

CHAPTER XI.

MORE ABOUT LAKE OKECHOBEE.



IN a little bay, separated from the lake by a fringe of grass, we tied up to a cypress-tree, and started a fire upon some cypress-knees, where had lodged a foot or so of earth. The water of the lake is so thick with organic matter that we could not drink it unless boiled with coffee, and so a fire was necessary every time we took a drink. Shores made a fire; the Doctor put in the coffee while I held the pot over the flame; and the Colonel descended the tree just in time to get a drink and escape an attack from a swarm of carpenter-bees, who had neatly chiselled holes in every limb of the cypress.

In the afternoon we rowed on, striving to reach a dense cypress-point; but toward night a sudden squall came on, blackening the water and sending rippling masses scurrying over the surface, and we hurriedly ran the boat through a bank of grass and reeds to the still waters of a quiet lagoon, where a noisome stench proclaimed decaying vegetation.

Our old friends the mosquitoes renewed acquaintance, and seemed desirous to watch with us through the night; but we bade them good-night, and turned in. Sleeping in the boat was rather difficult at first. Doubtless there are softer feathers than old boots and bags of shot; but the Colonel and myself occupied the bed in the stern, while the Doctor and Shores covered, respectively, the thwart and cracker-barrel. From various and sundry kicks and snorts, which came to my wakeful ears during the night, I judged that the mosquitoes were doing what they considered their duty.

At daylight we crept out into the lake, gladly leaving the black pool to the alligators and snakes. The wind was from the north, and we sped along, under double-reefed sail, beneath a sky of inky darkness. The cypress were reached



THE CAMP ON THE ISLAND.

after sailing through a narrow channel between floating vine-covered islands and a broad grass-shoal.

But what a disappointment awaited us! Instead of the land for fire and rest, we found floating islands, the trees surrounded by water and densely matted together with vines. The tall cypress rose far overhead, and many lay floating on the water; but there was no land. Throwing the anchor over a fallen tree, we started a fire upon its dry roots and boiled our coffee.

Pushing our way through stunted cypress, causing the snake-birds and cormorants nesting there to rise in clouds, we finally reached a beautiful hammock, where, back of the water-line of cypress, could be seen the delicate foliage of the maple. We ran the boat upon the sand and stepped out. Stiff and cramped with our long confinement on board the boat, we hailed with joy this opportunity to stretch our limbs.

The narrow ridge was densely covered with a growth of cypress, maple, ash, India-rubber, boxwood, and mulberry. Here upon a box-tree, in whose trunk was cut an inscription in large characters, we found signs of the former occupation of this island. We gathered about this tree, and speculated what the characters were meant to represent, —

(J. Smith 1⁰⁰⁰₈₇₃).

"I have it," said the Colonel; and when the Colonel said he had it, we all listened attentively, — "I have it. These characters were made by some of them Norsemen we read about coming over here eight hundred years ago! See! 1000, the year they came here; 873, the number of the men. This name, here, was that of one of their chiefs."

"But," said the Doctor, "that can't be; the bark would have covered the inscription, and the tree would have decayed hundreds of years ago."

"That may be; but could n't this be a young tree, — a sucker grown up from the roots of the old one?"

"I think the Colonel's the sucker," said Shores.

I connected this inscription with a story told me before we left the ford, of one John Smith, who essayed to find Fish-eating Creek, who was lost, went three days without food, and would have perished but for timely discovery by a band of Indians.

The most noticeable feature here was a gigantic cypress, six feet in diameter, enveloped in a mesh-work of wood, — the trunk of the parasitical fig, or "India-rubber." Towering aloft a hundred feet, wrapped in the close embrace of the parasite, wound about with vines whose leaves rivalled in color our Northern maple in autumn, the feathery foliage of the cypress blending with

the glossy leaves of the rubber made a charming picture of tropical beauty and luxuriance.

The nests of the osprey were everywhere; and as his enemy, the white-headed eagle, does not live here, it seems as though Mr. Fish-hawk might pass his days in peace and happiness.

Our course was southwest. We crossed a deep bay, some five miles across, to examine its farther shore for that creek with the unpronounceable name, — Thlathtopokahatchee, or Fish-eating Creek. Not that we wished to revel in a feast of fishes, or were actuated by any other desire than to explore the lake. But we dipped into bays, and navigated blind creeks, and threaded sinuous channels, beneath the hot sun of mid-day, and not a glimpse of Thlathtopokahatchee did we see; and it is our private recorded opinion that, should we have found the mouth of Thlathtopokahatchee, it would have been rather small, anyway.

