

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BRAVEST GIRL IN FLORIDA

DURING the month that followed Nita's departure there was in Fort Brooke but one all-absorbing topic of conversation and speculation. Would the brave girl succeed in saving the life of her lover? or must he die like a dog, without ever again treading the soil of his native land? Except for being kept a prisoner, the young war-chief was treated with distinguished consideration, and every want that he made known was gratified, so far as was consistent with safety. At the same time, he was still manacled, and his irons, together with those of his comrades, were carefully examined by a blacksmith, under supervision of an officer, every morning and evening. The guard on the transport was doubled, and at night a chain of sentinels was posted along such portions of the shore as lay adjacent to the ship. No boats were allowed to approach or leave the floating prison between sunset and sunrise, and no other precaution that human ingenuity could devise for the safe-keeping of the captives was neglected.

Ralph Boyd, often accompanied by some officer

from the post, made daily visits to cheer Coacoochee with his belief that all was going well, and to carry him the very latest news. On the occasion of his first visit he took Anstice, who claimed the privilege of telling the young chief what his sweetheart had undertaken in his behalf. As the stern warrior listened to the simple recital, his face became very tender, and a tear, hastily brushed away, glistened for an instant on his cheek. Then he said: "Now do I know that all will go well," and from that moment he was cheerfully confident of the final result.

No word was received from the messengers for a week, at the end of which time one of them returned, bringing with him ten warriors and a number of women and children. The messenger reported that, but for Nita, their mission, so far at least as this particular band was concerned, would have been fruitless. Upon their approach, the warriors had sternly ordered them away, covering them with their rifles, and threatening to shoot if they dared speak of peace. Upon that, Nita, who had until then remained in the background, boldly advanced to the very muzzles of the brown rifles, resolutely pushed them aside, and then pleaded so effectively with the warriors who held them that, ere she finished, their hearts were softened, and they announced themselves as not only ready to surrender, but willing to follow their young chief wherever he might lead them.

Coacoochee had given General Worth a bundle of

small sticks which, by their number, represented the entire strength of his band. Upon the arrival at the fort of these forerunners, the general counted them, and returned to Coacoochee an equal number of his sticks. From day to day after this, other small parties of Coacoochee's followers straggled in, and for every new arrival a stick was sent to the young chief, who gloated over his increasing pile as a miser over his hoard, or a politician over the incoming votes that promise to save him from defeat.

In the meantime Nita, with an incredible exhibition of endurance, was scouring the distant country lying about the headwaters of the St. John's and Kissimmee. Here in little groups, the widely scattered members of Coacoochee's once numerous and formidable band had sought refuge amid the vast swamps and overflowed lands, which constitute that portion of Florida. Here, from swamp to swamp, from one tiny wooded island to another, or from hammock to hammock, the dauntless girl followed them. Sometimes she was accompanied by a small escort; but more often she was alone. There were days on which she had food, but many others on which she went hungry. The howl of the wolf became her familiar lullaby, while the scaly alligator and venomous water-moccasin regarded her invasion of their haunts with angry eyes. She travelled on horseback, by canoe, and on foot, scorched by noon-tide suns, and drenched by heavy night-dews that

fell like rain, but always the image of Coacoochee was in her heart, as she bore his *talk* from band to band of his scattered followers.

As fast as they could be persuaded to go, she sent them to the far-away fort by the salt waters of the west, and bade them hasten or they would be too late. She, too, knew the number of Coacoochee's warriors, and kept a close count of those who had gone, as well as of those who still remained to be persuaded. With jealous care she noted the passage of each day, and murmured that they should fly the more swiftly as the fatal date drew near.

At length the last hiding-place was found, and the last sullen group of eight warriors, with their women and children, was persuaded to go in with her who was beloved of their young chief. By hard riding they could reach the fort on the twenty-ninth day, leaving but one to spare for safety. The brave girl, who had borne up so wonderfully during this month of suspense, was filled with joy at the success of her mission. At the same time, she was so utterly wearied that she often slept, even as she rode, and but for the quick support of willing hands, would have fallen from her saddle. But she would not pause. There would be plenty of time for resting afterwards. Now, they must push on.

On the evening of the last day but one of the month, the fort was only a score of miles away. They would keep on and reach it that night. So

said Nita Pacheco. But there were enemies on whom she had not counted. Halec Tustenugge, with the fourteen Miccosouky warriors who had escaped with him from their ravaged village, roamed that part of the country and infested that particular road like ravening beasts. They had sworn never to surrender themselves, nor allow others to do so if they could prevent them. Now they confronted the little party from the eastern swamps, and bade them turn back or suffer the consequences.

There was a moment of hesitation and consultation. Then Nita Pacheco sprang to the front.

“Are the warriors trained by Coacoochee to be told what they shall do, and what they shall not do, by a pack of Miccosouky dogs?” she cried. “No! It cannot be! Let them get out of our way, or we will trample them in the dust! Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-chee!”

As this war-cry of the Wildcat rang out on the evening air, and Nita's horse sprang from under the stinging lash, in the direction of those who blocked the road, the warriors of Coacoochee, echoing madly the cry of their leader, plied whip and spur in an effort to charge by her side. The Miccosoukies, though numbering nearly two to one, were on foot, while Nita's followers were mounted. The former fired one point blankst volley, and then fled precipitately from before the on-rushing horses.

