

CHAPTER X.

LAKE OKECHOBEE.



AR down in the Everglades, in the unknown interior of Florida, surrounded by impenetrable swamps and gloomy forests, lies the mysterious lake of the South, — the vast Okechobee.

When its existence was first made known to white men history does not affirm; but if one were to choose to believe that an intimation of it was conveyed to the gallant De Leon in the oft-related story of the chimerical "Fountain of Youth," — restorer of health and rejuvenator of the aged, — he would seemingly have support in historical facts. It is related that De Leon received his information from a Carib maiden, — one of a tribe then inhabiting the Florida Everglades, the Keys, and the adjoining islands. He landed, it is said, upon Cape Sable, the southernmost point of land in Florida, and penetrated northerly in the direction of the lake.

The traditions of the earlier tribes of Indians were few. Respecting their origin, the country from which they came to Florida, they knew little. Their traditions related principally to tales of wonderful hunting-grounds and waters. If, like the later tribes occupying their lands, their legends referred to the Great Lake, it is more than probable that those "Indian sages," met with by the old soldier Ponce de Leon, had this in their minds when they said (accepting the poet's rendering), —

"The leafy Bimini,
An island of grottos and bowers,
Is there; and a wonderful fountain
Upsprings from its gardens of flowers."

Either this rendering or the Indian, De Leon or the poet, was imposed upon. But if we cannot claim for the Great Lake that the fact of its existence was imparted to white men in 1512, we can bring forward historical data to prove

that its presence was not unknown a few years later, in 1539, when Ferdinand de Soto first landed upon the coast of Florida.

Then the discoverer of the Mississippi was told that the province in which he landed was called Macaco; that the ruling cacique, or chief, bore the same title, and that the great source of supply of the various rivers flowing into the Gulf of Mexico was known by that name. By this name, Macaco, as well as by that of Mayaco, Lake Okechobee is known to the older writers. We may deduce from these facts that the possibility of there being a large body of water in the unexplored interior was intimated to Europeans more than three centuries ago. To the Indians of the interior it was the symbol of the Infinite; and doubtless they worshipped it, and the sun that arose above its far eastern horizon.

They regarded with veneration the largest body of water known to them, excepting the ocean; and this may account for the universal manner in which, from first to last—from swarthy Yemassee to olive Seminole—they have hidden it from the search of their white brother. Its vastness filled them with awe; and, unable to explore it in their frail canoes, they called upon the imagination to supply what they could not discover. Thus it was the paradise of the red man—his happy hunting-ground on earth. Thus was the lake dotted with wondrously beautiful islands, and the far shores of white and glittering sand bordered a land of crystal fountains, beautiful birds, and flowers.

To this lake has been attributed the source of the St. John's, the wonderful river of Florida. When Aviles descended the St. John's, many years ago, he was told that the river had its rise "in a great lake called Miami, thirty leagues in extent, from which streams also flowed westerly to Carlos" (Carloshatchee River). A learned writer remarks: "Lake Mayaimi is identical with Lake Okechobee, called on older maps, and, indeed, so late as Turner's and Cary's, Mayaco and Macaco."

The ancient geographers represented water in the southern interior of the peninsula; so it seems that they must have been better informed than later ones, who have omitted the lake entirely. From evidences in various portions of the adjoining country, it would appear that the early Spaniards were more thoroughly informed of the lake than their successors.

Lake Okechobee has had a great reputation as being the chief source of supply whence the enormous quantities of pearls once possessed by the natives were obtained. Mention is made of a certain Spanish governor who despatched a successful expedition to the Great Lake for these precious substances. Whether this lake was the seat of the pearl-fisheries whence came



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the supplies of the natives, from whom De Soto and his soldiers took away bushels, will not be argued; but certain it is that they were obtained from a source now exhausted or unknown. The only mention of the lake in the last century is by Romans, who in 1772 relates the story of a Spaniard taken captive by the Indians and carried by them to the shore of the lake. He escaped, and returned with wonderful tales of the region he had penetrated.

The Seminoles have a tradition that the first white man ever seen by their ancestors was upon the shore of this lake. He came out of the sea, they said, and then disappeared. It may have been the same captive whose adventures were related a hundred years ago.

