CHAPTER XL

A DOUBLE WEDDING AND THE SETTING SUN

For days Nita Pacheco hovered between life and death. During this time, almost hourly bulletins of her condition were demanded, not only from the Indian encampment, but from the garrison, every man of which had been won to admiration of the gentle girl by her recent heroism. As for Coacoochee, he was as one who is bereft of reason. He would sit for hours on the porch of the Boyd cottage, heedless of any who might speak to him, motionless and unconscious of his surroundings. Then he would spring on his waiting horse and dash away to scour madly through miles of forest, before his return, which was generally made late at night or with the dawning of a new day. When food was offered him, he took it and ate mechanically; when it was withheld, he seemed unconscious of hunger.

The mental condition of the young chief so alarmed his friends that, one morning when he returned from a night spent in the forest, in a cheerful frame of mind, gentle and perfectly rational, they were greatly relieved, and welcomed him as one who had come back from a long journey.

"Take me to her," he said. "She is watching for me. From this moment she will get well. I have seen Allala, and she has said it."

They had not noted any sign of a change for the better in the sick girl, and so it was with misgivings as to the result that they complied with his request.

Nita lay as they had left her; but, upon the entrance of her lover into the room, her eyes unclosed. She smiled at him, and feebly held his hand for a single moment. From that hour her improvement was steady and rapid, and from that time forth Coacoochee was again the leader of his people, the firm ally of the whites, and unwearying in his efforts to persuade those of the Seminoles who still remained out, to come in and submit to removal.

During the two following months he spent his time as Nita had done, in visiting distant bands of Indians and explaining to them the folly of a further resistance. He possessed two great advantages over all others who had labored in the same direction. He had fought by their side, no one more bravely, and they trusted him. He had also crossed the salt waters and returned again in safety, so that, of his own experience, he could refute the assertion made by their prophet, that every Indian taken to sea by the whites was thrown overboard and drowned.

In this service the young chief often found himself in desperate situations, and he made frequent

hair-breadth escapes from death at the hands of those Indians who were either jealous of his power or distrustful for his honesty of purpose. In spite of discouragements and dangers, he persisted, and as the result of his convincing talks beside the red council fires of many a wild swamp retreat, band after band under well-known leaders and renowned fighters came into Fort Brooke, until only a scanty remnant still defied pursuit amid the impenetrable labyrinths of the Big Cypress.

The Indian encampment at Tampa occupied a space two miles square, and the task of guarding this large area was so great that, early in October, General Worth concluded to embark those already collected before they should become dissatisfied or rebellious and without waiting for more to come in. Accordingly the transports were made ready and the day for departure was fixed.

Now ensued most active preparations. For three days and nights the monotonous sound of the great wooden pestles cracking corn for the journey was heard from all parts of the camp. Vast quantities of fat pine knots were collected by the women, for they had heard that the country in which they were to live was destitute of wood. The entire area of the camp was illuminated at night by huge fires, so that there might be no cessation of the work.

The crowning event of all, or, as the general termed it, "the peace contract that ended the Seminole

War," was the double wedding that took place in the open air, under the great live-oaks in front of headquarters, on the evening before the day of sailing. The scene was as remarkable as it was picturesque. On one side were gathered the hundreds of forest dwellers who acknowledged one of the bridegrooms as their leader. Among these were proud chiefs, conspicuous in feathers and gaudy finery, stern warriors who had never known defeat in battle, plump matrons wearing many rows of beads and silver ornaments, slender maidens, and chubby children.

On the other side were ranks of troops as motionless as though on parade, and groups of officers in glittering uniforms. A superb military band rendered its choicest selections of music, and the simple ceremony was performed by the post chaplain.

Nita, fully recovered from her illness, and having emerged from it more lovely than ever, like gold that is purified by fire, was clad in the fawnskin dress of a forest maid, though about her neck lay a chain of great pearls, presented by the commander and his officers in token of their devoted admiration of her who had ended the war.

Beside her stood the young war-chief who had fought so bravely, and accepted defeat so manfully, and with whose fate hers had been so closely entwined during all the long years of fighting.

These two were married first, and after them came the beautiful English girl, whose heart had passed

into keeping of the dashing American trooper, standing so proudly beside her.

Ralph Boyd, after giving away both brides, declared that he could now appreciate the feelings of a parent bereft of his children.

