

CHAPTER VIII

The Everglades—"The Garden of Eden" and "The Valley of the Nile"—Gradual Reclamation of a Tropical Jungle—Birds, Alligators and Flowers—The Unconquered Race of Seminoles.

Time was when the mere mention of the Everglades made the proud Floridian hunt cover. They may still be on the defensive when they describe these lands as "The Garden of Eden" and "The Valley of the Nile," yet some progress is admittedly being made toward the drainage of the Everglades. The State is spending millions of dollars in constructing canals and ditches and building roads to make these lands accessible. It is claimed that something over half a million acres of the Everglades are now under cultivation.

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Along the shore of the Miami-Okeechobee Canal, for several miles west of Miami, the drainage has accomplished much, while along the eastern shore of the 'glades there is a large acreage under cultivation. There are many small farms in the sand and marl lands, and each year sees a few more thousand acres, but recently submerged or subject to frequent overflow, laid bare to the sun and made ready for the hand of man.

The Pennsylvania Sugar Company, a large corporation, has purchased over 150,000 acres of Everglades land, which they are developing into a sugar plantation. Large corporations usually know what they are doing. After extensive experiments this corporation planted over three thousand acres in sugar cane, and they are now erecting a sugar mill costing over a million dollars and having a capacity of fifteen hundred tons of cane per day. A Russian colony has eleven thousand acres in the Everglades, five hundred of which is in cultivation. The Curtiss-

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Bright Ranch, bordering on the 'glades, is a ranch of fourteen hundred acres, where cattle raising and dairying is extensively carried on.

The Everglades of Florida are perhaps the most talked about and least understood lands in America. The 'glades was once an inland lake, with long arms extending eastward to Lake Worth, Biscayne Bay or the Atlantic Ocean. Making out from this vast body of four million acres of overflowed lands are streams of greater or less importance that have broken through the ridge of rock and pine land lying between Lake Worth, Biscayne Bay and the ocean. The nature of the soil, its fertility and possible productivity is the basis for the reclamation of this vast inland empire. Without drainage these acres are a valueless waste. It has long been conceded that this area is essentially agricultural, the primary requisite being drainage.

The Everglades became the property of the state of Florida through an Act of the Federal Congress known as the "Swamp and Overflow Land Grant Act" in 1850, though it appears that patent

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from the government to the state to the lands of the Everglades was not forthcoming until 1903. A condition of the grant was that the proceeds from sales of land should be applied to the reclaiming of the lands by drainage.

The first attempt made at draining the Everglades was made by Hamilton Disston, of Philadelphia, over thirty years ago. Mr. Disston purchased a large tract of the Everglade lands from the state in what is known as the Lake Hart region on the southern boundary of Orange County. Soon after the purchase of these lands, he entered into extensive plans for the drainage of a large area. Drainage canals were constructed and a considerable acreage of sugar cane planted, as well as a variety of ordinary field crops. The crops, it is claimed, proved satisfactory. A sugar mill was erected which turned out a good grade of sugar. Then suddenly something happened which destroyed Mr. Disston's hopes and the Disston drainage projects and the Disston sugar cane farm were abandoned.

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This put a stop to drainage. There was some talk of it, but nothing was done. In 1898 there was a strong movement that promised something toward the drainage of a portion of the 'glades west of Miami. In that year the trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund entered into a contract with the Florida East Coast Drainage and Sugar Company for the sale of practically eight hundred thousand acres of Everglade land. This project also failed. In 1904 Governor Broward was elected on a platform advocating drainage of the Everglades, but he found the carrying out of his pre-election promises difficult.

The state undertook the task of draining the great inundated lands in a limited way in 1905 and since then the drainage of the Everglades has become one of the fixed policies of the state, the same as the building and maintenance of its highways and schools. During the past six years considerable progress has been made.

The major feature of the Everglades drainage

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project, according to the data of F. C. Elliott, chief drainage engineer of the state, is the control of the water level of Lake Okeechobee, the second largest fresh water lake wholly within the United States, approximately forty miles long and thirty miles wide, in itself a catch basin for a watershed to the north seven times its own area. The former level of this lake has been lowered about five feet. During the rainy season the water from above or north of the lake, including the water from the Kissimmee river, caused the lake to overflow and discharge the excess water over the lower south shore of the lake, resulting in inundation of the greater portion of the Everglades. To effect this control, six main canal outlets from Lake Okeechobee, five to the Atlantic Ocean south and east of the lake and one west to the Gulf of Mexico, are contemplated, and excavation on each of which is being prosecuted as fast as practicable. Besides these, various other and shorter canals are under construction.

