

A SOUTHERN INDUSTRIAL
EXPERIMENT

CHAPTER XVIII

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A FEW years ago a Florida cowboy, whose range work extended from the Kissimmee River in South Florida to the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Caloosahatchee River southward indefinitely, dreamed dreams as he sat in the saddle by day and lay under the stars at night.

The Florida cowboy is less known to fiction than his brother of the plains, but he lived the strenuous life. He dealt with cattle wild and wicked, though small, yet he learned to thrust his right arm across the back of one he wished to throw, and seizing it by nose and horn, deftly turn it upside down in the air as it bucked. In place of a lasso he carried a whip, called a cow-dragger, twenty feet long, of braided buckskin, dragged upon the ground until it was slick, with a snapper that made a report like a gun and was well understood by the cattle it controlled.

When cattle were rounded up for branding, certain cowboys, famed for their skill, would call off brands as calves were thrown, dividing hundreds of calves among scores of brands with never a mistake, simply from having seen the calves running with their mothers in the herd. The maverick of the West is the harrystick—from heretic, out of the fold—

of Florida, and often goes to the small owner, whose interest is looked out for, and his calves branded for him by the big cattlemen.

Our cowboy could see a cow farther through the woods than any of his fellows, and for this was distinguished among them, but he also saw other things, more distant, and quite beyond their vision. He saw great tracts of land, fertile but flooded, near to the Gulf and above its level, only waiting for the water to be drained away. Within that indefinite region which the imaginative maps of Florida call the Big Cypress Swamp, he explored islands containing hundreds of acres of rich hammock-lands densely covered with forests of palm and pine; live and water oak; bays, red, white and sweet; wild guava, fig, and other choice trees, with vines and flowers growing in tropical profusion. Within the swamp proper, much of which is dry half the year, he found forests of cypress, with individual trees containing five thousand feet of lumber, a dozen miles from the coast where men were paying sixty dollars a thousand feet for cypress boards. He knew the country as it was known to the hunter, trapper and Indian, and he knew its resources better than they. He dreamed of railroads and canals, fruit farms and vegetable gardens, sawmills and sugar mills.

Three years ago he sought to interest capital, and found men from the North ready to be inspired by his enthusiasm and to promote his projects. He talked of the fatal frost line that in two generations had driven the citrus family from South Carolina

and Georgia to South Florida, at times causing crop failures that had raised the price of choice grape fruit to ten dollars a box, and of land to be bought for a song within the Big Cypress, where freedom from frost would be found if anywhere in the country. He proposed that three hundred acres of rich hammock-land, lying like an island within the swamp, fifteen miles from navigable water, be converted into a grove of eighteen thousand grape-fruit trees, which within five years should produce an annual crop of one hundred thousand boxes of fruit. As to the transportation problem, he suggested that when the crop was ready railroads could be trusted to find it; or they could themselves cut a canal to the coast at slight expense, building with the excavated rock and soil a permanent road, giving at all seasons access to their property by water or land, as well as benefiting by drainage a large tract in which their interests would be important and increasing. The result was that now twelve thousand healthy young grape-fruit trees are growing on two hundred acres of hammock island.

There have been previous agricultural forays within the swamp limits, but this is the most important invasion, for "Deep Lake" is so far beyond the inhabited border, and so nearly inaccessible, that the cost of carting supplies from the nearest hamlet is more than double the rate charged by Uncle Sam for carrying second-class mail to Alaska or the Philippines, and the purchase price of a barrel of flour is forgotten in the cost of its transportation.

When the managing owner of the plantation visits his property, his fast yacht carries him from the railroad terminus at Fort Myers to Everglade in Chokoloskee Bay, whence he is taken in a small launch up Allens River for three miles, poled in a light skiff through a crooked creek for two more, and must then walk and wade for twelve miles over shaking sod and through water too shallow for a boat, but often inconveniently deep for a man.

During the dry season supplies are hauled most of the way by oxen, a yoke of which pulls about four hundred pounds through a country where a horse would be troubled to transport himself. These oxen are small, active creatures capable of scrambling like cats out of mudholes in which larger animals would be hopelessly stalled. For the first half-mile the road is too boggy even for oxen, and negroes struggle through knee-deep mud, bearing bags and boxes on shoulders and heads, or wallow to the waist in sloughs, with a barrel of flour slung upon a pole resting upon the shoulders of each pair of them. The journey of twelve miles, which consumes eight hours, is over a prairie level as the sea, threaded with strands of cypress and dotted with picturesque little islands of palmetto and pine, but so soft that a new path must be chosen for each trip, to avoid breaking disastrously through the interlaced roots of grass that bridge over the underlying bog. Often the rustling grass points out the sinuous path of a great black or chicken snake, or the wayside flower conceals the coils of the monster of many rattles. The trained



A prairie, level as the sea, threaded with strands of cypress.

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eye of the hunter can frequently detect the light print of a panther's paw or the heavier track of a bear beside the road, or trace the outline of a deer standing motionless against a background of grass watching him with wondering eyes.

