

The Flamingo Feather *by Kirk Munroe*

Chapter XVI: Has-se Receives the Token

Far away from the scenes of sorrow, suffering, savage cruelty, and savage rejoicing of which the shadowy depths of the great swamp were witness, in the pleasant land of the Alachuas, the close of the second day after the one on which René de Veaux had been held a prisoner into the Seminole village presented a picture of peace and happy contentment. A light breeze sweeping across the broad savannas brought with it the odors of countless flowers; from the moss-hung trees many birds poured forth their evening songs in floods of melody, and all nature was full of beauty and rejoicing.

In the camp of deerskin lodges and palmetto huts clustered beneath the grand trees, and occupied by those Indians who acknowledged the good old Micco as their chief, all were in the open air enjoying the cool of the evening. The hunters had returned from the chase laden with game, and now lay in comfortable attitudes on the soft grass, indulging in a well-earned rest. The women were busy about the fires, preparing the evening meal, and the children frolicked among the lodges or around the edge of the great spring, as free from care and as happy as the birds above their heads. From the bank of the river but a short distance away came the shouts of a party of lads who were bathing in the clear waters. To these the Indian mothers listened with a certain anxiety, fearful lest they should hear the shrill cry of warning that would announce the presence of Allapatta, the great alligator.

In the middle of the camp stood a lodge larger and taller than the others, and surmounted by the plume of eagles' feathers that showed it to be that of the chief. In front of this lodge, seated on outspread robes, and gravely smoking their long-stemmed pipes, were the old chief Micco, several of the principal men of his tribe, and Yah-chi-la-ne, the young Alachua chief. Behind the old chief, and ready to do his slightest bidding, stood a tall, slender, but remarkably handsome youth, in whose hair was braided a scarlet feather that shone against the dark tresses like a vivid flame. His face was lighted with a quick intelligence, and he evidently took a keen interest in the subject which the others were discussing, though, as became his years, he took no part in their conversation.



At length the old chief turned to the lad with a kindly smile and said, “What is thy opinion, my brave Bow-bearer? Can there be enmity between these white friends of thine and others of their own color who also come from across the great waters?”

Very proud of having his opinion thus asked, Has-se—for it was none other than the beloved Indian friend of René de Veaux—answered, modestly,

“It seems to me not unlikely that there should be. Do not different tribes of our own race and color often war against one another?”

“Well answered, my son,” replied the chief; “thou art right, and I am inclined to believe that what we have just learned is only too true. If it be, then am I deeply grieved for the sad fate of those who were our friends.”

The tidings of which Micco spoke had been brought that day by an Indian runner from a far-eastern tribe. They told of the arrival upon the coast of the Spaniards under Menendez, and of their destruction of Seloy and capture of Fort Caroline. The runner had also told of the brutal massacre by Menendez and his soldiers of Admiral Ribault and all who escaped with him from the wreck of the French ships. These, when they were cast ashore by the fearful storm already described, had thrown themselves upon the mercy of the Spaniards, and had met only with the mercy dealt out by the sword and the dagger.

That the pale-faces should thus destroy each other had been deemed so wonderful and of such importance by those eastern tribes who knew of these occurrences, that they had despatched runners to all the friendly tribes within hundreds of miles to acquaint them with the facts. Many of Micco’s warriors were inclined to doubt that such things could be, and it was to discuss the matter that he had summoned his advisers and principal braves to his lodge.

While the chief and his wise men thus talked and smoked with a gravity becoming their years and position, and while Has-se, the Bow-bearer, listened to them with an eager interest, there came of a sudden loud shouts from the lads on the river-bank. All eyes were turned in that direction, and some anxiety was felt lest Allapatta had indeed made his appearance, and was endeavoring to secure a meal off one of the bathers.

In another moment, however, all the lads were seen trooping towards the camp, and surrounding a young warrior who came willingly with them, but who was a stranger to all present. The lads conducted him directly to where the little circle was formed in front of the chief’s lodge. Here one from among them explained that this stranger had come down the river alone in a canoe, and had asked of them information concerning the land of the Alachuas, and particularly for that tribe of Indians led by a chief called Micco.



