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Affecting Narrative of the Captivity and the Sufferings of Mrs Mary Smith

Mary Smith

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Mary Smith, An Affecting Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Mary Smith



An Affecting Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Mary Smith tells the story of a white settler who, along with her husband and daughters, was forcefully taken from her frontier home by Kickapoo Indians in the vicinity of New Orleans. An unknown “gentleman” tells the outrageous story filled with extreme violence, including torture, scalping, massacre, sexual submission, white racism, bravery, and chivalry to “his friend in Rhode Island.” During this sixty day ordeal, Smith witnesses the horrific torture and killing of her husband and her children, marries an older chief, gets recaptured by the Kickapoos, and is saved by a detachment of General Andrew Jackson’s army.

Consistent with many captivity narratives, Native Americans were interpreted as savages, who occupied uncultivated wilderness and who obstructed western “civilization.” Infused with melodrama and stereotyping, circulating the importance of Christianity tied to God’s Providence, such books were designed to horrify readers with acts of Indian violence. The protagonist was most often a helpless white female, treated in a most inhumane manner by Native Americans. The vulnerable, ever-fainting women were frequently kidnapped at night from familiar surroundings and forced to endure cross-cultural experiences, while living at the mercy of devils in a desolate wilderness.

Popular through the colonial and early national periods, Indian captivity narratives were filled with graphic details of torture, potential cannibalism, and stories of good against evil. The tales of Christians against soulless Indians served as a device for creating strong anti-Indian sentiments, with the political purpose of pioneering, westward expansion, and Indian removal and relocation.

Edited by Petronella Van Doorn, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Further Reading

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An Affecting Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Mary Smith (1818)

An AFFECTING NARRATIVE OF THE Captivity and Sufferings OF MRS. MARY SMITH, who with her Husband and three Daughters were Prisoners by the Indians, in August last 1814) and after enduring the most cruel hard-ship and torture of mind for sixty days (in which time she witnessed the tragically death of her Husband and her harmless Children) was fortunately rescued from the merciless hands of Savages by a detached party from the army of the brave General Jackson now commanding at New Orleans: the proceeding pages will be found to contain particular account of the engagement between the handful of Jackson's brave boys, and the party of Savages, above (ILL) to — the reader may judge of what (ILL) the hardy sons of Tennessee and Ohio are composed.

Captivity and Sufferings OF MRS. MARY SMITH, & c.

Communicated from a gentleman in the (ILL) County to his friend in Rhode Island.

“THE intrepid and the brave GEN Jackson, with the troops under his command, having to completely effected his object the last reason in so far exterminating the Indians of the Creek Nations as to compel the surviving few to sue their peace—it was conceived advisable by the general to station a few regiments in their neighborhood to hold them in awe in case an enemy should attempt to instigate then to recommencement of hostilities—in the interim the commander was apprised of incursions of wandering hordes of the Kickapoo nation of Indians, who had committed many depredations on the white inhabitants residing near the Floridas,— A detachment from a Tennessee regiment, consisting of a lieutenant, sergeant, and thirty two privates, were ordered on an expedition for the protection of the defenseless inhabitants. This little but brave handful of men quit the main body of the army on the 3rd of Sept. and on the 4th crossed the Yazoo, and not meeting with any but friendly Indians in this quarter, they bent their course further west, and on the 24th fell in with a party of Choctaw—by these Indians they were informed that they had the day before fallen in with a large body of the Kickapoos, and runaway Chickasaws, and that they had with them some white prisoners, and a great number of scalps! Lieut. Brown pushed forward with all possible expedition, and on the day following about sunset fell in with their trail, and by the fires concluded that the enemy had not encamped not far ahead—at the dawn of day the Lieut. dispatched two of the most active of his men, to make an observation as to the number and situation of the Indians—they returned with the information that they had discovered the enemy encampment therefrom, that their number exceeded some hundred and were armed with bows and arrows—that they perceived three or four whited lying bound in their centre, one whom appeared to be a female! These observations were made without any discovery on the part of the enemy.

