

A TRIP THAT FAILED

CHAPTER XVII

A TRIP THAT FAILED

WE began the trip in canoes but ended it in an ox-cart. We paddled and wallowed through two hundred miles of flower-clad lakes, and boggy, moccasin-infested trails, zigzagging from border to border of the Florida Everglades, and were hauled for five days over pine-covered stretches of sand, across submerged prairies, and through sloughs of the Big Cypress country, but we failed to reach the big lake by twenty-five miles.

Last year we crossed the Glades, from west to east, in a power boat, over the deepest water known for a decade. This year, from Cape Sable to Lake Okeechobee, we could seldom find water enough to float a canoe.

Last year's trip was a picnic. That of this year—wasn't. But it was worth a dozen picnics and, after all, the hardest work was of our own compelling.

The explorers were the Florida man, the Camera-man, and the scribe. We wanted a guide to the Indian camps of the Everglades and the Big Cypress Swamp, and an interpreter after we got there, but such of the Everglade Indians as had a smattering of English shook their heads when interviewed, and

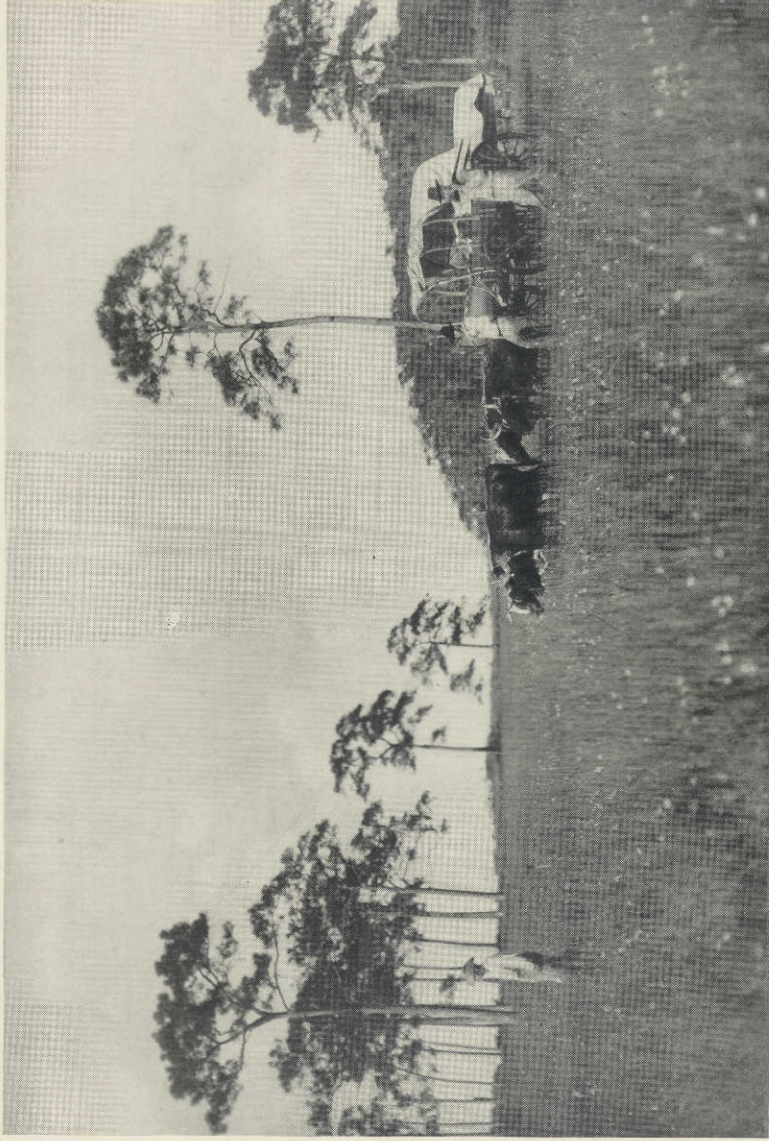
Florida Enchantments

said, "*oko suckescha*" (water all gone) so we finally engaged a Pineland Seminole—Charley Tommy—with the English vocabulary of a third-class parrot, who agreed to go with us as guide and interpreter. As an interpreter he was useful, but if he had any knowledge of the Everglades I never detected it, nor do I recall a time when he wasn't lost. But then he was "a amoosin' cuss" and really earned his pay. His promise to meet us at Everglade in two weeks had been a solemn one, ending with a dramatic, "Me no lie!" He was on hand at the appointed time, but neither drew himself up to his full height and pointed to a shadow cast by the sun, nor even recited the "Seminole's Reply." No, the descendant of Osceola was too drunk. He said to us with much reiteration:

"Lilly water in 'Glades, me think so, most dry."

