



by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 6: Jasmine and Cherokee Roses

Almost a half century ago Harriet Beecher Stowe lived on the banks of the St. Johns River and wrought for noble ideals in her own brave, cheery way. In "Palmetto Leaves" she tells of the beautiful country round about her home, of the three great live-oaks that sheltered it, and of a caged cardinal grosbeak that used to sit on his perch by her door and sing enthusiastically, "What cheer! What cheer!" The slaves for whom she wrote and wrought are now but a memory, and the State of Florida itself forbids the caging of wild birds, however sweetly they sing or however cheerily they bear their captivity. The fine old house that nestled beneath the live-oaks so confidently that its broad veranda partly clasped one of them has long since been torn down; and its very foundations obliterated by the tangle of wild verdure that rises here so soon from the unweary earth; but the live-oaks remain, towering with rounded heads still higher and stretching noble arms in still wider benediction.

From the very tip of one of them this morning a tiny crimson flame burned in the sun as if a spirit of clear fire had grown up from the earth her feet had pressed, traversing all the arteries of the noble oak and finally lingering a moment poised for celestial flight, and from the flame fell the voice of a cardinal grosbeak shouting in clear mellow notes, "What cheer! What cheer!" A half-century is but a breath carved out of time, yet in it both birds and men have found freedom, and still spirits of clear flame poise upon the heights and bravely call, "What cheer!" For all I know this cardinal may be a lineal descendant of that other and have caught a voice of joyous prophecy from the place.

I have yet to see nobler specimens of the live-oak than these trees that still hold their ground where the old-time battle was so bravely and cheerily fought. To the cardinal as he



swam into the morning glow and vanished they must have seemed three mighty domes of dense green. To me standing below they were the pillars and arches of a cool cathedral in whose dim upper recesses the mystic mistletoe hangs its strange, yellowish-green leaves and its pearl-white berries. More is born of thought than we are yet willing to acknowledge. Who knows what exaltation has come down the ages wrapped within the fiber of these druidical plants, to be subtly distilled on all beneath?

As the oaks are green above, so are they ghostly gray below with the long swaying draperies of Spanish moss that drip deep from every limb. These make prophets of old of the great trees, and one stands beneath as in the inner council of the Sanhedrin. Great ideals could have found no braver setting than this, and the cool north wind that sings across the river seems to make one feel here the very breath of Puritanical austerity, of renunciation of self for the sake of others, and perhaps too of the Puritan's scorn for any other method than his own. The sweetly surgent life of blossoming vines that climb in friendly embrace over all wild things here at Mandarin caresses and woos with perfume all the spot and dares the rugged trunks of the great oaks themselves, yet it may not touch the cathedral mystery and majesty of their shadowy arches a half-hundred feet up. The high, clear spirit of the place is still regnant.

Round about Mandarin sweeps Florida, which has been touched and in tiny spots remodeled by alien hands ever since the days of De Soto, yet remains Florida still, wayward, lavish, wild and loving all things with sunny, sensuous profusion. It has been the scene of one experiment after another and has obliterated the remains. Its tangle of vivid growth sweeps over many a ruin, from Fernandino to Biscayne Bay, the very building of which has been forgotten save perhaps in musty archives of some distant and less sunny clime in which the scheme originated. Just at this corner of the State, a quarter-century ago, the sweep of the river on one side and of untrammelled Florida on the other, enclosed a bit of Old England in a tiny colony of English people who had settled here, cleared the jungle and the level stretches of tall, long-leaved pine, and planted orange groves.

They brought with them sturdy English thrift and unchanging English ways, and soon the orange groves were everywhere, filling the spring air with the rich scent of their waxy white blooms and making the autumn days yellow with golden fruit. Docks sprang in narrow white lines far over the shallows to the deep waters where ships might load with the precious cargo for Northern ports, and English lanes and hedgerows divided and connected the groves. In English gardens bloomed roses and lilies and violets, and English ivy climbed over wide



porches and set a somber background for all the odorous tropic and semi-tropic wild vines that loving hands planted with it. I can fancy the jungle leaning in wild gorgeousness over the outermost hedgerows and biding its time. For fifty years, since 1835, no harmful cold had reached this portion of Florida, but the jungle knew. Fifty years was but as a day in its experience.

It was on a February day in 1886 that it came. That noon the mercury stood at eighty degrees and all the gorgeous profusion of semi-tropical spring growth filled the air about with perfume of flowers that spangled all things. The kind sun steeped the land in content and the negroes sang at their work, knowing and loving its fervor on their bent backs. By mid-afternoon clouds had come up out of the southwest and much rain fell bringing a chill in the air such as may often be felt here in February, or indeed at any time between November and April. But this chill instead of passing with the clouds grew with the setting sun and when his last red light came across the river the rain had turned to icicles that hung in alien glory from all the trees. There they swayed and clashed in the keen north-west wind all night, and before morning the astonished glass had registered the temperature of a Northern winter night, fifteen above or thereabouts.

