

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DOUGLASS FULFILS HIS MISSION

IN spite of the undisguised treachery by which Coacoochee had been made a prisoner and hurried from the country, the act was hailed with joy by unthinking people all over the Territory. These cared not how their enemy was got rid of, so long as they were at liberty to seize his lands and enslave the negroes among his followers. There were many others who were making too good a thing out of the war to care to have it end. From these classes, therefore, arose a mighty clamor, when it became known that General Worth was determined to bring back the young war-chief; and for a time there was no man in the country so bitterly abused and reviled as he.

To the fearless soldier, strong in the rectitude of his convictions, and planning far ahead of the present, this storm of words, prompted by ignorance, malice, and selfish interests, was but as the idle whispering of a passing breeze. He cared not for it; and if he had, his attention was too immediately and fully occupied by matters of pressing importance to permit him to notice it.

As the general had foreseen, the outrage perpetrated upon their most beloved chieftain caused the Seminole warriors to spring to their arms with redoubled fury. Even as a smouldering brush-heap is fanned into leaping flames by a sudden fitful gust, so the spirit of revenge, burning deep in Indian hearts, was now allowed to blaze forth without restraint. Small war-parties sallied forth from every swamp and hammock, burning and killing in all directions. Nimbly eluding pursuit, these could neither be destroyed nor captured; and through their fierce acts of vengeance, the citizens of Florida were given bitter cause to regret the taking away of Coacoochee. Such chiefs as remained, bound themselves by a solemn covenant to hold no further intercourse with the treacherous white man, but to fight him to the bitter end, and to put to death any messenger, red, black, or white, whom he might send to them under pretence of desiring peace.

It was now summer, the season of heat, rain, fevers, and sickness. Heretofore, during the summer months, the Indians had rested quietly in their villages, and cultivated the crops that should furnish food for the campaign of the succeeding winter. Heretofore, at this season, the soldiers had been withdrawn from the deadly interior, and allowed to recuperate in the health-giving sea-breezes of the coast.

Now all this was changed. While sympathizing

with the wronged and outraged Indians, General Worth's loyalty to his government was too strong to permit his feelings to interfere in the slightest with the full performance of his duty. The time for an active summer campaign had arrived, and the new commander was the very man to conduct such a one with the utmost vigor. The Indians who had taken to the war-path quickly found, to their sorrow, that the whites had done the same thing.

From every post in Florida detachments of troops scoured the neighboring territory, carrying desolation and dismay into every part of the country known, or supposed, to be occupied by the enemy. No hammock was so dense, and no swamp so trackless, that the white soldier did not penetrate it. During the month of June thirty-two cornfields of from five to twenty acres each were despoiled of their growing crops, and as many Indian villages were destroyed. Even the watery fastnesses of the widespread Everglades were invaded by a boat expedition from Fort Dallas, which destroyed crops and orchards on many a fertile island that the Indians had fondly believed no white man would ever discover. During this same month of June, more than three thousand men, stricken by fevers and kindred disease encountered in the swamps, were enrolled on the sick list of General Worth's little army.

By the end of the month nearly every Indian in

Florida had been driven into the impenetrable recesses of the Big Cypress, a vast swamp bordering on the southwest coast, and most of the troops were recalled to their respective posts.

Now, if Douglass had been successful in his mission, it was time for Coacoochee to be expected at Tampa, and the commander moved his headquarters from Palatka to Fort Brooke, that he might be on hand to receive the exiled chief. With him went the Boyds; for they had become too deeply interested in this game of war to remain at a distance from its most important moves. Of course, Nita accompanied them, alternately hopeful and despairing, longing for news from her lover, and yet fearing to receive it. Their old cottage being again placed at their disposal, the Boyds were at once as comfortably established as though they had never left it.

On the third of July, a strange sail was reported beating slowly up the bay, and that same evening Lieutenant Irwin Douglass, in speckless uniform, walked into the Boyds' cottage, as quietly as though he had left it but an hour before. As he entered, Anstice was the first to discover him, and sprang to his side.

"Irwin Douglass!" she cried. "Have you brought Coacoochee back with you? Tell me quick!"

Close behind her stood Nita, silent and motionless, but with shining eyes that gained the coveted in-

formation from the young officer's face long before he could give it in words.

"Didn't you say it must be a double wedding or none?" he asked, laughingly.

"Yes. Tell us quick!"

"Well, I didn't know of any one besides yourself who wished to get married, except Nita."

"You horrid man! Why don't you tell us?"

"And as I didn't suppose she would accept any other Indian —"

"You brought Coacoochee back with you?"

"I didn't say so."

"But you have! You know you have; for you would never have dared come here if you hadn't."

"Well then, I have, and he is aboard the transport out there in the bay, alive, hearty, and filled with happiness at once more breathing his native air."

"Irwin Douglass, you are a dear fellow, and I love you! which is more than I ever admitted before, except to Coacoochee," cried Anstice, throwing her arms about Nita and hugging her in her excitement. "But why didn't you bring him ashore? Didn't you suppose we wanted to see him? And didn't you know that poor Nita was wearing her heart out with suspense?"

