

## CHAPTER IX

### TEN DAYS WITH THE SEMINOLES.



SO jealously do the Seminoles hold themselves in seclusion, that their existence is regarded by many writers as purely mythical. Of the thousands of people who annually visit Florida, not ten get a glimpse of the swarthy red-man.

Along the waters of the St. John's, the mighty river which the Seminole once held as his own, are the winter-resorts of hundreds who little suspect, as they pass the forest-covered fields and mounds which the Indian once owned and cultivated, that the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants yet live in the State. Far down in the swampy Everglades, a ruined and degraded people eke out a bare existence upon a tithe of the lands which their ancestors once claimed by right of conquest. Few Northern men have ever visited them, so well have they covered the trails to their hiding-places.

No tribe — or remnant of a nation, rather — has preserved its blood so free from contamination as this. No tribe has so sacredly guarded its customs and dress from innovation as this. Despite the changes and rude shocks which the war must have occasioned, the Seminoles have retained their old-time habits of speech, ceremonies, dress, and traditionary rites of religion. They have adopted the dress and habits of the white man only to such a degree as will benefit them, but they cling to the primitive style of garb and speech that their chiefs and old women strove so zealously to preserve in the early part of the last century. They are, therefore, more interesting as a tribe than any other in the United States.

During the late war they maintained a strictly neutral position, though often approached with propositions that they should fight the Yankees. It is possible that they may break the bonds of caution that now restrain them, and

dig up the hatchet so long buried; for they are subject to many persecutions by the white settlers who have penetrated into the unattractive Indian reserve.

The Indian settlement near Lake Okechobee is about thirty miles from the Indian River, upon the Atlantic coast. Between the coast and the settlement, at the time of my first visit, there was but one white man's cabin, and this was some ten miles inland. From that cabin, one April morning, emerged the settler aforesaid and myself.

We mounted two tough stallions, and turned their heads westward. My guide was owner of several hundred head of cattle, which roamed in a half-wild state through the woods and over the prairies, and these horses we were astride were especially trained for hunting those wiry cattle, and admirably fitted for our purpose. We each carried a gun, a pint-cup, and a knife, and across our horses' backs were thrown two well-filled saddle-bags of provender for man, and two more of corn for beast.

A narrow trail led across the vast Alhattiokee Flats, following dry creek-beds, through cypress-swamps and saw-grass jungles, beneath gigantic pines, and through dense palmetto-shrub. We followed this Indian trail in a southwesterly direction, till we struck the saw-grass bordering the Black Cypress, — a cypress belt of swamp nearly forty miles in length, but scarcely a mile in width. Through this swamp was a narrow, blind trail, carefully hidden, lest the white man should discover it.



OSCEOLA, CHIEF OF THE SEMINOLES.

The precautions the Seminoles had taken to guard it were useless; for my guide had trailed Indians in that very swamp years before, and it was to him as plain as noonday. Dismounting, we attempted to lead our horses through it. Bleeding and torn we emerged from the saw-grass, whose serrated edges had cut and gashed us, to enter the blackest swamp that ever defiled the face of Nature. The tall cypress grew high above our heads, excluding every ray



"THE DESPERATE LEAPS OF OUR FRIGHTENED HORSES."

of light. Long trailing vines, and hooked, cruel-looking briars, hung athwart our path, and festooned every tree. The mud in which we struggled was black, and exceedingly soft and tenacious. Stagnant pools of slime-covered water gave lurking-places to numberless alligators and poisonous snakes, which latter reptiles untwisted themselves in dozens from the gnarled cypress-roots, and wriggled silently away after darting at us their forked tongues. It required the utmost vigilance to elude the snakes and the alligators, so as to guide the desperate leaps of our frightened horses.



THE CAMP IN THE PINE WOODS.

Never was daylight hailed more joyfully than by us at the moment we emerged from the swamp, and dragged our mud-covered horses out upon the solid ground. The Black Cypress was passed; a few miles over level prairie, and we saw the first habitation. This, then, was the Indian country, the last refuge of a persecuted tribe,—these half-dozen miles of prairie, bounded north and east by the swamp, south and west by forests of pines.

