

AN OVERLOOKED RIVER

CHAPTER XIX

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NOW wasn't that the blamedest (synonym) bit o' navigation that you ever see?" said the captain, as we paddled up to the little cockleshell of a power boat in which he and the Camera-man were awaiting us in a bend in the upper Miakka. He was a gentle-voiced captain and only twice before had I known him to talk in italics. The first time was when the swelling of new halyards delayed lowering the mainsail of the *Irene* until a twisting rain squall carried it away, and the second was when a gale in the night broke out our anchor and swept us on shore, where a big wave lifted us bodily and sat us down on a coral bank with the gentleness of an irate mother depositing her predatory offspring in a chair.

They had only come a few miles down a narrow stream with a current of five or six miles an hour, but it bristled with snags and was defended by sharp pointed rocks. Ends of palmetto logs, held fast to the bottom by their roots, bobbed up and down in the current, sometimes visible but more often hidden. Eddies, ripples and swirls in the water had to be read quickly and decisions made in the twinkling of an eye, as the craft swept down on obstructions at the rate of a dozen miles an hour. They were in a little

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boat with a big rudder, built to chase quick-dodging denizens of the water—fish, mammals and reptiles—and made to turn quickly, while the motor reversed so readily that the man on the bow usually went overboard.

We had towed a little Canadian canoe as far up the river as we could push the power boat, but an attempt to tow it back would have wrecked both boats in the first hundred yards. So I knelt in the stern of the tiny craft, put the colored boy in the bow, and promised myself a joyful voyage. But the power boat, which must go first! Nothing less than full speed would keep her under control while running the rapids and turning the sharp corners. The captain as pilot and the Camera-man as engineer, would have glory to divide if neither faltered and no error was made.

Down the river they started, the speed of the boat doubled by the current, toward a snag in the middle of the stream, then a sudden turn to the right sent them straight for a coral bank and I fancied I saw the craft tremble under the full power of the reverse action, which held it from striking the rock, while the current swept it out of danger. A double curve now had to be made, within about the length of the boat, to escape another snag and a sharp rock. My heart was in my mouth and I was half envious and half scared as the dangers were avoided by what seemed the breadth of a hair. We watched their zigzag course until a bend in the river hid them from us. Then I thought of the low-hanging



When navigation was closed to boats with spars, we tied the *Irene* to the bank.

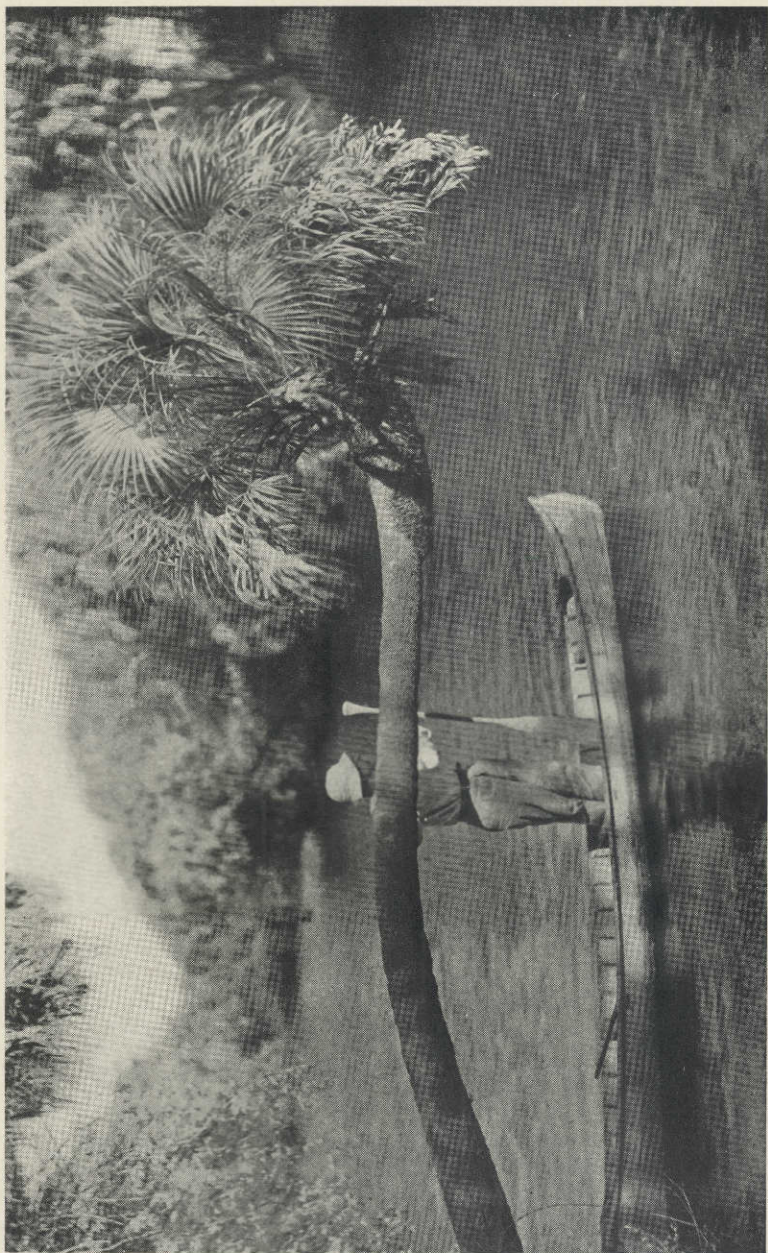
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branches which they would have to dodge, just where a lot of obstructions would demand undivided attention, of the long streamers of Spanish moss which would slap their faces and perhaps close their eyes at inopportune times, and especially of sundry long ropes of vines pendent from tall trees, ending sometimes in a loop hanging close to the water, suggestive of a gallows prepared by the Spirit of the River for just such intruders as were being hurled helpless beneath it. Once the propeller struck a log, the motor stopped and it was dollars to doughnuts that the blades were broken, but no harm was done and they went through without mishap.