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The drainage of the Everglades is one of the largest and most important reclamation projects ever undertaken in this or any other country. The Everglades and their ultimate drainage embrace approximately six thousand square miles, or the reclamation of more than four million acres of land. The entire justification for drainage rests upon the assumption that the lands are particularly valuable for agricultural purposes. The so-called muck soil, an inky-black residue of decayed sawgrass and other similar vegetation—the accumulation of centuries—was early discovered to be highly fertile and especially adapted to high productive yields of nearly every known vegetable and grass, as well as some of the tropical fruits. It is claimed that about 640,000 acres of this muck land are now under cultivation, and that the gross returns for vegetables and other products from this reclaimed area amount to about four million dollars annually. These products include early winter tomatoes, peppers, egg plant, beans and various other vegetables.

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The drainage of the Everglades has appeared to many as a doubtful venture, and the work has been very slow, but some progress is now being made. The undrained portion of these Bad Lands of Florida is a vast jungle of wild life of every description—birds, alligators and flowers—some species almost extinct, the last of their kind clinging to the remote past. Some day complete drainage may rob this potential “Garden of Eden” of its age-old mystery, and the thousands of years of life-giving properties accumulated by the soil through the millions of years of fallowness will yield its value to the Floridians. Then it may indeed blossom as “The Valley of the Nile” and become “The Sugar Bowl of the World.”

In the fastness of the Everglades live the Seminole Indians, the only race in the United States who have never been conquered by the American government—or the Florida mosquito. Their origin wrapped in a mystery never yet satisfactorily penetrated, the Seminoles are the most picturesque and

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the strangest figures in the whole strange state of Florida. They are the last remnant of a once powerful tribe who chose to live in the most inaccessible Everglades rather than give up the freedom which it has been their tradition to fight for always.

The Seminoles are a familiar figure in Miami, where their white and scarlet dress, with its splashes of barbaric color, attracts the attention of the stranger. They come down the Miami river in their graceful flat canoes or light their campfires on its banks. Their strong, primitive faces are never abashed by the gaudy trappings of the city. They are a quiet, unobstrusive people, who have regulated and preserved their corporate life through long years of struggling. Living in the mosquito-infested Everglades, the Seminoles appear strangely immune to the ravages of this notorious Florida pest. The men usually go bare-footed and bare-legged, and so hardy are they, through long years of out-door living, that they have been seen to scrape the mos-

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quitos off their bare legs in handfuls with apparently no discomfort. It is some Indian that can do that.

The Seminoles are slower to adopt the customs and dress of civilization than most any other Indian tribe. They prefer the primitive customs of their fathers and cling tenaciously to the old order. In their half-cultivated fields they raise corn, pumpkins, peas, chickens and hogs. They are, of course, expert fishers and hunters and kill what game they need. Five or six families usually camp under one head, each family having its own palmetto-thatched hut. The Seminole is healthy, industrious in his own way, moral and just. Devoted to tribal customs, he is usually kind to his women and children and reverences the Great Spirit.

When Florida became a part of the United States the Indians were considered a menace to the peaceful development of the country. These troubles culminated in the Indian wars which banished the hostile red man into the fastness of the Everglades.

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The Indians remaining in Florida after these wars were the Seminoles. The name was applied to the tribe by the Cherokees and Creeks, from whom they separated, and means a restless, wandering people. Some have claimed that the name implies degeneration or outlawry, but this is not substantiated. The name is thought to be derived from Ishti Semole, which means wild man, wanderer—vagabond, perhaps, but not outlaw. There is thought to be about four hundred members of this tribe in Florida, but there is no accurate accounting, as the taking of the decennial census among the Indians is difficult.

The Seminoles are thought to have sprung from the old Aztecs of Mexico. When they left Mexico they started on a wandering pilgrimage across the southern border of the United States. This pilgrimage continued for seventy-five or eighty years, until they reached east Alabama and western Georgia. The most of the trip had been one of intermittent warfare with the tribes they had come in contact with, with the result that when they reached

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the country in Alabama and Georgia occupied by the Creeks they had become reduced to a very small number. They made peace with the Creeks, and joined them as a sub-tribe, but always retained their own chief and controlled all their tribal affairs.

Both tribes kept the terms of their treaty. There was no discord in the friendship or the lives of these two tribes of savages living in the unexplored fastness of the wilderness. The time came when the territory assigned the Seminoles was once more coveted by the same kind of "White Devils" that had caused their departure from Mexico, and once more they started on a pilgrimage to find a new habitation—this time in the fastness of the Everglades, where they, no doubt, thought they would be forever safe from the greed and covetousness of the white man. When the Everglades are drained they will doubtless be told once more to move on, to make way for the white man's encroaching wheels of

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progress. And the Seminole will doubtless move on, because the Seminole loves freedom above everything else—even the freedom of the Everglades.