

CHAPTER XXXVI

PEACE IS AGAIN PROPOSED

AFTER Nita had left the room, Anstice began her story as follows :

“On the afternoon before that cold ‘Norther’ we had about a month ago, Nita was sitting, as she often did, by the magnolia spring. You must remember the place, colonel. There she received a most unexpected visit from her brother Louis, whom she had not seen for years. He had been sent by Coacoochee to carry the news of the battle of Okeechobee to the northern bands, and also to bring a message to Nita. After they had talked for awhile, he had to go on his way, but promised to be back in two days’ time and take any message or token she might wish to send to her lover.”

“That’s who it was then !” broke in Ralph Boyd. “Well, I am glad to have that part of the mystery cleared up.”

“Yes,” continued Anstice ; “and of course, Nita was awfully excited. When the second day came, she spent nearly the whole of it at the spring. Finally, late in the afternoon, as before, she heard a voice calling to her by name, very softly. Think-

ing, of course, that it was Louis, who feared, for some reason, to advance into the open, she followed the direction of the voice unhesitatingly. Then the first thing she knew, a cloth was flung over her head, she was seized in a pair of strong arms, and borne struggling away.

“When, to save her from suffocating, the cloth was removed, she found herself in a boat, with two white men and her brother Louis. The poor fellow’s head was cut and bleeding, as though from a cruel blow, and he lay bound in the bottom of the boat. One of the white men was rowing, and the other sat watching them, with a pistol in his hand.”

“Did she recognize the white men?” inquired Ralph Boyd.

“Yes, she says they were the very two who stole her mother, and afterwards stole the wife of Osceola.”

“The scoundrels!” cried Colonel Worth. “In that case they were the prime instigators of this war, and ought to have been hanged long ago.”

“Yes,” answered Boyd, “and one of them stole my sister, colonel, and turned her adrift in the forest, where but for Coacoochee she must have perished. The same gentleman also shot me in the back at the battle of Withlacoochee, and supposed he had killed me.”

“Hanging would be altogether too good for the brute,” declared the colonel, excitedly. “He deserves to be burned at the stake.”

"That is what the Indians thought," replied Boyd, significantly. "But go on, sister. Did Nita find out the name of the other man?"

"Yes, she learned while with them that it was Ruffin,—Ross Ruffin."

"I have heard of him, too, as being as great a scoundrel as Jeffers himself, only more of a coward," muttered Boyd.

"They made both Nita and Louis put on boots before leaving the boat," continued the narrator, "and that accounts for our finding what we supposed were the footprints of four white men. When they reached the place where the horses were waiting, both the captives had their wrists bound together, and a rope was passed from each to the saddle of one of the white men. So they rode for two days, and Nita says it was simply awful."

"I should imagine it might have been," said the colonel.

"Just at dusk of the second day, a lot of ambushed Indians surprised and captured them all without firing a shot. Nita says, in spite of her fright, she thinks that was one of the happiest moments of her life. The Indians knew Louis, and, of course, released him and her at once, tying up the white men instead. That night they camped some miles from the road, and when Louis told who the prisoners were, and of the many outrages they had committed, especially the stealing of poor Chen-o-wah, the Indi-

ans declared they should live no longer, and began at once to make preparations for killing them. Nita says she isn't certain how they were killed, as she made Louis take her a long way off, where she could neither see nor hear what was going on; but she thinks they were *burned* to death."

"And I know it," said Ralph Boyd, grimly. "Douglass and I saw their charred remains the next day, and not knowing who they were, I expended a certain amount of sympathy on them, that I now feel to have been wholly wasted."

"Oh brother! and you never told me! I'm glad you didn't, though, for it is too horrible to even think of. Well, when Nita got to the Indian village, they treated her just as nicely as they knew how, and promised to join Coacoochee, of course taking her with them, as soon as their crops were planted. Then you came along, colonel, and captured poor Nita with the others, and brought her in here, and the rest you know. Oh, I forgot! Nita is feeling very badly about her brother Louis, who was captured with her and brought here. She says he was taken off in one of the first boats this morning, and she is afraid she will never see him again."

"He must have given an assumed name," remarked the colonel, thoughtfully. Under the circumstances, though, I am very glad that he did, and that he is well out of the country. I am afraid if it had been known a few hours sooner that Major Dade's guide

was in the prisoners' camp, he would never have left it alive. In that case my course with Coacoochee, which now appears so plain, would have been beset with serious, if not insurmountable, difficulties. As it is, I congratulate you, Miss Anstice, on having Nita Pacheco for a friend, and look forward to the happiest result arising from that friendship. Within a week we shall be ready to start for the country of Coacoochee, and I can assure you that I have never anticipated any expedition with greater pleasure than I do this one."

The first of March, that loveliest month of the entire Floridian year, found Colonel Worth's command camped in Fort Gardiner hammock, on the western bank of the Kissimmee River. Here, they were more than one hundred miles beyond the nearest white settlers, and in a country so abounding with game of all kinds, including deer and turkey, besides fish and turtles in wonderful abundance, that the troops were fed on these, until they begged for a return to bacon and hardtack as a pleasing change of diet. The heavily timbered bottom lands were in their fullest glory of spring green, fragrant with a wealth of yellow jasmine, and the glowing swamp azalea, as well as vocal with the notes of innumerable song birds. It was one of the most charming bits of the beautiful land that the Seminole loved so well and fought so fiercely to retain. It was a typical home of the Indian, and one from which the

soldiers of the United States had thus far been unable to drive him.