The very jungle itself must have been black in the face with dismay and a thousand acres of orange groves that were bearing five to fifteen boxes of noble fruit to the tree were frozen to the very roots. It was a black day for the little English colony, a day from which it has never recovered. The trees sprang from the roots, were rebudded by the more courageous only to be cut to the ground again about ten years later. A second time the more tenacious spirits began their work over again, but the courage of the colony was gone and though there are still groves of five hundred to a thousand trees here that for a third time are beginning to bear well, all faith in the prosperity of orange growing so far north in the peninsula is gone.



New prosperity is growing up in the little town and another type of people are making good here, but the fine houses of the orange growers stand for the most part tenantless, some for almost a score of years. The ancient gardens have taken pattern from the jungle and grown with all its lawless luxuriance, and the once trim hedgerows riot in a profusion that is as bewildering as it is beautiful.

Sometimes at night I think the tenants have come back. In the slender light of the new



moon I seem to see white hands reaching out to refasten blinds that swing drunkenly from one hinge, and desisting in despair as the rude wind snatches them away and slams them. Sometimes in the full glare of day, peering through a broken pane I seem to see an old-time owner moving about in a room that a second later holds but long-forgotten furniture and a transparent form that dissolves in dancing motes of sun-smitten dust.

I find the ghosts nearest and friendliest, however, in the tangled growth of the old gardens. One that I love best lies far from the present town and I like to come to it from the jungle side, lured by the spicy breath of oleander blossoms. The north wind loses the salt breath of the river tides as he passes the house and draws deep on these rosy blooms, taking such store that he spills it through the foot-long needles of every pine that he passes. Coming from the swamp tangle beneath the sweet-gums and cypress, pushing through chin-high purple wood-grass, I let it lead me to-day straight to a huge ridge of wild cherokee rose plants that had once, no doubt, been an orderly hedge. It is winter now and sometimes the night brings frost, but the wild cherokee roses do not seem to mind that. The life vigor in them is such that it pushes out pointed white buds even now, and these open into five broad petals of pure white with a golden heart of close-pressed stamens.

The plant is so rough with its stubborn, hooked thorns set shoulder to shoulder along its stout interlacing stems that no finer hedge plant could be imagined. Not the deepest-flanked wild bull could push through this tangle were it devoid of thorns. Not the toughest-hided one could attempt those thorns without being torn and repulsed. And out of these stout stems, from among the defiant thorns spring these dainty white blooms bearing in their gold hearts a faint, fine perfume that is too modest to sail forth as does that of the oleanders on the errant wind. You must put your face close to the bloom and dare the thorns as you sniff deep before you know its fineness; but it is worth the trouble.

In and out among the cherokee thorns the wanton jasmine climbs. There is no place that it does not caress. Along the sand, amid brown leaves of deciduous trees, it creeps. It slips under porches and puts bud noses up through the cracked floors of long-disused buildings. It climbs trees and swings boldly from their topmost boughs, and later it blows yellow trumpets of invitation to the whole world and sends a sensuous perfume far and wide that all who pass may breathe their fill. The jasmine is common to all of the Florida world, yet withal it is so friendly sweet to each that none may have the heart to disapprove. The cherokee rose is different. He who would win the perfume of its heart of gold must bleed a bit, perchance, and wear an individual bloom very close before he gets it.



Coasting the thorn hedge, swinging the ancient gate on rusty hinge, a roadway leads me beneath sweet-gum and live-oak to the tennis court. Its level rectangle is still bare and close-turfed with flat-bladed grass and a tiny, stemless plant whose uniform leaves are no bigger than my little finger nail, and help hold the even level of close green. Only in one spot has this turf been invaded. There a lawless honeysuckle has made a patch of its own glossy with green leaves. All else is as it stood when the last tennis ball bounded freely from its elastic surface. The sun steps all this rectangle till it is one deep pool of golden light where silence and forgetfulness bathe.

