



Chapter 9: In a Florida Freeze

In St. Augustine there is a very genial, old colored man who, in spite of his weatherworn tatters, is a philanthropist and has an eye for good dressers. His favorite stampede is the sea wall and the open region about old fort Marion where he watches with wary eye for the tourist.

“Heah you are, suh,” he says to such, “heah’s yo’ lucky beans. Take a han’ful suh an’ be lucky all de res’ ob your bawn days. I gives dem to yuh. I ain’t charge nuffin for dese I ain’t, icense you is de born image ob my ol’ massab. Yaas you is, sub. Mons’ous fine lookin’ man he, yass suh. Dem ladies dey jes’ nachully follow my ol’ massa roun’ kase he such fine man. Hey? Yaas, tank you kindly sub. You sure is like ol’ massah.”

It is astonishing how many visions of his old master rise in this gray old man’s sight as tourists pass. Long or short, fat or lean, it makes no difference to him, so be they are well dressed and have an air of prosperity. If it is a group of ladies it is the same. They simply, one and all, are images of his ol’ missus who was the smartest dressed and handsomest woman in the State. It may be that the people who have small stores on St. George street and sell far less valuable things than lucky beans to good-looking tourists make more money, though I doubt it. Dimes come rapidly to the old chap, and though with many rents he has none to pay.

To-day is January of a new year, and all Florida is once more steeped in golden sunshine. Soft airs out of Eden, or some place just as good, breathe over the land scape, and the genial warmth is that of a fine, June day at home. But so far I have failed to hear the familiar salutation of the old bean man. I fancy he is not yet thawed out. I hope no harm has come





to him, for I have bought my beans and I like to stand smiling by and see the other fellows get theirs. Perhaps he is still a little distrustful, for this is the first comfortable day since Christmas, and that was something of an oasis in a raw desert of chill. There had been several frosty mornings before that, somewhat to the disturbance of the purveyors to tourists, though they had said, grudgingly, “Oh, well, we do have a light frost some winters.”

The morning after Christmas saw the thermometer at twenty-six, and the purveyors of summer, unlimited, in time of winter, were properly horrified. “Oh, but we assure you that this is quite extraordinary,” they vociferated. “The weather is always warm in Florida.”

The morning after that the wind came roaring down from the northwest, full of needles. The temperature was below freezing and it kept steadily going lower. The water front, steeped in the midday sun and sheltered from the keen wind, was the warmest place in town, and there my old colored man lingered, shivering beneath an old overcoat that, I trow, belonged to that grand, old master whom we all resemble. Beneath it he still clung to his lucky beans, but he found small comfort in the dimes that he took in from overcoated and shivering tourists.

“Uncle,” I asked, “what makes it so cold?”

“Huh,” he replied, and his usually beaming, shiny black face was ashy gray and twisted into a tragic discontent with the chill, “Hit’s dese Norderen people. We ain’t had nothin’ like dis ontwel dey began to come down here, so much. Pears like dey brought it in dere cloes.”

I fancy that is as good an explanation of the freeze as any, though if the Northern people brought it thus they did it against their will. Out on the water front the first severe morning I found an old man from Missouri. When they had told him about the perpetual summer that reigns in Florida during the winter time he had said, “show me,” and started for the peninsular State with his big overcoat under his arm. Wrapped to the eyes in his big coat he sat, this morning that the thermometer registered at only seventeen above in St. Augustine, on a bench that faced the morning sun. I thought he must be warm, for his face was flushed, but it was only the warmth of his indignation.

“They told me to leave my overcoat at home,” he said, “but I wouldn’t do that. But I did leave my sweater, and now look at me! Had to go out this morning and buy a new one.



There's no heat in the house I'm living in and I had to come out here and sit in the sun like a sage hen, and darn me if I'm warm now. Next time I take an excursion in winter, young man, I'll go North. I know a stove up in Chicago that I'll bet you is red-hot this minute, and I wish I was sitting side of it, darned if I don't."

