

CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD INDIANS AND BAD WHITE MEN.



It was two o'clock in the morning when we came to anchor opposite the bluff at Fort Pierce, on the western bank of Indian River. Fort Pierce was our destination, — at least, it was the terminus of our sea-journey. As soon as the anchor dropped, we all "turned in" and slept till day-break.

In the morning, after breakfast, Jim insisted upon carrying us ashore on his back; for the water was shallow for a long distance from the beach. I, the Historian, was the first passenger, and — well, Jim did n't carry any more, for a certain reason. About half-way to shore, as Jim was carrying me "pickback," I felt a sensation of coolness creep over me, and realized that, somehow, the water was climbing up my back. It got higher and higher, and I soon found that Jim (who meant well enough) was sinking in the mud; and I had to get off and wade ashore, after all.

The Antiquarian hooted his approbation of this proceeding, said he did not require any such assistance as that, and, taking off his shoes and stockings, calmly waded to the beach ahead of me. But Jim meant well enough; only he had found the place in which we had hidden the whiskey bottle.

The trading-post at Fort Pierce was to have been placed at our disposition; but the man in charge wanted a day to move out, and so we waited, not removing anything from our boats. About midnight a small boat came off to us stealthily, and the boatman in it awoke us with the startling intelligence that a murder had been committed ashore, and we were needed to join the force of residents who were going out to hunt up the murderers.

Jim (who had finished his interview with the whiskey bottle, and was just sufficiently intoxicated to feel more valiant than discreet) insisted on taking my best rifle, and going off into the woods at once and alone. But I per-



"AS SOON AS THE ANCHOR DROPPED WE ALL TURNED IN."

sueded him to wait till morning, and he went to sleep; and when morning came he thought better of it.

The circumstances attending the murder were these: Two young men ("crackers") named Drawdy and Paggett came up to the cabin of a Mr. Lang, a German, who had started a nursery some miles from the lagoon, in the pine woods. After taking dinner with him, they requested him to set them across the creek in his boat. He complied, taking them over the creek, about an eighth of a mile from his house; and at about the time he should have landed them, his wife (at the house) heard the report of fire-arms, since which he hadn't been seen. That was two days before our arrival,



AN OKECHOBEE INDIAN.

but his distracted wife had just got to the lagoon with the news as we reached Fort Pierce. There were very few people in this section, the sheriff was nearly one hundred miles away, and it really looked — as one of the men who brought the news declared — as if there were no law in this county at all.

We were all much excited. Everybody said it was outrageous, and that something should be done; but nobody was ready to take the lead, and so the murderers went at liberty, defying the law.

During the day we got everything ashore and safely housed in a small shanty of two rooms, one of which we occupied (temporarily) and the other was in possession of a negro family of six persons.

The ultimate object of the expedition, it will be remembered, was the re-discovery and exploration of Lake Okechobee, — the largest lake in the South, yet the least known. Two years before, I had tried to reach its shores by land, but had failed on account of having no boat in which to navigate the creeks leading into it. This time, however, I was prepared for all contingencies, and the only thing to discover was a practicable route across country over which to transport the boat. Nobody knew anything of the trail, and it was necessary for me to make a preliminary exploration.

As good fortune would have it, the day after our arrival a party of Okechobee Indians came in to trade. They were of the family of Osceola, deceased, — the mother of Charley Osceola (with whom I had hunted two years previously), and three small brothers. The old lady was very wrinkled, but fat and active; the boys very small, but also active and vigorous.

Upon my expressing a wish to see Charley, Mrs. Osceola said, "Ah ne hiepas-j!" ("Come along with us!") I needed no second invitation; and an hour later was ready, with knapsack, into which I had packed some hard tack, condensed coffee, and pork; a blanket over my shoulders, a canteen filled with coffee, a revolver and knife in my belt, and a rifle in my hand.

We — that is, Sally Osceola, Billy, Jimmy, and Jarneky — then said good-by to my partner, the Antiquarian, and trudged over the sand-hills into the pine forest. Late in the afternoon we reached the only cabin on the trail, the house said to contain the men who had shot Mr. Lang. There was nothing to do but to stop there awhile, as the trail led right by their garden, though our camping-place for the night was four miles beyond.

The owner of the cabin, Jernigan, I had known two years before, when he had led me off into the forests with the intention (as I afterwards believed) of losing me there and appropriating my "plunder." He was an evil-appearing man, with a black-looking face half hidden by a rusty beard, and always carried a gun over his arm. He hailed me with apparent joy, and introduced me to young Drawdy, one of the suspected murderers, — a simple-looking, not ill-favored young man.

While I was drying my clothing — for I had forded a creek a mile above — this young man came into the house and got his gun, drawing out the buck-shot, seventeen in number, from the barrel, and then firing off the powder. *The other barrel was empty!* The significance of this lies in the fact that with this gun he had shot the German, and had not reloaded it since, as was later proved, when he was captured.

