



Picturesque America; or, the land we live in

a delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, water-falls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities, and other picturesque features of our country ; with illustrations on steel and wood, by eminent American artists

Bryant, William Cullen

New York, 1872

St. John's And Ocklawaha Rivers, Florida.

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Mouth of the St. John's River—Looking in.

ST. JOHN'S AND OCKLAWAHA RIVERS, FLORIDA.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY FENN.

FLORIDA is a strange land, both in its traditions and its natural features. It was the first settled of the States, and has the most genial climate of all of them; and yet the greater part of it is still a wilderness. Its early history was one long romance of battle and massacre, and its later annals are almost equally interesting. The Spaniards, who were the first Christian people to visit it, were much impressed with its mystery and its scenery, and, as they discovered it on Easter Sunday, which in their language is called "Pascua Florida," they commemorated the event by giving the new territory its present appellation.

The time was when Florida was an immense sand-bar, stretching into the Gulf of Mexico, and probably as barren as can be conceived. But in the semi-tropical climate under which it exists, in the course of ages the seeds carried to its shores by the sea and the winds and the myriads of birds which find it a resting-place, have clothed it with luxuriant vegetation, interspersed with tracts of apparently barren sands. It is a land of peculiar scenery, which the pencil of the artist has heretofore scarcely touched. Its main features illustrate the absurdity of the common notion that the landscapes of tropical and semi-tropical latitudes are superior in luxuriance of vegetable production to those of the temperate zones. The truth is, that in the hot regions it is only where there is constant moisture that there is a strong and rank growth of plants. Generally, aridity prevails, the hill-sides are bereft of vegetation, and an air of parched-up and suffering Nature characterizes all that is seen. It is only when we come North that our landscapes glow with universal vegetable profusion; that the forests stand out in bold relief on the hill-sides; that the earth is carpeted with vernal green, and prodigality of vegetation reigns supreme. In the tropical landscape, the abundance of flowers, which are supposed to be peculiar to



Mouth of the St. John's River—Looking out.

warm climates, are exceptional phases. They exist, but it is in the recesses of the swamp, where the burning sun is checked in its effulgency. In these recesses, and favored by springs of water, we have in Florida the wildest effects. We have flowers, and vines, and strange leafings, and gigantic trees, as nowhere else to be seen; but they are always in hidden places; the open tropical landscape, we repeat, is arid and desolate.