At the commencement of the present century the lake was as little known as at the time of De Soto, and it was not until the necessities of war demanded the search of the Everglades, forty years later, for our enemies, the Seminoles, that any definite knowledge regarding it was obtained. Until that time, as stated by a writer of that period, "the interior of this part of the Territory was wholly unexplored by white men, and the description of the Indian inhabitants was at best imperfect. When I explored the coast, my force was not sufficient to ascend the large rivers that enter the Gulf of Mexico, and the great lakes that are believed to supply these rivers are *wholly unknown*." During the protracted Seminole War of 1836-1843 the lake was crossed once or twice. In the later war, 1856-1858, more accurate information was obtained of the northern portion of its shores, and two military stations were located near its borders,—one west, the other east of the lake. But notwithstanding the frequent visitation of its northern shores during the war, upon the withdrawal of the troops all communication with the lake ceased, and it returned to the seclusion its past history had awarded it. Since that time it has remained wholly forgotten until recently,—except, perhaps, by the few hundred Indians living in a half-wild state in the Everglades. These Seminoles have steadily repulsed and discouraged all attempts at its exploration, for reasons important to them, perhaps, but unknown. From time to time have appeared sensational stories of the wonders of Lake Okechobee. Ruins of castles and monasteries, with carved and ornamented pillars; ruins of Indian cities; dens of pirates, containing untold treasure,—were found upon an island somewhere in the Great Lake. Indeed, some ubiquitous party had explored the lake, and had found monkeys and baboons,—whether on land or in the glassy water they had seen them, no one knows; and delightful groves of tropical fruits decked beautiful islands, and everything was charming and serene, and everybody wanted to take the first boat for Okechobee! Ruins they had found also, and

islands with breezy bluffs and grassy plains. They had seen — O horror! — “spiders of four pounds’ weight!”

Such was Okechobee when I first undertook its exploration, which proved a failure. Nothing was definitely known; everything partook of that vagueness and was tinged with that romance which such a mysterious body of water in a section of country unknown and unexplored for years, surrounded by Indians alleged to be hostile to white men, and swamps heretofore impassable, was likely to create. But the semi-tropical lake was not forgotten, especially when the blasts of winter came; and now I was once more on Indian River, fully prepared, by the experience of my previous misadventures, for a thorough exploration of the lake.

Though I had undertaken the exploration alone and unaided, when the final start was made my party included five persons besides myself and the two drivers. As each one was an active participant in the scenes herein to be described, it is but just that the reader should form their acquaintance. The Professor had come to me recommended by the leading naturalist of America. He was a valuable acquisition, erudite, and companionable. The Doctor, his friend, was an indefatigable collector and naturalist, who had visited nearly every Indian tribe in North and South America, and had had much experience



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in tropical countries. Two students accompanied them, fresh from college and enthusiastic. But the mighty man of valor was a Dutchman, whom we will call Van Buster, whose only aim in life seemed to be to see new and strange sights and lands, and report thereon. His “corporosity” and visage gave ample credence to his statement, oft reiterated, that he was of Dutch descent; and a subsequent reading of the “History of New York” has satisfied me that his claim of descent from one of the first families of New York is fully substantiated, from a union of two of the most noted clans, — the “Van Houters, of Kaatskill, most horrible quaffers of new cider and arrant

braggers in their liquor;” and the “Van Kortlandts, much spoken of for their skill in shooting with the long-bow.” Thus it will be seen that our party was eminently respectable, and competent to undertake a complete exposition of the fauna and flora of southern Florida.

Leaving the party assembled at the river, I departed for the interior in search of a team for the transportation of my boat across the country. The man¹ whom I had selected as guide was an old "trailer" during the Seminole War, who owned a little cabin ten miles from the coast, half a thousand head of cattle, and a few horses. He was ready to go, but had no wheels; and we visited a neighboring "Cracker" who had just arrived, to solicit his.

As a Cracker, typical of the species, a slight sketch of him and his establishment will be given. The two carts, simply rough boxes of pine plank, were mounted upon hard-pine axles and very shaky wheels. Over the top were drawn strips of thin cotton over arched hickory-poles. They were a very feeble imitation of the Western immigrant wagon. In the carts was the entire collection of domestic utensils and furniture, including several hide-bottom chairs, a spinning-wheel, a cradle, a rough pine table and hominy-mill, which nearly filled them. Astern of each cart was lashed a rough-slab hencoop.

Two yoke of diminutive steers were quietly grazing a little way off; the hens were seeking food about the camp, and some half-dozen children were playing about the cart.

The wife of the Cracker, his "old woman," was busy cooking hominy in an iron pot suspended from a pine limb, smoking a cob pipe the while, and contorting her pasty face fearfully in vain attempts to make the "blamed thing dror."