Jernigan tried to make himself agreeable, and was eager for news from the lagoon, saying he had heard that Mrs. Lang was at Fort Pierce trying to get

a posse out to search for the slayers of her husband. He was anxious to know if anything would be done, and particularly inquired if Mr. Stewart, the sheriff, had arrived. He said that he didn't know much about Mr. Lang, but had heard that he was a mighty bad man. "They do 'low round here," he explained, "thet he hed been taken with *heart disease*, and crawled off and died. It's a right smart sudding disease, is heart disease, and persons has ofting been tuk with it, specially sich as Lang, which shoots our cattle when they feel like it."



THE MURDERERS' CABIN.

It was apparent that he knew something of the murder, if he had not been concerned in it; and I thought that my best policy (at least for the time being) was a non-committal one. I realized that I had unsuspectingly stepped into a nest of serpents, and heartily wished myself back at Indian River. But it would not do to recede, and so I went on with my Indian friends.

At Ten-mile Creek, four miles beyond, the sun went down as Billy was making our camp-fire. He built it Indian fashion, with the sticks and logs end together, radiating from a common centre, like the spokes of a wheel, first kindling a blaze by means of dry palmetto fans.

By the time the squaw and pickaninnies had arrived I had prepared coffee and hard-tack toast for us all; the packs were then opened, tin dippers and dried meat were produced, and we "fell to" heartily at the supper. They were easily satisfied, and did not complain at the small allowance I was compelled to give them.

For an hour or two after dark I sat up, questioning them about Indian ways of life, and adding many Seminole words to my vocabulary; then spreading my rubber blanket on the ground, and rolling myself in my overcoat, I went to sleep. Whenever I awoke, I had only to kick the charred logs together to kindle a flame; this being one of the manifest advantages of a fire built Indian-fashion.

At daylight, Billy started a flame by throwing on fresh fuel. I again produced coffee and crackers, and they some slabs of dried meat, which they warmed by hanging on sticks before the fire; and soon breakfast was disposed of, the packs were made up, and we were off on the trail.

Jimmy and Billy tried in vain to spear some fish in the creek, the Alpatiokee, with a spearing-pole they found in the bushes, and hid again when they left.

We passed through the pine woods, and then had a long stretch of wading over the submerged prairie, which lasted nearly all day. The only trees here were the gray cypresses, which grew in "knolls," surrounded by water, and were the abode of hundreds of heron, ibis, and teal.

We reached a strip of pine land at night, and there made a camp as before. In the morning I awoke refreshed, and but little the worse for my tramp except for a slight stiffness; and after a hearty breakfast we took the direct trail for the Indian village, which we reached that night.

What I found there, will be narrated in the next chapter; let us retrace my trail now, in order to finish my account of the doings of Jernigan and his crew.

It was nearly a week later when, having finished my exploration of the country to be traversed with the boat, I returned to Indian River. I had a guide to a point within twenty miles of the lagoon, and thence went on alone, as the trail was well marked, though nearly ten miles of the distance was under water, through which I waded half knee-deep. At about mid-afternoon I reached Alpatiokee Creek, where we had first camped, and arrived at Jernigan's cabin "an hour by sun," or just before sunset.

Jernigan and all the men were out hunting, his wife said; but she gave me a good supper, and then, in spite of her earnest appeals to stay till her husband's return, I went on towards the coast. It was then seven miles to the



"HIS PLANTATION WAS A MILE AWAY, IN THE CYPRESS HAMMOCK."

lagoon. Two miles beyond was Five-mile Creek, which was a very bad piece of water to cross, and I wished to get to the other side of it before dark. So I was walking swiftly on, at the very top of my speed, and had almost reached it, when I heard a whistle near me. Looking around, I saw Jernigan and Drawdy approaching, on horseback; while two other men could be seen slinking off into the distant woods. They said they had been out hunting; but they were heavily armed, and came from the direction of St. Lucie Prong, where stood the dwelling of Mr. Lang! They rode close up to me, and urged me to go back with them to the cabin. I held my rifle carelessly in the hollow of my arm, but it was quite ready for action in case of any suspicious movement on their part; and so I stood, half at bay, while they seemed to be making up their minds what course to pursue.

Jernigan was the man I wished to engage to take my boat across country to Lake Okechobee, as he had the only oxen and cart-wheels in this section of the country. He was very willing to do it, as I made him a liberal offer, but was afraid to go into Fort Pierce to get the boat. If I would meet him at the creek, he would engage to carry my party the whole distance. This I could not do, and finally he agreed to go in for the boat in ten days' time, as he first had "right smart of planting to do;" but I was to treat him squarely, and not say anything to his hurt, for he had heard "how them Indian River fellers spicioned" him and his partners of the Lang affair.

