

Chapter XIX: The Old World Once More

The moment in which the Chevalier Dominique de Gournes embraced the long-lost René de Veaux, and welcomed him as one who had been dead, but had again come to life, was one of as sincere pleasure as he had ever experienced. In his destruction of the Spaniards he had been filled with a fierce joy; for, according to his view, he was performing an act of solemn justice, and rendering the world a service in thus ridding it of those whom he regarded only as murderers and pirates.

It was, however, with far different feelings from these that he welcomed his young countryman, and he felt that to bear him back to France and restore him to the loving old man who had so long mourned him as dead, would indeed be a triumph worth all the other results of his expedition. He was not certain that René was disposed to give up the honors of his present position and return with him to France and civilization. Therefore, after he had introduced him to his officers, it was with a tone of anxiety that he inquired what the young chief purposed to do, now that the fighting was all over, and the services of himself and his warriors were not needed.

"I propose to accompany thee to France, where I may once more embrace him whom I hold most dear on earth and thou wilt take me," answered René, promptly.

Concealing somewhat his joy at this answer, De Gournes said, "I will take thee gladly, lad, and thou wilt go with us: but art thou prepared to relinquish thy chieftainship of these Alachuas, and become once more the plain citizen of a country where such rank is not recognized?"

"I would sooner be the humblest citizen of my own country, and dwell among those of my own blood, than be a ruler among strangers, even though they were the proudest nation of the earth," answered René, with flashing eyes and a voice trembling with emotion. "Thou knowest what it is to have a country; but dost thou know what it is to lose it, without the hope of ever regaining it?"

"Ay, that do I. Did I not tell thee I had served in Spanish galleys?"

"And hadst thou served on a Spanish throne instead of in Spanish galleys, with the same hopelessness of escape wouldst thou not have hailed with gladness the chance of resigning it, upon condition of regaining thy country?"

“Indeed I would! my dear friend, and thou art right. A man’s country and his own people are dearer to him than all the world besides. I did thee a great wrong in doubting for a moment that thou wouldst not relinquish all that thou hast gained in this new world, for the sake of again rejoining those dear to thee in the old. So now let us away with all speed; and ho, for the Old World once more!”

“Wilt thou, for my sake, delay thy departure for yet two days?” asked René. “There be certain papers belonging to my uncle Laudonniere which were removed by me to a place of safety upon the night of the capture of Fort Caroline. If I can again find and recover them, I doubt not but they will prove of value to him, and give him cause to welcome my return with the greater joy.”

“Take thou whatever time is necessary for thy business, and I will await thy pleasure. If it so please thee I will accompany thee and thy savages to the River of May, and visit once more the ruins of that stronghold that the Spaniards boasted could not be captured by the half of France. The ships shall go outside and meet us at the mouth of the river.”

Réné gladly agreed to this proposition, and De Gourgues continued:

“As for making greater thy uncle’s joy when he again beholds thee, I doubt if that will be possible; for he will have no eyes nor thoughts save for thyself. It may be, however, that these same papers will prove of greatest value to him, for he is in sore straits for want of evidence to make good certain claims. It is not forth-coming, and he alleges that it was destroyed by the Spaniards when they captured Fort Caroline. Be that as it may, he who should be loaded with honors and riches now suffers obscurity and poverty, and perchance thou art the very one who will bring him relief.”

It only deepened René’s love for his uncle to learn that he was in trouble, and increased his desire to hasten to him. Thus it was with the greatest impatience that he awaited the coming of the daylight, that should enable them to go in search of the hidden papers.

The next morning René and De Gourgues were rowed in one of the ship’s boats to the shell mound, where the war-party of Alachuas was encamped. Here the boat was dismissed, and the French admiral was given a place in the young chief’s own canoe. He was highly delighted with this, to him, novel mode of travelling, and was also greatly interested in the grim Indian warriors by whom he was surrounded. Their unmistakable devotion to their young chief touched him deeply, and he said to René,

“I know not if, after all, thou hast not found thy truest happiness in this wilderness.”



That night they encamped at the foot of the very bluff on which René had been captured by the Seminoles. The next morning he and his new-found friend, accompanied by Yah-chi-la-ne and E-chee, ascended the river to the fort which had lately been the scene of such thrilling events. Now, ruined and deserted, it was destined to be forever abandoned to its own solitude.

Although it filled René with sadness to witness this ruin of what had once been a home to him, and in the building of which he had taken such pride, he had rather see it thus than restored to all its former glory, but remaining in the shadow of the yellow banner of Spain.

Locating as nearly as might be that portion of the ruins beneath which the tunnel had penetrated, René, and those with him, began a search of the river-bank for its entrance. At length they discovered not a slab of bark, such as had formerly covered the entrance, but a block of stone, of such size that it required their united strength to remove it. It was also of a color so closely resembling the surrounding soil that, had they not been looking for some such thing, and been aware of almost the exact spot in which to search, they would not have noticed it.