"I feared so, but I couldn't help it. You see, when a man in the military business runs up against orders, he finds them mighty stubborn facts, and not lightly to be turned aside. So as I had orders

to leave our friend under guard aboard ship, until he had been visited by the commanding general, I thought it better to obey them."

"Never mind, dear," said Anstice, turning consolingly to Nita. "We will have him ashore to-morrow, and his coming will be a fitting celebration of the Fourth of July that the Americans make so much fuss over."

On the morrow, the general, accompanied by his staff, together with Douglass and Boyd, visited Coacoochee on board the transport. As these gained the deck, they beheld the distinguished prisoner thin and haggard, with manacles on both wrists and ankles, but still standing straight and undaunted, with eyes gazing beyond them and fixed on the dear land that he had thought never to see again.

Stepping directly to him, General Worth grasped his hand, saying :

"Coacoochee, I take you by the hand as a warrior and a brave man, who has fought long and with a strong heart for his country. You were not captured and sent away by my orders, but by the orders of the great chief who was then in command. Now I am in command, and by my order have you been brought back to your own land that you may give it the peace you promised me. For nearly five years has there been war between the white man and the red man. Now that war must end, and you are the man who must end it. You will

not be allowed to go free until your whole band has come in, ready for removal to the west. You may send a talk to them by three, or even five, of your young men. You shall state the number of days required for your people to come in. If they are all here within the limit of time fixed, you shall be set at liberty, and allowed to go on shore to them. If they are not here by the last day appointed, then shall its setting sun see you, and those with you, hanging from the yards of this vessel with the irons still on your hands and feet. I do not tell you this to frighten you. You are too brave a man for that. I say it because I mean it, and shall do as I say. This war must end, and you must end it."

For some minutes there was a dead silence, as the company reflected on the terrible words they had just heard, and Coacoochee's breast heaved with emotion he struggled to control. At length he said :

"Micco-hatke, you are a great chief, and I believe you are an honest man. Other white men have lied to me and cheated me. They could not overcome Coacoochee in battle, so they captured him by their lying words. With you it is not so. I will trust you. Let my young men go. If in thirty days the warriors of Coacoochee have not obeyed his voice and come to him, then let him die. He will not care longer to live."

After a conversation with his companions, to whom

all this had been interpreted, Coacoochee selected five of them, and with the earnest words of one placing his life and honor in their hands, charged them with a message to his people.

Then the irons were stricken from the limbs of those five, and they were allowed to pass over the side of the ship into a waiting boat. Coacoochee shook hands with each one, and to the last he said : " If thou meet with her whom I love, tell her — No, tell her naught. Already does she know the words that the heart of Coacoochee would utter. Give her this, and bid her wear it until I once more stand beside her or have gone from her life forever."

With this he handed the messenger a silken kerchief of creamy white, that, in honor of the occasion, had been knotted about his head.

Among those who thronged the shore to witness the return of the boats, none watched them with such straining eyes and eager impatience as Nita Pacheco. She stood with Anstice, a little apart from the rest, clad in the forest costume that she knew would be most pleasing to her lover.

General Worth had told no one of his plans, and so the girl did not doubt for a moment that Coacoochee would be allowed to come ashore that day. She was the first to make certain that one of the boats contained a number of Indians ; and from that moment her eyes did not leave it.

As it drew near to the shore, the happy light gradu-

ally faded from her face, and in its place there came a look of puzzled anxiety. "He is not there," she finally said to Anstice, in a tone that betrayed the keenness of her disappointment. "Let us go; there is nothing now to stay for."

"No," objected Anstice, "there must be a message from him. Let us wait and learn what has happened."

Boyd and Douglass came directly to where the girls awaited them; but ere either of them could enter into explanations, Nita darted away toward the warriors, who had just landed. With these she engaged in rapid conversation for the next five minutes, during which she learned of all that had passed aboard the ship, and of her lover's imminent peril.

When the girl rejoined her friends, her jetty hair was bound with the kerchief of creamy silk. She walked with a resolute step, and her eyes flashed with determination. Speaking to Anstice alone, without regard to those who stood near her, she said:

"The Micco-hatke will kill him if every member of his band is not here, ready to emigrate, within thirty days. The Seminole chiefs have sworn to receive no proposals for peace. They will even shoot the messengers of Coacoochee before they can be heard; but they will not kill a woman. It is for me, therefore, to go with those who bear the talk of Coacoochee. If, at the end of the allotted

time, every member of the band is not here, then I, too, shall be far away; but, as the sun sinks into the sea on that day, the spirit of Nita Pacheco will be forever joined with that of him to whom she plighted her troth. Come, let us go and make ready."

No persuasions nor suggestions of danger or hardship could alter the girl's determination, or cause her to waver from her fixed purpose. So she was allowed to have her way, and at daylight of the following morning she set forth, in company with the five warriors, on her perilous and fateful mission. They were amply provided with horses, provisions, and everything that could add to the success of their undertaking, and, as they rode away from the fort, every soul in it, from the general down, wished them a heart-felt "God speed."