

**A VANISHING RACE**



## CHAPTER XXIII

### A VANISHING RACE

**T**HE Florida Seminole is the incarnation of Hale's curious creation, "The Man Without A Country."

Once members of the great Creek family, the Seminoles of Florida have lost their tribe, their traditions and their homes. Their own people have forgotten them. The United States has ignored them since the Seminole war, when their roster was lost. Payment of the Government debt to their tribe made plutocrats of their brothers in the West, but never a dime reached the members of the little band who refused to be driven from their ancestral home. But their Spartan courage has departed, the Juggernaut of Civilization has crushed their spirit and in the cowed and cringing remnant there is no spark of the fire that flashed in "The Seminole's Reply."

The Government has no agent among the Seminoles and the last guess at their number made by the United States seven years ago, was three hundred and fifty-eight. That fragment of the tribe has now shrunk to two hundred and seventy-five. We kill more than that number of our own people in a single first-class accident to a steamship, on a railroad, or

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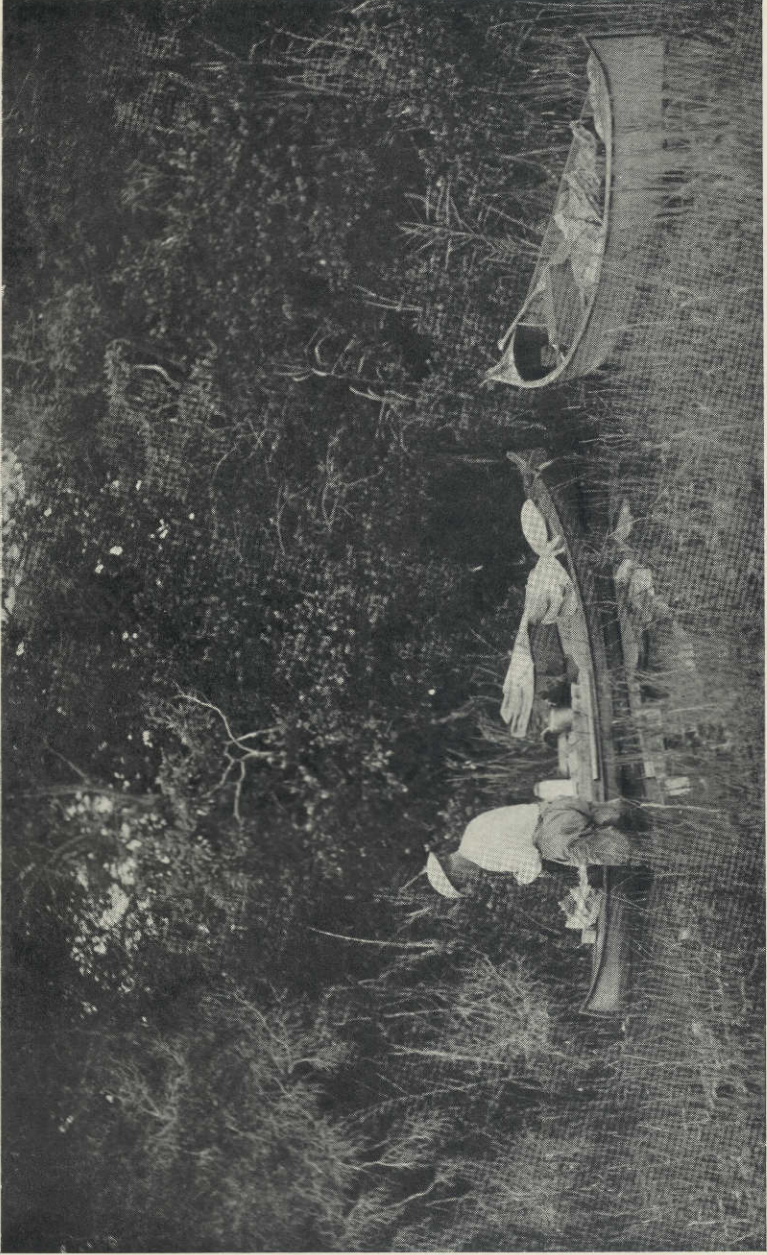
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down in a coal mine. If the entire residue of the Seminole tribe, bucks, squaws and pickaninnies, were turned loose on the hunting grounds of Maine, Michigan and the Adirondacks, and sportsmen shot as many of them as they do of each other, the tribe would be wiped out in a single season. Last year the measles carried off fifteen Seminoles in two months. When one of these Indians gets sick he is a goner. If the disease doesn't fetch him the medicine man will. This apostle of mummery will treat him to drastic bleedings, purge him with poisonous roots, and I have heard of his applying red-pepper poultices to inflamed eyelids.

