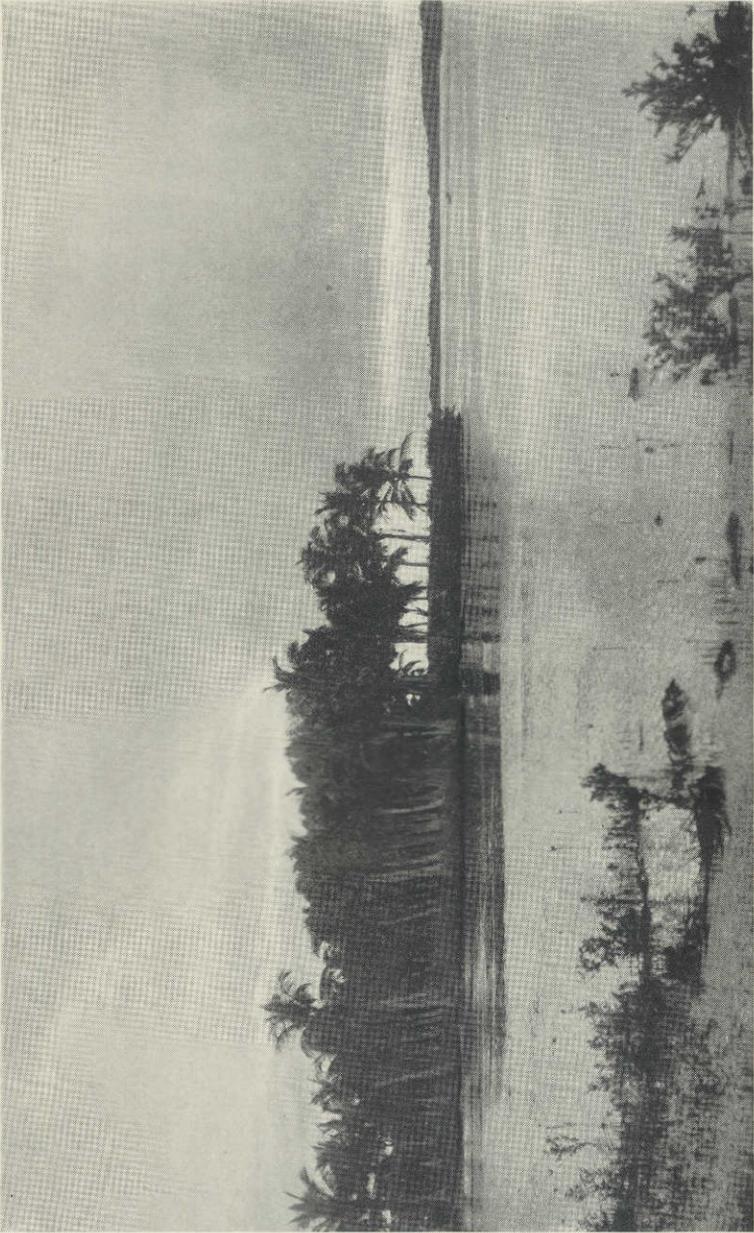


THE PASSING OF A WILDERNESS



Cocoa palms at Marco.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PASSING OF A WILDERNESS

THE next act, ladies and gentlemen, will be the shooting out of the lights by Mr. J. E. Wilson of the Ten Thousand Islands."

The speaker was a well-known Key Wester and his companion the most picturesque character on the west coast of Florida. He was a genial man, but mothers made use of his name to scare their babies into good behavior and men who were looking for trouble found him most accommodating. On the occasion referred to, although the lights did not go out, the audience did—with precipitation.

Some years previous the Key Wester, as deputy sheriff, had visited Mr. Wilson in his plantation in the Ten Thousand Islands, with a warrant for his arrest. When he attempted to execute it he was promptly disarmed and set to work in the canefield. He was so impressed by Mr. Wilson's resourcefulness that when two days later he was released and his gun (unloaded) returned to him, he departed with professions of friendship for his host and returning to Key West, reported that Mr. Wilson was the only man on the coast who was doing anything and ought to be let alone.