Some days later we concluded that he was less drunk at that time than we had given him credit for.

The launch from the cruising boat towed our little canoe, loaded with the impedimenta of the trip, down the coast to the rendezvous at Everglade. A little below Cape Romano a high wind from the southwest built up a sea that broke over the launch and made us bail furiously to keep the motor from being drowned, while the little fifteen-foot canoe rode the waves like a duck. At Everglade we were joined by the Florida man and the Seminole, and added to our outfit a canoe of similar model, but eighteen feet long. The two were to carry us to



For five days we lived aboard this prairie schooner.

A Trip That Failed

Okeechobee. Their aggregate weight was one hundred and forty pounds, or something less than their cargo of plates and camera. Small space was taken by such non-essentials as food and clothing. We wore little of the latter and a little grub goes a long way when one is out for a bigger purpose than pandering to his stomach. A light canvas sheet sometimes served as a sail by day and occasionally kept out some of the rain at night. We used the launch to tow the canoes through the labyrinth of bays and rivers of the Ten Thousand Islands to the head of Lossmans River. Our boatman borrowed Johnny, an Everglade boy of thirteen, an alligator hunter from his cradle, to help him find his way back. When we started, Johnny took the wheel with an air of grown-up nonchalance that ended in his tumbling overboard in the first half mile.

“Want to go back and get some more clothes, Johnny?” asked the Camera-man.

“Nope, got ’em all on,” replied the dripping boy.

I had resolved to make a chart of our route and for twenty miles watched the needle and covered pages of pad with estimates and courses until I had boxed the compass a dozen times. The thought of plotting out that spider’s web made me tired and as I scattered my torn notes among the keys, I caught a twinkle in the eye of the Florida man as he said:

“That’s right, throw ’em away, you can’t learn this country that way.”

“I ought to know it,” I replied, “all your naviga-

tion among these islands is by rule of thumb and I believe you're lost half the time, only your superb assurance conceals the fact."

As we passed through Alligator Bay we looked sadly upon the abandoned rookery of plume birds, where the attempt of the Audubon Society and other friends of the birds to save the few remaining egrets had been thwarted by the unprecedented dryness of the season, which so narrowed down the feeding places of the birds that the Indians were able to get them all. We renewed our acquaintance of last year with the crooked creeks which led to the network of shallow lakes and bays that lay between the Everglades and the heads of Lossmans, Rodgers and Broad Rivers, cutting our way through tangles of vines and other vegetation, and were again worried by wasps above and moccasins below. At dusk we landed on Possum Key, pleasantly planted in the middle of a bay and convenient for the solitude-seeking convicts of the neighborhood. Our blankets, when laid down for the night, nearly covered the tiny island and I lay upon mine in luxurious ease while the boys began to rustle some grub. Soon I felt something running over my neck, several somethings in fact, and tried to brush them off. Then, in the language of our hunter-boy, I "sat up and squalled." An army of big black ants, each from one-half to three-fourths of an inch long, was advancing upon us, biting like bulldogs whenever they got a chance. We embarked in record time and made for Onion Key, a possible camping ground in the next bay, which was encom-

A Trip That Failed

passed by heavy foliage above and dense undergrowth beneath. This, too, we found occupied by what the Florida man impertinently called "Jersey humming birds."

The boys made a fire and cooked something which no one ate but the Indian, who sat unconcernedly on a log, enveloped in a halo of mosquitoes which settled on his bare legs until he appeared to be wearing gray trousers. The rest of us had rigged up our mosquito bars and crawled under them as quickly as possible, without even the customary precaution of exploring the ground for rattlesnakes and moccasins. In the morning we broke camp and embarked with no thought of breakfast until we were out in a bay, a hundred yards from shore where, free from insects, we ate a cold, unsatisfying lunch.

