by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 25: In a Turpentine Camp

The white sands of the Florida coast seem like the pearly gates drawing reluctantly together behind the departing traveler. The winter has rolled up like a scroll behind him, enfolding pictures of delights so different from those which a Northern winter could have given him that it seems as if for him the ages have rolled back and he is our father Adam stepping forth from Paradise, while his eyes still cling fondly to beloved scenes. The swoon of summer is on all the land which lies blue beyond those pearly gates and the soft odors follow like half-embodied memories. Strongest perhaps of these and most gratefully lasting is the resinous aroma of the Southern pines which clothe the level peninsula in living green from Tampa to the Indian River, from Fernandina to the Keys. In the coolest of winter days this odor greets the dawn and lingers behind the sunset, and though the stronger scent of flowers often overpowers it for a time it is always there, a permanent delight. Now the fervid heat of the sun is distilling this from all barrens, for the sap is exultant in the trees and all the turpentine camps are in full swing.

People who regret the turpentine camps set the day not far ahead, in three years or in five, when the smoke of the last still will have vanished and the ruthless ax of the woodsman following will have cut the last tree for the second-quality lumber which the turpentine-bleeding process leaves behind. Others say the end of the trees is something like the end of the world. It has been prophesied almost since the beginning and has never yet happened. Certain it is that turpentining is to-day being carried on within a few miles of Jacksonville, Florida's principal city, just as ruthlessly as it was a dozen years ago, and though the end of

the world has surely come for the trees in certain tracts, in others they still give up amber tears of resin under the wounds that re-opened weekly that they may continue to bleed.

Young trees grow where the old ones have been taken out and in many a once-ploughed field stands today a young growth that will soon be big enough to yield a "crop of boxes." It takes but fifteen years of growth under favorable circumstances to make a tree large enough to be profitable. From the time such a tree feels the ax of the turpentiner until it ceases to bleed profitably may be several years, three at least. Then if let alone it does not die. The sun which draws rich aromas from the resin on the long scar leaves behind a seal of hardened pitch which closes the wound and beneath such bark as is left the sap rises still to the nourishment of the leaves above. After a few years the man may come back with his ax and again draw revenue from new wounds that cut through the yet untouched bark. Another "crop of boxes" extending through more years depletes the final vitality of the tree. After that its value is measured only by the worth of the sap-drained lumber remaining in its trunk.

The Chinese taught the world the first rudiments of the uses of turpentine. As one follows one art of modern civilization after another to its source, it is surprising how many of them came from the far slopes of eastern Asia. It seems sometimes as if the Chinese had grown old in the arts before we of the Western world began to know there was any such thing, old and forgetful of most of them, but still having lingering traditions on which we base our first halting experiments. Through them came to the shores of the Mediterranean in the unremembered ages the knowledge of the uses of the oil and the gum of the terebinthine tree, a rudimentary knowledge which modern chemistry has expanded into a science which touches all arts, from portrait painting to pavements, from sanitation to seamanship.

Without the distillations from these stately trees of the Florida barrens the forward march of the world's progress would go on somewhat haltingly and for that reason if no other we may well hope that their destruction may never be accomplished. That conservation must take the place of destruction is already the cry, and the regulations which would bring this about would not seem to be difficult to enforce. Methods which improve the product and prolong the life of the tree are already coming into vogue from economic reasons. Legislation prompted by these is already discussed. The awakening of an aesthetic sentiment which will save to Florida one of her chief beauties, the endless groves of stately trees where one wanders as in a mighty-columned temple filled with incense burning upon the altars of the wood gods, may well do the rest. The world needs turpentine and Florida needs tourists; wisdom may well be justified of both.

The old, crude method of the turpentine maker was to "box" the tree near the ground, cutting a considerable cavity in the trunk into which the sap might drip and collect. Then above this is cut a wide scarf going just beneath the bark into the sapwood, a scarf whose upper edge draws down into a point in the middle. In our great-grandmother's day young children wore short flaring skirts and projecting white garments beneath, the lower edges of which were cut into saw points. Looking into the gold-green depths of a Florida pine wood which is being turpentined you catch the flash of these white garments beneath the skirts of the forest as your train rushes by, and you smile. Here is all the world in pantalets. The flitting perspective flips these before your eyes in bewildering changes till you recall the lines of one who sang—

Oh, had I lived when song was great,
And legs of trees were limber,
And ta'en my fiddle to the gate
And fiddled in the timber!

Old elms came breaking from the vine,
The vine streamed out to follow.
And, sweating rosin, danced the pine
From many a cloudy hollow—

and you make sure that the days of old Amphion have come again. Here are the stately trees that buttress this solemn temple of the deep pine woods, doing a weaving maypole dance in pantalets. Surely this could happen only in an American forest.

The pitch sweats from the wood in curdy white cream and imperceptibly flows down into the boxes cut for it in the base of the tree. When these boxes are full appear stalwart negroes, often fantastically clad, dipping the accumulated pitch into buckets and filling casks that are drawn by solemn mules, whose faces are so inscrutably stupid that they appear wise with an elder, satyr-like wisdom.