Conditions in South Florida are primitive. Much of it has changed little, since its recesses enabled the Seminoles to prolong a resistance to the United States Government that never was fully overcome. Three counties, Lee of the Big Cypress Swamp, Dade of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, and Monroe of the ten times Ten Thousand Islands contain the most that is left in this country, of uncharted territory and wilderness available for exploration.

Outside of their county seats, the population of these counties averages less than three-quarters of an inhabitant to each square mile of territory. Census statistics give 95 per cent. of the population of Monroe County to its county seat, which is about 10 per cent. less than the estimate of the average Key West, who looks upon the Ten Thousand Islands as of negligible importance.

Throughout these islands society is as loosely organized as it is sparsely distributed. One of the principal men on the coast told me that court justice was too expensive and uncertain for that country, and that people were expected to settle their own quarrels, a homicidal custom that has cost me four guides during the years of my own explorations.

Sometimes these settlements started little feuds which soon ran out for lack of material, and occasionally the participants violated the code of ethics of the community, which was apt to be bad for them. One man shot his enemy, who had assaulted him frequently, threatened to kill him, and was a bad man with one human life already to his debit. The



Royal palms, native to these plantations.



The cane field.

The Passing of a Wilderness

murder itself was considered commendable, but its method was criticised, in that he crept upon his victim and shot him in the back. Public sentiment acted through the authorities and the homicide found himself in the chain gang working for a turpentine distilling company.

He subsequently escaped and has for years lived as a fugitive in the Ten Thousand Islands. I have occasionally met him in the wilderness and listened to his story. He says in a gentle voice:

“I will go dead, but I will not go back.”

If the half he tells of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of justice on the helpless criminals of the chain gang is true, the State of Florida might, as a matter of mercy, substitute the torture chambers of the Spanish inquisition for the methods pursued under its auspices.

The man by his crime sacrificed his claim to credence, but there is independent evidence of the criminality of the system through which he suffered. A young employee of my own who had served as guard to the prisoners in both turpentine and phosphate camps, resigned his position because he feared being called upon to kill a prisoner and because he was afraid of being killed by a relative of some prisoner, for, said he, “If a brother of mine was to be used like those convicts was used I’d sure kill somebody. I’d rather be burned at the stake than go to the chain gang in either of those camps.”

The mazes of the Ten Thousand Islands have proved a sanctuary for the pursued since before

Florida Enchantments

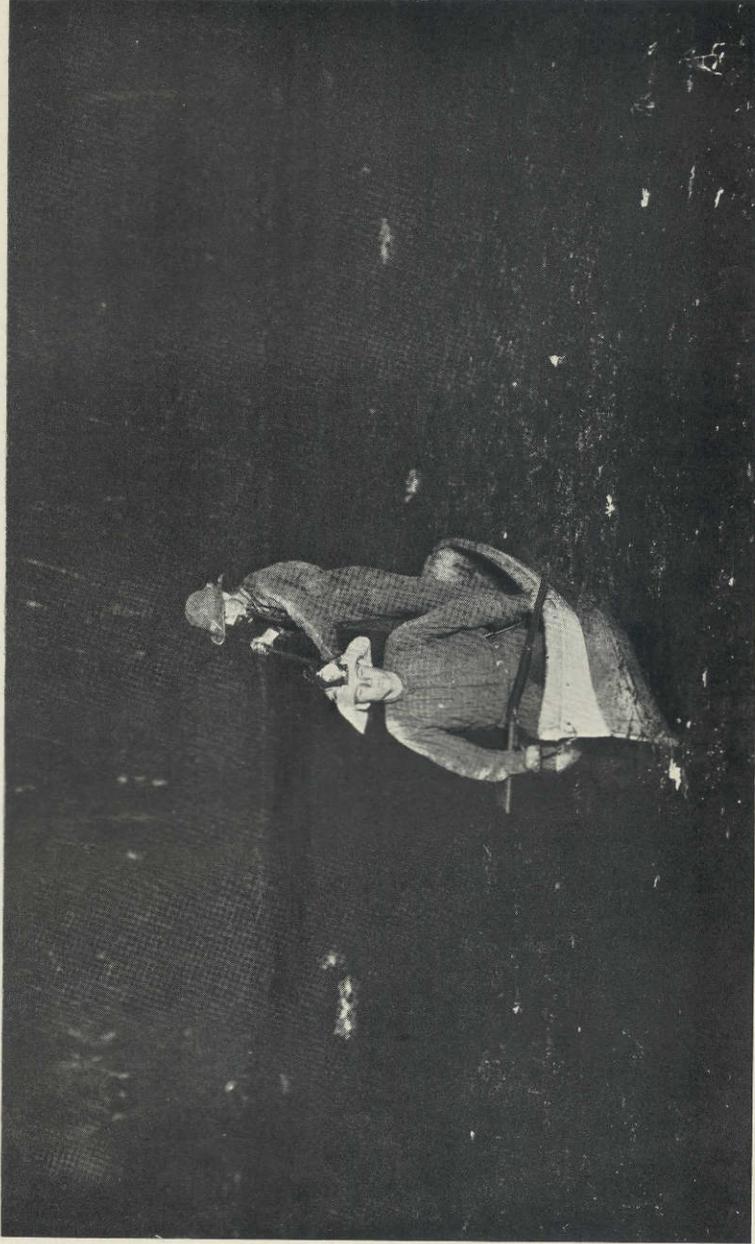
the Civil War. At that time they harbored deserters from the Confederate service, some of whom continue their residence within its boundaries in apparent ignorance that the need therefor has passed.

