

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter III: Chitta's Revenge

So Has-se the Sunbeam became Bow-bearer to his father, the great chief Micco, and Chitta the Snake was disappointed of his ambition. By some means he became convinced that René de Veaux had instructed Has-se in his newly acquired trick of wrestling; and though he had no proof of this, he conceived a bitter hatred against the white lad. He had especially included him in his muttered threat of vengeance against all those who greeted his final overthrow with shouts of joy; but, like the wily reptile whose name he bore, he was content to bide his time and await his opportunity to strike a deadly blow. After the games were ended he disappeared, and was seen no more that day.

His absence was hardly noted, for immediately after Has-se's victory the entire assembly repaired to the great mound which had gradually been raised by the accumulation of shells, bones, broken pottery, and charred wood that many generations of Indian feasters had left behind them, and here was spread the feast of the day. Then followed dancing and singing, which were continued far into the night.

At length the dancers became exhausted; the men who beat the drums and rattled the terrapin shells filled with dried palmetto berries grew so drowsy that their music sounded fainter and fainter, until it finally ceased altogether, and by two hours after midnight the whole encampment was buried in profound slumber. Even those whose duty it was to stand guard dozed at their posts, and the silence of the night was only broken by the occasional hootings of Hup-pe (the great owl).

Had the guards been awake instead of dreaming, it is possible that they might have noticed the dark figure of a man who noiselessly and stealthily crept amid the heavy shadows on the edge of the forest towards the great granary, or storehouse, in which was kept all the ripe maize of the tribe, together with much starch-root (koonti katki) and a large quantity of yams. The granary was built of pitch-pine posts and poles, heavily thatched with palm-leaves, that the summer suns had dried to a tinder.

Occasionally the dark figure skulking among the shadows came to little patches of bright moonlight, and to cross these he lay flat on the ground and writhed his way through the grass like a snake. A close observer would have noticed a dull, steady glow which came from a round object that the skulker carried with great care. If he had been



near enough he would have seen that this was a large gourd, in which, on a bed of sand, were a quantity of live coals taken from one of the fires that still smouldered about the epola, or place of dancing. In his other hand the man carried a few fat-pine splinters that would burn almost like gun-powder.

At length, without having attracted attention from any one of the encamped Indians, or the drowsy guards upon whom they depended for safety, the figure reached the granary, and disappeared amid the dark shadows of its walls. Crouching to the ground, and screening his gourd of coals with his robe, he thrust into it one end of the bundle of fat-pine splinters and blew gently upon them. They smoked for a minute, and then burst into a quick blaze.

Beginning at one end of the granary, this torch was applied to the dry thatch that covered it, and it instantly sprang into flame. As the figure ran along the end of the structure, around the corner, and down the entire length of its side, always keeping in the shadow, he applied the torch in a dozen places, and then flinging it on top of the low roof, where it speedily ignited the covering, he bounded away into the darkness, uttering, as he did so, a long-drawn, ear-piercing yell of triumph.

By the time the nodding guards had discovered the flames and given the alarm, the whole granary was in a blaze, and the startled Indians, who rushed out from the lodges and palmetto booths, could do nothing but stand helpless and gaze at the destruction of their property. All asked how it had happened, and who had done this thing, but not even the guards could offer the slightest explanation.

Meantime the author of all this mischief stopped when he had gained what he considered a safe distance from the fire, and, concealed by the friendly shadows of the forest, stood with folded arms and scowling features gazing at the result of his efforts. At length the light from the burning building grew so bright that even the shadow in which he stood began to be illuminated, and he turned to go away. As he did so he shook his clenched hand towards the burning granary, and muttered, "The white man and the red man shall both learn to dread the fangs of the Snake, for thus do I declare war against them both."

As he spoke, a voice beside him, that he instantly recognized as that of Has-se, exclaimed, "What! is this thy work, Chitta?"

For answer Has-se received a terrible blow, full in the face, that stretched him, stunned and bleeding, on the ground; and Chitta, saying, "Lie there, miserable Bow-bearer, I will meet thee again," sprang out into the forest and disappeared.

