

TO CUBA IN THE WINTER.

WHAT A ST. JOHN MAN HAS TO SAY OF HIS OWN EXPERIENCE.

The Southern States as They Appear to the Who Visits their Ports in the Heart of Florida—Waits and Drives Amid Scenes of Rare Beauty.

My trip to Cuba had come at last. For a long while I had imagined to myself the delight of going down to those southern shores of Florida, and on to Cuba, that Queen of the Antilles, so poorly managed by Spain, and which could flourish so much better under the American government.

There lay the steamer under the shadow of the great bridge which joins New York to Brooklyn. The immense piers are like houses, and the steamer "Iroquois," at the wharf ready for Jacksonville, Florida, seemed small alongside of their bulk.

It was Dec. 29th 1889. Thus at the close of the year I was leaving the oldness and all other things that belong to winter, especially a gripe, which then had a firm hold of New York, and all the Eastern cities, was leaving all this to revel in the heat of a southern January and February.

We steamed out through the harbor, and about 4 p. m. passed the Bartholdi Statue. By 5 o'clock we had left the city well behind, and all that we could see was a cloud of smoke over the Yankee metropolis.

The next day, the very last of 1889 we had the usual rough weather which sailors tell us belongs to Cape Hatteras, which point we passed late at night. I had never before spent New Years Eve in just this way, and it came to my mind how at home they were then having the usual New Years festival with all the jollity of children, and the comfort of warm fires.

The next day the clouds, which had kept with us during the last day of the year, separated, and out came the sun giving us an agreeable New Year. We ran near a light ship on the shoals, sixteen miles from Wilmington. These vessels serve a good purpose off the sandy shores of the Southern States, as most harbors are barred, having only ten or twelve feet of water at low tide, and many have shoals out for miles. From the chills of Boston we had come into the delightful temperature of South Carolina, and not long after sunset we saw Charleston harbor, or rather the place where the sailors told us Charleston harbor was. It seemed so tedious getting into it, first going one way and then another, the bar twelve miles away from the harbor, buoys on one side and light ships on the other, until at last we came to Fort Sumter at the entrance. On the right at the point of land which extends seaward from Charleston lay Fort Moultrie, where the rebel guns first played upon Fort Sumter, and where the crash of that great conflict between the north and south first began.

We lay at the piers all night, and early the next morning inspected the old city. Negroes are about two-thirds of the population. Negroes of all sizes, children playing on the stone quays, women with bright turbans, carrying big baskets of vegetables on their heads, happy good natured men lying around on the ends of the piers waiting for work, three or four boys together, all in rags, with brooms in their hands looking for a chimney to sweep, their black clothes blackened by the soot. Their black faces and woolly heads unburdened by caps show in strong relief the white teeth and shining eyes.

What an old looking city! The earthquake of a few years ago has left cracks and crevices in the big stone houses, the massive warehouses and the elegant residences. Between the war, the earthquake and the easy life commercial Charleston is going into decay. The very pavings on the wharves, the wretched condition of the sidewalks, the tumble down look of the warehouses, all indicate that trade has gone either further South or further North.

St. Michaels is there, the old church which the poem says a negro saved from the flames. Besides this and the history that clusters around Moultrie and Sumter, Charleston has not much to demand the stranger's attention except it be in its beautiful gardens. Roses, yellow, pink and white, large as our largest cabbage rose, and beautiful red Japonica greet one from every garden. Great clusters of trumpet flowers hang like curtains from the stone walls. Some of these flowers are nine inches long and present a wonderful scene much like our Ivy, if it were half Ivy and half flower.

Leaving the business part, the negroes and the piles of cotton bales and going back a few blocks one sees wonderfully kept gardens with curious shell houses for pleasure resorts: pheasants running here and there amidst the grasses and the low bushes guinea pigs kept in small enclosures: grottoes and fountains with young alligators and turtles, unconscious of winter and the ice of Northern ponds. We wandered into an old book-store, behind the counter of which stood a hardy Hibernian who has always lived in Charleston. How sorry he was for the poor people that lived north to stand the ice and colds of January.

We left the earthquake shaken houses, cotton bales and negroes, roses and alligators and the ever present spire of St. Michael's, and during the night steamed off for Jacksonville. Our sister ship the

"Seminole" (every school boy remembers the brave Indian Chief who lived and died in this Southern country,) set out last night but had to return. How these steamers roll! They kept us so thoroughly churned up that we could hardly enjoy the lovely colors that greeted us the next morning as we found ourselves at the entrance of the St. Johns river, Florida, just outside the sand bar. We crossed the bar and steamed up the broad river. Pines with their tall trunks and evergreen needle leaves. Oaks in great clusters along the banks and often stretches of marsh where we were told cormorants, ducks, and other wild game tempted the northern rifle. Then came an occasional steamer, saw-mills, and at last, Jacksonville!