A consultation was now held among the officers and privates, whether it would be prudent to resque an action with a force to much superior to their own there probably being four to one! but the idea of rescuing from the merciless hands of their enemies their unfortunate countrymen, who probably were designed as victims to feed their savage fires, inspired the Lieut. and his little band with unconquerable resolution—not one expressed a doubt in their success, but the whole company begged to be led to the unequal combat! The commander placed the utmost confidence in his men, whom he knew were well skilled in the Indian mode of bush fighting, did not hesitate to devise a plan of attack that would insure the release of their unfortunate countrymen—he divided his company into four parties—the sergeant with ten men, were designed to gain their rear, two parties of six men each were to flank them on the right and left, while the lieutenant with the remainder of the company were to charge them in front—each party were directed to gain their stations unperceived by the enemy. If possible, and having them thus encompassed, the charge of those in the front was to be the signal for the other party to rush on the enemy. The Lieut. with his little band of invincible were soon within ‘gunshot of the savages by whom being as this instant discovered, the later threw themselves into Indian style, and with a yell peculiar to the savage race, rushed upon their assailants, at whom they hurled their tomahawks and discharged their arrows at this important crisis, Lieut. Brown ordered his little company to charge, which being the first for a general attack, the detached parties rushed upon the enemy with such a impetuosity, in the meantime shouting and discharging them pieces with so good effect that the latter were soon thrown into disorder and became panic struck; they made no further resistance, but throwing aside their pales, blankets and even their weapons, attempting each to save himself by flight; but this

unexpected opportunity of revenge pass unimproved by the Lieutenant's brave lads—not having sufficient time to reload their muskets, they assailed the enemy with their own weapons destroying numbers with the tomahawks, &c. which they had so recently possessed!—In less than half an hour the conquering assailants completed their work. At the conclusion of the fight, the unfortunate captives were fought for, whom they found four in number (one a female) bound hand and foot with green withes!—Thus did this inferior number of the brave and hardy sons of the western world, attack an enemy in the heart of their own country, and of four times their number, of whom fifty two were slain, twelve made prisoners, and many wounded, and all this effected without the loss of a single man on their part, and but four slightly wounded. The poor female appears to have been particularly unfortunate—by these ferocious Cannibals, she has been deprived of her husband and three lovely children, 'and that too in a manner almost too shocking to relate her story is such as cannot fail to touch the heart of all not callous to the feelings of humanity.

The name of the late husband of this unfortunate woman was Richard Smith, who with his family (consisting of himself, with three children and a negro lad) resided at the extreme part of a small township 135 miles west of the Natchez, and at the distance of 12 miles from any other white family; that they remained unmolested until the night of the fifth of August last, when Mr. Smith was alarmed by the barking of his dog, he rose from his bed and looked from his chamber window, but saw no person, and all appeared to be quiet; he again returned to his bed, but not many minutes after he was once more disturbed by a loud and repeated knocking at the door; the whole family now became greatly alarmed and repaired to the chamber of Mr. Smith, who now hailed from the window, and demanded who was there; but received no other answer, that if he did not immediately open his doors, he should be murdered! He was soon convinced that a party of Indians surrounded his house, and suspecting that their designs were hostile, he armed himself, and ordered the remainder of the family to prepare to defend themselves to the best manner they could; accordingly Mr. S. with his wife and negro equipped themselves with a loaded musket each, and the two oldest girls with each a hatchet. Being thus prepared, Mr. Smith hailed once more from the window, and with the most horrible threats he was ordered to open his doors, which he peremptory refused, In a few moments the doors were forced and the hellish tribe rushed in, and were saluted with the three musket, which cause them to retreat, and gave the brave defenders time to reload; immediately after they again returned and attacked the negro, whom they soon dispatched with their tomahawks. Mr. S. and his wife again discharges their pieces, and then with their daughters retreated to the inner chamber, the door of which they bolted: here the unfortunate family did not remain long secure, for before they had time to reload, they succeeded in forcing the door, and with uplifted tomahawks and a hideous yell, rushed into the room! all further resistance now was vain. Mr. S. receiving a severe blow upon the head from an Indian with his tomahawk, fell senseless to the floor! Mrs. S. observing herself and children surrounded by those savage monsters, frightfully painted, and who with their tomahawks and scalping knives menaced them with instant death, begged for mercy, but alas, her intreaties were in vain! they were dragged almost naked out the house, and bound severally with cords.

