by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 5: 'Twixt Grove and Swamp

The old Greek myth-makers sang with poetic fervor of the golden apples of the Hesperides, which no doubt were oranges, nor do I blame them for their fervor. Apples they knew, and knew, too, that nothing could be more beautiful than an apple tree, holding its dappled fruit bravely up to the pale October sun. But oranges came to them out of the misty west, a region that the setting sun set glowing with romance each night, and then swathed in the purple evanescence of darkness. Something of this delight of mystery has flavored the fruit ever since, and we taste it with mental palate before its pulp passes the lips.

I had thought all the orange trees of northern Florida killed by the great cold of a decade ago, and so in the main they were. But there are spots on the east bank of the lower St. Johns where the miles of warm water tempered the cold somewhat, so that though the trees were cut to the ground the life in the roots remained and has since burgeoned in reborn groves. The trees sprouted from the stump as oaks and chestnuts do in a Northern woodland, and now the sprouts bear fruit. At Mandarin, a dozen miles from Jacksonville, are such groves through one of which I delight to take my way to "the branch." It is literally a branch of the level river into which it so smoothly glides with never a ripple on its black surface or a clot of foam to cloud its mirror.

Swamp and grove meet but do not mingle, the dividing line being firmly drawn by the teeth of the harrow that all summer long vexes the sand beneath the orange trees. With all its persistence this harrow barely keeps down the scutch and dog fennel and a score or two of other weeds that under soaking shower and fervid sun continually rise rampant. Even now that the almanac has decreed winter rosettes of seedlings of a score of nascent annuals

spangle the gray with green that softens its glare to the eye and tempts the knight-errant grasshoppers. These zip from glare to glare, and seem to creak a bit as the tiny coolness of the northern breeze touches the joints of their machinery.

Sitting in the grateful shadow of an orange tree, facing sunward in the grove, the world becomes an expanse of glistening white sand, blotched with the deep green masses of foliage, dappled with the gold of as yet unpicked fruit. Over yonder a short ladder spires above a tree and I can hear the snip-snip of the picker's shears and the soft thud of fruit dropped into big bags. The noise fits in with the rampant listlessness of the creaking grasshopper machinery, a busy, drowsy blurring of staccato sounds that has a sleepy insistence. It fits the gray glitter of the sand and the shining sun. I note an orange sulphur butterfly, just the color of the fruit on which he seems to linger, where in the sun he may match his own shade. I have a fancy that he does this consciously, the dark tips of his wings contrasting harmoniously, as the black-green, glossy foliage does, with the golden fruit.

Something of this semi-conscious matching up of colors seems to exist in other insect life of the grove. The "orange puppy" that feeds on the young leaves is black with the same quality of blackness and curiously mottled with a cool gray of lichens and gray moss. When he rests quietly on a twig he is part of its growth, simply a gnarled excrescence, but no caterpillar. When by and by he tucks himself up for slumber in silk homespun and later, joyous, emerges, he has still the colors of the orange grove, the pale yellow of ripening fruit, barred with the dark shadows that are set by linear leaves on all that flits beneath them. One finds many happy insects among the oranges, too many perhaps for the joy of the grower, the perfection of whose product they mar. None should be happier than this Papilio cresphontes butterfly that is hatched on an orange twig, fattened on the crisp green leaves, falls asleep in their shadow and finally wakes, a spike-tailed fairy with shimmering black and gold wings, to drink deep of the honeyed dew in the gold hearts of odorous orange blossoms.

On the edge of the grove, at the very mark of the harrow, rises the tangle of the swamp margin. On the higher ground is the sumac, the leaves still green, though ripening in the margins to a dull red, holding none of the vivid flame that burns the Northern sumac leaves to ashes before October is over. It is December, indeed, and the wind out of the north has

sometimes a wire edge of northern ice on it, but the first margin of dense trees that lines the river bank takes off this edge and the sun floods all the sheltered places with warmth that bids one seek the shade for shelter. There still he finds a sniff of tonic ozone in the air, expanding the exultant spirit while yet the body revels in a genial glow. The day seems a child of June, with October for its father. Elder crowds the sumac and blackberry canes tangle the two. The scuppernong grape twines supple vines all about and hangs its crinkly pale green leaves in festoons to the tops of the sweet-gum trees in the swamp behind. The pale amber wine of the scuppernong grape seems to hold in its depths something of the golden delight of this December sun, and just a tang of the vigor of the north wind.

