

The Flamingo Feather by Kirk Munroe

Chapter XVIII: The French Have Come Again

Three years had passed from the time the Spaniards established their power in this part of the New World, by their fearful massacres of the French at Fort Caroline and among the sand dunes of the coast, below San Augustin. They were years of cruelty and injustice on the part of the Spaniards, and of great suffering to those nations who fell into their hands; but to the dwellers in the distant land of the Alachuas, among whom René de Veaux had taken up his abode, they were years of peace, prosperity, and contentment. The little encampment, that the good chief Micco had established beside the great spring, had grown into a populous village, surrounded, in all directions, by broad fields of waving maize and yellow pumpkins, besides an abundance of other things pleasant and useful. The forests still teemed with game, and the rivers with fish, and the skill of the Indian hunter was such that both could be obtained in plenty at all seasons.

In this beautiful land, with every want anticipated, surrounded by devoted friends, and leading a life of active usefulness, it would seem as though no man could be unhappy. There was, however, at least one among its dwellers who was so, and he was their ruler, the chief of them all, whose word was their law, and whose slightest command they hastened to obey. They called him Ta-lah-lo-ko (the White Chief), though in another land he would be known as René de Veaux.

It was a great longing to visit once more this other land, the fair France of his birth, and the apparent impossibility of ever doing so, that made the white chief unhappy, and caused his people to regard him sorrowfully, as one troubled by an evil spirit. The old medicine men of the tribe used their most powerful incantations against it, and made charms with which to drive it away; but they did not succeed, because they could not understand it, and did not even know its name, which was "Homesickness."

When the good old chief Micco died, which he did a few months before the time which this chapter opens, greatly lamented by all his people, the person who would have naturally succeeded to his office was Yah-chi-la-ne (the Eagle). When it was offered to him, this brave young Indian declared that he was not nearly so wise or fit to become a ruler as his friend Ta-lah-lo-ko, who, though younger in years than he, was so much older in wisdom that his equal did not exist in all the land. He therefore begged

them to hail Ta-lah-lo-ko as head chief of the nation. Greatly to René's astonishment, this was done, and he found himself anxiously wondering how he should act in this new and unexpected position.

His modesty, bravery, and ready tact were, however, as quick to aid him now as when they had guided the boy René de Veaux on his perilous journey in search of food for the starving garrison of Fort Caroline; and, day by day, the white chief steadily gained the love and approbation of his people.

He had entered upon the performance of his new duties with all his heart and soul, and it was only within a few days that he had felt the great longing to see once more his own land, and that his thoughts had been constantly turned towards the old chateau in which his early boyhood had been passed. He felt so strongly that in some way he was to receive tidings from his native land, that one day, when a travel-stained runner from the East was brought to his lodge, he at once asked "what word dost thou bring of the French?"

The runner stared at him for a moment in amazement and then answered,

"I bring word that the French have come again. With the new moon three great thunder canoes, bearing the banner of lilies, reached the end of the salt-waters. It is thought there will soon be fighting between those who come in them and the bad white men who already hold the land. The dwellers of the country of sunrise, by the great river, send a prayer to the chief of the Alachuas. It is that he will come, and with his wisdom aid these white men, and then tear down and tread in the sands the yellow banner of death and bondage."

"Ay, that will I, and right gladly, not only with my wisdom, which is but little, but with a hundred warriors, which is more to the purpose!" exclaimed René in a tone of such excitement as greatly to astonish the runner once more. Springing to his feet, the white chief ordered his bow-bearer, who was in attendance, to summon to him, without delay, all the principal men of the tribe, and in particular the chief Yah-chi-la-ne. He was also to issue orders to his own war-party of a hundred picked braves to prepare themselves, with all possible despatch, for a forced journey to the great river of sunrise.

These messages from their chief caused the greatest excitement and commotion among the Alachuas. They were obeyed without hesitation, and while the braves of his own war-party restrung their bows, or secured new heads of keenest flint to their lances, the principal men, with Yah-chi-la-ne among them, repaired to his lodge.

No word was spoken until all were seated and their stone pipes were well alight, when René, standing in their midst, addressed them and said,



“Wise men of the Alachuas: it is now many moons since thou didst receive Ta-lah-lo-ko into thy tribe, and open wide thy hearts to him. In all this time he has been as one with thee in everything. Now he would go. His own people, the pale-faces who dwell beyond the land of sunrise, and beyond the great salt-waters, have come again. The heart of Ta-lah-lo-ko sings for joy within him at the thought of seeing them once more. The pledge of the Flamingo Feather holds him no longer, for the old man to whom it was given has passed away. But the singing and gladness of his heart is turned to sighing and to sadness by the thought that he may never again see the land of the Alachuas. This may not be; for if it is possible for him, he will come again from beyond the great waters. Now he must go to his own people, who have many wrongs to set right, and must do much fighting before they turn again towards the sunrise. They call for help from the brave Alachuas. Ta-lah-lo-ko and his own war-party will hasten to them. When the fighting is done, they will return; but he must go first to the land of the pale-faces. Until he comes, the brave and wise Yah-chi-la-ne will guide your councils, and lead you on the war-path. Ta-lah-lo-ko has spoken.”

