

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A TURKEY-HUNT IN THE PINY WOODS.



AT dawn, next morning, I felt a chill presentiment of a disagreeable arrival in camp, as I lay half asleep. Rousing myself with an effort, I opened my eyes and looked straight up into the face of a man who was bending over me. I had hardly time to cry out, when the man seized my hand, and shook it cordially; for it was no other than Jim Scobie, who had come across from Indian River on foot.

"Yis, sir, I waited till arter moon-up, an' then streaked it acrost to you-uns. Well, how are you-uns, anyhow? I'm right smart peart, myself, and hopes you-uns am the same. Now, if you-uns don't object, I'll jest take charge uv this camp, and set yer up right all ready to go out huntin' soon as sun-up."

The proprietors did n't object; and Jim, leaning his long rifle against a tree and hanging on it his game-pouch, set about making a fire, the cheery flame of which was very comforting in the damp of the morning; so the inmates of the tent crawled out half dressed, and completed their toilet by the fire.

Jim moved about as though completely familiar with the surroundings, found without trouble the provisions, and soon had the omnipresent pork frying in the pan, and a pot of coffee boiling beside it.

In the midst of his labors his attention was arrested by the little iron-hooped keg, for which he immediately conceived a warm interest; he eyed it intently, then took it up and "hefted" it, set it down carefully, and finally put it up to his nose and took a good whiff at the bung.

"Thet's the stuff, dog-gone me ef 'tain't,—the reg'lar snake-medicine, boys, an' it was rale thoughtful uv yer to brung it. Dog-my-cats ef I ain't afeard I shall be snake-bit to-day ef I don't hist in some of thet ther snake-juice plum-quick. Here's to ye, boys; may yer never be snake-bit!"



It was rather "airly in the day," as Jim explained, to begin "a-histin'" in liquor; but there had been a whiskey famine on Indian River for nearly a month, and he could n't resist the opportunity to indulge.

His hosts, though willing to indulge any respectable whim of this vagrant hunter, were not going to allow him unstinted use of the liquor, and this they told him; but Jim protested that he had no intention of using it to excess, and that, as all he wanted was one heavy dram, they might lock it up for the rest of the day.

Then he returned to his frying-pan; and as he got warmed up (either through the internal or external heat applied) he became communicative, unfolding a plan for the day's sport.

"As I kem along, boys, by the ten-mile slew, I see somef'n thet made me ache to stop; but I thought how much you-uns might like to be thar tew, an' so I kep' on, — I kep' on. What was it I see? Well, I did n't *see* nuffin'; but I *heerd*, — yis, boys, I *heerd*. What did I heerd? Well, boys, dog-gone my buttons ef I did n't heerd the all-firedest gobblin' in the hammock thet ever I heerd in all my borned days."

"Turkeys!" shouted the Antiquarian and I in one breath.

"Turkeys!" calmly replied Jim; "and a whole fambly uv 'em, at that."

"Well, then, let's go after them now."

"Thet's what I wus goin' to remark when you-uns busted in onto me so suddint-like. Jest es soon's you-uns hes eat them hog an' taters, we'll light out arter the gobblers."

To dispose of breakfast was now a short proceeding, and in less than twenty minutes "we-uns" were entirely equipped for a turkey-hunt. Jim whistled up his cur-dog, Satan, and after feeding him on the scraps left over from breakfast, took up his gun and strode out of camp, followed by his eager employers. And while we are on the trail to the turkey-roost, let us glance at the wild turkey in his native home.

Time was when this "most delicious, as it is the largest and noblest, of all gallinaceous game" might have been taken in almost any State east of the Rocky Mountains; but now the would-be wild-turkey hunter must seek his game in the southern and western portions of our Union. In the Southern States, especially Florida, any one, even the veriest pot-hunter, may secure his bird, provided he has money enough. The sudden appearance of a flock of wild turkeys upon the banks of the upper St. John's, as the steamer rounds some wooded point, is not of uncommon occurrence.

