



Chapter 23: Down the St. Johns

The everglades, which on the later maps of Florida are concentrated in the southern tip of the peninsula, there hardly conceded to extend as far north as Lake Okeechobee, as a matter of fact do flow in certain favored localities much farther north, well into the middle of the State. Up through St. Lucie and Osceola counties run one "slough" after another, wide depressions which in any but the driest weather are shallow, sand-bottomed lakes filled with numerous and beautiful wooded islands.

In the driest of weather these are deserts of white sand with tiny ponds innumerable all about in them, alive with concentrated schools of fish. It takes long drought to make this condition. A single good rain will set the fish free to roam clear water for mile on mile, and where before the rain the alligator hunter walked dry shod, afterward he must wade, knee deep or waist deep as the case may be. In the height of the rainy season, say in July, I believe a man could make his way in a canoe up the St. Johns and on without touching bottom till he slid off the lower end of Dade County, having traversed the entire peninsula by water. He would, of course, have to know his way, as probably no man now knows it, but I believe the water is there. A good part of all Florida, in fact, emerges in the dry season, which is the winter, and submerges for the rest of the year. You may hoe your garden in January and row it in July, raising tomatoes in one season and trout in the other.

There is a project on foot which glibly promises to drain the everglades. Several dredges are lustily digging ditches through which this flood water is supposed to drain rapidly off some thousand square miles of level, clay-bottomed sand. To look at these tiny machines



merrily at work on one hand and the area of water they attack on the other is to smile once more at the Atlantic Ocean, Mrs. Partington and her mop.

So the St. Johns River, the one large river of the State, rising on the map as it does in Sawgrass Lake, on the lower edge of Brevard County, not a dozen miles from the East Coast and the Indian River, really draws its water, during a part of the year at least, from the everglades themselves. In that it is to be congratulated, for the water of the everglades is beautifully clear and pure. There are bogs and mud in the everglades, to be sure, but in the main their water falls straight from heaven and is caught and held in shallows of white sand that might well be the envy of a reservoir of city drinking water. The little city of West Palm Beach draws its water from one of these shallow everglade reservoirs, and has thus an inexhaustible supply, which analysts have pronounced pure and wholesome.

But if the lake bottoms of southern Florida are thus pure and send only clear water down the St. Johns, the condition of clarity does not last long. The St. Johns, as the tourist knows it, from Sanford to Jacksonville, is a dark and muddy stream that winds through an interminable succession of swamps, miry and forbidding at the surface, but brilliant above with foliage, flowers and strange birds and beasts. Beyond these swamps are higher ground and many pretty villages, groves and farms, but one sees little of this from the river. Except for the occasional landing, the occasional razorbacks and range cattle, one might as well be coming down the stream in the days before Florida knew the white man, and the river's only boats were the narrow, artistic dugouts of the Seminoles, built by fire and hatchet from a single cypress log.

Through the energy of many bold real estate men and many patient gardeners Sanford is rapidly becoming known to the world as "The Celery City," a title once held alone by Kalamazoo, Michigan, though it might well have been disputed by Arlington, Massachusetts. If you travel back and forth enough in Florida you can come to know certain spots in it, spots favored or otherwise, by their odors, also favored or otherwise. I know haunts in the upper part of the State toward which the fond, free scent of jasmine will lure you through many a sunny mile of stately, long leaved pines, themselves giving forth resinous aroma for a solid foundation on which the airy jasmine scent is built.

Farther south where the jasmine hardly dares the heat of the summer sun the orange groves send out messengers that beguile you through long distances in the same way. None of these calls you to Sanford. There the homely fragrance of crushed celery leaves drowns all else and salutes your appreciating nostrils from afar. I am told that Sanford people carry these



odorous bunches of translucent golden-green beauty at weddings just as other, custom-bound folk carry bride roses, but I think the tale is persiflage. Certainly you have but to step from the train there in April to be accosted by a demure and smiling young woman who says, "Won't you try some of our celery?" holding up a tempting stalk or two, "We grow celery here and we are very proud of it. We want all strangers to taste it and see how good it is."

This is an excellent custom, both for Sanford and the strangers. I have been to places in the North where mine host, who produced verses, always proffered me these, to read or to hear, soon after my arrival. I much prefer Sanford. Aside from its celery, which should be glory enough, one of Sanford's other claims to fame is that it is at the head of steamship navigation on the St. Johns. Here you embark on an amber-watered lake which is but the river, grown wide and lazy for a time. If you were to ask me for Florida's most astounding characteristic I might hesitate, but I should eventually decide that it was the great number of fish which frequent its shallow waters. Looking from the Sanford dock as you go down to embark you see the sunny shallows full of schools of bream and in the deeper places, much bigger and a little more wary, other schools of "trout," as the Floridians insist on calling the big-mouthed bass which swarm in all fresh waters. Farther down stream you may amuse yourself with watching the big silver mullet which here seem to teem in all brackish waters, leaping, sometimes five or six feet in air, then falling back with a resounding splash in the wave as if they like the spank of the water on their scaly sides.

To name all that one sees on an April day while the boat surges round the curves of the lazy river might well be to write a catalogue of the commoner wild things of Florida, and a good many of those not so common. The paddle wheels suck the water from in front of the boat and the tide there falls a foot or two in a minute, for a minute. Then the hill of water thus heaped up behind rushes in again to fill the hollow and makes a miniature tidal wave. Creatures of the shallows are thus suddenly bared and again as suddenly flooded to fright and a hasty escape. The big Florida blue herons, standing in immobile alertness on the brink, are less alarmed at the approach of the steamer than by this fidgeting of the tides. If you will watch ahead you will often see one of these great stately birds bend his head and stand in astonishment at this falling off, then as the leaping wave splashes him give a croak of terror and flap rapidly away into the woods, to light in a big cypress, now all feathery green with new spring foliage, and stab the air this way and that with his keen beak, not knowing which way further to flee.



