



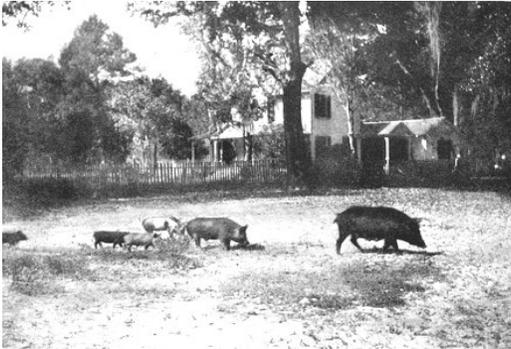
Chapter 7: A Frosty Morning in Florida

It was out of a moonless night that the frost came—a night whose sky was velvety black and seemed to hold no stars. Instead they had slipped moorings and on slender cables, I do not know how many thousand million miles long, were swung down toward the earth, quivering with friendly yellow fires as if to warm as well as light it. In a Northern December night the stars are diamond dust, splintered in keen glints from a matrix of black onyx. Their shine is that of scintillant spears of electricity. Here they are radiant golden globes swung just above the treetops. The wind out of the north was hushed and in the stillness the frost sprites that had soared gleefully upon it far beyond their usual habitat fell to earth, motionless. They were very young and adventurous frost sprites, and the sudden dawn found only their feathery white garments resting on exposed surfaces; the sprites themselves had already evaporated into invisible mists in terror of the coming fervid sun.

The first rays of the sun licked up these gray, leathery frost garments and only in the shadows did you still feel the chill the night had brought. Only the sweet potato vines seem to have been harmed by this wee frost. Down on the river's brink the tangle of convolvulus still shows great white blooms as large as the palm of the hand. The river radiates warmth all night and it is a bitter cold that reaches the blossoms on its brim. In the gardens the roses, red and white and yellow, did not seem to mind. Dense walls of thick foliage had kept the cold from them and the jasmine whose yellow blooms seem to glow with their own warmth. The slim, pointed buds of the jasmine are to the open flowers now as a million to one, and not a bud even had been harmed. The sweet potato vines, however, were not so fortunate. Their heart-shaped leaves turned black and shriveled when the sun struck them.



Out of the sudden gray of dawn came the sun, a glowing ruby in a sky of clear gold. To look at this sky was to forget the chill and bathe in a rich warmth which seemed to distill from it invisible gold dust as the day advanced. By nine o'clock summer had come back, and all the open spaces in the wood were wells of this sky-distilled gold, through which you saw all things in a subtle haze of romance, as if the frost sprites had brought in their train all the joyous people out of fairyland. To walk through narrow forest roads where the



sand made all footfalls noiseless was to glide forward without seeming effort, and in this rich atmosphere of vaporous gold surprise Oberon and Titania kissing beneath the mistletoe, note the quiver of oak leaves as elves frolicked along their mossy boughs, and to see Puck starting forth to put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes.

To be sure, if I watch Oberon and Titania long enough with the glass I shall perchance find them but a pair of redbirds, beauteous in crimson and olive green. The elfin train may become a flock of kinglets and warblers quivering in and out along the limbs in search of breakfast, and Puck be but a roguish red-headed woodpecker. These December birds are as elusive and as full of vanishings and roguish tricks as any fairy train in Christendom.

Florida roads have the same elusive quality. They part and bow to one another, meet and touch hands and glide away again as if dancing a minuet, leading you in a mazy dance hither and thither to the most delightful surprises. Here a tree has fallen before the wind or under the ax of a careless woodman, and blocks the way. Little does the road care for that. It leaves itself with an airy flourish of sandy ruts for good-bye as if just to avoid the obstruction. Then it may wander a dozen rods among slim trunks or along catbrier tangle, quietly seeking stray blue gentians or golden tufts of St. Peter's wort, and saunter gently back to itself, or it may swing a wide corner and leave you at some man's front gate, to admire his cherokee roses and negotiate with his dogs as best you may. To the traveler eager for some definite destination this quality may have its vexations. To the wood wanderer seeking but to find the true heart of a golden haze, conscious most of the mystic quality of all untrammelled nature and unexplored places, it is but an added delight.