We saluted the Cracker. His name was Pigpen. "Good-evening, Mr. Pigpen!"

"How d'ye, gen'lemen?"

"I want them wheels of yourn a few days."

"Well, I reck'n you ken hev 'em."

"How much will they stan'?"

"Well, I 'low as how they 'll stan' right smart, — reck'n they 'll stan' twelve hundred poun's."

"Are you sure?" I interposed.

"Heap sartin; they 'se brung all them traps from Manatee, an' my old woman 'lows they 'se more 'n twelve hundred poun's to the keert."

This individual desired to make a favorable impression, and informed us that he had a "hundred head uv hens an' a heap uv cattle in Manatee."

"Do the hens all roost in the coops?"

"Well, no; kinder squats round permiskus."

Other information of a kindred nature did he vouchsafe, but I quickly closed a bargain with Jernigan, the cattle-hunter, and rejoined my party. At

¹ Jernigan, mentioned in a preceding chapter.

the appointed time (noon, of February 14th), Jernigan appeared with his assistant and team of two yoke of steers.

We were awaiting his arrival; and after an hour or two spent in fitting the axles to my boat and disposing of dinner, we loaded the boat with the articles each considered necessary. Besides our provisions of pork, hard-tack, hominy, and coffee, of which each had ample supply, there were many things. The Doctor and Professor had large cans of alcohol, bales of paper for plants, cans of arsenic for birds and beasts, fish-nets, insect-nets, etc. A huge knapsack of tin, weighing fifty pounds, containing every known appliance for capturing, preserving, and transfixing every living, creeping, crawling, walking, flying, swimming thing upon the face of the earth, the water upon and beneath it, and the circumambient atmosphere, the Professor proposed carrying upon his shoulders, but we labored with him successfully not to do so. The students had other knapsacks, a hundred pounds of powder and shot, and vast stores of arsenic for the preservation of birds. For myself, there was a trunk of chemicals, and provision, ammunition, etc. The camera and necessary chemicals were for procuring pictures of the ruins said to be in the lake, and thus assist in bringing shame and confusion upon those unprincipled persons who dared assert that this nation, this free and enlightened people, "possessed no ruins!" Our armament was complete. We had thirteen deadly weapons to the party. More weapons of destruction were started upon that expedition than had been in the country before since the war.

When all was ready the team was started, and the panting oxen drew the rickety wheels through the loose sand. Slowly they filed out of sight,—the diminutive oxen; the swearing drivers; the Colonel (with this sobriquet the people of the river honored Van Buster), to whom I had yielded my claim to the only horse; the Professor and students, looking for birds; the Doctor, seeking bugs.

Half an hour later when I walked to the brow of the sand-ridge with my partner, who was to keep camp, there was no one in sight.

"Good-by, old fellow; I'll be back in a month!"

"Good-by! Send a note back by Jernigan!"

Then I trudged down the hill, across the marsh and into the pine woods, leaving behind me the truest-hearted fellow in all Florida.

The sketch of our route was something as follows: It was called sixty miles to the Kissinee, a river supposed to flow into Lake Okechobee. My boat was to be transported overland to that river, where it was to be launched, and we were to descend and explore the lake. There is an old military road crossing the peninsula from the Atlantic to the Gulf, which crosses the Kissinee, but at a

point farther north than another, — an Indian trail, which I had chosen. This latter was but knee-deep in water on the average, while the other was neck-deep even swimming. We were to keep the trail for about twenty-five miles, then strike across the prairies of the head-waters of the St. John's, travel a few miles on the old military trail, and then cross the Kissinee Prairie southwest.

Four miles out, I discovered the party assembled about the boat bewailing a broken wheel. Though all despatch was used, it was two days before that accident was repaired, and during that time we camped in the pine-woods. A new set of wheels was procured with difficulty, and the boat was reloaded and the old wheels left in their tracks, where they remained five weeks later upon our return.

The first deep water encountered, Five-mile Creek, was swimming, — that is, so deep that neither oxen nor wheels could touch bottom. The leading yoke was taken off, swam across, and the team entered. Our driver stripped naked, and one of the students and myself did likewise. With a shout from all hands, the steers plunged into the stream with Miley, the driver, at their heads, where he swam at the risk of being gored in their wild plunges, and Shores and myself swimming astern to guide the boat as it struck the bank. As soon as the wheels struck bottom and the steers had gained footing, they refused to move. It was a critical moment; for the current, though not swift, was gradually raising the boat from the wheels, which were sinking in the quicksand. There was no time for delay, as the sand was slowly, surely, creeping up the spokes. The leaders were hitched on, and amid the plaudits of the Colonel and the Professor, who stood on the bank aiding us with encouraging smiles and advice, the boat was drawn from the creek, and our team stood panting and dripping upon the bank. This creek is formed by the converging of the waters that, miles above, spread over the flats and prairies of the St. John's.

