

CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE LIVE-OAKERS.



HE good Major did not relax his energies, nevertheless, and saw them off in "first-rate style," as he put it; and they left him standing on his wharf, with a feeling akin to homesickness.

The next edition of the — — contained a description of the voyage down the lagoon, from the pen of the Historian. It opened as follows:—

We had what might be called a stormy voyage. The very night that saw the "Virginus" in such peril, we sighted the light off "Frying-pan Shoals,"—just caught a glimpse of it, only to be driven away far east of the Gulf Stream. Four times did we cross the Gulf Stream. For a week we lay to under double reef-spanker and foresail, drifting with the waves. Dolphins and porpoises, gulf-weed and Portuguese men-o'-war, swam and drifted in the water near us; but they failed to excite the interest they ought, for the reason that the objects we sought on the shores of Florida were far away. The New Year brought a blessing; for upon that day we first descried the long low line, far in the distance, that told us of the land we sought. The next day the palms appeared above the horizon; but it was sunset ere we were boarded by the pilots and were threading the tortuous windings of the channel, in tow of the little steamer belonging to the port.

Mosquito Inlet, our destination, is in about latitude 29° , longitude 81° , fifty-five miles south of St. Augustine, and one third the way down the Florida coast. It is about a mile in width, with two channels, obstructed by sand-bars, having a depth of seven to nine feet. It is the outwatering of two large

lagoons, — the Mosquito North, or Halifax River, and the Mosquito South, or Hillsborough River. Thirty miles each lagoon extends, meeting in a common channel at the inlet. Close in is Massacre Bluff, with its tragical history of the murder of shipwrecked sailors by Indians early in the Indian war. Two miles farther is Mount Pleasant, — a high shell-bluff, upon which is the residence of Major Alden, a Massachusetts man, whose hospitality many have shared. A mile farther is Lowd's Hotel, — the only one here, and one of the three houses constituting the town of New Smyrna. This place is about thirty miles from the St. John's, at Enterprise, the road to which fully maintains the reputation of Florida roads generally.

Though to a stranger the hotel at New Smyrna may present few attractions, being fronted by a muddy creek and backed by a dense forest, it is filled to overflowing every winter, the same boarders forming its quota each succeeding year, coming here to enjoy the superb fishing and get a shot at the game in the woods, — deer, bear, panther, and wild-cats.

The only business of New Smyrna is in live-oak, which, in the hands of one firm, employs many schooners the entire winter. On both lagoons are large groves of delicious oranges, noted for their size and flavor. The guava, pomegranate, fig, and banana will flourish here, and have been successfully grown.

The best location for building or camping is at Mount Pleasant, where the channel runs close by the wharf, with sixteen feet of water. We camped there upon its shelly shore, and passed two pleasant weeks, — pleasant, though I could not but heave a sigh whenever I thought of my field of labor so far away. The weather was unusually cold, even closing the jaws (if they have jaws) of the bloodthirsty mosquitoes for a time, and causing that omnipresent oldest inhabitant to declare with fearful imprecations that no such had occurred before since the great frost of '35. Yet we would have days delicious in their dreamy warmth, when the air of a morning would be full of the music of robin and red-bird.

"We" comprehends myself and a young man, — a friend, of my own age, who was to accompany me upon my boat excursions, and remain at camp while I was absent upon my explorations inland. "We," then, had a tent that had done service on the St. John's, which I had brought more for the good it had done than from any love I bore it. It was called the "lawn tent," and resembled the tents figured as belonging to the children of Israel. It was well adapted to the covering of a large surface; but in a "norther" we had to get out guys in every direction, and then stand outside and hang on, while the winds howled and the floods descended. We had two boats. I had one built to

carry a heavy load in shallow water, and told her builder to sacrifice everything else to strength and lightness; and he did. She was twenty-one feet long by seven feet beam amidships, flat bottom, centre-board, rigged with two small sails. I had always stood in awe of her, and was much relieved when after she had lain idle nearly two weeks, a rash sailor asked me if he could sail her; and when he came back and said she worked splendidly, I could have embraced him. When the boat was loaded with our freight, I saw the wisdom of my instructions to the builder; for she was full to overflowing. And so, one pleasant day, we started down the Hillsborough, laden almost to the water's edge. We were fortunate in getting a tow down the river for nearly twenty miles.

The Hillsborough for twenty miles is filled with mangrove and marshy islands, making many exceedingly tortuous channels, difficult to follow. "Ship-yard Reach," fifteen miles south of Smyrna, is a noted place for ducks.

The Mosquito Lagoon commences at the "Devil's Elbow," a channel of the Hillsborough where there are nine crooks in half a mile. We passed safely through the Devil's Elbow, and arrived at the headquarters of the Swifts, proprietors of the live-oak interest here. From Captain Swift and his employees we have received the kindest attention. Mosquito Lagoon is here two miles in breadth, and ten miles to the canal connecting this lagoon system with Indian River.