By order of one of the savage, who appeared to be chief, about twenty of their gang took charge of the unhappy prisoners, and by whom they were to be conducted to their settlement, about 100 miles distant, without delay; while the remainder were left to the pillage and fire the house. They commenced their journey about two in the morning, and traveled through an uncultivated

wilderness, at a rate of six miles an hours. If either of the prisoners through fatigue slackened their pace, they were most inhumanly beat and threatened with instant death.

After a tedious travel of nearly thirty miles, the savages halted in a swamp; here for the first time, for the time of their departure, the prisoners were permitted to sit down: the Indians kindled a fire, on which they broiled some bear's flesh. But which they allowed the unfortunate captives but a small portion. After refreshing themselves and extinguishing their fire, they recommenced their journey and traveled until sun-set when the Indians again halted, and began to prepare some covering for the night. The unfortunate children complained much of their feet being swollen; contrary to their expectations, however, they has a tolerable night's rest, and on the succeeding day, though nearly naked and half starved, traveled with much more ease than on the preceding one. The Savages occasionally allowing them a little half roasted bear's flesh, sufficient only to keep them alive! they this day traveled, according to the reckoning of the Indians nearly 40 mile, and were about sunset joined by the remaining Savages who were left behind, they were loaded with the spoils of Mr. Smith's property, among which, unfortunately for the captives, was a small keg of whiskey, of which until they became intoxicated, they diverted themselves in torturing their unhappy prisoners in every way that savage brutality could devise. Mr. Smith having lost so large quantity of blood in consequence of the severe wound that he had received at his house, and now receiving additional bruises and lacerations became so weak, that on the morning ensuing he was unable to support himself on his legs, the Savages imputing his inability to willfulness, renewed their acts of barbarity to effect a compulsion, they severally beat him with club, cut and gashed his flesh with their knives, and scored his naked body with brand of fire! Finding, however, that their hellish proceedings had no other effect than to render the poor unhappy sufferer less enabled to travel, the formed the horrid conclusion of putting him to a painful death, and in order to execute the infernal purpose, they stripped and prostrated the wretched victim on his naked back, they cut holes through his wrists and ankles, between the bones and tendons, in such a manner as to draw green withes through the apertures! then extending his arms and legs to a degree exquisitely painful, they, with the ligatures above mentioned, lasted him fast to four small trees, about six feet from the ground, which bloody exploit finished those horrid hell hounds left for a few moments the writhing sacrifice, with an intent to make merry and enjoy, in idea, the excruciating tortures of the sufferer!

In about half an hour they returned and commenced an Indian dance and pow wow, around the distressed victim, this they continued to do so about an hour, when becoming weary of such severe exercise, a strip of bark was placed within a few inched of Mr. Smith's head. As a mark, and at which his cruel tormentors now in succession hurled their tomahawk! At length either by accident or design one of those deadly weapon struck the head of their expiring victim and fortunately put an immediate end to his existence! To this horrid spectacle Mrs. Smith and her unfortunate children were compelled to stand witness, unable to render their wretched husband and parent any assistance.

The merciless cannibals feasted themselves with a view of the mangled body of the descended, of which having deprived of its scalp, they again resumed their journey toward their settlement, in view of which they encamped that night. At day light next morning, they gave their prisoners new clothe, panted their faces with various colours and put into their hands white staffs, tasseled round with the tails of deer, this being done, the Savages commenced a dismal yell in a few moments

after they were joined by a great number of Indians and squaws from the village, to which the unhappy prisoners were now conveyed, they were led in great triumph to the cabin of their principal chief, while they were given to understand their fate was to be determined.