Things worked differently with the canoe. In the first half mile, in a reach of swift water, we came upon a log lying across the stream, almost from bank to bank. On the left was a narrow space between the log and the bank toward which I turned the canoe. On the right of the log was a little space, blocked below by a snag, which the boy mistook for the channel and swung the bow in that direction. We were then in the grip of the current and escape was impossible. There was barely time to head for the log, when we struck it and slid half way over it. Here, balanced between earth and sky, like Mohammed's coffin, we teetered up and down in a constant struggle to keep from swinging broadside to the current, which would have insured a capsized and a battle with deep and angry waters in a tangle of snags. Our fix was so ludicrous that I laughed over it, afterward. An occasional deluge of water, flopping

over the low gunwale, brought from the darky the comment, "Sumpin's goin' to happen right now." By working my way toward the bow of the canoe its balance was changed until it tilted forward downstream. Then by a series of hitches we jarred it along, inch by inch, until we were again afloat in our cranky craft, with two in her bow and her stern out of water. As the current swept us down the river I worked back to my place without quite capsizing the canoe, but I knelt in water the rest of the passage. Thenceforth the voyage, until we reached the power boat, was uneventful, beyond the thrills that came with gleams of rock that were just below the surface, projecting logs that seemed to lie in wait for us, and swirling waters that spoke of obstructions, all crowding the joy of hours of canoeing into a few rapid minutes.

From Charlotte Harbor north, from the Caloosahatchee to the Homosassa, the rivers of the west coast of Florida have been explored and exploited, partly settled and altogether denuded of game, and swept bare of their most interesting animal life by native hunters and foreign tourists. There was small chance that the Miakka River, with its mouth in Charlotte Harbor, six miles from the important town of Punta Gorda, had been overlooked in the general devastation, and it was with little hope of success that we began our cruise up its broad mouth. We passed through mile-wide meadows of partly submerged bulrushes backgrounded by forests of pine, with clumps of cedar to the fore and dotted with tall



Palm-trees, their roots undermined by water, lean across the stream.

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palmettoes, singly and in groups. As we ascended the river the pines came nearer, the water grew shoal and was dotted with islands, while tall ferns adorned the banks. As we continued to advance the river narrowed to fifty yards and became a fresh water stream with a strong current, so crooked that we traveled twelve miles to make six and in doing so went in every direction. Sometimes in traveling a mile we nearly completed a circle and once a tiny tunnel beneath a high bank disclosed an effort of Nature to shorten the stream by cutting out a superfluous segment. As we ascended, the river continued to narrow and deepen. On both sides were great white sand banks, six to ten feet in height. In some places these were quite bare, in others they were carpeted with grass or covered with scrub palmetto, while far beyond them stretched park-like groves of stately palmettoes interspersed with patriarchal live oaks with long gray beards of Spanish moss and branches closely garmented with brilliant orchids. Often the shifting current had undermined the banks and the projecting trunks of long-fallen trees imperiled the passing boat. Long, slim, python-like bodies of palmettoes thrust themselves above the surface of the water and upreared threatening crests. Trunks of great live oaks, three feet in thickness, projecting horizontally from the bank, broke up into octopus-like arms, that writhed in dim light like monster serpents, sometimes so twining with others across the stream as to close the river to craft with spars. Upon an undermined bank, a palmetto

