



Ocala to Tampa by Train

by M. L. Barber

When I call to mind the variety of climates in the different and various states, I am impressed with the truth that Florida is in a class by herself. And again when I look at it on the map and compare how much more densely populated most of the other states are, I am again assured that the vast majorities of my readers will be interested in reading descriptions that are new to them in every detail.

The writer has been in twenty-one states and territories and is familiar with their climates, soil, peculiarities of weather under given conditions, so we hope to give the reader breadth of comparison than as though we knew only two places, home and Florida.

No spot on earth but has its objectionable features in some way or other. You may enumerate nine fine points and the tenth one will be a drawback. There is a story going the rounds of two tramps who were in search of a place where they could live with less effort and expense and one found a copy of the Florida Review, and leaned back against a stone, soaking in the sunlight on a hillside reading it, he called out to Sleepy Willie:

“I have found a land where grows the loveliest fruit and good things to eat, all you have to do is pick them.”

Turning half over and rubbing his eyes Willie retorted: “Look a here, Weary, don’t you have to PEEL them bananas?”

“Well yes.”

“I thought there was no drawback to that country.”

So in truth the drawbacks are largely the viewpoints of the individual. The object of this letter will be mainly to note the scenery in December, when so many of my readers are piling the coal at -- dollars per toil, and hibernating like a ground hog till February only to see if he shall go back to stay six weeks longer.

I was born away up almost under the shadow of the largest flouring mill in the world, (as I am not advertising I will let you guess where it is) so I know the whole process of a winter almost arctic, I have seen only six weeks between frosts, and after such a delightful winter as I am passing in Florida, it makes me wonder why there isn’t a snowbound family on every ten acres in the whole state, instead of passing mile on mile of undeveloped land, as I have on this trip.

The first to attract my attention on leaving Ocala are the acres of small shrubbery with its gorgeous hues of autumn leaves. Many or all of the hard wood varieties do not shed their leaves annually, so they are as fresh and green in winter as they are in summer. Ocala has such green foliage, the only difference made by the recent frost, when the thermometer staid near 32 for several days, was that the moss looks a little more gray.

But this frost has done wonders in the southern varities of small oaks, acres on acres of living colors—just like a moving picture film, all the glorious shading from pale yellow to gold, bronze and red, brown and crimson. Several small towns were pointed out as non-resident towns, the explanation of which is that they were occupied only during the winter by northern people who have found out the glories of a Florida winter.

As the train sped on its way the glimpses of gardens showed them to be in fine condition, the lettuce and radishes ready for market, the turnips and onions flourishing. Several crate factories suggested the magnitude of the truck industry, and some glimpses of orange groves with dark, waxy gloss leaves in strong contrast to the rich, ripe oranges dotting their branches, made a picture rich in beauty as well as suggestive of the wealth of the enterprise.

I have ridden in other states miles on miles of monotony, but this little hundred miles of scenery is one of constant surprises; a lake nestling among the pines dotted with lily pads and lilies and teeming with ducks. Just as we get a good view of the big, piney woods whose straight poles seem trying to reach the skies, and maybe acres of them cut for their turpentine, presto!—the scene changes and we have cypress swamps and acres of water, dark, dismal, tropical and one might expect to see an alligator, boa constrictor or other terrible inhabitants, but we didn't.

Next comes the plain old every day sand, but always underbrush where the sand is, and a lake or a spring every few miles. Now it is rolling country, hill and dale, pine and swamp, garden and sandy stretches, old sawmill ruins, whole settlements of company huts where the turpentine industry is carried on, just a panorama of beauty and change.

Leaving miles of gorgeous autumn leaves, where the hand of Frost, Nature's Sorrow, has touched the leaves in their full maturity, leaving them more beautiful in their prime of life rich with experience, than was possible in the pale green of their youth.

We now come to a forest of low, heavy hard wood of different varieties where there is not underbrush at all and looking beneath the dense branches we see a lake in the distance. Oh! what a subject for a canvas! Here we have it all, foreground, middle

distance and perspective, and with the changes the sky seems to change just as often as the varieties of views give us a constant study in light and shade.

But as the miles fly by we are reminded that December has the shortest days of the year and we had hoped, (without looking at the time table) that we might get to see the sun set over the gulf, but no, all too soon, as the train rounds a curve, we are brought around to view a pine forest on a distant hill, and there peering through the tree trunks beneath the tall foliage is the great golden ball that seems to have slipped and fell behind the pine tops and there is no hope of getting it out. We have been seeing oranges and mammoth grapefruit as large as pumpkins until we are in doubt but that this is only a rich, golden orange falling down behind that picture, and while we are mentally inquiring which Fairy to call upon to rescue it, it gently slips the rest of the way down and is lost to view.