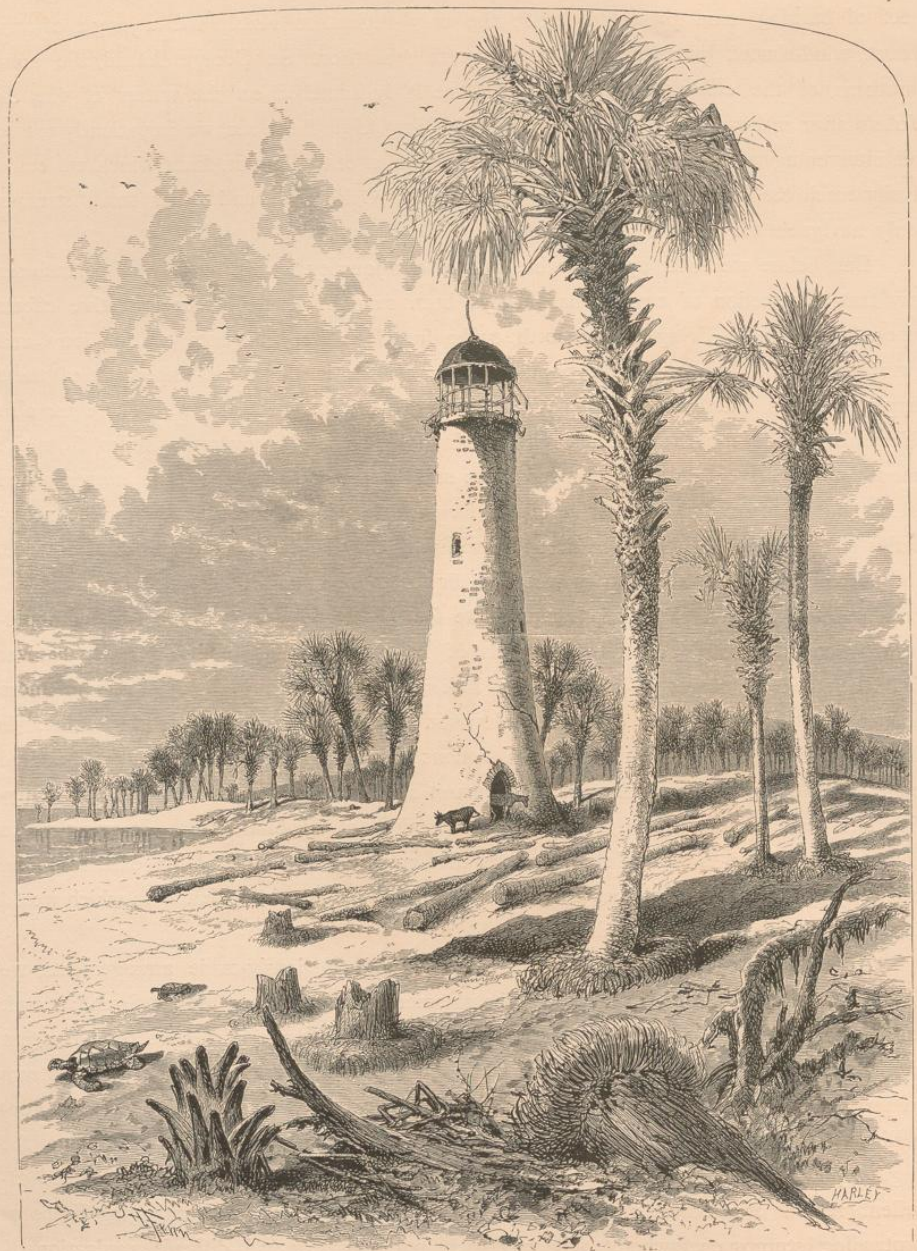
Originally starting out for the avowed purpose of hunting the picturesque, we sailed for the mouth of the St. John's—a river that reaches into the very heart of the peninsula, and from the ill-defined shores of which you can branch off into the very wildest of this, in one sense, desolate region. The approach of the mouth of the harbor, as is the case with all our Southern rivers, is interrupted by a bar, over which the surf beats always more or less wildly. Extra facilities being afforded us, we safely passed the "rough places," and with impatience sought a look-out from Pelican Bank, situated at the mouth of the harbor. Our sudden intrusion startled myriads of sea-fowl, which went screaming away, yet in such close contact to our persons that we could have caught many of them in

our hands. The scene had a strange look, for, as far as the eye could reach, a long, low reef of burning sand presented itself; the only vegetation visible was a jungle of sun-burnt, wind-blasted palmettos. A little north was Fort St. George Island, the most southern of the cultivated sea-islands. Once fairly launched on the waters of the St. John's, after making a sketch of the harbor looking toward the sea, we impatiently passed all intervening places until we arrived at Pilatka, a central point, from which we could easily reach the Black River, and the more famous Ocklawaha, and other small streams, only navigable for boats of miniature size.

But, before we enter upon the business of our journey, let us, by way of parenthesis, say that this section of country has always been remarkable for its recuperative effects upon invalids, who, living farther north, suffer from the borean blasts of our long and dreary winters. Jacksonville, a popular winter resort, is the most important of these hygienic towns, and boasts a population of over five thousand persons. There are also Hibernia, at the mouth of Black Creek, Magnolia, something over fifty miles from the mouth of the river, and Picolata, ten miles still farther up. If the time comes when these famous places for a winter residence for invalids can furnish abundantly the necessities and comforts of life, there is no reason why they should not be annually crowded, for nothing can be better than their balmy air for those upon whom the Northern winters bear too heavily. But it is inconsiderate for those who are past recovery with pulmonary complaints to wander to the wilds of Florida in pursuit of health, for, whatever may be the advantages of climate, the lack of the comforts the sick require more than counterbalances the effect of the balmy air. Among the especial resorts for invalids is Green Cove Springs, near Magnolia, famous for curing rheumatism and a hundred complaints, and composed of a series of warm sulphurous pools, in some places twenty-five feet deep. The water is very transparent, and of a pale-bluish tint. It was perhaps some rumor of the virtues of these springs that gave origin to the notion, current among the early Spanish explorers, that there was in Florida a fountain, to bathe in which would insure perpetual youth and health.

