

CHAPTER III

PIONEERS' TRAGEDIES AND COMEDIES

IN the spring of 1898 Miami's little community, which was then scarcely two years old, had become greatly excited over the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, owing to its proximity to the firing line. The prevailing excitement was greatly stimulated by the arrival of seven regiments of soldiers and countless camp followers. The presence of the troops in the city (the camp was located at what is now known as North Fifth Street, extending from the bay to the river) kept things extremely lively for several months. To start with, one of the soldiers, who was alleged to have insulted a lady, was shot dead by her husband; then followed our merchants' frequent marathons with some of the fleetest members of that army of occupation in breathless chase to recover their stocks of merchandise to which the soldiers had helped themselves. To keep up the excitement, a company of soldiers had invaded the colored settlement and terrorized the negroes who scattered in all directions for safety. A member of a certain regiment, more enterprising

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than the rest, shot and killed a negro who happened to brush by a lady while making his exit from a dry-goods store.

Upon the departure of the soldiers, late that summer, the town was getting ready for the entertainment of the few tourists who had been fortunate enough to have discovered the little town of Miami. Things ran uneventfully until the latter part of September of that year, when the community was saddened by the untimely death of one of the founders of this city, Mrs. Julia D. Tuttle.

The following summer proved the most critical period in Miami's history. Cuba was stricken with an epidemic of yellow fever which shortly spread to the city of Key West. This greatly alarmed Miami's inhabitants, who soon reached a frame of mind bordering on panic. The East Coast Railway Corporation, assisted by the city council, left nothing undone in its efforts to prevent the penetration of the epidemic into Dade County. A rigid quarantine had been put in force against Cuba and Key West, thus somewhat allaying the acute apprehension felt by the inhabitants. However, the presence in this city of the terrifying epidemic soon became evident.

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Despite the heroic efforts put forth by the State Board of Health and corps of Federal physicians to prevent the importation of the epidemic, a number of prostrations bearing all the symptoms of yellow fever came under the observation of the physicians. The announcement of the presence of fever cases in town was followed by the institution of a more rigid quarantine, isolating the town from the rest of the country. During the period of isolation, which had extended from the middle of September to about the middle of December, 1899, the inhabitants were sadly depressed. This condition of mind made them easy victims to the most incredible rumors regarding the menacing progress of the epidemic, as a result of which, business and all other activities were literally suspended.

The suspension of traffic and the increasingly exaggerated reports of the course of the epidemic were responsible for many pathetic scenes among the imprisoned population. Many citizens had made their wills and were ready for the grim reaper. Others tried to persuade the Board of Health to grant them immune certificates in order to be enabled to leave town.

Among the physicians who rendered this com-

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munity invaluable services were: Dr. J. Y. Porter, head of the State Board of Health; the late Dr. J. M. Jackson, Jr., the late Dr. R. H. Huddleston, Dr. P. T. Skaggs, the late Dr. Horsey, the late Dr. Edwin Pugh and the Federal physicians, Drs. Simpson and McAdam; the last named subsequently succumbed to the disease at Key West.

This is the only period in the history of Miami when its population remained stationary, as no settlers were admitted, nor did any wish to enter. The following tourist season, however, which opened shortly after the eradication of the fever, showed no perceptible shrinkage in the number of winter visitors. This proved highly encouraging to the inhabitants who soon retrieved their losses sustained during the preceding few months. At the beginning of 1900 the local situation was again normal. The inhabitants, though having suffered financial losses, felt grateful to Providence for the insignificant loss of life during the prevalence of the epidemic. They were also grateful for the subsequent scientific discoveries which rendered a recurrence of yellow fever epidemic, or even sporadic cases of the disease, in Florida improbable.

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The following tragi-comic incident occurred during the epidemic period: One of our pioneer merchants happened to be in New York when the quarantine had been put in force. His younger brother, who had charge of the store, took advantage of the opportunity offered to all who wished to leave prior to the quarantine becoming effective. He locked the store and took the key to his brother whom he was to meet in Jacksonville.

Jake, as he was familiarly called, received his key and started for Miami. On reaching West Palm Beach he was apprised of the rigid quarantine against Miami. While sojourning in the former town he heard rumors of robberies that were taking place in Miami. This led him to communicate with me, requesting me to take a look into his store occasionally, for which purpose he forwarded the key.

I visited his store several times and found things undisturbed. On one of these visits of inspection, however, I discovered that several piles of clothing which had been stacked on tables were missing. Stepping across the street where Wilson & Fly kept a grocery store, I invited Mr. J. I. Wilson to join me in an investiga-

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tion of the premises. Upon close examination we found that a large number of carton containers in the shelves were empty, the merchandise evidently having been removed and the boxes left in the shelves so as to prevent detection by chance passers-by in front of the building.