The chiefs of the tribe, after a consultation of an hour or too, conceived it most advisable to put the prisoners to death, as the captors it appeared had disagreed about whose property they should be as they had jointly seized them and to terminate the dispute, agreeable to the abominable usage of the Savages, it was determined by the chiefs of the party, that the prisoners, who gave rise to the contention, should be destroyed, and that their captors should be the principle agents in the execrable business! by them it was resolved that the unhappy girls should immediately suffer, when the death of the mother should be deferred until some future day.

No sooner was the determination of the chiefs made known, than the whole village set up the death cry, and began to make preparations for an event the most tragically ever recorded in history. Two saplings were pruned clear of branches up to the very top around them; while this was doing, two of three of the Indians employed themselves in splitting pitch pine billets into small splinters about five inches in length, and as small as one's little finger, sharpening one end, and dipping the other in melted turpentine.

At length with countenances distorted with infernal fury, and with hideous yells, two or three of the Savages leaped into the midst of their circle, and dragged those ill-fated females, the oldest in her 19th, and the youngest in the 11th year of their age, shrieking from the embraces of their helpless mother! these furies assisted by their comrade, stripped the forlorn girls, already convulsed with apprehensions, and tied each to a sapling, with their hands as high extended above their heads as possible: and then, horrid to relate, pitched them from their knees to their shoulders, with upwards of six hundred of the sharpened splinters above described, which, at every puncture were attended with screams of distress that echoed and re echoed through the wilderness! And then, to complete the infernal tragedy, the splinters, all standing erect on the bleeding victims, were every one set on fire, which must have been exhibit a scene of monstrous misery, beyond the power of speech to describe, or even the imagination to conceive. It was not until near three hours had elapsed from the commencement from their torments that they had lost almost every resemblance of the human form, that these helpless virgins sunk down in the arms of their deliverer, DEATH.

What could have been the sensations of the poor distressed mother as she was insensibly drawn from the fire and conveyed to an Indian hut, where she remained in a state of delirium for two or three days, when she had a little recovered she was given to understand by an Indian, who spoke a little broken English, that the hut which she occupied belonged to one of their chief, who with four other Indians, were shot in the late attack on her husband's house. The wretched captive now expected every moment to receive a summons to prepare herself for a fate as horrible as that of her friends! she remained however unmolested for nearly a week: when, two aged squaws came to the hut, and made signs to her to follow them, which she did, to the distance of nearly a mile, to a cleared spot of land, where were collected two or three hundred Indians, squaws and children: Mrs. Smith was now addressed by one who appeared to be a chief, and informed of the number of his tribe that had been slain, whose friends said he, cry for vengeance, and that she was then to suffer torments! the most hideous yells echoed through the wood, a large fire was kindled, and over it they placed a kind of gallows, on which the captive was made to understand, she was to be

hung. Two large and fierce looking Indians bound her, and with savage ferocity, she was stripped and dragged towards the fire: a ring was first formed by the children, a second by the women, and a third by the men round the wretched victim: they then commenced the death song, running back and forth round the flames, after continuing this for near an hour, one of the savages approached the prisoners and when about to commit her to the devouring element, their attention was suddenly attracted by the harangue of an old Indian, apparently a chief, at the conclusion of which the prisoner was unbound and by the two old squaws conveyed back to the hut where she had been recently confined. Here she had not remained long before the old Indian, by whose means her life had been preserved, entered, attended by an interpreter, and the intercession of the old chief, her life had been spared, his power was absolute, and he had concluded to adopt her to supply the place of his squaw, who with his two children, had been killed by the whites in one of their former expedition, the prisoner was now informed that it was left to her choice whether she would accede to the proposals of the old chief, or would rather resign herself up a victim to savage barbarity.