The habitat of the Seminole has been the unexplored wilderness which is passing away. The title of the white squatter to wild land in the Big Cypress-Everglade country is respected by everybody. That of the Indian never reached the substance of a dream. Engineers of Civilization are invading their country from the east; lumber, bark and fruit-growing companies crowd them on the west; hunters swarm in their ancient preserves; surveying parties, pioneers of other enterprises, are locating the land of the Big Cypress; the State of Florida is draining away the water of the Everglades; and Anglo Saxon aggressiveness is bumping the native American off of the map.

Even missionaries, who rarely allow a savage to escape them, seldom camp long on the trail of the Seminole of Florida. One of them did settle near an encampment at Immokalee (Home), whereupon the



Our conveniences were two Ontario canoes.



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Indians rose like a flock of quail and moved to the Big Cypress Swamp, where one of them announced:

“If come Big Cypress, me *hiepus* (go), stay two year.”

Another, who aspired to teach the Indians, began by snapping a kodak on a half-drunken member of the tribe, despite the protestations of his victim. The interference of an Indian trader saved the kodaker from having his own face spoiled. The principal trader with the Seminoles, recently sent me, with lurid comments, a copy of a late number of a well-known magazine devoted to the interests of the negro and the Indian. It contained an illustrated article by an alleged missionary among the Seminoles and included an account of an exploration of the Everglades by the missionary author, alone, in a canoe. Of certain Indians, mentioned by name and described as “Christian gentlemen,” I could have supplied him with photographs representing them as gloriously drunken Christian gentlemen. The missionary’s illustrations of the Everglades represented views with which I was familiar, but which I had never seen, *in the Everglades*. His presence of mind, however, impressed me as phenomenal. For example, when, in the vicinity of Shark River, he was in doubt as to his exact location, and inflated with hot air, of which he appeared to have a supply, a fire balloon which he carried in his canoe and ascended four hundred feet in the air. But, as was said on a similar occasion: “What is the use of presence of mind when a man can lie like that.”

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Aliens in their ancient heritage, the Seminoles lack the means of ordinary subsistence. They might exist without clothing—they don't wear much now—but their food supply grows scantier and more precarious year by year. The snowy heron is nearly extinct and the Indian must soon stop selling its plumes to the women of Vanity Fair. The white traders of the west coast now refuse to buy these plumes, but the half-civilized Indian who trades in them finds a congenial partner in the unlawful traffic among the white merchants of Miami. Otters have become scarce, and alligators, the present dependence of the Seminoles, are fast following the trail of the dodo. It is easy to command the Indian to work like the white man, or starve. His inherited, racial limitations may compel the latter alternative.

I once interviewed a Seminole, who had just come to the store of a trader to exchange a score of alligator hides for fifteen dollars' worth of bacon, grits and tobacco. We talked in the hodge-podge of bad English and broken Seminole with which the white man holds converse with the Indian, but when I suggested that deer, otter and alligator, "bimeby *hiepus*" and asked:

"Think so, Indian plant corn, potato, tomato and sell?" the reply came like a bullet: "No."

Sometimes Seminoles will work for farmers in the fields, but as laborers they are not to be depended upon. An Indian who had refused to do some light work for a dollar a day, yet offered to get me a live otter, without trap marks or other injury, for a



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moderate sum. He spent some weeks in securing the creature, which he said he ran down on the prairie. Although the otter had bitten his thumb half off, the Seminole seemed satisfied with his compensation, which was far less than he could have earned by much lighter work. Yet after all I sympathized with the Indian. I would myself much rather chase otters than hoe tomatoes.

Even in his own country of the Everglades the Seminole is an unsatisfactory guide and I much prefer, as an exploring companion, a white man who doesn't know the country, to an Indian who does. The latter lacks stamina and resourcefulness, is easily discouraged, quite regardless of all contracts of service, and has to be coddled like a spoiled child. Of course some are better than others, or rather, some are worse than others. If the trail is dry and canoes must be hauled through mud and saw-grass, the Indian is liable to lie down and say: "Me sick *ojus*, want *whyome*," and if he doesn't get it, to throw up his job instanter. Yet the Seminole is reliable in spots, with his own sense of honor, which, however, may not always run parallel with the more commercial code of the white man.