The plaint of this man from Missouri is a song of different words, perhaps, but it is the same tune which all Northern people sing who happen to hit a Southern winter during one of the freezing spells which are so likely to reach the northern third of Florida. The most severe of these kill the orange trees and are felt to the very southern limits of the peninsula. Fortunately, there are periods of several years' duration in which these do not touch the State. This one is exceptional enough both in severity and duration, to make the Northern visitor, who comes to escape that sort of thing, unhappy, severe enough in some cases to make him unpleasantly ill from colds contracted in draughty houses, often unheated. At home we install elaborate apparatus for taking care of a temperature that gets below fifty degrees. Down here they scorn such a thing. Yet sections far enough advanced in civilization to have water pipes and plumbing arrangements awoke to find them frozen all over northern Florida the other morning.

Now that my own memory, somewhat iced up by these alleged unprecedented conditions, is thawed out, the week seems quite grotesquely impossible. It is like asking me to tell how, during a week in midsummer, we had icy weather and mornings on which the temperature was only seventeen above, Fahrenheit. But that is just what happened, and the only thing to prove it as you walk about town now is the black wreckage of all tender herbage that a little over a week ago flourished so greenly and put forth sweet-scented flowers. There is visible from my window the roof of one of the old-time houses on quaint old St. George street. On this grew, before the freeze, tiny, beautiful clumps of the Southern polypody fern. These are represented now by crumpled remnants of gray leaves from which the life has been frozen—and it takes a good deal to kill a polypody. The gardens in the town were full of vivid-colored foliage plants, coleus and the like, handsome poinsettias graced many places and climbing vines scattered white and scarlet bloom. All these are dead, killed to the ground, and with them went the taller and more picturesque shrubs. The palmettos stood it, though their leaves have since curled a bit, showing that the cold penetrated their tough fiber.

The first frosts turned the upper leaves of the banana trees a light brown like that of elm leaves after they fall in the autumn. The two nights at seventeen killed the plants to the ground, and not even the thick coats that I saw hung over green bunches of bananas here



and there sufficed to keep the fruit from freezing, any more than similar protection helped the flower beds any; the cold was too severe to be staved off in that way. I think the most striking sight was a big field of sugar cane out at Hastings. This had been green and luxuriant, though ripe for the knife, the grinding having begun in many sections. After the second morning of severe cold this field was all of a lovely soft, tan brown, the exact color of the shocks in a Northern cornfield where they are allowed to stand out in the field until this time of year. The Southern cornstalks still standing in the field do not take that color, nor are they so massed. The whole looked as striking and out of place as the weather in which I saw it. In this same town of Hastings is a big orange grove from which the fruit had been but half picked, the rest hanging, waiting for the holiday rush to be over, the market cleaned up, and the prices better. There the orange leaves were curled and crisp with the frost and a thousand boxes or more of splendid, golden fruit was still hanging, yellow, beautiful in the chill sun—and solid blocks of ice, from kumquats which are as big as one's thumb to grapefruit almost as big as one's head.

There is an alligator friend of mine out by the city gates for whose safety on that first cold morning I was much concerned. For free alligators one need have but little worry. Safe under water in the warm corners of the swamps they were sleepy and happy and would not come out till the sun called them with sufficient vigor to assure them a warm day. Nor need I worry much for the city alligator who is put into the little pond beneath a fountain in the plaza on the first of January, to be removed no doubt when the tourists go. The steady outflow of warm artesian water would make him comfortable. The East Coast railroad people have two that they put into similar tanks in their station grounds. These, too, seem to be a part of the decoration in honor of the tourists. So, not to be outdone in friendly welcome, a photographer friend of mine has been keeping "George" in a pen in a shallow, cement tank on his grounds down by the city gate.

