

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter XIII: Arival of Jean Ribault

As the fugitives from Fort Caroline lay inside the mouth of the River of May, awaiting the calming of the great seas that broke in columns and hills of foam on its bar, and for a favorable wind with which to put out to sea, they attempted to strengthen their crazy vessel and render her more seaworthy. Already her seams, calked with moss and pitch, had opened in so many places that she leaked badly, and only constant labor at the pumps kept her afloat.

Laudonniere had no hope of a successful termination of their voyage, and as he shared his fears with Le Moyne and René de Veaux, these three found little consolation in the thought of leaving the river and embarking upon the turbulent sea that promised them only a grave. They had no choice, however, but to go on with the rest; for to remain behind would be to fall into the hands of the savages, and thus meet with a more terrible death than that offered by the sea.

For several days they awaited the opportunity to depart, and at length it came. The great waves subsided, the wind blew from the right quarter, and spreading all their sorry showing of canvas, the little band of white men carried their vessel over the bar, and putting boldly out to sea, bade farewell, as they thought forever, to the shores on which they had suffered so greatly.

But other things were in store for them, and their voyage was soon brought to an end; for, as they were fast losing sight of the land, and it showed only as a low-lying cloud in the west, the ship suddenly rang with the thrilling cry of "Sail, ho!" All eyes were eagerly turned to the white speck seen far away to the southward, and its probable character and nationality were anxiously discussed. Many felt confident that it was one of the ships of Admiral Ribault, bringing the long-expected reinforcements, but as many more felt certain that it was a Spanish ship. If it should prove to be the latter they could expect only death or cruel captivity, for, being Huguenots, they knew that no mercy would be shown them by the Spanish Catholics.

As they watched the sail with straining eyes it was joined by another and another, until they beheld a goodly fleet bearing down upon them. Only constant labor at the pumps kept their own wretched craft from sinking, as she crept on at a snail's pace compared with the rapid advance of the on-coming fleet, and those on board of her



knew that in any case flight was impossible. Nor were they in a condition to defend themselves against an attack from even the smallest of the approaching ships. Therefore there was nothing left for them to do but pray that those who came might prove friends and not enemies.

At length Laudonniere, whose cot had been brought on deck, pronounced that by their rig and general appearance the ships they watched were not French. Upon this a feeling of dull despair seized upon all who heard him, for they thought, if not French, they must certainly be Spanish ships.

In a moment, however, this despair was changed into the wildest joy, for from the mainmast-head of the foremost ship there flew out upon the freshening breeze, not the cruel yellow banner of Spain, but the brave blood-red ensign of England.

Shouts of welcome burst from the throats of Laudonniere and his men. They danced about the deck as though crazed by the thoughts of their great deliverance, and most speedily they ran to their own mast-head the lily banner of France. Its appearance was the signal for a roar of kindly greeting from the cannon of the leading English ship, which was soon afterwards hove-to at a distance of less than half a mile from them.

The English fleet proved to be that of the brave Sir John Hawkins, the bluff old sea-king whose very name was a terror to all Spaniards. He was on his way back to his own country from one of the famous cruises to the Spanish Main and the West Indies that were even then making him world-renowned. He had captured many Spanish ships laden with treasure in gold and silver from the mines of Mexico and Peru, and when he learned of the sad plight of the Chevalier Laudonniere and his people, he promptly offered to give them a ship in which they might safely undertake a voyage to their own country. Moreover, when he was told how slender was their store of provisions, he furnished the ship which he was about to give them with a supply of food that would last them for several months.

In the name of King Charles IX of France, Laudonniere, who had again assumed command of his little company unquestioned by the mutineers, thanked the brave Englishman for his great kindness to them, and accepted his generous gifts. Then the English fleet, with a parting salute from its loud-mouthed cannon, bore away and resumed its homeward voyage. At the same time the Frenchmen started back for the River of May, where, under shelter of the land, they proposed making the transfer of their property from their own crazy craft to the stout ship which they had received from the English admiral. Thus it happened that the sunset of that eventful day found them in the very same place from which they had so willingly departed that morning, and had never expected to see again.



At this time Laudonniere made another earnest effort to induce his men to return to Fort Caroline, and there await patiently the arrival of Jean Ribault, now that they had a supply of provisions and a good ship, but to no avail.

Simon, the armorer, expressing the sentiments of all the rest, save only Le Moyne and René de Veaux, said,

“What with fightings and fevers, we are in no condition to drive out the savages who have doubtless ere this entered into full possession of Fort Caroline. If we did regain the fort, what could we do save remain there until this heaven-sent store of provisions should be exhausted? and then would we not be in as sad a plight as before? No, your Excellency, let us return to our own land while we may, and not linger here longer in the hope of succor which seems likely never to be sent.”

So Laudonniere, having numbers against him, was forced to accept the situation as he had done before, and the work of transfer from one vessel to the other proceeded rapidly.

