

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter XVII: Death of Has-se (The Sunbeam)

On this night of storm and escape, Cat-sha, the Seminole chief, was more than usually restless. He tossed and turned on his couch of robes, but found it impossible to sleep. Finally he determined to make one of his customary midnight visits of inspection to the several guards, and to his sole remaining prisoner, the “young white chief.” As he left his lodge Cat-sha bowed his head to the bitter storm, and drew his robe more closely about him.

On approaching the hut, in which he imagined the prisoner to be spending his last hours of life, he found the guard standing before it, motionless, but wide-awake, and with one corner of his robe drawn over his head to protect it somewhat from the pelting rain. Cat-sha questioned him as to the safety of the prisoner, and the warrior answered that he had looked in upon him just as the storm began, and found him quietly sleeping and securely bound.

The rain had extinguished the watch-fire, which it was customary to keep burning in the middle of the village during the night, and thus it would be somewhat difficult for the Seminole chief to procure a light with which to examine for himself into the condition of the prisoner. He therefore accepted the assurance of the guard that he was still safely confined within the hut; for, indeed, how could it be otherwise? Such a thing as escaping seemed too utterly impossible to be worthy a thought.

So Cat-sha passed on, and bent his steps in the direction of the sentinel who kept watch at the end of the trail. At first he was not to be discovered, nor did he answer when challenged, and Cat-sha was rapidly becoming both angry and surprised, when all at once he stumbled, and almost fell over the prostrate form of him whom he sought. The warrior was still unconscious, for the terrible blow that felled him had been delivered but a few minutes before Cat-sha’s discovery of his condition.

At this state of affairs, the wily Seminole at once took an alarm. To be sure, he reflected that the sentinel might have been struck by a lightning-flash or seized with a sudden illness. Still he might have also received a blow from the hand of an enemy, and the mere thought that such might have gained access to the island, and even now be lurking within its limits, made the chief hot with anger.



His first thought was for the safety of the prisoner; and leaving the unconscious warrior where he lay, he hurried back to the hut he had just left, determined to trust only the evidence of his own eyes as to the condition of its occupant. Having after considerable delay procured a torch, he entered the hut, where a single glance revealed the startling truth. It was empty, and the severed bonds lying on the ground, and the hole cut in the rear wall, at once told the whole story. The prisoner of whom he had been so proud, the young white chief for whose torture such elaborate preparations had been made, and whom he had thought to be so safely secured, had escaped. He could not have done so unaided; and who had thus boldly penetrated the very heart of the village to save him? Such a thing was unheard of, and the knowledge that it had been successfully accomplished so angered the black-browed chief that he rushed from the hut in a terrible passion. As he passed the warrior who stood guard at the entrance, and who was still unconscious that anything had gone amiss, the angry chief struck him a staggering blow in the face as a punishment for his negligence, and then aroused the village.

While most of the angry and excited Seminoles searched the island and the village itself, in hopes that the escaped captive would be found somewhere in the vicinity of his late prison-house, Cat-sha followed another plan. Hastily gathering together a small band of his best warriors, he placed himself at their head, and they left the island by the trail. This they followed at the top of their speed, hoping that, had the fugitive and those who aided him taken it, they might be caught before they reached the canoes at the head of the little lagoon. With these went Chitta (the Snake), whose every instinct had by this time become that of the outlaws whose fortunes he had joined, and who was rapidly gaining the reputation of being the most cruel and vindictive member of their band.

Although these pursuers exerted themselves to speed, they would have made still greater efforts could they have known that those whom they sought had passed that way but a quarter of an hour before, and were even then delayed in their progress by the necessity of supporting, and nearly carrying, him whom they had rescued.

As soon as the first excitement of escape had passed, René's swollen ankles began to pain him so keenly that he found it almost impossible to walk, and, when he and his three rescuers reached the place where the rest of the party had remained, he sank to the ground with a groan.