The waters now were well known to us from months of manatee hunting, and the path to the 'Glades through Harney River was familiar, but the camp of Osceola, which we wished to visit, was by way of Rocky Creek. Our Pine-land Seminole was of no help in our search for the creek, which after some failures we found. It was very shallow and as the launch began to bump on the rocky bottom we got overboard and shifted cargoes, putting two days' rations and the rifle (for we carried no weapons ourselves) in the launch and bade good-bye to the boys. The Florida man and the Seminole took the larger canoe, while the Camera-man and the scribe got into the little one. Then as we dipped our paddles in the water, with the canoes pointed to the Everglades, the

boy whispered to me, "I wish I was goin' with you," and I sympathized with the child.

Neither canoe, loaded, drew over five inches, and for a time they slipped through the clear water at the rate of five or six miles an hour. Then the creek began to lose itself in the Everglades, thick grass held us back, poling took the place of paddling and when the footing was fairly firm we often chose to wade and drag the canoes. We abandoned the wandering creek for an Indian trail which led in the direction of our choice, along sloughs, through saw-grass and over marshes. Often, for one or two hundred yards, passage had been made possible by Indian-dug canals. The trail wound among little keys called heads, of bay, myrtle and cocoa-plum, and after following its turnings for three hours we arrived at Osceola's camp, only to find that it had been abandoned. A trail led northwest from the old camp and we followed it for an hour when a bit of dry ground on a little key tempted us to rest and lunch. After some coffee and canned stuff three of us reclined on the grass, but the Indian climbed a tree and lay down upon a branch. When, later, I asked him why he slept in a tree, he said: "Redbug *ojus* (plenty)," adding, "sometime me want to scratch, then me like 'em." We promptly took a kerosene bath, which became thereafter, during our stay in the Glades, our first duty in the morning and our last at night. The microscopic redbug is the dreaded wild beast of this country. Even hunters who will wade through mud ponds filled with alliga-



The water shoaled until we could hardly budge the canoe.



Then began weary days of hauling the canoes, through soft, sticky mud.

A Trip That Failed

tors, grab the unwounded reptile at the mouth of his cave, kick out of their way the moccasins in their paths and hardly turn aside for the royal rattler, will anxiously inquire before making camp:

“Any redbugs here?”

As we progressed the water deepened a few inches and we floated on a broad meadow of white pond lilies, thousands to the acre, dotted every few hundred yards with fascinating little keys topped often with picturesque palmettoes and an occasional cypress or pine. We passed masses of bulrushes, strands of flags and fields of saw-grass. Fat limpkins watched us from near-by trees, ducks flew up from every bunch of grass, and among the heron, which abounded, were a few plume birds. Sometimes we paddled up to a tiny mound, that floated in the shallow water, and admired the prettily constructed house of a die dipper, with its eggs, which we were careful not to disturb beyond clipping off such blades of grass as were in the way of the Camera-man. In some of the nests we found newly hatched birds among the eggs. Once the Indian thrust quickly with his paddle and stepping overboard took from beneath its blade a water-turkey. In the afternoon our surroundings suddenly changed from dazzling sunshine to the alternate blaze and blackness of a tropical thunderstorm. We covered up our chattels and then hurried into rubber coats, not to keep dry, for we were already wetter from work than rain could have made us, but to escape the chill of cool water, wind driven. Tommy scorned our weak devices and

smiled superior as he lay down in the warm water of the Glades till the fury of the storm had passed. Just after the sun had set we discovered Tommy Osceola's new camp, only to find that it, too, had been abandoned. Excepting for Tommy himself this desertion was temporary, as Charley Jumper and others of Osceola's band were coming back to the camp. A few days later we met Tommy in the Glades and learned that he had made new matrimonial arrangements, having dropped his old wife and married again. Tommy Osceola was an Indian of modern ideas and one of the social aristocrats of his tribe. According to Seminole usage he had to leave his old camp and live with the family of his new squaw. As she was a widow with six children and Tommy already had a few of his own, we doubted somewhat his judgment in the matter.

The camp was the conventional one of the well-to-do Seminole and contained such evidences of enlightenment as a sewing-machine, a cane mill and a device for distilling, intended, possibly, to provide pure water for the family. We kept house in Osceola's camp for a day, to give the Camera-man an inning, as he claimed that the absence of the family afforded unusual opportunities to one of his profession. We visited the fields of cane and corn that covered the patches of dry land on adjacent keys and utilized Indian implements to pulverize the latter and civilized methods to convert it into something more palatable than any Indian mess. When the hens cackled we negotiated with them for eggs

A Trip That Failed

at prices current in the settlements and put the cash therefor in their nests.

