

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter VIII: On the Trail

Cat-sha, the Seminole chief, rejoiced greatly at having gained to his band so promising a young warrior as Chitta, who had so incurred the enmity of both the white men and his own people as to be obliged to fly from them for his life.

After eating together a meal of dried venison that the elder produced from his wallet, the two Seminoles sat, concealed behind a thick cluster of cactus, watching the river for any signs of pursuit, and forming plans for future action. Cat-sha told Chitta that he had left his band in their most inaccessible stronghold among the bayous and deep morasses of the great Okeefenokee Swamp. He also said that, were it not for the presence of so large a number of friendly Indians in the immediate vicinity of Fort Caroline, he should bring his warriors to attack it; for he had decided that the chances were in favor of his success in so doing.

“Ha!” exclaimed Chitta, interrupting his chief at this point, “I may, in that case, be of service to thee, though I am as yet untried in battle.” Then he told Cat-sha a secret that was known to but few of his people, and which he himself had only discovered by accident. It was the same that Has-se had declined to confide to René when the latter questioned him as to the manner of his escape from the fort, and it was indeed a secret of the utmost value to enemies of the white men.

Cat-sha listened attentively, and when Chitta had finished he exclaimed, “Well done, my young brave! Thy serpent’s wisdom is already proving of value to us. What thou hast just told me makes clear our plan of attack upon this nest of pale-faces, and removes one of the chief difficulties in our way. Having this information, I regard the fort and all that it contains as already in our power. We have only to bide our time. Well may the white man tremble; for ere many days the tiger, guided by the serpent, will spring at his throat.”

As they talked, their attention was directed to a dark moving mass floating down the river, close under its bank. Cat-sha soon pronounced it to be a fleet of canoes filled with people, and they watched them with eager curiosity.

It was, indeed, the tribe from which Chitta had fled, moving, under the leadership of their chief, Micco, towards the land of the Alachuas, where food in abundance awaited them. At the outset of their journey they kept as close as possible under the

river-bank, to avoid observation from the white men in Fort Caroline, who, they feared, might oppose their departure if they learned of it. It was not until they reached the bold bluff from the summit of which the two Seminoles watched their progress that they felt they were safe from the eyes of the fort, and might strike boldly out into the river. Here, aided by the full strength of the ebbing tide, they proceeded rapidly on their way towards its mouth.

Seeing that the canoes which were thus passing beneath them contained, besides the warriors of the tribe, its women and children, and all of its movable property, Cat-sha concluded that it was a general movement of Micco's people towards some distant place; and from the direction they were taking, he guessed that their destination was the fertile land of the Alachuas.

"This is thy doing," he said to Chitta, who was regarding in bitter silence this departure of his people, towards whom he still felt drawn by old association in spite of what he had so recently done and become. "This is thy doing, my young Seminole. Thou hast destroyed their store of food, and thus compelled them to go in search of more. Now let us follow them, and when we have seen them at a safe distance, we will bring my brave warriors to the attack of the white men shut up in yonder gopher hole."

When the departing tribe was nearly out of sight down the river, the two Seminoles, drawing Chitta's stolen canoe from its hiding-place, started in pursuit. They so arranged their own movements that they ran no chance of discovery from those in advance of them, though they were never far behind. They carefully examined each camping-place of the moving tribe, to assure themselves that no person was left behind who might discover them, and they always placed their own little camp so that it should be entirely concealed from those whom they followed.

Cat-sha was much pleased to find that in thus following Micco's tribe he was also journeying in the direction of his own band, who awaited him in the depths of the great swamp. He even meditated an attack upon his Indian foes as they travelled, with their women, children, and baggage, before leading his warriors back to Fort Caroline.

It was these two, then, whose traces had so puzzled Has-se as he and René de Veaux in turn followed them, and it was their canoe of which the two boys caught a fleeting glimpse in the great swamp.

"Look!" exclaimed Has-se, whose keen eye was the first to detect the vanishing canoe. "These are either my own people, whom we have thus overtaken, or those whom we know to be in close pursuit of them. Here is work for us, Ta-lah-lo-ko, or rather for me, for it is my duty to discover the meaning of this pursuit, and warn my



people if danger is near them, while I am also bound to keep thee as far as possible from all harm.”