When it was accomplished, and they were ready to start on their second venture, the elements were again against them, and for a week they were confronted by an impassable wall of foam-crested billows, breaking and roaring upon the bar in the most tumultuous confusion.

Late one afternoon, when their patience had become well-nigh exhausted by this tedious delay, all hearts were thrilled by the report of a fleet of ships seen far out at sea, but approaching the land. An anxious night followed, for again were the members of the little band torn with conflicting fears and hopes. Were the ships French, English, or Spanish? Daylight only could bring an answer to the question.

At length it came, and as the sun rose, its earliest beams fell upon seven tall ships riding easily at anchor outside the bar. From each was displayed in the golden light the fair lily banner of France.

At this glorious sight there was indeed joy on board the ship of Laudonniere. At last the long-looked-for reinforcements had come. There was no more talk of mutiny, nor of abandoning the country. Now the cry was, “Ho for Fort Caroline, and destruction to the savages!”

Crowding all sail upon their newly acquired ship, and with its guns firing salutes of welcome, and banners flung to the breeze from every point, they sailed out over the still tumultuous bar to greet the new-comers from their own land. It was indeed Admiral Jean Ribault and his fleet of succor for the little colony. On board his flag-ship Trinity, a joyful meeting took place between him and his trusted lieutenant, the brave



Laudonniere, who, supported by René de Veaux and Le Moyne, found strength to carry himself thither.

The admiral was highly indignant when he heard of the mutiny, and would have punished the mutineers severely had not Laudonniere pleaded for them, giving their sufferings and their despair of the arrival of reinforcements as their excuse.

The closest attention was paid to the tale of the brave deeds of René de Veaux. At its conclusion the admiral sent for him, and caused him to blush as ruddily as his sun-tanned cheeks would permit, by highly commending the courage and wisdom he had displayed on his journey to the land of the Alachuas. In conclusion the admiral said, “Did thy years warrant it, thou shouldst receive thy knighthood, for never did squire more worthily earn it. For the future thy welfare and speedy promotion shall be the especial charge of Jean Ribault.”

For such words as these from such a man, René felt that he would gladly face, single-handed, the whole Seminole band; and for the rest of that day he conceived himself to be the happiest boy in the world.

Only one of Admiral Ribault’s ships was of such light draught as enabled her to cross the bar, and so this one, with that of Laudonniere, was obliged to transfer all the newly arrived colonists and supplies to Fort Caroline. This labor occupied many days, for the three hundred new colonists had brought with them a vast amount of provisions, munitions of war, tools, and articles of every description necessary for the building and equipping of other forts in the New World, and all this had to be brought in over the bar and carried up the river.

When the new-comers first caught sight of the fort they were grievously disappointed to see it dismantled and deserted. As they approached it more closely they obtained a glimpse of a few savages who were still searching for plunder within its walls, and from these they gained their first impressions of the inhabitants of the New World.

Réné was made very happy by the return to the fort, for he said to himself, “It will soon be time for Micco’s people to come again to their own hunting-grounds. Then I shall again see Has-se, and mayhap I shall be able to persuade him to go with me some day to France.”

His thoughts were soon to be of other things, for even at this time a terrible storm which had long been gathering was about to burst upon this little band of Huguenots. Even as they busied themselves so happily in restoring their fort and planning a settlement that should flourish forever as a refuge for the persecuted of their religion, a powerful enemy, and one who was even more cruel than powerful, was on the way



to destroy it and them. Don Pedro Menendez, with a fleet of thirty-four ships and three thousand troops, had been sent out to the New World by the King of Spain. He was ordered to take and hold possession of all the country then known as Florida, which extended as far north as the English settlement in Virginia, and had no western limit. He was to build a fort and found a city; but first of all he was to discover and destroy the colony of heretics who were reported to have established themselves within this territory.

Soon after Ribault's coming the Spanish fleet arrived on the coast, and sailing northward they discovered the French ships, late one afternoon, lying at anchor off the mouth of the River of May. At midnight they too came to anchor within hailing distance of the French fleet, and a trumpet was sounded from the deck of the San Palayo, the Spanish flag-ship. It was immediately answered from the Trinity, and from the deck of his own ship Menendez inquired, with great courtesy,

"Gentlemen, whence comes this fleet?"

"From France," was the reply.

"What is its object here?"

"To bring men and supplies to a fort that the King of France has caused to be built in this country, and to establish many more in his name."

"Be ye Catholics or heretics?"

"We be Huguenots, and who be ye who askest these many questions?"

Then came the bitter answer, "I am Don Pedro Menendez, admiral of this fleet. It belongs to the King of Spain, his Majesty Don Philip II, and I am come to this country to destroy all heretics found within its limits, whether upon sea or land. I may not spare one alive, and at break of day it is my purpose to capture your ships and kill all heretics they may contain."