At Pilatka, by the aid of influential letters and previously-made arrangements, we secured the good-will of the captain of the steamer we named the "Flying Swan," a craft which, from its simplicity of construction and rude machinery, might have been the first model constructed by Fulton when he was putting into practical shape the use of steam in propelling boats. Its general outline was that of an ill-shaped omnibus, with the propelling-wheel let into its rear, and, on further examination, we found the smoke-pipe, the engine, pilot-house, and all other of the usual gear of steamers, were housed, for the excellent reason of protecting them from being torn away by the overhanging limbs or protruding stumps everywhere to be met with in the narrow and difficult navigation of the swamps.

A sail of twenty miles along the St. John's brought us, a little before sunrise, to the



BAR LIGHT-HOUSE, MOUTH OF ST. JOHN'S RIVER.

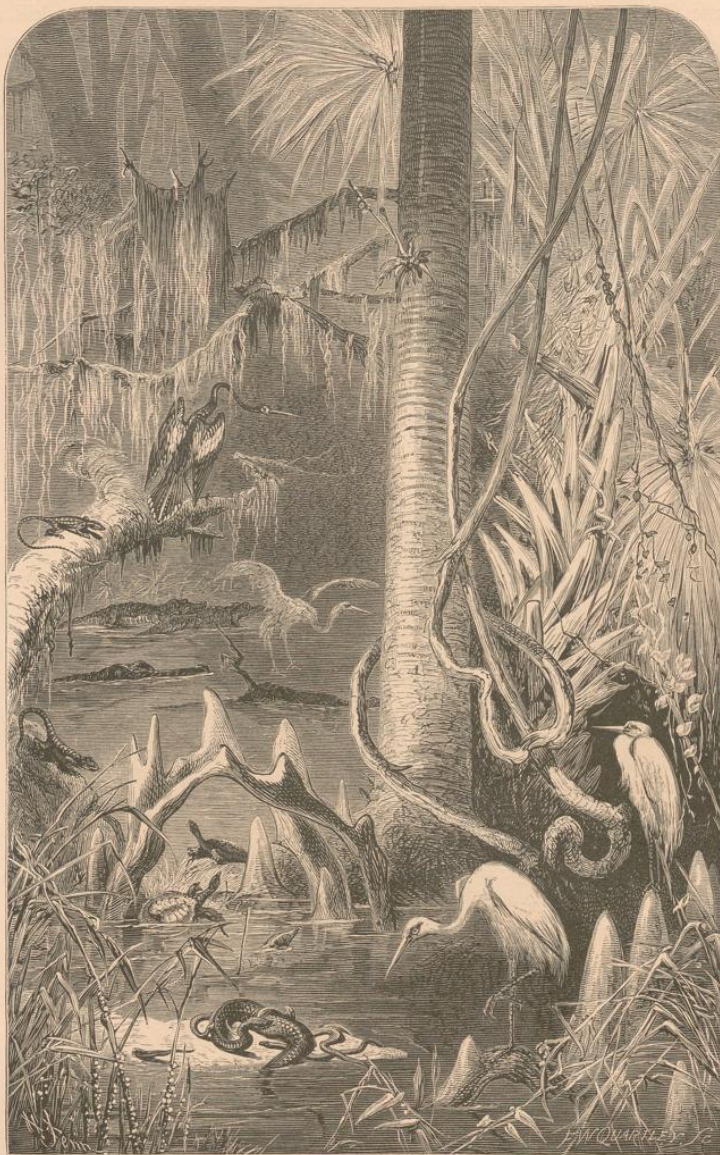
mouth of the Ocklawaha River, looking scarcely wide enough to admit a skiff, much less a steamboat. As daylight increased, we found that we were passing through a dense cypress-swamp, and that the channel selected had no banks, but was indicated by "blazed" marks on the trunks of the towering trees. There was plenty of water, however, to float our craft, but it was a queer kind of navigation, for the hull of the steamer went bumping against one cypress-butt, then another, suggesting to the tyro in this kind of aquatic adventure that possibly he might be wrecked, and subjected, even if he escaped



Green Cove Springs.

a watery grave, to a miserable death, through the agency of mosquitoes, buzzards, and huge alligators.

