by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 3: St. Johns River: Along the River Margin

One of the sweetest of Southern trees at this time of the year is the loquat, which is not by right of birth a Southern tree at all, being transplanted from Japan. However the loquats have been here long enough to be naturalized and seem Southern with that extra fillip of fervor which marks, often, the adopted citizen. Their odor was the first to greet me on landing at the long dock at Orange Park, floating on the amorous air with sure suggestion of paradise just beyond. At the time I thought it just the "spicy tropic smell" that always comes off shore to greet one in low latitudes, whether on the road to Mandalay or Trinidad or Honolulu. Usually it is born of Southern pines whose resinous distillation bears on its rough shoulders breath of jasmine, tuberose or such other climber or bulb bearer as happens to be in bloom.

Off shore in the West Indies the froth of the brine seems to play ball with these odors, tossing them on the trade winds leagues to leeward, till one wonders if Columbus might not have hunted the new world by scent. Later in the year, say February or March, this perfume might well be compounded of orange blossoms, but just now, when the oranges, hereabouts at least, are waiting for the winter frosts to be over before they bloom, it is the loquat trees which take up the burden of scent. The loquat is a handsome tree, suggesting in its shape and dark green leaves the horse-chestnut. The blooms are in corymbs, and their cotton-downy, yellowish-white flowers are not so very different to the casual glance from those of the buckeye. With one of those fairy-like surprises that the South constantly gives you the tree however does not produce horse-chestnuts, but an edible, yellow, plum-like fruit, whence its other, common name of Japanese plum.

All night the loquat blooms send their rich perfume questing off shore along the banks of the St. Johns, and the big yellow stars swing so low that it is hard to tell which is the heavenly illumination and which the trawl marks of the fishermen, lanterns hung from poles where the trawls lie in wait for channel cats. In the gray of sudden dawn you find these fishermen rowing home again, black silhouettes against a black river, and I often wonder if the scent of the loquats, slipping riverward in the lee of the long dock does not unconsciously guide them, they find port so surely without beacon.

It is very sudden, this gray of dawn. It is as if some one turned a switch, paused for a moment only to see that the first turn had taken effect, then turned another which released the spring beneath the sun, after which it is all over. Daybreak I am convinced is a word coined between the tropics. No man born north of latitude forty would speak of day as breaking. There the dawn comes as leisurely as a matinee girl to breakfast; here it pops like popcorn. With the coming of day on this bank of the St. Johns the pungent odor of wood smoke cuts off the scent of the November blooming loquats. The smoke of a Southern pine fire is an aroma decorated with perfume. To me the smell of wood smoke of any kind is always delightful. It sniffs of campfires and the open road, of blankets beneath boughs and the long peace of the stars. The fire whence it comes may be guiltless of any outdoor hearth. It may be half-smothered among brick chimneys, built to cook porridge for life prisoners in a city jail, for all I know, but the smoke is free. It was born of the woods, where it gathered all spices to its bosom, and though the log crumbles to ashes in durance, the smoke is the spirit of freedom and can mean nothing else to him who has once smelled it in the wild. If I am ever a life prisoner, I hope they will not let me get scent of wood smoke. If they do, on that day I shall break jail or die in the attempt.

The wood burned here for breakfast fires is the Southern pitch pine, whose smoke seems to carry in its free pungency a finer spiciness than comes with the smoke of other woods. One born to it ought to be sure he is home again by the first whiff. It differs from that of white pine, fir or spruce, this long-leaf pine smoke, and I am sure that if you brought me magically from the Adirondacks or the Aroostook in my sleep and landed me in the barrens I should know my location, however dark the night, the very moment the wind blew the campfire smoke my way.

Every Southern backyard seems to hold the big, black, three-legged iron pot for boiling clothes, and I know not what other incantatory purposes. Beneath this, too, they burn an open fire of pitch wood, so often I may walk all day long with this subtle essence of freedom

in my nostrils, a tonic to neutralize the languor that comes down river with the breeze out of the tropic heart of the peninsula. I walked south to meet this breeze this morning, with the morning sun on my left shoulder, the blue sea of the broad river stretching five or six miles beneath it to the haze of the distant bank. On my right was the ten-foot sand bluff of the bank and I waded with the aquatic cows, now knee-deep in shallows on a sandy bottom, now following their paths through margins of close-cropped water hyacinths, over mangrove roots and through the mud of marsh edges, and again along a dry bank of clean white sand. To know a river takes many expeditions, and one of these should surely be afoot along its shallows.

