

CHAPTER XXXI

A DARING ESCAPE

NOT until his prison door was again closed, and the footsteps of his visitors had died away in the distance, did Coacoochee turn from listening, and stoop to see what it was that Nita had brought him. From under the forage-bag he first drew a Spanish hunting-knife, beautifully balanced, and with the keen edge of a razor. It was of dull blue Toledo steel, and its shapely haft was exquisitely silver-mounted. At sight of it the young Indian uttered an exclamation of joy, for it was his own well-tried weapon, endeared by long association, and his unfailing friend in many a combat with man and beast. It had been his father's before him, and with it Anstice Boyd had severed the bonds confining Irwin Douglass, when his life hung by a thread, in the swamp stronghold of Osceola. She had kept it ever since, awaiting an opportunity to restore it to its owner, and had now done so, by the hand of Nita Pacheco.

While Coacoochee gloated over this treasure, his comrade in captivity pulled aside the bag beneath which it had been concealed, and disclosed another

object of equal value with the precious knife. It was a coil of rope, slender and finely twisted, but of a proved strength, capable of supporting the weight of two men.

"Now, Talmeco," cried Coacoochee, in the Indian tongue, "we have something to live for. Already do I breathe again the free air of the forest, for want of which I had died ere many days. Now will we show these dogs of the Iste-hatke that their cunning is no match for that of the Wildcat. Again shall the war-cry of Coacoochee ring through hammock and swamp, glade and savanna, and the Iste-hatke shall tremble at its sound."

"But," said Talmus, "was it not one of the Iste-hatke who brought us these things? Has my brother won the heart of a pale-faced maiden?"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the young chief. "Are the eyes of Talmeco grown so dim from long gazing at stone walls that he did not see, through the dress of the white squaw, the form of Nita Pacheco, daughter of Philip Emathla, and the beloved of Coacoochee? She it was, and no other, who found a way to this hole of rats, and brought the means of escape. Let us hasten, then, to make use of them, that she may not be disappointed."

"How can we?" queried Talmus. "There is but one opening, and it is too small for the passage of a warrior. A boy could hardly make his way through it. Besides, it is too high for us to reach,

and, even if we got outside, would we not fall again into the hands of the soldiers?"

"Ho-le-wau-gus, Talmeco!" exclaimed the other. "Is thy man's heart turned by thy captivity into that of Cho-fee [the rabbit], and art thou become one who trembles at the sight of his own shadow? Listen, that thy heart may again become strong. The Wildcat will climb to yonder opening, and show his brother the way. It is small, but we will make ourselves smaller. We will go when the Great Spirit has drawn his blanket over the face of the sky, so that no light may shine from it, and no man can see us. Is it well?"

"It is well, my brother. Let Coacoochee lead, and Talmus Hadjo will follow in his steps."

For long hours during the weary days of captivity, had the young chief lain on his bed of bags, and gazed hopelessly at the single narrow opening in the wall far above him. He had believed that, if he could only reach it, he could so reduce his body as to pass through the aperture. Now he saw a way to reach it. Standing on his comrade's shoulders, and using his knife, he soon worked its point into a little crevice between the stones, just above his head. As Talmus could not support his weight very long at a time, and as there came days of such frequent interruptions that they dared not work, it was several weeks before the crevice was so enlarged that it would receive the knife up to its hilt. Then, by

drawing himself up on it, Coacoochee found to his delight that he could gain the narrow slit piercing the thick wall. To his dismay, it was barely wide enough to permit his head to pass through, but not his body.

The prisoners at once decided to starve themselves, and reduce their flesh by taking medicine. This they did, until they became mere skeletons, and their keeper began to fear that they would die on his hands.

In the meantime they cut up many of the bags on which they slept, into short lengths, which they bound closely, at intervals, about their slender rope, so as to afford a grasp for their hands. When all was in readiness, they were obliged to wait many days longer for a cloudless and moonless night.

At length it came as dark as Erebus, with squalls of rain, and a fierce wind that howled mournfully about the bastions and through the embrasures of the old fort. Much to the disgust of the captives, one of the prison keepers was in an unusually sociable mood that night, and made repeated visits to their cell, talking and singing, until they feared they would be compelled to kill him, in order to get rid of his presence. Finally they pretended to be asleep when he entered, and upon this he left them for good.

The time for action had arrived ; and, taking one end of the rope with him, Coacoochee, stripped to

the skin, save for a breech-cloth, mounted on his comrade's shoulders, felt for the deeply cut crevice, thrust his knife into it, and, in another minute, had gained the embrasure. Here, after first regaining and securing his precious knife, he made the rope fast, by passing a loop about a projecting ledge, and leaving only enough inside for his comrade to climb up by, he passed the remainder through the opening, and let it drop, hoping that it might be long enough to reach ground at the bottom of the moat.