Often in the cypress or mangrove swamps which border the Everglades, you will meet men who turn their faces away, or if they look toward you, laugh as you ask their names. After they have passed, your boatman will mention names that will recall to your memory stories of tragedies.

These outcasts trap otters, shoot alligators and plume birds, selling skins, hides and plumes to dealers who go to them secretly, or through Indians who often help and never betray them. When I asked an Indian, whom I knew well, when he had last seen a certain one of these refugees, his, "Um-um, no see, long time," together with an earnest shake of his head, would have been convincing if I had not happened to know that he was with the man inquired of on the previous day.

Sometimes these outlaws kill one another, usually over a bird rookery which two or more of them claim. I passed the camp of two of them, beside which hung a dozen otter skins and a few days later learned that both of them had been killed, probably in a quarrel, but possibly by some third outlaw, tempted by their wealth of skins.

The country in which they live is a labyrinth. The big rivers fork into smaller streams which divide and subdivide into creeks that for miles, although deep, will give passage only to skiffs, for which a way



The jack-lantern is the hunter's best assistant.

The Passing of a Wilderness

must frequently be cleared with knives through vines and overhanging bushes. Often these creeks branched off into hundreds of shallow channels, making a thousand tiny mangrove keys in each square mile.

Within these mazes are occasional blazed trails, upon one of which I found hanging to a tree an old shoe containing a bit of paper on which was penciled:

“ef u want sum grub tom has got it.”

There is fertile land on the rivers leading from the Everglades to the Gulf of Mexico, which is especially adapted to the cultivation of sugar cane, but plantations on them have been generally deserted because of menacing mortality statistics.

On Rodgers River, the most beautiful of all these streams, are three plantations, all abandoned, all for sale, and all without purchasers. On them are splendid royal and date palms, palmettoes and tamarinds, but occupants have found skull and cross bones notices upon these trees, which latterly they have obeyed, influenced thereto by seven mysterious deaths which have occurred in the vicinity. The story of the murders, and the names of those who doubtless committed them, are upon the lips of even the children on the coast, but positive proof is lacking.

The killing of a game warden at Cape Sable was resented by his neighbors to the extent of firing a few shots at night through the house of the assassin, while his family hid behind pieces of furniture, and subsequently burning it down, but these acts were accounted for on the ground of his general unpopularity

