

CHAPTER XXXIV

FOLLOWING A MYSTERIOUS TRAIL

NITA had not appeared during the lieutenant's former brief visit to the plantation, and when, on his departure, Anstice sought her to charge her with having already learned that Coacoochee still lived, the happy girl made no denial of her knowledge. At the same time she would not reveal the source of her information, though when Anstice declared her belief that Nita had seen the young chief himself, the latter denied that such was the case. "He is wounded," she added, "and could not come. Besides," she continued proudly, "he is now head chief of the Seminole nation, and has much to think of. But he remembered me, and sent me a message."

"Remembered you, indeed!" cried Anstice. "I should think he ought to; but I am sorry to hear that he is wounded, for he is a splendid fellow. Isn't it wonderful, though, that Lieutenant Douglass went through that same awful battle, and came out without injury. I can't understand it."

"In a battle where Coacoochee commands, no friend of Ralph Boyd can be struck, save by accident," replied Nita, simply.

“Do you believe that? If I thought it were true, I should love your Indian hero almost as much as you do, dear. I wonder, though, if that can be the secret of Irwin’s escape?”

So the two girls talked and became drawn more closely to each other with their exchange of innocent confidences.

On the following day, Nita rode Ko-ee as usual, though not in the direction of the magnolia spring; but on the one after, she haunted its banks for hours. She went to it in the morning, reluctantly returning to the house for lunch and to have Ko-ee fed at noon, and made her way back to the place appointed for meeting her brother, as soon afterwards as she could frame a decent excuse for so doing.

She was in the gayest of spirits as she rode away, and she laughingly called back to Anstice, “Tomorrow, dear, I am going to spend the whole day with you.”

“Isn’t it a pleasure to see her so happy?” asked Anstice of her brother, as they watched the girl ride away. “And did you ever see such a change in so short a time? A few days ago she was listless and apparently indifferent whether she lived or not. Now she is full of life, and interested in everything. Then, I did not consider her even good-looking; while at this minute, she seems to me one of the most beautiful girls I ever saw.”

“Yes,” replied Boyd, “I have noticed the change;

but I wish, Anstice, you would persuade her to give up these lonely rambles; though she has promised me not to go beyond the limits of the plantation, I can't help feeling uneasy. If I weren't so awfully busy, I would ride with her myself, since she insists on riding."

"No you wouldn't, brother," laughed Anstice. "I couldn't afford to have the jealousy of the savage lover aroused in that way. Besides, it is absurd to regard Nita as though she were a daughter of civilization, needing to have every step carefully guarded. In spite of her sweetness, and the readiness with which she has fallen into our ways, she is still so much of an Indian as to be more at home in the trackless forest, than in the *chaco* of the *Iste-hatke*, as she is pleased to term the house of the white man. So let her alone, brother; for, if she is to be the wife of an Indian, the more she retains of her Indian habits, the better it will be for her."

Thus Nita was allowed to go her own way. And when, at sunset, she had not returned, but little uneasiness was felt in the great house on her account, though Anstice did sit with her gaze fixed on the long avenue up which she expected each moment to see the truant appear.

A few minutes later her uneasiness was exchanged for alarm, as one of the stable boys came running to the house to report that Ko-ee, the pony, had shortly before appeared at the stables, riderless and alone,

though still saddled and bridled, and that Miss Nita was nowhere to be seen.

Filled with dismay at this report, Ralph Boyd and his sister hastened to the stables, and there were greeted by the further news that four of the best horses belonging to the plantation were missing. This had only been discovered when one of the stable boys went to the field into which all the horses not in use were turned during the daytime, to drive them up for the night.

By this time a group of excited negroes was collected, and it seemed as though it had only needed the starting of disquieting reports to cause others to come pouring in. It now appeared that saddles and bridles had been stolen, that provisions had disappeared, that a boat was missing from the river bank, that unaccountable noises had been heard, and mysterious forms had been seen at night, in various parts of the plantation.

When Boyd sternly demanded why he had not been informed of these things before, the negroes replied that they had not dared offend their Indian friends, whom they believed to be at the bottom of all the trouble.

“If Indians are prowling about here, the sooner we locate them and discover their intentions, the better,” announced the proprietor, “and if Miss Nita has come to any grief from which we can extricate her, the sooner we do that, the better also.”

With this, he armed himself and a dozen or so of the more trusted negroes, provided a dozen more with torches, for the night had not grown very dark, let loose all the dogs of the place, wondering at the time why they had not given an alarm long before, and thus accompanied made a thorough examination of all Nita's known haunts within the limits of the plantation. Midnight had passed ere the fruitless search was ended, and the young man returned wearily to the great house.

"It is my honest conviction," he declared to Anstice, as she hovered about him with things to eat and to drink, "that Nita has met some band of Indians and gone off with them. I shouldn't be surprised to learn that Coacoochee had sent for her, or even come for her himself."

"I don't believe any such thing," said Anstice, decidedly. "She would never have gone off without bidding us good-bye. Nor do I believe that Coacoochee would take, or allow to be taken, one pin's worth of property belonging to you. Whatever has happened to Nita, and I am afraid it is something dreadful, she has not left us in this state of suspense of her own free will."

"Well," replied the other, "I am too tired to discuss the question further to-night, and perhaps daylight will aid us in solving it."

Soon after sunrise the next morning, according to his promise of returning on the third day, Lieutenant

Douglass, heading an escort of troopers, and accompanied by one of the most experienced scouts in Florida, reached the plantation. While at breakfast he gathered all the known details of what had happened on the previous evening. Then he asked which of Nita's usual haunts she would have been most likely to visit the afternoon before.

