

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter XIV: A Night of Terror

Immediately after landing Menendez and his soldiers, with their supplies, at San Augustin, the ships of the fleet, which on account of their size had been unable to enter the river, sailed away for Spain, leaving only a few small vessels at anchor inside the bar. Thus apparently all was favorable to the bold enterprise of Admiral Ribault, who, with his six ships, and all the troops from Fort Caroline, had determined to attack, and if possible to destroy, the newly founded city before it could be fortified.

When he arrived off the mouth of the river the tide was so low on the bar that his ships could not pass it. So they stood off and on, waiting for it to rise, and the Spaniards on shore, seeing them, were filled with great consternation. Of a sudden, almost without warning, there came a terrible blast of wind out of the north-east. It was followed by another and another, until such a gale was raging as had never been seen by white men on that coast. In vain did the French ships struggle against it, and against the huge billows that towered as high as their tallest masts. They could do nothing against its fury, and soon the Spaniards were filled with joy at seeing them drift helplessly down the coast towards certain wreck and destruction.

Then Menendez made up his mind, in spite of the terrible gale, to march overland to the attack of Fort Caroline, thus deprived of its defenders. Followed by five hundred picked men, he set forth, and for three days, beaten and drenched by the pitiless storm, he wandered through over-flowed swamps and tangled forests. He had compelled several of the Seloy Indians to go with him and act as guides; but finally, believing that they were purposely leading him astray, he put them to death with great cruelty, and trusted to his own knowledge to lead him to the great river. At length he reached it, and following its course, came during the night to a high bluff, from which he looked down upon the few twinkling lights of Fort Caroline beneath him.

Meantime the raging of the elements had caused the greatest anxiety to those who remained within the fort, for they were fearful of its effect upon the ships of Admiral Ribault; and though they of course knew nothing of their fate, they were already beginning to regard them as lost.

Under Simon, the armorer, as captain of the guard, René de Veaux had done duty with the few old men and invalids who were pressed into service as sentinels, and he

had manfully shouldered his cross-bow, and paced the walls through many long hours of storm, rain, and darkness. Although, in his pride at thus performing the duties of a real soldier, the boy allowed no word of complaint to escape him, he felt what the others expressed openly—that this guard duty, now that the Spaniards and savages had departed, and in the midst of a storm so terrible that it did not seem possible for mortals to face it, was an unnecessary hardship. So when, towards morning of the fourth night, after two hours of wearily pacing the walls in the cold, drenching rain, he was relieved, and flung himself, all wet as he was, upon a couch in his own quarters, he determined to remonstrate with Simon upon the subject.

In spite of his feelings, René had been absolutely faithful to his duty, which, alas! the soldier who relieved him was not. After a few turns upon the parapet, during which he neither saw nor heard anything to disquiet him, this sentinel sought shelter from the beatings of the storm in an angle of the walls, where he soon fell into a doze.

Even then the Spaniards were at the gates, awaiting the signal to make an attack. It was given, and René had hardly dropped into a troubled sleep when he was rudely awakened by a crash, a rending of wood, the wild scream of agony with which the unfaithful sentinel yielded up his life, and the triumphant yells of the enemy, who had forced an entrance through the little unguarded postern-gate.

Réné sprang to the door, and for an instant stood motionless, petrified by terror at the awful sights that greeted his gaze. Already flames were bursting from many of the tents and barracks, and by the light thus given he saw men, women, and children, almost naked as they had sprung from their beds, flying in every direction before the pitiless Spaniards. Wherever they turned the fugitives were met by long pikes, gleaming swords, and keen daggers, and above the howlings of the storm rose their shrill screams of terror and quickly stifled cries of mortal agony.

For an instant only did René gaze upon these awful scenes, and then, remembering his uncle, he rushed to the commandant's dwelling which the Spaniards had not yet reached. He found, Laudonniere, pale and trembling, but as calm and collected as becomes the brave soldier even in the presence of death, standing beside his bed, while the faithful Le Moyne endeavored to assist him into his armor.

Breathlessly René explained that there was no time to lose, and no hope of saving the fort. "All is lost!" he cried, "and if ye would save your own lives, follow me without an instant's delay. I, and I alone, know of a way of escape."

It was only then that René had bethought himself of the underground passage of which Has-se had taught him the secret.



Reassured by his confident words, the two men followed him out of the house, and to their great surprise were led beneath it among the stone piers of its foundations. They were not a moment too soon, for as they disappeared, some Spanish soldiers, who had learned that this was the dwelling of the commandant, burst into it with savage cries, and proceeded to search its every corner in the hope of capturing the greatest prize of all in the person of the Huguenot leader.

Their hour of triumph was embittered by not finding him, for even as they searched his chamber he, preceded by René de Veaux and followed by Le Moyne, the artist, was making his way through the narrow tunnel beneath them towards the river-bank beyond the walls of the fort.