Four miles farther is Jernigan's cabin, where we halted, and where we parted with much regret from the Professor, who afterward reached the lake by a different route. The road to Ten-mile Creek was "right-smart palmettery," — rough palmetto-roots causing the alcohol-cans, chemicals, etc., to dance in a lively manner. We reached and crossed the creek without serious delay, and camped upon its western bank at noon, beneath a huge oak. Here we caught a few large black bass, which had been left in small pools by the drying of the creek, and took a refreshing bath.

After a short rest we marched on, striking the Alligator Flats just beyond the creek. These flats are miles in extent, submerged over half the year. At Trout Creek we struck a curious formation of cypress-clumps. They are in

rounded knolls, and stretch away in every direction, resembling in appearance the Holyoke Mountain of Massachusetts, as seen from Springfield.

The mud and water grew deeper and deeper, and as far as we could see was one stretch of water, dotted with cypress-clumps. The poor oxen tugged and strained, yet moved but slowly through the mud, nearly axle-deep, through which we on foot plodded wearily, half knee-deep in its miry depths.



FLATS AND PRAIRIES OF THE ST. JOHN'S.

Occasionally we started a moccason-snake from the grass; and many times did we tread near them, barely missing their heads. These snakes are deadly poisonous, as much to be dreaded as the terrible rattlesnake. Lurking in the tussocks of grass, and concealed beneath the water, they are more to be dreaded than the rattlesnake, which generally gives warning before it strikes. These, however, give no warning, but swiftly and surely strike their envenomed fangs deep into the leg ere the traveller is aware of their presence.

Toward night I walked ahead of my companions, with orders for the team to meet me at the Indian camp, in a pine-island in the swamp. At dusk I reached

the camp, and finding a convenient log of pine-wood left by the Indians, started a blaze for the guidance of my fellow-travellers. Soon they came in, one by one, wet and tired, and dropped by the fire. After the oxen were turned out to feed, Miley baked potatoes, barbecued meat, and cooked hominy, the water being obtained from a cypress-pond near by, where the snakes writhe and twist among the cypress-roots, and where the frogs hold noisy concert all night long. After an hour's talk over the fire we "turned in" and slept profoundly till morning, when we arose at daybreak, and started an hour or two later.

It was but a repetition of the day before, except that there was more prairie with deeper marsh, where we waded knee-deep in the swampy mire, with the snakes wriggling among the small bushes and grass-roots in close proximity to our feet. I have not mentioned that the Doctor, Shores, the student, and myself were barefoot most of the time, and any anxiety may be attributed to our disinclination to come in contact with a snake; for a snake always does feel cold and clammy when touched by the naked skin, and we do not like to give our nervous system such a shock as must inevitably ensue. We kept an eye open for snakes.

We travelled for miles over a broad prairie, across which we could see a line of cypress; around us, and occasionally surrounding us, was a dense marsh.

"Yonder's a 'gator, boys!" said Jernigan. We all made a rush for him, and soon were grouped about an eight-foot alligator, high and dry on the prairie. He made no attempt to escape, as he was perfectly well aware that all efforts would be perfectly useless, and received our shots without a motion; hardly a groan escaped him. As it was the first alligator Shores had encountered, to him was awarded the privilege of shooting him.

We pushed on, till noon found us at the largest cypress-clumps and spurs of a beautiful rounded outline, conspicuous from their isolated positions, called the "Blue Mountains." Here we took a long nooning, as the oxen were nearly famished. The grass was short and sweet, as the prairie had been recently burned over.

South of us, ten miles, was the Seminole town, and about twenty miles southwest, Lake Okechobee; though, from the character of the country intervening, we were obliged to treble that distance.

A slight shower passed over without wetting us much, and we travelled on till nearly dark, crossing Cow Creek and an old trail once used by the soldiers in passing from Fort Loyd to the Kissinee River. At Cow Creek we struck the St. John's prairies, in no wise different from the others, except that they extend far to the north to Lake Washington, the extreme head of navigation on the St. John's.

At dark we reached "Cow-bone Camp," where is a clump of palms and grass for our cattle. The place received its name from the bleaching skeletons of cattle, the accumulation of years, which were strewed around.