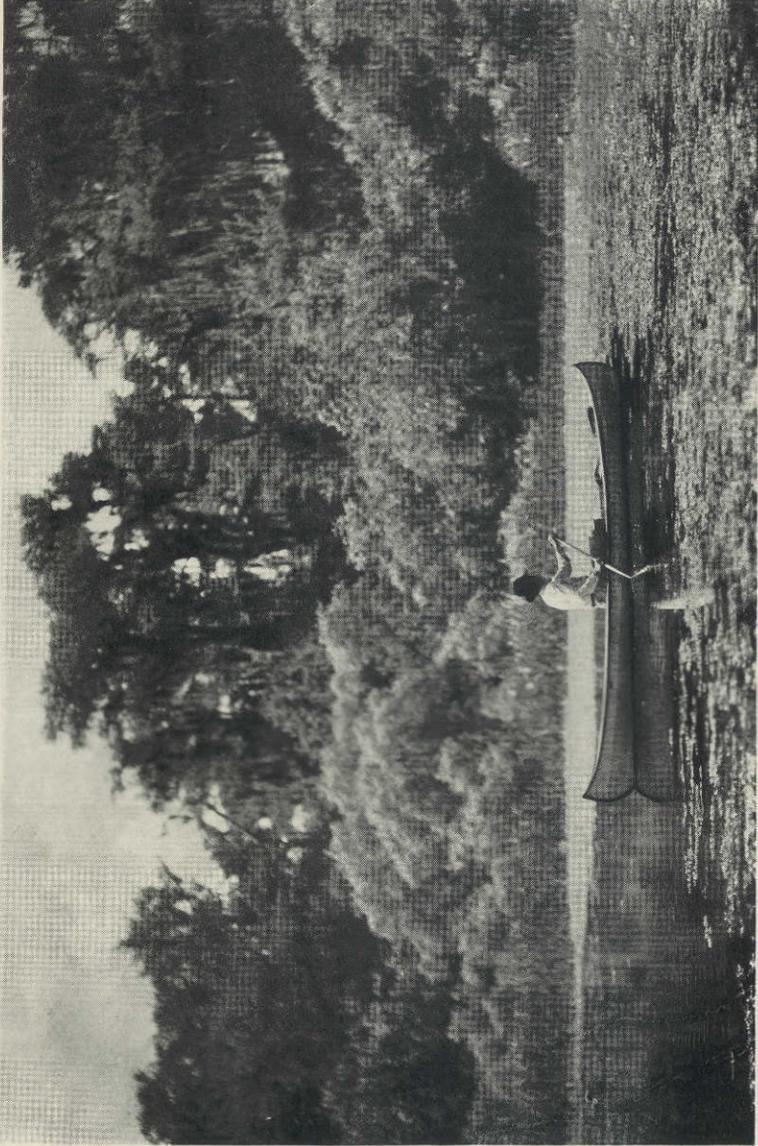
rather than the specific deed which they were supposed to resent.

The activity of the murderer in matters religious and educational never seemed to suggest incongruity to the community and, indeed, I have listened to a tale of homicide from the lips of one concerned therein, which was interrupted that the narrator might ask a blessing upon the food placed before us. The continuation of the story was spliced on to the "amen" without appreciable pause or other indication of lack of harmony between the narration and the petition.

Sometimes in the wilderness there may be seen a modest shack surrounded by a field of cane. In its final stage the cultivation of this crop is conducted by the light of the moon and its product attracts its own market. Hunters come openly, outlaws furtively, and the noble redman brings his family and camps for weeks in one gloriously prolonged drunk, which swallows the product of a season's hunting of alligators and trapping of otter.

Tragedies sometimes accompany the debauch but these belong chiefly to the story of the Indian, who is fast learning to make firewater for himself in crude stills which he constructs from old iron cans and pipes.

The fauna of South Florida is passing away. The habitat of the disappearing Florida crocodile has shrunk to a narrow strip of land, on the southern coast of the peninsula, scarcely ten miles long. Within that territory, before every crocodile cave a picket fence tells of an attempt to capture its occupant.



In the Big Cypress.

The Passing of a Wilderness

Alligators are being slaughtered so rapidly that upon rivers frequented by them I saw ten the previous year for every one I could find twelve months later. So many of the inhabitants of the wilderness, white, black and red, depend upon alligator hunting for their food and clothing, that even the small prices of from ten cents to one dollar each paid for hides probably insures the extermination of the reptile.

An alligator cannot resist a bull's-eye lantern at night, but will lie fascinated on the surface of the water, with eyes shining in its glare, while the hunter slowly paddles toward him. In the whole Ten Thousand Islands, filled with creeks without number, I seldom or never found one through which I could force a canoe, that failed to show by marks of hatchet or knife, that at some time an alligator hunter had preceded me.