As the young warrior, whose person bore every evidence of long and hasty travel, stood silently before him, the old chief said,

“I am Micco. Who art thou, and what is thy errand here?”

The stranger answered, “I am known as E-chee, and am of that place by the great waters called Seloy. He whom I seek most anxiously among thy people is named to me as thy son, Has-se, the Bow-bearer.”

“Then is thy search ended,” replied Micco, “for Has-se, my son and Bow-bearer, is even here in attendance. What is thy business with him?”

As Has-se, greatly surprised at being thus singled out, stepped forward, the stranger drew from his breast a scarlet flamingo feather. It was exactly like the one that glowed so vividly amid the dark tresses of the young Bow-bearer, and from it hung a slender gold chain, to which was attached a golden pin. Handing it to Has-se, E-chee said,

“He who sends thee this token is in danger of speedily losing his life, and he prays that thou wilt come to his rescue.”

Eagerly seizing the feather, Has-se exclaimed, “It comes from Ta-lah-lo-ko, the young white chief! Where is he, and in what danger?”

Then, while all present listened with the closest attention, E-chee told of the destruction of Seloy and the capture of Fort Caroline by the Spaniards; of his own capture, and that of René de Veaux and two other white men, by the Seminoles; of his escape, and of the terrible fate now awaiting those still in the hands of the outlaws.

When he had finished, Has-se, who had followed the story with breathless attention and flashing eyes, turned to the chief and said,

“My father, this pledge I would redeem with life itself, for he who sends it is my best beloved friend and brother.”

“And if he still lives, and it can be accomplished, he shall yet be saved,” answered the old chief, promptly, with the fire of a young warrior blazing in his eyes. Then of E-chee he asked, “Dost thou know the trail back to this den of wolves? and is thy strength sufficient to allow of thy immediate departure to guide a party of my warriors to it?”

“As the wounded deer knows the trail marked by his own blood, so know I it; and if my strength should fail, hatred of these Seminoles would take its place and still bear me on,” was the answer.

“It is well spoken,” said the old chief. Then turning to Yah-chi-la-ne, his son-in-law, he said, “Take thou twenty picked braves, my eagle, and with them find out this hiding-place of Seminoles. If Ta-lah-lo-ko still lives, effect his rescue, and that of the other prisoners, and return with them. I send no more with thee, for fear that with a stronger party thy hot blood would lead thee to attack this nest of swamp foxes. Such



a measure could only result in failure; for if it be situated as this young man describes, not the whole force of our tribe, together with that of thy brave Alachuas, could prevail against it. Therefore the rescue must be effected by cunning and not by mere valor; but take thou careful note of the locality, and bring again word to me. If there is any chance of success in attacking it, we will then send forth a war-party that shall blot from existence this plague-spot.”

Gladly did the brave Yah-chi-la-ne set about the execution of this order; and within an hour he and his war-party of twenty picked braves, of whom Has-se was the first chosen, were ready to start on their dangerous mission.

During that hour E-chee, who was to be their guide, had bathed in the life-giving waters of the spring and eaten a hearty meal; so that he now felt like a new man, and equal to any amount of fresh hardships and fatigue.

In the darkness of the early night the little party entered their canoes, and with lusty strokes of the paddles started swiftly up the narrow river towards the terrible swamp, and the more terrible scenes that it concealed.

E-chee occupied the foremost canoe with Yah-chi-la-ne and Has-se; and as they sped onward he told them at greater length than before of the tragic events of the past few days, and of the captivity of Ta-lah-lo-ko.

He also told the story of his own escape, which would doubtless have interested the Seminoles greatly could they have heard it. Having made up his mind that if he was to be of service to the young white chief he must set about it immediately, he had determined to attempt an escape on the very night of his arrival at the Seminole village. As he knew that he would not be permitted on any account to pass the guard at the end of the trail, he conceived a plan that would draw the sentinel from his post for a few moments, and as soon as darkness came on proceeded to put it into execution.

