



Chapter 24: Holly Blossom Time

A swoon of heat and blue tropic haze brings holly blossom time to northern Florida in mid-April. In this haze the distant shores of the St. Johns slip away until the silver gleam of the water seems to lift them and toss them over the horizon's rim, out of sight, making a boundless sea of the placid river. The thermometer climbs with the day into the eighties and stays there till the sun is well on his way down again. The noon weather has the dog-day feel of a New England August and gives little invitation to exercise in the full sun.

It is then that one is apt to give thanks to the great oaks which grow upon all the high hammock land and whose glossy green leaves and pendent masses of gray moss shut out the sun. Here in a druidical twilight one may roam in safety and near-comfort following the quaint odor of the holly blooms to the trees themselves. The oaks are mighty of trunk but soon divide into proportionately mighty limbs that lean far over the road till the moss that swings down from them is like banners swung across city streets in holiday decorations. Often the wild grapes, now with tender, crinkle-edged leaves two-thirds grown, swing in stout ropes across the street too, from one oak to another, and all these are also hung with the moss flags till they make the gloom grayer and deeper and in spite of the festive suggestion one half expects in the duskiest corners to see the stones, the flash of the sacrificial knife, and hear the eerie chant of the elder priests. It takes the cheerful holly to remove this impression.

Compared with the oaks the holly is a Noah's ark tree, with one central shaft from roots to apex and numerous short, slender limbs that shape the outline into a modified cylinder. At Christmas time this cylinder was of dense, dark green with red berries giving it a ruddy glow in all shadows, as if ingle-nook embers glowed therein. The stiff, prickly-edged leaves



stippled the whole into a delightful decoration that has become hallowed by conventional association.

Now the tree is different. The dark green of the Christmas foliage is still there, but from all twig tips have sprung shoots of new leaves that have not yet known their set pricklers, but light the dark surface with of tender color which old leaves grown joyous new. Sitting on the new flowers, each very prim divisions of tile white set between and holding angles. All this should Christmas decorations, waywardness of youth of the holly and the new as airily conscious of shrub you will find in a swamps.

Even the perfume is wayward and just originality to make you come to dislike it, and while you test it. The unobtrusiveness of the holly blooms is proof of their good taste, for this jaunty waywardness of the exultant spring does not appear till you come to know them well.

One looks in vain for the blooms of the jasmine in this region now. Six weeks ago they crowned all wild tangles with golden yellow and made cloth of gold all along the sunny forest aisles. Now all this bloom is gone and the jasmine, grown strangely wise and industrious, will do nothing in the fervid heat but climb in twining slenderness over new routes and plan flaunting displays of beauty for another winter-end. The wild cherokee roses, that shamed the gold with the purity of their white, have done better. There are hedgerows still starred with their beauty, but even these are passing and the stars are but single where once they marked a milky way of scintillant white. But the woods have other beauty to tempt the



a wayward sprinkling is but the green of the and youthful in the wood are tiny clusters of and proper with four corolla, four stiff stamens yellow heads at exact be as conventional as the but it is not. The has got into the blood sprigs are as jaunty and the joy of living as any league of flat-woods and

of the holly blooms enough different in its wonder if you will not then fall in love with it



wayfarer into their aisles. In places they are green with the leaves of the partridge berry and the twin blossoms, I think a little larger than those I find on Northern hillsides in summer, send forth the same delicious scent.

In lower grounds the atamasco lilies have trooped forth to stroll here and there in the woodland shadows. Fairy lilies the people here call them, and Easter lilies. Fairy lilies they might well be. They spring from a bulb and show no leaves to the casual glance, only a dainty lily bloom that is pink in the bud, pure white in maturity, and pink again as it fades. The fairy lilies seem to thrive most where the cattlemen burn out the underbrush each winter. Their tender purity springing from the blackened stretches under the great pines is one of the dearest things imaginable. Sometimes you may stroll a mile with these stars tracing constellations on the dark vault at your feet.