From Osceola's camp we traveled to the north-east, intending to work over to the eastern border of the Everglades. All hands toiled from daylight till dark and Tommy began to develop unrest, first asking to take the little canoe, then wanting to rest altogether, but finally suggesting that some *whyome* (whiskey) would make him strong enough to go on. By good fortune we had anticipated this emergency. The next morning the Indian treated us to his views on temperance:

"Me got no sense. Head hurts *ojus*. Think so too much *whyome* make Big Sleep come pretty quick. Lilly bit *whyome* good, me want lilly bit now."

We found less and less water and while Tommy dragged the little canoe, one of us pulled at the bow and another pushed at the stern of the big one, while the third rested. The one at the bow sometimes sank in the mud of the trail waist deep, while the toiler at the stern could save himself by grabbing the canoe, but then the pilgrim in advance could usually see the moccasins in the trail while the other could only recognize them by their squirmy feel under his feet. During a noon rest on a little key where I had just killed a coiled and threatening moccasin, which occupied most of the bit of dry land on the island, I asked the Seminole if he had ever been bitten by a moccasin.

"Um, um, six time. One time, walk in trail, push canoe, moccasin, me no see 'em, bite in leg, sick *ojus*, four week, me think so." Thereafter we worked in

pairs in dragging the canoe, walking on each side of the trail and carrying a pole between us to which the painter of the canoe was fastened. Day by day, with increasing frequency, reptiles appeared in the trail, but although my apprehensions became dulled, they were never fully quieted. The toil was incessant, the noonday sun pitiless, and the hot water scalded our feet. Then for a time the trail improved, and we met on it an old Indian in his canoe. Tommy exchanged a lot of gibberish with him of which we got the substance.

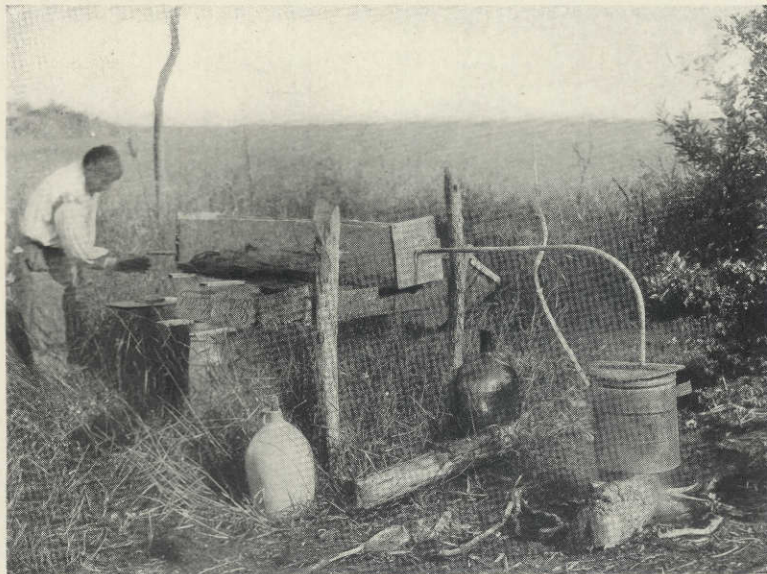
“Him Miami Jimmy, camp one mile, sick *ojus*, want lilly bit *whyome*.”

We went with Jimmy to his camp of five Indians and a few squaws and pickaninnies. We were received without enthusiasm, excepting by an Indian dog with painfully sharp teeth, which rushed out and grabbed me by the leg. One of the Indians was a medicine-man and another his victim. The patient was in a bad way according to his voluble physician, who assured us that the trouble was heart disease and bad blood, that he had just bled him in thirty places, taking out two quarts of blood and would fix him in four months. The appearance of the patient indicated that he would succeed.

With sundry trinkets and gay kerchiefs the Camera-man secured the exclusive right to photograph the family, all and singular, but when the goods came to be delivered a string was found attached to them in the shape of impossible conditions of attitude, arrangements, surroundings and light, until the Camera-



We followed trails in the Glades until they dried into mud-paths.



At Osceola's camp there was a distilling device—presumably used to purify the water.