So surprised was Laudonniere at this underground passage leading into the very heart of his fort, of the existence of which he had never until that moment even dreamed, that when they emerged on the river-bank he forgot all else in his curiosity concerning it.

“Whence comes this passage that has proved of such wonderful service to us, and how came thou by a knowledge of it?” he asked of his nephew.

Even then René would not betray the solemn promise of secrecy given to Has-se, but answered,

“Let us not now stop to talk of these matters, I pray thee, oh mine uncle. Thy precious life is still in great danger. Let us first perfect thy escape, and another time I will answer thee concerning this secret passage. For the present I beg of thee to make thy way, accompanied by the good Master Le Moyne, as speedily and secretly as may be, down the river to its mouth, where do still lie the two small ships left behind by Admiral Ribault. Let me, who am young, strong, and active, tarry here for a short time, that perchance I may aid others of our people to effect an escape by means of this same tunnel. I will delay but shortly, and will overtake and rejoin thee long ere thy feebleness shall have permitted thee to reach the river’s mouth.”

Although Laudonniere was most reluctant to part with his nephew at such a time, he deemed that it would be an exhibition of selfishness on his part to compel his attendance upon himself when it was possible that by remaining he might save the lives of some of the unfortunates within the fort. Therefore he reluctantly gave his consent that René should remain behind for a short time, but charged him not to unnecessarily expose himself to danger. Then both men embraced the lad fervently, gave him their blessing, and departed, full of the hope of speedily meeting with him again—a hope that was destined to be sadly deferred.



After their departure René again entered the tunnel and made his way back to its inner terminus. There he cautiously drew himself up from its mouth, crept to the edge of the building beneath which it lay, and watched and listened for what he might discover.

He had not been there a minute when he was startled by hearing a smothered groan close at hand. Listening attentively, he heard it again; and feeling confident that he who uttered it must be one of his own countrymen, he began to creep carefully, and without betraying his presence by the slightest sound, in the direction from which it proceeded. At length he heard a third groan, so close to him that he instinctively drew back for fear of coming into contact with the person who uttered it. Then, in the lightest of whispers, he inquired,

“Who is there? I am René de Veaux.”

For answer came the whisper, “Heaven help thee, Master René, if thou art in like plight with myself! I am thy old friend Simon, sorely wounded, and with no hope save that of falling into the hands of these fiends of Spaniards when daylight shall enable them to make a thorough search of the premises.”

“Cheer up, good Simon, and speak not thus dolefully,” whispered René. “If thou canst walk, or even crawl, I can save thee. Where lies thy wound?”

“Not so that it interferes with my crawling or even walking; for though it seems to lie in several portions of my body at once, it affects not my legs. If thou hast knowledge of a chance of escape, however slender, lead on, and I will gladly follow thee, for hopes I have none in remaining here.”

So René guided Simon very slowly and cautiously to the mouth of the tunnel. Through it the old man forced his way, and with much difficulty and many groans, until he too reached the river-bank in safety, and was sent on to join Laudonniere and Le Moyne, and with them to make an effort to reach the ships.

Then once more did the brave lad make his way back through the narrow tunnel and to the outer edge of the house above its inner entrance. Here, as before, he listened and awaited in the hope of discovering other unfortunates whom he might aid to escape.

As he lay there watching, he listened with a swelling heart to the triumphant songs and shouts of the Spaniards, and the cries of the victims, whose hiding-places were still occasionally discovered, and who were instantly put to death. Suddenly the smouldering embers of a fire near by were fanned into a momentary blaze that caused him to withdraw hastily beneath the building lest he should be discovered. As he did so his eye lighted on a pile of books and papers that had been tossed from the windows of



the building beneath which he was concealed. Even in that glance he recognized them as belonging to his uncle, and being the same that he had helped to pack when the fort was abandoned.

Realizing their importance, and despairing of being able to afford further aid to any of the recent occupants of the fort, René determined to attempt to save these papers. It was a bold undertaking, for to reach them he was obliged to leave the shelter of the building and advance some distance into the open, where at any moment he might be revealed to his enemies by flashes of firelight from the smouldering timbers near by. Fully realizing the risk he ran, but undismayed by it, the brave boy made several trips to and from the pile of books and papers. He had removed nearly all of them to the tunnel, which he felt to be the only safe place for them, when he suddenly became aware that morning was near at hand, and that the rapidly increasing light of day had made his task doubly dangerous.

Knowing, however, that all that were left could be carried on one more trip, he determined to make it. Just as he gathered into his arms the last of the papers to save which he was risking his life, a yell of delight announced that he was discovered. A quick glance revealed two Spanish soldiers rushing towards him with levelled pikes, and gleaming eyes that were red and bloodshot as those of the tiger who has tasted blood.