"Many's the bull-fight I've had here," said Jernigan; "and many's the bull we've had to kill before we could go on with the branding."

Multitudes of cranes dotted the prairie and marsh, and turkeys were occasionally seen; but our numbers precluded a successful approach and capture. Deer were seen at times; but the Seminole had hunted here for a generation, and this made them scarce and shy.

It was late next morning before we started, as the cattle were lost in the marsh; but after finding them we forced our way through a "cypress-slue," where the mud was axle-deep and the cypress-knees thickly strewed, and emerged upon a clear, open prairie, where we could see ahead for miles. North and east was the broad prairie, dotted with pine and palmetto; south and west, a line of cypress-swamp, extending for forty miles. After crossing this prairie we entered a wood of pines, and emerged from that upon the old military trail, where every tree was blazed, and not a tree or stump obstructed.

Three miles over this trail brought us to a deserted house, where once lived a well-to-do settler. One of the distinctive characteristics of a Cracker is his unrest. He rarely stays half a dozen years in the same place, but wanders from county to county, seeking the promised land of Crackerdom,—a land flowing with corn and whiskey, hog-meat and hominy. He will settle at a new place upon the slightest provocation; perhaps there is promise of a good cattle-range, or a "right smart chance" to grow corn or potatoes; then stops the team, the cattle are turned out to graze, and a log or palmetto shanty goes up in a jiffy. Upon equally slight grounds will he vacate the premises. If the fleas get uncomfortably thick, if a panther kills a few calves, or if the proprietor hears of a better land, away he goes, and the house and clearing are left desolate. So now, where I found thrift and apparent prosperity two years ago, I found a home deserted and a wilderness. A flock of wild-turkeys were feeding in the cleared field; and as I was ahead of the party, I had an excellent opportunity to secure one.

Wild-turkeys are excellent barbecued, with just the right proportion of fat pork to baste them, and our driver was just the man that could do it well. He could barbecue a turkey so nicely as to make one's mouth water after a hearty dinner. Mine watered. I concluded to have that gobbler, the leader of the flock, and drew my Remington revolver, which had never failed me, and fired. The turkeys looked up in astonishment, but soon resumed their feeding. Bang! The bullet ploughed the earth at their feet, but the one nearest where

it struck merely hopped up and resumed his search for food. This was provoking. I never had such shooting before. The next shot winged the gobbler, and the way those turkeys "dusted" was astonishing.

Three miles farther is the site of old Fort Dunn, with nothing to indicate it except the old parade-ground, covered with a younger growth of pines. Here we crossed Fort Dunn Creek, the ultimate head-water of the St. John's River.

"Do you remember that cypress-bulk down yonder?" said Jernigan.

Ah! well I remembered that dark-green clump; for that was the first landmark known to my guide when we were lost two years ago. There commenced the most southern affluent of the mighty St. John's. At the same place "headed" another creek, taking a different direction southwardly, into the St. Lucie Sound and Indian River; reaching the Atlantic coast two hundred miles south of the waters of its brother creek, flowing into the St. John's. The creek at the crossing, two miles north, is very shallow, but in the wet season very broad. We camped in the pine-woods near the Kissinee Prairie that night, and our horse and cattle luxuriated upon the fresh grass of a recent "burn."

At sunset we saw the sun go down upon the Kissinee Prairie, and gild with its last rays the blue cypress-swamp containing the fountain-heads of two of Florida's largest rivers. At one o'clock next morning, Jernigan aroused us, and we soon had the coffee boiled and a hasty breakfast disposed of. We then started, for we were determined to reach the river before night. We had twenty miles farther to go, having accomplished forty. The darkness was intense, and it was wonderful how Jernigan, walking ahead, could discover the trail.

Soon we left the old road, and struck a narrow trail leading southwest. A dense fog hung over the land, but we pushed on, with our guide ahead; and no sound broke the stillness, save the crack of the driver's whip and his occasional shout to the cattle. For an hour we went steadily on, and I closed my eyes and yielded myself to the drowsy influence stealing over me. But something soon caused me to sit upright with a start and rub my eyes. The wind, which had fanned my left cheek as I lay down, now blew directly upon my right. While I was striving to account for this phenomenon, the team came to a sudden halt, the driver uttered an exclamation, and he and Jernigan held a consultation in low tones. We had missed the trail. In the darkness and fog we were as wholly lost as a ship at sea without a compass. We go farther to the north and strike a marsh, in which we bog. Extricated from this, we turn south, and are lost in a wilderness of reeds. We have had the wind from all quarters, and are completely at loss as to our course.