This photographer is an enterprising chap; indeed, the photographers of the city gates neighborhood are all enterprising. If you get by them without having your picture taken in many poses it is not their fault. They know the weakness of vain, human nature almost as well as does the ancient bean man. One has a jungle, a wild and most realistic wilderness in which you may be pictured in the very den of alligators, sitting on pa, fondling ma, and holding the babies on your knee. Who would not send one of these home to the shivering sufferers in the frozen North? Another will take your likeness sitting at a tiny table with a most gorgeously-gowned young lady, sipping bubbles from a tall glass. Few gay sports can



resist sending that up to jealous admirers who have doubted that they would be received in Southern society. To be sure, the young lady is of pasteboard, but how are the neighbors to know that? You can have your picture taken in the ox cart, just coming in through the ancient city gates, and a real live ox is kept for the purpose—that is, he was alive until he got pneumonia standing out there, waiting for customers in the freeze.

Of all these I think the owner of “George” does it best. He takes your picture in a real orange grove, picking oranges. He is the fortunate possessor of five trees, and some of the five have real oranges growing on them—a few. But who wants to be picking oranges in a skimpy grove? The owner of “George” fixed that. He wired golden fruit and leafy twigs on his trees by the bushel and then, because nature has made it difficult to photograph oranges in their native color, he whitewashed the fruit. As a result you may send home from the ancient Spanish city a picture of yourself, supremely happy, standing beneath trees loaded with real fruit, picking them as nonchalantly as if it was your constant occupation. No wonder people come to St. Augustine by thousands each winter and go away charmed with the place.



But about “George.” The first morning that the thermometer stood at seventeen I went out early, wearing a sweater and a big overcoat, besides one’s usual garments, and still shivering, so penetrating is this Southern cold. At the gates I found the owner of “George” inside the pen, chopping vigorously. He was removing an ice blanket from the top of the shallow tank in which the alligator was securely frozen. This ice blanket had kept the ‘gator secure in a temperature above thirty-two, whereas he would have been frozen stiff if he had not had the wit to get under water. “George” was lethargic. Even when prodded severely to see if he was really alive, he moved but slowly and positively refused to blow off steam with that high-pressure hiss which is the alligator’s chief warning note. But he came through it unharmed. Still, he was fortunate in his tank. There were many Northern people in quaint old St. Augustine that night who had no such reliable heater.

For all the blackened gardens, the iced oranges and the banana trees cut down in their prime, the whitened sugar cane and the ice-blanketed alligators, I think the really extraordinary sight of that first morning of severe cold was a fountain in the plaza. This shoots a few tiny streams into the air and they fall upon greensward beneath it. The brisk, northwest wind that blew all that cold night blew the thin stream askew, and the morning



sun showed a circle of ice hummocks beneath this fountain, such hummocks as suggested the bad roads which Arctic explorers negotiate, and a pyramid of icicles that was built up from the ground into the urn of the fountain and above that into a sort of statuette of ice on which the artesian stream sprinkled still. The sun of Florida, even in the dead of winter, is a hot one, but the pyramid of icicles stood unmoved during the greater part of that forenoon, indeed they would have been there all day and the temperature of the night which followed would have augmented them, only that people began to take them away for souvenirs.

Now the point of this story is not that the climate of Florida is not beautiful during the winter. I know that it is, most of the time. But to say that Florida is a land of perpetual warmth is not to tell the truth. In northern Florida the winters often show days when the morning temperature is below freezing. A temperature which freezes the oranges is likely to come any winter, and though such cold lasts but a few days at the most, it is very trying to people dressed for July. Florida women buy furs for the winter, and wear them, too. Remember that if you are coming down for even a short stay. This freezing weather comes oftenest in late December or early January, but it may come as late as early March. Remember that and wear the overcoat down, also put the sweater in the trunk, else you may be like my friend from Missouri and vow to take your next winter vacation beside a Chicago red-hot stove. Florida is indeed a land of perpetual summer, with certain exceptions that prove the rule. One of these certainly came, this year, between Christmas and New Year's.

