

Chapter VI: The Journey in Search of Food

As the paddles flashed brightly in the moonshine, and the light craft in which René and Has-se were seated moved swiftly and silently down the broad river, the former related to his companion all the particulars of his leaving the fort, and the delays that had detained him past their appointed time of meeting. As he concluded his story, Has-se, who until then had remained silent, said,

“Thou hast done well, Ta-lah-lo-ko, and thy success at the outset is proof to me that the Great Spirit favors our undertaking.”

Réné was not so convinced of this as his companion, for he was not at all certain that he was acting rightly; but he did not seek to disturb the other’s confidence, and only said,

“Now tell me of thy escape, Has-se; for I must confess that I would have deemed it impossible, and am not a little concerned to find Fort Caroline such a sieve as thy easy leave-taking would seem to prove it.”

Has-se was silent for some minutes, and then he said,

“I would have no secrets from thee, my brother, and would gladly tell thee that thou askest; but I may not now, though at another time my tongue may be loosed. For the present I am bound not to reveal that which must needs be known were the manner of my escape described to thee.”

Réné felt somewhat hurt at this answer, which seemed to imply a want of confidence in him; but he knew his friend’s character too well to press the subject further, and so, smothering his curiosity, he turned the conversation to other things.

After they had travelled for several miles down the river, Has-se turned the bow of the canoe into a sluggish bayou, that wound, with innumerable turnings, amid vast limitless expanses of salt-marsh. This stream led into others that formed such a maze that it seemed to René impossible that they should ever discover a way out of it.

As Has-se kept the canoe to its course, never for an instant hesitating as to which way he should turn, they startled from their resting-places myriads of water-fowl and strange birds, that flew away with harsh notes of alarm. These were answered from the distant forest by the melancholy howlings of wolves and the cries of other night-prowling wild beasts, that sounded very fearful to René’s unaccustomed ears.

At length their craft was run ashore at the foot of a small shell mound that formed quite an elevation amid the wide levels of the marshes, and Has-se said they would rest there until sunrise. After hauling the canoe well up out of the water, he led the way to a small hut, thatched with palmetto-leaves, that stood half-way up the side of the mound. In it was piled a quantity of long gray moss, that formed a most acceptable bed to the tired boys; and throwing themselves down on it, they were in a few minutes fast asleep.

It seemed to René that he had but just fallen asleep when he was awakened by a light touch upon his forehead. Springing to his feet, he found Has-se standing smiling beside him, and saw that the sun had already risen. Running down to the beach, he bathed his face in the cool salt-water, used a handful of moss as a towel, and turned to the breakfast that Has-se had spent an hour in preparing.

When René saw what a luxurious repast the ingenuity of the young Indian had provided, he opened his eyes wide in astonishment. He knew that a bag of parched corn and several gourds of fresh water had been brought along, and upon this simple fare he had expected to break his fast. Now, in addition to the parched corn, he saw fish, oysters, eggs, and a vegetable, all smoking hot, cooked to a nicety, and temptingly spread on some freshly cut palm-leaves.

The fish were mullet, that Has-se had speared from the canoe as they swam in the clear water. He had cleaned them, wrapped them in fresh, damp leaves, raked aside a portion of the fire that he had kindled when he first arose, buried them in the hot sand beneath it, and covered the spot with live coals.

The oysters had also come from the water, in a great bunch that Has-se had just been able to lift and carry to the fire. To cook them he had simply placed the entire bunch on the coals, where they had roasted in their shells, which now gaped wide open, offering their contents to be eaten.

The eggs were plover's eggs, of which Has-se had discovered several nests among the tall marsh grass. They also had been roasted in the hot sand, from which the fire had been raked one side.

The vegetable puzzled René considerably, for he had never seen its like, and knew not what to make of it. When he asked Has-se what it was, the latter laughed, with the soft, musical laugh, peculiar to his people, and answered,

“Dost thou not know thy namesake, Ta-lah-lo-ko? It is the leaf bud of a young palm-tree, and with us Indians it takes the place of bread when we have neither a-chee” (the maize) “nor koonti-katki” (the starch-root).

It was indeed the tender leaf bud of the cabbage-palm, roasted in its own husk, and to René it tasted much like roasted chestnuts.