Their relative abundance in any particular locality depends upon the supply of their favorite mast, — nuts, acorns, etc., and the seed of the palmetto,





THE HOME OF THE HERON.



wherever found. Their presence is indicated to the experienced hunter by their "scratching-places;" and he can tell by the freshness of them, and the character of the surrounding forest, where to look for them. In October the males have in a great measure recovered their strength and plumpness, the females their good condition, and the young are able to take care of themselves, and withal are tender and juicy. Then, according to Audubon, the males and females hunt in separate parties. At this time the gobblers may be enticed within shot by the hunter lying concealed and imitating the clucking sound of the hen. Of the various methods employed, probably this is the most successful, though even this may be better used in spring. Old hunters are adepts in the art of calling, and their peculiar inimitable call is something the gobbler is hardly proof against, provided the hunter lies close. Sometimes, however, he will answer the call without putting in an appearance, thus depriving the worthy hunter of his meal. The best call, by the way, is made from the wing-bone of the turkey itself, though tolerably good ones may be obtained from dealers in sporting goods.

The old style of trapping the bird in pens is, of course, out of the question, except to residents in a good turkey country.

Shooting by moonlight, also, is only to be indulged in by the occupants of turkey-haunted sections, though those favored beings whose lives are cast in such places may depopulate an entire neighborhood in a short time.

Probably the most sportsmanlike method of procedure would be to hunt with dogs, though even then the sport savors of pot-hunting, as it is rarely a wing-shot can be procured, for the turkey soon takes to tree, and must be sought out, like the ruffed grouse when in similar position. Like the grouse, too, it remains perfectly immovable, and is often overlooked.

It is in early spring, and early in the morning, when the gobblers are saluting each other from the different tree-tops, that a good hunter may expect sport. Then his success depends upon his skill in threading the tangled thicket without noise, and in nearing the wary bird unperceived. If he wishes to bring that bird to bay, he must move with the rapidity of a deer when necessary, and at times stand motionless as a stump; for there is no more suspicious bird than an old gobbler who knows that he is informing a whole forest of his presence. It may be unsportsmanlike; it may be pot-hunting; but there is a deal of satisfaction in seeing a plump fifteen-pounder drop from his airy perch at the report of your gun, especially when you need his presence in camp. Frank Forester says that though he is always delighted to see a well-roasted turkey on the board, especially if well stuffed with truffles and served up with well-dressed bread-sauce, he would n't give the least pala-



table mouthful of him — no, not his undevilled gizzard — to pot-hunt a thousand in such a style. But then, he never shot one. The weight of the hen turkey, full grown, should be about ten pounds; gobblers, from fifteen to twenty, though instances are related of the capture of thirty-five pounders. Though a full-grown bird will carry away a heavy load in the body, a charge of an ounce and a half of number two shot, backed by three drachms of good powder, well placed in the neck or head, will always prove effective. Even number eight shot have proved too much for young males, though hunters generally prefer buck-shot.

The Florida hunters "call" wild turkeys from October to April. The birds begin to mate about the last of February and the first of March. They can only be called when they are scattered; then go in the direction they take, and sit down and call the old hens when the young are about, by imitating their whistle somewhat mixed up with their gobbles.

The best time to hunt them is in the winter, when the leaves are dry and the turkeys are scratching, as they then make so much noise as to be heard a long way, and give the hunter time to slip in upon them unperceived.

It was about an "hour by sun" when we started for the turkey-grounds. At first our route lay through the pine-woods, after leaving which we entered a marsh with the mud up to our knees. Wading through the marsh, the next feature of the journey was a cypress-swamp; and of all the dismal, even repulsive places, this was the worst. There were broad, stagnant pools, black as ink, with old stumps and dead branches scattered through them, and in the foul mud we would sink knee-deep.

We waded through this dismal swamp for nearly an hour, seeing no living thing other than ourselves; and it was with a heartfelt sigh of relief that we emerged from its darkness and stood on firm ground beneath tall pines, looked through the long vistas between their tall trunks, and breathed the pure air laden with resinous odors.

The ground was covered with low scrub-palmetto, about two feet high, except at intervals, where occur spaces of sand with nothing growing but wire-grass.

