

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter II: A Wonderful Deliverance

The building of Fort Caroline occupied about three months; and during this time the friendly Indians willingly aided in the work of preparing the tree-trunks which, set on end, were let deep into the earth close beside one another, and in digging the wide moat that surrounded the whole. A heavy embankment of earth was thrown up on the inner side of the palisade of tree-trunks, and upon this were mounted a number of great guns.

During the time thus occupied, René de Veaux became acquainted with Micco's son, a young Indian of about his own age, named Has-se, which means a sunbeam, and a strong friendship was speedily cemented between them. They saw each other daily, and each learned the language of the other.

After the ships had sailed away René's uncle found time, even in the midst of his pressing duties, to attend to the lad's education; and every morning was devoted to lessons in fencing, shooting the cross-bow, and in military engineering. The evenings were passed with the good Jacques Le Moyne the artist, who was a very learned man, and who taught René Latin, and how to draw.

Although his mornings and evenings were thus occupied, René had his afternoons to himself, and these he spent in company with his friend Has-se, who instructed him in the mysteries of Indian woodcraft. Now it happened that while Has-se was a merry, lovable lad, he had one bitter enemy in the village. This was a young man somewhat older than himself, named Chitta, which means the snake. Their quarrel was one of long standing, and nobody seemed to know how it had begun; but everybody said that Chitta was such a cross, ugly fellow that he must needs quarrel with somebody, and had chosen Has-se for an enemy because everybody else loved him.

One afternoon Has-se asked René to go out on the river with him in his canoe, as he had that to tell him which he did not wish to run any risk of being overheard by others. René willingly agreed to go with him, and taking his cross-bow and a couple of steel-tipped bolts, he seated himself in the bow of the light craft, which Has-se paddled from the stern. Going for some distance down the river, they turned into a small stream from the banks of which huge, moss-hung oaks and rustling palm-trees cast a



pleasant shade over the dark waters. Here the canoe was allowed to drift while Has-se unburdened his mind to his friend.

It seemed that the day of the Ripe Corn Dance, the great feast day of his tribe, was set for that of the next full moon. On this day there was to be a series of contests among the lads of the village to decide which of them was most worthy to become Bow-bearer to Micco, their chief and his father. This was considered a most honorable position to occupy, and he who succeeded in winning it and filling it satisfactorily for a year was, at the expiration of that time, granted all the privileges of a warrior. The contests were to be in shooting with bows and arrows, hurling the javelin, running, and wrestling. Has-se had set his heart upon obtaining this position, and had long been in training for the contests. His most dreaded rival was Chitta; and, while Has-se felt ready to meet the snake in the games of running, shooting, and hurling the javelin, he feared that with his greater weight the latter would prove more than a match for him in wrestling. Could Ta-lah-lo-ko advise and help him in this matter?

“Ay, that can I, Has-se, my lad,” cried René; “thou couldst not have hit upon a happier expedient than that of asking advice of me. ‘Tis but a week since I removed a cinder from the eye of Simon the Armorer, and in return for the favor he taught me a trick of wrestling that surpasses aught of the kind that ever I saw. I have practised it daily since, and would now confidently take issue with any who know it not without regard to their superior size or weight. I will show it thee if thou wilt promise to keep it secret. Ha!”

As they talked the canoe had drifted close in to the shore, until it lay directly beneath the gigantic limb of a tree that extended far out over the water, and from which hung a mesh of stout vines. As he uttered the exclamation that finished his last sentence. René seized hold of a stout vine, and with a quick jerk drew the light craft in which they were seated a few feet forward. At the same instant a tawny body was launched like a shot from the overhanging limb and dashed into the water exactly at the spot over which, but an instant before, Has-se had sat.

The animal that made this fierce plunge was a panther of the largest size; and if René had not chanced to catch sight of its nervously twitching tail as it drew itself together for the spring, it would have alighted squarely upon the naked shoulders of the unsuspecting Indian lad. René’s prompt action had, however, caused the animal to plunge into the water, though it only missed the canoe by a few feet; and when it rose to the surface it was close beside them.

