

CHAPTER XIII.

SOMETHING ABOUT CAMPING OUT.



FLORIDA abounds in wonders, with its underground lakes and rivers, its curious birds, beasts, and fishes; and many of its possessions may be seen in a journey along its largest river, the St. John's. Flowing through swamp and forest and prairie, it brings down with it, from the almost unknown source of its existence, a suggestion of mysterious regions as yet unpenetrated. Though the broad surface of its lower waters is crossed by many a craft of sportsman-tourist, yet none has penetrated beyond a certain little lake, surrounded by marshes of reeds and canes.

Lake Washington, more than three hundred miles from the mouth of the St. John's, is the last navigable water, and few have ever reached it. On its eastern shore a fringe of low willows borders a rolling swell of upland, upon which are growing a few wind-torn palmettos, wild oranges, and persimmons. This little isolated mound shows traces of cultivation in some time long past; and an occasional shard of pottery, or arrow-head of flint or shell, gives color to the tradition that this was an Indian field, cultivated by the red man many years before the advent of the white man.

Beneath the rustling leaves of the palmettos, basking in the sunshine of a March afternoon, two young men lay watching a

wreath of smoke which, proceeding from some source unseen, was floating over the prairie, dancing here and there, north, east, and west, in a manner most unaccountable. This smoke-wreath came from the stack of a diminutive steamer, the "Starlight," which had laboriously steamed all the way from the civilized portion of the lower St. John's to bring these young men to this, the farthest limit of navigation.

It was the first time in years the trip had been taken, and the adventures of that voyage would have made a lasting impression upon the voyagers, had they not already been eclipsed by their earlier explorations. For these two (it is perhaps needless to explain) were no other than the Antiquarian and the Historian, who, finding they could not reach the head-waters of the St. John's with all their "plunder" by an overland journey, had taken sailing-craft to the mouth of the great river, and thence, by the way of Jacksonville, had chartered the little steamer to bring them back to this place, within less than one hundred miles of their starting-point.

We will not discuss the wisdom of this undertaking; but they were after adventure, and they took this method of finding it.

The letters they had sent back by that little steamer — their last connection with civilization for several weeks — were replete with the experiences of their sail up that mighty river. The night passed in a narrow channel, fast in a mud-bank, surrounded by clouds of mosquitoes, when the booming and clanging clamor of thousands of water-fowl filled their ears and prevented sleep; the days of monotonous steaming against the sluggish current, cautiously threading narrow channels through the dense canebrakes, where the canes met above the deck; the deer they saw, and the turkeys they shot, — all these were fully described in their letters. From one of the Historian's we take this account of their trip:—

The steamer was a curiously contrived affair, its motive power in the stern, in the shape of a paddle-wheel; and everything, even to the smoke-stack, was



A CURIOUS FLOATING ISLAND.

"housed," to prevent being swept away by overhanging trees. The berths were narrow, and the room limited; but during the day we stayed on deck, with rifles ready for deer and alligators, or sat astern, above the foaming water of the paddle-wheel, and trolled for bass.

On the lower river long stretches of gray cypress, miles in extent, were relieved by dark green clumps of magnolias and live-oaks, while a few cleared places indicated plantations and orange-groves.

After crossing famous Lake George, we entered a narrower channel, where the palms grew close to the water's edge, and the banks narrowed upon the river until the hanging festoons of Spanish moss nearly swept the steamer's deck. Floating islands of water-lettuce, rods in breadth, spangled with flowers and alive with water-birds, were set adrift by the waves and floated idly down the stream with their living freight. At times we passed the mouths of creeks, where the clearer water was alive with fish, — pike, perch, and bass, — and were supplied by springs, which boiled up from great depths.

At Lake Harney was passed the site of old King Philip's town, an Indian village once in possession of a noted Seminole chief; and at intervals loomed up mounds of earth raised by the Indians ages ago, to commemorate some great chief or important epoch of Indian life. So many creeks and bayous opened out of the river, that any less experienced man than Captain Jones, of the "Starlight," would have been perplexed to keep the channel; especially when nearing Lake Washington, which was approached through a series of vast marshy plains. We reached the lake in the forenoon, unloaded the steamer, sent back our message to friends at home, and the afternoon found us preparing to camp.

As the shades of evening drew near we bestirred ourselves in getting up the camp. We had with us our small boat, and this was heavily laden with provisions for two months' time, just as it had been landed from the steamer in the hurry of departure. A half-barrel of flour, securely hooped, lay on the sand; near it a keg of pork, a barrel of hard-tack and one of potatoes, and a box containing smaller articles necessary for subsistence, such as salt, pepper, mustard, condensed milk, raw coffee, a little tea, sugar, and a few pickles. One little keg, securely bound with iron hoops, contained two gallons of whiskey, which, as neither of us used the "ardent," seemed superfluous. But let the following letter explain its being found in our possession. It was written by Jim Scobie, whom we left on Mosquito Lagoon, and who had promised to join us here and take us to the haunts of heron and turkey.

NEW SMYRNA, FLA., March 9, 18—.

DEER SIRs, — If you will be at Lake Washington in just one month from too da, at the injun feild on the east side of the lake, I will be there O. K.

Git Capn Jones to take you on the starlite, he and me went up there once and he knos the channel like a book, and better for he can't rede.