The scene before me was one of peaceful rest and happiness. The meadow-lark trilled his clear note from the grass as we rode along; the quail whistled merrily, and the woodpecker tapped the aged pine. Paroquets flew by on golden wings, and the mysterious ibis winged his silent way overhead.

As we neared the village the entire population came forth to meet us; for those at work in the hammocks had been apprised of our arrival, and were there to greet us.

The shanties were grouped together, about thirty in number. They were simply constructed; four posts supported a pitched roof thatched with palmetto-leaves. Open at the sides and ends, a full view of the interior could be obtained. A raised platform of logs, three feet from the ground, was used to sleep upon, and hold the family treasures.

The people that surrounded us were strange in appearance, but the women were most noticeable. Around their necks they wore a profusion of beads,—coil upon coil of great glass beads. They would omit any portion of their attire sooner than these beads, which are of all colors, shapes, and sizes, and the accumulations of years. So long as there is space between the chin and breast, so long do they crowd in beads until the weight is burdensome. Some of these strings have been weighed, and turned the scale at twenty pounds. They are slaves to fashion,—these untutored sisters. The only exception to the general style of dress was in the case of a young widow, who, according to the fixed and unalterable laws of the tribe, was permitted to wear no beads, no cape, no bustle, or polonaise. The law regarding widows is, furthermore, that they shall not leave camp for two years, nor comb their luxuriant hair during that period. If they pass the time of probation with credit, they may marry again.

To summarize in respect to dress: Children of both sexes under five cavorted about in a state of nature. The boys enjoyed this freedom, unrestrained, until ten or twelve years old; but the children of the softer sex donned a petticoat. At fifteen the boys arrived at the dignity of a shirt. The girls of that age had accumulated vast possessions of beads, and when turned sixteen were allowed to wear a cape.

Upon great occasions both men and women ornament themselves regardless of expense. The men disguise themselves in shirts of fine make, and long, flowing gowns of large-figured calico, embroidered elaborately and belted at the waist. Their legs are encased in fringed leggings, and their moccasins are shapely and highly ornamented. Around their heads they wind a large, gayly colored shawl, making a huge turban, from which the fringe hangs gracefully. Heron and egret plumes are thrust into the hair, and from the neck are suspended large gorgets of silver. The women use a profusion of ribbons, bracelets, and beads. About their ankles they tie shells of the box-tortoise, which are bored with holes, so that they make a loud noise when struck together. They manufacture ear-rings from silver half- and quarter-dollars, without any instruments for working save the most primitive. These observations I made while surrounded by the motley crowd, and during my subsequent residence with them.

After a short rest, we were invited by Indian Parker, a sub-chief, to inspect his plantation. It was a mile away in the cypress hammock. Their houses are built in the pine-woods for health, while their gardens are in the more fertile, swampy hammocks.

His wife and children were hard at work when we arrived, but desisted at the first intimation of visitors, washed themselves in a creek, donned their clothing, and gathered about us with offerings of the fruit of the place, — corn and sweet-potatoes. The corn we roasted in the ashes, and ate the great milky ears with much satisfaction, though our sleeves did not brush away all of the clinging dirt.

It was in April; and Parker had corn six feet high, and pumpkins, beans, peas, and melons, in flourishing growth. All worked, — men, women, and children. There were no shirks. This is a pleasing characteristic of the Seminole. He will hunt all the time that he can be spared from his plantation; but when the season of planting comes, the rifle and arrow are laid aside, and he takes up the hoe and axe. Labor is mutual. The warrior kills the deer and bear, skins it, prepares the meat, and brings it home or to camp. The squaw, sister, or daughter dries and dresses the skin, smokes the meat for future use, and performs all the labor incident to the camp.

From Parker's plantation we went beyond, to that of Tiger, his father-in-law. I had met Tiger two weeks previously. He had visited my camp and eaten me out of provisions. At the time of his visit I had enough food, with the game we shot, to last three weeks. He came with ten younger men, stopped with me over-night, and left me next day without a pound of flour or meat in the larder.



"THE NEXT DAY THE PERFORMANCE BEGAN."