Jernigan then seized the horse and started off in a circuit about the boat. We whooped at intervals to guide him in the darkness, and anxiously awaited

a response. Minutes seemed hours as they glided by, with no answering cry. Then there came a cry, — the long, shrill whoop of the cattle-hunter, — faint in the distance. Turning our cattle that way, we sought, and after a long search found our guide. Lighting some dry grass, we found unmistakable evidence in the worn soil and smooth palmetto-roots of the trail. Not long after, the first gray of morning appeared; and it seems that we had been lost for hours, for we could see the woods we left far in the distance. The eastern sky slowly brightened, and the sun came out and dissipated the mists.

An hour after daylight we passed a cypress-swamp, where rises the famous Taylor's Creek, which runs into Lake Okechobee, upon the banks of which General Zachary Taylor fought one of the hardest battles of the Seminole War. The slope of the prairie is unmistakably west, toward the Kissinee River. We saw what looked like a river, but what, in reality, was only fog. The illusion produced by the fog was complete, and we saw houses, gardens, and cattle, which another mile of distance resolved into mist. Occasional bunches of cattle, a few sand-hill cranes, and a few herds of deer bounding over the scrub-palmettos, were the only living objects we saw. Nearing a belt of pines, fifteen miles from our starting-point, we saw unmistakably a house. The trail leads through a swamp and then into the pine-woods, by this log-cabin. This proved to be the residence of Henry Parker, a large cattle-owner, who had made this wild place his home to avail himself of the size and excellence of the cattle-range; for, with his brothers, he was owner of twenty thousand head of cattle, which were shipped to Cuba from the Gulf coast, as the market required.

From Parker's to the Kissinee is about five miles, — three through rough pine-woods, half a mile over prairies, and a mile and a half of wading, then the Kissinee River, deep and dark, though narrow. Alligators grunted at us from the reeds, coots and gallinules swarmed in clouds before us, and the ibis and snake-birds covered every shrub. There was just dry land enough upon the river-bank to unload the boat upon; which done, we launched her, put in all the luggage, sent the team back to the pine-woods, and rowed rapidly downstream to the western bank. Here, at the ford, we found high, dry banks, and a good camping-place. Two small water-oaks mark the ford on the western bank, and some rotten cattle-pens, in the swamp, the eastern. The land is covered with a dense growth of scrub and water oak, back of which is a broad stretch of pines and prairie. The road from Manatee to the Atlantic coast crosses here. Above is a marsh of lilies, willows, and reeds, and marsh below. A mile south is the site of old Fort Bassenger, where General Taylor crossed, marching to subsequent defeat, at the battle of Okechobee.

The Kissinee River rises far north, in a succession of lakes, and flows, for



HERONS.

two hundred miles and more, with tortuous course, southward into Lake Okechobee. The upper waters are beautifully diversified with islands; and the country through which the river flows is covered with oaks and pines, affording shelter to numerous flocks of turkeys and herds of deer.

The southern portion, however, flows through a marshy region, with little game, and few localities suitable for hunting. Throughout its whole course it is narrow, and extremely crooked. At the ford its width is about fifty yards, though, at high seasons, it spreads over the adjoining country for miles. The current is swift; the water dark, cool, and sweet. No one knew the distance to the lake, and there had been but three white men there for fifteen years.

We camped at the ford two days, waiting the arrival of Mr. Parker with a "beef." Here the Doctor came near being drowned, and would have been had it not been for the gallant efforts of Shores, who, though the unfortunate cause of the mishap, nobly atoned for all by his prompt rescue. The 22d of February, being the Sabbath, should have been devoted to its proper use as a day of rest; but that being impossible, from the superabundance of mosquitoes, and the nearest place of worship we were cognizant of being three hundred miles away, we did the next best thing, — got our boat loaded and started for the lake.

The air was balmy, and vocal with the songs of birds. We rowed easily down the stream, between banks of water-lettuce and yellow lilies, passing still lagoons where coots, gallinules, and water-turkeys swam and dived and chattered, in blissful ignorance of guns and hunters.

The river makes a grand sweep not far from Fort Bassenger, and we boxed the compass in a course of three miles. A flock of hundreds of white ibis flew before us for miles; the sun, glinting their glossy backs and black-tipped wings, produced a beautiful effect.