From the shells on the beach he obtained a small quantity of salt, that had been left in them by the evaporated water of some former high tide. This he wanted for both his fish and his eggs. Then the two boys sat down to their feast, and ate and laughed and chatted, and enjoyed it so thoroughly that one of them at least thought nothing had ever tasted so good to him before.

After breakfast, as there were no dishes to be washed, and nothing to be packed to carry with them, they were able to resume their journey at once. Until nearly noon they were hemmed in by the monotonous salt-marshes; then they crossed a wide sheet of open water, and entered the mouth of a wild, dark river that flowed into it from the west. The rest of that day and most of the next was occupied in the ascent of this river, which ever grew darker and narrower as they neared its source. They worked incessantly at the paddles, and made such speed that Has-se said they must certainly overtake his people before they reached the land of the Alachuas.

Several times during these two days he ran the canoe ashore at places that his keen vision noted as having been the landing-places of other canoes. At each of these places he found the ashes and charred sticks that denoted recent camp-fires, and each time after making such a discovery he returned to René with a puzzled and thoughtful expression on his face. His companion noticed this, and finally inquired the cause.

“What troubles thee, my Has-se?” he asked. “Thy looks betoken a worriment of some kind. May I not share it with thee?”

For a few minutes Has-se plied his paddle vigorously and in silence; then he said, more as if thinking aloud than in answer to René’s question, “Others besides ourselves are in pursuit of my people, and I fear they are enemies.”

“What is thy reason for thus thinking?”

“Because I find that each halting-place of Micco’s band has been carefully examined after their departure. I have also found the remains of several small but recent camp-fires on opposite sides of the river from theirs, and around them I find the traces of but two men. One of these men is very large, and he wears moccasins that were never made by my people. I fear they are enemies.”

“But why should they be enemies?” asked René. “May they not be some of thy band left behind like thyself. Or may not one of them be of thy tribe, and the other be one of the guests who attended the Feast of Ripe Corn?”

“That is easily answered,” replied the young Indian. “If they were friends who for some reason had been left behind, and were now anxious to rejoin those whom they follow, they could have done so long since. Their fires burned at the same time with those of my people, and they have visited Micco’s camps before the ashes of his fires



grew cold. Besides, in each case their own fires were carefully hidden, so that they could not by any chance be seen by those who were in advance of them.”

“Who, then, can be following so large a band, and for what purpose? Surely two cannot harm so many.”

“That I know not, but I fear them to be of the outlawed Seminoles.[1] If so, they are following my people for the purpose of picking up plunder, or of snatching the prize of a scalp—a thing they could only gain by a cowardly attack upon one defenceless, for they dare not seek it in open fight. Or it may be that one of them is he who has conceived a bitter enmity against those who never treated him with aught save kindness, and that he has joined with him another equally base.”

At this thought Has-se’s bright face became clouded, and for some time he remained silent. Finally the silence was again broken by René, who asked,

“Who are these Seminoles of whom thou dost speak thus contemptuously?”

“Seminole, in my language, signifies a run-away. They are a band of thieves, murderers, and other bad Indians, who have been driven out of my tribe and other tribes on the north. They have gradually increased in numbers, until now they call themselves a tribe. They are always at war with all men, and against them my people have declared a fight forever.”

“And who is he of whom thou speakest so vaguely as having conceived an enmity unjustly against those who have harmed him not?”

“One who should be well known to thee, Ta-lah-lo-ko. I speak of Chitta the Snake, whom I hope we may not encounter.”

“It will be the worse for him if we do encounter him, and he ventures to interfere with us,” replied René, hotly.

“Nay, Ta-lah-lo-ko. I have a feeling within me which warns me that a meeting with the Snake will be a sad one for us,” answered Has-se, who, though as brave as a young lion, was inclined to be superstitious, as were all of his race.

During this conversation the course of the canoe had been through a mere thread of a stream, and René now noticed that they were traversing the mazes of a dark swamp. The little stream connected a series of stagnant pools or bayous, and just as they came into the open water of one of these they caught a glimpse of another canoe leaving it on the opposite side. Even as they sighted it, it shot in among the trunks of a dense cypress forest, and disappeared.

[1] Before the Seminoles became the powerful tribe into which they finally grew they were a band of outlaws, composed of those who, for some good reason, had fled or



been driven from the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and other tribes of the South.—K. M.

