

THROUGH SWAMP AND GLADE

CHAPTER I

A BIT OF THE FLORIDA WILDERNESS

THE scene is laid in Florida, that beautiful land of the far south, in which Ponce de Leon located the fabled Spring of Eternal Youth. It is a land of song and story, of poetry and romance; but one also of bitter memories and shameful deeds. Its very attractiveness has proved its greatest curse, and for weary years its native dwellers, who loved its soil as dearly as they loved their own lives, fought desperately to repel the invaders who sought to drive them from its sunny shores.

Although winter is hardly known in Florida, still there, as elsewhere, spring is the fairest and most joyous season of the year, and it is with the evening of a perfect April day that this story opens.

The warm air was pleasantly stirred by a breeze that whispered of the boundless sea, and the glowing

sun would shortly sink to rest in the placid bosom of the Mexican Gulf. From the forest came sweet scents of yellow jasmine, wild grape, and flowering plumes of the palmetto mingled with richer perfumes from orange blossoms, magnolias, and sweet bays. Gorgeous butterflies hovered on the edge of the hammock and sought resting-places for the night amid the orange leaves. Humming-birds, like living jewels, darted from flower to flower; bees golden with pollen and freighted with honey winged their flight to distant combs. From a ti-ti thicket came the joyous notes of a mocking-bird, who thus unwittingly disclosed the secret of his hidden nest. A bevy of parakeets in green and gold flashed from branch to branch and chattered of their own affairs; while far overhead, flocks of snowy ibis and white curlew streamed along like fleecy clouds from feeding-grounds on the salt marshes of the distant coast to rookeries in the cypress swamps of the crooked Ocklawaha. Some of these drifting bird-clouds were tinted or edged with an exquisite pink, denoting the presence of roseate spoonbills, and the effect of their rapid movement against the deep blue of the heavens, in the flash of the setting sun was indescribably beautiful.

Amid this lavish display of nature's daintiest handiwork and in all the widespread landscape of hammock and savanna, trackless pine forest that had never known the woodman's axe, and dimpled lakes

of which a score might be counted from a slight elevation, but one human being was visible. A youth just emerged from boyhood stood alone on the edge of a forest where the ground sloped abruptly down to a lakelet of crystal water. He was clad in a loose-fitting tunic or hunting-frock of doeskin girded about the waist by a sash of crimson silk. In this was thrust a knife with a silver-mounted buckhorn handle and encased in a sheath of snakeskin. His hair, black and glossy as the wing of a raven, was bound by a silken kerchief of the same rich color as his sash. The snow-white plume of an egret twined in his hair denoted him to be of rank among his own people. He wore fringed leggings of smoke-tanned deerskin, and moccasins of the same material. The lad's features were handsome and clear cut, but his expression was gentle and thoughtful as might become a student rather than a mere forest rover. And so the lad was a student, though of nature, and a dreamer not yet awakened to the stern realities of life; but that the mysteries of books were unknown to him might be inferred from a glance at his skin. It was of a clear copper color, resembling new bronze; for Coacoochee (little wild cat) belonged to the most southern tribe of North American Indians, the Seminoles of Florida. Indian though he was, he was of noble birth and descended from a long line of chieftains; for he was the eldest son of Philip Emathla (Philip the leader), or "King

Philip," as the whites termed him, and would some day be a leader of his tribe.

Now, as the lad stood leaning on a light rifle and gazing abstractedly at the glistening clouds of home-returning birds that flecked the glowing sky, his face bore a far-away look as though his thoughts had outstripped his vision. This was not surprising; for to all men Coacoochee was known as a dreamer who beguiled the hours of many an evening by the camp-fire with the telling of his dreams or of the folklore tales of his people. Not only was he a dreamer of dreams and a narrator of strange tales; but he was a seer of visions, as had been proved very recently when death robbed him of his dearly loved twin sister Allala.

