

MAKERS OF MOONSHINE

CHAPTER V

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THERE was a price on every head in the group before us, while Winchesters rested against convenient trees.

The Camera-man stood with me just within the entrance to a spherical glade in the swamp. It was thirty feet in diameter, between walls of closely growing trees and tangled vines; thirty feet from ground to dome of curving branches burdened with orchids and brilliant with their blossoms. Festoons of Spanish moss swayed with the column of air rising from a fire of fat pine which filled the cavernous opening with ruddy light and waving shadows.

The big iron kettle over the fire was fitted with a wooden top, deftly fashioned from a section of a cypress tree three feet in diameter, the stump of which served as a table within the glade. An iron pipe led from the cypress cover of the kettle through a wooden box of water, and from its projecting end poured a tiny stream of the potent product of the still.

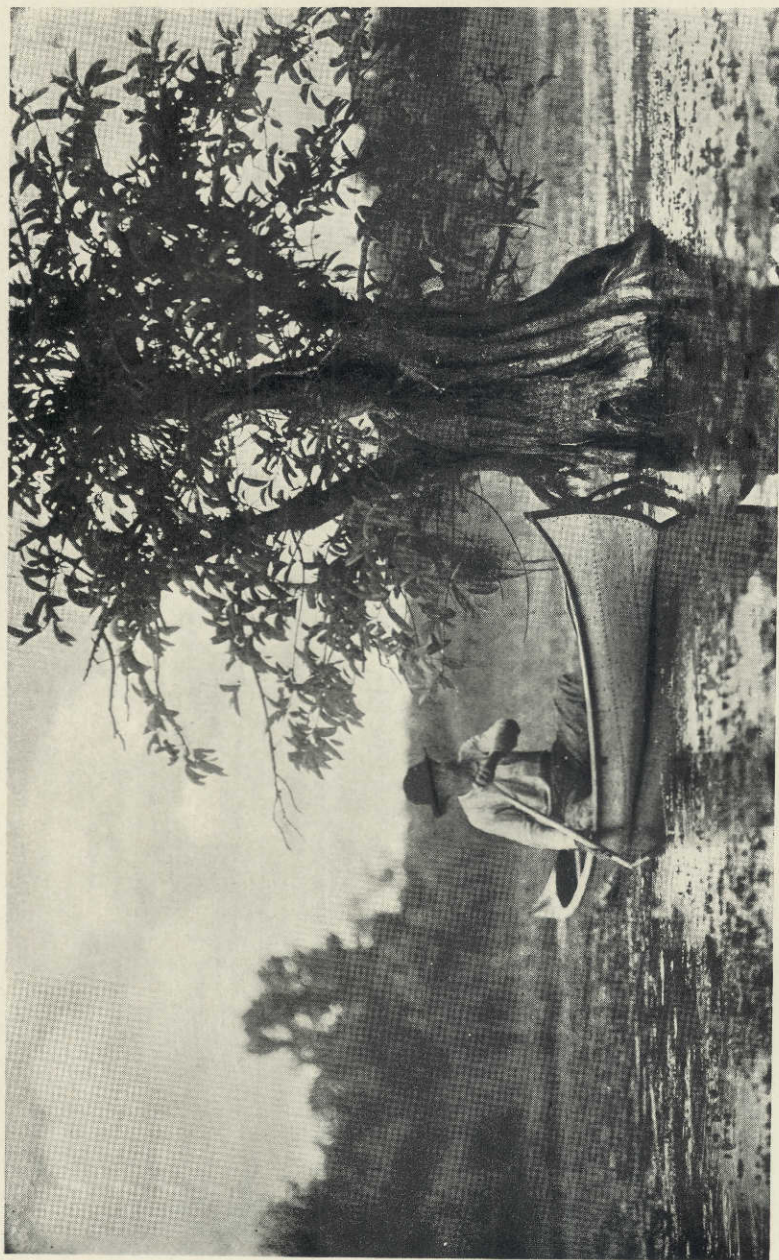
Half an hour earlier the hooting of an owl had told the group of the coming of our guide, but *we* were unexpected. There were no introductions and his, "It's all right, boys," didn't seem to make it "all

right," although every one knew that our being there under his guidance involved his pledge to stand for us, in the Indian sense of a hostage, with his life the forfeit. Some of the whispered colloquy which we overheard was unprintable and the tension was only relieved when it was understood that the boxes we carried contained camera and sensitive plates.

This audacity appealed to the sense of humor of the moonshiners and we were made parties to the conversation, which continued to be lurid in spots, and I was tendered a fiery potation, straight from the still, "just to round up the damn foolishness and copper-fasten the evidence," as a satirical member of the group, whose culture shone through his costume and his company, remarked.

It was all made pleasant for us after the first few strenuous minutes, when the moonshiners became satisfied that we would observe the flag of truce we carried, which bound us to make no use, that would imperil them, of what we learned.