A Trip That Failed

man lost his temper, shut up his camera and used language regarding the entire Seminole tribe, which it would have been imprudent to translate. As we worked east the islands became fewer, pine, cypress and palmetto disappeared and low as was the water it yet became difficult to find ground dry enough for a camp, and sometimes one or two of us chose to sleep in a canoe. On one such night which I spent in a canoe we had three heavy rains. I rolled myself in a rubber blanket which partially protected me through the first one, but by the end of the second storm I was lying in about six inches of water and after that had to sit up to keep from drowning. When the smoke of the factories and craft of the coast became visible we changed our course to the northwest and made our way back to the borderland between the Everglades and the Big Cypress. Again the islands took on a greater variety of vegetation. Scattering cypress trees and beautiful strands of the same marked our approach to the Big Cypress Swamp. One morning we saw, about three miles to the westward, the top of a wooden building of which Tommy said:

“Me think so, Charley Tiger.”

Following the line of least resistance the three miles became fifteen and even then we hauled the canoes for half a mile over dry land through sawgrass. It was late in the afternoon when we arrived at a building of boards, across the entire front of which was a home-painted sign:

“MR. CHARLEY TIGER TAILS STORE.”

Back of the store was an orthodox Seminole camp occupied only by squaws and pickaninnies, the men being absent. We camped there two nights and the Camera-man spent one whole day in getting acquainted with some Indian girls. His efforts were unsuccessful until he assumed an Indian costume consisting of a crimson shirt. This seemed to secure the confidence of the young ladies and they apparently overlooked the fact that he continued to wear trousers. The result of his efforts belongs to the story of the Indians. After one more zigzag to near the eastern border and a return to the more picturesque western side of the Glades, we headed north for Okeechobee. One day we found water that floated our canoe and as a high wind favored, converted our bit of canvas into a sail that in a few hours put many miles behind us. Once more the water gave out and we found Indian canoes abandoned on little keys because of it. We met Indian hunters whom we knew, who had turned back from hunting because "*oko suckesche.*"

Tommy suddenly remembered that his pickaninnies were hungry and he must go home. A little *whyome* would have convinced him to the contrary but that argument had been drunk up. As we struggled on, the work grew harder, keys and trees scarcer and moccasins multiplied. Camping on a little key one night, the Camera-man was struck in the face by a frog that jumped against his mosquito bar and a moment later a struggle and a squeak beside him told that a snake had secured a supper and that

A Trip That Failed

the disturber of his rest was punished. There were twenty-five miles of nearly dry land and heavy saw-grass between us and the big lake and an alligator hunter who met us as he was returning disgruntled from a hunt, dragging his canoe, summarized our prospects.

“Half a mile a day, over dry trails, through saw-grass twelve feet high, with no air and a d—d hot sun sizzling your brains.”

The Florida man could spare no more time and conceding that the trip had failed, we decided to make for Boat Landing, locally known as Bill Brown's, on the western border of the Everglades. Tommy was a happy Indian when we turned back and told him that it was now “Bill Brown's or bust,” and every few minutes for a whole day he could be heard repeating to himself with a laugh, “Bill Brown's or bust.”

From Brown's the Florida man started on foot with Tommy, the former for a forty-five mile tramp home, over prairies and through swamps in the Big Cypress country. Brown put a couple of yoke of oxen to a cart, loaded on our canoes, and with two of his boys we started for the Caloosahatchee River to resume our interrupted itinerary. During the first hour of our journey we were struck by lightning, the team ran away, the boy who was driving was knocked down and I felt like a live wire. Our road lay in the northern end of the big Cypress Swamp and ran through groves of palmetto, around heads of ash, maple, water and live oaks, bunches of cypress

Florida Enchantments

trees draped with Spanish moss and covered with orchids, meadows of wild sunflowers, six to eight feet high, hiding all of the oxen but their backs, through swamps dense with undergrowth and dark with thick growing trees, and across sloughs of clear flowing water beside which lay half-finished Indian canoes fashioned from the trunks of great cypress trees that grew on its banks. Wild turkeys were abundant and tame, deer plentiful and we flushed a number of flocks of quail. We had carried no guns in the Glades and it was weeks since we had eaten a Christian meal, and therefore it was that no scrap of the turkey gobbler that was served for our first supper was left over for breakfast. It may have been a tame turkey—I asked no questions—but that night, as I rested on a fragrant bed of pennyroyal, I quieted my conscience with the reflection that *malum prohibitum* was not always *malum in se*. As the slow-moving oxen wore away the days, the landscape changed and in place of the flora of the swamp came areas of tall pines above a carpet of low-growing scrub palmetto, alternating with shallow ponds and meadows of grass from which half-wild cattle, wary as deer, gazed upon us with apprehensive eyes. One of the boys walked beside me, gathering specimens of grasses, weeds, flowers, herbs and vines, giving names and characteristics, knowledge born of a trip with a botanist. Cattle recognized his voice at the distance of a mile, half-wild razor-backs brought their families to him from half that distance and owls held conversation with him at night.