Late in the afternoon we reached a small island, — just a hint of sand above the water, — and seized upon the opportunity offered for an attack upon the coffee-pot. The low trees were filled with nests of snake-birds and herons, loaded with eggs and young. The alligators were very numerous and familiar; they would sail slowly up to our boat, rub their noses against it, and manifest an inclination to form our acquaintance, until there were several dozen about us. A few rifle-shots and sundry raps over their snouts would cause them to retire a few yards and gaze at us in a wistful way, truly touching.

The marsh here is intersected by many creeks and bayous, but very few trees appear.

We undertook to cross a bay south of this island, but darkness came on, and a sudden gale of wind lashed the waves into immense billows. We scurried for shelter into a bay in the marsh, and were forced to pass the night there, with a strong force of mosquitoes to keep watch. 'T was a fearful night. Shores and myself were afflicted with a touch of fever, and in the morning he was so sick as to be unable to work.

The south shore stretched away for miles, — the same desolate expanse of marsh, fringed with scrubby willows. In a long stretch of coast but one tree was in sight; and just as we reached that tree, next morning, the wind died away. It was well. Our only mode of observation was by ascending trees, and we should have stopped to climb that tree if the wind had blown a gale. Tall trees were few. Perhaps we had passed a dozen isolated ones, and we had climbed every one. Our feelings were elevated proportionably to our elevation above the level of the lake. The inclination so grew upon us that we were seized with a desire to climb every tree higher than our mast.



THE NATURALIST IN FLORIDA.

In the afternoon of a pleasant day the Colonel and myself shot a few herons for their plumes. The dark masses of the ipomea were dotted with herons, white as snow, beautiful, graceful, their long plumes waving in the wind. At the first reports of our guns they left the island and their thousand nests to the mercy of those egg-thieves, the fish-crows, who reaped rich harvests. We saw a few of those magnificent birds, the rosy spoon-bills, and found a few of their eggs.

The Colonel shot a huge snake as we entered the swamp, which circumstance deterred him from penetrating very far into its dismal depths; but I, unconscious of the fact, was far in advance, having excellent shooting.

As soon as a heron was killed, I would strip the plume of downy filaments from its back, and throw the body upon the ground, passing on to the next. After coming out of the swamp I heard a report, and then another; and soon appeared the Colonel, very much blown, but jubilant, holding high above his head, out of harm's reach, one of the herons I had shot and stripped.

"I've got one," said he, "a reg'lar stunner; but, by thunder! how I raked his back!"

He would not accept my version of the shooting, but made himself miserable for three successive days and nights in vain endeavor to convince me that "the charge of shot just raked every feather clean off the bird's back."

Our sick man was much refreshed by our stay at this island. The few days had been filled to overflowing by the Doctor in collecting bugs and plants, so that we left it, after a sudden gale had abated, in good spirits.

The dim island, as seen from the cypress, proved to be a mile or so of sand-beach, backed by interminable marsh. Huge cypress covered the beach; down the long vistas are charming views. We call this lonely beach "Fossil Beach," from some rare fossil shells the Doctor finds here. Three deep bays, each some five miles across, terminate Lake Okechobee at its southern shore. They are lined with the same desolate shores of reeds, canes, and scrubby willows, and the successive points terminate in scraggy "custard-apple" trees, filled with the nests of cormorants and snake-birds.

A lone cypress terminates a long point of marsh, and back of this is a deep bay, the last and southernmost.

Here are the Everglades, where the water of the great lake filters through an immense swamp, through the spongy shores of grass, canes, and lily-roots, through gloomy forests of cypress, to the ocean and the gulf.

No creek, no river, forms the outlet of the waters of this vast lake; the accumulated drainage of thousands of square miles of territory slowly percolates through the Everglades by thousands of channels with countless ramifications. Northwest of the cypress is a chain of partially submerged islands,

which we reach one night just at dark, vainly seeking a fragment of *terra firma* sufficiently large to build a fire upon, and casting anchor in a dark pool, peopled only by ibis and alligators.

Our attempts to sleep were ineffectual, as the mosquitoes were cruel and bloodthirsty; and after several hours' battle, we concluded to sail for the eastern shore.

It was midnight. The moonbeams feebly lighted up the dark Everglades; the same moon had accompanied us from our first camp on the Kissinee until now we were looking upon the river for probably the last time. It was a fitting ending to our dreary voyage along the Everglade shore that we should leave the forsaken stretch of marsh and swamp, and enter upon the home-stretch with all the repulsive features softened and chastened by the moonlight.

Farewell, forever, to the Everglades!

A few hours after the wind died away, leaving the water like glass; and we lowered our sail, and anchored opposite the southernmost point of the eastern shore.

