

The Flamingo Feather *by Kirk Munroe*

Chapter V: The Escape of Has-se and Rene

This speech from his uncle both pleased and troubled René. He was glad to learn that it was deemed advisable for some one from the fort to visit the land of the Alachuas, and troubled to find that if he went with Has-se, he must do so without permission from his uncle. Nevertheless he felt certain that he, being Has-se's friend, and also regarded by the Indians as the son of the great chief of the white men, could undertake the mission with a greater chance of safety and success than any one else. He would have urged this view of the case upon his uncle's attention, but feared that speaking of the subject a second time would only result in his being absolutely forbidden to leave the fort on any pretence. The lad felt himself to be truly a man, now that he was nearly seventeen years old, and like all manly, high-spirited boys of his age, he was most anxious to enter upon any adventure that promised novelty and excitement.

René's appearance at this time was very different from that of the boy who, less than a year before, had left the old chateau of his fathers with tear-stained cheeks. His long curls had fallen under the shears, and his closely cropped hair showed to advantage his well-formed head. He was tall for his age, his muscles had hardened with constant exercise, and his face, neck, and hands were tanned to a ruddy brown by the hot suns beneath which he had spent so many months. His brown eyes held a merry twinkle, but at the same time there was an expression of pride and fixed purpose in his face that well became it.

At this time he wore a small plumed cap, a leathern jacket, knee-breeches, stockings of stout yarn, and short boots, the legs of which fitted closely to his ankles. Simon, the armorer, had made for him a light steel corselet, that he wore over his leathern jacket whenever he went beyond the walls of the fort. Upon all such excursions he was armed with his well-tryed cross-bow (for which he carried a score of steel-tipped bolts) and a small, but keen-edged, dagger that hung at his belt.

After considering Has-se's proposal all the morning, René finally decided to accept it, and, without notifying any person in the fort of his intention, to accompany the young Indian to the land of the Alachuas.

In accordance with this plan he gathered together a number of trinkets, such as he knew would be acceptable to the Indians, and during the afternoon he conveyed these to the forest beyond the fort, where he bound them into a compact package and carefully hid them.

Réné could not account, any more than the others, for Has-se's disappearance, nor imagine how his escape had been effected; but he felt certain that the young Indian would be true to his word, and await his coming at the appointed place of meeting when the moon rose above the pine-tree tops.

As it would not rise until nearly ten o'clock that evening, and as his uncle retired early on account of his indisposition, Réné was able to bid him an affectionate good-night and receive his customary blessing without arousing any suspicion of his intended departure in the breast of the old soldier.

Leaving his own quarters about nine o'clock, with his cross-bow over his shoulder, Réné walked with an unconcerned air, but with a beating heart, directly to the main gate of the fort, at which he was challenged by the sentinel on duty there. Réné gave the countersign, and was recognized by the soldier, who, however, firmly refused to allow him to pass.

He said, "I am sorry to be obliged to interrupt thy walk, Master De Veaux; but since the escape of the Indian prisoner last night, we have received strictest orders not to allow a living soul to pass the gates between sunset and sunrise."

Thus turned back at the very outset of his adventure, Réné knew not what to do. Should he attempt to scale the walls, he might be shot while so doing, and at any rate there was the moat beyond, which he could not possibly cross without detection. Seeking the deep shadow of an angle, the boy seated himself on a gun-carriage and pondered over the situation. The more he thought of it the more impossible did it seem for him to escape beyond the grim walls and meet Has-se at the appointed time.

While he was thus overcome by the difficulties of his position, and as he had about concluded that he had undertaken an impossibility, he was startled by the deep tones of the great bell that hung in the archway of the gate, striking the hour of ten o'clock. Directly afterwards came the measured tramp of the guard and the clank of their weapons as they made their round for the purpose of relieving the sentinels on duty, and replacing them with fresh men. Réné sat so near the gate-way that he could overhear what was said when that post was relieved, and distinguishing above the rest the voice of his old friend Simon, the armorer, he became convinced that he had been placed on duty at this most important point.



After relieving this post the guard resumed their march, and passed so close to where René sat in the shadow of the great gun that, had the night been a shade lighter, they must have seen him. As it was, he escaped detection, and once more breathed freely as their footsteps sounded fainter and fainter in the distance. After a while he heard them return along the opposite side of the fort, and finally halt in front of the guard-house, when silence again reigned throughout the entire enclosure.

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René gave
and added, “It
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their cause. What distresses thee so grievously?”