My guide had attended the annual feast of the harvest, or "busk," the previous year, and described to me this interesting ceremony:—

"Twas about the fust of July, and Aleck and me thought we'd go out and kind of celebrate the Fourth among the Injuns. They give us a shanty, and we turned our hosses loose, and the next day the performance began. You see that cleared place thar, about a hundred feet across? Well, that was all smooth, and was used to dance on, around that thar pole, which was hung with leaves, and one sort of thing and another. This house, here to one side, was a sort of sweat-house, and they had it stopped up tight, and a big kettle of water—two or three of them—in one end.

"The women, they went round and collected all the old stuff and made a big heap of it, and then set it afire. Then they went out and got some kind of a root and made a strong drink; and that physicked them, you bet. This took about all day.

"Next day they got together on that level place, and danced about the pole. They did n't like it because we was there, and some of the Big Cypress fellows threatened to kill us; but Aleck had brought out a keg of real good whiskey, and the promise of that, when they was through, made everything all right.

"The women had them turtle-shells strapped around their ankles, and they'd clap 'em together and make a noise you could hear a mile. First they'd dance kind of slow, then gradually quicken their steps till they would fairly wake things, and sing and howl fit to wake the dead. All these two days they had n't had nothing to eat, and would n't give us anything; and if we had n't brought something, we should have starved.

"Every once in a while one of the chiefs would get up and make a speech, and then dive into the sweat-house, where they had got up steam by chucking red-hot rocks into them kettles of water. There he would stay till nigh about dead,—for the house was all full of steam,—and then he'd rush out and jump into that pond there, stark naked, and yelling like sixty!

"All this time the old doctor seemed to be the master of ceremonies, and he was a-mumblin' over big words, hard enough to choke a white man, and pretended he was conversing with the Great Spirit. Toward night of the second day they seemed to think they'd got things about clean enough, with their sweating and physicking and dancing, and all the girls went off and got corn and melons and pertaters, and they had a reg'lar feast, and they eat and eat, till everybody had enough to make up for a two months' fast.

"This is all the ceremony these heathen have, and they don't care no more for religion than a cat. If they are good when they are on this earth, they



will go to a land of plenty, where things is cheap and whiskey and game is plenty. If they don't be good here, they will go to the land of the Bad Spirit, who is half starved, and has no bear's-oil or whiskey. After the ceremonies was all over, they elected old Tustenuggu chief, instead of Tiger-Tail, who has been chief so long, and that came near making a fight; but it was proved that Tustenuggu was descended from old Micanopy, and had ought to have been chief long ago."

Giving a last look to our horses, we retired to sleep upon the hard logs, awoke early the next morning, bade adieu to our kind friends, and departed, intending to return in a few days.

Of the week that followed, — of our being lost in the woods, and finally emerging at the settlement we sought, — I will say nothing, for that had nothing to do with the Indians.

When we returned we found the shanties deserted. Not a living being was within sight or sound. Carefully stowed away beneath the thatch were deer-skins, tortoise-shells, and small household articles. In one shanty we found a rifle and a spelling-book.

We were out of provisions, and must find some Indians or starve. Starting for their plantations, darkness gathered about us before we could find the trail through the swamps. Wheeling the horses about, we galloped over broad stretches of prairie toward the trail through the Black Cypress; for that way the trail led, and we felt sure we should eventually overtake them. The moon came up and flooded the prairies. We passed a group of deserted dwellings, and were greeted by the hoot of *oopah* (owls) from their bare ridge-poles.

Soon we entered the gloom of the Cypress, where scarcely a moonbeam could penetrate, and struggled for an hour in the horrible blackness, with the terrors of our previous passage increased tenfold by the darkness. Exhausted, we led our horses out into the moonlight, mounted and rode on, soon striking the prairie upon the other side. The trail of the Indians was fresh, and my guide followed it without difficulty. On and on we rode; the outlines of the cypress, curved and beautiful, melting away in the distance. Halting to give our jaded beasts a bite of grass, we mounted again, anon falling in with herds of cattle and giving chase.

The monotonous, long-drawn cry of wolves wailed out faintly on the air. My guide assured me that there was nothing to be feared from them, as well I knew; yet that cry caused me to grasp my rifle tighter and look back over my shoulder more than once. Another wail, nearer now, and another answering, gave promise of good watchmen, in case we had to camp alone. Our horses pricked up their ears at the sound, and pressed forward with renewed



"THE GLOOM OF THE CYPRESS."

speed. A long spell of silence, broken only by the thud of hoofs, ensued, worse in its suspense than the noise of the wolves.