The plantation island, containing three hundred acres of land, elevated enough to escape the accumulated water of the rainy season, is one of many to be found in this uncharted country. A cypress swamp surrounds it like the moat of an ancient castle, and the corduroyed entrance is a floating drawbridge. Vines and shrubs have been cleared from the plantation, and enough of the larger growth to let sunlight into the soil. For six feet around each grape fruit tree stumps and roots have been removed, and all boulders of stone for a depth of several feet blasted and piled up for future use in the building of roads. Between the rows of fruit trees, which have been set out thirty feet apart, many natives of the forest, live and water oak, palmetto and pine, have been left standing, to be taken away as the fruit trees cease to require their shade and the season frees laborers from more urgent work. In the meantime they measurably protect the young fruits from the light frosts that sometimes touch this region.

The plantation house, which is principally piazza, was built upon stilts near the center of the grove, from trees that grew on its side, out of which timbers were hewed, rafters formed, and shingles split by the axe of the pioneer. Royal palms and ponciannas have been set out around the house, and rows of

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cocoa palms planted along the drives that are to be. Within the boundaries of the grove are a few low-lying, primeval tangles of tree and vine, called heads, of present interest to moccasins, alligators, and wading birds, awaiting redemption through drainage, the promise of which secured to the Governor of the State the office which he now holds.

The deep lake from which the plantation takes its name is about five hundred feet in diameter, with a maximum depth of one hundred and thirty feet, or about twice that of the average "bottomless lake," of Florida fiction. It is inhabited by several varieties of fish of mysterious antecedents, among them tarpon of goodly size. Grave alligators with unwinking eyes rest upon the surface, or swim lazily about, so unafraid that I paddled a skiff squarely upon the back of one before he took the trouble to move away. Water-turkeys drop into the lake from trees on its border and thrust snake-like necks with darting heads above its surface, ducks paddle among the lily-pads, and flocks of white ibises fly across the lake when approached too closely, in resentment of excessive curiosity rather than from any apprehension of danger. Upon the plantation guns are tabooed, and deer gaze nightly through the grove, to its sometime injury, while wild turkeys daily walk unalarmed among the laborers, paying for protection by devouring the worms that threaten the young trees, and, as the axemen allege, even distinguish the sound of the fall of the water oak from that of trees whose foliage is less rich in edible insects.

Occasionally a licensed gun in trusted hands is turned loose upon predatory hawks and owls, and the cook is allowed discretion in the use of clubs on crows and buzzards when they enter his tent and snatch food from his table. The report of firearms does not alarm the wild turkeys, whose confidence has never been abused, nor the woodpeckers constantly nodding their crimson heads in approval of the universe, while unapprehensive mocking-birds carol forth their faith in the humanity of man. Indian hunters bearing the historic Seminole names of Osceola and Tiger, with a plain Tommy or Charley prefix for every-day use, sometimes appear at the grove to ask for the *whyome* (whiskey), which is never given them, but they respect the request not to shoot game upon the plantation, and their guns are silent within the limits of the island.

The purpose of the enterprise is not exclusively commercial, and on the lake lot, in contemplation of residential use, a few acres have been devoted to oranges of several varieties—king, Brazilian, pineapple, and tangerine, Japanese persimmons, peaches, plums, roses, and other fruits and flowers. A garden for vegetables is to be enclosed in wire fence that shall be proof against the deer and wild turkeys, which have hitherto harvested all such crops even before their maturity.

The laborers upon the plantation are negroes, to many of whom its isolation is its attraction. They talk with freedom and without embarrassment of the chain-gang and the lash, and if the sheriff of the

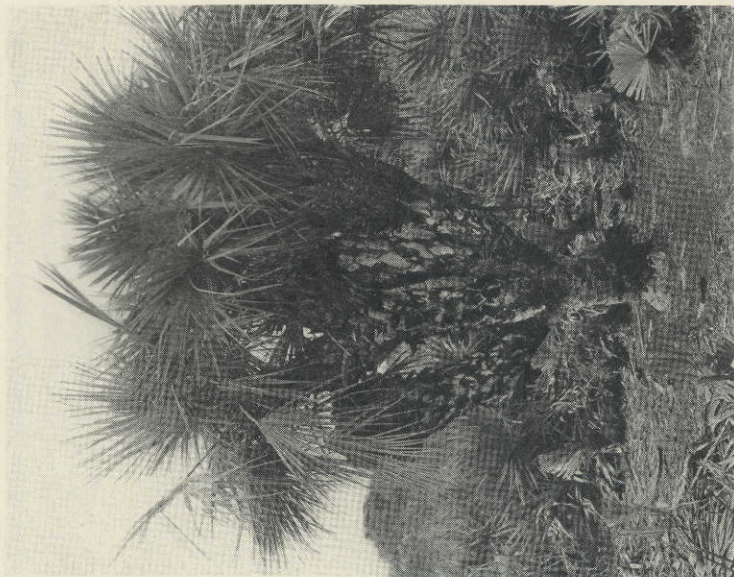
county chanced to visit the grove it is probable that work would be suspended for the day, while the neighboring swamps would acquire a considerable colored population. When off duty their waking hours are spent in gambling with each other with cards, and the game continues as far into the night as the rules of the plantation permit. If whiskey gets into the camp chaos comes with it. The negro who smuggles it into the swamp and hides there with it can readily sell the liquor for a dollar a drink, until he is detected, when he is driven forth with the significant suggestion that if he is found lurking around the plantation again he will probably be mistaken for a bear. It is said that this warning has been disregarded but once, and that the mistake will not be repeated—by the same offender.

