

The Flamingo Feather *by Kirk Munroe*

Chapter XII: Abandoning the Fort

Although the Seminoles and their newly made allies, the savages from the South, were thus put to flight by the timely arrival of the party that accompanied René de Veaux, it was only because of the surprise of the attack, and because they had no knowledge of the strength of these new enemies, which they believed to be much greater than it really was. It was certain that when they discovered how few those were who had thus surprised them, they would return with the chance of overwhelming the little party by mere numbers. Therefore Yah-chi-la-ne was anxious to deliver the twelve canoe-loads of corn to the fort, receive the promised reward, and depart for his own country that night if possible.

To accomplish this, he and his followers returned as speedily as they could to the place where their canoes had been left, and under cover of the darkness which came on about that time, moved silently as shadows up the river towards the fort. When they reached its vicinity a new difficulty presented itself. They feared to hail the sentries and demand admission lest they should be fired upon, and at the same time draw upon themselves an attack from the savages, who would thus discover their whereabouts.

While they remained undecided as to what plan they should adopt to gain an entrance to the fort, Has-se drew René to one side, and in a whisper said,

“Ta-lah-lo-ko, the time has come when I may share with thee the secret of my people. Since thy blood has flowed for my sake, and thou hast received the sacred Flamingo Feather, I am free to do so. First pledge thy word never to deliver this secret, even to those of thy own blood, and it shall be made known to thee.”

René having satisfied Has-se that the secret should be kept, the latter continued:

“Know, then, oh my brother, that when my people aided thy people to build this fort of thine, they constructed secretly, and by Micco’s own orders, a passage beneath one of its walls, by which they might at any time obtain access to the fort or escape from it, as they might desire. It was by this means that the Sunbeam left the fort when thy people would have held him prisoner within it. It was easy to force a form as slight as mine between the bars of the guard-house window, and once past them I was as free as at this moment.”



Réné was greatly surprised at this disclosure of the weakness of the fort, and not a little troubled to learn of it. He asked Has-se if the existence of the passage were known to all of his people.

“No,” said Has-se; “to not more than a score of them is the secret known, and they are bound to preserve it as they would their lives. Thou art the first besides them to whom it has been disclosed.”

“Well,” said Réné, “so long as the passage thou namest exists, we may as well make a use of it. Do thou show it to me, and I will enter the fort by means of it. Then will I seek my uncle and inform him of what has taken place. Thou and the rest shall wait at the water gate, and there deliver the provisions and receive the reward. After that thou and they are free to return to the land of the Alachuas; but, oh, Has-se!” he added, with a burst of sincere affection, “it grieves me sorely to part from thee, for thou art become to me dearer than a brother!”

Then the two returned to Yah-chi-la-ne, who had been somewhat troubled and aggrieved by their long whisperings, which he was not invited to join. He was much relieved when Has-se told him that Réné had discovered a safe way of communicating with his people, and readily gave his permission for the two to depart together in a canoe, promising at the same time to await patiently Has-se’s return.

With the utmost caution the two boys approached the fort at a point where its walls extended close to the river’s edge. Here, beneath a tangle of wild-grape vines, Has’s removed a great piece of bark that closely resembled the surrounding soil, and disclosing an opening so narrow that but one man at a time might pass it. Leading the way into the passage, that extended underground directly back from the river, he was closely followed by Réné, and the two groped their way slowly through the intense blackness. It seemed to the white lad that they must have gone a mile before they came to the end, though in reality it was but about a hundred yards.

At length Has-se stopped, raised a second slab of bark that rested above his head, and whispered that they were now directly beneath the house of the commandant, which was built on stone piers that lifted it nearly two feet above the ground.

Has-se then lay down in the narrow passage, while Réné crawled over his body, until he was directly beneath the opening. Then giving Has-se’s hand a warm squeeze with his own, he raised himself to the surface, leaving the Indian lad to make his way back to those who awaited him outside.

Upon gaining the fresh air once more, Réné found himself, even as Has-se had said he would, beneath a house, and in fact struck his head smartly against one of its timbers before he realized how shallow was the space between it and the ground. Unmindful



of the pain of the blow in his excitement, he replaced the slab of bark over the mouth of the tunnel, and crawled on his hands and knees from beneath the building, which, as soon as he passed beyond it, he recognized as that occupied by his uncle Laudonniere.

A profound silence reigned throughout the great enclosure, nor was any light to be seen save a faint gleam that found its way through a crevice in one of the lower window-shutters of the building in front of which René stood. He was surprised not to meet the sentry who used formerly to pace always before the dwelling of the commandant; for he knew nothing of the mutiny, nor that all save the sentinels at the gates had been withdrawn. After listening for a moment, and hearing nothing, he made his way to the window from which came the ray of light, and tapped gently upon its shutter. He was compelled to repeat the noise several times before it attracted attention from within. At last he heard the well-known voice of his old tutor, Le Moyne, the artist, who called out,

“What ho, without! Who goes there?”