But Nature, like an indulgent mother, always compensates, and we turn our eyes from the west, disappointed at losing our king of day, only to be greeted in the east with a round, pale moon gorgeous in the blue sky, waiting her turn to flood the landscape with crystal glitters, and an entirely different panorama of light and shade.

TAMPA BY NIGHT—A GLIMPSE OF FAIRY LAND.

What is more beautiful than a city by night any way? and the visitor to Florida has something in store for him if he has not seen Tampa.

It might have been said that a city is no prettier than its lighting, capacity for places, buildings corners, old land-marks, even unsightly stalls and old land-marks are made to appear to be a bower of beauty under the Aladin transformation of night and electricity.

The trolley cars with their buzz, loaded with pretty gowned women, the changing, winking signs, and as we came in sight of one where one worm chases the other around in an endless but futile effort to catch him, we almost expected some unseen to tug at our coat sleeve and whisper that old familiar warning, "The Boogies will get you if you ain't good."

But we hurried on and turning on



LaFayette street we face another avenue of beauty. The lights at even intervals leading to and crossing the bridge making the darkness all the more intense. A short walk brings us to the bridge crossing Hillsborough river and we pause here to enjoy the sights of various water craft on either side.

Just across the bridge is City Park and Tampa Bay Hotel. Can we describe this fairy land? The long winding paths take us all through the grounds, which is a collection of rare trees and shrubbery. The palmettos are giants and their graceful swinging palms, bending, as they do, form arches some 20 to 30 feet in diameter. But the wonder of all wonders is the liveoak on the east side of the grounds. The diameter given in detail would be almost incredible, except to readers who are familiar with the redwoods of California. The mammoth trunk stands here in mute resistance to the passage of time. It spreads out its limbs larger than the average tree in majestic dignity as though it defied any age limit, forgot to die and continued to grow, expand and offer its shade to a whole army at a time. A miniature amphitheatre is built under one side, but it looks like a doll house when compared with the spread of its branches. We did not learn if there were any legions to tell, but we would not be surprised to hear that such a wonder of the forest had a history worth relating.

Passing around on the west side of the hotel we hear soft strains of music, and as we come nearer, drawn by an attraction irresistible, we discern that it comes from the parlor, where the decorations and scintillating lights show us that the guests are enjoying the Terpsichorean art.

The one who has not danced has missed one of the keenest delights as well as harmless forms of amusements that this life affords, and a glimpse at this picture will prove it. The music, soft, flowing in its rhythm, is felt as well as heard. It does something more than appeal to the ear, it sets every nerve vibrating in harmony and sympathy, and when enhanced by the delicate tints of the highest art in womanly costumes and manly evening attire, the art of dancing in musical rhythm is the very poetry of motion.

The dances of the nations and of the ages is a very interesting study and the present American ballroom presents the high cultivated stage of the art. The restful quiet, quiet glide of the modern two-step and waltz seem to have left nothing to be desired, and we hope we will not live long enough to see it go out of fashion.

Time was when the professor of dancing said: "The higher and more vigorous the hop the prettier the dance." But dancing is a pleasure and not for physical culture or muscular development.

Leaving the glimpse of fairy land where all the nymphs were clothed in pink, white or crystal satin, we turn expecting to see wings unfold and all the pretty ones fly away, so as not to witness a transformation as disappointing as that would be, we pinch ourselves to in make sure we are still on earth, and turn down the serpentine path arched on both sides with foliage and studded overhead with real stars. The blackness of the sky is held in place with brass-headed tacks.

Oh! What a beautiful picture! What is it? Lights and lights and then some, like beads on a string. Nearer we go and just a little listening will unfold the mystery, it is the old familiar midway of Chicago, and the pike of St. Louis and a feature in a class by itself. No, we refuse to take our reader through the gates, distance lends enchantment and if we enter and attempt to describe it in details as it deserves, this article would fall into the waste basket from sheer force of gravity, instead of reaching print, as we hope it will do.

We must repeat that a city is no prettier than its lights and electricity is the wizard of modern civilization when used unsparingly and almost recklessly, as it seems to be in Tampa.

You smaller growing cities who are striving to excel in civic attractiveness, do not try to economize in lights if you expect to rank any where on the list for beauty.