At the time Coacoochee was many miles away from his father's village, on a hunting-trip with his younger brother Otulke. One night as they slept the elder brother started from his bed of palmetto leaves with the voice of Allala ringing in his ears. All was silent about him, and Otulke lay undisturbed by his side. As the lad wondered and was about to again lie down, his own name was uttered softly but plainly, and in the voice of Allala, while at the same moment her actual presence seemed to be beside him.

It was a summons that he dared not disobey; so, without rousing Otulke, the young hunter sprang on the back of his pony and sped away through

the moonlight. At sunrise he stood beside the dead form of the dear sister whose fleeting spirit had called him.

Since then he had often heard Allala's voice in the winds whispering through tall grasses of the glades, or among nodding flags on the river banks; in waters that sang and rippled on the lake shore; from shadowy depths of the hammocks, and amid the soft sighings of cypress swamps. Fus-chatte the red-bird sang of her, and pet-che the wood dove mourned that she was gone. To Coacoochee, she seemed ever near him, and he longed for the time when he might join her. But he knew that he must be patient and await the presence of the Great Spirit, for he believed that the hour of his own death had been named at that of his birth. He also knew that until the appointed time he would escape all dangers unharmed. He felt certain that Allala watched over him and would warn him of either death or great danger. Being thus convinced, the lad was absolutely without fear of dangers visible or unseen; and, dreamer that he was, often amazed his companions by deeds of what seemed to them the most reckless daring.

At the moment of his introduction to the reader Coacoochee, bathed in the full glory of the setting sun, wondered if the place to which Allala had gone could be fairer or more beautiful than that in which he lingered.

Although he was without human companionship he was not alone; for beside him lay Ul-we (the tall one), a great shaggy staghound that the young Indian had rescued three years before from the wreck of an English ship that was cast away on the lonely coast more than one hundred miles from the nearest settlement. Coacoochee with several companions was searching for turtle-eggs on the beach, and when they boarded the stranded vessel, a wretched puppy very nearly dead from starvation was the only living creature they found. The Indian boy took the little animal for his own, restored it to life through persistent effort, nursed it through the ills of puppyhood, and was finally rewarded by having the waif thus rescued develop into the superb hound that now lay beside him, and whose equal for strength and intelligence had never been known in Florida. The love of the great dog for his young master was touching to behold, while the affection of Coacoochee for him was only excelled by that felt for his dearest human friend.

This friend was a lad of his own age named Louis Pacheco, who was neither an Indian nor wholly a paleface. He was the son of a Spanish indigo planter and a beautiful octoroon who had been given her freedom before the birth of her boy. The Señor Pacheco, whose plantation lay near the village of King Philip, had always maintained the most friendly relations with his Indian neighbors; and, Louis hav-

ing one sister, as had Coacoochee, these four were united in closest intimacy from their childhood.

At the death of the indigo planter his family removed to a small estate owned by the mother, on the Tomoka River, some fifty miles from their old home; but this removal in nowise weakened their friendship with the red-skinned dwellers by the lake. Frequent visits were exchanged between the younger members of the two families, and when Allala was taken to the spirit land, none mourned her loss longer or more sincerely than Louis and Nita Pacheco.

Louis, being well educated by his father, taught Coacoochee to speak fluently both English and Spanish in exchange for lessons in forest lore and woodcraft. The young creole was as proud of his lineage as was the son of Philip Emathla, and bore himself as became one born to a position of freedom and independence.

It was some months since he and Coacoochee had last met, and at the moment of his introduction to us the latter was thinking of his friend and meditating a visit to him. It would seem as though these thoughts must have been induced by some subtle indication of a near-by presence; for the youth was hardly conscious of them ere Ul-we sprang to his feet with an ominous growl and dashed into the thicket behind them. At the same moment the young Indian heard his own name pronounced in a faint

voice, and wheeling quickly, caught sight of a white, wild-eyed face that he instantly recognized. Ul-we had but time to utter one joyful bark before his young master stood beside him and was supporting the fainting form of Nita Pacheco in his arms.