

CHAPTER XXXV

FATE OF THE SLAVE-CATCHERS

FOR some time, Boyd, Douglass, and the scout had been aware of an odor, pungent and sickening; but neither of the two former had been able to determine its character. Now, as they gazed into an opening in the pine forest, beside a small pond, its hideous cause was instantly apparent. Although there was no sign of human life, there was ample evidence that human beings, engaged in the perpetration of an awful tragedy, had occupied the place but a few hours before. Chiefest of this evidence were the charred remains of two human bodies, fastened and supported by chains to the blackened trunks of two young pine trees. At the foot of each tree a heap of ashes, and a few embers that still smouldered, told their story in language so plain that even the civilian and the soldier had no need of the scout's interpretation to enable them to comprehend instantly what had taken place.

For a few minutes they remained in hiding while he cautiously circled about the recent encampment to discover if any of the Indians still lurked in its vicinity. At length he reappeared on the opposite

side of the opening, and entering it disturbed a number of buzzards that were only awaiting the cooling of the embers to begin their horrid feast. These rose on heavy wings, and lighting on neighboring branches, watched the intruders with dull eyes.

"The Injuns have gone," said the scout as he met his companions in the middle of the opening, "and taken the four horses with them. It was a small war-party, all on foot and without women or children; but what beats me is that there ain't no tracks of white men along with theirs. Here are two accounted for, but what has become of the other two? They might have rid horseback, it's true; but then, it ain't Injun way to let prisoners ride when they are afoot themselves."

"Is there any way of finding out who these poor devils were?" asked Douglass, indicating the pitiful remnants of humanity before them.

"No, sir, I can't say as there is," replied the scout, doubtfully. "All I know for certain is that they was human, most likely men, and more than likely white men. They must have done something to make the Reds uncommon mad, too; for even Injuns don't burn prisoners without some special reason, and never, in my experience of 'em, have I run across a case where they did it in such a hurry. Generally when they've laid out to have a burning, they save it till they get back to their village, so as to let all

hands share in the festivities. No, sir; this case is peculiar, and you can bet there was some mighty good reason for it."

As it would have been useless to follow the Indian trail any further, the scouting party turned back from this point.

"If I could only be sure that one of those wretches was Jeffers," said Boyd to Douglass as they made their way among the solemn pines, "I should feel that he had met with his just deserts. Certainly no man ever earned a punishment of that kind more thoroughly than he. As the matter stands, I fear it will be long before this mystery is cleared, if, indeed, it ever is. Under the circumstances, don't you think it will be just as well not to tell Anstice what we have seen?"

"Certainly," replied Douglass, "and I will instruct Redmond not to mention our discovery to any one. Of course, I shall be obliged to report it to the general, but beyond that it need not be known."

So Anstice was only told that the scouts had followed the Indian trail as far as they deemed advisable, without discovering a living being, and she rode on toward Tampa, happily unconscious of the hideous forest tragedy that had been enacted so near her. Although she was still anxious concerning Nita, she was not without hope that the girl had fallen into friendly hands, who would ultimately restore her to Coacoochee.

At Tampa, which presented at that time a scene of the most interesting activity, the Boyds formed many friends. A large military force was stationed here in Fort Brooke, a post charmingly located on a point of land projecting into the bay, and shaded by rows of live-oaks, vast in size, and draped in the cool green-gray of Spanish moss. Beneath these were the officers' quarters, and long lines of snowy tents. One of the married officers, whose wife had gone North, tendered the Boyds the use of his rudely but comfortably furnished cottage until they should find an opportunity for returning safely to their own home. They gladly accepted this offer, and their cottage quickly became a centre of all the gayety and fun of the fort.

Just back of the post was a large encampment of Indians, who had surrendered or been made prisoners at different points, and were now collected for shipment to New Orleans, on their way to the distant west.

Although Anstice, in her pity for these unfortunates about to be torn from the land of their birth, often visited them, and made friends with the mothers through the children, she did not realize their sorrow so keenly as she would had any of her own friends or acquaintances been among them.

On the day before that fixed for their embarkation, Colonel Worth, of the 8th Infantry, came in from a long and finally successful scout after Halec Tuste-

nugge's band of Indians. Although the leader of this band, together with a few of his warriors, succeeded in eluding capture, a large number, including many women and children, had been brought in. These it was decided to start for New Orleans in the morning with the captives already on hand.

The colonel who had just concluded this arduous campaign was a fine specimen of the American soldier, as honest as he was brave; and a cordial friendship already existed between him and the Boyds. As was natural, therefore, the morning following his arrival at Fort Brooke saw him seated at their cheerful breakfast table, where, of course, the conversation turned upon the existing war.

"There is just one man in Florida to-day, with whom I wish I had a personal acquaintance," remarked the colonel. "He alone could put a stop to this infernal business of hiding and sneaking and destroying cornfields, and running down women and children, if he only would. His name is Coacoochee."

"Yes, I know him well, and believe what you say of him is true," responded Boyd.

"You know him! Then you are just the man to aid me in meeting him. I am to be sent into his country in a few days, and am extremely anxious to have a talk with him. Will you go with me, and exert your influence to induce him to come in?"

"I am afraid my influence would prove of small avail, colonel. You see, Coacoochee has been already

caught by chaff and made to suffer dearly for his credulity."