Here I cannot better describe the feelings of Mrs. Smith, on this trying occasion, than to make use of her own words, they are these; "I now prayed for death, I heartily wished to be delivered from such merciless cannibals! but just escaped from torture, I was reduced to the necessity of becoming a prostitute in order to prevent the most cruel death bit I had but little time to reflect, and that must be employed faithfully, to resign myself as a victim to the barbarity of the Savages was a dreadful thought, and to gratify the wishes of one of those vile monsters, was as I conceived, although shocking in the extreme, not quite so bad as to endure their savage torture, of the two impending evil, I was therefore induced to choose the least, I gave the old sachem to understand that I would cheerfully comply, and was conducted immediately to his wigwam, here I affected great regard for his person, but as a feigned great indisposition, begged of him to suffer me to remain in the situation I then was, until I should in some measure recover my health and spirits to which, contrary to my expectations, he acceded.

I began now contemplate seriously upon my disagreeable situation, when the thought arose in my mind, that by killing this Indian, I might possible effect my escape: the hut wherein I dwelt was entirely deserted by all other Indians than its owner, therefore my chance was good—I accordingly provided myself with an old scalping knife, which I found in the hut, and which I secreted beneath a quantity of moss, which served me for a bed—the night succeeding, the old Indian having prostrate himself upon a matress, near by me, soon fell asleep. I thought this to be the time to effect what I had premediated, accordingly I took my knife and creeping with as little noise as possible to where the savage lay, plunging it into his bosom! He attempted to rise, but at that instant snatching his tomahawk from his belt, gave him a severe blow on his head, which I repeated until I was sure he was dead.

I now hastily collected all the victuals that the hut contained, and left the longsome place. Nothing was to be heard but the wild beasts which very much daunted me, I however ventured to proceed, and steered a north easterly direction every shake of a leaf startled me, thinking my enemies were in pursuit. I traveled on through brooks, briars and woods as fast as my feeble legs would carry me till morning when I conceived with more prudent to climb some tree and conceal myself in its top than to travel, while I was pondering, heard a dreadful yelling at a distance which appeared to be at the same course that I had been traveling. I was so frightened that I knew not what measure to

take at last I resolved to climb a tree near by which I climbed with considerable difficulty. I had not been long in this situation therefore I descried twenty or thirty frightful looking Indians, who passed within a few rods of the tree which I had ascended; I recognized some of my old torturers among them. I kept upon the tree during the day, and at night descended and continued my journey. I had not proceeded far however before my ears were again assaulted by the dreadful howling of the wild beasts, which continued till morning [illeg.] several beasts approached me near enough to distinguish their horrid forms, and some wild cats appeared also in sight, which perhaps, magnified by my fears, appeared in most enormous size, nay there may be one of them that advanced nearer to me, than any of the rest, but upon me setting up a loud cry, he retrenched, after he set forth a most horrid yell, which was echoed back by all other beasts of the forest.

To avoid these nocturnal enemies, I now resolved to travel only by day. After the fear and fatigue of the night, I could not think of setting forward before I had taken some repose, which I stood in great need of; and, at last, ventured to stretch myself down beneath the branches of a large oak; but the agitations of my mind prevented me from any perfect enjoyment of that blessing and I slumbered rather than slept, till noon.

I then took a slight repast, which consumed the remainder of my provisions and began my journey easterly, in hopes of reaching some christian settlement or falling in with some friendly Indians who would conduct me thereto. The meeting with the hostile savages was the worst I had apprehended but I now began to think that a sudden death would be preferable to the state I was in, passing from one misfortune to another, and exposed to the perishing with hunger or supplying the wild beasts of the forest with meals to assuage theirs.

My weakness did not suffer me to go far that day, my journey being only about three hours slow pace; I took care to halt before my strength was quite exhausted: the terrors of the night preceding warned me to prepare a safe retreat for the night from the ferocious animals of the wilderness—Fear was the first principle of my action, which must have been very powerful in me, when it was superior to the pressing calls of hunger—having selected a tree of easy ascent on which I had concluded to pass the night, I began to look about for food of any kind, but there was neither roots nor vegetables fit for eating, to be found.