Alligators were not numerous, preferring those sections of the river where low shelving banks or projecting sand-bars give them sunning-places. The shore preserved its marshy character as we proceeded; occasionally a water-worn bluff made up to the shore, covered with a wilderness of trees and tangled underbrush.

Ten miles down we discovered a rookery of white herons. Their large nests, built of sticks, a foot and a half across, were placed in low bushes, just above the water. Each nest contained two large, greenish-blue eggs. We secured a couple of dozen in a few minutes, and pushed on, promising to call again upon our return.

A few miles farther a rifle-shot of ours provoked an answering bark. Rounding a live-oak bluff of unusual thickness, we saw two boys and a pack of

dogs standing beneath a large oak. We brought our boat to anchor near a palmetto-thatched shanty, and there soon appeared a white woman and a negro wench.

We learned that this clearing was the property of Thomas Dougherty, — a Tennessean by birth, a Floridian by adoption. He had moved here from Fort Dunn because "varmint was powerful bad thar," and he could n't raise good corn. This bluff was formerly the property of a Seminole, of whom Mr. Dougherty bought it. The Indian shanty was still there, and we visited an old Indian field and inspected a corn-crib of Indian workmanship, rat-proof, and water-tight. The Doctor said it was exactly similar to those now in use in the Choctaw and Seminole nations west. Upon the logs of his shanty was stretched a large panther-skin, that had been taken from an animal killed near our camp of the night before.

Giving some fish-hooks and lines to the boys, we cast off, and drifted down the stream.

This was the last white man's residence we should see for several weeks. No one had passed their bluff since their arrival but a family of Indians a few days before. A mile or two farther we discovered a small hut, made of palmetto-leaves, evidently the work of the Indian family ahead of us. We stopped here to dine and give the Doctor rest, for the heat was intense. A sweep in the river soon hid the hut from our sight, and we rowed between tree-fringed banks, with very low shores, where opportunities for landing were few indeed. A pine-ridge on our left seemed to approach the river, but did not reach it, and nothing broke the monotonous swamp-line; and night approached, with no prospect of a camp. At last one of the numerous curves disclosed a large maple upon a high bank. The place was instantly seized upon for a camp; the boat was brought about, and, secured in an eddy, lay safe for the night. A fire was started at the roots of a fallen tree, and ran through the dead wood and grass to kill vermin and start out the snakes. The bank is narrow, but large enough for a fire and sleeping-place, and we stretched our canvas and turned in, after a good supper of bass, caught on our way down. A pine-dotted prairie is seen back of us, with a mile of swamp intervening.

Casting off bow and stern lines in the morning, we floated between banks overhung with maples and occasional palmettos. Coming to a place where the river forked, and beds of water-lettuce and masses of canes made choice, of course, very difficult, we let the boat drift, taking the stronger current. Then we came to a glimpse of prairie, where pines and palmettos diversified the plain. A sudden turn to the left revealed an aged oak, — lone sentinel in this vast swamp, its trunk and broad limbs clothed in a dense covering of long gray

moss. Upon its trunk were cut the letters "F. L. S." and "J. C." I climbed the oak and looked off. Before me, south, lay the river, — a bright stretch of water for a mile, then suddenly lost in the marsh. Far away to the east I could see two large cypress-bulks, seemingly the terminal points of the pine-ridge which had followed the course of the river several miles away; west, a palmetto-ridge came down, sweeping away far westward. Between these two ridges was a vast plain, with here and there a single tree. Beyond that, I felt —



"SOON THE RIVER RESUMED ITS CROOKED COURSE."

I could not see — was Okechobee; for the line of the horizon seemed beyond the line of plain. Quiet lagoons opened out here and there, where the trees and bushes were white with the nests of the snake-bird. Numerous as are these birds upon the St. John's and the Ocklawaha, they were in tenfold numbers here. The most abundant bird was the odd crying-bird, — the limpkin, cour-lan, or Indian hen. Everywhere we saw it, jumping from the grass at every turn, rending the air with its cries.

Soon the river resumed its crooked course, narrowing to less than twenty yards across, which width it held to the end. No pen can describe its crookedness. Twisting, turning, doubling on our course, we rowed between banks of

saw-grass and reeds, and marshes of canes so high that they overtopped our heads as we stood upon the rail of the boat. It was depressing in the extreme, and we grew weary long before night came on. Just before sunset we discerned a lone cypress, — a broad-topped, well-formed tree, with branches reaching to the ground. It was covered with snake-birds, which flew away silently at our approach. The bow of the boat touched the shore, and I sprang into the tree and climbed to its very top. Turning about, I saw at last the long-sought lake, the *ultima Thule* of our hopes, Okechobee, — a faint-blue line; upon the east, a darker line of cypress; west, an immense plain.