As we wound along through the dense vegetation, a picture of novel interest presented itself at every turn. We came occasionally to a spot a little elevated above the dead-water level, covered with a rank growth of lofty palmetto, the very opposite, in every respect, to those stunted, storm-blown specimens which greeted us at the mouth of the St. John's River. Here they shot up tall and slender, bearing aloft innumerable parasites,



A Florida Swamp.

often surprising the eye with patches, of a half-mile in length, of the convolvulus, in a solid mass of beautiful blossoms.

Another sharp turn, and the wreck of an old dead cypress is discovered, its huge limbs covered with innumerable turkey-buzzards, which are waiting patiently for

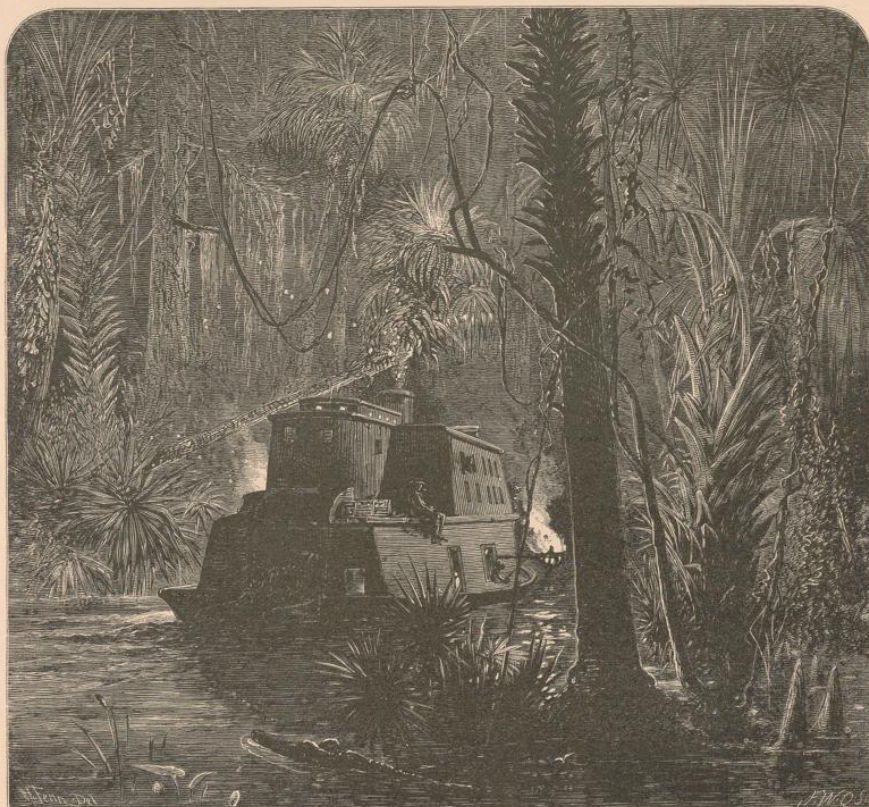


Waiting for Decomposition.

the decomposition of an alligator that some successful sportsman has shot, and left for the prey of these useful but disgusting birds. The sunshine sparkles in the spray which our awkward yet efficient craft drives from its prow, and then we enter what seems to be a cavern, where the sun never penetrates. The tree-tops interlace,

and the tangled vines and innumerable parasites have made an impenetrable mass overhead.