As soon as the night fell I retired with a heavy heart to what I conceived a safe retreat for the night—the wild beasts did not cause any alarm until about midnight, when I might imagine, from the horrid noise, that all the wild beasts throughout the deserts of this new world, had been gathered together, to terrify me with their howling!

The welcome morn at length arrived, and, by driving the beasts back to their dens, relieved my alarms, which had for the night suspended the cruel sensations of hunger; but as soon as my fears began to abate, these began to operate to a severe degree. Thus was I apparently fated to sustain alternately, the most bitter ills of life, hunger and fear!

I descended from the tree and prepared to pursue my uncertain journey, in hopes of being able to meet some sort of aliment, in my way, to recruit my sinking spirits: I made trails of every species of plant, root, or vegetable, I could pick up, but with little success—there was no nourishment in them. My hunger increased every moment, but the hope of being able to assuage it sustained me

every step, and enabled me to travel on till afternoon—when I arrived at a piece of rising ground, where I expected to have a view of some fruitful spot or hospitable village; but all was as dreary before—nothing was to be discovered but a thick and gloomy forest as far as the eye could reach! I was now almost resolved to give up the idea of pursuing my further my fruitless route, in which I could not possible foresee any end to my wants and miseries, except what I might have received upon the spot where I was, from death alone.

However as the day began to draw to a close, I had yet sufficient strength left to seek me usual place of safety for the night, during which I had little repose, as the continual howling of the wolves, and the other beasts, prevented it.—The morning ensuring I once more set forward, but with as little prospect of meeting with any succour as on the days preceding:—a thick wood that I met with in my course, I found it almost impracticable to pass through. on the account of the strong reeds and briars it was choked up with, which tore my feet and hands in a shocking manner—but fortunately formed, kind Providence seemed willing to reward me, at length, for the pains that I had taken to penetrate a forests so gloomy and uninviting—in the course of my travel this day, when hunger had driven me almost to the last extrememity, I had the good fortune to discover a wild turkey nest, containing thirteen eggs! With what a transport of joy did I view this welcomed price! which to me at that moment was far more acceptable than what would have been their bulk in gold!—such indeed was my hunger at the moment, that I had devoured nearly half of them, before I gave myself time to reflect that in my then weak bodily state having been for so great a length of time without food, I secured the remainder of the eggs, and feeling much more recruited by the unsuspected repast I again set forward with the fond expectation of reaching some settlement, before I should be again compelled to endure the pains of hunger!

But, alas! how true is it that when we, poor unhappy mortals, conceive ourselves almost within the reach of the object of our pursuit unexpectedly precipitated into a state of unconceivable sorrow and disappointment indeed proved the results of my endeavors to reach some hospitable mansion, where I should not only be secure from the further annoyance of the Savages, and wild beasts of the forest, but should probably obtain something to satisfy the cravings of nature. Toward the close of the day I had descended a valley to seek shelter for the night, when I was roused by the sound of some shrill voices, which seemed to proceed from a distance—as I conceived myself now not far from some christian settlement, I concluded that they were voices of some friendly persons whom kind Providence had selected to extricate me from the difficulties which attended me;—whether they be friends or foes (thought I) will meet them—for I began to conceive it impossible for man to render my situation worse than it then was. To prevent being passed unnoticed, I hallowed as loud as the weak state of my lungs would permit me—I soon discovered that I not only been heard by those people, be their answering, but I soon perceived by the rustling of the leaves that they were approaching the very spot I stood! the bushes which surrounded me were so extremely thick as to conceal them from my view, until within a few yards of me, when to my inexpressible horror, I perceived them to be savages, and of every notion from which I had so recently escaped? thus were all my expectations of a speedy relief in moment blasted.

They made me their prisoner, and as their number exceeded one hundred, and had with them a number of human scalps, and three young men, prisoners, I had no doubt but that they were on their return from an expedition against some of the white settlements. They bound me in the manner which they had the other unfortunate captives, and weak and emancipated I was, forced

me to keep their pace for three days, when I was fortunately rescued from their merciless hands by Lieut. Brown, and his brave little company of soldiers!”