The live-oak is, or has been, one of the most valuable of our forest trees, — so valuable that the Government has protected and preserved large tracts or reservations of it in Florida, where no person is allowed to cut any timber. It is used altogether in ship-building; and the knees, or ribs, of vessels made from it will last a hundred years or more. There are yet shown on Cumberland Island, near the coast of Georgia, the stumps of trees from which were shaped the timbers of the frigate "Constitution," so celebrated in our history.

The live-oak is fast decreasing in numbers, and men are yet employed in cutting its valuable timber, which is shipped to the various navy-yards and stored up for future use.

At Captain Swift's camp three hundred men were employed, and they lived in little villages of palmetto huts, each group having its captain, teamster, and cook. They all were Northern men, most of them from the lumber camps of Maine, — men born in the woods, and well accustomed to fatigue. At first the oaks were cut upon the banks of the lagoon; but these were soon exhausted, and, mile after mile, the men had followed, building roads of logs across the marshes, and rude bridges over the creeks and swamps, until they had finally reached the margin of oak growth, seven miles away. There was no other

village near; and this settlement, with its many huts, huge barns (for all hay and provender for the cattle had to be brought from the North), stores, warehouses, and wharfs, would be abandoned as soon as the supply of timber was exhausted.

Every morning a gang of men went into the woods; a certain number cut down the huge oak; others hewed the logs square, cut out the "knees," or bent limbs, which are the most valuable, and marked on every piece its contents in cubic feet. The timber was then taken by the teamsters, who hung them under the axles of their huge wheels, eight feet in diameter, and drew them to the river. Their teams contained six, eight, and sometimes ten yoke of cattle; and they were often nearly a day in accomplishing the distance to the lagoon. The native cattle were used, as, though hardly half the size of Northern oxen, they could undergo more fatigue, could travel more quickly and surely among the stumps and roots, and could live on less food. After the timber had been taken to the banks of the lagoon, it was loaded upon huge, boat-like rafts, and thence taken to the live-oak schooners, generally in waiting inside the bar at the inlet.

Captain Swift, a native of New Bedford, in Massachusetts, and his clerk, George Weld, took charge of us on our arrival, and introduced us to the interesting features of live-oaking. They were then cutting over an old indigo plantation, where the growth of live-oak is nearly or quite one hundred years old, on old fields that were once completely cleared. This old field was once cultivated by the famous Minorcan colony that was brought out here by Dr. Turnbull, over a century since. Ruins of the old buildings may be seen to-day back of New Smyrna. Turnbull Castle was on an elevation near the hotel, back of which are the old fields once planted with indigo; and remains of great canals, and wells, walled with coquina, or shell-rock, are found on every side.

The Antiquarian (the second member of the party) was deeply interested in everything pertaining to the history of Florida; and, to his great joy, he was introduced to one of the oldest residents of New Smyrna, Mrs. Sheldon, who lived here in 1835, when the place was attacked by the Seminoles. It was the day before Christmas that the Indians burst from the forest and set fire to all the buildings at three o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Sheldon escaped on a raft, under cover of the darkness, to a point south, just as the Indians reached the mouth of the creek. All the white people collected at "Bulow's," and there picketed themselves in, remaining close prisoners for six weeks, during which period occurred the fight at Dunbarton. The Indians began burning at New Smyrna, and followed the short line of settlements northward to St. Augustine; and when the United States troops arrived, there was no property for them to



AN EPISODE OF THE SEMINOLE WAR

save. Mrs. Sheldon saw the famous Osceola many times; he was then about thirty years old, tall and fine-looking. The other Seminole chieftain—Coacoochee, or Wild Cat—was not so frank in his bearing as Osceola, but wild and sulky-looking. After most of the Seminoles had been captured, many of them poisoned themselves sooner than leave the country. Mothers poisoned their children with a certain tea they extracted from a root dug in the swamps.

The great Seminole war of fifty years ago, during which so many lives were lost and so much treasure wasted, was provoked by the aggressions of the white men, especially the cow-boys, who stole the land of the Indian and then his cattle.