The substitution of this slab of stone for the one of bark proved that others had meddled with the passage since René last passed through it, and also that these others were white men, probably Spaniards. Nevertheless, though he greatly feared that the search would prove fruitless, for those who had discovered the passage must also have found its contents, René determined to keep on and explore it to the end.

Lighting their way with torches, and with René in the lead, the party entered the tunnel. De Gorges lamented that he had not known of its existence sooner, in which case he would have used it as a mine, in which to place powder and blow the walls of the fort about the ears of the Spaniards.

When they reached the point at which René had left the books and papers, they found that, even as he feared, they had been removed, so that no trace of them remained. René bethought himself, however, of the small iron box which he had buried in the earth at one side of the tunnel. After thus burying it he had stopped the place again with clay, and now he hoped that this box at least might have escaped discovery. So they prodded the earthen wall of the tunnel for some distance with their daggers, and at length the point of René's weapon struck against metal. Here they dug, and directly he had recovered the box much rusted, but still sound, in which he felt sure his uncle had kept his most important papers.



While they had thus obtained all that they could now hope for in this search, both René and De Gourgues were anxious to explore the passage to its extreme end, and so they continued on through it.

Of a sudden they found themselves in a place that had been so greatly enlarged beyond the original limits of the tunnel that a score of men might stand in it. By the light of their uplifted torches they saw, piled one above another, from floor to roof, on two sides of this little chamber, a number of chests, both of wood and iron, every one of which was inscribed with the royal arms of Spain. So heavy were these that two strong men could not lift one of them.

Instantly recognizing their character, De Gourgues exclaimed,

“As I am a knight of France, thou art in luck, René de Veaux! Here thou hast unwittingly stumbled upon a treasure-vault of these Spanish usurers. If I mistake not, there is that contained within these chests that will place thee on an equality with the wealthiest noble of France.”

“Nay,” replied René, “it is not mine, but thine. To the conqueror belong the spoils. But for thee, these chests and their contents, whatever be their nature, would still remain with those who placed them here.”

“Not so,” answered De Gourgues; “I came not in search of spoil, but to punish these insolent Spaniards for their many cruelties; and besides, but for thee I should never have dreamed of the existence of this passage. Thou alone didst possess its secret, and to thee alone belongs whatever it contains.”

“Well,” said René, unwilling to discuss the matter further at that time, “it may be that we are already counting unhatched fowls. Let us first take measures to remove these chests to the ships and discover their contents. After that we shall have ample time to define their ownership ere ever we reach France.”

The grave wisdom of this speech, proceeding as it did from one whom he still regarded as a mere boy amused De Gourgues greatly. He, however, admitted that René was right, and that they were foolish to waste time in fruitless discussion, that might be better occupied in making good their escape from a place in which they might at any time be attacked by the Spaniards from San Augustin.

By an unusually high tide the ships had been enabled to cross the bar, and now lay inside the mouth of the river. So the coffers were removed to them, though the labor of so doing was so great that it occupied the remainder of the day. By sunset it had been accomplished; and everything was in readiness for their final departure from the River of May and the New World.



As the tide turned and flowed outward to the sea, the white sails of the ships were loosened, and they were made ready to go out over the bar with it. Then came an affecting scene of farewell between the Alachuas, who were to be left behind, and their chief. One by one the stern warriors came forward and kissed his hand, while he had for each some kind word that would long be cherished in the memory of him to whom it was spoken. He had loaded their canoes with all that they could contain of presents, furnished by the generosity of De Gourges, for themselves, and to be taken to that distant western country in which he had left so many friends.

So long as he remained in their sight René retained his costume as an Indian chief, and in his hair gleamed the Flamingo Feather.

At length the anchors were lifted, and the stately ships moved slowly down the broad river. As they drew away from the canoes in which, with heavy hearts and sad faces, the motionless Indians watched the receding form of their beloved young chief, of a sudden the banners of France were flung to the breeze from each masthead, and a tremendous roar of artillery gave voice to his final adieu.

Long after the ships had crossed the bar and left the coast, René, still in his Indian dress, stood alone, his feelings respected by those about him. With a swelling heart he watched the shores on which he had suffered and enjoyed so much, and where his boyhood had been left, and a noble manhood gained. As it finally disappeared in the gathering darkness, he slowly turned and descended into the admiral's cabin. When he again appeared he was at first unrecognized, for his Indian costume had been exchanged for that of civilization, and the Flamingo Feather was no longer to be seen in his hair.

The opening of the Spanish treasure-chests found in the underground passage revealed their contents to be of astounding value, consisting of jewels, gold coin, massive silver plate, and weapons of curious design and great worth.