If on such a day the birds of the bush have their elfin quality most strongly evident, those always fay-like creatures the short-horned grass-hoppers are not to be forgotten. In the



still haze of the yellow pine forest their shrill voices seem to make the stillness audible, to give it pitch and quality. Here on a leaf sits one, catching the full heat of the sun twice, once direct and again as it is reflected from the leaf's gloss. His antennae are short and brown, arched most delicately from a straight brow that seems to denote dignity of thought. His long, brown wings fit neatly to his brown abdomen and his legs have the same shade. He seems cloaked in the soft, delicate color from head to foot, yet you can but suspect that this is a domino, which he will later cast aside and appear a glittering sprite. Of those fairy creatures which attended Prospero on his island of shipwreck this well might be one in a fitting disguise. None of the flitting bird-fays is more beautifully cloaked than he in this exquisite brown. As I watch him the sun glints in a lenticular eye, and I know by this that he is full of laughter at my ignorance. Not one of the airy sprites that plagued Prospero's guests could be more demure or more full of roguery than he. From the bushes beside the path as I pass, other fays of the true locust clan flip into the air on long, shimmering, silver wings and vanish after flying along in level flight for a hundred yards. And here in the grass at my feet is Caliban.

He is a clumsy and stupid lout, this Caliban whom some people call the lubber grasshopper; the very dolt of his class. He is huge, longer than a man's finger and bigger than his thumb, and he has ridiculous short wings that I am sure he cannot use. They are beautifully mottled and gauzy with pinkish shadows, these wings, and seem as much out of place as those of the loveliest tiny fairy of the Christmas pantomime would on a pig. He moves his greenish-yellow body as slowly as Caliban did his when going sulkily to his heaviest task and Trinculo and his fellow must needs be very drunk indeed before they would sleep beneath the same cloak with him.

On first seeing the lubber grasshopper I wondered that anything so fat and clumsy should continue to exist in a country swarming with insect-eating birds, but even the barnyard fowls will have none of him.

At the start on this morning of gold born of white frost my path led me down the river bank under arching live-oaks. All to northward the pearl river was of glass that softened and melted into a blue haze where, miles beyond, the farther bank hung as indistinct and unreal as a dream, an illusion through which glided a white phantom of a turpentine steamer, kicking up frothing hills of water behind it, a sea-serpentlike line of humps whose head was the great stern wheel. There is a quiet and solemnity in these high-vaulted paths beneath the river oaks that seems to withdraw on the one hand from the witchery of the pine forest and



the glamour of the river on the other.

Something of the England of the middle ages seems to have drifted over seas and down the years to this spot. A monastery should be just beyond, and, though perhaps he does not know it, Jones, the postmaster, traversed monastic aisles as he walked his mile this morning to the tiny post office. Far beyond in the open beneath the big pines I hear blue jays blowing clarion calls of challenge to the lists and the tramp of hoofs as knights in armor ride the winding paths to be present at the tourney. There are days down here when I know the charging hoofs to be those of razorbacks scuttling through the underbrush and the amble of palfreys is but that of half wild cattle going down to feed in the river flats, but not on a morning like this. The gold haze of stillness after frost has put a spell upon all things.

The great Florida heron that frequents my favorite swamp and with whom I am beginning to feel neighborly intimate takes on goblin traits with the rest of the witchery. Out in the shallows of the pearl river was a new stump, gray and water-worn, with a long branch sticking straight upward. Something uncanny about this stump made me watch it long. It was the deadest gray stump I ever saw, evidently a swollen cypress root with the bark long worn off. By and by this stump grew a head and the wood changed to gray-blue feathers in the twinkling of an eye. Thus goblins arrive from underground and dryads step from trees; but what should a rotten cypress stump produce? Here was a chimera of a bird with a neck three feet long, a bob of a head and a body like that of a gray goose that did not sit on the water but was suspended just above it as a mirage sits on the desert horizon, separated from everything by a gray mist of nothing! Then the bob of a head wiggled, turned, I suppose, and a big, sharp beak came into view, and my heron who was simply standing to the very top of his high, waterproof boots in water began to wade along.