They took a childlike interest in the arrangement for flash-light pictures, but were modestly careful to keep out of range of the camera. It required some persuasion to overcome this diffidence and more to keep the subject selected from too obviously posing for his picture. When he was requested to go to work naturally, just as if he was alone, he picked up his Winchester, tucked it under his arm, and proceeded to poke fat chunks of pine under the kettle. This bit of realism seemed to satisfy the artistic sense of the Camera-man, for he ceased to criticise.



Traversing a vast swamp. A custard apple tree in the foreground.

Makers of Moonshine

Our satirical friend observed to me that he didn't care to have his photograph taken by amateurs, but would send me a fine one by a New York artist with one of his new visiting cards as soon as they arrived from Tiffany's.

"How often do you require new visiting cards?" I inquired, lightly.

"People don't ask such questions in this country, unless they're looking for trouble," he replied, adding, "If you want to accumulate a lot of dangerous information you surely are on the right track."

I told him frankly just what information I was seeking and surprised an amused smile on his face when I suggested looking to him for it. I explained my acquaintance with his associate, whom I first met long before, in the wilderness bordering the Everglades, "out of grub" and whose needs of food, ammunition, and salt for his alligator hides, I had supplied, taking advantage of his gratitude to exact a promise that he would introduce me to a moonshiner's camp. Again I met him in a little settlement, where he had gone to see his young son, who prattled to me in his father's presence:

"Pap's awful careless. He left his gun in his canoe, and I'm afraid somebody'll get him. You know Pap's had trouble."

Only the day previous, while exploring in a canoe a bit of the Everglades and a little cypress swamp that bordered them, I met him for the third time and urged him to take the Camera-man and me at once, in his Indian canoe, to his camp in the swamp.

Florida Enchantments

Since then, with a little help from us, he had poled his loaded canoe thirty miles, once stopping to add to its burden the weight of a buck, which he shot through grass so thick that only the tips of its antlers could be seen.

Sometimes the course lay along almost invisible trails, over a sea of meadow, dotted with islands of bay, white, black and sweet, myrtle and cocoa plums, marked by strands of cypress and an occasional group of palmettoes; across wide bands of the almost impassable saw-grass of the Everglades; through sloughs choked with grass and moss, and deep waterways so grown up with "bonnets" that one could almost walk upon the continuous carpet of their leaves; through acres of long cat-tail flags that rose high above our heads and shut out the air, while a noonday sun poured down upon our heads vertical rays that frizzled our brains, burned our eyes and sent the sweat streaming down our bodies.

From out of this Tophet we slid into the cool, dark recesses of a cypress swamp, along a creek, scarcely the width of the canoe, which was fairly choked with gar, mudfish and bass, that beat tattoos upon the canoe as they struggled past it. Moccasins slipped into the stream before us, or lifting their ugly heads from the logs on which they lay, let their forked tongues play before our faces as we passed. More than once I barely escaped laying a hand upon one as I helped push the canoe over the shoal places. Often the stream broadened to a pool of mud and water from which the heads of alligators would ap-



The cover, deftly fashioned from a huge cypress stump, converts the kettle into a retort.



A watchful eye is kept on the tiny trickle of the potent product.

MAKING MOONSHINE

Makers of Moonshine

pear in response to the grunting of our guide. Wary old 'gators would sink slowly back beneath the mud, but the youngsters sometimes replied vigorously, in grunts that could not be distinguished from the call of our guide.

We were traversing a vast swamp, abounding in rotting logs and dotted with cypress knees, from which rose trunks of live and water oaks, fringed with Spanish moss and covered with orchids, custard apples, bays and other trees, which shut out the sunlight with their dense foliage. Great vines, twisted like cables, stretched from the tops of the trees to the swamps beneath and occasional palmettoes struggled in the strangling clutch of octopus-like fig trees. Water turkeys, herons and ducks flew up from muddy pools and buzzards flapped lazy wings above our heads.

A powerful stench struck us, like a blow in the face, as we passed beneath the guano-whitened trees of a small bird rookery where the ground was covered with broken shells of the white, lightly spotted egg of the white ibis, the blue of the Louisiana heron, and the white, with blue areas, of the cormorant. Little heads at the end of snake-like necks were thrust over the edges of nests above us and from widely opened bills came distinct cries of, "Mamma Mamma!" while crows sat upon near-by trees ready to rob of its eggs the first unguarded nest. Among the disturbed mother birds that flew around us, there were but three with plumes. A single egret and only two long whites told the miserable story of the

raking of the wilderness with a fine comb, to satisfy the demands of fashion and vanity.

There were tracks in the oozy earth which our guide named as we passed, much as one would read the signs on the streets of a city. Wildcat, coon, otter, possum, panther, and bear with one cub, were among those pointed out.