Charley Billy, son of Miami Billy, was accounted a worthless Indian, yet he had certain ideas of honor that totted quite up to the paleface standard. His last trading was done at Everglade, after he knew that sentence of death had been passed upon him, and as he left the store, to return to his camp for execution, he turned quietly to the trader and said:

“Me *hiepus*, Big Sleep come pretty quick.”

On his return home he was shot, his body dragged out on the prairie and left unburied for beasts and birds to devour. The new-born child of the woman in the case was thrown alive to the buzzards and she was given to wife to Charley Dixey, the half-negro executioner. Several years have passed, she has two pickaninnies, but the horror of the tragedy remains stamped upon her mournful face.

Charley Dixey and his negress mother were once condemned to death by the tribe, but Tommy Osceola, a grandson of the great Osceola, obtained a reprieve, offering himself as a hostage for their good behavior and pledging his life thereto.

The Seminole has a few superstitions, odds and ends of religious belief and a distrust of white men, missionary men and government men, increasing in depth in the order named.

During a trip through the Everglades and Big Cypress, Charley Tommy was my interpreter and frequently talked with refreshing frankness of his people.

“Charley Tommy, why you no come to Tampa, bring other Indians, see big show, get plenty money? You savey?”

“Me savey—want to go—old chief got no sense—wont let go—says don’t like young men see much white men—may be so Big Sleep come pretty quick if go—sixty-five years ago Billy Bowlegs *hiepus* with white man—no come back.”

“Think so you want your pickaninnies go to school, learn to read, have store and trade?”



Charley Dixey, his wife and child.



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“No use, old chief no want store in Big Cypress. Me *savey*, want to go school two weeks.”

“Two weeks not enough, must go long time to learn.”

“No, me smart, learn *ojus* (plenty.)”

Occasionally a Seminole would talk of his religious belief.

“You talk sometime Great Spirit?”

“*Unca* (yes).”

“What you say?”

“Um, um. Me hunt two, three days, get no *echu* (deer); have big talk Great Spirit, get *echu*. Me want go in canoe, no *oskee* (water); me talk Great Spirit, *oskee* come *ojus*. Me bury one more Injun; he buy pipe and sugar water, make *whyome* drink *ojus*; me tell him stop, he no stop, drink, drink, all same white man; me bury him, then me say lilly bit.”

Seminoles bury their dead on top of the ground, after wrapping them in blankets, but always leave the top of the head exposed. They build a pen over the body and usually chink it with earth. When his squaw dies the husband wears his shirt until it rots off, which is not strikingly distinctive. When the husband dies the squaw doesn't comb her hair for three months. Little reverence is shown for the dead. When Tom Tiger's grave was robbed and his bones taken for exhibition, the outcry over the desecration was almost wholly a newspaper affair. The nearest settlers were unalarmed and the Indians indifferent.

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Mr. Storter, a trader on the west coast of Florida, asked Johnny Osceola about Indian debtors.

“No pay one year, all right; no pay two year, get other Injuns with big sticks in line, make him run between, hit him one time for every dollar.”

“Little Billy, he pay me?”

“*Unca*, he good Injun, he pay.”

“Billy Tommy pay me, think so?”

“Dunno, lazy *ojus*, no hunt. Injun just like white man, some pay, some no pay, some good, some *holowaugus* (bad) to hell.”

“Think so bad Injun go Happy Hunting Ground?”

“No! Me think so, Injun after Big Sleep come to big river with pole across it, pole pretty slick, bad Injun fall off, *alpate* (alligator) catch him. Good Injun get across pole to Happy Hunting Ground.”

“You think white man Happy Hunting Ground like Indian?”

“*Unca*, Injun hunt *alpate*, sell him George Storter, same as here.”

“You think Injun ever fight white man any more?”

“No use, white man all round, Injun in middle.”

For slight attacks of sickness the Seminole often takes the medicine of the white man, but in serious cases he calls in the medicine man of his own people. I talked with Johnny Billy, medicine man, while he busied himself extinguishing a patient. Every hour or so he drained off a lot of his “bad blood,” and in the intervals dosed him with sweet bay, snake root, and black root. He permitted his victim to eat turkey, but forbade deer, duck and fish.