The egret and long white have been taught to fly high and far, on their way to their nests, but the curse of their plumes clings to them, and they will soon be classed with the dodo.

Of the plume bird rookeries which I visited a year ago, every one has since been destroyed. The mother birds have been shot from their nests by either white men or Indians, the difference being that the Indian leaves enough of the old birds to feed the young of the rookery, which they will do to the limit of their strength, the egret especially responding promptly to the pitiful cries of the orphans from other nests. The white man kills the last plume bird he can find, leaving the young ones to die in their nests, and then

returns a few days later lest he might have overlooked a few birds.

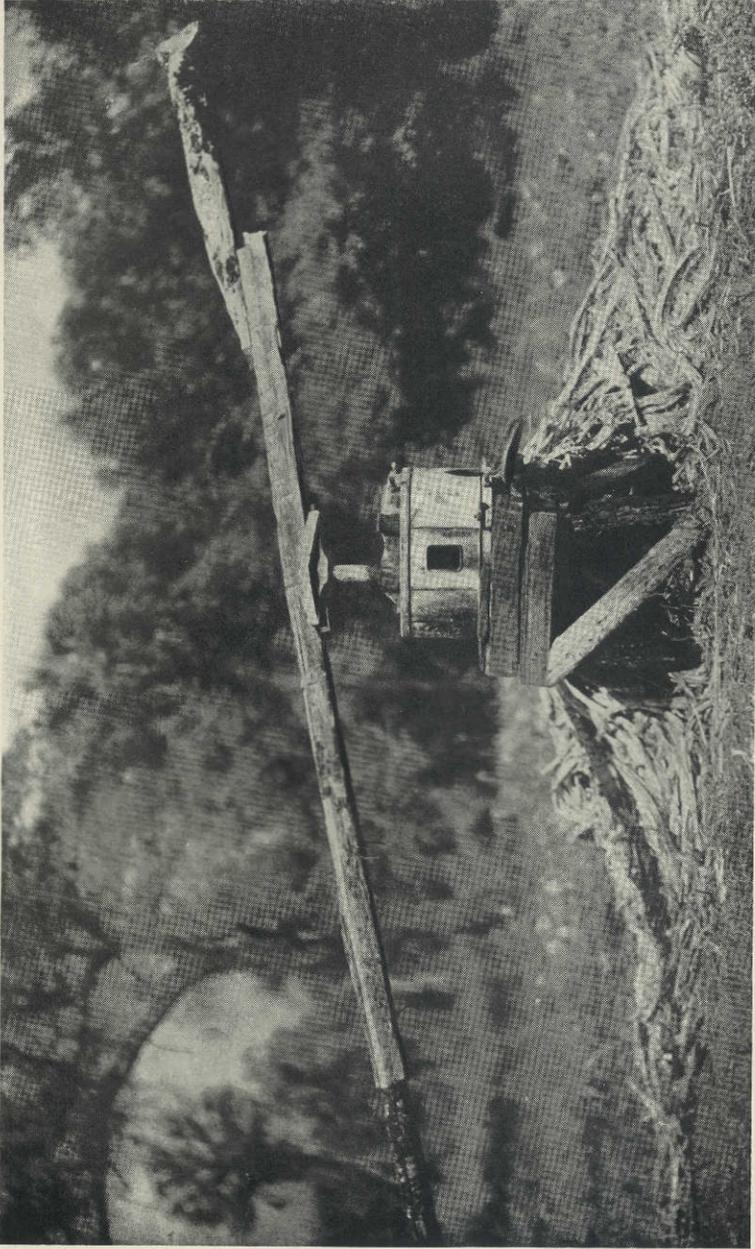
I was denouncing the slaughter of birds to a bright Cracker friend one day, who responded:

“What for?”

“Why do you people destroy your best asset? Your big crop is the tourist and nothing attracts him like the bird life that you are working overtime to destroy. The egrets and long whites are about gone, you can't find a flamingo in the country and there is one roseate spoonbill where there were ten a few years ago.”