They found the braves who had been left behind so impatient of their long delay, and alarmed for their safety, that they had been about to advance upon the village to learn, and if possible to avenge, the fate that they feared had befallen them. These



were overjoyed to see their leader and his companions once more, and to learn of the successful issue of their hazardous undertaking.

There was no time for the exchange of congratulations, and Yah-chi-la-ne ordered the flight to be resumed with all haste, at the same time directing two of the strongest warriors to support the almost helpless René. He himself, with E-chee, occupied the post of danger in the rear; while Has-se kept as close as possible to his newly recovered friend at the head of the little column.

The storm had by this time passed away, and their path was made easier by the light of the full moon, that shone with the wonderful brightness peculiar to southern latitudes from an unclouded sky. Although this aided them, they knew that it also favored the pursuers, whom they felt certain must ere this have started after them, and many an anxious backward glance did Yah-chi-la-ne and E-chee cast over their shoulders as they hastened onward.

In this manner, and without mishap, they finally reached the end of the trail at the head of the little lagoon, where their canoes had been left. Here all breathed more freely, for they considered themselves almost safe from pursuit, and were jubilant over their success. Yah-chi-la-ne would, however, allow of no delay even here; but, after seeing René placed tenderly in the foremost canoe with two of the strongest and most prudent of his warriors, he ordered the rest to embark with all haste and follow it.

While they were doing this, he, with Has-se and E-chee, busied themselves with the canoes of the Seminoles, of which E-chee showed the hiding-place. In these they drove great holes, so that they would not float; or if they happened to lie in the water they cut them adrift, and pushed them far from the shore.

Just as they came to the end of their task, and had thus rendered useless the last of the fleet, a wild yell of disappointed rage close at hand warned them that their enemies were upon them, and that only the most instant and speedy flight could save them from their hands.

The Seminoles had uttered their yell of disappointed rage at seeing, by the moonlight, the flashing paddles of those canoes that had already departed; for they did not at first discover the three who had lingered to destroy or render useless the canoes of their own fleet. As these sprang into the only one they had left uninjured, and shot out from the shore, the Seminoles uttered loud cries of exultation, and rushed to the hiding-place of their fleet, in order that they might follow and capture these three who were now so widely separated from their fellows.

When they discovered what had been done to their canoes, and that they were indeed useless, their fury knew no bounds, and they sent flight after flight of arrows





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whizzing after those who had thus outwitted them. Many of these struck the canoe; but all, save one, fell as harmless to its occupants as so many drops of rain.

The one barbed shaft that sped so truly on its fatal mission was delivered with all the strength of venomous hate,

just as the canoe was passing out of the lagoon, and beyond bow-shot. It struck the gentle Has-se between the shoulders, and, piercing his body, protruded its keen point from his breast. With a sharp cry the poor lad dropped his paddle, and sank into the bottom of the boat.

At this moment the others dared not stop; but, with hearts torn with anguish at seeing their best and bravest thus stricken, they paddled on, until they had rejoined their party and passed beyond the reach of Seminole pursuit.

A few hours later, on a grassy point that projected into the river, which was flecked by glints of the sunlight the lad had loved so well, and which sifted down upon him through the moss-draped branches of a venerable oak, Has-se (the Sunbeam) lay dying. Beside him, and holding one of his hands, sat René de Veaux, so numbed by this great and sudden sorrow that even the comfort of tears was denied him, and his eyes were dry and strained.

“Oh Has-se, Has-se!” he cried. “To think that it is for me that thy life is given, and that for my sake only thou art lying here thus stricken to thy death!”

“Grieve not so sorely, Ta-lah-lo-ko, my brother. A brave warrior fears not death in any form; and when it comes to him while he is truly performing his duty, it is to be hailed with joy for the honor it confers.”



“But thy life was so full of promise, and they whom thou lovest will miss thee so terribly.”

“If my life had promise, then is that promise fulfilled in my death. For those left to mourn I am truly grieved. It is for them that, while I am still able to speak, I would ask a favor of thee, Ta-lah-lo-ko.”

“Name it, my brother, and if it be a thing within my power to compass, it shall be granted, even according to thy wish,” answered René.