“Nonsense, Has-se! It is well for thee to keep me out of danger so long as thou keepest from it thyself; but since I have thrown my fortunes with thine, thy friends are my friends, thy enemies are my enemies, and thy safety or danger is mine to share with thee. So say no more of my safety, save as it concerns thine as well, but lead on as thou thinkest best, and I will follow thee as truly as though I were enlisted beneath thy banner. Not that I suppose you Indians have such things as banners, or understand their significance; but thou might well have them, and be none the worse for the having.”

Although Has-se made no reply to this brave speech, he accepted it as an evidence of true friendship, and gave René a grateful smile, which the latter understood to mean “Very well, Ta-lah-lo-ko, I accept thy offer of service as heartily as thou dost tender it.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Has-se’s Indian instinct would not have permitted him to cross the open water of the bayou in broad daylight when he suspected that an enemy might be lying in wait for him on its farther side. On this occasion, however, it seemed so impossible that the occupants of the canoe, of which he had caught but the merest glimpse, should have looked back and detected them at the same instant, that he decided to push on, and if possible discover more of it. So he and René crossed the open water as quickly and with as little noise as possible, and as they approached its opposite side, Has-se gazed keenly into the dark lanes between the moss-hung cypresses. He neither saw nor heard anything to cause him alarm, and congratulating themselves that they had not been discovered, the boys pushed on over waters of another extremely narrow stream.

This, to René’s surprise, flowed, though with an almost imperceptible current, in the direction they were taking, or exactly opposite to that of the river they had ascended from the salt-marshes of the east. As Has-se had requested him to keep absolute silence, and on no account to speak, he restrained his curiosity for the present, but determined to seek an explanation of this phenomenon when an opportunity should offer.

He afterwards discovered that the river they had ascended, and that they were now descending, both rose in the great swamp, and that their headwaters were connected by navigable streams, but that while one flowed east into the Atlantic, the other flowed west into the Gulf of Mexico.

In thus deeming themselves undiscovered by those in advance of them, the boys made an almost fatal mistake. The wily Cat-sha, accustomed to look for danger behind every tree, and almost expecting to hear the war-cry of his enemies in every breath of wind, knew better than to leave open waters without looking behind as he did so. On



this occasion the quick glance thrown backward at the instant his canoe entered the shadows of the cypresses detected the gleam of a paddle, and he knew at once that he and Chitta were being followed, even as they were following Micco and his people.

He said nothing until they were safely within the shadows, when he told Chitta of his discovery. The latter advised going into hiding at once, and awaiting the approach of their unknown pursuers; but the more experienced Cat-sha said no, for if they had also been discovered, that was exactly what they would be expected to do, and their pursuers would exercise more than a usual amount of caution in approaching that point. Once safely past it they would advance more boldly, thinking that their own presence had been undetected. He therefore continued on down the little stream for nearly a mile, until they reached a point where the channel was so seriously obstructed by overhanging vines and stranded driftwood that only a passage barely wide enough for a single canoe was left open.

Here they drew their canoe from the water and carefully concealed it. Then they took positions one on each side of the stream; and, hidden behind screens of tangled vines, with arrows held ready to be fitted to their bowstrings, they patiently awaited the coming of their unknown pursuers.

Towards this well-planned trap, that seemed to insure their destruction, René and Has-se advanced, cautiously, to be sure, but without a warning of what awaited them. At length they had approached within a quarter of a mile of the ambush, and one would have said that nothing could prevent their falling into it.

At this point Has-se whispered, "Keep wide open thy ears as well as thy eyes, Talah-lo-ko"; and René answered also in a whisper,

"They are already so wide open that not the faintest hum of a gnat escapes them. What's that?"

The sudden snapping of a twig by some bird or small animal caused them to start, and listen for a moment with uplifted paddles. The canoe thus left to itself, unguided, drifted aside, and hung for an instant upon the upraised end of a sunken log. René reached his hand down into the water to push it clear of the obstruction, but suddenly withdrew it with a suppressed cry of pain and fright. At the same moment a large water-snake, of the kind known as a moccasin, glided away, and disappeared beneath the slimy bank.