By the advice of Mr. Wilson, I reported the robbery to the sheriff. The latter directed me to procure him an assistant who would agree to accompany him into the store after sundown where they would await the return of the burglars, which from all indications was highly probable. I was assigned the duty of observing the building, which was located at the northeast corner of South Miami Avenue and Second Street, through the window of a room above my own store, at the northwest corner of South Miami Avenue and First Street.

After approaching several reputed burglar hunters in the interest of the sheriff's proposed adventure, I succeeded in enlisting the service of a friend of the burglars' victim. The sheriff and his lieutenant made a surreptitious entrance into the store after sunset that evening and took positions behind counters on either side of the room, where they remained for an intermin-

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able hour in breathless silence and in total darkness.

Their enforced silence, the heat and mosquitoes, had finally gotten on their nerves and they were forced to retire to the rear of the store which was screened by a partition. There they agreed that the sheriff lie down on the floor for a rest and that his lieutenant take a position opposite the rear door through which, from all indications, the burglars had effected their entrance. The door was of heavy panels and was kept closed by an old-fashioned latch. In order to gain easy entrance at their own convenience, the burglars bored a hole large enough to admit a fishing cord, one end of which was tied to the latch inside and the other was twisted into a knot which fitted in the orifice outside, thus enabling one to raise the latch by a pull on the string and enter the premises.

The sheriff presently found himself in the throes of an oppressive nightmare. As the minutes succeeded each other the former's nightmare gained in interest to his watchful lieutenant who, from the sleeper's incoherent exclamations, had gained the impression that the latter was trying to arrest an army of burglars. The watcher was

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tempted to relieve his chief of his seeming agony, but on second thought had decided not to interfere with an officer in the performance of his duty. He later admitted, however, that he was apprehensive that an attempt to waken the sleeper might have resulted in an actual assault upon himself.

The watcher fearing that he too might fall asleep, took the precaution of attaching a tin dipper to the latch in such a manner as to detach itself from the latch and drop to the floor upon the cord being pulled from the outside, thus apprising the guard of the burglars' presence. After perfecting this ingenious protective device, he resumed his seat at the feet of his reclining companion, who had about that time succeeded in extricating himself from his oppressive nightmare and was enjoying his first refreshing sleep since the outbreak of the epidemic.

Presently the watcher relaxed and fell into a troubled sleep from which he was startled a few minutes later by the released dipper striking the floor. Thereupon, the now wide-awake watcher fired his revolver over the prostrate form of his chief in the direction of the door. Before the sound of the shots died away, the sheriff bounded

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to his feet and wildly fired several shots at a hazy form in front of him which proved to be his able lieutenant, who, owing to the dazed condition of the former, escaped unharmed.

Upon hearing the shots I bounded downstairs and rushed toward the firing line. From the number of shots fired I expected to find several dead bodies lying on the ground in the vicinity of that building, but to my profound relief no corpses were visible. What I did behold, however, were the sheriff and his lieutenant facing each other at a respectful distance, uttering frightful imprecations against their hard luck and against the cunning burglars that outwitted them.

Another exciting incident occurred in the same neighborhood but in a different period. Two well-known pioneers, of dignified appearance, befitting scions of Miami's aristocracy of the first train, met in the post-office on a Sunday morning (where all good citizens used to assemble before going to their respective churches) and soon became engaged in a heated argument on the subject of evolution. (Evolution has been the local favorite subject of discussion long before

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its noted antagonist became a citizen of Miami.) When the controversy reached the boiling point, they embraced affectionately, fell to the floor and without breaking their strangle-hold rolled out of the lobby into the street. In trying to pull them apart, the spectators discovered that the defender of the negative side of the issue had imbedded his teeth in the ear of the affirmative and stubbornly refused to let go. This exhibition of brutality elicited the unanimous decision of the crowd of bystanders that there is something to the Darwinian theory of evolution after all. The affirmative side, despite a badly lacerated ear, accepted this decision as a moral victory and magnanimously assured his defeated but satiated opponent that he harbored no malice against him, as his ferocity was excusable on physiological grounds.

Another incident, while not so exciting as those previously related, occurred some years later. One of our prominent pioneers in addition to accumulating a great fortune had attained the dignified title of "Colonel," of which, in his younger days, he was very proud. Before its novelty wore off he often appeared in

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a military uniform which transcended in splendor any that is worn by the highest rank general in the Mexican Army. He won this distinction while attending a banquet given by the Miami Board of Trade in honor of one of Florida's governors who conferred this exalted title upon him for being the only guest that laughed uproariously at the jokes which punctuated His Excellency's after-dinner speech.