The tunnel had been discovered during the building of a house for the Spanish commandant of the fort upon the site of that formerly occupied by Laudonniere, and he had conceived the idea of constructing within it his treasure-vault. The books and papers concealed there by René had been taken forth and burned with great rejoicing; for they were supposed to be filled with heretic magic and sorceries. Upon the sudden capture of the fort by De Gourges there had been no time to remove the treasure from its underground chamber, and the few Spaniards who escaped and fled to San Augustin had left it, hoping to return and recover it when the French should have departed.

After much discussion concerning it, De Gourges consented to accept of it an amount sufficient to recompense him for the sum expended in fitting out his expedition.



It was, however, decreed by him and those with him that the balance belonged to René de Veaux, and to none other.

Thus the lad, who had never in all his adventurous career dreamed of acquiring worldly riches, neared his native land possessed of wealth so great that it might be envied of princes.

The homeward voyage was quick and prosperous, and unmarked by incident save their pursuit by a great Spanish fleet which they encountered in the Bay of Biscay. This danger was escaped by their superior speed and seamanship, and at length René de Veaux saw the spires and roofs of that same seaport from which he had sailed for the New World, in company with his Uncle Laudonniere, nearly four years before.

Tidings of their return, and some rumors of the brave doings of De Gourges and those who sailed with him, had preceded them. So, as the three ships sailed into the harbor with banners flying, sails glistening like white clouds in the bright sunlight, and strains of martial music issuing from them, the bells of the little town rang a merry peal of welcome, and the quay was thronged with people in holiday attire, eager to learn of their voyage to the New World.

A triumphal procession and fêtes of various kinds had been arranged to give honor to the victors; but René de Veaux was too anxious to reach his uncle and be the first to take to him the tidings of his own safe return, to care for these things. So he eluded those who would have made a hero of him, and, travelling by post, made all speed towards Paris.

In the same little unpretentious dwelling in which he had first greeted his nephew years before, the old soldier, René de Laudonniere, sat one chill autumn evening, musing beside a small fire. His surroundings were poor, and his fine face was haggard and careworn. As he sat, in his loneliness, his thoughts were in the New World, and with the brave lad whom he had lost there.

His musings were interrupted by the entrance of an old servant, who was none other than that François who served the family of De Veaux for so many years, and who had now joined his poor fortunes with those of the old chevalier. As he quietly opened the door, he announced:

“There is one without who would have speech with thee, but he refuses to give his name.”

“What manner of person is he?”

“As well as I may judge, he is young, tall, dark, and has the air of being from foreign parts.”



“Well, show him in. His presence will at least divert my mind from sorrowful thoughts.”

With a quick, firm tread, a young man entered the room and stood for a moment silently regarding Laudonniere. The light from the fire was not sufficient to disclose his features, and the other had no suspicion of who he was. At the same time he felt strangely moved by the young man’s presence, and also remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

“Uncle.”

The old man started at the word, and leaned eagerly forward.

“Uncle, dost thou not know thy René?”

“My René! René de Veaux? He is dead in the New World,” cried Laudonniere, trembling with excitement.

“No, my uncle! my father! thy René is not dead in the New World. He is alive in the Old World, and has come to be thy comfort and support from this time forth.”

In all France there was not such a happy household as that modest dwelling contained that night. Old François was called in to share the joy of his master, and until daylight did the two old men sit and listen with breathless interest to the strange history of him who had come back to them as one risen from the grave. Every now and then they rose to embrace him, and then resumed their seats, only to devour him with their eyes and ply him with questions.

He too had questions to ask, and now learned for the first time of his uncle’s escape to the two small ships left by Admiral Ribault. With Laudonniere had also escaped the good Le Moyne and Simon the armorer. They had waited for him until forced to give over all hope of ever seeing him again, and had then sailed sadly away.

When René produced the little iron casket that he had recovered from its hiding-place within the tunnel, Laudonniere joyfully seized it. He cried out that it contained that which would restore him to honor and wealth, and blessed his nephew for thus bringing him that which was more precious than life itself.

The great riches that René had brought with him from the New World enabled him to restore to all its former glory the old chateau in which he was born, and which, of all places on earth, he held most dear. Here, for many years, he dwelt in happiness and contentment. At times he would be seized with a great longing to revisit the beautiful land in that far-away country beyond the western sea where lived the Alachuas. At such times he would close his eyes and fancy that he could again hear their musical voices calling him “Ta-lah-lo-ko,” their white chief.



That he did revisit them, at least once before he died, is proved by existing manuscript; but he is not supposed ever to have resumed his position as their chief.

For many generations his descendants preserved among their most valued treasures, and may possibly retain even to this day, the exquisitely embroidered costume of an Indian chieftain. To it was attached, by a golden chain and pin, a curious scarlet feather, which was supposed to be that of a flamingo.

THE END

