

CHAPTER XXXIII

TOLD BY THE MAGNOLIA SPRING

THE reported death of Coacoochee, which was generally believed, gave great satisfaction to the people of Florida, and to the troops who had been for so long engaged in the thankless task of trying to subdue the Seminoles. With many of their leading chiefs removed beyond hope of return, and with their most daring spirit dead, the Indians must, of course, relinquish all hopes of successfully continuing the struggle. So the war was supposed to be ended, and many families of refugees now returned to their abandoned homes.

Among these were the Boyds, who had no longer any reason for remaining in St. Augustine, and who were particularly anxious to remove Nita from the sorrowful associations surrounding her there. She was slow to recover from the shock caused by the news of her lover's death, but as soon as she was able to bear the journey, they took her with them to the plantation, which they begged her to consider her own home.

Ralph Boyd began at once the energetic restoration of his property. A few of the old servants had

already found their way back, and others, tired of dwelling amid the constant alarms of Indian camps, began to arrive in small bands, as soon as they heard that the proprietor had returned, until nearly the whole of the original force of the plantation was restored to it. Aided by these free and willing workmen, the young planter repaired the great house and numerous outbuildings, cleared and replanted the weed-grown fields, trimmed the luxuriant growth of climbing vines and shrubbery, and, within a few months, could gaze with honest pride over an estate unexcelled for beauty by any in Florida.

In these undertakings Nita tried, for the sake of her friends, to exhibit an interest, and in their presence to appear cheerfully content. With all her efforts, however, she could not conceal the fact that she was pining for her old forest life, and would gladly exchange the luxuries of civilization for the rude camp of her warrior lover, could he but be restored to her. She spent much time, clad in her Indian costume, and roaming the wilder portions of the plantation, mounted on one of those fleet-footed ponies for which Florida was famous, and which were descendants of the old Andalusian stock brought over by De Soto. One of the girl's favorite haunts was the bank of a spring that boiled from a bed of snow-white sand, amid a clump of stately magnolias, about a mile from the great house. Here she would sit for hours, plaiting

sweet-scented grasses into graceful shapes, as she had learned to do among the maidens of King Philip's village; but always thinking such sad thoughts that her work was often wet with scalding tears. At such times Ko-ee, as she called her pony, circled about her in unrestrained liberty, nibbling at grasses or leaves, here and there, but always quick to come at her call, and behaving much like a well-trained watch-dog, fully aware of the responsibility of his position.

One mild and hazy afternoon early in the new year, when the weather was of that degree of perfection that it so often attains just before the coming of a "Norther," Nita sat by her favorite spring, and Ko-ee browsed near at hand. All at once the pony uttered a snort, pricked up his delicate ears, and began to move uneasily toward his mistress. As she glanced up from her work, she was filled with terror at the sight of a man standing but a few paces away, and regarding her earnestly. Her first impulse was to fly, and her next was to fling herself into his arms; for in that instant she recognized the brother whom she had not seen since that night of cruel separation nearly four years before.

"Louis!" she cried. "Louis, my brother! Is it you? Are you really alive? I thought you were dead, together with all whom I have ever loved. I knew you had escaped and joined our friends in fighting for their rights and our rights; but they



NITA SAT BY HER FAVORITE SPRING.

told me you were killed, and I thought I was alone in the world."

"Even if I had been killed, dear, you would not be alone, so long as Coacoochee is left; for he —"

"Louis! How dare you? He is dead!"

"Dead, sister! Coacoochee dead, when he but now sent me here to find you; when but four days ago I fought by his side in the fiercest and most splendid battle of this war? He was wounded, to be sure, though not seriously; but as for his being dead, he is no more dead than you or I. What could have put such a belief into your mind?"

For a moment the girl stared at her brother with unbelieving eyes and colorless face. "Is it true?" she whispered at length. "Can it be true? Tell me, Louis, that you are not saying this thing to tease me, as you used when we were children. Tell me quick, brother, for I can bear the suspense no longer."

As Louis assured her that he had spoken only the truth, and that her lover still lived, the girl's overstrained feelings gave way, and she sank to the ground, sobbing, and panting for breath.

Louis Pacheco, clad in the costume of a Seminole warrior, battle worn, and travel stained, sat by his sister's side and soothed her into quietness. Then he told her the story of the great fight on the shore of Lake Okeechobee. He told how Coacoochee and three other chiefs, with less than five

hundred warriors, fought for three hours in the saw-grass and tangled hammock growth, against eleven hundred white troops under General Zachary Taylor, and finally retired for want of ammunition, taking with them their thirteen dead and nineteen wounded. "The white soldiers were killed until they lay on the ground in heaps, and their wounded could not be counted. If we had only had plenty of powder, and as good guns as they, we would not have left one of them alive," concluded the narrator, fiercely.

"Oh, Louis, it is awful!" cried the girl, with a shudder.

"What is awful? That we left so many of them alive? Yes; so it is, but—"

"I do not mean that. I mean this terrible fighting."

"Yes, sister, the fighting is terrible, and so is the suffering; but neither is so terrible as tamely submitting to slavery, and injustice, and oppression, and the loss of everything you hold most dear on earth. Those are the terrible things that the whites are trying to force upon us. But we will never submit. We will fight, and cheerfully die, if needs be, as free men, rather than live as slaves. As for the white man's word, I will never trust it. Coacoochee trusted it, and it led him to a prison. Osceola trusted it, and it led him to death. Miccanopy trusted it, and it led him into exile."

“But, Louis, some of the whites are honorable. The Boyds have treated me like an own sister, and, but for them, Coacoochee would not now be free.”