Darkness prevented us from staying, and we had but a moment to peer through the glass, which the Colonel brought up, before descending. By the faint light of the stars and the new moon, we sought the channel, rowing in the shadow of the trees, and finally emerged into what seemed a broad bay, where a gentle swell rocked uneasily, and we could hear the murmuring of waves. In the darkness we concluded it was not safe to go farther, and accordingly threw the anchor over, and drifted to leeward of an old cypress. Mosquitoes attacked us. Fury! how they bit! This was our welcome to Okechobee, — our first reception, — music by the band! We retired beneath our bars, where we might listen to the soothing strains unmolested.

This was our first night aboard the boat. As but one of several nights thus spent, it will answer as a description of all. The Colonel and myself slept aft. There was space there, four feet by three. We squeezed ourselves into that space, drew the bar over us, and essayed to sleep. The knees of the boat were troublesome, and we used, in lieu of feathers to soften the bed, sundry boots, bags of shot, and bits of broken wood. The Doctor stretched out on a thwart, six feet long and a foot wide. He did not sleep well. He had not yet recovered from the terrible shock at Fort Bassenger. Shores had, for his exclusive use, the cracker-barrel. For the first time in his life he was heard to utter the wish that barrels were longer and curved the other way.

An old cormorant flew around me many times as I lashed an oar to the tree, next morning, for a landmark. He seemed anxious to obtain, for the benefit of his friends, a good description of the first white man he had ever seen.

The bay formed at the entrance of the Kissinee into Lake Okechobee is a mile in length from east to west, and half a mile in breadth. It is nearly filled with yellow lily-pads and the floating water-lettuce, though the line of the marshy shore may be easily traced. East is a large body of cypress; west, a smaller clump; between, north, is interminable marsh. The blue waves dance in the sun, and I could see nothing to the south but water, — far away south to the horizon-line.

A heavy swell came in from the lake; but we rowed out into the open water, and sought a landing upon the western shore. Cypress, dead and white, against which the waves dash violently, stand far out in the lake. Cautiously we forced our way through them, and made a happy discovery. Back of the phalanx of cypress-knees is a little drift of yellow sand, — merely a drift, such a ripple as a huge wave throws up in a moment, and wastes away again; but it seemed a very paradise to us, this sand-bar with its overhanging maples and ash, intertwined with huge grape-vines and hung with moss. Landing, we built a fire and cooked a much-needed breakfast. We spent nearly half a day here, drying our provisions and investigating the flora and fauna of our little island.

In the marsh behind it was a black lagoon, whose still surface was crossed and recrossed by huge alligators. The Colonel and Shores shot at them, laying low many a one. The Doctor unearthed many an innocent bug, and deposited a few new specimens of plants between his sheets of bibulous paper.

The wind rose, and our sand-bar proved a poor place for the night's camp. Skirting the cypress, we scanned the shore for a landing-place; none appeared. A few miles west, a sand-bar gleamed out behind the cypress; but no sloping beach appeared upon which we could run our boat, and the water was full of cypress-knees, which threatened destruction to it. While my companions held her in position, head on to the rollers, I jumped into the water, waded ashore, and sought a place to land; found a narrow passage leading by a land-locked lagoon, and through this we ran the boat, and hauled her up, secure against wind and waves. We found indications of an old camp; and the charred logs, with the ends together, radiating from the centre, proclaimed it to be an Indian camp. Availing ourselves of a large log cut by our unknown friends, we soon had a fire started and supper cooked.

The Doctor and myself were the self-elected cooks, as Shores was unwell, and the Colonel was too lazy to do aught but smoke and talk. We had appetites like wolves, and rapidly and ravenously devoured hominy, pork, and beef.

Our old friend the crying-bird, with whom we had got acquainted on the Kissinee, paid us a visit, and cackled and shrieked for our benefit all night long.

From this point we could trace the eastern shore — a line of trees — till lost in a deep bay. The western shore runs southwesterly, and is mostly marsh.

The wind was ahead. We could not sail; and the Doctor and myself took the oars and rowed all the forenoon toward what appeared to be an earth-mound, but which a near approach resolved into clumps of reeds. A deep grass bay sends an arm into the marsh, and a few grass-shoals loom up in the water, like islands afar off.