

Attack of the Panther

(This story is adapted from the book, The Flamingo Feather, written by Kirk Munroe in 1915.)

In 1564, the French explorer Laudonniere led a group of Protestant Huguenots to Florida. Rene de Veaux, Laudonniere's nephew, was a young lad with the group. When the French arrived at the mouth of the St. John's River, they stopped and built a triangle-shaped fort for protection. They called it Fort Caroline.

Initially, Laudonniere established good relations with the Timucuan Indians of this region. Rene's friend was Has-se, an Indian who instructed him in the mysteries of Indian woodcraft.

One afternoon Has-se asked Rene to go out on the river with him in his canoe. Rene willingly agreed to go with him. Taking his crossbow and a couple of steel-tipped bolts, he seated himself in the bow of the light craft. Has-se paddled the canoe from the stern. Going for some distance down the river, they turned into a small stream. Huge, moss-hung oaks and rustling palm-trees cast a pleasant shade over the dark waters. Here the canoe was allowed to drift.

The canoe had drifted close in to the shore, until it lay directly beneath the gigantic limb of a tree that extended far out over the water. A mesh of stout vines hung down. Rene seized hold of a stout vine, and with a quick jerk drew the light craft in which they were seated a few feet forward. At the same instant, a tawny body was launched like a shot from the overhanging limb. It dashed into the water exactly at the spot over which, but an instant before, Has-se had sat.

The animal that made this fierce plunge was a panther of the largest size. If Rene had not chanced to catch sight of its nervously twitching tail as it drew itself together for the spring, it would have alighted squarely upon the naked shoulders of the unsuspecting Indian lad. Rene's prompt action had, however, caused the animal to plunge into the water. It only missed the canoe by a few feet. When it rose to the surface it was close beside them.





Has-se seized his paddle, and with a powerful stroke forced the canoe ahead. It moved directly into the mesh of trailing vines, in which it became so entangled that they could not extricate it. The beast had recovered from his surprise, and had begun to swim towards them.

A bolt was hurriedly fitted to Rene's crossbow and hastily fired at the approaching animal. It struck him near the fore-shoulder, and served to check his progress for a moment. With a snarl of rage, he bit savagely at the wound, from which the blood flowed freely, crimsoning the water around him. Then he again turned towards the canoe. The panther seemed to leap rather than swim, in his eagerness to reach the canoe. A second bolt, fired with even greater haste than the first, missed the panther entirely. The boys were about to plunge from the opposite side of the canoe into the water, in their despair, when an almost unheard-of thing occurred to affect their deliverance.

Just as one more leap would have brought the panther within reach of the canoe, a huge, dark form rose from the red waters behind him. A pair of horrid jaws opened, and then closed like a vice upon one of his hindquarters. The panther uttered a wild yell and made a convulsive spring forward. His claws rattled against the side of the canoe, and then the waters closed above his head.

He was dragged down into the dark depths of the stream, to the slimy home of the great alligator, which had thus delivered the boys from their peril. A few bubbles coming up through the crimson waters told of the terrible struggle going on beneath them. Then all was still.

The stream flowed on as undisturbed as before. For a few moments the boys sat gazing in silent amazement at the place of the sudden disappearance of their enemy, hardly believing that he would not again return to the attack.

When they returned to the fort, Laudonniere heard with horror Rene's story of the adventure with the tiger and the crocodile (as he named panthers and alligators). He bade Rene to be very careful in the future how he wandered in the wilderness.

Laudonniere's little colony was largely dependent on the Indians for provisions. He considered Rene's influence with the Indian lad, who was the son of the chief, very important. He did not forbid his nephew to associate with Has-se, for he was most anxious to preserve a friendship with the Indians.