"They are on our track!" said my guide, "but I don't know what it means. I ain't seen a wolf on this prairie this year, and there's either a big pack after us, or a starved one." We entered the shadow of a palmetto-grove, and dashed over the cracking fans as though we heard the wolves on our track. At the farther end we halted just a minute. Patter, patter,—I seemed to hear the noise of many feet, and urged my horse on, while a cold thrill ran down my back.

In the midst of a heavy canter we saw the gleam of lights at our right, heard the barking of dogs, and wheeling about soon found ourselves in the midst of friends. A host of dogs came forth to meet us, and leaped about and frolicked just as white men's dogs would do. As we crashed into the hammock over dead and brittle limbs and leaves, a sleepy Indian greeted us, who assigned a place for us to sleep, and roused a drowsy squaw, who set out various vessels of food and then retired.

Kicking the embers of their camp-fire together, a blaze leaps up that brings out the weird features of the scene. Lofty palmettos, with imbricated trunks, stand out gray and ghastly, supporting an arching roof of broad leaves, beneath which, singly and in groups, are stretched the sleeping Seminoles. Many strange objects loom up, and familiar things take unfamiliar shapes; but we are too tired to analyze the picture, and only too grateful to stretch our weary limbs beneath the palms, safe in the company of friends.

It was long past midnight when we had finished our attack upon the meat, sausage, and "thin drink;" and the sun looked in upon us several hours before we awoke next morning.

An Indian camp is this village, moved into the forest, *minus* the houses. Nearly all their personal property is carried with them. Hogs, dogs, hens, cooking-utensils, and every other movable thing, is taken with them when they set out on a grand hunt. This party was destined for the prairies of the St. John's, intending to be gone a month and procure hundreds of deer-skins. They marched by easy stages, and hunted as they went. They were to stop here a few days, to kill a couple of bears in the cypress-swamps near; then they would move on.

Tied to a tree near my head was a half-grown bear, who lunged at me fearfully as I arose and threw off my blanket. Two small pigs were tied by the middle to another tree, and through all the day they raised their pitiful voices to heaven for deliverance. A litter of puppies, with eyes yet unopened, snarled and whined beneath the shade of a palmetto. Upon poles, stretched

from tree to tree, were piles of deer-skins, and large bear-hides curiously stretched with sticks and thongs. From the trees hung pots and kettles, spoons, dippers, blankets, bladders, bottles, fawn-skins of honey, deer's brains wrapped in moss, leggings, saddles, saddle-bags, bear-meat in huge flakes, axes, knives, and thongs, and as miscellaneous and varied a wardrobe of feminine garments as ever adorned an Indian camp.

After breakfast, the squaws and girls busied themselves with the various employments left them by their husbands and fathers. One dressed skins; another prepared bread from the powdered *contikatke*, coontec, or bread-root; while the little ones ran about, stark naked saving their beads, gleaning the fragments left from breakfast, inverting themselves in the huge kettles in search of some choice morsel, or licking the bowl of some huge spoon.

I never tired of watching their antics. They were as cheerful and as jolly as white children, and carried on their games with as much gusto. They never cry. There was a babe there but three weeks old, laid out on the palmetto fans, which never even whimpered. They made curious little shelters of palmetto leaves for the children. The stalks of some of these leaves are three feet long, and the leaves as much in diameter; and these would be thrust into the ground, the leaves joined at the top, forming a charming little tent, turning rain and dew, and allowing free play for the wind between the stalk-supports.

The process of dressing the deer-skins is interesting. The skins are fleshed, thrown into water until the hair peels off readily, then thrown over a post sunken into the ground at an angle of about forty-five degrees, rubbed till perfectly smooth with a piece of wood, and then smoked. This smoking process colors them, in shades varying from yellow to brown, makes them comparatively waterproof, and gives them a villanous odor of smoke, which is retained as long as the skin exists. To smoke them, they dig a small pit, build a fire at the bottom, place upon the fire pieces of rotten wood, and over the pit place the skins, which have been previously softened with a mixture of deer's brains in water. After smoking, the skins are hung up to dry, and are ready for market.