It was a scene of solitude without dreariness. In a tall pine isolated from the rest was a great bulk of sticks, which a nearer examination revealed to be an eagle's nest, and going yet nearer we saw a beautiful bald eagle sailing high in the air overhead. This was a male eagle, with pure white head and neck; soon the female came flying over the tree-tops, and a well-directed shot from the Antiquarian's double-barrel brought her screaming to the ground. Throwing herself on her back, she extended her claws and awaited our coming, her



eyes flashing defiance, her crooked beak gnashing savagely, and her crest bristling. The dog rushed in and seized her, though he received many severe gashes from the cruel claws, and only overcame her after a long and obstinate fight.

In the strip of woods beyond we saw our first wild turkey, running rapidly at first, and then taking to flight. This warned us to be cautious; and we didn't need Jim's warnings to cause us to tread softly, and make no noise whatever. It was a rather open bit of woods, between the swamp and the pine-barrens, where pines and palmettos grew in clusters, and the ground was covered with dead grass.

It was quite hot by this time, and we reclined awhile beneath a palmetto, while a slight breeze rustled the great palm-leaves and the pine-leaves quivered; but all else was quiet and dream-like.

Many warblers were twittering in the pines; graceful swallows performed aerial evolutions over the savannas; a red-shouldered hawk sent forth frequently its sharp cry; a little plover mourned in the copse, and high overhead three white-headed eagles were describing a series of circles in the pure atmosphere.

It seemed too quiet (as Jim remarked) for any game to be moving; and as it was late, no turkeys were gobbling, as they only gobble in early morning. So we had about concluded that our journey was destined to be barren of results, and that after a rest we would turn about for camp, when old Satan, in his goings to and fro in the scrub, suddenly gave out a short yelp, which brought us all to our feet in an instant.

Then, about a hundred yards away, up flew a wild turkey, followed by another and another, until three were in the air at once. As they were a little beyond the range of our guns, we were obliged to let them fly off unmolested; but as they had not seen us, and had only noticed the dog, they did not fly far, but alighted, one after the other, in some tall trees in a neighboring hammock.

"Now, boys," said Jim, "lay low and try to creep onto 'em in the hammock yander. You two spread a little apart, an' I'll take a line for that t' other hammock beyont, in case they sees you-uns and flies. Be keerful, now, for them ther animiles hes eyes es sharp es needles."

Satan, when he observed the direction taken by the turkeys, dashed off through the scrub in hot pursuit, although he must have known that it was out of the question to catch them; but his manœuvres served a good purpose, in diverting the attention of the birds, and enabling us to creep to within a long gunshot unobserved.



Selecting the largest turkey in sight, the Antiquarian "drew a bead" on it; and as the report of his gun broke the stillness, the others broke from their covert in precipitous flight.

I was not quite within range at this moment; but the two turkeys in the air chanced to fly right over my head, and by a fortunate wing-shot I brought down the foremost crashing through the trees.

Nor was this all; for the remaining bird, confused by the noise and smoke, wheeled around to the left, and passed directly over the Antiquarian, who was trying to note the exact spot in which his first game had fallen. His attention being attracted by the whirring of wings overhead, he was quick to avail himself of his opportunity, and with a sudden motion threw up his gun and stopped the flight of the noble bird right in mid-air.

A cheer from me announced that this extraordinary shot had a witness, and each of us darted forward to secure his fluttering prey.

