

CHAPTER XXXII

NITA HEARS THAT COACOOCHEE IS DEAD

LONG and anxiously had the friends of Coacoochee in St. Augustine awaited the result of their effort to aid him in regaining his freedom. They dared not attempt to visit him again, lest by so doing they should arouse suspicion and injure his cause ; for the two principal chiefs were so closely guarded that visitors were only admitted to them at long intervals and as a great favor. So Nita was forced to endure a weary period of suspense and feverish anxiety, that caused her to droop like a transplanted forest lily.

Although Ralph Boyd sought daily for information concerning the prisoners, he could gain little, save that of a depressing nature, much of which he and Anstice dared not share with their guest. He heard that Coacoochee's strength was so weakened on confinement that it was believed he could not live much longer, and there was a rumor that he and Osceola were to be hanged for their perversity in continuing the war.

In the meantime, the number of Indians held captive in St. Augustine had been greatly increased by

the bands of Micanopy, Cloud, Tuskogee, and No-coosee, all of whom, urged to do so by the Cherokee delegation, had accepted General Jesup's invitation to meet him for a peace talk. Again was the flag of truce violated, again was treachery substituted for honest fighting, and again were the too trusting savages seized, disarmed, and sent to St. Augustine as prisoners of war.

So many captives were now crowded into the ancient city, that, in order to secure them beyond all hope of escape, as well as to make room for others who, it was hoped, might be enticed to *make peace* in a similar manner, it was deemed advisable to transfer them to Charleston. There they could be detained in safety until the time came for their final removal to the west. Preparations for this movement were made with great secrecy, that the Indians might not learn of it until the last moment. Transports were secured, and finally it was made known to the officers of the post only that an embarkation would be effected on the following day.

Rumors of the contemplated removal had reached the Boyds, and had, of course, been communicated to Nita. She declared that, if Coacoochee did not succeed in escaping before it took place, she should resume her position as the adopted daughter of Philip Emathla, and so follow her lover into exile. In this determination, Anstice warmly upheld her friend, but begged her to wait until the latest possible mo-

ment, before exchanging her present security for the uncertain fate of a captive.

One evening, Lieutenant Douglass, who, having safely passed the ordeal of a court-martial, and, honorably acquitted, had been restored to duty, called on the Boyds. In course of conversation with Anstice he casually remarked, that the morrow would probably offer the last chance they would ever have of seeing their friend Coacoochee.

"What do you mean?" asked the startled girl.

"I mean that the Indians in St. Augustine are to be embarked for Charleston to-morrow morning; and Coacoochee, poor fellow, is reported to be in such wretched health that it is not probable he can live long, especially in a climate so much colder than this."

Nita, who sat in another part of the room, listlessly engaged in a bit of fancy-work, glanced up quickly as she caught the name of her captive lover. She did not hear what else the young officer said, and waited eagerly for his going, that she might question her friend. Anstice, on her part, was so impatient to communicate to Nita the news she had just learned, and became so absent-minded in her conversation with Douglass, that he suspected something had gone wrong, and so took his departure earlier than usual.

Long and earnestly did the two girls, who had grown to love each other like sisters, talk together

that night. Very early the next morning, escorted by Ralph Boyd, they left the house and turned in the direction of Philip Emathla's encampment. Nita had resumed her Indian dress, but over it she wore the same long cloak that had served to disguise her on a former occasion. Its hood was drawn over her head and about her face, so that but little of her features could be distinguished.

As they hastened through the narrow streets of the quaintly built city, their attention was attracted by a clatter of iron-shod hoofs, and a mounted officer in service uniform came dashing toward them. It was Irwin Douglass, and he reined up sharply at sight of his friends. As he lifted his cap to the ladies, he exclaimed:

"Well, you are early birds this morning! I suppose you have heard the great news and are come out to verify it?"

"No, we haven't heard any news; what is it?" asked Boyd.

"Coacoochee has escaped from the fort! got out somehow during the storm last night, and made off. The general is in a terrible temper over it. I am ordered out with a scouting party to see if we can pick up the trail. So I must hurry on. Good-bye."

In another minute the bearer of this startling bit of news was clattering away down the street, while the three who were left stood staring blankly at one another.

Nita was saying over and over to herself, "Coacoochee has escaped, has escaped, and is free. Oh! how happy I am! And that soldier is going to try and recapture him. Oh, how I hate him! But he cannot. Coacoochee is free, and will never let them take him again. Oh, how happy I am!"

As Anstice Boyd reflected upon the full meaning of what she had just heard, her heart was crying out: "Coacoochee has escaped, and I aided him. Now Irwin has gone to find him. They will meet and kill each other. I know they will! Oh! why did I do it? Why did I do it?"

Ralph Boyd expressed his feelings aloud by exclaiming: "That is one of the best bits of news I have heard in many a day. It will continue the war, no doubt, but I don't care if it does. Serve the sneaks right who thought to end it by treachery. They will get some greatly needed lessons in honest fighting now."

"You don't mean Mr. Douglass, brother?"

"Douglass? No! Bless his honest soul! He's no sneak, but only an unfortunate victim of circumstances. But never you fear, sister. Douglass won't catch Coacoochee, even if he has to ride half around the territory to avoid him. He is too honorable a fellow to do a mean thing, or forget a debt of gratitude. If Douglass is the only one sent after him, Coacoochee is all right. I am afraid, though, there are others. I'll find out as soon as I get

you two back to the house. What! Not going back?"