The swamps of Florida are as rich in birds as in vegetation. It is no wonder that Audubon here found one of the finest fields from which to enrich his great works of natural history. A minute list of the varieties we sometimes saw in a single day would fill a page. One of the most attractive was the water-turkey, or snake-bird, which was



Ascending the Ocklawaha River at Night.

everywhere to be met with, sitting upon some projecting limb overlooking the water, the body as carefully as possible concealed from view, its head and long neck projecting out, and moving constantly like a black snake in search of its prey. Your curiosity is excited; you would examine the creature more critically, and you fire, at what seems a short, point-blank shot. The bird falls, apparently helpless, in the water; you row rapidly to secure your prize, when, a hundred yards ahead, you suddenly see the snaky head

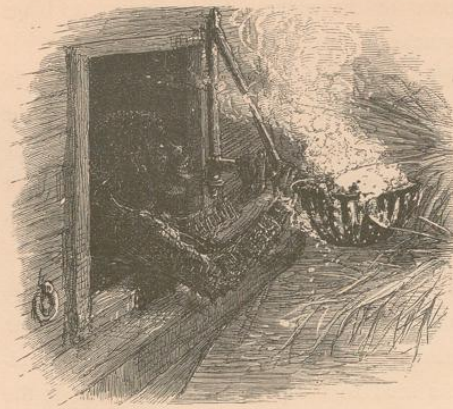
of the "darter" just protruding above the surface of the water. In an instant its lungs are filled with air, and, disappearing again, it reaches a place of safety.

Another conspicuous bird is the large white crane. It is a very effective object in the deep shadows of the cypress, as it proudly stalks about, eying with fantastic look the finny tribes it hunts for prey. Especially is it of service in seizing upon the young of the innumerable water-snakes which everywhere abound. With commendable taste, it seems to pay especial attention to the disgusting, slimy, juvenile moccasins, which have a taste for sunning themselves on harsh dried leaves of the stunted palmetto.

But the prominent living object to the stranger in these out-of-the way places is the alligator, whose paradise is in the swamps of Florida. Here he finds a climate that almost the year round suits his delicate constitution; and, while his kindred in the Louisiana swamps find it necessary to retire into the mud to escape the cold of winter, the Florida representative of the tribe is happy in the enjoyment of the upper world the year round. It was a comical and a provoking sight to see these creatures, when indisposed to get out of our way, turn up their piggish eyes in speculative mood at the sudden interruption of a rifle-ball against their mailed sides, but all the while seemingly unconscious that any harm against their persons was intended. Like Achilles, however, they possess a vulnerable point, which is just in front of the spot where the huge head works upon the spinal column. There is of necessity at this place a joint in the armor, and a successful hunter, after much experience, seldom lets one of the reptiles escape. If any philanthropist has ever objected to the slaughter, the circumstance is not remembered in the swamps and everglades of Florida. On one occasion we fired into a herd of alligators, and the noise of two or three shots caused all but one to finally disappear. For some reason it seemed difficult to get the remaining one to move, the creature lying with its head exposed to our gaze, looking as demoniac as possible. A bullet, which struck somewhere in the vicinity of its jaws, touched its feelings, and then, with a grunt not unlike that of a hog, it buried itself in the muddy water. This unwillingness to move was then explained by the appearance of a large number of young alligators, which, in the confusion, came to the surface like so many chips. We had, without being aware of it, attacked the mother while she was protecting her nest.

In the vicinity of the alligator's nest we came upon a primitive post-office, consisting of a cigar-box, bearing the magic letters "U. S. M.," nailed upon the face of an old cypress-tree. It was a sort of central point for the swampers, where they left their soiled notes and crooked writing to be conveyed to the places of destination by "whom-ever came along." We, desiring to act the part of a volunteer mail-carrier for the neighborhood, peeped into the post-office, but there were no signs of letters; so our good intentions were of no practical effect.