"The magnolia spring," replied Anstice, without hesitation. "She was going in that direction when last seen."

"Let us take a look at the magnolia spring, then, and see if Redmond, my scout, can discover any signs of her having been there."

So they four, the Boyds, Douglass, and the scout, visited the bubbling spring beside which Nita was known to have passed so much of her time. Within two minutes the scout pointed out a place in a thicket but a short distance from the spring, where a struggle had taken place, and from which a plainly marked trail led through the undergrowth toward the river.

"There were only two men," he said, "and they warn't Injuns, for no redskin ever left such a trail as that. Besides, Injuns don't wear boots, which them as was here yesterday did. It's my belief that them men has made off with the girl. Leastways, one of 'em carried something heavy; but they've been mighty careful not to let her make any footprints."

The trail was followed to a place on the river-bank where a boat had been concealed, and from signs undistinguishable to untrained eyes, the scout described the craft so minutely, that Ralph Boyd knew it to be the one missing from his own little fleet.

"But what have white men got to do with this business?" the latter asked, in perplexity, and unwilling to drop his Indian theory.

"Dunno, cap'n," replied the scout; "but you can take my word for it, that white men have been, and Injuns hasn't. Yes, they have too!" he cried, as at that instant his eye lighted on another, almost illegible print, near where the boat had grounded. "Here's a moccasin track, and it ain't that of any woman either. What I want now is to have a look on the other side."

In compliance with this desire, a boat was procured, and the whole party crossed the river. Then a short search located the point where the other boat had landed. It also disclosed a most puzzling trail, for here were the prints of *four* pairs of booted feet instead of two, while no trace of moccasins was to be found. The trail led from the water's edge to a grove in which four horses had been tied to trees, and from there it bore away to the southwest.

"They're headed for the Tampa road," remarked the scout; "and I reckon Tampa's where they're bound for."

"Then we'll have a chance to find out something more about them," said Douglass; "for I must be a long way toward Tampa before another nightfall."

"By Jove, old man! I'm going with you," declared Ralph Boyd; "I want to know something more of this affair myself."

"If you go, Ralph, I shall go too," announced Anstice, firmly. "I'm not going to be left here alone again. Besides, I am as anxious to find out what has become of poor Nita as you are, and I have always wanted to visit Tampa."

As Douglass assured his friends that nothing would afford him greater pleasure than to have them accompany him, and joined with Anstice in her plea, Ralph Boyd reluctantly gave consent for his sister to form one of the party. Thus, before they regained their own side of the river, all details of the proposed trip were arranged.

While Anstice was making her preparations for departure, her brother summoned the entire working force of the plantation, and telling them that he had reason to believe the recent thefts to have been committed by white men, asked if any of them could remember having seen any strange white man about the place within a week.

All denied having done so, save one of the old field hands, who hesitatingly admitted that he had seen the ghost of a white man, on the night of the "Norther."

"Where did you see it?" demanded Boyd.

"At de do' ob de chickun house."

"What were you doing there?"

"Jes' projeckin' roun'."

"How do you know it was a ghost, and not a live man?"

"Kase I seen him by de light ob de moon, an kase I uster know him when he war alive."

"Whose ghost do you think it was?"

"Marse Troup Jeffers, de ole oberseer."

"The very man I ought to have thought of at first!" exclaimed the proprietor, turning to Douglass. "He is not only so familiar with the place that he knows where to lay his hands on such things as he needs, and is friendly with the dogs, but he is so bitter against me for turning him off, that he has already attempted to take my life, as well as that of Anstice. He is now a slave-trader, and, in company with other ruffians like himself, disguised as Indians, he very nearly succeeded in running off all the hands on the plantation. He has already made several attempts to capture Nita, for the purpose of selling her into slavery, and now I fear he has succeeded. I swear, Douglass, if I ever get within striking distance of that scoundrel again, his death or mine will follow inside of two seconds. Now, let us hasten to pick up the trail, and may God help Nita Pacheco, if she has fallen into the clutches of that human devil."

The plantation being left in charge of old Primus, the travellers set forth, and, a number of boats having been provided, they were speedily ferried across the river, towing their swimming horses behind them. On the farther side they resaddled and mounted, Anstice riding Nita's fleet-footed Ko-ee.

By hard riding they struck the Tampa road before noon, and Redmond immediately pointed out the trail of four shod horses, which he affirmed had been ridden at full speed, late the evening before. Soon afterward, the scout discovered the place where the outlaws had camped. He declared that they had reached it long after dark, and had left it before sunrise that morning.

"Mighty little hope of our overtaking them this side of Tampa, then," growled Douglass.

For two days longer did the pursuing party follow that trail. They found two other camping-places; but study the signs as they would, they could discover nothing to indicate the presence of a woman, nor of any save booted white men. "Which is what beats me more than anything ever I run up against," remarked the puzzled scout.

On the third day, by nightfall of which they expected to reach Fort Brooke on Tampa Bay, the plainly marked trail came to a sudden ending, amid a confusion of signs that Redmond quickly interpreted.

"They were jumped here by a war-party of Reds,"

he said, "were captured without making a show of fight, and have been toted off to the northward. Would you mind, sir, if I followed this new trail a few miles, not to exceed five? I might learn something of importance from it."

"No," replied Douglass. "We can afford to rest the horses here for an hour or two, and I will go with you."

"So will I, if you have no objection," said Boyd.

The three went on foot swiftly and in silence for about three miles, then the guide suddenly stopped and held up his hand for caution. Creeping noiselessly to his side, the others peered in the direction he was pointing, and there beheld a scene of horror that neither of them forgot so long as he lived.