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### SEMINOLE TYPES

- (1) The squaws smoke—whenever they get a chance. (2) Johnny Billy, a medicine man. (3) A primitive mortar for grinding corn, and an up-to-date coffee mill.





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Many traditions of the tribe have perished with recent deaths. Old Nancy, widow of the great Osceola, was a fountain of fact and fancy. Old Doctor, once chief, became garrulous in his later years, while Chief Motley, as a nonagenarian, continued to tell, with devilish detail, his story of tossing white babies in the air and catching them on a big knife as they fell.

The language of the Seminoles is like that of the Creeks. Much of the construction is by building up from root words:

*Eche* is tobacco; *eche-polka*, cigar; *wakana* is cow; *wathes*, teats, and *wakanawathes*, milk.

There are often two words with the same meaning, probably to mislead aliens:

*Panewa* and *fightee* both mean turkey; *loskee* and *nokanosee* mean old, and *whyome* and *kehone*, whiskey.

The Seminoles live in widely separated small colonies, consisting usually of five or six families. A typical camp covers about an acre of dry land and consists of four rather attractive buildings of poles and palmetto leaves. The roofs are large, high, and extend to within four feet of the ground. The earthen floor is nearly covered with large tables, three feet high, on which the Indians eat and sleep. In the center of the camp, between the larger buildings, is the cooking camp, which consists of a circular shed. Under this is a campfire, from which logs of wood radiate like spokes from the hub of a wheel. As the ends of the logs burn away they are fed up to the center, where a tiny fire suffices for the simple

requirements of the Indian. The arable soil about the camp is devoted chiefly to growing corn and sugar cane. An old cane mill and a still, crudely constructed from an iron pot with a wooden cover, a length of iron pipe and a box of water, utilizes the sugar cane in the way best appreciated by the Indian.

Under the influence of liquor the Seminole is quarrelsome, bites like a dog, fights with his companions and all the members of his family, but seldom with white men, whom he fears even when in his cups. Whenever these Indians carouse, one of the party keeps sober to look after the others. The corn dance of the Seminoles is a carousal which begins with the new moon in June and lasts from ten to twenty days. The Indians walk around in a circle twenty or thirty yards in diameter and talk until, at the signal of a scream, they jump up and down. The ordinary dance of the squaws consists of a perfunctory rising and sinking motion caused by bending the knees and is utterly unattractive. Sometimes the younger girls vary the monotony of the performance by a rough-and-tumble wrestling match which is exciting enough, but exasperating because the sight of a camera sends them to cover so quickly. Casualties are not uncommon during these festivities. I heard an Indian report to a trader an occurrence at a recent corn dance.

“Doctor Jimmy, he kill squaw Jack Buster.”

“Shoot her with gun?” asked the trader.

“No, killed it with stick. He drunk.”

Nothing was done by the tribe or the husband,



The dancing girls—their dance is simply a rising and falling on the toes.



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but a few weeks later the measles and the medicine man killed both Doctor Jimmy and Jack Buster. On another festal occasion Jimmy Jumper, a half-negro member of the tribe, ran amuck and killed five Indians before he was shot down.

*Mackillesee*, the Indian name of a trader, whose store is in the Everglades, gives a Christmas dinner annually to the Seminoles, which is usually attended by nearly half of the tribe. The Seminole who described the latest affair to me expressed himself idiomatically:

“Mackillesee—Set ’em up—pie—sure Mike.”

Indian hospitality expresses itself negatively. You are expected to dip either your hand or a big wooden spoon into the family pot, when you are hungry, and no one helps or hinders you. The squaws are diffident, or reserved, especially in the presence of male Indians, and it is sometimes embarrassing to speak to one or offer her a trinket without even eliciting an indication that she is conscious of your existence.

Marriage ties are lightly regarded and a Seminole separation is as simple as a Dakota divorce. If a married couple come to blows the non-resistant can light out and Indian ethics are complied with. When Tommy Osceola’s squaw got drunk and pounded him, he didn’t strike back, but left her and the camp, and married a widow with six children, who was twenty years his senior. The tribe inflicted no additional punishment.

Numerically, the Seminole represents five per cent.

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of the immigration of a single day through Ellis Island. Intellectually and economically his percentage is negligible.

A speedy solution of the problem could be reached by letting him alone to be disposed of by disease, drunkenness and medicine men.

What humanity and moral obligations demand is quite another question.

THE END