"Yes, I know, and it was one of the most outrageous — But I have no business criticising my superior officers, so I can only say that —"

Just here came an interruption in shape of a lieutenant, who wished the colonel's instructions concerning an awkward situation. "You see, sir," he began, "we had just got the prisoners, whom you brought in yesterday, nicely started for the boats, when one of them, and a mighty good-looking one for a squaw, darted out from among the rest and ran like a deer towards the woods. Two of the guards started after her, and several men ran so as to head her off. At this, and seeing no other chance of escape, she sprang to a small tree and climbed it like a kitten. Once up, she drew a knife from some part of her clothing and declared in excellent English that she would kill any man who dared come after her and then kill herself. I have been talking to her and trying to persuade her of her foolishness. She only answers that she will never be taken from Florida, and will do exactly what she threatens, in case we attempt her capture. She is terribly in earnest about it, and I am afraid means just what she says. Now all the boats have left, save one that is only waiting for her, and I am in a quandary. I dare not order any man to go up after her. I can't have her shot. I can't shake her down, nor can I

persuade her to come down, and the transports will have sailed long before she is weary or starved into submission."

"It certainly is a most embarrassing situation," laughed the colonel, rising from the table as he spoke, "and one that would seem to demand my official presence. Will you come with us, Boyd?"

"Can't I go too, colonel?" broke in Anstice. "Perhaps I can persuade the poor thing to come down after all you men have failed."

"Certainly, Miss Anstice; we shall be delighted to have both your company and assistance."

They found the situation to be precisely as described, except that, by this time, quite a crowd of soldiers, all laughing and shouting at the Indian girl, were collected about the tree. These were silenced by the coming of their officers, and drew aside to make way for them.

"This is a decidedly novel experience," began the colonel, as he caught sight of a slender figure perched up in the tree, and staring down with great, frightened eyes.

At that moment, Anstice Boyd, who had just caught a glimpse of the girl's face, sprang forward with a little scream of recognition.

"It is Nita! my own darling Nita!" she cried. "Colonel, order these horrid men to go away at once, and you and the others please go away, too. She is my friend and will come to me as soon as

you are all out of sight. I will be responsible for her, and shall take her directly to the house, where you can see her after awhile, if you choose."

Two minutes later the men had disappeared, and the poor, brave girl, who had determined to die rather than leave the land in which her lover still fought for liberty, was sobbing as though her heart would break in Anstice Boyd's arms. The latter soothed and petted her as though she had been a little lost child, and finally led her away to her own temporary home. Here she clad her in one of the two extra gowns she had managed to bring from the plantation, and so transformed her in appearance, that when, an hour later, the colonel called to inquire after his captive, he was more amazed than ever in his eventful career, to find her a very beautiful, shy, and stylishly dressed young lady, to whom it was necessary that he be formally presented.

He had, in the meantime, learned her history from Boyd; and, when made aware of the tender ties existing between her and the redoubtable young war-chief of the Seminoles, had exclaimed:

"Ralph Boyd, your coming here with your sister was a special leading of Divine Providence, as was the act of that brave girl in refusing to embark for New Orleans this morning. Now, with her aid, we will end this bloody war."

Proceeding to headquarters, he briefly explained

the situation to General Armistead, who had just succeeded General Taylor in command of the army in Florida, and obtained his permission for the transports to depart, leaving Nita Pacheco behind.

Upon meeting Nita in Anstice Boyd's tiny sitting-room, the colonel chided her gently for not making herself known to him at the time of her capture with the others of Halec Tustenugge's village.

To this she replied that she and her people had suffered so much at the hands of white men, and been so often deceived, that they no longer dared trust them.

"That is so sadly true, my dear girl, that it seems incredible that a Seminole should ever trust one of us again. Still, I am going to ask you to do that very thing. I am going to ask you to trust me, and believe in the truth of every word I say to you as you would in that of Coacoochee himself. If I deceive you in one word or in any particular, may that God who is ruler of us all repay me a thousand fold for my infamy."

Here followed a long conversation, in which the colonel outlined his plan for obtaining an interview with Coacoochee, through the influence of Nita, who he proposed should accompany his forthcoming expedition to the southern interior. At its conclusion, Nita gave him a searching look that seemed to read his very soul. Then, placing a small hand in his, she said:

"I will go with you, I will do what I can, and I will trust you."

"Spoken like a brave girl, and one well worthy the bravest lover in all Florida!" cried the colonel. "Now can I see the end of this war. Boyd, I of course count on you to go with us?"

"And me?" interposed Anstice. "Don't you count on me too, colonel? Because if you don't, neither of these people shall stir a single step with your old expedition."

"My dear young lady," rejoined the colonel, gallantly, "the entire fate of the proposed expedition rests with you, and I made so certain that you would accompany us, that I have selected as my adjutant Lieutenant Irwin—"

"That will do, sir. Not another word," interrupted the blushing girl. "If you get into the habit of talking such nonsense I, for one, will never believe a word you say. I don't care, though, so long as it is settled that I am to go. Now I want you both to listen while I tell you what Nita has just told me of all that has happened to her since she disappeared so mysteriously from the plantation. Nita dear, I am sure you don't want to hear it, so run up to my room, and have a good rest. I will come just as soon as I have got rid of these men."