The battle had been fought and won, and the

enemy dispersed in less than a single minute; but it was the victors who suffered the heaviest loss. One warrior killed outright, two more wounded, one horse so severely wounded that he had to be killed; and, what no one noticed at first, not even Nita herself, a stream of blood spurting from an arm of the girl who had led the charge.

So delayed was the little party by this fierce interruption, that the sun had climbed high above the eastern horizon, on the last day of the thirty allotted to Coacoochee, ere the last of his followers, travel worn, staggering from wounds and weariness, but filled with pride at the feat they had just accomplished, and fully conscious of their own importance, filed slowly into Fort Brooke.

For days their coming had been eagerly awaited. For hours they had been watched for with feverish anxiety. Now the tale of sticks in General Worth's possession was complete, for Nita had insisted upon the living warriors bringing in him who was dead, that he might be counted with them.

The soldiers of the garrison uttered cheer upon cheer at sight of these last comers. The friends who had preceded them thronged about them with eager questions and congratulations; and the news that Coacoochee was saved, repeated from lip to lip, spread like wildfire throughout the post.

Ralph and Anstice Boyd, seated at a late breakfast, heard the glad shouting, and ran to the porch

of their cottage to discover its cause. They were just in time to greet Nita as she rode up, and to catch her as she slipped wearily from her saddle.

Her clothing was torn and stained, and her unbound hair streamed wildly about her head. Her eyes were bright and shining, but her cheeks were hollow, and glowed with spots of dull red. Coacoochee's silken kerchief that had confined her hair, was now bound tightly about her arm, and its whiteness was changed to the crimson of blood.

"He still lives? I am in time?" she whispered huskily as Anstice met her with a mingled cry of joy and terror.

"Yes, you dear, splendid, brave girl. He still lives, and you are in plenty of time. But, oh Nita! if you have killed yourself, what will it all amount to? Ralph, you must carry her in. She isn't able to walk."

Very tenderly they bore her into the house, and laid her on the tiny bed in her own room. Then Boyd hastened to find the surgeon, while Anstice bathed the girl's face with cool water, and talked lovingly to her. Ere an hour was past, the deadly fever of the swamps, that she had defied so long and so bravely, held her in its fierce clutches, and the girl, who by her own exertions had brought the war to a close, lay with staring eyes, but unconscious of her surroundings.

To Irwin Douglass was assigned the congenial

task of notifying Coacoochee that he was free, and bringing him ashore. He hastened to execute it, and, on reaching the ship, at once ordered the hated irons to be struck from the limbs of the captive leader. As they fell clanging to the deck, the whole appearance of the young chief changed. He again lifted his head proudly, his form expanded, and he paced the deck with the stride of a free man.

His first query was for Nita, and when told of her triumphant return, leading the last remnant of his band, he smiled proudly, and said that she was indeed fitted to be the wife of a warrior. At that time Douglass did not know of the girl's wound, nor of the illness that was even then developing its true character. Consequently, Coacoochee was allowed to go ashore filled with happy anticipations of meeting her whom he loved and to whom he owed so much.

He arrayed himself in a striking costume for the occasion, and one that well became his rank. From his turban drooped three black ostrich plumes. His frock was of scarlet and yellow, exquisitely made. Across his breast glittered many medals. In his silken sash was thrust the silver-hilted hunting-knife, by aid of which he had escaped from the fortress prison of St. Augustine. His leggings were of scarlet cloth, elaborately fringed, and on his feet he wore beaded moccasins.

A great throng of people, including every Indian at the post, was assembled to greet him ; and as the boat neared land, these raised a mighty shout of welcome. As he leaped ashore and trod again his native sands, the throng drew back. Then with outstretched arms, and his form extended to its fullest height, Coacoochee gave utterance to the ringing war-cry that had so often carried dismay to his foes, and thrilled his warriors to desperate deeds.

“Yo-ho-ee yo-ho-ee-chee yo-ho-ee !”

It was answered by a sound of hearty cheers from the assembled troops. Then the throng parted to make way for him, and up the living lane the young war-chief walked proudly to headquarters, where he exchanged greetings with General Worth as one with whom he was in every respect an equal. This formality concluded, he turned to the crowd of Indians who had followed him, and addressed them briefly, but in ringing tones :

“Warriors : Coacoochee stands before you a free man. He sent for you, and you have come. By that coming you have saved his life, and for it, he thanks you. The Great Spirit has spoken in our councils, and said : ‘Let there be no more war between my children.’ The hatchet is buried so that there may be friendship between the Iste-chatte and his white brother. I have given my word for you that you will not try to escape. For that I am free. See to it that the word of Coacoochee is kept

strong and true. I have spoken. By our council fire I will say more. Now, away to your camp."

As the throng melted away in obedience to this command, Coacoochee turned to Lieutenant Douglass, and asked to be taken to Nita.

At the cottage in which she lay, he was met by the Boyds, from whom he learned what she had undergone on his behalf; of her wound incurred in fighting his battle, and of her present dangerous illness. He insisted on seeing her; and, on being led to where she lay tossing and moaning in the delirium of fever, the proud warrior knelt by her side, and, hiding his face, wept like a little child.