On the margins of the oak hammock where thickets slope to the swamps the wild smilax races with the grapes, and all among these the viburnums and the dogwoods have set cymes of softest white. Above these still climbs the wild sweet honeysuckle of the South, *Lonicera grata*”, its fragrant white tubes turning yellow with age, and now and then a high wall of green foliage is all hung with bead-like decorations of the coral honeysuckle, giving it a curious, gem-like effect in red and yellow. Viewing these things, less obtrusive but equally beautiful, one is inclined to forget his regret for the vanished jasmine yellow and the pure white of the passing cherokee roses. Behind it all, looming toward the high sky line of the swamp in such places is the feathery softness of the new cypress leaves, delicately fluffed in the softest tints of pure spring green. Young cypress leaves are more like feathers than any other leaves I know. Collectively it seems as if they had as much right to be called plumage as foliage.

It is at this time of year that the frost weed slips shyly at first into sandy dooryards, and later makes them all gold of a morning with crowded heads of clear yellow flowers. With these two comes the phlox, almost unnoticed among low-growing herbs till it blooms. Then some morning the dooryard begins to blush and by night has grown all rosy with pink and purple flowers, a heterogeneous assortment of shades that blend nevertheless in a pleasing whole. Such marvels does April build out of sand and sun and rushing in that has hardly time to fall so eager is the sun to be out and at it again.

More than flowers does this scorching midday sun bring out. It always seems as if under its potency the little green chameleons were drawn up as blisters from the herbage on which they like to rest. Once you get the shape of the motionless, finger-long creature in your eye you may note that it is that of an alligator whose tail fades indistinctly into the leaf or twig.



But while the alligator is repellent his tiny, leaf-textured prototype fascinates, and it is easy to see how the desire to make pets of chameleons originated and grew till the law had to step in and put a stop to the wholesale cruelty which the practice engendered. He looks at you with such gentle, bird-like, bright eyes that you inadvertently reach out to stroke him. Then he gives you an example of his kind of thought transference. Surely the wee legs of the creature never could have moved him like that, but he has gone like the flashing of a thought to a place out of reach where he eyes you, as bright and immobile as before.

In Mark Twain's heaven people wished themselves from one part to another, traversing limitless space in no time. So evidently it is with the chameleon.

This tiny lizard sleeps in pale green with an immaculately white under side, a most charming nymph's nightdress. Pale green too is its fighting color, and when badly frightened the green suffuses its entire body. Often in bright sunlight this green changes to a rich, dark brown, a color which makes it look so much like a twig as to defy the eye to find it until it moves. Yet I doubt if this change of coloring is so much a matter of protective instinct as we have been taught to believe as it is a matter of temperament and emotion. The animal seems to sleep, fight and run away in pale green. When let alone, unsuspecting and basking in the full sun, this color is changed to the brown, and if you will watch the change take place you will see some interesting variations into gold, yellow, slaty gray and even a peppering of white dots on the back. Gentle and lovable as these creatures seem, the males have tiny battles which are quite tempestuous within teapot limits. At such times they protrude queer, inflated neck pouches and bite and thrash about with great agility and vehemence, the combat often ending in the vanquished leaving his twisted-off tail in the mouth of the other while he wishes himself to safety in the crevice of some dead stump. Then the victor struts with the trophy in his mouth, his neck pouch distended and his brightest green showing more vividly than ever.

This loss of the tail does not seem to be a serious matter with chameleons and other small lizards, indeed the appendage seems to be a sort of customary final ransom paid for bodily safety. It twists off with comparative ease and the lizard merely goes without it until another, stubbier one grows in its place.

They are queer folk, these little Florida lizards. Another variety is known quite properly as the "five-lined skink" when young. Colloquially it is the "blue tail," from the color of that part which is a bright and beautiful blue. The body is then black with five stripes of vivid yellow. This coloring fades, the blue last, as the creature grows old till finally you would not



know the beast. In maturity it is the “red-headed lizard,” its olive brown, ten-inch whole including a big head which is quite brilliantly red. This lizard the neighbors call a “scorpion,” and assure me it is deadly poison, with the accent on the deadly, though I fail to find any record of injury coming from contact with it. Its blood-red head gives it a rather raw look and I fancy that is all there is to it. To be repulsive is to be dangerous; that is a common fallacy.