Toward noon one of the girls led the surly bear-cub to a neighboring pond to drink. He walked by her side peaceably enough until he got opposite us, when he darted so fiercely in our direction that the thong that held him parted. Forgetting the peculiarly ursine predisposition to climb, so inherent in a bear, I started up the nearest tree. It was smooth. A dozen feet from the ground I hung, unable to proceed. It was a desperate situation. Below was a raging bear, sharpening his claws in bloody anticipation; above, the smooth bole of the tree, slippery as glass. I ask the reader, What would you have done? Verily, nothing different from what I was doing, — digging toes and finger-nails

into that miserable tree. But there is a limit to human endurance. My arms weakened, legs shook, muscles quivered. One desperate effort—I was gone! So was the bear! After playfully scratching at the root of the tree awhile, he allowed himself to be caught and led away. Not being aware of that, I had hung to that tree full fifteen minutes after his departure. I never did love bears.

Late in the afternoon a handsome squaw came in from the swamps with a huge load of brier-roots. Without vouchsafing a word to any one, she deposited her load on the ground, procured water, washed a kettleful carefully, and then placed them in another kettle half filled with water. This she hung over the fire, packed a thick layer of Spanish moss over the top, and placed over this a strip of the inner fibre of the palmetto; all this was done to keep in the steam. A few hours' steaming over a slow fire was sufficient; they were taken from the kettle, mashed to a pulp, strained in several waters, dried, and then reduced to a fine flour. This was the *ah-há*, or China brier, by some called the wild potato. This and the coontee furnish the Seminoles with an abundance of farinaceous food. It is of a brick-red color; the powder of the coontee-root is of the color and appearance of rye-flour. The squaws baked thin cakes of it, and gave them to us, served up in honey. The honey found in these woods is delicious, made mostly from the wild pennyroyal. The Indians are exceedingly fond of it, and spot a beech-tree a long way off. They carry it in fawn-skins, said skins being stripped from the



"IT WAS A DESPERATE SITUATION."

animals nearly whole, stretched out till dried, when, with the nose tied up, they make water-tight bags.

At an hour before sunset we heard the report of a gun, then another. That was all; but the squaws looked at one another, and said, "No ko-sé" (Bear), and busied themselves in preparing a repast for the hunters and putting the kettles in order for trying out the oil.

A little after dusk the braves came in. First came villanous-looking but honest and pleasant Parker and his son, each loaded down with bear-meat; and behind them Parker's son-in-law, bearing a portion of meat and a huge hide.

Old Billy came next, the most perfect specimen of an old Indian I have met. He was tall, with brawny limbs, a large Roman nose, and large eyes. Tommy Tiger, a Spanish Indian, followed after him, threw his meat at the feet of his squaw, and stood upright, with folded arms, eying us savagely. Tommy Tiger was a son of old Tiger. He was over six feet in height, large and muscular. His eyes were black and fierce; his mouth, firm, but not cruel, was shaded by a small black mustache. We soon made friends with him, and found him gentle and pleasant-voiced.

Every one was now full of activity; the squaws took the bear-meat and venison, cut the former into small slices, which they strung upon sticks to smoke, and trimmed the hams of the latter. The brave's work for the day was done. He had procured the meat and skins; the squaw was to prepare and preserve them.

Though wet, weary, and hungry, they were very kind and courteous, answering quietly the questions of the children as they clung to their legs and hands, while at the same time conversing with us.

And this has been my experience with the Seminole. I have found him ever kind, hospitable, generous, and brave; worthy a better fate than is before him. So long, however, as he is left alone, he asks nothing more. He is happy. The forests and rivers furnish food in abundance; and if the native Floridian does not extend his encroachments farther, the Seminole will continue to live in peace and harmony with mankind, asking nothing, needing nothing.

We remained with them several days; and, were this but a tale of adventure, I might prolong it many a page; but my only aim has been to represent the Seminole as he is in these pictures of camp and village life, and enough has been written to show the manner in which he lives.



"IMPENETRABLE SWAMP AND GLOOMY FOREST."