“Ah! Master De Veaux,” answered the old soldier, “I fear me greatly that the fever of the bones with which so many of our men are suffering has at length laid hold on me, I have been warned for some days of its approach, and only a few hours since obtained from good Master Le Moyne physic which, if taken at the outset, prevents much pain. I left it in the smithy near the forge, not deeming the attack so near; but the chill of the night air hath hastened it, and already am I suffering the torments of the rack. Tell me, lad, wilt thou fetch me the phial from the smithy, that I may test the virtue of its contents?”

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“Not so, good Simon,” answered René, whose thoughts had been busy while the old soldier told of his troubles. “I will gladly aid thee, but am convinced that it can better be done in another way. Go thou for the physic, for thou canst more readily place hands upon it than I, and at the same time apparel thyself in garments thicker and more suited to the chill of the night than those thou wearest. I will stand watch until thy return, and pledge thee my word that none shall pass, or be the wiser for thy absence.”

All his soldier’s training forbade Simon to accept this offer. To desert his post, even though he left it guarded by another, would, he knew, be considered one of the gravest military crimes. Therefore the struggle in his mind between duty on the one side and his sufferings on the other was long and pitiful.

Finally pain conquered. “Well, well, Master René,” he said, gruffly, “I must e’en take thy advice, and obtain speedy release from this pain, or else be found here dead ere the post be relieved. Keep thou open keen eyes and ears, and I pray that no harm may come of this my first neglect of duty in all the years that I have served the King.”

With these words the old soldier thrust his pike into René’s hands, and hurried away as quickly as his pain would permit towards his own quarters in the smithy.

As soon as Simon was out of hearing, René went and recovered his cross-bow. Then he carefully and noiselessly undid the fastenings of the great gate, and swung it open a few inches. This accomplished, he shouldered Simon’s heavy pike, and patiently paced, like a sentry, up and down beneath the dark archway, until he heard approaching footsteps.

He called softly, “Is that thou, Simon?”

“Ay, lad,” came the answer.

Then laying down the pike, and seizing his own cross-bow, René slipped quickly through the gate (which swung to behind him), and with noiseless footsteps fled swiftly across the bridge that spanned the moat, and disappeared in the black shadows of the forest beyond. René slipped quickly through the gate.

Although the moon had risen, and was now well up in the eastern sky, so that the bridge was brightly illumined by it, René crossed unnoticed. As the gate was still firmly fastened when he returned, Simon failed to detect that it had been opened, but the old man spent some minutes looking for the lad in the archway before he became convinced that he was gone. Even then he considered that René was only endeavoring to tease him by thus slipping away, and muttering something about a boy being as full of mischief as a monkey, the soldier shouldered his pike and once more resumed his measured paces up and down the archway.



At the edge of the forest René stopped, drew from his bosom a note that he had written before leaving his room, and thrust it into the end of a cleft branch that he stuck into the ground near the end of the bridge. It was addressed to his Excellency the Chevalier Laudonniere, Commandant of Fort Caroline, and its contents were as follows:

“MY DEARLY BELOVED UNCLE,—Doubtless I am doing very wrong in thus leaving the fort and undertaking an important mission without thy sanction. It would seem, however, that circumstances are peculiarly favorable to my success in this matter, and I feared lest thou wouldst forbid the undertaking, out of a tender regard for my youth and inexperience. I go with the Indian lad Has-se, my friend, to the land of the Alachuas, on a quest for provisions for the fort. In case of my success I will return again at the end of a month, or shortly thereafter. If I fail, and return no more, I still crave thy blessing, and to be remembered without abatement of the love thou hast ever extended to me. No person within the fort has aided me in this matter, nor has any one of thy garrison knowledge of my departure.

“I remain, dear uncle, with sincerest respect and deepest love, thy nephew,
“RÉNÉ DE VEAUX.”

Having thus taken measures to inform his uncle of his departure and the mission on which he had set forth, René tightened his belt, shouldered his cross-bow, and turned into the dark pine forest. He made his way swiftly down the river-bank towards the appointed place of meeting, where he hoped to find Has-se still waiting for him, though it was already past the hour that the latter had mentioned. On the way he stopped and recovered the package of trinkets that he had hidden in the forest that afternoon.

As he neared the little stream on the bank of which the Indian lad had promised to await his coming, he uttered the cry of Hup-pe the great owl, which was the signal Has-se had taught him. To his joy it was immediately answered from a short distance in advance. In another moment he stood beside his friend, who without a word led him to where a canoe was hidden beneath some overhanging branches. They stepped in, a few strong strokes of the paddles shot them clear of the creek, the bow of their craft was turned down-stream, and ere a word had been spoken between them, they were gliding swiftly down the glassy moonlit surface of the great river towards its mouth.