With a rare presence of mind, and without dropping his precious bundle, René darted, not under the house, but into it through the main entrance. Running through the long hall, which was still shrouded in complete darkness, he sprang out of an open window at its rear end. As he did so he heard his pursuers enter the house and begin an eager search of its rooms, at the same time calling others of their comrades to their assistance.

Breathlessly creeping beneath the building, René reached the underground passage in safety, and deposited within it the papers for which he had dared so much. After drawing the slab of bark carefully over the entrance above his head, he removed all the books and papers to the very middle of the tunnel, where they nearly blocked the narrow way and rendered it impassable. With the other things, he had brought away a small iron box, banded and locked, and this he took especial pains to effectually conceal.

While he was thus working like a mole beneath the ground, the baffled Spaniards above his head were becoming more and more enraged and perplexed. Their thorough search of the building into which they had seen their would-be victim enter, but which



no one had seen him leave, failed to discover not only him, but any traces of the great pile of books and papers which they had collected for the purpose of burning.

Finally they became convinced that the building contained some secret chamber that they were unable to detect, and by order of Menendez himself it was set on fire and burned to the ground. Thus the Spaniards felt sure that they had destroyed not only the books and papers, but the unknown enemy who had so daringly risked his life to recover and save them. At the same time they were greatly astonished that he should have quietly permitted the fire to destroy him without making an effort to escape, or allowing a single cry of pain or anguish to betray his presence. After much consideration of the matter they finally concluded that so many of the Huguenots had suffered martyrdom at the stake that they had all learned to endure the torture of burning in silence.

When René had finished storing the books and papers as carefully as the circumstances would permit, he at last found time to consider his own safety. Going to the end of the tunnel, and peering cautiously out to make sure that he was not observed, he replaced the bark door beneath its curtain of vines, and began to work his way very slowly and with many a backward glance down the river. It was now broad daylight, and for fear of being seen from the fort, he crept close under shelter of the bank, sometimes crawling on his hands and knees, and often wading in water up to his waist.

At length, by several hours' hard labor, which, coming after his exertions of the preceding night, completely exhausted him, he reached the high bluff which has already been described as commanding a view of several miles both up and down the river. Warily the tired boy climbed to its summit, from which, as he gazed up the river, he saw with a heavy heart the yellow banner of Spain flaunting itself above the walls of Fort Caroline. As its folds glistened in the bright sunshine, for the storm of the past four days had passed away with the night, they seemed to him like those of some huge and venomous serpent, and he turned from the sight with a shudder.

On the other hand, in the far distance, he saw, still lying at anchor, the two small ships which he believed to be, as they were, the only representatives of the power of France now left in the New World. On these he placed all his hopes of escape, of future happiness, and of life itself.

Anxious as he was to reach the ships and to rejoin his uncle, the poor lad's exhausted frame could withstand the terrible strain upon it no longer. It pleaded for a rest so effectually that René flung himself upon a pile of wet moss, determined to snatch an hour's sleep before attempting to proceed farther.



As the boy slept he was visited by troublous dreams that caused him to toss his arms and moan pitifully; and no wonder, after the horrid scenes of which he had so recently been a spectator; no wonder, too, when new and terrible dangers threatened him closely even as he slept. Had he been awake he would have noticed the approach of a small band of Indians, who, appearing on the edge of the forest, made their way directly towards the bluff. It was a party of Seminole warriors, led by their chief the gigantic Cat-sha. With him was Chitta the Snake, and behind them walked three bound prisoners. Two of these were Frenchmen, and the third was an Indian lad who had escaped with his chief from the doomed village of Selay, only to share the fate of the equally doomed fort in which he had sought shelter. These had thrown themselves from the walls of the fort upon its capture by the Spaniards, and had reached the forest unharmed.

There they had fallen into the hands of these Seminoles who had not fled from this part of the country upon the return of the French, as the latter had supposed, but had lingered in the hope of capturing any white men who might incautiously stray beyond the protecting walls. They desired to capture these that their tortures might form part of the festivities with which they proposed to celebrate their return to their stronghold in the great swamp, and to which the rest of the band, bearing the plunder taken from Fort Caroline after it was abandoned, had already gone. The Seminoles, rejoicing greatly over the fortune that had thrown three victims thus easily into their hands, were now on their way to their canoes, which they had hidden near the foot of this high bluff.

Directing the others to proceed to where the canoes lay, Cat-sha, accompanied by Chitta, ascended the eminence for the purpose of taking a sweeping view of the river and the surrounding country. As they gained the summit René's moanings warned them of his presence. Stealing to the spot where he lay with the noiseless footfalls of wild beasts, the two Indians stood for a moment gloating over the unconscious lad. They fully realized the value of this unexpected and welcome prize, for both of them recognized the young white chief the moment their eyes lighted upon him. In another minute the poor lad had awakened with a wild cry of terror, to find himself bound hand and foot, and lying at the mercy of those whom he knew to be his bitterest and most unrelenting enemies.