The moment the double ceremony was concluded, the band played its most brilliant march, the troops raised a mighty cheer, there came a salvo of artillery from a light battery stationed on the parade ground, and the assembled Indians gazed on the whole affair with curious interest. All that evening there was music and feasting and dancing; but on the morrow came the sorrowful partings, and, for hundreds of those about to become exiles forever, the heart-breaking departure from their native land.

As Coacoochee and Nita stood together on the after-deck of the steamer that was bearing them down the bay, straining their eyes for a last glimpse of the stately pines that they loved so dearly, she murmured in his ear:

"Without your brave presence, my warrior, I could not bear it." And he answered: "Without you, Ista-chee, I would never have come."

Across the blue Mexican Gulf they steamed, and for one hundred miles up the tawny flood of the great river to New Orleans. There the followers of Coacoochee were so impressed by the numbers and evident strength of the white man, that they

were filled with pride at having successfully resisted his soldiers so long as they had.

At New Orleans the exiles were transferred to one of the great river packets, that, with its glowing furnaces, and the hoarse coughing of its high-pressure exhaust, seemed to them by far the most wonderful creation of the all-powerful Iste-hatke.

Being embarked in this mighty Pith-lo-loot-ka (boat of fire), no stop was made until they came within a few miles of Baton Rouge, where, by special request of Coacoochee, the packet was swung in toward the eastern bank. Guided by one familiar with that country, the entire body of Indians followed Coacoochee to the land. He bore a great basket, very heavy, and covered with palmetto leaves. None save himself knew what it contained.

A few rods from the shore the guide halted, and pointed to a lowly mound that was evidently a grave. Standing silently beside this, and waiting until all his people were gathered about him, the young chief said, with a voice that trembled, but so clearly that all might hear:

"Under this grass lies a great chief of the Seminole nation; one whom you knew and loved. He was an old man when the soldiers tore him from his home. His heart broke with its weight of sorrow, and he died on his way to that new land to which we are now going. He lies cold in this strange earth; but I have brought that which will

warm him. With this soil from the land of his fathers, I now cover the grave of Philip Emathla." Thus saying, Coacoochee emptied the contents of his basket over the mound at his feet.

At mention of Philip Emathla's name, a great cry of grief and loving reverence went up from the dusky throng, and they pressed tumultuously forward. They struggled to see, to feel, and even to taste the earth that now covered his grave. It was only coarse gray sand; but it was sand from Florida, from the dear land they would never more see. Through the magic of its shining particles they could hear again the whispering pines, the rustling palms, and the singing birds of Florida. They could see its shadowy woodlands and white beaches. Its myriad lakes and tortuous waterways lay outspread before them. The fragrance of its jasmine and palmetto was wafted to them. Its glinting clouds of white-winged ibis circled before their eyes. The countless details mirrored indelibly on their hearts rose before them in all their alluring beauty. The warriors stood stern and silent; but the women tore their hair, with piteous cries.

After a while Coacoochee succeeded in restoring quiet, and, with many a backward, lingering glance at the lonely grave of Philip Emathla, the company was re-embarked, and the steamer continued on its way up the mighty river. Turning from it into the Arkansas, they continued up the muddy volume

of that great tributary, across the whole State to which it gives a name, and on into that territory that the United States Government had recently set apart for the occupation of its Indian wards. Here, at Fort Gibson, the journey by water ended, though they had still to traverse the country of their old-time neighbors and enemies, the Creeks, ere they could reach the narrow tract reserved for them, in which they were to make their new homes.

At Fort Gibson a joyful surprise awaited Nita and Coacoochee; for Louis Pacheco, long since established in the west, and previously notified of their coming, had travelled that far to meet them. For them he had brought saddle-horses, while for the others a long train of wagons had been provided.

It was late on the day after their arrival before all was in readiness for the last stage of their journey; but they were now so anxious to press forward that Coacoochee gave the order for a start. Then, vaulting into his own saddle, and with Nita and Louis riding beside him, the young war-chief dashed away in the direction of the setting sun. As they gained a crest of the rolling prairie, he waved his rifle toward the infinite glories of the western sky, and, turning his face to those who followed him, thrilled their hearts with the ringing war-cry that had so often led the Seminole to victory:

"Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-chee!"