Shoals of alligators swarmed up, their black heads dotting the water like water-worn pine-knots. They rubbed their noses against the boat, and grunted loudly and deeply, — a welcome, perhaps, though we viewed it in the light of a welcome addition to their bill of fare. Time and again we shot at them; but neither the death-dealing bullets nor the reports — which reverberated through the swamp like noise of cannon, and started out large flocks of ghostly ibis — alarmed them, and we lay down to rest, secure of a watchful guard throughout the night.

The heat of the sun awoke us next morning, and we pulled for a clump of palms and a snowy beach, where, beneath graceful palms and overarching vines, we stretched our weary limbs. The beach was covered with shells of various hues, fragments of coquina, and nodules of clay. Windrows of mussel-shells with iridescent hues we discovered, but did not find the famous pearl-mussel, which history affirms the Spanish governor of long ago found in such quantities.

As we sped along the shore, we noticed that the trees grew larger, — cypress, ash, and India-rubber, — and we could trace the line of the shore far away to the north.

Late in the afternoon we made a landing. As the keel of the boat grated the sand, an ominous splash greeted us, and the water was covered with bubbles and foam. In explanation of this we saw a huge snake — a moccason, poisonous as death — slowly unwind himself from the upturned roots of a prostrate India-rubber, and glide into the water. Out of the grass and down from the trees

they came, — a repulsive, hideous concourse of slimy snakes. We waited until the procession had passed out of sight, and then leaped ashore, determined to camp, snakes or no snakes, as it was nearly dark. The ridge of sand is very narrow, covered with palmetto, boxwood, and rubber trees, and back of it is an impenetrable marsh of saw-grass. A well-beaten alligator-trail led from the lake to a little pool in the edge of the swamp, where the sand had washed over, forming a pure white basin of clear water. From this pool we dipped up water clear and sweet. Oh, how refreshing to our parched lips, after two weeks of the green broth of the lake! In this we found beautiful water-lilies, exactly the counterpart of our Northern *Nymphaea odorata*, but tinted with the hue of yellow topaz.

The next day we found a beautiful bay, with a wide white beach, above which rose large trees, draped with graceful festoons of long gray Spanish moss. The song of the cardinal-bird and the exquisite notes of that inimitable mimic the cat-bird fell gratefully upon our ears. A stiff southeast breeze sent us flying along the shore, and caused the waters of the lake to rise in huge billows that threatened to engulf us as they increased in size. In the afternoon we sought a lee behind a marshy point, only to find that we had entered a deep, narrow bay, down which the wind drew us as fiercely as from the lake. There seemed to be a creek emptying into it, and it is about two miles in depth. It is the bay known upon the old military maps as Cohancy Bay.

Finding no shelter here, we again sailed on, the waves growing heavier and larger, dashing at times clear over us. Several miles farther a white beach gleamed out behind the cypress, and we made a landing after much danger and a complete soaking in the surf. A surprise awaited us. As I ran up the beach with the anchor, I stumbled over a hewed cypress-plank. Looking about, we saw a group of bananas, their broad leaves lashed by the wind. Beyond were the ruins of several palmetto shanties, the corner-posts alone standing, the roofs sunken into the ground. Pawpaws in flower, sugar-cane, and guavas flourished amid a wilderness of swamp-growth. There were boards strewed upon the beach, ten feet in length and a foot in width, hewed by hand. This, the first permanent camp I had seen on the lake, I afterward ascertained was during the Indian war the village of a Seminole chieftain, who now resides in the "Big Cypress," southwest of the lake.

The clearing embraced several acres, but was now so completely overgrown as to be impenetrable. One of the cow-hunters subsequently told me that he had visited it while hunting Indians from the prairies behind it, and was obliged to wade nearly a mile in mud and water. I was upon the prairie back of this swamp in 1872, but could not reach the lake. It is about fifteen

miles from the Kissinee. Next morning, the waves having subsided, we launched the boat in time to take the southeast breeze, which rises at about nine every morning, blows through the day, and subsides at sunset. A deep bay, similar to the bay of the Kissinee, deceived us, and we sailed far up it, with a fair wind, and were obliged to row painfully back again, reaching the main shore at dark, when we camped in a dry swamp.

The next morning, as we rowed along the cypress-fringed shore, we saw the strangest sight of all our trip. Upon the shore stood a man, a nomadic Hoosier, "looking at the country." He was tall, well formed, roughly dressed. His boat was a dozen feet in length, a foot high, and built of hard pine, — merely a box. His oars were whittled from pine-slabs. He had a blanket for a sail. A small box contained everything he had else; no gun, rifle, or fish-line. All we could induce him to accept was a box of matches.