The sweet-gum tree fills the swampy ground along the St. Johns "branches" and sheds its maple-like leaves in December. Sailing up the broad river you may trace the swampy spots now by the soft gray of bare twigs of the sweet gum, in beautiful contrast to the glossy dark green of live-oak and the paler silkiness of plumy tops of the long-leaved pines of the barrens. Its roots dispute the very black depths of the flowing waters with those of the cypress, and its purpling autumn leaves seem like those of a Massachusetts swamp maple that have by some mischance ripened without vividness. The sour-gum tree, which is nothing more than the tupelo which grows on the swamp edges at home, thrives as well in Florida and is true to its colors. The rich red of its leaves makes the most vivid blotches of autumn coloring I have yet found here. Along with the scuppernong grows its cousin vine, the Virginia creeper. This too holds much of its Northern red in the passing leaves. The homesick Northerner in Florida at this time of year will do well to take to the swamps. The pinky gray of baring sweet-gum twigs, the rich red of the bordering tupelos and the festooning ampelopsis will do much to make him feel at home.

Just beyond the mark of the harrow tooth the goldenrod has bloomed and the fluffy plumes of brown seed pappus mound into obese, inverted cornucopias for the seed-eating birds that flock along the swamp margin. The grapes and the Virginia creepers have been high-minded and have not rested without topping the tallest trees, but the greenbrier seems to have had less ambition. It has been content to help the blackberries tousle the close-set margin of the field, and its glossy green leaves and purple berries add their colors to the rest. The greenbrier here is gentler in its ways than our Northern representative. That well merits the name of horsebrier which is often given it. It is as strong as a horse and the kick-back of its stretched sinews will drive its numerous thorns to the hilt in your obtruding flesh. This vine has hardly thorns enough to be felt, and its leaves instead of ovate are hastate or halberd-

shaped, whence I take the plant to be the Smilax auriculata.

I doubt if I would change Northern thickets in any particular, but if I would it should be to suggest gently to the horsebrier that its Southern cousin's ways are most admirable and might be imitated to advantage. The auriculata does grip you valiantly and even scratch your legs when you would penetrate it with undue haste, but it is such a polite and lady-like scratch in comparison with some that might be mentioned that you feel like saying "thank you" rather than other things. In the wetter spots big purple asters which I take to be Aster elliottii, out of all the maze of scores of varieties of Southern asters, toss their corymbed heads in the breeze and still invite the passing butterfly. Cool weather has thinned out the butterflies, only the strongest remaining. About the asters flit a big and little sulphur and a lone zebra. But there are a half-dozen monarchs coming and going. These seem to be the strongest and most able to withstand cool weather of all butterflies. I see them out earliest in the morning and latest at night, often soaring in shade on days when the December wind has a Northern nip in it and when no other varieties are visible.

Loveliest of all old friends that help to make this thicket-borderland homelike is the Andropogon, the purple wood-grass, that holds the dryer corners with its brave wine-red culms and its gray mist of bearded blooms. The pampas grass is cultivated in gardens here in Florida for its feathery plumes. These are beautiful, no doubt, but their beauty cannot compare with that of the clumps of purple wood-grass that grow in the neglected border between this dark orange grove with its glistening white sands and the black depths of the swamp that borders the little branch. The Andropogon scoparius of our sandy fields north is less robust than this buxom beauty of the barrens. It grows but a scant knee high and seems to me now but slender and rather pale. This, which is I think the Andropogon arctatus, grows to my chin, and its culms seem as red as the skin of a ripening baldwin apple, a rich wine red that intoxicates the eye and makes it see in the misty beard of the tips a frothing as of bubbles rising to the top of a glass but now filled. With this the Florida fields seem to have as much of the joy of autumn as they can hold, and in it to drink deep to the passing of the purple year.