The wilderness noises which come to the edge of this space but emphasize its silence and forgetfulness. In the trees that rim the court about ever-changing flocks of birds flit and chatter. Blue jays clang tintinnabulations, woodpeckers tap and croak tree-toad notes, warblers and sparrows and titmice and fly-catchers twinkle and chirp, and often try a half song of almost forgotten melody. Cardinals cry “tut, tut” much as uneasy robins do, but in softer and more cooing tones. A Carolina wren grows nervously curious in the cedar beneath which I sit, and flirts and quivers and scolds as only a wren can, coming nearer and nearer till I might almost put up my hand and touch his vibrating brown body. Then he withdraws a little and whistles till the cardinals lift their crested heads and listen and a tufted titmouse answers. “Teakettle, teakettle, teakettle,” he cries, and the very spirit of an English garden descends into the golden air. Gossamer threads of spider-web float silverly front tree to tree, argent ghosts of the old-time net, till I hear in the bird notes the chatter of laughing voices, and for a moment the place is peopled with gay young folk in flannels and the game goes merrily on.

It may have been that the lady of the house served the tea for which the wren called so lustily in the shade of the garden tangle which now rises twenty feet on the house side and completely hides it, though it is but a stone-toss away. Here cedar, spice bush, bayberry and oleander crowd one another in a struggle for upward supremacy in which the oleanders win, their trunks, as large as a man’s thigh at the base, dividing into long, aspiring branches that are pinnacled with pointed leaves and sprays of fragrant bloom. The jasmine climbs here, too, twining and straggling, loving and leaving, but the garden cherokees shoot upward in clean, noble sweeps that carry their brave stems almost to the oleander tops, whence they bound in long exultation, arching to the ground again.

I do not find these in bloom out of season, but the roses that crowd the crumbling arbor within toss up sprays of pink whose scent intertwines with that of the oleanders. It is



a sad garden now, for all its riot of growth, for the ground beneath is dank with shade and decay and its once prim palings fall this way and that in a snarl of rough weeds where the sesbania opens its two-beaned pods and rattles in every passing breeze. The old house itself, once so prim and erect, seems to droop wearily, in round-shouldered senility, to the ground which already claims corners of the wide verandas. The pinnate-leaved stems of a twining vine, starred with white blooms, reach up to it lovingly and climb wistfully, only to drag it down with the tiny weight which it once held up so unconsciously. Within, the wind which sighs through broken panes carries light footfalls from room to room and as it sways long unlatched doors these grumble one to another, mumbling like uneasy sleepers who wait long for the cockcrow of dawn.

Down on the waterfront an ancient cement breakwater still guards smooth sands and the waves lap patiently at this, wearing it away infinitesimally and talking to one another in liquid undertones. They alone of all the voices of the place are oblivious of tenants past and present, of growth or decay, telling in changeless tones the tales the waters have told since long before man began, a primordial cell in their unending depths. The waterfront of the old place seems most melancholy of all, for there nature has failed most to hide the swift decay of man's work. Yet there I notice with satisfaction one thing. That is the defiant erectness and primness of the English ivy that climbs one side of the house. This neither straggles nor retreats, but goes squarely upward as it was long ago set to do. It seems to hold the house up rather than to drag it down, an epitome of that British sturdiness from which it was transplanted but from which it may not swerve.

The low swinging sun faded into dun clouds to westward, letting a winter chill fall upon the place and bringing thoughts of the open fire at home with the big pitch logs shooting crimson flames up the wide chimney. Yet through all the chill air the oleanders held their rosy blooms proudly aloft and the pink roses sent their perfume too, following me along the sandy, hedge-bordered road on the homeward way. After all, the memory of the old place which always follows farthest is that of perfume and golden sunshine and the ghosts of merry voices echoing through the garden tangle and down the golden depths of the forgotten tennis court. Dearest of all is the heart of the wild cherokee rose, holding its faint, elusive perfume for those only who care enough to dare the stab of its keen, defensive thorns.

Dark clouds gloomed the west as I passed the Stowe place. It seemed inexpressibly gloomy and lonesome under the great arching oaks where the wild tangle of grape and jasmine, greenbrier, and I know not what other vines and shrubs cloaks the crumbling foundations



and makes a thorny and impenetrable jungle of the walks the gracious lady's feet once trod, and crowds and smothers the plants and shrubs she once tended. The sheltering oaks seemed to brood a silence of sorrow, failure, and forgetfulness. Of the chapel, the school, and the work she nobly tried to do among the poor and ignorant, what traces here remained? And then the sun shone low under the western clouds and sent red beams in beneath the brooding live-oak limbs and touched all the swaying moss with fire, lighting up the cathedral arches with a golden warmth and radiance that glorified the place and all thoughts connected with it. Over on the darkening lane a negro boy, born free, whistled on his way home, a little cadenced fragment of a tune without beginning or end—a whistle like that of the cardinal that had flown, a crimson flame, into the morning air. I knew then that whatever crumbles, the spirit of cheer and devotion and self-sacrifice lives on unquenched. The jungle may ride over and obliterate the Stowe place and the lovely English gardens, but the spirit of devotion that burned in the one and of homemaking hospitality that glowed in the other can never be quenched.

