship that of one wearing the disgraced livery of a United States officer.”

“Horrid thing!” cried Mrs. Canby, as the party hurriedly withdrew from the cell. “The idea of a mere savage daring to speak so to an army officer! You did well, Miss Felipe, not to go near the wretch, and I only wish I hadn’t. I certainly don’t want to see any more of them.”

As the speaker absolutely refused to visit the remaining prisoners, which the others were still desirous of doing, Douglass remained with her, leaving but three of the party to inspect the cell occupied by Coacoochee and Talmus Hadjo. It, like the other, was guarded by a sentry, with whom the guide, after throwing open the door, stepped aside to speak.

Although the Spanish girl had remained outside the other cell, she pushed eagerly forward into

this one, while Anstice and her brother stood in the doorway. Talmus Hadjo lay on a pile of forage-bags that served as a bed, while Coacoochee, the very picture of despair, stood leaning, with folded arms, against one of the walls. He hardly noticed his visitor, until in a low, thrilling tone she pronounced his name. Then, as though moved by an electric shock, he sprang forward, gasped the single word "Nita!" and clasped the girl to his breast.

A few murmured words passed between the two; then he released her, and, stooping, she slipped something from her shawl beneath one of the forage-bags lying on the floor.

When the sergeant reappeared at the doorway a second later, the Spanish girl, looking perfectly composed, was standing quietly at one side, Talmus Hadjo was regarding her with undisguised amazement, while Coacoochee, with a new light shining in his face, was silently exchanging hand-clasps with Ralph and Anstice Boyd.

"Rather a more decent and civil sort of a chap than the other," remarked the sergeant as he again locked the door, and the visitors turned away. "Now there's only one more cell, and —"

"I don't think we care to inspect any more cells to-day," interposed Anstice, hastily; and so a few minutes later the reunited party were breathing once more the outer air of freedom, while Mrs.

Canby expressed very freely her opinion of Indians in general and of those whom they had just seen in particular.

While the transformation of Philip Emathla's adopted daughter into Miss Annette Felipe, clad in the costume of civilization, and guest of Anstice Boyd, may appear as surprising to the reader as it did to the captive war-chief whom she had just left filled with a new hope, it was all brought about very simply. On the evening that Coacoochee confided her to the protection of Ralph Boyd, that gentleman, accompanied by his sister, strolled down to the Indian encampment. First they received permission to speak with the aged chieftain, who was summoned to the lines for that purpose. A few minutes later their strolling carried them past the darkest corner of the camp, where they were joined by a slender figure that had slipped through the lines without attracting the attention of a guard. Over this figure Anstice threw a long cloak that she had carried on her arm, and thus disguised, Nita Pacheco accompanied her new friends to their home. Her absence from the Indian camp was not discovered until two days later, when Mr. Troup Jeffers, claiming her as his escaped slave, and armed with an authority from the general for her recapture, visited the Indian camp in search of her.

The slave-catcher made a great outcry when he found that his prey had again eluded him, but he

was speedily silenced by a very unexpected meeting with Ralph Boyd, who had been watching for the man who should make that very claim.

At sight of him whom he had every reason to believe was long since dead, the scoundrel's face turned livid, and he staggered back like one who has received a knife-thrust.

“Drop this business, and leave town inside of an hour if you value your wretched life!” hissed Boyd in his ear, and an hour later St. Augustine was well rid of Mr. Troup Jeffers.