Shortly prior to the institution of constituted authority in incipient Miami, two young attorneys, a Justice of the Peace, from a neighboring village, and a constable had assumed the prerogative of administering justice to law-breakers.

On a bright Sunday morning when all the inhabitants except the merchants were attending religious services in the community tent, the said attorneys, Justice of the Peace and constable, disguised as shoppers, visited the stores which were open for business as usual, and purchased diverse articles of merchandise, which were introduced in evidence against the guileless merchants, who were arrested and put on trial the following Monday morning.

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After five of the defendants had pleaded guilty, at the suggestion of the merciful judge, and paid fines according to their respective financial abilities, the last one called to the bar of justice shocked the court by his open rebellion. The jolt produced upon the said Justice of the Peace, attorneys and constable by the defendant's insubordination, coupled with the effect of their retirement into a back room upon the disposal of each of the preceding cases, had precipitated a noisy if not legal argument which was led by the prisoner at the bar (the front bar) in a manner that made the officials' heads swim.

The loquacious defendant brought his trial to a sensational climax by challenging the legal qualification of the court. This unanticipated challenge brought the dejected victims of pioneer justice to their feet, loudly demanding the return of their money and shouting their enthusiastic acclaim of the young Cicero who had routed their common enemy.

Upon restoration of order in the court, the judge invited all present into the back room; where, after a libatious consultation, it was agreed that one half of the collected fines be refunded, and the other half be applied on the liquidation

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of the court's debts which had been incurred that morning in anticipation of a big day's business.

The recital of the following incident' in Miami's history will reveal to the reader the keenness of commercial competition which prevailed among pioneers engaged in kindred business. In some instances this antagonism had developed into bitter feuds which are still smoldering in the breasts of some of the surviving pioneer merchants.

Such a feud had existed between two West Palm Beach merchants, one of whom had removed to Miami early in 1896. Some months preceding his removal, the wife of his vindictive competitor entered the former's store and proceeded to assault his manager, whom she accused of having vilified her husband.

In the tussle which had ensued her body came in impact with a sharp projection of one of the counters and she fell swooning to the floor. While under medical treatment, her husband had secured a doctor's certificate which recited that his patient was in a critical condition. Armed with that certificate the revengeful competitor had

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secured a warrant for the arrest of his fellow-merchant and his manager. After some semblance of a trial the accused were acquitted. A few days later they were again arrested, tried and acquitted. This was repeated innumerable times until the victims of malice and intolerable annoyance had removed to Miami and left the field to their relentless foe.

Some months later the wife of the victorious feudist, who had been used as a *casus belli* by her spouse, took seriously ill and died. Shortly after her death the sheriff came down to Miami, handcuffed the two merchants and carried them to the Dade County jail, which was then located at Juno, on Lake Worth, on the grave charge of murder. (One year later the County government was removed to Miami.)

While waiting to be taken to jail, the prisoners had received the terrifying information that their train would be met by a mob (the same mob that lynched Sam Lewis, and accidentally killed jailer Keiser, about a year previously, for the killing in Lemon City, of ex-sheriff Highsmith and Geo. A. Davis, both of West Palm Beach), which would take them from the sheriff's custody and hang them on the first convenient

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telegraph pole. However, the sheriff and his frightened prisoners, who were accompanied by a friend, safely reached the Juno jail.

The friend of the prisoners after repeated efforts to obtain bondsmen, which had been frustrated by their implacable enemy, had finally succeeded in securing their release. The case never came to trial. One of the victims of primitive commercial competition died in an accident shortly after this dramatic incident. The other, to escape further persecution, removed from Miami immediately after the conflagration of 1896.

On a bright moonlight night, in the spring of 1896, a number of pioneers plunged into the Miami River, at the foot of Avenue "D" (South Miami Avenue), and were enjoying swimming from shore to shore. In the midst of this refreshing exercise the terrifying cry of "Alligator" broke the stillness of the night and precipitated the swimmers into a scramble for safety to the banks of both sides of the stream. One of the bathers, a former resident of Fort Pierce, who had studied the habits of the alligator in its haunts on the shores of the Indian River, felt the

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closing jaws of a monster alligator upon his shoulder. Without emitting a sound he injected the tips of his fingers into the eyes of the brute and was instantly released. After having his wounds cauterized, he secured a row-boat and rifle and set out on an alligator hunt vowing to kill the brute that attacked him. He persisted in the hunt for several nights until he finally located and slew the monster.