The brackish tides that swirl up from the sea to the deep water off the Jacksonville wharves speed with little loss of vigor on, many broad miles into the heart of Florida. To march along this water is to promenade a river side and a sea beach in one. Splashing through the shallows I find the water as full of fish life as the woods are of birds, or the air of butterflies. You can look nowhere without seeing one, usually all forms in numbers. The mullet leap sometimes six feet in the air from the river surface, gleaming silver in the sun. A blue crab scuttles, left side foremost, from the margin toward deep water, his blue claws conspicuous and marking the species, which is Southern in its habitat though found in numbers as far north as the Jersey coast. This crab is very plentiful here, the neighbors catching him with ease by the simple expedient of tying a piece of ancient meat to a string which they drop from the wharf and occasionally draw up. The crab will be found feeding on and so gripping the meat with those blue claws that he may be dropped on the dock or in a pail by shaking him off.

By the river at night may be seen a fine example of the continuance of a trade not taught in schools or in books, but handed down from father to son for countless generations. The fishing for channel cats in the St. Johns is a good business. The fish run from a few pounds in weight up to thirty or thirty-five. They sell in the rough for two and a half cents a pound. Nobody about here will eat cats and they are shipped north, I suspect to become boneless cod. But the cat fishing is not what I mean, it is the shrimping. These curious, bug-like creatures infest the river, and the negro fishermen capture them at night in primitive circular nets which have lead weights about the circumference and are held by a rope from the center. The fishermen cast these upon the surface by a peculiar motion which spreads them out flat. Then they sink and are drawn up by the central rope, looking for all the world like a dangling lace petticoat with shrimps and small fishes entangled in the lace. The water laps in ghostly fashion under the piers and the lantern light makes grotesque creatures out of an elder world

of the fishermen.

Here, I suspect, is a fine survival. Were not the nets that Peter and his brethren cast into Galilee of this fashion? Did not the fishermen of an ancient legend who drew up the bottle which contained an afreet, find its cork entangled in a net like one of these? The slippers of Abu Kassim, in the Persian story, desperately thrown away and brought back again always by most untimely rescue—were not these hauled from the Euphrates once by a fisherman with just such a net? I believe so. But our thought, tangled like the shrimp in the net, has traveled a long way.

The name of the water hyacinth is linked for all time with Florida's broad river. Here where the tide flows in the main stream I see but little of it. Now and then a fleet of tiny green boats floats boldly down as if piratically planning to take the open sea, with green halberds pointed bravely over blunt, round bows. I fancy the salt of the real sea is too much for these bold voyageurs, but they line the river bank everywhere, rarely a leaf showing along the main river, so closely are they cropped by the roaming aquatic cattle. These whet appetites of a morning on the hyacinths as they step over the green blanket of them that hides the sand. They breakfast far from shore on the homely waterweed, Anarcharis canadensis I take it to be, that grows so plentifully in water a few feet deep. Then they wade in again and give the hyacinths another crop as they go by to rest beneath the live-oaks and chew the cud of contentment.

This makes the hyacinths which blanket the shore but squat agglomerations of green-air bulbs that give one little idea of the real plant. These grow persistently, however, and now and then blossom out of season because of this priming, showing a wonderful blue, hyacinth-like bloom that one might almost take for a translucent blue orchid, the standard petal larger and deeper blue with a mark like a yellow fleur-de-lis on it, a blossom that makes the banks of the St. Johns in spring a blue sheen of dainty color.

But you need to get away from the frequented banks of the river to see the water hyacinth in full growth. There, uncropped by cattle and unmolested, the plants crowd creeks from bank to bank with serried ranks of leaves whose deep green gives a fine color but whose culms effectually stop all navigation.