In the camp a large double tent, pitched next that of the commander, was set apart for the use of the Boyds and Nita. Here Anstice held regal court; for she was not only the first white woman to penetrate that wild region, but the first who had ever accompanied a command of the Florida army on one of its "swamp campaigns." In her efforts at entertaining the officers who flocked about her, Anstice was ably seconded by Nita, who, though demure and shy, was not lacking in quick wit and a cheery mirth that had been wonderfully developed during this expedition into the haunts of her lover.

From its outset she had refused to wear the garb of civilization, and appeared always dressed in the simple costume of an Indian maiden such as the young Seminole war-chief might recognize at a glance, and now he might be expected at any moment.

The day on which he had promised to come in had arrived, and already was Ralph Boyd gone forth to meet him. Oh, how slowly the time passed, and yet again, how swiftly! Finally, unable to conceal her agitation, Nita returned to the innermost recess of the tent, while Anstice entertained several officers with gay talk and laughter outside.

Friendly Indians, sent out long before with a white flag, on which were painted two clasped hands,

in token of friendship, and with numerous presents, had found Coacoochee, and informed him of Colonel Worth's desire for a talk ; upon which the fierce young chief had laughed them to scorn.

"Tell the white chief," he said, "to come alone to the camp of Coacoochee if he wishes to talk."

"Thy friend Ralph Boyd is in the camp of the soldiers, and sends word that the white chief is to be trusted."

"Tell my friend that I am through with trusting white chiefs. I have had a sadder experience with them than he."

"Nita Pacheco is in the camp of the soldiers, and, being restrained from coming to thee, bids thee come to her. She also sends word that the white chief is to be trusted even as she is to be trusted."

For a long time Coacoochee sat silent, while the little smoke clouds from his calumet floated in blue spirals above his head ; then he spoke again, saying :

"Tell the white chief that in five days Coacoochee will come to him. Tell Ralph Boyd that on the fifth day from now, two hours before the sleeping of the sun, if he comes alone, I will meet him at the palmetto hammock, one mile this side of the soldiers' camp. If he comes not, then shall I return to my own people, and the white chief shall never meet me save in battle. Tell Nita Pacheco that at her bidding only, of all the world, do I trust myself

again within the power of the Iste-hatke. Now go, and bear to her this token from Coacoochee."

With this the young chief detached from his turban a superb cluster of egret plumes fastened with a golden clasp, and handed it to the messenger. This token had been promptly delivered to Nita, together with her lover's message, and now she awaited his coming.

Ralph Boyd, riding out alone to meet his Indian friend, felt almost depressed at the utter loneliness of his surroundings, in which no signs of human presence or animal life were to be discovered. He wondered curiously, as he rode, whether that fair country would ever be filled with the homes and tilled acres of civilization. As he approached the cluster of cabbage palms named as the place of meeting, he scanned it closely, but without detecting aught save an unbroken solitude.

Even as he pondered on how long he should wait for Coacoochee to fulfil his engagement, he was startled by a low laugh, and the young chief, with outstretched hand, stood by his side.

Springing from his saddle, the Englishman grasped the hand of his friend, and after a warm greeting confessed his amazement that any human being could have approached him so closely without warning.

"I remembered the magic by which your warriors were made to appear and disappear on that former occasion long ago," he said, "and have watched so

keenly this time that I did not believe even you could come within many yards of me without detection. Even now I know not from where you came."

For answer Coacoochee uttered his own signal, the cry of a hawk. Instantly, to Boyd's infinite amazement, the two were surrounded by a cordon of warriors, all armed with rifles, and the furthest not more than three rods away.

Coacoochee smiled at the blank expression on his friend's face, and said: "From the camp of the soldiers to this place have my braves kept pace with thee; for, while I trust Ralph Boyd, I was not yet prepared to fully trust the war-chief of the Iste-hatke nor place myself entirely in his power. Now am I satisfied, and will go with you."

Thus saying, Coacoochee waved his hand, and the Indians, who had stood motionless about them, disappeared within the shadows of the hammock. At the same moment there came from it seven mounted warriors, one of whom led a superb horse fully equipped for the road. The young chief vaulted lightly into the saddle of this steed, and Boyd mounting at the same time, the two friends, followed by their picturesque escort, dashed away toward the camp by the Kissimmee.

A few minutes later a blare of trumpets and a roll of drums heralded their arrival, and Colonel Worth, escorted by a group of officers in full uni-

form, stepped forward to greet the distinguished guest, from whose coming so much was hoped. As the two war-chiefs of different races, and yet both natives of one country, held each other's hand, and gazed into each other's face, each was impressed with the belief that he had met an honest man, a worthy foe, and one who might become a staunch friend.

After the formalities of the occasion had been exchanged, and just as Coacoochee's eyes were beginning to rove restlessly down the camp, Anstice Boyd stepped to his side, gave him the greeting of an old friend, and leading him to her own tent, bade him enter alone.

Thus there was no witness to the meeting of the forest lovers ; but when, a few minutes later, they came from the tent together, there was a happiness in their faces that had not been there since that long-ago evening of betrothal in the village of Philip Emathla.