Has-se seized his paddle, and with a powerful stroke forced the canoe ahead, but directly into the mesh of trailing vines, in which it became so entangled that they could



not extricate it before the beast had recovered from his surprise, and had begun to swim towards them.

A bolt was hurriedly fitted to René's cross-bow and hastily fired at the approaching animal. It struck him near the fore-shoulder, and served to check his progress for a moment, as with a snarl of rage he bit savagely at the wound, from which the blood flowed freely, crimsoning the water around him. Then he again turned towards the canoe, and seemed to leap rather than swim, in his eagerness to reach it. A second bolt, fired with even greater haste than the first, missed the panther entirely, and the boys were about to plunge from the opposite side of the canoe into the water, in their despair, when an almost unheard-of thing occurred to effect their deliverance.

Just as one more leap would have brought the panther within reach of the canoe, a huge, dark form rose from the red waters behind him, and a pair of horrid jaws opened, and then closed like a vice upon one of his hind-quarters. The panther uttered a wild yell, made a convulsive spring forward, his claws rattled against the side of the canoe, and then the waters closed above his head, and he was dragged down into the dark depths of the stream, to the slimy home of the great alligator, who had thus delivered the boys from their peril. A few bubbles coming up through the crimson waters told of the terrible struggle going on beneath them, and then all was still, and the stream flowed on as undisturbed as before. For a few moments the boys sat gazing in silent amazement at the place of the sudden disappearance of their enemy, hardly believing that he would not again return to the attack.

When they had regained the fort, Laudonniere heard with horror René's story of their adventure with the tiger and the crocodile, as he named panthers and alligators, and bade him be very careful in the future how he wandered in the wilderness. He did not forbid his nephew to associate with Has-se, for he was most anxious to preserve a friendship with the Indians, upon whom his little colony was largely dependent for provisions, and he considered René's influence with the Indian lad who was the son of the chief very important.

On the afternoon following that of their adventure, Has-se came into the fort in search of René, and anxious to acquire the promised trick of wrestling. After securing his promise never to impart the trick to another, René led him into a room where they would not be observed, and taught it to him. It was a very simple trick, being merely a feint of giving way, followed quickly by a peculiar inside twist of the leg; but it was irresistible, and the opponent who knew it not was certain to be overcome by it. Has-se quickly acquired it, and though he found few words to express his feelings, there was a look in his face when he left René that showed plainly his gratitude.



When next the silver sickle of the new moon shone in the western sky, active preparations were begun among the Indians for their great Dance of Ripe Corn. The race-course was laid out, and carefully cleared; clay was mixed with its sand, and it was trampled hard and smooth by many moccasined feet. A large booth, or shelter from the hot sun, under which the chiefs and distinguished visitors might sit and witness the games, was constructed of boughs and palm leaves. Bows were carefully tested and fitted with new strings of twisted deer-sinew. Those who had been fortunate enough to obtain from the white men bits of steel and iron, ground them to sharp points, and with them replaced their arrow-heads of flint. Has-se, with great pride, displayed to René his javelin or light spear, the tough bamboo shaft of which was tipped with a keen-edged splinter of milk-white quartz, obtained from some far northern tribe. Guests began to arrive, coming from Seloy and other coast villages from the north, and from the broad savannas of the fertile Alachua land, until many hundred of them were encamped within a few miles of Fort Caroline.

At length the day of feasting broke bright and beautiful, and soon after breakfast Laudonniere, accompanied by René de Veaux and half the garrison of Fort Caroline, marched out to the scene of the games. Here they were warmly welcomed by Micco and his people, and invited to occupy seats of honor in the great booth. Upon their arrival the signal was given for the games to begin.