Leaving our new-found friend, who had braved the dangers of the lake in his frail skiff, we rowed through the floating islands of lilies and water-lettuce to the cypress at the mouth of the Kissinee. Our voyage up the river was without incident of any note; we reached the ford the third day up, and the Atlantic coast the thirty-third from our departure. In all that time there were but two falls of rain. The average daily temperature was 75°; the nightly, 50° to 55°.

The lake is about forty-five miles in length, from north to south, and thirty in width, from east to west, near the centre. The distance from the Atlantic to the Kissinee is sixty miles; down the river, fifty-five; and around the lake, at least a hundred. This makes our journey a hundred and twenty miles land-travel; a hundred and ten by the river, — lake and all, over three hundred and thirty miles.

The lake has been for the first time thoroughly explored. Its topography you have examined with me, and its natural history will be made known when our dear friend the Doctor brings to light the contents of his bales of plants and cans and bottles of alcoholic specimens. Until the line of stage and steamer connecting the St. John's with Okechobee is inaugurated, the tourist desiring to visit a new and in some respects a little-known country cannot do better than take boats and guides for the largest lake in the South, the much-maligned Okechobee. Taking warning and wisdom from the narration of our misadventures, he may be able to "do" the river with as little discomfort as is practicable in more northern waters.

Our first day of unalloyed happiness was at Judge Parker's, where we engaged horses and means of transportation to the coast. There it was that we stretched our legs beneath a table for the first time in many days. We

rehearsed the story of our adventures to an attentive audience, with the Colonel as spokesman. He detailed every circumstance, from the first conception of the enterprise to its fulfilment, with a minuteness that showed profound study and powers of observation. He had saved the Doctor from a watery grave by shouting a talismanic word as he went down. His provisions had kept us from starvation,—in fact, he had been the savior of the party. He incidentally alluded to his descent from one of the oldest families of New York; spoke in glowing terms of the prowess and renown of his valiant progenitors, and modestly affirmed that he was winning a fame that promised to eclipse that of his forefathers, wholly dependent upon his individual effort. Then he recalled a scene in the lake when the whole party was in imminent danger of being drowned by a furious alligator.

Warming with his theme, he grew eloquent, describing the approach of the alligator, his horrid appearance as he rose from the water and climbed into the boat, and the horror of the Doctor as he saw his beloved cans of alcohol and bales of plants disappear down the cavernous throat of the monster as he approached the party, huddled together in the stern of the boat.

"It was at this juncture," said the Colonel, "that I recalled my presence of mind. I was the only one of the party brave enough to face the alligator. The rest sat paralyzed with fear. Fortunately, I was equal to the emergency. I advanced boldly. I seized the alligator by the snout, spit tobacco-juice in his eyes, and while the creature was blindly seeking to strike me, I, by a dexterous movement, seized him by the tail, and —"

What was the *dénouement* no one will ever know, for the Colonel disappeared from our sight. In his excitement he had arisen from the table and taken a few steps into the outer darkness, beyond the light of the blazing pine-knots. Like the puffing out of a candle, he had gone. His voice had ceased.

We looked at one another, rubbed our eyes, and looked at the Judge. He smiled. "Flea-pit!"

To explain: So annoying and plentiful are the fleas that pits, two feet in depth, are dug for the reception of any unwary one that may be skipping about in the exuberance of its spirits. Two pits are generally considered necessary.

From beneath the table came groans and oaths; subsequently appeared a frowsy head and a red face, plentifully besprinkled with sand and little sticks. That sight would have upset the gravity of a graven image. Our sick man exploded and collapsed. The Doctor choked and grew black in the face. I rose to pat him on the back. Tears blinded my eyes,—tears of mirth soon changed to those of genuine sorrow.

As I rose, a hog darted between my legs. He was a tall hog, with the



A MOUNTED WARRIOR.

frame of an elephant, the backbone of a racer. To express it briefly, he was taller than my legs were long. I rode a few feet and then fell off. I felt a shock; my cervical vertebræ seemed driven against the roof of my mouth. The toes of my boots abraded the cuticle from my nose, and it dawned upon me that this was the other flea-pit.

To this day I consider the laughter that greeted my premature exploration wholly uncalled for.

The Doctor, even, laughed himself off his chair, and rolled on the ground, emitting a succession of "Oh dears!" that grew fainter and fainter as his breath grew shorter and shorter.

There is little now to add, for our return journey to the coast over the same old trail was without important incident.

I found my partner, the so-called Antiquarian, anxious over our protracted stay, and happy to see us once more safely with him after the month's absence. His trading had not been so successful as we could have wished, and in another week we had "packed our traps" and were aiming for the head-waters of the St. John's River.