Only a block from the main business street is Hillsborough river, where small skiffs and launches plow their way and oyster boats unload their wares, the river is much narrower than one would expect so near its mouth, so we walk across the bridge in order to get a better view and act so interested that we miss our car, so this gives us a half hour to spend in City Park and view the mammoth Tampa Bay hotel, a structure which would be a credit to any metropolis in the world. Accommodation for eight hundred guests and the most beautifully laid out grounds! Nothing less than a column would do it justice, so let us take our car and tell you about this some future day.

In leaving the city we might say that it looked quite like any other suburban district and not be uncomplimentary, as to a certain degree all cities look alike; but a mile or two more and we see the unusual; a turn to the east brings us facing the sun over the waters and the blue waves on the left dance and ripple in the calm morning as only the salt water can.

You who have seen a frosty morning where every bush and twig was laden with glittering crystals, can have some idea of the view of the bay as the sun rose majestically higher and higher, leaving in a wide path its sparkling and scintillating gleams, as though he had emptied down a whole dishpanfull—no! a whole tubfull—of diamonds of all sizes, and there they were dancing on the glassy surface of the placid

waters, changing and rolling around, coming nearer and still nearer, but never arriving. It is just one broad path; the largest ones are rolling toward the center, but they get thinner the further they roll toward the sides.

Looking away to the left we soon see Tampa, the city we have just left on the other side of the shore. The white minarets shine in the sun and the slender masts of the skiffs against the sky gives one a better idea of distances, as the water is very calm and smooth.

All along on our right we are reminded again that Florida has been called the rich man's playground. Homes beautiful and picturesque are closed, for their northern occupants to come from the snow drifts and zero weather to this balmy, salty breeze; many are now being put in readiness and the gardeners are trimming the shrubbery and planting the winter gardens.

Arriving at the terminal we are informed that Tampa Bay lies a mile further. Now I hope you are not going to object to a mile walk this glorious morning with the ozone of the air and the salty breeze in your face. You have come this far with me, my reader, and I shall be disappointed if you stop in this antiquated, discarded, neglected part of the trip and not see what is in store for us a mile beyond. Now, see! it not so bad, we finished the distance in 20 minutes and are scarcely tired.

Oh! Oh! Look! It was well worth the trip; no, never mind the schooners being loaded with phosphate rock, now, yes, I see there are several in the canal but those big steamers interest me. See the smoke of that one in the distance against the sky!—and one is anchored, and another is coming; we must go out on the pier as it arrives.

The waves are so calm and placid. There is an empty box riding the waves which looks like a cradle; it rocks so easy and regular; the sea gulls hover around in flocks, their white breasts glistening in the sunlight; how they dip and skim and appear to enjoy their life, there are about a hundred walking on the beach, we will go near them treading on shells and sea weed as we go far out, as it is low tide, and as we come almost as near as we would to our flock of chickens at home they suddenly take flight as though the flock was all one, swirl around for a few yards and settle down on the water swimming like ducks.

The soft [s]plash of the waves at our feet remind us that we are not in a gallery looking at a picture, so to make it more realistic we stoop down and dip up a handful of water and pass it to our lips, assuring you, reader, that it tastes just like soup. Don't laugh, now.

I look at my watch—I have missed my car. What do I care, I am alone on that soft, sandy beach, the broad expanse of water facing me, with only the interval of

small waves between me and the sky; I could forget trolley cars, forget every thing for a few grand moments where I can contemplate the wonders, —try to comprehend the meaning of those waves, the restless motion,—where they go and whence they come.

Oh! the enigma of the universe! The secret of the ocean! I recall the words my sister wrote to me of her sensation on her first view of the Pacific Ocean. She quotes the lines of the poet:

“The sea, the sea, the open sea!
The blue, the fresh, the ever free.”

And further says: “To us, sister, whose bump of sublimity is as big as a dry goods box these things are unspeakable.”

What is one more half hour with God’s secret facing me? His glorious sunlight getting higher above my head, the life-giving breezes in my face, let me forget that it is winter, my back is turned to the smoke and noise of the elevators, the traffic of the mart, the freight boats, they do not interest me this December morning, another car has gone and still another! and then as the sun has climbed to the zenith and life with its duties calls to me I turn my reluctant steps for the retracing of the mile walk, discarding my wraps, and the silent ride to the city only serves to stamp indelibly on my memory the beauties I have seen and felt.

Meeting my friends, I have not a word to say for my morning’s adventure; it was too grand to relate; words are so inadequate to express those scenes that are felt as well as seen.