First of all came the races for wives, for at this feast only of all the year could the young men of the tribe get married. Even now they were obliged to run after their sweethearts, who were allowed so great a start in the race that if they chose they could reach the goal first and thus escape all further attentions from their pursuers. They generally allowed themselves to be caught, however, and thus became blushing brides. Thus, on this occasion, and in this manner, Yah-chi-la-ne (the Eagle), a young Alachua chief, gained the hand of Has-se's beautiful sister Nethla, which means the Day-star.

The contests among the boys to decide who of them should be Bow-bearer to their chief for the ensuing year followed, and as the great drum, Kas-a-lal-ki, rolled forth its hollow, booming notes, twenty slender youths stepped forward, of whom the handsomest was Has-se the Sunbeam, and the tallest was dark-faced Chitta the Snake. All were stripped to the skin, and wore only girdles about their loins and moccasins on their feet; but Has-se, as the son of the chief, had the scarlet feather of a flamingo braided into his dark hair.

From the very first Has-se and Chitta easily excelled all their competitors in the contests; but they two were most evenly matched. Has-se scored the most points in hurling the javelin, and Chitta won in the foot-race. In shooting with the bow both were



so perfect that the judges could not decide between them, and the final result of the trial became dependent upon their skill at wrestling. When they stood up together for this contest, Has-se's slight form seemed no match for that of the taller and heavier Chitta; and when in the first bout the former was thrown heavily to the ground, a murmur of disapprobation arose from the white spectators, though the Indians made no sign to express their feelings.

In the second bout, after a sharp struggle, Has-se seemed suddenly to give way, and almost immediately afterwards Chitta was hurled to earth, but how, no one could tell, except René, who with the keenest interest watched the effect of his lesson. As Chitta rose to his feet he seemed dazed, and regarded his opponent with a bewildered air, as though there were something about him he could not understand.

Again they clinched and strained and tugged, until the perspiration rolled in great beads from their shining bodies, and their breath came in short gasps. It seemed as though René's friend must give in, when, presto! down went Chitta again; while Has-se stood erect, a proud smile on his face, winner of the games, and Bow-bearer to his father for a year.

Has-se had still to undergo one more test of endurance before he could call himself a warrior, which he must be able to do ere he could assume the duties of Bow-bearer. He must pass through the ordeal of the Cassine, or black drink. This was a concoction prepared by the medicine-men, of roots and leaves, from a recipe the secret of which was most jealously guarded by them; and to drink of it was to subject one's self to the most agonizing pains, which, however, were but of short duration. In spite of his sufferings, the youth who drank from the horrid bowl was expected to preserve a smiling face, nor admit by word or sign that he was undergoing aught but the most pleasing sensations. If he failed in this one thing, no matter what record he had previously gained for courage or daring, he was ever afterwards condemned to share the work of women, nor might he ever again bear arms or take part in the chase or in war.

Immediately after his overthrow of Chitta, and while the shouts of joy over his victory were still ringing in his ears, Has-se was led to an elevated seat, where he could be seen of all the people, and a bowl of the awful mixture was handed him. Without hesitation, and with a proud glance around him, the brave youth swallowed the nauseous draught, and then folding his arms, gazed with a smiling face upon the assembled multitude. For fifteen minutes he sat there amid a death-like silence, calm and unmoved, though the great beads of perspiration rolling from his forehead showed what he was enduring. At the end of that time a great shout from the people told him



that his ordeal was over; and, weak and faint, he was led away to a place where he might recover in quiet from the effects of his terrible sufferings, and enjoy in peace the first glorious thoughts that now he was indeed a Bow-bearer and a warrior.

Réné sprang forward from his seat to seize and shake his friend's hand, while from all, Indians as well as whites, arose shouts of joy at the victory of the brave and much-loved lad who wore the Flamingo Feather.

As the angry Chitta turned away from the scene of his defeat, his heart was filled with rage at these shouts, and he muttered a deep threat of vengeance upon all who uttered them, those of his own race as well as the pale-faces.