A grateful smile lighted the face of the dying lad, and René felt a faint pressure of the hand clasped in his, as Has-se said, almost in a whisper, so weak was he becoming,

“Thou hast lost thy people: my people are losing a son. Take thou my place. Be to the old chief, my father, a son, faithful and true, and to Nethla a brother.”

Then after a pause, during which he gasped painfully for breath, he added, and a questioning look passed over his face—“And thou wilt wear the Flamingo Feather?”

“Gladly will I be thy poor substitute for son and brother to those who are dearest to thee, if they will accept of me as such,” answered René. “As to the Flamingo Feather, didst thou not say that its wearing was reserved for the chiefs and sons of chiefs of thy people?”

Very faint came the reply, “One adopted of a chief is adopted to all the honors of an own son. His wearing of the chief’s token is a sign that he will never leave nor desert his father until death shall part them. Ha—”

The effort of making this explanation was too great for the weakened frame of the dying lad, and it was followed by such a terrible flow of blood from the wound that those who witnessed it made sure that the end had come.

But once again the tender eyes were opened, and once more came the words to René de Veaux, faint but clear,

“And thou wilt wear the Flamingo Feather?”

“I will, Has-se! I will!” exclaimed the boy, choked by the great sobs that at length came to his relief—“and with my life will I be true to its meaning.”

A smile passed over the face of the dying lad, and there came into it such a look of great joy and perfect peace that it was glorified in the eyes of those who saw him. Then René felt once more the gentle pressure of his hand and heard one soft sigh.

With its utterance the brave soul of Has-se (the Sunbeam) took its flight, and, at the same moment, the sun sank from view, amid the unspeakable glories of the western sky.



Very tenderly they lifted the lifeless form, and carefully laying it in the bottom of a canoe, resumed that journey towards the land of the Alachuas which had been thus sorrowfully interrupted.

The withdrawal of the arrow that had pierced Has-se's body had caused him the most intolerable agony; but he had borne it without a murmur, and only his drawn features and clinched hands had indicated his sufferings. A stream of his life's blood that could not be wholly checked had followed the arrow upon its removal, and the same day that witnessed his receipt of the wound also witnessed his death.

He never knew whose hand had sped the shaft upon its deadly flight; but, when it was withdrawn from his body, the others had noted, rudely cut upon it, the form of a serpent, which was the token of Chitta (the Snake). Thus had the Snake gained a bitter revenge for his overthrow, months before, in the games at the Feast of Ripe Corn.

Sad indeed was the return of Yah-chi-la-ne and his party to the pleasant village beside the great spring, in the land of the Alachuas. The sight of the rescued captive was indeed greeted with joyous shouts of welcome; but they were hushed, almost ere they were uttered, as those assembled on the river bank noted the black paint with which, in token of mourning, the returning warriors had covered their faces.

In heavy-hearted silence did his comrades carry their dead back into the circle of lodges, from which he had departed so bravely and loyally to the rescue of his friend. As they bore it into the lodge of Micco, his father, the old warrior sat as though all hope and joy had departed from his life forever; while outside, the air was rent by the wailings and bitter lamentations of women.

They laid him to rest, after the manner of his people, in a tomb built of great tree-trunks, so cunningly fashioned that no wild beast should ever disturb its contents. Beside him they laid whatever he had possessed of value, and the things he had prized most highly. The young girls of the tribe threw over the sleeping form great handfuls of sweet-scented wild flowers; and, ere the tomb was closed, René de Veaux placed in the calmly folded hands the scarlet feather, with the slender gold chain and pin attached to it, that had been a token between them.

As they finished the simple rites, and were about to turn away from the spot, the old chief, thus bereft of the pride and hope of his declining years, took the hand of the white lad in his, and, in a voice that faltered with his strong emotion said, so that all present could hear him,

“I have lost a son, and I have gained a son. Has-se has gone from me, but Ta-lah-lo-ko has come in his place. It is your chief who speaks, and as the son of your chief shall this lad dwell among you.”