He simply procured a billet of heavy water-soaked wood, that would sink like a stone, and carried it, undiscovered, to a thicket on the edge of the island near the end of the trail. There he flung his Seminole head-dress of feathers upon the ground, chanted a few notes of a death-song, cried out that he was thus about to rejoin his own people, and threw the billet of wood into the dark waters, where, with a loud splash, it instantly sank from sight. Then he crept noiselessly from the spot, and when the sentinel reached the thicket he had gained the unguarded trail, and, without waiting to listen to the comments upon his supposed suicide, made off with all speed. He had happily succeeded in retaining his footing upon the uncertain pathway, and in safely reaching the spot at the head of the lagoon where the Seminole canoes were hidden.



Taking possession of one of these, he had travelled night and day towards the land of the Alachuas, guided by the directions given him by René.

Has-se and Yah-chi-la-ne listened attentively to this tale, and at its conclusion commended E-chee highly for the skill and bravery with which he had effected his escape and made his way to their encampment. Then they talked of their chances of still finding René alive, and of how they should rescue him, until E-chee, utterly exhausted by his prolonged efforts, dropped into a profound slumber, from which he did not awaken until daylight.

Meantime, in the Seminole village, the preparations for the great Feast of Rejoicing had been completed, and it had been begun on the very day of E-chee's arrival in Micco's camp, and of the setting forth of the rescuing party. For two days René de Veaux listened with a sickening dread to the sounds of savage revelry that penetrated the hut in which he lay. He heard the continuous beating of the kas-a-lal-ki, or Indian drum, and the rattle of the terrapin shells, filled with dried palmetto berries, that accompanied the dancing. He heard the fierce, wild shouts and yells of the savages and shuddered at them. Above all he heard, and attempted to close his ears to the sound, the cries of agony forced from those of his own race who suffered torture at the stake. Of all these sounds he could only guess the meaning; for none came near him save the guard who brought him food and water, but who refused to speak to him, and once Chitta came and stood over him with a smile of triumph lighting his dark features. As he turned away he said, as though speaking to himself,

“On the morrow we shall see of what stuff pale-faced chiefs are made.”

This was all, but to the quick understanding of the captive boy it meant everything. He knew at once that his turn had come, and that with the light of another day he would be led forth, and by his sufferings afford a brief amusement to a horde of yelling savages.

Could he endure it? Would his strength bear him bravely to the bitter end? Or would he too break down and cry out as he had heard the others? The agony of such thoughts was too great for the poor friendless lad, and, throwing himself face downward upon the ground, he burst into bitter tears.

How long he lay thus he knew not. At last, after passing what seemed like hours of anguish, he rose slowly to his knees and poured forth his whole soul in prayer to One who had also been tortured, and knew the agony that preceded such sufferings. His prayer was for deliverance; or if that might not be, then for His presence to support and strengthen him in the hour of trial.



Having thus resigned all care of his own affairs, and placed them with the only One who could bring him peace and strength, the boy felt greatly comforted, and as though he should bear bravely whatever tortures might be devised for him.

His cheerfulness astonished the guard who brought in his supper of sof-ka (soup) and koonti-katki (starch-root), and he thought within himself, "He cannot know what awaits him on the morrow; but he will wear a different face when he sees the stake."

Réné had hardly finished eating with a good appetite his rather scanty meal, when the guard again entered and loosened his bonds, and he was led forth from the hut for the first time since his arrival in the village. Guarded by a tall warrior on either side, he was forced to head a sort of triumphal procession, and, accompanied by the sound of the rattles and the kas-a-lal-ki, to march through and around the village, to be gazed at and taunted by its entire population.

The lad walked with a firm tread, in spite of his painfully swollen ankles, that had been cruelly bound for so long a time that they now hardly supported him. His head was proudly lifted, and his youthful countenance bore so brave and fearless a look that all who saw him marvelled at it. It also caused them great joy, for they said one to another, "He is so brave that the tortures must be many and long before he will cry out, and we shall have rare sport with him on the morrow."

As this noisy procession passed on that side of the village nearest the end of the trail that led away from the island through the swamp, it attracted the attention of the warrior who was there on guard. So great was his curiosity to see what was going on that he allowed it to carry him a few yards from his post to a point where he could obtain a better view.

While he thus stood, neglecting his duty for a moment and with his back turned to the trail, three dark figures, hardly distinguishable from the twilight shadows, glided noiselessly and swiftly from it. An instant later they had vanished in the little thicket from which E-chee had flung his billet of wood into the water on the night of his escape from the Seminoles.