Lying on a gentle slope towards the river, this city of new houses and large hotels looked somewhat out of place, amidst the tall oak trees laden with there funeral mosses. The whitish grey tints of the moss blend with the general greyness of the soil, and with the glare of the sun. Busy as the main street of a Minnesota town, the long street fronting the river, shows immense signs, windows with an never ending display of fruit, street cars, mules, sick people and wild people: the curious and the consumptive.

At the back part of the town are the higher hotels, with one or two squares, which give a chance for the negro nurses to air the southern babies. It was as warm as a July day in Frederickton. No letters, so we wandered around. In one store we could find everything that pertained to an alligator, from a little "gaiter" (as they called them), just popping out of the egg, to a big fellow sixteen feet long; lizards also, dead and alive, and shells of every possible shape. The girl behind the counter wore rather a peculiar ornament on her breast. About to ask her what it was, I saw it jump. It was a live lizard, its green changing body, and its gleaming jewel eyes continually alert. It was attached to her dress by a short chain. It was evidently gala time in Jacksonville as the shops were adorned with pine trees and hung with mosses for the exhibition to take place in a few days. Some pious man had put admonitions on the corners of the streets. Frequently one saw little boards with "Love God," or "Fill your heart with kindness," and like advice printed on them.

We are off for the heart of Florida and at 11 P. M., took the express to Tampa. We decided to stop at a little town called Ocala, in the centre of Florida, near the head of the Ocala river. In must have been two o'clock in the morning, when, looking out of the car windows we were told that this was Ocala. Everything was utter darkness,—so black that one could hardly take a step ahead anywhere. Could see lights here and there like torches or the camp fires of squatters or bush rangers. The pitch-pine that grows everywhere provides an easy fire for camping out under the great evergreens. The lights were in front of a few negro cabins. The engineer called out "all aboard," the train rushed into the darkness, and for the life of me I did not know what had happened. Whether I had been left off at the wrong station, or had been purposely misguided and fallen into the hands of thieves. Finally we heard the clatter of five or six teams and the yelling of the drivers, rushing to the station to get a fare. Ocala lies about a mile away from the little forest hidden station, so we were surprised upon getting out of one of the crazy cabs to find ourselves entering the door of a spacious hotel large enough to accommodate five or six hundred people. It is an active town, quite modern, four or five hotels, horse-cars, and all the improvements: The axe has not yet laid bare the heart of all the live oaks, for we saw many of them, heavily moss laden fringing the streets. Ocala is in the centre of the fruit raising districts, and takes pride in its annual exhibition. It claims 5000 population. You see the Orange trees everywhere, grove after grove laid out most symmetrically. It is strange to see the green foliage with its golden fruit, and all of this coming up out of what is almost white sand. After breakfast we drove to Silver Springs. No road, but just in and out among the great tall trunks of the pitch-pine: hundreds of little holes in the white and yellow sand show where an animal like our ground squirrel has built its nest. We met a fallen tree, turned to the left and drove around it. Every team makes its own road. There is plenty room between the immense trunks which tower perpetually underbrush, and also, one might say, no flowers, no life. Occasionally we passed a sweet gum tree and then oaks, and then as we came nearer the head of the river we came to the water oaks and great live oaks, all bore their burden of funeral garlands. Our guide told us wonderful stories about blue racers and other kind of snakes so numerous in these woods. We were almost breathless, hoping to see some of these long spiral moving animals slide along before us. We felt that at Silver Springs we would be surrounded by snakes and alligators and would have a chance to gaze at those Florida fancies.

It took two hours to get to the springs, which gave us half an hour before the steamboat left. This is one of the beauties of Florida which cannot be too much praised. A stream, or run, which begins at three boiling springs and after fifteen miles course joins the Ocala river. The Silver Springs themselves seem nothing remarkable at first glance. They cover a space about 150 feet long and 50 feet wide. The brush and the trees which line the banks, especially the taller oaks, are reflected most accurately in the surface. We got into an old boat and floated

around, stopping here and there. The water is perfectly clear and is of a silver-green color. One of the wells from which the water comes steadily up but makes no perceptible boiling, is 84 ft. deep. Learing over the boat you can see to the bottom, in the centre of this well it looks black, much like the rough blackness on the bark of an old tree. This is the hole in the centre, the depth of which has never been ascertained. Around this extending up from the centre hole (crater one might call it) lie pieces of shells and places where the surface has been worn off. These reflect such colors as green, shell green, and the most intense blue. Around these holes little white specks which seem like coarse dust shoot up silver like gleams. It seemed as if you were looking into some wonderful cavern with its silver and blue, much like as if a water humming bird were down below you 50 ft. and was darting in and out after the flowers of this submarine garden. Another well was 60 ft. deep and gave exactly the same results; the other was not quite so deep.