"Not just yet, brother. Nita wants to be the first to tell the great news to Coacoochee's father, so as to give the old man courage to bear his exile and his sad journey. She wants to bid him good-bye too, for of course she will not go with him now."

"Of course not, and I suppose we must let her do as she wishes," agreed Boyd, reluctantly. "I hope, though, she will be very careful not to be recognized."

"I will see that she is careful, brother."

So the three continued their way to the Indian camp, which they found in a state of dire confusion on account of the order for removal just received. There were already many white persons in the camp; soldiers who were hastening the preparations, and mere curiosity-seekers who were retarding them by their useless presence. All of these, as well as the Indians themselves, gazed curiously at the two ladies and the stalwart young Englishman, who walked directly to the tent of Philip Emathla. The old man, who was sitting in a sort of a daze just outside, recognized Ralph Boyd at once, and when Nita stooped and whispered in his ear, he immediately rose and followed her inside the canvas shelter. Anstice also went inside, and the flap curtaining the entrance was dropped, leaving Boyd outside on guard.

As he gazed curiously on the novel scene about him, and even walked a few steps to one side the better to observe it, a white man of sinister aspect passed him twice, each time regarding him furtively but keenly. Suddenly he darted to the tent, pulled aside the flap, and thrust his head inside.

A startled cry from the interior attracted Boyd's attention, and, ere the man had time for more than a glimpse, he was seized by the collar, and jerked violently backward.

"What do you mean, scoundrel ! by your rascally intrusion into other folk's privacy ?" demanded the young Englishman, hotly. "I've a mind to give you the kicking you deserve."

"I didn't mean nothin', cap'n," whined the man, squirming in the other's fierce clutch. "I didn't know thar was any privacy in thar. I'm thought 'twas only Injuns ; and I'm got orders to take that tent down immejiate."

"Well, you won't take it down, not yet awhile ; and you'll vanish from here as quick as possible. So get !"

With the utterance of this expressive Americanism the speaker released the man, and at the same time administered a hearty kick that caused its recipient to howl with anguish. Ere he disappeared he turned a look of venomous hate at his assailant and muttered :

"I'll git even with you for this, curse you! Anyway, I saw what I wanted to see, and I know whar the gal's to be found."

He was Ross Ruffin, Mr. Troup Jeffers' human jackal, who, at the bidding of his master, had been hanging about the Indian camp for weeks, watching for the reappearance of Nita Pacheco. His suspicions had just been aroused by the disappearance, into Philip Emathla's tent, of two ladies, and in the single glimpse caught by his bold manœuvre they had been confirmed. He had seen Nita, whose cloak having fallen to the ground, was fully revealed in her Indian costume, standing with her hands on the old chieftain's shoulders and imparting to him the glorious news of Coacoochee's escape from captivity. Now all that he had to do was to discover whether the girl accompanied the Indians to Charleston or remained behind, and this information he had acquired ere nightfall.

Nita had not seen him, and it was Anstice who uttered the cry that attracted her brother's attention. Of course neither of them recognized the man, nor when, a little later, they returned to the house that Nita had believed on leaving she should never see again, did they notice that he was stealthily following them at a distance. After that he watched the embarkation of the captives, to assure himself that Nita Pacheco did not accompany them. As the transports sailed, Ross Ruffin also left the

city, and that night he held a conference with Mr Troup Jeffers.

The inmates of the Boyd house experienced mingled feelings of satisfaction at Coacoochee's escape, apprehension lest he should be recaptured, and anxiety in behalf of their friend Douglass. Only Nita was confident and light hearted.

"He will not be caught," she said, "nor will he harm your friend; we shall hear from him very soon by some means."

She was right; they did hear very soon, and when the news came, it was of such a terrible nature that the others would gladly have kept it from her. Lieutenant Douglass, returning at nightfall from his scout, went directly to the Boyds' house; and, in answer to the eager queries that greeted his entrance, said:

"Yes; I found him, poor fellow! About a dozen miles from the city we met a squad of volunteer cavalry. In reply to my question if they had seen any sign of Coacoochee, who had just escaped from the fort, one of them said: 'You bet we have, cap'n, and here's his scalp.' With that —"

Here the speaker was interrupted by a stifled cry and a heavy fall. Nita Pacheco lay unconscious on the floor. The two men bore her to a bed in an adjoining room, where they left her to the gentle care of Anstice. When they returned to the outer room, Douglass asked curiously:

"What does it mean, Boyd? What possible interest can your guest have in Coacoochee?"

"My dear fellow, I see now that we ought to have told you sooner, and so saved her this cruel blow. She is Nita Pacheco, Spanish by descent, but Indian by association and bringing up. She is the adopted daughter of Philip Emathla, and the betrothed of Coacoochee."

"Good Heavens!" cried Douglass. "No wonder she fell when struck such a blow. What a brute she must think me."

"Don't blame yourself, old man," said Boyd, soothingly; "the fault lies entirely with us. But are you certain that Coacoochee is dead?"

"The man who scalped him said he knew him well, and could swear to his identity. We went on to examine and bury the body, and it answered fully the description of Coacoochee. Oh yes, there is no doubt that he is dead, though his companion has thus far eluded all search. In one way, I suppose his death will be a good thing for the country; but I must confess, that for the sake of that poor girl, I would gladly restore him to life if I could, and take the consequences. Well, good night. Make the best apologies you can for me to Miss Anstice."