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with head lifted forty feet in air, stood beside a sturdy pine whose crest towered above it some twenty-five feet, the roots of both washed clean for the grave the stream had dug deep beneath them. In places the water had washed away low banks from above, laying bare the entire root system of trees that yet seemed to stand firmly, upheld by the lace work of tiny rootlets that spread out like a carpet for yards around. Upon the banks, too, could be seen the familiar hickory and the bright-leaved maple, while the graceful willow dipped its slim leaves in the flowing water. When some trees, closing above the stream, barred the advance of our cruising boat, we tied it to a tree on the bank and explored with launch and canoe.

We continued our journey up the stream, and it grew still narrower, swifter and crookeder. We saw curious forms of branches and trees, a big palmetto growing out of the trunk of a bigger oak and gnome-like forms into which Nature had twisted the roots of trees upturned long ago. The current grew swifter and at times took nearly all the power of the motor to overcome it, leaving a margin of a mile or two an hour only for the upstream work. Our progress was so slow that it mattered little what we ran into, since obstacles could be studied with the bow of the boat touching them and the slow advance permitted the enjoyment of surroundings.

Drowsy-eyed alligators watched us from their sun-baths on top of the high banks until we were opposite them, when with amusing haste they made for the



The pines begin and the palmettoes take strange shapes.

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river. The little ones scurried like rats to the water, bigger members of the family trotted with clumsy rapidity a score of yards along the bank to an easier slope, while one old moss-back, who slept until we were within a few yards of him, rolled over and over in ludicrous panic down the steep bank and crashed into the water beside us with a splash that drenched the man in the bow of the power boat. A moment later the head of the reptile appeared upon the surface and inquiring eyes obviously asked if we were the real thing or only a nightmare.

The living creatures of the wild, told by their conduct of the sometime absence of the-man-with-a-gun. It was the cattle, wilder than deer, that fled from our approach, although a quarter of a mile of forest lay between us. Hogs usually scampered from the banks at distant sight of us, yet more than one old boar stood firm upon a point of bank that overlooked us and with bristles lifted in rage invited us to battle.

Hérons, from the big blue and great white to the little green "fly-up-the-creek," flew just before us from every bend in the river and sluggishly preceded us up the stream with cries of protest against being disturbed that ranged in pitch between the quack of a duck and the croak of a raven. Flocks of ducks spattered up from before our advancing bow to rendezvous above the next turn in the river. A wild turkey looked from the bank with surprise upon a lot of two-legged things without a gun, but shook his head in distrust as he winged his way out of range. Snake birds were in the air, the water, and on most

of the trees. When we were within a few feet of them, they dropped from the branches and splashed in the water in a fashion more awkward even than the alighting of a pelican, and a minute later a long snake-like neck thrust up from the surface of the water a little head with bright eyes that took careful note of our outfit.

As we continued to advance, long slim islands divided the little stream, leaving two channels of which we always took the wrong one first, high-banked tongues of land bearing beacons of tall palmettoes thrust themselves out into it, false forks led to little lakes in tiny forest glades, and the river divided into labyrinthic channels like the puzzle paths to a garden. Then it suddenly went crazy, dodged around islands, made little incursions into the forest, spun about like a teetotum and lost itself in channels the power boat could not follow.

Two hours later, for two hours downstream did what six had accomplished in the other direction, we were again aboard our cruising craft and voyaging down the broadening river until its current of fresh water changed to the ebb and flow of the tide, and its banks, fading in the distance, made of it a shallow, placid, island-dotted bay. Then as one of its shoals seized our craft, and for an hour held it to ransom by a rising tide, we sat upon the cabin top watching the wonderful clouds massed in the west and colored by the declining sun, rejoicing in the rest and peace that had followed a strenuous day on the river that had been overlooked.



The light and shade of park-like arrangements.