The procession passed on, and the careless sentinel returned to his post, filled with thoughts of what was to take place on the morrow, but as utterly unconscious of the three pairs of eyes that regarded him from the thicket as though no human beings save himself existed. Could he have seen them, he would have instantly known them for those of enemies, for he would have recognized E-chee, though Has-se and Yah-chi-lane were strangers to him.

It was indeed these three friends and would-be rescuers of René de Veaux, who had thus been fortunate enough to gain the island without opposition and without



bloodshed. From the time of their starting they had made no stop until they had reached the head of the little lagoon and taken to the trail through the swamps. Under E-chee's guidance they had followed it safely and without meeting a soul, so taken up were the Seminoles with their festivities. Within a short distance of the island Yah-chi-la-ne had halted his men, and bade them remain where they were while he, with Has-se and E-chee, approached more closely to the village, to discover the best mode of operation.

Unperceived, they had stolen close up to the warrior who guarded the end of the trail, and for some time they lay hidden within bow-shot of him, discussing in the lowest of whispers how they should pass him. The timely approach of the procession, with René at its head, had, by diverting his attention for a few moments, offered an opportunity too good to be neglected. They had seized it, slipped past the unsuspecting guard, and thus safely accomplished the first stage of their difficult undertaking.

As they lay concealed in the thicket, awaiting a later hour of the night, and for the revellers in the village to seek their lodges, fortune again favored them. Dense black clouds gradually spread over the sky, one by one the stars disappeared, the air grew thick and heavy, until at length, with a blinding flash, a terrific thunder-storm burst upon the village. Taking advantage of the intense darkness, the three made their way swiftly, but with every precaution against discovery, among the now silent lodges until, guided by E-chee, they reached the rear of the palmetto hut in which René was confined.

The lightning revealed to them the motionless figure of a warrior standing in front of it, and E-chee, lying flat on the wet ground, with a keen-headed arrow fitted to the string of his bow, was left to watch him. Upon the slightest alarm being given, the arrow would have found its way to his heart, and the three, taking René with them, would have attempted a desperate flight. As long, however, as all remained quiet and they could work undisturbed, they were to try another plan.

While E-chee kept watch, Yah-chi-la-ne and Has-se, with the knives given them by René, attempted to cut an entrance to the hut through the thick thatch at its rear. Fortunately the rain, which beat upon them in torrents, prevented any slight sounds they might make from being heard, and also moistened the palmetto leaves so that they did not crackle, as they would have done had they been dry. Thus, though they worked but slowly, they worked silently, and gradually cut their way into the interior.

Upon returning to his prison, after the trying ordeal of being subjected to the taunts and stares of the whole village, René threw himself upon the ground to gain what rest he might. Supposing that this was his last night of life, his mental sufferings kept him long awake, but at length he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Suddenly he found

himself sitting bolt-upright, as wide-awake as ever in his life. At first he supposed his sudden awakening to have been caused by a terrific burst of thunder that crashed overhead, but in the deep silence that followed he heard his own name pronounced in a whisper—

“Ta-lah-lo-ko!”

Could he be dreaming? No; it came again—

“Ta-lah-lo-ko!”

Truly he was called, and he whispered in reply, “I am here.”

A slight rustling followed, and then the captive boy, whose wildly beating heart seemed like to burst from his breast, knew that a friend was beside him, cutting the bonds from his wrists and ankles, and whispering,

“It is Has-se, and thou art saved, oh my brother!”

Then tremblingly, and guided by the gentle hand of the Indian lad, René crept through the opening made by the keen knives of his friends. In spite of all precautions, his passage through the leaves rustled them so loudly that only a violent thunder-clap coming at the same moment prevented the noise from being heard.

Without a word being spoken, the four made their way as swiftly as might be to where the trail left the island.

The guard at this point was suddenly petrified by superstitious fear at the sight of E-chee, whom he supposed to have been drowned. The figure stood in front of him, and, as revealed by a flash of lightning, was haggard and dripping, as though it had just risen from a watery grave.

Ere the frightened warrior could give an alarm, a stunning blow from behind felled him to the wet earth, where he lay motionless and apparently devoid of life.