I was splashing along through the shallows that border this riverbank hyacinth blanket, headed toward a great bed of pied-billed grebes that were resting and feeding in a shallow near the entrance to Doctor's Lake, when I had my first tiny adventure of the day. Right among the hyacinths near my feet I heard a scream of pain and terror. Very human it was,

but tiny and with an elfin quality about it. I stepped to the right and it was at my left. I stepped to the left and it was at my right. I looked down, but it sounded twice before I located it.

Then I saw a small green frog, one with a body an inch and a half long, whose hind leg was caught beneath the water hyacinths. He it was that was giving these most human-like little screeches. Almost I reached to disentangle his foot with my finger. Then I bethought me what country I was in and poked with the handle of a net that I had with me, instead. This was just as well, for the poking disclosed the arrow-shaped head and baleful eyes of a young water moccasin. A blow or two broke his hold on the frog, that stopped his yelling forthwith and hopped eagerly away. The snake was soon dispatched. He was only nine inches long, and how he hoped to swallow a frog so big I cannot say. Common report says he could stretch his rubber neck four times its usual size and accomplish his dinner.

Sitting in a clean sandbank, and safe, no doubt, I soon got intent on my birds. Never before had I seen so many grebes. There were easily half a thousand of them swimming about in such close communion that they jostled one another, all pied-bills. I saw no alien among them. Some rocked on the wavelets, their heads down between their shoulders, seeming half asleep. Others fed industriously. The water of the shallows along here is so full of small fish that they had little trouble in getting their fill. Some seemed to succeed by merely dipping the head and picking up what came within reach. Others swam sedately, then of a sudden leapt into the air and curled below in a lightning-like plunge that often brought up a big one.

Before long I began to see that the great community was made up of families or associates, of two to five, oftenest three, as if this year's father and mother kept the young still in charge. Now and then one grebe seemed to rush to another that had just come up and receive something from the resurgent bill, as if the mother had captured a special tidbit which was passed over to the young. Sometimes, too, the would-be recipient was chided away with a sharp dab of the bill instead of the reached-for refreshment. Here no doubt was a bunco child, and the parent was too keen to be thus swindled. In that case the dab that rebuffed the impostor was followed by a swallow that settled the matter as far as that particular young mullet was concerned. There was, however, always a strong community spirit. The most of

the five hundred coursed the shallows in one direction, swimming all heads one way with something like army discipline. The leader of this company had but to turn and swim back and the whole array turned front and made in the opposite direction. Yet there were squads under secondary leadership, for now and then a flock of twenty or so would rise and fly swiftly up or down stream without drawing the others. At such times a quaint little croaking cry was exchanged by many birds.

I might have learned more had I not happened to look sharp at the sand not far from my elbow. Something rather indistinct there took shape after a little, and a troubled conscience sent me up in the air, perhaps not so high as the top of the bayberry shrubs, but if not it was not my fault. I certainly had a strong desire to sit on top of them. The nearer grebes squawked and fled, but little did I care for them, for there in the sand at my feet as I came down I saw the ghost of my little moccasin, a stubby little nine-inch gray creature whose curious black mottlings left him still indistinct among his surroundings.

After all, it was but a ghost of a little gray snake, probably dead, for he did not move. Grown bold I turned him over with the toe of my big boot. He lay motionless. Then I gave him an extra poke and suddenly moved away some yards, for he turned back upon his belly, raised a threatening head and began to grow. All the cobras in India, concentrated, could not have looked more venomous. His markings became distinct and glowed. Two black loops far down on his neck became like great eyes, and the whole snake became so big of head that I looked for legs, thinking he must be some sort of lizard after all. Never have I seen a nine-inch creature look so portentous, and when I whacked him on the head with my net pole and stretched him out, undoubtedly dead, I had vague feelings that I was dealing with a magical creature that might at the next move become a dragon like those of King Arthur's time and take me down at one fiery gulp.

It was my first encounter with a harmless inhabitant of the sandy barrens, the hog-nosed snake. The reptile may grow to a length of three feet. He has neither fangs nor venom, but he does not need them. When cornered he simply swells up to thrice his usual size, hisses, and acts generally as if built out of mowing machines and loaded with cyanide of potassium. I am still congratulating myself that this sand baby was not full-grown. If he had been, and terror can kill, the tiny frog-chaser of the water hyacinths would surely have been avenged.