The pioneer work of the Deep Lake Plantation is almost accomplished, and already its promoters have struck hands with other capitalists, drawn in by the fascination of the unexplored, who with them are wading in the swamps with their surveyors and engineers, estimating the trees, studying the land and watercourses by day, and camping on the high spots by night, calculating, by their campfires, the cost of men and machinery to establish the mills they contemplate, the capital needed to build and equip railroads to civilization, quoting the prices of lumber in the great centers of trade and figuring out profits and percentages to themselves.

Within the swamps and on the higher lands that border them are strange growths, odd freaks of



Uncleared hummock-land at the deep lake plantation.



A hydra-headed palmetto—one of the “freaks” of the great swamp.

nature, and trees of rare beauty and value. The cypress-knee, a curious cone-shaped formation, rises above the water from the root of the tree, of no apparent use, yet if it is long submerged the tree dies. Great vines hang from the tallest trees, and so extend and arrange themselves that the trees look like masts of a full-rigged ship as seen from her deck, while smaller vines weave nets which tie up an impatient man as the web of a spider tangles a fly. Birds drop seeds of the wild fig on the leaf stalks of the palmetto or on the bark of cypress, oak, or other tree. The parasitic tree grows rapidly upward and downward, and many a wide-spreading fig, with its branches twenty feet from the ground, can be seen surmounted by the broad top of a palmetto at twice that height, the trunk of the former completely enclosing that of the latter. Occasionally a palmetto with two trunks is found and, rarely, a hydra-headed freak of that family. There are groups of royal palms, slender silver palms forty feet high, with coats of thorns, growing like bamboos in a jungle, and fine specimens of madeira, closer-grained and as beautiful as mahogany.

To the holiday coast, where the science of spending is infinitely illustrated, and no outlay is too great which can purchase the picturesque, gratify the taste or contribute to the pleasure of the birds of passage who populate it, the interior wastes of the peninsula are of minor importance, but the prosperity of the Gulf side of South Florida depends upon its conquest of the soil and control of the floods that each year take

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possession of all its territory save a narrow strip along the coast. Within this narrow rim of land are few important industries. A canning factory recently established at Caxambas will distribute throughout the world the product of the vast clam bank that extends from Cape Romano to Cape Sable, while in the same vicinity is a pineapple field with an annual output far beyond the million mark.

Many planters who have lost successive groves and homes in the northern portions of the State, through the great freezes of recent years, are now pushing their way toward the interior, and already within the borders of the Big Cypress are little groves of oranges and grape fruit and flourishing fields of cane. Young grape fruit trees three or four inches in diameter can be seen bearing clusters of fruit of which single specimens measure eighteen inches in circumference, and the slender branches must be carefully propped to keep the fruit from the ground and to prevent its tearing the limbs from the tree by its weight. Often the ends of saplings from the parent stem are grafted into the trunk or branches of the already grafted tree to give it double support and sustenance. The sugar cane which in other States is treated as an annual, is here perennial, living for more than a score of years, even going to seed, and the waving plumes of a field of blossoming cane are not to be found in similar luxuriance, if at all, elsewhere in the United States. The juice of Florida-grown sugar cane is said to be eighteen per cent. richer in sugar than that of Louisiana. To one



A young grape-fruit tree.

familiar with sirup made from the Florida cane, molasses, which is the refuse of sugar making, and the pale glucose products seem alike characterless. Of that other product of the cane, brewed in the mystery of moonlight, it would be a violation of hospitality to speak.

Nowhere else in America are lands so fertile and so reclaimable, or a climate so benignant, where frost and drought are so nearly negligible as in South Florida. The waters that smother it contribute to the permanent value of its soil, and can be directed into channels of the utmost usefulness. Drainage is as simple as irrigation is complicated. Yet the latter has rescued from the desert great tracts in our Western country, and is the only hope of yet greater areas now unproductive.

Of the vastly simpler work of redeeming seven million acres of land in South Florida from the thrall of its penned-up waters little has been done. A territory extending over two parallels of latitude and nearly two degrees of longitude cannot be drained by a few ditches in the northwest corner, and the feeble work of a quarter of a century ago seems to have been conducted with a view to draining the State of its assets instead of its waters.

In the valley of the Mississippi, communities live beneath the level of its waters, the people of Holland drain their country into waters far above the tops of their houses—the Floridians have only to give their water a chance to run down hill off from their lands.

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The demand for the work is so universal, its benefits so obvious and the engineering difficulties so inconsiderable, that the time cannot be far distant when the South Floridian will fear the floods that afflict him to-day no more than the Dutchman dreads the Zuyder Zee.