Then I laughed, and I suppose that broke the spell, but it was enough to make anyone laugh, for the Florida heron, wading leg deep in the St. Johns River, has the same self-conscious dignity, the same absurd rhythmic hesitancy of motion as a wedding procession going up the aisle. I have seen a great many grooms wade in and I never saw anything a bit different.

The high road and high noon and I met in the heart of a pine wood where all things had forgotten the frost in a midsummer temperature, and short-horned grasshoppers made merry all about. In the thin treetops was no motion, not even the quiver of a bird's wing. The long wood swooned in the golden haze that seemed impaled and held motionless on a thousand million spears of palmetto leaf points standing chin high, a motionless sea of deep green. The



tall palmetto is a beautiful tree with the columnar trunk of a palm. It aspires and has sturdy dignity. The scrub palmetto crawls on its belly like a snake, its trunk strangely and horridly like one, though when you observe it closely enough you see that it roots all along this boa-constrictor trunk, as if it had changed its mind after all and decided to be an elephantine thousand-legged-worm. Then as if ashamed of its fallen and misshapen appearance it rears its head and spreads a great rosette of long-stalked, stiff green leaves to hide it all.

You can find no more distinctive Florida scene than this; the endless procession of rough-barked columnar trunks, topped with sparse limbs and tufted with needles a foot and more long, and beneath the lake of deep green, scrub palmetto with a surface infinitely diversified with the spatter of the split leaves. The three-foot stems of these



leaves are so woody and the leaves themselves are so stiff that to ford the lake is difficult and your progress through the palmetto is accompanied by a wooden clatter that is like a parlor imitation of stage thunder.

Breathing deep the aroma of the pines, resting in the golden warmth and quiet of the place I saw little of wild life moving. All nature seems to take a mid-day siesta, even in winter, here. The place seemed to lend itself to dreams for which all the mystic witchery of the morning had prepared me. How deep into these I sank I cannot say, but I was aroused from them by the approach of a beast.

“The jabberwok with eyes of flame
Came whiffing through the tulgy wood
And burred as he came.”

I think it was his burbling that I first noticed, a grumbling undertone as of something with a deep throat and very large teeth that talks to itself. Even here within twenty miles of Jacksonville, Florida, is yet a wilderness, criss-crossed with roads and spattered here and there with clearings, but yet a wilderness where deer and bear still lingers. This sounded like a very large bear; one with a toothache and a morose disposition. I noticed for the first time a sort of path that crossed mine, an enlarged rabbit-run under the palmettos. Perhaps he



was coming down that. I could hear the palmettos clatter in crescendo and the morose voice come rapidly nearer, and still I sat motionless. It is hard to believe in bears, until you have met a few. But I sat too long. Suddenly out of the path burst a black bulk, and I sprang to my feet with a shout of dismay. A big, black creature with a shambling gait, a long snout and little fierce eyes, was right upon me.

But my shout of dismay was nothing to the woof of terror and astonishment the jabberwock let out. He almost turned a somersault and, ignoring his path, went straight through the palmettos which waved about him, down the distance, with a noise like an anvil chorus played on many xylophones. It was really the biggest and fiercest razorback I have yet met. Razorbacks do not think it good to live alone. When they miss their fellows they gallop, mumbling and grumbling till they find them. I do not blame myself for thinking this the jabberwock, however. Seen from his own level, head on, the razorback has a weird and ferocious aspect that can out-countenance most of the wild animals I have met. Incidentally one can give a very good account of himself in the prize ring with any opponent whatever, from a rattlesnake up. What this one thought me I do not know. If he is familiar with jabberwocks perhaps he, too, thought he suddenly saw one.

