

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter XV: Rene in the Hands of His Enemies

Well might René de Veaux feel that he had fallen into evil hands, as, upon awakening from his troubled slumber, he found himself bound hand and foot, and gazed into the cruel face of Chitta, lighted by a triumphant but sneering smile. Nor did he gain any comfort by turning his eyes to the sullen countenance of the huge Cat-sha. Neither pity nor mercy was expressed in the slightest degree by either of the Seminoles. Chitta thought of the revenge he was to enjoy for his humiliating overthrow during the games at the Feast of Ripe Corn, which he fully believed he owed to the white lad. Cat-sha knew that René had led the attack upon his band at the shell mound, and regarded him as a brave enemy whom he should take an exquisite delight in torturing.

Loosening the bonds that encircled the boy's ankles, his captors forced him to walk to the foot of the bluff, where the rest of their band were gathered. These received the new prisoner with extravagant manifestations of delight, and after all had examined him, and his weapons had been taken from him, he was again tightly bound and thrown into the bottom of one of the canoes. Although he had caught a glimpse of the other white prisoners, he was not allowed to communicate with them.

As his captors desired to keep him well and strong, they gave him food and water, both of which he at first thought of refusing, and thus bringing his sufferings to an end as quickly as possible. On second thought, however, he decided that this course would be cowardly, and unworthy of his white blood. So he ate heartily all that was offered to him, determined to keep up his strength, and to make a desperate effort to escape should the slightest opportunity present itself.

Having reached this decision, René felt much calmer and more hopeful, and as he was sadly in need of sleep, he determined to obtain as much of that blessing as was possible. Shortly afterwards the Indians were greatly astonished to find their new prisoner slumbering as quietly as though no danger threatened him, and he had not an anxiety in the world.

While daylight lasted the Seminoles remained in that spot, but at nightfall they launched their canoes, and set forth on their journey to the great swamp of the Okeefenokee.



An hour later a few shadows flitted through the darkness over the placid waters, past the two French ships that still lay at anchor near the mouth of the river. Making no sound, they were unnoticed and unchallenged, and in a few minutes they had turned and vanished amid the vast salt-marshes that bounded the river on the north. Thus René de Veaux passed within a few rods of the uncle who was so anxiously awaiting his coming, and neither of them had the slightest suspicion of the other's presence.

Lying in the bottom of a canoe, from which he was only taken when the Indians went into camp, René knew not whither he was being taken, nor had he any idea that he was making the very same journey that he and Has-se had taken together some months before. He was not allowed to communicate with, nor did he even see, the other white prisoners, for they were carried in separate canoes, and at night all three were bound to trees situated at considerable distances from each other.

Day after day the boy studied the faces of his captors attentively, but among them all he found only one that betrayed the faintest evidence of pity for his forlorn condition. Even his expression was only one of somewhat less ferocity than that of the others, and poor René imagined that it was owing to his youth, for this Indian was but a mere lad of even less years than himself. In fact he was the young Indian from Seloy who had been captured by the Seminoles on the same day with René. Having unexpectedly obtained three instead of two white prisoners, and being in need of recruits, Cat-sha had offered to spare this lad's life and set him at liberty if he would become a Seminole and a member of their band. This the young Indian, whose name was E-chee (the Deer), had professed himself as willing to do, though he secretly determined to make his escape at the very first opportunity.

He had at once recognized René, though he was careful not to betray the fact, and was very glad that the white lad showed no sign of ever having seen him. Only by an occasional pitying glance, when he could give it undetected by the others, did he attempt to convey his friendly feelings to the young prisoner. When it came his turn to stand guard over the captives, he treated them with greater harshness than any of the Seminoles, in order to allay any suspicion that might be entertained of his faithfulness. But always he watched for an opportunity to communicate with René, and make known to him that he was a friend.

At length such an opportunity offered itself. They had entered the great swamp, and even René, from the bottom of the canoe, seeing the tall cypresses meet overhead, began to suspect where they were. During a portion of an intensely dark night E-chee kept watch over the prisoners. While the guard whom he relieved was there to note the action, he gave each of the three captives a kick with his moccasined foot. This, while



it did not hurt them, expressed to the Seminole a degree of contempt that satisfied him that the new recruit hated the white men as cordially as he himself.

When he had departed and all was quiet, E-chee approached the place where René lay bound to a tree, and lying down close beside him, he whispered, “Ta-lah-lo-ko.”

Réné had fallen asleep, but he was instantly awakened by the sound of this familiar name, even though it was only whispered. Without moving, he waited to hear if the sound would be repeated, or whether he had only dreamed some one had called him.