Then I said good-by, and pushed on again, as they turned about and made towards their cabin. It was then quite late, and night was already spreading its gloom over the swamps as I reached the hammock bordering the creek, and walked over the slender poles across it in fear and trembling. Ah! but it was gloomy above that deep alligator hole, into which a single misstep would have plunged me!

It was fairly dark as I waded the "branch" struck across the marshy plain, and pushed on into the woods. Just before darkness obstructed the view, I glanced back, and saw something that made my blood tingle with anticipatory danger. I saw the four men I had left behind me circling to right and left, — two on each side, as if to flank my course and head me off before I could reach the lagoon.

Nothing has since occurred to justify me in the surmise that they intended to cut off my retreat and put me out of the way, as one possessing dangerous information against them, except some dark hints from Jernigan, two weeks later, that I nearly lost the "number of my mess" that night.

It was said to be but four miles from the creek to the fort; but I found them long and weary ones that night, as I strode along in the darkness, my

shoes and clothing saturated with water from the mud-holes into which I occasionally plunged. Pool after pool, and marsh after marsh, I waded through, guided only by the glimmer of the water. How anxiously I looked forward to my arrival on the sand-ridge that should show me that the coast was near!

It does not matter now, that the men I saw circling about in the forest did not succeed; I then thought the chances were good for them to overtake me, and then — For an hour and a half I pictured to myself my fate should such an event have come to pass.

At last I ploughed through the loose sand that indicated the proximity of the coast-ridge, and a little later reached the crest and saw the moon, half an hour high, shining brightly in the sky. It was the most grateful sight of that week, except perhaps the light streaming through the window of the house where my partner was quartered. The rest I got there in our half-room was very welcome, and not less grateful was the sense of security surrounding me.

The people at the Fort had collected quite a number of facts regarding the murder, forming indeed a perfect chain of circumstantial evidence against the two Drawdys and Paggett, with Old Jernigan as accomplice. The sheriff had been here, but was afraid to act, as Jernigan and his friends were reported strongly intrenched in their cabin and had threatened to shoot every man coming out to arrest them.

To complete this episode (which occurred several years ago), let me insert an extract from a Florida newspaper of two years later, which was sent me while absent from home in the West Indies. Jernigan had often said to me that he would never be taken alive, and it seems by this account that it was no idle boast. The following is the extract: —



"LANG WAS A SHREWD GERMAN."

"A MURDERER KILLED. — Information has been received from Fort Thompson, Manatee County, saying that Elias Jernigan, one of the murderers of O. A. Lang, was killed near that place on the 18th of January, by a posse who were attempting to arrest him. The facts in relation to the murder of Mr. Lang are written by Mr. C. S. Williams, and published in the 'Union.' Mr. Williams, in the course of a long sojourn in the

Indian River country, became acquainted, we believe, with Mr. Lang, who, in some respects, was an odd genius. He says: 'Mr. O. A. Lang was a shrewd German gardener, educated and accomplished in his business, and well versed in botany and other scientific studies. He came to this country about ten years since, and some eight years ago settled with his family on Lake Worth, Dade County, Florida. Here he lived a solitary life, having no neighbors nor associates, except a few "beach-combers," or "wreckers," and some straggling Seminoles; introducing foreign plants and cultivating vegetables and fruits about six years. He it was who opened the communication between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Worth, since become noted as the subject of a claim by W. H. Gleason under his contract with the State for ditching, — Gleason claiming that Lang did it in his employ. While living here, Lang made careful and thoroughly scientific examinations of the fauna and flora of that section, and prepared several books of preserved foliage as specimens, with botanical descriptions attached. Wearied of his monotonous life, he removed to a location on the St. Lucie River, some twenty miles or more from its mouth, where he established a home, and finally secured a title to a tract of land, part of which was on an island in the river, and there he made a clearing, and planted various tropical fruits, etc., but for some reason he acquired the enmity of his neighbors — if families living several miles distant can be called neighbors, and it was reported that he was in the habit of shooting their hogs and cattle. Whether this was true or not, or whether it was but a pretext for getting rid of him, is uncertain, but one morning, about two years since, two men came to his house, pretending to be hunting horses. They were known to him, living not far away, and he took them in to breakfast, gave them such information as he could, and finally put them across the river in his boat, when they shot and killed him, — his wife distinctly hearing the shots. His body was sunk in the river, but it rose after a few days and was cut in pieces by the murderers, and the parts stuffed into alligator holes. Subsequent developments revealed the fact that four men were connected with the murder, of whom the Jernigan above-mentioned was one. Some were arrested, and one is now in prison for the crime; the others left the country. Mrs. Lang, with her two or three children, abandoned their plantation, and is said to be living with relatives near New Smyrna. The improvements have gone to ruin, although sugar-cane, bananas, and other fruits are growing there, to be gathered only by wandering Indians or stray hunters. For several years Lang kept a diary, which is said to be in the possession of a resident of Indian River, and contains much that would be of value to citizens and fruit-growers if it were published."