“Yes,” admitted Louis, with softened voice. “Coacoochee has told me of them, and with my life would I repay their kindness to you and to him. With them you are safe, and with them will I gladly leave my sister until such time as I can make a free home for her.”

“Oh, Louis! Haven’t you come for me? Can’t I go with you?”

“Not now, Ista-chee [little one]. Here is greatest safety for you; for to all the Iste-chatte has word been sent that none may harm this place, nor come near it. The suffering of the women and children with us is very great, and I would not have you share it. Now I must go; for I am sent to notify the northern bands of our victory, and bid them follow it up with fierce blows from all sides. In two days will I come to this place again, when, if you have any token or message for Coacoochee, I will take it to him. Soon he hopes to come for you himself, and until that time you must wait patiently.”

So saying, and after one more fond embrace of his sister, Louis disappeared in the undergrowth, leaving Nita radiant and filled with a new life. Her brother had bound her to secrecy concerning

his visit, at least until he had come and gone again, but she could not restrain the unwonted ring of happiness in her voice, nor banish the light from her face. Both of these things were noted by Anstice, as she met the girl on her return to the house.

"Why, Nita! What has happened?" she exclaimed. "Never have I seen you look so happy. One would think you had heard some glorious news. What is it, dear?"

"Please, Anstice, don't ask me; for, much as I am longing to tell you, I can't; that is, not for a few days. Then I will tell you everything. But I am happy. Oh, I am so happy!"

With this, the girl darted away to her own room, leaving Anstice in a state of bewilderment not un-mixed with vexation.

"I'm sure she might have told me," she said to herself. "It can't be anything so very important, for there is no possible way of receiving news at this out-of-the-world place, unless it is brought by special messenger, and none could arrive without my knowledge. I do believe, though, that one is coming now."

Anstice was standing on the broad front verandah, over which was trained a superb Lamarque rose, so as to form a complete screen from the evening sun. Her ear had caught the sound of hoof-beats, and, as she parted the vines before her, she saw two horsemen coming up the long oleander

avenue. Both were in uniform, and it needed but a glance for the blushing girl to discover the identity of the foremost rider. It was Irwin Douglass, hot, dusty, and weary with long travel. He dismounted, tossed his bridle to the orderly, who rode back toward the stables with both horses, and slowly ascended the steps.

As he gained the verandah, his bronzed face flushed with pleasure at sight of the daintily clad girl who was stepping forward with outstretched hand to greet him.

"Oh, Miss Anstice! If you could only realize how like a bit of heaven this seems!" he exclaimed.

"You must indeed have undergone hardships to find your ideal of heaven in this stupid place," laughed the girl, at the same time gently disengaging her hand, which the young man seemed inclined to hold. "Now sit down, and don't speak another word until I have ordered some refreshments, for you look too utterly weary to talk."

"But I have so much to tell, and so short a time to tell it in," remonstrated the lieutenant. "I must be off again in an hour."

"Never mind; I won't listen to such a woe-begone individual. Besides, Ralph will want to hear your news as well."

With this, Anstice disappeared in the house, and Douglass sank wearily into a great easy-chair.

Directly afterward Ralph Boyd appeared with a

hearty greeting, and a demand to hear all the news at once. Before his desire could be gratified, his sister returned with a basket of oranges, and followed by a maid bearing a tray of decanters, glasses, and a jug of cool spring water.

"These will save you from immediate collapse," said the fair hostess, "and something more substantial will follow very shortly. Now, sir, unfold your budget of news, for I am dying to hear it."

"Well," began Douglass, "there has been the biggest fight of the war, away down south on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, and I was in it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Anstice.

"That, of course, is nothing wonderful," continued the young soldier, "but it is surprising that I came out of it without a scratch, for there were plenty who did not. On our side we left twenty-six dead on the field, and brought away one hundred and twenty severely wounded, besides a few score more suffering from minor injuries."

"Whew!" ejaculated Ralph Boyd. "Who was in command?"

"General Taylor, on our side. And now for my most surprising bit of news." Here the speaker hesitated and looked carefully about him. "I want to be cautious this time," he said. "But it was confidently asserted by scouts and prisoners that the Indian commander was no other than our late lamented friend, the Wildcat."

“Coacoochee! So that was Nita’s secret!” cried Anstice. “I might have known that nothing else would make her look so radiant. Oh! I am so glad!”

“What do you mean?” demanded the astonished lieutenant. “How could she have heard anything about the battle, when I have just come from the field with despatches for St. Augustine, and have ridden almost without stopping?”

“I don’t know, for she wouldn’t tell me; but I am certain she did hear some time this afternoon. But oh! Mr. Douglass, we are so thankful that you escaped so splendidly. It must have been awful. Of course you gained the victory, though?”

“I don’t quite know about that,” replied the lieutenant, doubtfully. “We silenced their fire, and drove them from the field after a three-hours fight; but it is said that they had less than half our number of men, and we are in full retreat. Officially, of course, we have won a victory; but it wouldn’t take more than two or three such victories to use up the whole Florida army.”

They discussed the exciting event for an hour longer, and then Douglass was reluctantly forced to continue his journey. When he left, he promised to be back in three days’ time, as his orders were to proceed from St. Augustine to Tampa.

This promise was fulfilled; but when the lieutenant again drew rein before the hospitable planta-

tion house, that seemed so much like a home to him, he found its inmates filled with anxiety and alarm. Nita Pacheco had disappeared under very mysterious circumstances the evening before, and no trace of her whereabouts or fate could be discovered.