Our little craft bumps along from one cypress-stump to another, and fetches up against a *cypress-knee*, as it is termed—sharp-pointed lances which grow up from the roots



The Lookout.

of the trees, seemingly to protect the trunk from too much outside concussion; glancing off, it runs into a roosting-place of innumerable cranes, or scatters the wild-ducks and huge snakes over the surface of the water. A clear patch of the sky is seen, and the bright light of a summer evening is tossing the feathery crowns of the old cypress-trees into a nimbus of glory, while innumerable paroquets, alarmed at our intrusion, scream out their fierce indignation, and then, flying away, flash upon our admiring eyes their green and golden plumage. It now begins to grow dark in earnest, and we become curious to know how our attentive pilot will safely navigate this mysterious channel in what is literally Egyptian darkness. While thus speculating, there flashes across the landscape a bright, clear light. From the most intense blackness we have a fierce, lurid glare, presenting the most extravagantly-picturesque groups of overhanging palmettos, draped with parasites and vines of all descriptions; prominent among the latter is the scarlet trumpet-creeper, overburdened with wreaths of blossoms, and intertwined again with chaplets of purple and white convolvulus, the most minute details of the objects near being brought out in a sharp red light against the deep tone of the forest's depths. But no imagination can conceive the grotesque and weird forms which constantly force themselves on your notice as the light partially illuminates the limbs of wrecked or half-destroyed trees, which, covered with moss, or wrapped in decayed vegetation as a winding-sheet, seem huge unburied monsters, which, though dead, still throw about their arms in agony, and gaze through unmeaning eyes upon the intrusions of active, living men.



A Post-office on the Ocklawaha.

Another run of a half-mile brings us into the cypress again, the firelight giving new ideas of the picturesque. The tall shafts, more than ever shrouded in the hanging moss, looked as if they had been draped in sad habiliments, while the wind sighed through the limbs; and when the sonorous sounds of the alligators were heard, groaning and complaining, the sad, dismal picture of desolation was complete.

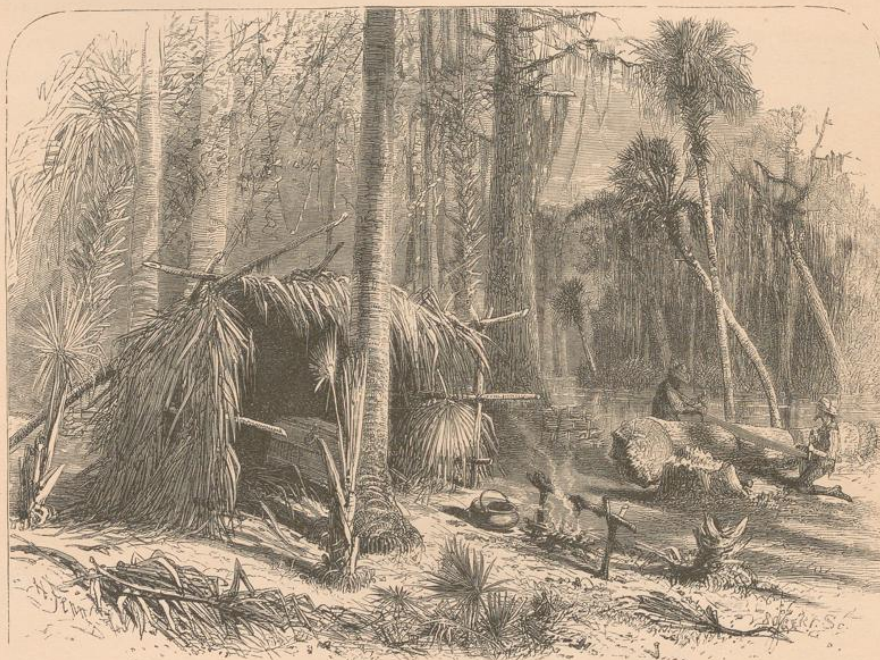
A sharp contact with a palmetto-knee throws around the head of our nondescript steamer, and we enter what appears to be an endless colonnade of beautifully-proportioned shafts, running upward a hundred feet, roofed by pendent ornaments, suggesting the highest possible effect of Gothic architecture. The delusion was increased by the



A Slight Obstruction in the Ocklawaha.

waving streamers of the Spanish moss, which here and there, in great festoons of fifty feet in length, hung down like tattered but gigantic banners, worm-eaten and mouldy, sad evidences of the hopes and passions of the distant past. So absorbing were these wonderful effects of a brilliant light upon the vegetable productions of these Florida swamps, that we had forgotten to look for the cause of this artificial glare, but, when we did, we found a faithful negro had suspended from cranes two iron cages, one on each side of the boat, into which he constantly placed unctuous pine-knots, that blazed and crackled, and turned what would otherwise have been unmeaning darkness into the most novel and exciting views of Nature that ever met our experienced eyes.