He replied:

“We don't kill spoonbills. They haven't got any plumes to sell to New York, and we don't kill birds for fun. It's your New York fellers that do that. Most tourists bring with them an automatic shotgun and a repeating rifle and bang at everything that flies or crawls. Two Northern men are at Cape Sable now, with climbers and nets and a couple of hired hunters getting spoonbill eggs for specimens. Every egret and long white that's shot in this country is killed on an order from New York. Your rich merchants send agents down here to hire hunters and Indians to get plumes for them. Sometimes they grubstake poor men to go into the swamps and break the law by shooting plume birds. They find poor men cutting buttonwood in the swamps and hauling it out for three dollars a cord, while sweat runs out of them and a million mosquitoes eat 'em and they tempt them with an easy job and I don't



A primitive method of grinding the cane.

The Passing of a Wilderness

blame them for taking it. I don't blame the Injuns either. Look at that bare-legged fellow there. He's poled that heavy dugout forty miles with a load of alligator hides to trade for grits and bacon. He lives at Tommy Osceola's camp, up Lossmans River, where he's got twelve mouths to keep full. By and by he'll rob a rookery and some Northern woman's hat will buy shirts for his family. Did I tell you there's a big order from New York for ibis wings? For hats, I s'pose; so they'll go next."

The deer of the Big Cypress and the Everglades is in no present danger of extinction. He wears no plumes and the labor of following him over boggy meadows and through mangrove thickets is too strenuous for the tourist. When the dweller in the wilderness needs *echu* (venison) he fires the prairie and before the ashes are cold, inquisitive deer will be walking over them.

The splendid field for exploration offered amateurs and scientists by the great maze of the Ten Thousand Islands is being recognized, and every year increasing scores of launches churn its intricate channels to the extent of fifty to one hundred miles each, daily.

I thought to cruise this year in a hidden river leading from a far corner of White Water Bay to the Everglades, the entrance to which I believed was known only to the Indians and a few alligator hunters. As our boom brushed the bushes that masked the narrow channel leading to the river, we nearly ran into a New England colony which had been established within its mouth.

Florida Enchantments

There was a floating house with canaries and cats, ladies from Commonwealth Avenue sewing on the upper balcony, a State Street man smoking on the front steps and an orchestrion giving through the parlor windows free music to the alligators and moccasins which uplifted restless heads from the river's banks. A power yacht, anchored nearby, supplied motive power to the building, and a naphtha launch, with two or three dingees, completed the flotilla.

As we crossed the bows of the house a voice, hailing us from the street door, inquired if we had any late Boston or New York papers, and one from the second story asked for the latest quotations of Atchison Common and Coppers.

In other rivers and bays, hitherto sacred to solitude, we found house-boats and cruising boats, yachts and launches, parties of pleasure and of exploration, piloted by old hunters who had learned that the biggest Florida game and the easiest bagged was the Northern tourist.

The greatest diameter of the unredeemed portion of the Florida wilderness is little more than a racing automobile of the east coast could cover in an hour. In the southeast portion, where a year ago were impassable mangrove swamps, may be seen camps of several hundred men each, grading the road, that, straight as an arrow, stretches as far as the eye can reach on its way to that Key West where it is scheduled to arrive before the close of the coming year.

On the west side, a big camp near the mouth of



A prairie fire—ignited by hunters to lure the deer.

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Shark River has begun the work of collecting the bark, rich in tannin, of the red mangrove which covers the land with its impenetrable thickets.

Already in the hammock lands of the Big Cypress Swamp important plantations are being established, while lumber men are treading on the heels of sluggish land companies which are showing symptoms of awaking from their Rip Van Winkle sleep.

The State is pledged to the draining of the Everglades and cannot be long thwarted by obstructionists.

Property, in favored sections, has already increased greatly in value. A small key in Charlotte Harbor that was once offered to me for two hundred dollars, I am told has since been sold for ten thousand. A big hotel is promised to the latitude of Cape Romano, a railroad is already planned to pierce the Great Cypress Swamp and the Ten Thousand Islands, and there are symptoms of railroad extension down the west coast.

When the locomotive and the tramp have intersected from the west the Key West line of the east coast, civilization will have rounded up South Florida and the wilderness will have passed.