In a moment the whisper came again, “Ta-lah-lo-ko.”

“Who art thou?” asked René, in the Indian language.

“I am E-chee from Seloy, where I saw thee when thou first set foot on the land of my people. Dost thou not remember?”

“Art thou not E-chee the Seminole?”

“To all appearance I am become one of these runaways, but my heart is that of a true man, and I seek only an opportunity to escape from them and to rejoin my own people. If indeed any of my people be left alive,” he added, bitterly.

“Dost thou think an escape may be effected?” asked René, eagerly, a new hope dawning in his breast.

“I know not, but I can try, and should I fail, death itself were better than life with these Seminole dogs.”

Then René asked where they were and what E-chee knew of Cat-sha’s plans.

He was told that they were in the great Okeefenokee swamp, even as he had suspected. On the morrow they were to leave the canoes and find a trail that led to the Seminole village, hidden in its most impenetrable depths. When they reached it E-chee believed, from fragments of conversation he had overheard, that there was to be a great feast, and that the prisoners were to be tortured.

Then René told E-chee of the land of the Alachuas, and described to him how he might reach it. This done, he asked the young Indian to reach a hand into the breast of his doublet, where, within its lining, he would find a feather with a slender chain and pin attached to it. This, on account of his bonds, he could not get at with his own hands.

When E-chee had secured the feather, which was the very Flamingo Feather given to René by Has-se, René told him to guard it with his life; and, if he succeeded in escaping from the Seminoles, to convey it with all speed to the land of the Alachuas. There he was to present it to any of Micco’s tribe, but in particular to one named Has-se the Bow-bearer, if he could discover him. He was to tell them of the sad plight of the prisoners, and beg of them to send a party to their rescue.



Hardly had he finished these instructions when the snapping of a twig near by caused E-chee to spring to his feet and pour out a torrent of abuse upon René, at the same time giving him a kick that drew from the prostrate lad an exclamation of pain. It was quite as much a groan of despair; for he could not understand the action of the young Indian, and imagined him to be a vile traitor who had only gained his confidence in order to betray it.

Directly, however, he heard the voice of Cat-sha demanding of E-chee why he thus abused the prisoners. To this the young Indian made answer that he had discovered that this one, who was the most troublesome of the three, had nearly succeeded in loosening his bonds. This he would doubtless have accomplished had not he, E-chee, been possessed of the forethought to examine them as he made his rounds.

Commending his vigilance, Cat-sha, who was in the habit of personally assuring himself of the safety of the prisoners several times during each night, passed on. Then E-chee, after stooping to whisper to René to be of good cheer, also moved away.

Before noon of the following day the canoes were run ashore, and René was allowed to rise and step from the one in the bottom of which he had travelled. As he did so, he at once knew the place as the head of the little lagoon, where he had been left to nurse his snake-bite, while Has-se explored the trail that led away into the swamp. It was with a swelling heart that the lad contrasted his present position with the one he had occupied at that time, and it was with difficulty that he forced back the hot tears that his thoughts caused to stand ready to flow.

The brave lad did not permit these signs of weakness to be seen, and he received some comfort by catching a kindly look from E-chee, and exchanging sympathetic glances with his fellow-prisoners, with whom, however, he was not allowed to speak. They were of the new arrivals, and on account of illness had been left in the fort when the fighting men marched away to join Admiral Ribault.

As soon as the canoes had been drawn from the water and carefully concealed, the Seminoles and their captives turned into the gloom of the shadowy cypresses, and made their way in single file along the narrow trail that led away from the lagoon. It was often covered with water, and a misstep on either side of its entire length would have plunged the unfortunate who should make it into a bottomless morass. From it, without assistance, he would never be able to extricate himself, but would only sink deeper and deeper, until he had disappeared forever. It happened that one of the French prisoners did step from the trail on this occasion. The brutal savages watched with pleasure his frantic struggles to regain a footing, but without offering to aid him. He had very nearly drowned in the horrible mixture of black water and blacker mud before they hauled him



out. He was in a pitiable plight, but they only greeted him with blows and jeers at his appearance, and forced him to resume the march, without allowing him to remove from his clothing any of the filth that clung to it.

Réné was able to distinguish the point at which the trail they were following branched off from that formerly taken by Has-se. He hoped that E-chee would also note it, but had no chance of assuring himself that the young Indian had done so.

It was nearly nightfall before they reached the Seminole village that marked their journey's end. Here they were received by its inhabitants with the wildest demonstrations of savage joy. Réné was an especial object of interest, for, as the "young white chief," his name was already well known to them, and his capture was regarded as the most noteworthy one ever made by the band.