Making no answer, René tapped again. This caused the light to be extinguished and one leaf of the shutter to be cautiously opened, while Le Moyne asked, in a nervous voice,

“Who is here, and what is thy business with me at this hour?”

“Sh!” replied René, in a whisper. “It is I, René de Veaux. Ask me nothing, but admit me, that I may instantly communicate with my uncle the commandant. I have tidings of the utmost importance for him alone.”

Le Moyne had at once recognized the voice of his beloved and long-lost pupil, and with hands trembling with eager excitement, he hastened to throw wide open the shutter and assist him to enter by the window. When he had got him safely inside he embraced the lad fervently, and kissed him on both cheeks. Then he said, “Thy uncle has been ill and is still weak; but if thy business is indeed as urgent as thou representest, I will instantly acquaint him with thy presence. I must, however, break the glad tidings gently and gradually to him, for fear of the effect of an overdose of joy.”

So the good man shuffled away in his loose slippers towards the room in which Laudonniere lay, and without his knowledge, René followed him closely.

In the commandant’s room Le Moyne began with,

“Monsieur, I have a message from the dead.”

“Ay, thou wert always a dreamer,” replied the sick man, testily.

“Nay, but this time it is no dream, but a living reality.”

“Then the dead have come to life, and thou hast had dealings not with them, but with the living.”



“It is even so, and he is one very dear to thee, whom thou hast deemed lost.”

“What sayest thou?” cried the old chevalier, sitting up in bed in his excitement.

“One dear to me, whom I deemed lost, and is now restored? It can be none other than René, my son. Where is he? Why tarries he from me?”

“He tarries not, uncle!” exclaimed a glad voice at the door, and in another moment uncle and nephew were locked in a close embrace, while sympathetic tears of joy stood in the eyes of the good Le Moyne.

As briefly as possible, and reserving the details for another occasion, René told his uncle that he had visited the land of the Alachuas, and had returned with twelve canoe-loads of corn, for which he had promised in his name twelve packages of trinkets such as he described, and the safe dismissal of their escort from the fort. He added that those who had come with him wished to depart that very night, and even now awaited him at the water gate.

“Alas!” exclaimed Laudonniere, when this had been told him, “I have no longer the power to make good thy word. While I have lain here as helpless as one struck with a palsy, another has assumed command; for know thou, my dear lad, that Fort Caroline and all it contains has passed into the hands of a body of mutineers, headed by none other than thy old friend Simon, the armorer. Go thou to him, and I doubt not he will treat with these friends of thine even as thou hast promised; for provisions such as thou sayest await even now an entrance to the fort are too rare a commodity within its walls to be scorned, even by mutineers. But, lad, return to me as speedily as may be, for the sight of thy brave face is as balm to the wounded, and thine absence has distressed me beyond that I can express.”

So René departed in search of Simon, the armorer, and by his sudden appearance so frightened the old soldier that for some moments he could do nothing but stare, speechless, with a mixture of terror and amazement.

At length René succeeded in convincing the leader of the mutineers that he was no ghost, but a real flesh and blood René de Veaux. He gave an evasive answer to Simon’s question as to how he obtained entrance to the fort, and hurried on to tell him, even more briefly than he had the commandant, of the successful journey he had made, and of the provisions that must be brought into the fort immediately.

“In good sooth, Master René,” said Simon, when he fully comprehended that which the other told him, “I am heartily disgusted with this mutineering, and if thy uncle would but hold our views as to leaving this country, I would gladly resign all authority to him. Even as it is I am most willing to be guided in all such matters as this of thine by his judgment. As he says receive the provisions, of which indeed we are



sorely in need, and deliver the trinkets thou hast promised to the savages who bring them, why so it shall be done. Thou canst vouch for them, though, and art certain that when the gate is once open they will not lurch in with the intent of capturing the fort and murdering us in cold blood?”

“Of a surety I am,” answered René, indignantly. “Would those who wished thee harm have fought for thee so valiantly as did these same friends of mine but a few hours since? It was their brave onset delivered thee from the savages near yonder mound of shells, and enabled thee to gain the fort in safety.”

“What! How sayest thou! Was it indeed thy company who came so gallantly to our aid when we were so sorely beset by the savage ambush? Heaven bless thee, lad! These friends of thine shall be friends of mine as well for this day’s work. Let us hasten to them. It was no fancy, then, but thine own brave cry of ‘France to the Rescue!’ that rang so cheerily through the forest, though I did misdoubt mine own ears at the time, and wondered greatly who our unknown friends could be. Thou art a noble lad and an honor to thy name.”