Then the beautiful Nethla, taking René's other hand, kissed him gently on the forehead, and said,

"In the name of him who has gone from us I welcome thee, Ta-lah-lo-ko, as a brother."

As she spoke she offered him a Flamingo Feather, the same that had gleamed among the dark tresses of the dead lad. René took it, and twining it in his own sunny curls, said, in a clear voice,

"As the son of a chief I wear this emblem. Its significance has been made known to me, and, even as I vowed to him who lies yonder, I will, from this time forth, endeavor to act truly the part of a son to this old man. I will never fail him or desert him until death shall part us."

So René de Veaux became, to all intents and purposes, a member of this tribe of Indians. The Flamingo Feather which he wore proclaimed his position among them to all men, and obtained for him that regard and respect which his own manliness and ready tact enabled him to retain and increase. He became a skilful hunter, and from his Indian companions he soon acquired all their knowledge of woodcraft. In return for this he taught them so many of the useful arts of his own civilization, that his reputation for wisdom spread far and wide over the land, and many from distant tribes came to learn of him.

From time to time rumors were brought to these Indians of the terrible cruelties practised by the Spaniards upon such natives of the country as fell into their hands. For this reason the tribe into which René had been adopted returned not to their own lands in the far east, but remained in the land of the Alachuas. With these people they became so closely united by ties of kinship and mutual interest that after a while no distinctions were drawn between them. Thus, upon the death of the Alachua chief, the good Micco was chosen to succeed him; and from that time he ruled over the united tribes. Among his wise men and principal advisers, those upon whom he relied the most were Yah-chi-la-ne and René de Veaux.

At the time of Has-se's death, Micco's tribe and the Alachuas had determined to be no longer annoyed by the neighborhood of the Seminole outlaws, and had despatched a powerful war-party against them. When, however, this party reached the island village in the depths of the great swamp, they found it deserted. By some means the Seminoles had obtained a knowledge of their coming, and had fled from that part of the country. The Alachuas destroyed their village, and from that time for more than a year they were heard of no more, save by rumor, which located them among the savages of the far south.

Upon a certain occasion, after he had been for many months a member of the tribe, René led a hunting-party, who sought to secure a large number of alligators, to the edge of the great swamp. One night as they sat about their campfire, gravely smoking their stone pipes, and listening to some of the wild traditions of their race, related by the oldest member of the party, they were suddenly startled, and all but René were greatly alarmed, by a flash of light and a loud explosion. It sounded from a small grove of trees not far from them, and René instantly recognized it as the explosion of a fire-arm.

As it had been followed by a loud cry of pain, and as groans were still to be heard, he succeeded in convincing his companions that the terrifying sound was of human origin, and in persuading them to go with him in search of its cause.

In the grove they found a young Indian writhing in agony upon the ground, while near him lay the shattered remains of a Spanish arquebuse or musket. He had evidently attempted to discharge it at some member of the hunting-party, and, either because it was over-loaded or was too badly rusted to be of service, it had burst in his hands. Although he had escaped other wounds, an examination of his face showed that his eyesight had been totally destroyed by the burning powder, and it was the pain thus caused that had drawn from him the cries and groans they had heard.

In spite of the disfiguration of his face René knew him the moment he was dragged within the light of the camp-fire, and it was with sensations of dread and horror that he gazed upon the once familiar features. When he explained to his followers the nature of the weapon this enemy had attempted to use against them, they were filled with rage, and would have instantly slain the wretch, but René bade them spare his life.

“I know him,” he said, “and he is too vile a being to be worthy to meet death at your hands. Besides, if he be now released, a lifetime of blindness will prove even a greater punishment than any you can inflict. Lead him far out upon the trail, and there leave him. Others must have accompanied him, and they will doubtless find and care for their own.”

So it was done as René had ordered, and on the following day no trace of the wounded man could be found; but the imprint of other moccasined feet, near where he had been left, showed that his friends had discovered and borne him away.

When René was afterwards questioned as to who he was, he answered, “Chitta, the Seminole.”