The squaws and children, and even the youths of his own age, crowded closely about him, taunting him with shrill voices, spitting on him, pulling his hair, and pushing him this way and that. For some time Réné bore all this patiently, feeling that to express annoyance would perhaps only subject him to greater abuses. He knew also that it would afford his tormentors the greatest delight and satisfaction, and this pleasure he was not inclined to give them.

At length, however, his patience came to an end. Among the crowd surrounding him was a lad somewhat taller than himself, and possessed of hideous features. When he began pricking Réné with the point of a sharp knife, at the same time approaching his face close to that of his victim, and mocking him with frightful grimaces, the boy could stand it no longer. Regardless of what the consequences might be, he drew back a step, and raising his clinched and still bound hands, struck his tormentor full in the face such a blow as felled him to the ground.

A loud outcry arose at this unexpected exhibition of the prisoner's spirit, and the young savage, regaining his feet, was so enraged that he attempted to plunge his knife into Réné's heart. This was prevented by several warriors who had witnessed the scene, and who stepped quickly forward to his rescue. Pushing Réné's assailant aside, they led him away to a palmetto-thatched hut that stood at a distance from the rest. Here, after so tightening the bonds of his ankles that he could not stand, but could only sit or lie down, they closed the entrance and left him to his own sorrowful reflections.

The Seminole village occupied an island the surface of which was raised considerably above that of the surrounding swamp. It was of such extent as to afford space for several large fields of maize, pumpkins, and starch root, besides the collection of huts, which numbered in all about a hundred. These represented a population of about five hundred souls, of whom about two hundred were warriors.



On all sides of the island stretched to unknown distances the vast impenetrable swamp, and only by the one narrow trail over which René had been brought could it be gained from the outside world. At the point where this trail joined the island a Seminole warrior kept watch night and day, so that the place would seem to be absolutely safe against surprise, and proof against any attack that might be made upon it. Escape from it would also appear to be impossible.

On the very night of the arrival of Cat-sha and his prisoners, the warrior who kept guard at the end of the trail was startled by hearing a few wild notes of a death-song rise from a small thicket but a short distance from him.

Then came a loud cry, and the words,

“Thus does E-chee of Selay defy the Seminole dogs and rejoin his people!”

Directly afterwards, and before the astonished warrior could reach the spot, he heard a loud splash in the black waters that surrounded the island, and then all was still.

As the warrior gained the little thicket, he saw nothing save some ripples on the surface of the water, and some bubbles rising from its unknown depths. He was joined by others from the village, and all searched the thicket for some trace of him who had uttered the remarkable cry. Finally they discovered in it the head-dress of feathers that the young Indian of Selay had worn as a Seminole warrior, and were forced to conclude that he had drowned himself rather than to live as one of them. Sneering at the want of taste he had thus displayed, and regretting that he had not been kept a prisoner, and as such been tortured for their amusement, instead of being allowed to become a Seminole, they returned to the village. The sentinel resumed his watch on the trail, and the incident of E-chee’s disappearance was thought of no more.

When René overheard some Indians talking outside the hut in which he lay, and laughingly telling each other of the method E-chee had taken to rejoin his own people, his heart sank within him, and he felt that he no longer had aught to hope for, now that his only friend amid all these enemies was dead.

On the following day preparations for the great feast of rejoicing were actively begun. In the middle of a small mound just outside the village a stout post of green wood was set deep into the ground, and near it was gathered a great pile of dry wood and fat pine splinters. This was the stake at which the prisoners were to suffer torture, and around which the chief interest of the festivities was to centre. The feast was to continue for three days, according to the number of prisoners on hand. One of them was, by his behavior under the ingenious tortures devised especially for the occasion, to furnish the principal amusement for each day. At its close, if he were not already dead, he was to be sacrificed.



It was generally understood that the most important of the prisoners, the young white chief, was to be reserved for the last and crowning day of the feast, and for him an especial committee were inventing a series of new and peculiarly painful tortures.

At all hours of the day crowds of women and children gathered about the hut in which René was confined, in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. Their delight knew no bounds when, occasionally, one of the more good-natured of his guards would lift the mat of braided palmetto fibre that hung before the entrance, and allow them to peep in at him, and taunt him with hints of what he was to undergo.

Wearily did the long hours pass with the unhappy boy as he lay thus friendless among cruel enemies, helplessly awaiting the fate from which he shrank so fearfully, and yet from which he could conceive no manner of escape.