When Has-se, aroused by the shouts of the guards and the glare of light, had rushed from the lodge in which he slept, he had seen a figure standing between him and



the light, and had approached it to learn the cause of all the excitement. He was just about to speak, when he recognized Chitta, and heard him utter the words that at once declared him to be the author of the conflagration and the enemy of his people and their friends.

Not being able to appreciate the petty spirit of revenge that influenced the Snake, Has-se gave utterance to his exclamation of surprise, and in return received the cruel blow for which he was so little prepared.

When he recovered consciousness he found himself in his father's lodge, lying on a bed of deer-skins, while his sister, the beautiful Nethla, was bathing his temples with cold water.

It was now broad daylight, and the great granary, with all its contents, had been reduced to a heap of smouldering ruins. About the lodge in which Has-se lay were gathered a great crowd of Indians, awaiting his return to consciousness, to learn what he knew of the occurrences of the past few hours, and in what way he had been connected with them. By the earliest light of day a band of experienced warriors had tracked his assailant from the spot in which the young Bow-bearer had been discovered, through the tall grass and underbrush from which the fugitive had brushed the dew in his flight to the river's edge. Here one of the canoes that had been drawn up on the beach was found to be missing, and search parties had been sent both up and down the river, but as yet they had not returned.

As Has-se slowly recovered consciousness, and opened his eyes, his sister bent over him and whispered, "Who dealt thee the cruel blow, oh, my brother?"

Receiving his faint answer, she sprang to her feet, and turning to her father, who stood near, exclaimed, "'Tis Chitta the Snake who has done this thing in revenge for our Has-se's success in the games of yesterday."

From the entrance of the lodge the old chief proclaimed the news, and all through the great assembly were heard cries of anger against Chitta the Snake.

The destruction of this winter's supply of food was not only a serious blow to the Indians, but to the little garrison of Fort Caroline as well, for Laudonniere had just completed arrangements with Micco for the purchase of the greater part of it. Only a small quantity of provisions remained in the fort, and though the forest contained an abundance of game, and the river teemed with fish, the French soldiers were not skilled in either hunting or fishing, and had become dependent upon their Indian neighbors for what they needed of such food. It was therefore with feelings of surprised alarm that, on the second day after the burning of the granary, they noticed the absence of all Indians from the vicinity of the fort. Scouts were sent to the Indian encampment



to discover the cause of this unusual state of affairs, and they soon returned with the report that the place was wholly deserted, and that not an Indian was to be found.

Not only had all the visiting Indians disappeared, but also every soul of Micco's tribe; and, what was more significant, they had taken with them their lodges and all portable property.

Laudonniere at once realized the full force of the situation. His soldiers were worn out with the labor of building the fort, and many of them were prostrated by a peculiar fever that racked their joints with severe pains and unfitted them for duty. The store of provisions upon which he had depended to feed his men through the approaching winter had been destroyed. The Indians who might have provided him with game had abandoned him and gone he knew not whither. His men knew nothing of the art of winning for themselves a livelihood from the wilderness that surrounded them. Although the soldiers had been allowed to think differently, he knew that some months must still elapse before the arrival of reinforcements and supplies from France. He himself, worn out by anxiety and overwork, was beginning to feel symptoms of the approach of the dreaded fever, and he feared that ere long he would be unfitted to perform the duties of his important position.

In this emergency, he decided to hold a council with the officers of the garrison, and ask their aid in deciding what was to be done. He therefore sent word to Soisson, his lieutenant, old Hillaire, the captain of artillery, Martinez, the quartermaster, Chastelleux, the chief of engineers, Le Moyne, the artist, and to René, his nephew, bidding them meet him in council. He added René to the number, for his uncle wished him to fully comprehend the difficulties of their position.

The council met in the commandant's private room, and Laudonniere, stating the situation clearly to them, asked what was to be done. Some suggested one thing and some another, and the discussion was long and earnest. Le Moyne, the artist, added to the perplexities of the commandant by stating that he had heard rumors of dissatisfaction among the garrison, and threats that unless provisions were speedily obtained they would build a vessel, abandon the fort and country, and attempt to make their way back to France.

While the discussion was at its height, two soldiers appeared at the door, leading between them a slender young Indian, whom René, with a joyful cry, at once recognized as his friend Has-se the Sunbeam.