Thus saying, Simon led the way towards the water gate, turning out the guard and bidding them accompany him as he went. At the gate they found Has-se, Yah-chi-lane, and the others awaiting them, according to agreement, and Simon and his soldiers rejoiced greatly when they saw the twelve canoe-loads of corn; for it had arrived just in time to avert a veritable famine within the walls of Fort Caroline.

While under Simon’s direction the provisions were transferred to the storehouse with all possible despatch, René and Le Moyne made up the twelve packages of trinkets which were to pay for them. On his own account René also made up a package for Has-se, and another of such things as women prize for his sister, the beautiful Nethla. Nor was the brave Yah-chi-lane forgotten, but received in the shape of knives and hatchets what seemed to him presents of inestimable value.

Réné also gratified the young Alachua warriors by taking them inside the fort, and showing them, as well as he was able by the light of lanterns, the great “thunder-bows” whose voices they had heard that morning when still many miles away.

It was past midnight before the visitors were ready to depart, and then René and Has-se bade each other farewell with swelling hearts; for they had learned to love each other more dearly than brothers, and they feared they might never meet again.

One by one the canoes of the Alachuas glided away from the water gate noiselessly as so many thistle-downs, and were instantly lost to view in the night mist that hung like a soft gray curtain over the whole river. René watched the last one depart, and then going to his own room, he flung himself on a couch and was almost instantly buried



in a profound slumber, so thoroughly exhausted was he by the exciting labors of the previous day.

The morning was well advanced when he awoke. For some moments he stared about him in bewilderment, unable to account for the absence of the open-air surroundings of his late life. As soon as he realized where he was, he sprang up, dressed, ate a hurried breakfast, and went to his uncle's room.

He found the commandant feeling so much stronger and better that he was sitting up for the first time in weeks, and, in a large easy-chair by the window, was impatiently awaiting his nephew. A look of great joy lighted up the old soldier's face as René entered the room, and he blessed Him who had once more restored to him this son of his old age. Then they talked, and several hours had slipped away before René had related all the details of his remarkable journey through the unknown wilderness of the interior, and Laudonniere had in turn given all the particulars of the mutiny, and made clear the present state of affairs in Fort Caroline.

At the conclusion of René's story his uncle said, "Thou hast carried thyself like a man, my lad, and like a true son of our noble house. The successful issue of thy undertaking also insures thee a pardon for the manner in which thou didst set about it. I must warn thee, however, that unless thou choose to be considered a mutineer or a rebel, never again take upon thyself the ordering of such a matter when under command of a superior officer."

René hung his head at this mild rebuke, and promised his uncle that his future actions should be entirely guided by him, so long as they sustained each other the relations they now bore.

He was amazed and troubled to learn of the plans of the mutineers in regard to abandoning the fort, and begged his uncle's permission to remonstrate against such a proceeding with Simon, the armorer. It being granted, he held a long and serious conversation with the old soldier, but to no avail.

"It is of no use, Master René," the armorer said, in his gruffest tones, but not unkindly, for he felt a strong affection for the lad, as all did who knew him—"it is of no use arguing at this late day. We have fully determined to leave this country of starvation and misery, and at least to make an effort to lay our bones in fair France. Our ship is ready for launching, and the provisions thou hast so bravely fetched will serve to victual her. We no longer dare to show our faces outside the walls of the fort, for the forest is full of red savages who thirst for our blood; and if we remain here much longer we shall die like rats in a trap. So put you the best possible face on the matter, young master, and lend us thine aid in preparing for departure."



Although René could not do this and still remain loyal to his uncle, he could and did prepare the chevalier for the abandonment of the fort that was so fully determined upon, and he rendered the latter valuable service in gathering together and packing his important papers for immediate removal.

The newly built vessel, which was at best a poor affair in which to undertake so tremendous a journey, was launched, and so speedily equipped, that within two weeks from the time of René's return she was pronounced ready for sea, and the business of getting her stores on board was begun. It proceeded so rapidly that in one week more Fort Caroline was dismantled of everything except its heavy guns and other ponderous articles that must be left, and the day for departure was set.

Soon after daylight, one fine morning early in the new year, the garrison marched on board the vessel. Laudonniere, protesting to the last, and accompanied by his nephew and by the faithful Le Moyne, was carried on board. Then the sails were spread to a gentle breeze, and the little company, who had only a few months before built the fort with such brave hearts and high hopes, sailed away from it, leaving it to its fate, though with the broad banner of France still floating above its walls. They expected, and even hoped, never to see it again, and even the terrible voyage they were about to undertake in a small and crazy craft seemed to them less fearful than a continuance of the life from which they were escaping.

The only farewells sent after them came in the shape of a few arrows shot at the ship by the angry savages who lined the river-bank, and sullenly watched the departure of their intended victims.

That day they sailed to the mouth of the river, but found so great a sea rolling in over its bar that they dared not attempt a passage through it, and were therefore forced to drop anchor while still within shelter of the land, and await its abatement.