The negroes, in the freedom of the old wood, lose the veneer which civilization is giving the race and work with a care-free swing. Often you hear them in the distance singing some song that lilts and croons, that ignores the studied interrelation of tonic and sub-dominant, that has neither beginning nor end, but chimes in its minor cadences with the music of

the wind in the tree tops. It might well be impossible to reduce such songs to the bonds of modern notation. It is a music that grew in the marrow of the race before tunes were invented—a music grown sad and fragmentary now, I fear, but surely that which Amphion learned and to which the free-footed trees danced in his days. The negro of the pineries is careless, often brutal, always happy-go-lucky, but the men who employ him say that he works well with right management; in fact, is the best labor that can be had for the place, and that the business would not know what to do without him. He surely fits the scene and one would he sorry to miss him from it.

The old crude method of boxing the trees is, fortunately, rapidly passing and in the place of the great hole cut in the base of the trunk one often passes through miles of trees that have flowerpot-like receptacles hung beneath them to catch the pitch. This means a cleaner product, longer-lived trees and greater facilities in handling. It means that when fire sweeps through the barrens as so often happens the blaze will not get down into the heart of the tree and destroy it. Before this boxed deeply would hold the trees which were till it had eaten them out and fire in their light-wood hearts and sagging drunkenly, would the stately columns, reeling but a burnt-out crater where finally fall in ruin, leaving once they stood.

The mule teams bring the casks of pitch to the still on creaking wagons. The big copper, flask-like top is taken off the great copper kettle and barrel after barrel is hoisted and dumped in till it is full, scores of barrels of pitch from thousands of trees being required for one run. The fire is started beneath the kettle and the pitch warmed up a bit till the chips which have been collected with the sap have risen to the surface and been skimmed off. The cover is replaced and connected with the great copper worm which winds down and round in big convolutions in a great tank of water which shall cool it. Then a tiny stream of water is set flowing by way of a spigot into the pitch kettle and the fire is pushed again.

The refining heat melts the dross and the very spirit of the tree begins to bubble forth, is caught up by the steam from the water which is introduced and carried over into the great copper worm whence both flow, cooled and condensed by the surrounding water. But the

two cannot mingle and in the end the floating turpentine is siphoned off and the residual water allowed to flow away.

By what alchemy of a subtler kind than any yet applied by man the tree draws from the gray Florida sand, from the black humus scattered through it, from the flooding rains of summer and the long glories of winter suns and the winds of space, this aromatic essence of pungency and fire no man can say. These are things for a deeper chemistry than that yet taught in the schools to fathom. So desired is it by artist and artisan that in a year more than three quarters of a million casks are shipped from Southern ports to the markets of the world, a massing of results that might well astound the Confucian alchemists of the elder race who first worked on the gum of the terebinthine tree.

After some hours of heat all the turpentine has passed from the retort and the spigot is turned at the bottom of the tank that the residue may run off. In the old-time rough working of boxed trees this was a dark, viscid liquid which soon hardened in cooling into a brittle mass which is known the world over as rosin. To-day one may well be surprised and delighted to stand by the still when the liquid is drawn off and see what he gets. Instead of the dark mass he will see a pellucid flood which is dipped into the casks in which it is to harden and be shipped, at first a pale amber wine which might have got its color from the same source as that juice of the grape which flows from the vats in Italian vineyards. You may dip flowers in this liquid and take them out coated with a brittle transparency which is beautiful to look at and which will keep them, hermetically sealed and preserved, till a rough touch shatters the glassy envelope and it falls in splintered fragments. This is the finest rosin, the "water white" of the trade, bringing the distillers a matter of ten dollars or so a cask. The next best grade is known as "window glass," almost the equal of the other in purity, and from that the quality runs down through grade after grade till the old-time opaque, dark red rosin stands at the bottom of the list. Twelve grades in all are commonly quoted by the trade.

The flowing sap in the Florida pine trees is as susceptible as that of the Northern sugar maples to heat or cold. In the months of winter, December, January and February, little pitch is collected. In early summer or late spring the flow is best. But as the pine of the Southern forests is more stately and taciturn than the maple, so the movements of life within its veins are slower and more dignified. On a warm spring morning in Vermont you may hear the patter of the sap in the pails and see it drip from the very trees. A man may watch a Southern pine for long before he sees any amber tear pass from the trunk into the receptacle placed to hold it. That drumming of the rising sap is never heard.

The solemn quiet of the flat-woods seems to be on the whole thing, and it is no wonder that the songs the negroes sing while working in the woods have minor cadences in them. One must learn to know these lonesome and at first monotonous pine forests before he understands them and comes to love them. Once that is accomplished, their charm for him is perennial. The endearing aroma of the pines follows him far and seems most potent when the fervent warmth of spring suns turns his thoughts toward the cool winds of Northern hillsides.

So long as the southwest winds follow his home-bound ship, so long he sniffs, or thinks he sniffs, the wild freedom of the pine levels, and the chant of the wind in the sparse tree tops seems to come to his ears and whine that wild, minor, endless tune of the elder world, fragments of which the care-free negroes chant as they gather the pitch and scar anew the bleeding trunks. It takes a change of weather and the rough burr of a northeaster to change this. Then he smells once more the cool brine swept far out of arctic seas. His ears lose the minor cadences and prick to welcome the major uproar of surf that bellows hoarse on Grand Manan and sends white surges playing follow-your-leader over the gray rocks of Marblehead, leaps the rough cliffs of Scituate and rolls in fluffy masses of spindrift far inland on the sands of Cape Cod. Then only is the charm broken and he breathes deep of the home wind and knows that it is blowing to him across a cool land, one yet but gray-green with the first impulses of spring, but dearer and more beautiful than all others.

The End