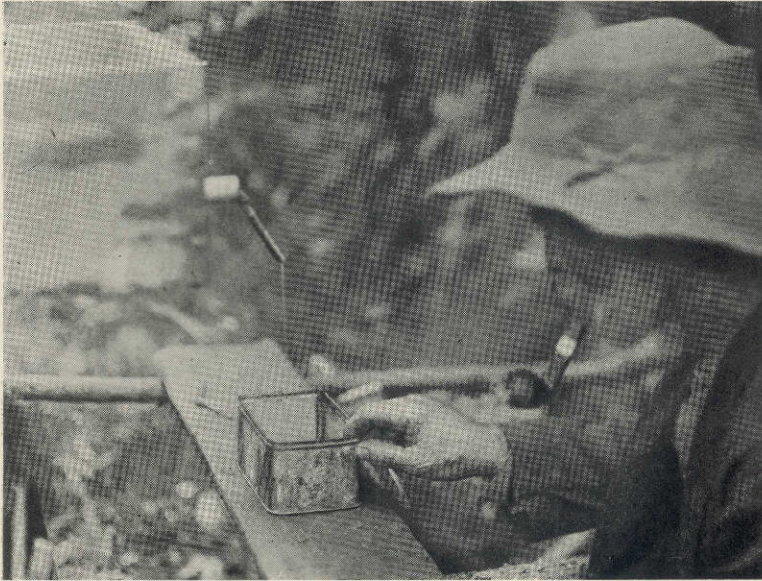
As darkness came on and eyes were useless, imagination became active and peopled this underworld with forms that fitted its gloom and mystery. What seemed the distant barking of a dog resolved itself into the hooting of an owl, and thereafter the calls and answers of these creatures of the night were continuous.

“Hoo! hoo! hoo-hoo!” coming from behind me in the canoe was followed by the voice of our host:

“That’s to let ’em know we’re comin’. It’s some safer.”

As the canoe stopped beside a log, I clung to the branch of a tree while feeling for a place for my feet, and soon, with a plate box swung from my shoulder, was stumbling through the darkness, clinging to the pack which the moonshiner carried on his back with one hand and holding the other uplifted to guard my eyes from the bushes that brushed my face.

The Camera-man followed with the camera which he would trust in no other hands. The moon was full, but few of its rays reached us throughout that interminable tramp, during which I never knew when my foot was lifted, whether it was to strike against a root, or snag, or sink into a slimy hole.



Frequent tests of the finished article seemed necessary.



Suspicious of strangers, the moonshiners are always prepared for emergencies.

MAKING MOONSHINE

Makers of Moonshine

Once the squirming of a fat frog beneath the sole of my canvas shoe became, in fancy, the writhing of a venomous snake that puckered my scalp and made goose flesh of my skin.

Often I stumbled, twice I fell, arms were bruised, face scratched and shins macerated, when with eyes blinking in the blaze I first looked upon faces that shone sinister in the light of the fire beneath the still.

After the excitement of the flash lights, when the men had crawled into their near-by lairs, perhaps to rage and regret the folly of their complaisance, I sat with my back against the big cypress stump and listened to my cynical new acquaintance as he fed the fire and, as he said, "talked like a fool because a man *must* speak and hear his own language sometimes, or else go dotty."

He told me the name that he kept from his companions, and laughed aloud at my start of recognition. In a conversational orgy of some hours, religious, philosophical, political and social, I felt that I was acting as a safety valve to a dangerously repressed intellectual nature. He discoursed with dispassion upon ethics and enactments which had circumscribed his own sphere of action and playfully played that in the great future, the elect, who through the tariff had collected wealth from poverty, whose wives smuggled diamonds and whose daughters wore aigrettes, would look down with compassion on the condemned poor who shot the plumed birds, or ventured, in their hovels in the wilderness, to boil the product of their toil in closed vessels.

I inquired about his companions and was told that one of them, an Indian, was merely a customer, who came to trade because, as he said:

“Think so you make better *whyome* (whiskey) than Miami mans.”

The two others were murderers. One had cleaned out his wife’s family, killing two of them at the courthouse door. The other had killed two men, been sent to the chain gang and after serving two years had escaped.

“You don’t seem to regard human life very highly down here,” I suggested.

“We value it at all it is worth in the swamp. Some of these refugees would give themselves up, if they could be sure of decent treatment. Any of them would be more likely to surrender to a United States marshal than to kill him, and some would stand trial for murder rather than shoot a sheriff, but if any of them were wanted for the chain gang it would be the officer’s life or theirs.

“That man had no business to bring you here, but he’s a grateful beggar who isn’t used to decent treatment and he thought that was the only way he could get square with you. You could trust your life with him, but there are others around here who wouldn’t let your existence stand between them and a dollar. There’s that fellow who just ran away with his partner’s wife, for example, but nobody need worry about him—after his friend finds him.

“I know, of course, that you won’t give us away, but you’ve broken up the business here and to-



Streaked with strands of cypress.

Makers of Moonshine

morrow the still will have to be moved. We will all be scared as rabbits, when we wake up in the morning and think of what has happened. You arranged to leave at daylight. Better anticipate it a bit.”

But we did not leave at daylight. Our host said that he had brought us there and by — we were going to stay as long as we pleased and take as many damn pictures as we wanted to.

And we did.