As René sat down, Yah-chi-la-ne and others sprang to their feet, and begged him not to leave them. Yah-chi-la-ne declared that as he had taken the place of Has-se (the Sunbeam), so he had become a flood of sunlight to them, and that in losing him they would be buried in darkness.

These appeals stirred his feelings deeply, but could not alter his fixed purpose; and when they saw that he was determined to leave them, they opposed him no longer, but only begged of him that he would speedily return.

So René de Veaux, at the head of his own war-party of picked Alachua braves, set forth once more on the same journey that he had now made so many times, and under such different circumstances.

As the canoe which bore him shot out from the shore into the middle of the river, and was headed up against the current, there arose from the multitude collected on the bank a mighty cry of lamentation for the young chief who was departing from them. For answer René, standing up so that all might see him, took the Flamingo Feather that was entwined in his hair, waved it above his head, and replaced it. This was a sign that, though he was leaving them, he would return again, and by it they were greatly comforted.

Once started, the party moved with the greatest speed, those who plied the paddles being frequently relieved by fresh men, and never before had René accomplished the journey so quickly. At its various stages he received many reminders of former passages over the same waters, and of the brave and loyal Has-se who had



accompanied him on most of them. Here was the point where his loving and beloved friend had so peacefully breathed his last, and there, at the edge of the great swamp, the place where Chitta had met with his self-inflicted punishment. Now they passed the mouth of the little lagoon, from the head of which the trail led away through the dark mazes of the swamp to the Seminole island, rising from its slimy waters; and soon they were gliding swiftly down with the current of that other river, that flowed eastward to the coast.

Finally they passed its last bend, and the leading canoe, in which René sat, shot out into the open waters of the sound. As it did so the heart of the white chief gave a great leap within him, and for a moment a mist swam before his eyes. He had not expected to find his countrymen before passing the vast salt-marshes and reaching the River of May; but, to his astonishment, he had already come upon them. Within a mile of him lay three tall ships, riding gracefully at their anchors, and from their mast-heads floated proudly in the light of the setting sun the lily banner of France.

They were indeed the ships of his own people, whom he had never dared hope to meet again. There was the emblem of his own land, which, when he had last beheld it, had been torn, amid sorrow and defeat, from above the walls of Fort Caroline, to give place to the yellow ensign of Spain.

When René had controlled his tumultuous feeling sufficiently to speak, he gave orders for his warriors to proceed to the shell mound in the midst of the marshes, on which he and Has-se had rested after their flight from Fort Caroline, and there encamp and await his coming. His own canoe he ordered to be directed, with all speed, towards the ships.

As he approached them closely, he saw that he was observed by many curious eyes from their decks, and finally a hoarse voice commanded him to halt and explain his presence there.

At his order, his men backed water so stoutly with their paddles that the canoe rested motionless. Standing erect in it, René, speaking in French, to the great surprise of those whom he addressed, and wearing a bold air that sat well upon him, asked, "Who commands here? and in which ship is he to be found?"

There was a slight stir on the quarter-deck of the ship nearest him; and, from a group of gentlemen who occupied it, one, wearing a plumed hat and a velvet mantle, from beneath which peeped the richly jewelled hilt of his sword, stood forth and answered courteously,

"I, Dominique de Gorges, chevalier of France, am admiral here at thy service. Who art thou, that while in savage guise yet speakest our tongue as though born to it?"



“I am known as Ta-lah-lo-ko, and am chief of that western tribe of Indians called Alachuas,” answered René, who was not yet ready to reveal his true identity. “If it suit thy convenience, I would have a word with thee in private concerning important matters.”

Upon this De Gourgues invited his visitor to come on board the ship and meet him in his own cabin, where he would with pleasure converse with him.

As René stepped upon the quarter-deck, and passed through the group of gentlemen who still occupied it, they regarded him with the liveliest curiosity. It was not unmixed with admiration; for his tall and handsome though slight figure was set off by a costume which, though becoming to him and fashioned with the best of Indian art, was strange to their civilized eyes.

The long tresses of his sunny hair were bound by a simple fillet, and in them was twined the Flamingo Feather that proclaimed his rank. His face was tanned by the burning suns of that country to a shade but little lighter than that of his Indian companions, and after the custom of the Alachuas he had added to it here and there a touch of war-paint. From neck to feet he was clad in garments of fawn-skin, that fitted like a glove to his person. These had been made soft as velvet by the Indian process of curing, and were exquisitely embroidered and fringed. Over his shoulders was flung a light mantle of feathers, woven of the glistening plumage of many rare birds and fastened by a clasp of two great pearls set in virgin gold. In his hand he bore a slender lance, of which the shaft was of dark wood highly polished, and the tip was a splinter of purest rock-crystal.