Through this border tangle one goes to enter the solemn silence of the swamp where the black water seems to listen as it glides breathlessly by to the river. In the steaming warmth of midsummer the place must drip with purple shadows. Now, because the sweet gums and swamp maples are losing their leaves it holds only a sun-flecked twilight that soothes after the black shadows beneath the orange trees and the glare of the sand. Here one may

draw a long breath and let the bustle of a busy world slip from him. I have the same feeling on entering a church of a week day and hearing the heavy ticking of the clock. The silence broods. The maples are already bare, the gum trees partly, and the feathery fronds of cypress have grown brown on the trees and in part fallen, slipping one by one to the placid surface where they add their color to the purple of the other thick-strewn leaves.

In these fleets of dead and gone one gets the nearest approach to a Northern autumn that I have found as yet in all the woods. The small birds that frequent the groves do not seem to enter here and there is no sound of their twitter. Only the leaves are noisy within the place. Those which touch limp margins on the water have found a quiet that is finality. But their fellows, saying a final good-by to the twig, do it with little glad chirps as if the spirit within each joyed at its release. Nor is this the last cry. Many chuckle at each touch of limb and trunk on the way down and reach the water with an audible pat. Poets to the contrary notwithstanding, autumn is a joyous time with the leaves, at least those of deciduous trees. The maples, the sycamores, and the sweet gums all seem to give the laugh to the evergreens as they pass. The bare limbs stretch skyward with a relieved resurgence as of those who have done good work and welcome rest. Compared with them now the live-oaks seem over-tasked. They are as somber as Northern pines in winter, burdened with a never-ending routine of business.

I cannot say that the swamp cypresses seem glad. They are so weighted and surpliced with vestments of gray moss, priestly robes that sweep from upraised arms to the very water, that they are like weird priests of a lonely world mumbling perpetual incantations deep in their swaying gray beards.

The only bird of the swamp to-day was a great heron that looked white as he stood facing me, his chin in somber meditation on his breast, as if he might be a carving in stone,

that suddenly took flight on tremendous wings, flapping solemnly out into the river sunshine and taking a post far out on an ancient, decaying dock. I might better have said becoming a post, for had I not seen him light I might have sworn he was part of the structure. He hunched himself up there till he had no more form than a decaying timber and his big beak, crossed at a wooden right angle to the rest of him, was exactly as if it had been nailed on. Only

with the bird glass did I make sure that he was not a post after all. Then I discovered that instead of being the great blue heron, as I at first supposed, it was the Florida form, known as Ward's heron, a bird much like the great blue but even greater, the lower part lighter and the legs olive instead of black.

I think Ward's heron more lonesome and preternaturally solemn than any other, and he seems to belong under the long robes of gray moss at the foot of the ancient cypress trees. He is as grotesque and wooden in his make-up as they.

The passing sun dropped the cool garment of December night lightly down through the bare limbs. The heron came flapping noiselessly back to his perch, to sway away like a gray ghost when he saw me still there. The low latitudes have summer and winter in each twenty-four hours, midsummer in the fervid warmth of the afternoon sun, midwinter in the black chill that comes between midnight and dawn. I passed reluctantly from the swamp while yet the level rays shone in long shafts of light through the mystic aisles. The heron was waiting to come back. It was time to be gone, yet I lingered lovingly where in one spot on the very margin of the black swamp water grew a single plant of Andropogon arctatus. It stood ankle deep in the water, a perfect plume of misty softness that had none of the wine-red radiance of its brothers of the open border. In the gray twilight it was a slender spirit of wood-grass, pare and sweet, the dearest creature of the day.

As I came along the western border of the orange grove with the placid river reflecting the crimson of the sunset between the great live-oak boles and the dripping streamers of gray moss, the full moon walked with me over the eastern border, seeming to stand a moment on tree after tree, a rounder and more perfect orange than any tree has yet borne, a symbol, let us believe, of a golden total of crops yet to come.