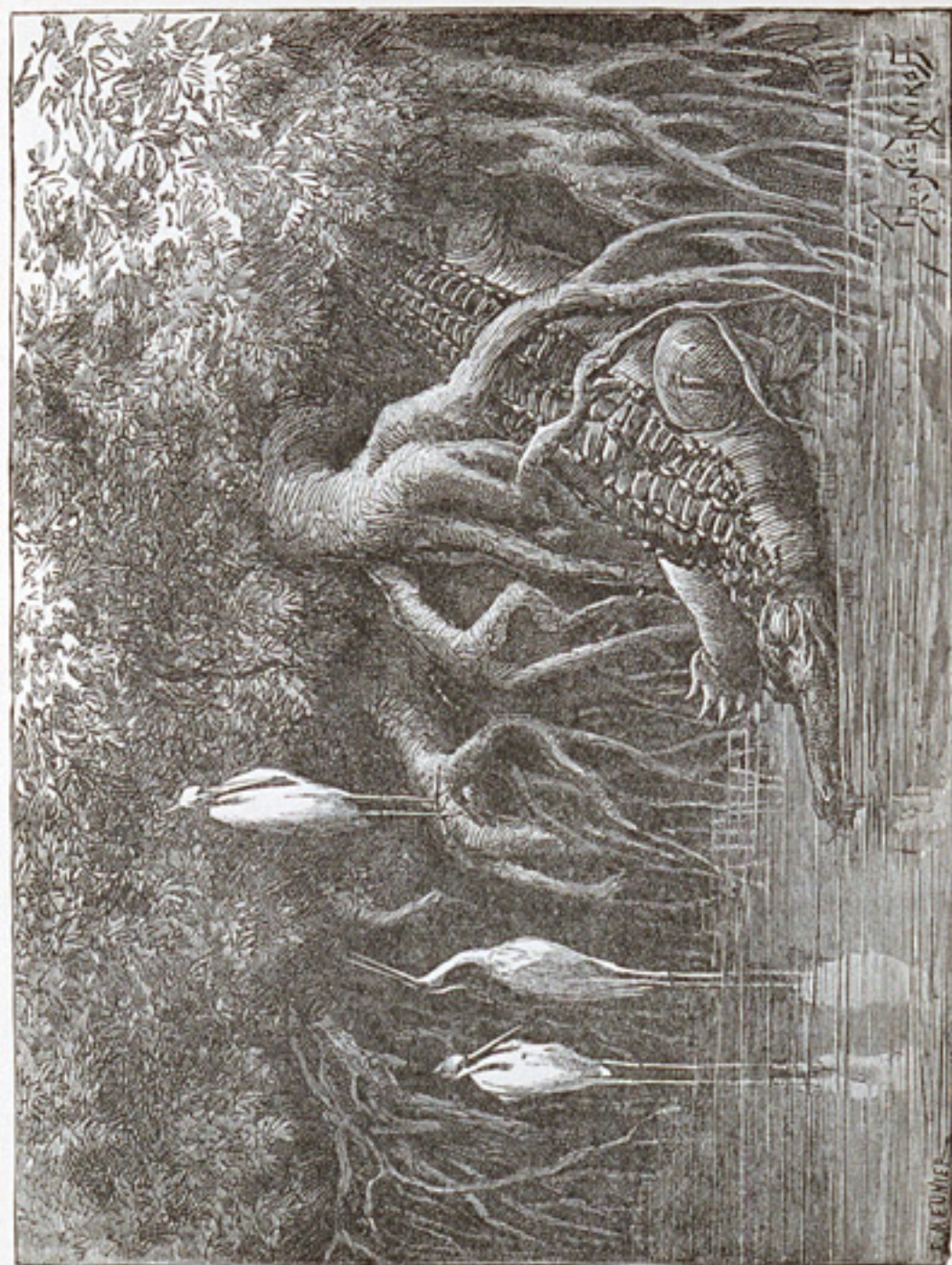
Jim Scobie, who had traversed but half the distance to his destination, was puzzled to account for those three shots in rapid succession, but he wisely concluded that they meant three dead turkeys, in which case there were none left for him; so he changed his course and joined us at the hammock. And he was surprised!

"Dog-gone my picter!" he ejaculated, rubbing his chin with his horny palm, "ef I hed thunk you-uns would cleaned out the hull flock, you-uns would n't hev come along with we-uns."

But he was not half so vexed as he would have us believe, and at once helped us to find the turkey in the tree; after which we all paused to admire them. They were beautiful birds, good representatives of the *Melagris gallopavo*, though not so large as some we had shot previously. They weighed, perhaps, a dozen pounds apiece; though we certainly thought that *thirty* was nearer the mark, after we had "toted" them into camp.

Shouldering a turkey each, we marched triumphantly back to the lake, tired and hungry when we arrived, and prepared to do justice to the "hog and taters" that Jim cooked over the light-wood fire as soon as possible after reaching our destination.





HERONS AND ALLIGATORS.