He crossed the quarter-deck, and descended to the admiral’s cabin with a proud and dignified bearing, as became his station, but which greatly belied his feelings, for he was wellnigh overwhelmed by the joyful emotions he experienced at being once more among his countrymen.

In the cabin he was most courteously received by De Gourgues, and invited to a seat; but before taking it he inquired with a trembling voice,

“Oh, sir, know ye aught of a certain noble chevalier of France, by name René de Laudonniere, and whether he be still alive or no?”

“Ay, that I do. He of whom thou speakest is not only alive, but is well known to me. Not only that, but it is owing to his pitiful tale of cruel wrong done to him and those with him in this country that I am here at this present moment. But thou art overcome with emotion; what had he to do with thee?”



Upon thus learning that his dearly beloved uncle had escaped, and was yet alive, René had sunk into a seat, and buried his face in his hands. In a moment he obtained mastery of himself, and looking up, answered,

“He was all and more to me than an own father; for I am his only nephew, René de Veaux.”

At the utterance of this name De Gourgues sprang to his feet, and regarding his visitor intently, exclaimed,

“What! Do I hear thee truly? Art thou indeed that René de Veaux so bitterly mourned by the Chevalier Laudonniere, and not the savage thou seemest? If so, there is the best part of my mission to this new world accomplished by this meeting.”

As René satisfied the other of his identity as the nephew of Laudonniere, De Gourgues embraced him warmly, and would have at once proclaimed the joyful intelligence to those on deck; but the young man begged of him to refrain from so doing for yet a short while, as there was still much that he would say to him alone.

De Gourgues consented to this, and René continued:

“Although I am René de Veaux, I am also Ta-lah-lo-ko, head chief of the Alachua nation, and I have brought with me a party of chosen warriors which I will place at thy service, if, perchance, thou canst make use of them. Wilt thou not describe to me the nature of thy business in these parts, and something of thy plans, and what has been already accomplished?”

“That will I gladly, my noble savage,” answered De Gourgues, with a smile, “and truly I could but lately have made a most excellent use of these brave warriors of thine, whose service thou dost so promptly tender.”

Then the admiral gave René a brief history of his expedition, its purpose and results, which was in effect as follows:

He himself had been a prisoner in Spanish dungeons, and had suffered as a Spanish galley-slave. Upon making his escape and returning to his own country, he had met his old friend, the Chevalier Laudonniere, and learned from him of the terrible massacres of the Huguenots, perpetrated by Menendez and the soldiers at San Augustin. Upon hearing this tale of wrong and outrage, he had then and there determined to devote his fortune and his life, if that should be necessary, to the punishment of these same Spaniards, and to the rescue of such of his countrymen as might have escaped with their lives, but who still remained in the New World.

By selling his estates, he had obtained the means to fit out three ships, and in them had induced a brave company of soldiers and seamen to accompany him upon what he considered his holy mission.



Ten days before the coming of René he had arrived off San Augustin, where the Spaniards, supposing his ships to be that of their own nation, had fired a salute of welcome from the guns of their newly erected fort.

As De Gourgues deemed this place too strong for him to attack, and as he only wished to recover that which had belonged to the French, he had not tarried there, but had sailed northward to the River of May, the name of which the Spaniards had changed to Rio de San Mateo.

He found its entrance guarded by two small forts, one on either side, which Menendez had built after his capture of Fort Caroline. As the French ships were of too great draught to cross the bar, De Gourgues had organized an expedition of small boats, and had carried these works, one after another, by assault.

Having thus effected a landing, and being joined by a large body of Indians, who had joyfully hailed him as a deliverer from Spanish cruelties, he had marched to the attack of Fort San Mateo, by which name Fort Caroline was now called.

Through a series of blunders on the part of its Spanish commandant he had been able to capture this fort with comparative ease. By the aid of powder and fire the walls of all these forts had been levelled with the ground, and their total destruction effected.

Having thus accomplished the main objects of his expedition, De Gourgues had regained his ships, and sailed still farther northward, to the deep harbor in which René had discovered him, and in which he was now preparing for the homeward voyage.

“This,” he said, in conclusion, “brings my narrative to the present date, and my expedition to the place in which I am granted the great blessing of a meeting with thee, my noble countryman, who art become at the same time a noble savage.”

Then in his turn René gave an account of his experiences at the overthrow of Fort Caroline, his capture by the Seminoles, his rescue from them, and his subsequent life and rise to power among the Alachuas. To all of this De Gourgues listened with breathless attention; and when René had finished, he exclaimed,

“No knight of olden time had ever adventures more thrilling than these of thine, and greatly do I envy thee thy brave record.”

After this exchange of experiences the two emerged from the admiral’s cabin, where they had been so long closeted as to excite the liveliest curiosity of those on deck. When René was made known to the officers of De Gourgues’ command, he was most joyfully welcomed by them, as one of whom they had heard brave things, and who was most worthy to command their respect and esteem.