With great difficulty, the young Indian thrust his head through the narrow slit. Then, with the sharp stones tearing the skin from his breast and back, he slowly and painfully forced his body through, being obliged to go down the rope head foremost, until his feet were clear of the opening. With each minute of this desperate struggle, it seemed as though his weakened powers of endurance must yield to the terrible strain, and that his grasp on the slender rope must relax; in which case he would have pitched headlong into the yawning depths below. But the indomitable will that had already aided him so often finally triumphed over physical weakness, and after a half-hour of struggle, the young war-chief slid in safety down the line that led to freedom, and lay panting on the ground, twenty-five feet below the aperture that had so nearly proved fatal.

Fortunately he lay in the deep angle of a bastion,

where the shadows were blackest, for just then two men, evidently officers, passed close to him engaged in earnest conversation. He overheard one of them say that arrangements were perfected for removing all the prisoners on the morrow to Charleston, South Carolina, where they would be beyond a possibility of rescue or escape.

So overjoyed was Coacoochee at thus learning of the timeliness of his venture for liberty that he became filled with fresh vigor, and feeling a movement of the rope, that he still held in one hand, he instantly gave the signal that all was well, and the way clear for his comrade to descend. As he waited in breathless anxiety, he could plainly hear the struggle that was taking place far above him. At length it ceased, and in a low, despairing voice Talmus informed him that having forced his head through the embrasure, he could get no further, nor could he even draw it back.

“Throw out thy breath, Talmeco, and try again! Throw out thy heart and soul, if needs be, and tear the flesh from thy body,” urged the young chief, in a voice little above a whisper, but thrilling in its intensity.

Thus adjured, Talmus Hadjo made one last desperate effort, with such success that he not only forced his bleeding body through the aperture, but lost his hold of the rope and came tumbling down the whole distance.



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WHOLE DISTANCE.

With a smothered cry of horror, Coacoochee sprang to his side, and, feeling a faint heart-beat in the stunned and motionless form, dragged it to a near-by pool of water. This he dashed over the injured man with such effect that, in a few minutes, his consciousness returned. He was, however, so injured by his fall as to be unable to walk, and feebly begged Coacoochee to save himself and leave him to his fate. For answer the young chief, with an astonishing display of strength, considering his condition, picked up his helpless friend, slung him across his back, and thus bore him nearly half a mile, to where the palmetto scrub afforded temporary concealment.

Daylight was now breaking, and some means must be devised for moving rapidly. So, depositing his burden on the ground, Coacoochee turned back to an open field in which he had seen several mules. Hastily twisting some shredded palmetto leaves into a rude bridle, he had the good fortune to capture one of the animals, on which he mounted both himself and his comrade.

For several hours they rode through the trackless pine forest, and at length reached a travelled road, which it was necessary they should cross. Before doing so Coacoochee slipped from the mule to assure himself that no enemy was in sight. He had gone but a few paces, when the animal, with a loud bray, dashed into the open, and galloped madly towards a

small party of mounted volunteers, who happened to be making their way towards the city.

The sight of a single naked Indian dashing toward them was too great a temptation to be resisted. A dozen rifles poured forth their deadly contents, both the mule and his helpless rider pitched headlong, and in the death struggle of the animal, the dead face of Talmus Hadjo was crushed beyond recognition. One of the white men, coolly and as neatly as though well accustomed to the operation, took the scalp of the fallen warrior. Then the party rode merrily forward, exchanging coarse jests concerning the handsome manner in which the redskin had been potted.

Filled with rage and grief at this loss of his companion, Coacoochee also hastened from the scene, plunging deep into the recesses of a near-by hammock and vowing a future but terrible vengeance upon the cowardly perpetrators of this cold-blooded murder. Living on berries, roots, and the succulent buds of cabbage palmettoes, sleeping naked on the bare ground, and slinking from hammock to hammock like a wild beast who is hunted, the fugitive worked his way southward for three days.

On the evening of the third day he walked into the camp of his own band on the headwaters of the Tomoka River. By Louis Pacheco and his warriors the young chief was greeted as one raised from the dead. When, after they had fed and clothed him,

they listened to his wonderful tale of treacherous capture, long imprisonment, timely escape, and the cruel death of Talmus Hadjo, they vowed themselves to a fiercer resistance than ever of the white oppressors.

Within an hour runners were despatched to several bands who were known to be contemplating surrender, urging them to abandon their intention and continue the fight to its bitter end. Thus was the conflict which General Jesup had just declared ended, renewed with a greater fury than ever, and Coacoochee the Wildcat became the acknowledged leader of his people.