Upon this Ribault and his men interrupted the proud Spaniard with taunts and jeers, begging him not to wait until morning before putting his threat into execution, but to come at once and kill them.

So greatly did this provoke the Spanish admiral that he ordered his captains to cut the cables of their ships, and make an instant attack upon the French fleet, though the night was intensely dark. He was so enraged that he rushed about the deck of his own ship like a madman, and assisted with his own hands in forwarding the preparations for battle. In a few minutes the entire Spanish fleet bore down upon the six French ships; but the crews of these had not been idle, and before their enemies could reach them they too had cut their cables, hoisted sail, and stood out to sea. For the rest of the night the Spaniards chased them, but Ribault's superior seamanship soon placed him at a



safe distance from the pursuers, who at daylight gave over the chase and turned back towards the River of May, intending to make an attack upon Fort Caroline.

In the meantime word had been sent to the fort by Admiral Ribault of the coming of the Spanish fleet, when it was first sighted, and Laudonniere had collected his entire force at the mouth of the river, and planted there a number of heavy guns. Here he proposed to dispute the landing of the enemy, and if possible to prevent his crossing the bar, just inside of which he had anchored his two small vessels, so that their guns commanded the narrow channel.

When Menendez returned from his unsuccessful pursuit of Ribault's ships, and saw these warlike preparations, he felt that it would be unwise to attempt to land his troops through the surf, or to force the passage of the bar, and so he ordered his captains to proceed southward to the River of Dolphins. When it was reached, the smaller vessels crossed the bar at its mouth, and came to anchor opposite the Indian village of Seloy, where René de Veaux had first set foot upon the soil of the New World, and where he had received the name of Ta-lah-lo-ko.

Here Menendez determined to build his fort, and found a city which he hoped to make the capital of a great and glorious kingdom, and from which he proposed to conduct operations against the Huguenots of Fort Caroline. On the day after his arrival he landed with the greatest pomp and ceremony, and claimed possession of the country in the name of the King of Spain. As he did so all the cannon of the ships lying in the river were discharged at once with a mighty roar, which was answered by a distant booming from those anchored far out at sea. At the same time all the trumpets were sounded, and the air was filled with the exulting shouts of the soldiers, and with hymns of praise chanted by a great company of priests. At the same moment the great stag that stood in front of the council-house of the Indians was torn down from the tall pole on which it was uplifted, and the cross was raised in its place.

So terrified were the simple-minded Indian inhabitants of the village by this sacrilege, and the great noise of the rejoicings, that they knew not which way to turn or flee, until they were seized by the brutal soldiers, and either killed or set to work with the negro slaves brought from the West Indies in throwing up fortifications. After thus taking possession of the country, Menendez proclaimed that the new city, founded upon the smoking blood-stained ruins of the pleasant little Indian village of Seloy should be called "San Augustin," which name it bears to this day, and that the River of Dolphins should be thereafter known as the "San Augustin River."

When the bewildered chief of the Seloy Indians found that these strange white men were about to destroy his village, he made a bitter protest against their cruelties; but he



was no more regarded than if he had been a barking dog. They would have killed him, but he gathered together a few of his chosen warriors, and with them fled for protection to his white friend Laudonniere, at Fort Caroline, which place he reached the next day.

He had some difficulty in gaining admittance to the fort, for since its attack by the Seminoles its garrison were suspicious of all Indians, and had it not been for René de Veaux he would have been driven away. René happened to be near the gate when the sentinel challenged the newcomers, and recognizing the good old chief who had been so kind to him, and whom he knew to be a friend of his uncle, ordered the sentry to admit these Indians, at the same time pledging his own word for their good faith.

When René learned the importance of the tidings brought by these fugitives, he at once conducted the chief to Laudonniere, on whom the fever still retained such a hold as to confine him to his room.

The poor old chief told his pitiful tale to Laudonniere, and begged his powerful aid in driving away these wicked white men, who had treated him so differently from all others who had landed at his village. Promising to do what he could, Laudonniere at once despatched a messenger down the river to Admiral Ribault, who had returned with his ships and again lay at anchor beyond the bar.

In answer came an order for all the fighting men of Fort Caroline to join the fleet immediately, as the admiral proposed to sail southward and attack these impudent Spaniards ere they had time to erect fortifications, or so strengthen their position that to attack it would be useless.

Then came a time of tremendous bustle and excitement within the fort. There were men hurrying hither and thither gathering their weapons, women and children screaming and crying—for many of these had been brought out with the new colonists—and dogs barking.

René de Veaux begged his uncle to permit him to accompany the fighting men, but Laudonniere said “No,” that the order did not include boys, and he could be of greatest service by remaining within the fort.

So the fighting men marched away to join the fleet, leaving Fort Caroline to be defended only by the old, the sick, the women, and the children. Besides the commandant and René de Veaux, among those who remained behind were Le Moyne, the artist, and old Simon, the armorer, to whom was given the command of the guard.