The morning came, and the theatrical display of the swamp by torchlight ended, when we were destined to be introduced to a new feature of this singular navigation. A huge water-oak, seemingly in the very pride of its matured existence, had fallen directly across the channel. Its wood was only a little less hard than iron, and the labor to be performed to get this obstruction out of the way was contemplated with anger by the captain of our craft, and in sadness by the "hands," to whose lot fell the labor of clearing the obstruction away. However, the order was given, and no inhabitant of the swamp is inexperienced in the use of the axe. The sturdy blows fell thick and fast, as



Cypress-shingle Yard.

one limb after another broke loose from the parent trunk and floated slowly away. The great butt was then assailed, and, by a judicious choice in the assault, the weight of the huge structure was made to assist in breaking it in twain. While this work was going on, which consumed some hours, we waded—we won't say ashore—but from one precarious foothold to another, until, after various unpleasant experiences—the least of which was getting wet to our waist in the black water of the swamp—we reached land, which was a few inches above the surface of the prevailing flood.

We were, however, rewarded for our enterprise by suddenly coming upon two "Flor-

ida crackers," who had established a camp in a grove of the finest cypress-trees we ever saw, and were appropriating the valuable timber to the manufacture of shingles, which shingles, we were informed, are almost as indestructible as slate. These men were civil, full of character, and in their way not wanting in intelligence. How they manage to survive the discomforts of their situation is difficult to imagine, but they do exist, the mosquitoes drawing from their bodies every useless drop of blood, the low swamp malaria making the accumulation of fat an impossibility, while the dull surroundings of their life, to them most monotonous, cramp the intellect until they are almost as taciturn as the trees with which they are associated. But their hut was a very model of the picturesque, and the smouldering fire, over which their dinner-pot was cooking, sent up a wreath of blue smoke against the dark openings of the deep forest that gave a



A Sudden Turn in the Ocklawaha.

quiet charm, and a contrast of colors, difficult to sufficiently admire, and impossible to be conceived of in the mere speculations of studio-life.

One of our strangest experiences in these mysterious regions was forced upon us one morning, when, thrusting our head through the hole that gave air to our "sleeping-shelf," we saw a sight which caused us to rub our eyes, and gather up our senses, to be certain we were positively awake. Our rude craft was in a basin, possibly a quarter of a mile in diameter, entirely surrounded by gigantic forest-trees, which repeated themselves with the most minute fidelity in the perfectly translucent water. For sixty feet downward we could look, and at this great depth see duplicated the scene of the upper world, the clearness of the water assisting rather than interfering with the vision. The bottom of this basin was silver sand, studded with eccentric formations of lime-crystals

of a pale emerald tint. This we soon learned was the wonderful silver spring of which we had heard so much, which every moment throws out its thousands of gallons of water without making a bubble on the surface. The transparency of the water was marvellous. A little pearly-white shell, dropped from our hand, worked its zigzag way downward, deepening in its descent from a pale green to a rich emerald, until, finding the bottom, it seemed a gem destined forever to glisten in its silver setting. Procuring a "dug-out," we proceeded to inform ourself of the mysteries of the spot. Noticing the faintest possible movement on the surface of the basin at a certain point, we concluded that it must be over the place where the great body of the water entered the spring. So, paddling to the spot, we dropped a stone, wrapped in a piece of white paper, into the water at the place where the movement was visible. The stone went down for some twenty-five feet, until it reached a slight projection of limestone rock, when it was suddenly, as if a feather in weight, forced upward in a curving line some fifteen feet, showing the tremendous power of the water that rushes out from the rock. The most novel and startling feature was when our craft came from the shade into the sunshine, for then it seemed as if we were, by some miraculous power, suspended seventy feet or more in the mid air, while down on the sanded bottom was a sharp, clear *silhouette* of man, boat, and paddle. A deep river a hundred feet wide is created by the water of this spring, which in the course of seven miles forms a junction with the Ocklawaha.



Silver Spring.