The fish crows, who have little fear of anything, croak humorously to one another at this. Having a frog in the throat so often has got into the fish crow's voice and made his croak catarrhal, but nothing can take away his sense of humor which always sounds through his talk. I notice behind the St. Johns River steamers the fish crows playing the part of gulls, following in the vessel's wake and hovering to daintily pick refuse from the dangerous waves. The gull lights and feeds; the fish crow is ruined if the water reaches his wings, but he hovers perilously near the troubled surface and picks out his morsels, just the same, with plunging beak. *Corvus ossifragus* is courageous as well as humorous. In my first acquaintance with him I was inclined to hold him in light esteem, as a weakling and a trifler compared with his bigger, more saturnine relative, *Corvus americana*, but he wears well if he is light-minded.

I had come to think that all the large alligators left in Florida were in captivity, where, tame and most wooden in appearance, they dream their lives away. Yet in mid-afternoon, roaring down the St. Johns on this river steamer I came upon the finest specimen that I have seen anywhere. As the steamer shouldered by a bush-lined bank the negro helmsman leaned far out of the pilot house, yelling and pointing. "Hi!" he said, "look at dat big ol' 'gator." Right on the bank facing us he lay, black, knobby and ugly as sin, his only retreat the water in which the paddle wheel was thrashing within a dozen feet of his nose.

Then indeed I saw one alligator that was like the old-timers that used to line the river in favored spots. They said he was twelve feet long. He surely was ten, and active. Wakened from his siesta in the scorching April sun he glared at us with very evil eyes, opened his big mouth, showing stout, yellow teeth, and plunged right down the bank at us, going in with a great splash. Alligators are said to have a great fear of man and it is commonly reported that you may bathe in their swimming pools in the utmost safety, even at dinner time after a fast day. That may be. I know this big, old, black one looked as if he ate steamers for luncheon and came down the bank as if he were about to do it. However nothing happened to prove it. Later on we saw another one, not quite as large, lying asleep on the bank. His stomach was greatly distended and he did not even wake up as we passed. I fancy he had just finished his steamer and was too full of it and contentment to bother about us.

A prettier sight by far as the steamer rounded another curve was a group of black vultures on the bank. These had been feeding and were too plethoric to fly. Vultures are usually reckoned disagreeable objects, but there was nothing unpleasant in these birds. They were sleek and black and plump enough to be barnyard fowl in a giant's hennery. Another curve disclosed another group, but here was something to astonish at first sight: Half these vultures



were white, with longer legs and necks, a different bird altogether, yet all feeding in a group. If you could mate a black vulture and a white heron the resulting progeny might be such a bird as this. Primaries, secondaries and tail were glossy, greenish black, the rest of the bird was white. The head and neck were bare like a vulture, and the group took flight together, the white birds going into the air with the black ones, and soaring about in the sky later in much the same sort of circling, flapless flight. Here they looked like big white water turkeys, their legs stretched heron-wise behind their fan-shaped tails, their necks stretched forward like that of a water turkey when flying, a thing a heron never does.

After all the answer was easy. Bird-gazing on a roaring St. Johns River steamer, I had chanced upon a flock of birds of a variety that I had not before found in all Florida, the woodland ibis. They remained contentedly soaring in the heavens with their black friends as long as I could keep them in sight from the steamer, with a glass. It was a curious group, too, these long-necked, long legged birds soaring like crazy cranes with the sedate, graceful vultures.

Nightfall catches the steamer still churning the dark waters down winding walls of forest, now and then stopping at a rough dock which represents some invisible town. The water gets black and the wilderness ahead blends with it, while the goblin-like voices of Florida frogs sound from the swamps. I would hate to be lost in a Florida swamp over night. There are more strange voices there that gasp and gurgle and screech and choke than anywhere else in the world. By and by the sudden shaft of the searchlight leaps ahead, transforming a single ever-changing circle into fairyland walled within impenetrable murk.

Never before was a forest so green as that which this light penetrates till trunks and foliage bar it off. Never before were tree-trunks edged with such quivering rainbows and built of such corrugated gold. On any stump, once black and slimy with decay, now coruscating with jeweled light, might well sit a fairy with wand, transparent wings, and diaphanous garments of green and gold. You get to watch, breathless, for this as the rich circle slides on and on down the bank ahead or jumps like rainbowed lightning to another side or shoots far ahead along a straight stretch of river, perhaps firing with smokeless splendor some crazy dock or ancient river-bank house.

The scorching heat of the sun is gone and the river damp wraps all things in a coolness that is grateful to the wearied skin. The boat glides forward into white river mists, out of which fly wonderful winged creatures of the night. These, invisible in the darkness, become spirits of fire in the white shaft of the searchlight, up which they fly to the lantern itself, then



vanish again. It is the moth and the flame, only there the moth is the flame itself, a winged, magical creature of gold, fluttering in a rainbow-tinted white light that has called it out of the black invisibility. It is no wonder that many of the travelers sit up all night. These have their reward, for they see the sudden sun flash all the white river mists with fire, through which they glide up to a magical city, which after all is only Jacksonville, the end of the route.