Cardinal flowers grow everywhere, and ever so many little southern flies lit over the dilapidated and moss worn Oaks. The steamer was ready. The Captain and mate were white men, but the crew (about 15) were black. They run a double crew for night and day work. The "Okeehumchee" glided along the wonderful water lanes with their millions of flowers. The festoons of the live Oaks and of the palmetto trees hung everywhere, like curtains concealing the panorama of southern life hidden in the money marshes on both sides of the stream. From the tops of the highest bushes came the bright hues of red berries to relieve the grey of the hanging moss. How straight, the palmettos were reflected in the clear green of the stream! Where the trees had got old and decayed, vines lift up and clothe them with their living green. Even the palmettos lost their ugly look bedecked with the pink blossoms of the vines much like our own purple and pink Asters.

On through the lanes, turning in half circles, and then again almost returning on our course: past the cardinal flowers and the vines swinging gently to and fro; we see the lazy turtles paddling away from us, their fat legs pushing their heavy bodies quicker than we could think; dragon flies of transcendent hues dart here and there, but there are few birds, and every-thing is so still. Occasionally a linikin screams, a buzzard flies by. In a bend of the river we see a coot, and next a blue heron, and a hawk circling around in its ever narrowing flight. The water turkey slides from bank to bank, partly in the water and partly over it, but no music, no songsters through the banks of this luxurious wild.

We came to a broader place in the river, ran up to an old wharf and landed freight. A little distance back from the wharf was a long shed with narrow doors. At the top of each door was an opening. Our cook stepped up to this shed and put his big black fist through the opening, pulling out of each coop one or two live hens, and after selecting the fattest brought three birds aboard. The noise delighted the crowd of negroes. The birds were safely stowed away, and were probably the same on which we feasted that day at half past one.

The Ocala river is a succession of sharp turns, lanes of water, from a half a mile to a mile long, and then a turn right or left. Our steamer is twenty feet wide and fifty feet long. We often ran on the bank while going around the sharp curves. Then the whole negro crew crowd at the bow and with poles about thirty feet long, shove off into the smooth running stream again. We ran quickly by a saw mill which reminded me of our 5000 population rivers. Then darkness came down upon us. Here we were in the very midst of this maze of marsh, river and woods, where Ocala and Corocoochee years before evaded for months and for years the pursuit of the United States troops.

On the pilot house was a large iron pan, and as darkness comes on very suddenly in the south, we saw the mate set fire to a half a dozen pitch pine blocks in the pan. The light from this beacon flamed out into the now intensely dark night and lighted up both sides of the ever bending river, so that we could see a hundred yards ahead. The straight palmetto trees gleamed ghostly in the red glare of our pitch pine beacon. The captain, a native of Florida, had never seen a sleigh and hardly knew what we meant by snow and icicles, said the pitch pine beacon saved the work of two men at the bow.

At this moment the boat, running swiftly, struck the mud on the opposite bank and brought us up standing. I leaned over the rail of the deck; the whole crew (17 in all) were at the bow, the two great poles were out, and whilst one of them recited in a peculiar monotone the words of one of their many negro melodies, the others came in at the chorus in a half passionate way, keeping up the time with the movements of their bodies as they pushed and strained against the poles. The red gleam from the beacon, the black faces turned upwards, their dark eyes and darker faces, the monotonous cadence of their hymn, the strange look of the river, the knowledge that but little life of bird or beast was anywhere near stamped the scene forever in my memory.

Next morning about eight o'clock we entered the St. Johns River and soon arrived at Palatka, thence by rail to St. Augustine, of which more hereafter.

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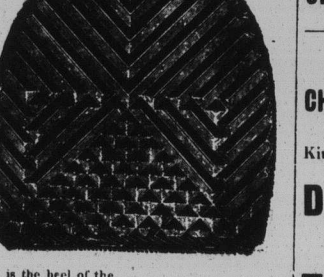
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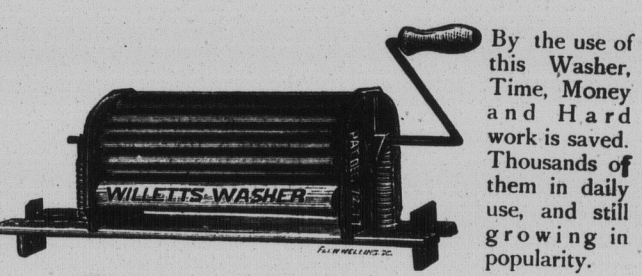
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