If I were to see a “red-head” coming toward me with his mouth open I am quite sure I should run, though where or why I cannot imagine, for the skinks can wish themselves from one place to another just as well as the chameleons. Like the chameleons they battle and lose their tails, and it is no uncommon thing to see a couple fighting, whirling and scrambling among the leaves like nothing in the world unless it is a snake in a fit, or a goblin pinwheel made of a blur of whizzing tails and a red blotch in the center.

But enough of these uncanny creatures. The woods are vibrant with bird voices, local and migrant. Vireos warble in the tree tops, white-bellied swallows twitter as they soar and swoop, red birds whistle till the very dogs run hither and thither, believing they have a hundred masters all calling them at once. Mocking birds mock, not so much their bird neighbors as me. I stalk them for this and for that old friend, for this and for that stranger, only to find half the time that it is just Mister Mocking Bird sitting on a twig on the other side of the orange tree and looking as soulful and demure as if he had not just finished cackling with elfin laughter at my mystification.

He is a rare old bird, this mocker, and you come to love him more and more as you know him better. Even now though he fools me and mocks me I am ready to swear that he never did it. He was just singing heavenly melodies without any thought outside of the pure and noble joy of living. As for imitating other birds, I am convinced that it is no such thing. They learned their notes from him. They tell me that mocking birds sing more and better in September than they do in April. This, I dare say, is true, though listening to them in April I do not see how it can be.

When the grateful coolness of the evening comes fast with the lengthening shadows the mocking birds carol their friendliest good-nights. The sun goes down in a flame of red as vivid as the color of the scarlet tanager which I heard in the pine tops at noon, warbling his cheery, robin-like notes through an air that quivered with gold and green, and was sticky with the aroma of pitchy distillations. The sun was the original distiller of naval stores. It is quite plain that he taught the Jacksonville millionaires the way to wealth, leading them by



the nose, so to speak. The silver river of the morning is for a time a plain of burnished copper through which the sun burns a long straight trail of fire that vanishes into the blue mists of the distance. Up this trail flies the copper burnishing and the blue mists follow after, leaving an opaque mystery of darkness, an , unexplorable country where was the river. Shadows well up in the orange groves, blurring the long aisles between the trees, while the mocking birds and red birds go to sleep with their heads under their wings. Silence has fallen on the cheery voices of the day, and out of the mystery of the darkness come the sourceless noises of the night.

Out of grass and shrubbery flood the shrill pipings of myriads of insects, beings that exist for us only as voices. The thought gives them neither body nor location. It is as impossible to guess the direction whence the noises come as it is to find the creatures themselves. They are but a million infinitesimal shrillnesses merging in an uproar that nevertheless soothes and lulls. From the gray void where by day there was a river come other voices, they tell me those of frogs. These swell in rattling gusts up out of silence and down back again, an unmusical clangor as of drowning cowbells struck harshly. These should be mechanical frogs with brazen throats and tense cat-gut tongues, made in Switzerland, frankensteins of the batrachian world, wound up and warranted for eight hours, to make such eerie, disquieting music. To turn your back to the river and walk inland along the dim, uncertain aisles of the orange groves is to escape this and meet pleasanter if still mysterious voices.

From dusk till the full blackness of the moonless night wipes out all things below the tree tops the Southern whip-poor-will sings. The voice is less shrill and insistent than that of our Northern whip-poor-will, does not carry quite so far, is less of a plaint and more of a chuckle. Some Southern people say that the bird says, “Dick-fell-out-of-the-white-oak,” others “Dick-married-the-widow.” Both phrases seem to recognize a humorous quality in the tale the bird has to tell, far different from the lonely “whip-poor-will.”

Best authorities, however, seem to have agreed that “Chuck-Will’s-widow” is the most accurate translation. It is easy to fancy that Will’s widow is buxom and still young, and that to chuck her—under the chin, of course—would put a mellow gurgle into any night bird’s note. At any rate the gurgle is there, and though the voice ceases in complete darkness the first crack of dawn lets it through again, and we lose it only when the red-bird chorus begins to pipe hosanna to the new day.