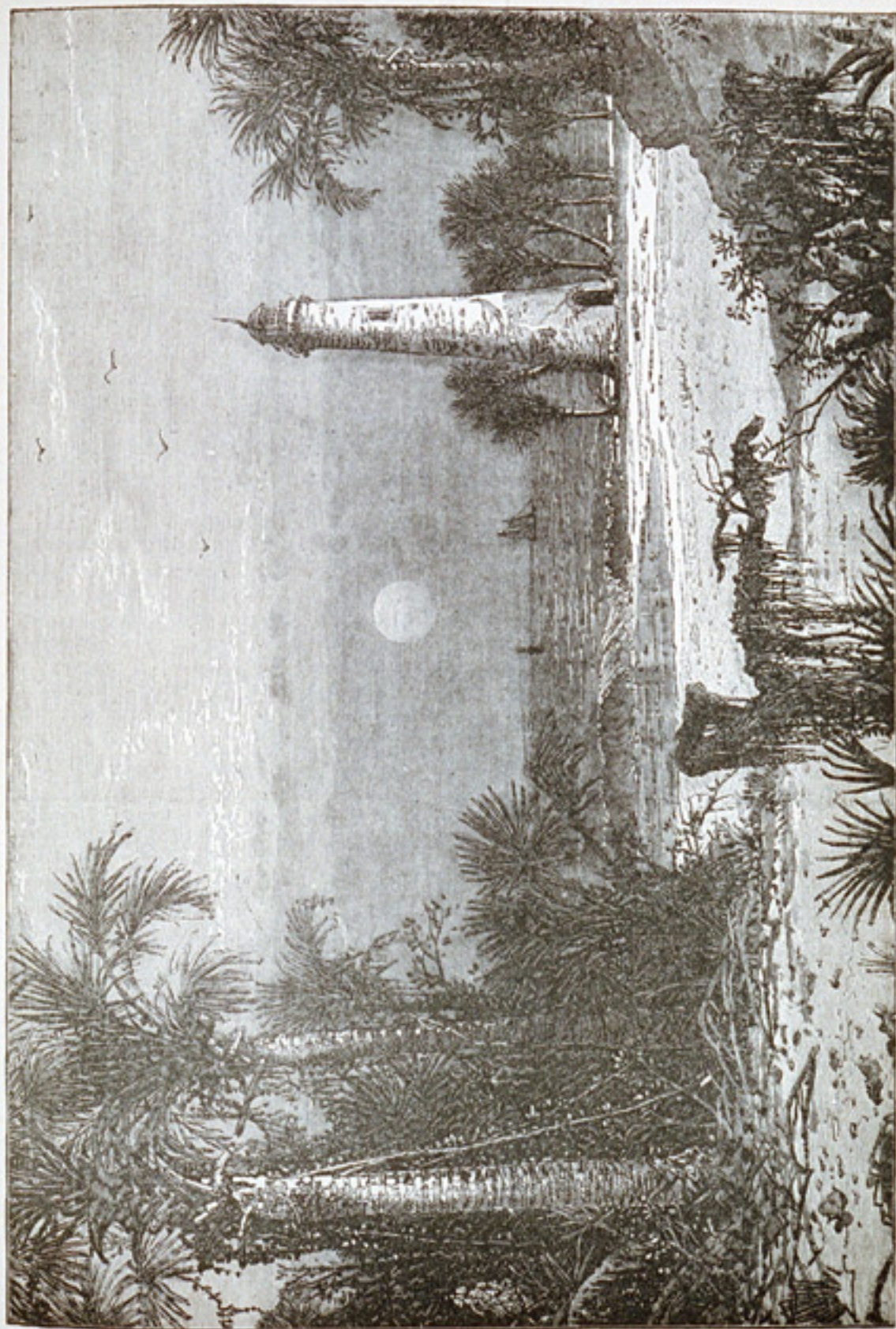
Both Historian and Antiquarian were eager to learn more of live-oaking; and one morning, hearing that an ancient pike-head (a relic probably of the Spaniards of three hundred years ago) could be obtained at the cutters' camp, they started on foot through the woods,—first through the open pine-barren, with several wet "slews" in it bridged over, then through a swamp, over a bridge of cypress trunks seven eighths of a mile in length, then a mile farther through "hammock" and wet prairie. Everywhere were birds,—robins, blackbirds, red-birds, woodpeckers, and ground-doves. Violets, honeysuckles, oxalis, and blackberry bloomed on every side.

The choppers' shanties were more open than those of the teamsters, which were near the lagoon, and were in the midst of a beautiful hammock. Everything was well appointed, the food abundant and well cooked; and two cooks were in charge, while the choppers worked a mile away. There were three gangs of choppers, each containing forty-seven men; their first camp four miles from the lagoon, the second six, and the third eight miles away. To reach the timber, over five miles of corduroy bridges had been built; the longest bridge, seven eighths of a mile, was constructed in nine days, by a gang of two hundred men.

Two hundred yoke of oxen were employed in the woods, hauling out the timber, each yoke travelling some fourteen miles a day. The "drafts" used to haul out timber are great wheels nine feet in diameter, used in pairs, each pair drawn by five yoke of oxen. Fifty teamsters had charge of this force of cattle; and at the headquarters were extra drivers, clerks, carpenters, stablemen, and blacksmiths, all comfortably housed and busily employed.

Live-oaking was first carried on by the Swifts nearly seventy years ago, in Georgia, and has been kept up ever since by father and sons, operating chiefly upon the Sea Islands of Georgia. They have cut live-oak in Louisiana, Georgia, and central and eastern Florida. They came to Florida forty years ago, operating upon the North Lagoon, or Halifax River, until driven

away by the Rebels, who destroyed their steamer and sixty thousand feet of live-oak. After the war was over they returned, and began work at this place. One should see all the different branches of the great work, each department in perfect order, to realize what has been accomplished by the indefatigable energy of these Northern men.



"NUMEROUS CHANNELS RUNNING OFF EAST AND WEST."