Fit out with what I told you and take a good stock of tobacko and a little wiskey for the stomuks sake you kno. Don't forgit the wiskey, for the stomuks sake, as you might be bit by snaiks which it is the only remedy for snaik-bites.

Aligaters is plenty where I'm going to take you, and dere and turkeys just heeps of em and we can make a heep of money on their hides.

All other directions I told yu last time I saw yu. Send the wiskey along sure, as they don't have any here worth drinking — for snaik-bites, I mean ; better send enuff.

Yures till deth,

JAMES SCOBIE.

The whiskey, then, was brought along for "snake-bites" that Jim might be troubled with, though for ourselves we had little apprehension.

One of our boxes held a small quantity of arsenic, alcohol, carbolic acid, and such like for preservatives for use in case we met with any rare and curious animals.

An old trunk, half full of clothes, held also two rubber ponchos, with buttoned slits in the centre, from which water-proof cloaks could be quickly fashioned when it rained, some heavy woollen blankets, and strips of mosquito-netting made into "bars," for protection from the inevitable insect. A keg of powder, several bags of shot, and boxes of ammunition, with a rifle, revolver, and shotgun each, completed our armament.

Unfastening the line that wrapped the roll of blankets, I withdrew a canvas, carried it up beneath the palmettos, and there spread it upon the ground, disclosing a small tent I had made on the voyage.

Taking an axe, the Antiquarian went off in search of poles for the support of the tent, and for some soft substance for bedding. He was successful in finding the bedding, hanging from some broad-limbed oaks in the shape of long skeins and festoons of the gray *tillandsia*, or "Spanish moss." Climbing the trees, he threw down a large heap, and then carried it to the spot selected for the camp and spread it out a foot deep; over this a layer of palmetto-fans, then the rubber ponchos, and then the blankets. Thus the bed was made; and it looked sufficiently inviting, although not of softest down, to be occupied at once.

But he could n't find anywhere a tree small enough for the tent-poles. "I never saw such a country in all my life," he growled to me. "Just



AN UNPLEASANT NEIGHBOR.

look at these pines; nothing but pine-trees for miles and miles; not a bush or shrub beneath them, and not a branch or limb on their trunks for forty feet. Here I've been hunting an hour or more, and can't find a branch, even, large enough or small enough for a ridge-pole. The fires have burned all the fallen limbs, and the branches of the few oaks are too scraggy and crooked."

"Well," I answered, "perhaps we sha'n't need a tent to-night; we must get accustomed to sleeping without one. But why can't we make the oars and the sprit of the sail answer for supports?"

"So we can; I did n't think of that. Bear a hand, now, and the house goes up to-night."

It was n't long before the sprit was made fast at one end to the trunk of a tree, the other supported upon the crossed blades of the oars lashed together, the canvas thrown over them, and the tent-pins driven into the sand. A fire was then kindled at the foot of an old stump; and in the frying-pan, supported upon a pile of bones, the pork was soon sizzling briskly.

"Bring up some of those sweet-potatoes that we bought of the Cracker at Lake Harney, and a handful of hard-tack," commanded the Antiquarian; "brown some of the coffee in the skillet, pound it in a shot-bag, and we'll soon have supper ready, and sooner disposed of, I'm thinking. Now, 'take a cher,' as these Florida Crackers say, and 'dror up' to the table."

"Speaking of Crackers," said I, "do you remember that specimen we met at Fort Pierce, the one who volunteered to collect beetles for the Doctor? He came into camp, while you were away, with five or six palm-beetles, which he had dug out of a rotten palmetto.

"'Doc.,' he drawled, 'I've got some curosties fer yer; yis, sir, I hev, an' thet's a fack.'

"'Well, I'll take them,' said the Doctor, 'and thank you kindly.'

"'Yis, Doc., but we-uns can't live on thankee-kindly; we-uns has to hev hog an' homony. I reck'n I've got to charge ye somef'n fer them there critters, Doc.; they 'se guv me a heap uv trouble, an' I grubbed fur 'em right-smart, I did, Doc., bet yer boot-jack!'

"'All right! How much do you want for them?'

"The beetles were worthless; but the Doctor always made a point of taking everything the natives brought him, because he sometimes got valuable finds.

"'Waal,' drawled the Cracker, 'them's val'ble critters, them is; but I reck'n you-uns can hev 'em at about tew dollars apiece.'

"'Two dollars apiece?' demanded the astonished naturalist.

"'Thet's what I said, Doc.'

“‘ But, my dear friend, don't you think they 're worth more than that? ’



ONE OF THE DOCTOR'S FINDS.

“ The Cracker scratched his head, and looked, if possible, more foolish than usual. ‘ Yis, I s'pose they'se wuth moh, an' I ought tew ask moh ; but I 'lowed we-uns did n't know *how much yew Yankees could stand !* ’ ”

“ Yes, that's it, ” mused the Antiquarian ; “ that's the key-note of their tune down here, — how much we Yankees will endure. It is said, you know, that they themselves admit that they live on ‘ taters an' pone in the summer, and on the Yankees in the winter. ’ But I think this Jim Scobie we have engaged to meet us will treat us well ; at all events, I wish he were here, and shall hope to see him by to-morrow. ”

The conversation languished as darkness fell, and soon after the stars came out we sought our blankets beneath the canvas ; the fire sputtered fitfully awhile, and then went out, and no noises broke the stillness of this solitary spot, save the hootings of the owls and the mournful cries of the chuck-wills-widows.