We passed cunningly constructed nests of the diedipper.



This sinuous creature fascinated us and seemed altogether worthy of his Indian name, "The King."

A Trip That Failed

When we traveled after dark the Camera-man and I rode in the cart. By day we could see the venomous snakes which filled the fields and overflowed into the road. I don't know how many we killed. Late one afternoon, while walking with the Camera-man, he snatched me aside just as the loud jarring of rattles smote my ear. Coiled beside the path was a magnificent specimen of a diamond-back rattlesnake, nearly seven feet in length, and a foot in circumference, with head and tail lifted eighteen inches above the irregular coils of the glistening body. We had slain many big, black-bodied, stubtailed cottonmouth moccasins with no other feeling than repulsion, but this grand, sinuous, spectacular creature fascinated us and seemed altogether worthy of his Indian name, "The King." His quivering tail was a blur and from the vibrant head on the curving neck a serpent tongue darted forth and back incessantly. I stood as near his majesty as I dared and kept him at bay while the Camera-man went back to the cart for camera and plates, and a boy to help our subject to pose. It was almost hopelessly late in the day for photographic work, but it was impossible not to make the attempt. We kept the reptile angry and coiled by threatening him with sticks, while the Camera-man with face buried in the hood of his instrument, exposed plate after plate, as we worried the snake into more threatening attitudes, once asking:

"How far off is he now?"

"Eight feet."

"Watch out if he jumps."

“You bet!”

When the last plate had been exposed and while I was considering how to capture the creature with the least injury and danger to him and to us, our boy driver, who had left his team to see the fun, struck at the still furious snake with his big whip. The end of the thirteen foot lash curled past us and with the crack of a rifle sheared off the rattles of the reptile as clean as could have been done with a knife. The blow dethroned the king, crushed his splendid spirit and so intensely annoyed me that I told the boy to get a stick and kill the creature. Then I walked sadly far down the road lamenting again that the trip had failed.

That night a wandering native joined us. The after supper campfire stories were of snakes and as I wanted facts on the subjects I asked him:

“Did you ever *know* of a man dying from the bite of a rattlesnake?”

“Never knew one that didn’t excepting old Ferguson, and he’s worn a wooden leg ever since he got out of the hospital,” he answered. I asked about the story, current in the country, of a boy who did get well.

“Ugh! I know that kid. He never was bit. He got scared by a rattler, jumped into a bunch of cactus and thought that the snake had killed him.”

Later we broke camp to make a few miles in the coolness of the night and, when I asked the native if he was coming with us he shook his head saying:

A Trip That Failed

“I know this country and I wouldn’t walk that next mile in the dark for your whole outfit.”

When we reached the big flower garden known as the Caloosahatchee River the Camera-man and the scribe got into the larger canoe and, towing the other, paddled down the stream. Wind and tide are the landscape gardeners of this river, at one hour filling it from bank to bank with the lovely water hyacinth, at another breaking the mass up into islands and banks of flowers of many sizes and forms, arranging and rearranging them with kaleidoscopic effect and suddenness. We paddled among those gorgeous masses, drinking in their beauty of color and design, regardless of the anathemas with which boatmen of all degrees had weighted each bunch of them.

Until noon the day was dazzling, but it was the storm month and it made good by piling up masses of black clouds in the east and sending down a deluge of rain that shut from our sight the river’s bank. We covered up camera and plates and prepared for a ducking, when—the storm that was within a hundred yards melted away and not a drop of water fell on us.

The tide was against us for the last ten miles of the river but a canoe oughtn’t to be troubled by a tide and we made the mouth of the river that night as we had planned. We left the smaller canoe at Punta Rassa, to follow us in the mail boat, as in case of bad weather in the Gulf of Mexico even one canoe would keep us busy. We filled a fifty-pound lard can with ice obtained from a fish boat, wrapped it

in a blanket and put it in the middle of the canoe. Every half-hour of our labor we laid down our paddles long enough to dip a cup of ambrosia from the can.

At daylight, as we were starting out of the pass for our forty-mile paddle down the coast, we were passing the yacht of a retired admiral of the Japanese Navy when its owner hailed us:

“Where are you going?”

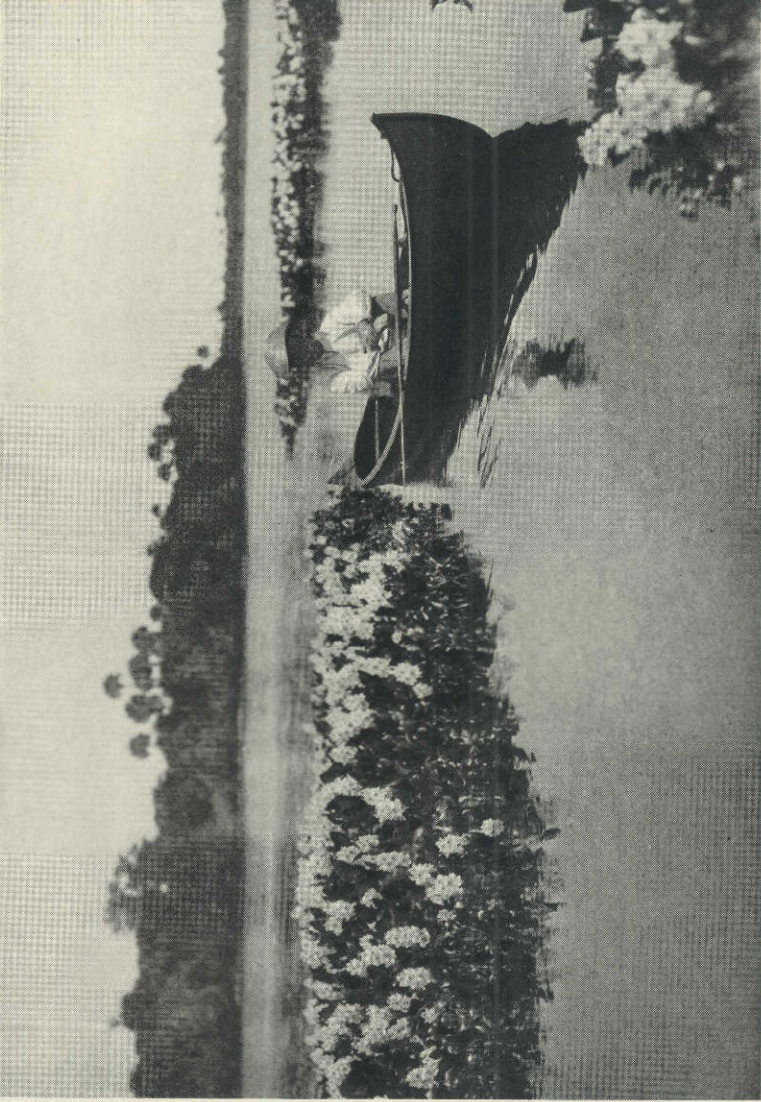
“Marco,” said I.

“Not in that thing?” inquired the Admiral.

“Yep,” I replied.

“You’re a couple of children and I wish to Heaven I were going with you,” came to us as we dipped our paddles into the water.

Every minute of the trip down the coast was a distinct pleasure. The wind was fresh and there was exhilaration in the waves, increasing to excitement as we crossed the breakers at the mouths of the many passes. About noon, when off Little Hickory Pass the Camera-man said he wished we had something more substantial for lunch than the pie and fruit a girl had put up for us. Just as he spoke a fat pompano jumped into the canoe and we promptly paddled through the surf and soon were sitting in the shade of a palmetto, eating broiled pompano and drinking iced lemonade. The wind freshened and held us back, while the waves grew bigger and darkness found us ten miles from our destination. We again ran the canoe through the surf to the shore and slept on the beach until the rising of the moon.



Down the Caloosahatchee River, through masses of water-hyacinths.

A Trip That Failed

Then, in the solemn beauty of its light which was reflected from the white crests of breaking waves and rested brightly on the beach save where it was crossed by dark shadows of tall palmettoes, we paddled silently down the coast and at midnight, passing between the palms that guard the entrance to Marco Pass, finished the trip that failed.

