

DEMOREST'S FAMILY MAGAZINE.

No. CCCXLIV.

FEBRUARY, 1892.

Vol. XXVIII., No. 4.

AT THE HOME OF A FLORIDA "CRACKER."*



WHAT is a "cracker"?

The term "cracker" is applied to the poor white natives of Georgia and of Florida living outside the larger towns. The origin of the term has never been explained satisfactorily. It has been said that in former times many of the poorer whites were employed in the care of cattle, and that the cracking of their long whips gave rise to the name. This is not unlikely, though as probably a majority of "crackers" live in the piney woods and in sections where the herding of cattle is not followed, or work in the Georgia cotton-mills, the occupation of a portion must have given the name to the class. I was once informed by a native of Georgia that the poorer people living in districts thinly populated formerly depended largely for their food on what they might shoot, and that the cracking of their rifles was the origin of the term applied to them. This seems somewhat improbable, but it goes to show that we cannot with any certainty give the derivation of the word. It is known, however, that the term originated in Georgia, and was taken to Florida through the migration of "crackers" from the former State.

Intelligent Southerners speaking of the "cracker" describe him as lazy and shiftless, densely ignorant, and as proud as Lucifer. Whether through climatic causes or through lack of any incentive, since his needs are few, the average "cracker" seems devoid of all energy, mental or physical. The Florida "cracker," as a rule, lives at a distance from any settlement, and when making his weekly or monthly visits to the town "to do his tradin' at the sto'," he usually bestrides a poor little mule which seems already overtaxed to draw the cart with its contents to which it is attached. At times the "cracker," when living near some town, will gather energy enough to drive a team of oxen; but even then the happiest hour of the day to him is when, having given his beasts a refreshing draught, he lies down in the shade for a siesta.

It is a matter of great difficulty to per-

suade him to undertake anything involving work, even though a high rate of pay be offered. To this rule there are of course exceptions, as must necessarily be the case when the habits and characteristics of a large class of persons are described. He does not seem to realize the value of money when personal labor is involved; and to such a point is this carried that upon a number of occasions I have had "cracker" women refuse to do the washing for the boat, and in a very disagreeable manner, though their appearance betokened that they were by no means possessed of any superfluity of wealth.

The practice of "dipping," the term used to describe the rubbing of snuff under the gums, is almost universal among the "crackers," their custom being to chew at the end of a piece of wood until it somewhat resembles a brush, with which the snuff is applied.

One bright warm day in January, last year, my friends and myself started from Palatka on a journey up the St. John's. Our steamer, the "Osceola," was built to run on the narrow and winding Ocklawaha, and much resembled a



GOING "TO DO HIS TRADIN' AT THE STO'."

* Illustrated from photographs by the author.

three-story house afloat. Of its speed, the less said the better; but its flat bottom, and its great paddle-wheel at the stern, enabled us to go where others might not venture, and to lay under contribution the beauties of many a winding river tributary to the St. John's, and of many a broad lagoon



BLUE SPRING.

unseen of the Florida tourist. Space was abundant, and with a cabin turned into a dark room the work of the camera could receive ample justice. And thus we idled up the river, one day opening a burial mound, a relic of a long-forgotten race, the next stopping to shoot or fish, and again to picture on the sensitive film some spot whose towering palmettos or moss-covered live-oaks could not but arouse the enthusiasm of the artist. On we went, across the broad waters of Lake George, past the beautiful Blue Spring, whose azure current mingles with the darker stream of the St. John's, and where great gar-fish can be seen lazily lying at the bottom or darting from side to side.

At length we reached Lake Monroe, some two hundred miles by water above Jacksonville, on whose western bank is Sanford, the terminus of river navigation by the regular line of steamers. Thirty miles south of Sanford lies Lake Harney, in a region abounding in game, one of the most beautiful spots in Florida, but so little known that perhaps not ten tourists, among the scores of thousands yearly visiting the State, ever see its palmetto-covered shores or the picturesque banks of the narrow and winding St. John's between it and Lake Monroe.

The only habitation around the entire lake is the cabin of palmetto thatch belonging to "Captain" Mansfield, who, with his "old woman" and Grant, his hired boy, the blackest negro I ever saw, lives quite contentedly among the palmettos on the border of the lake.

"Captain" Mansfield (his military title was conferred upon him by his "old woman") has lost some of the traits of the ordinary "cracker." A veteran of the Seminole War and of the War of the Rebellion, he has mixed so much with the outside world that many of the "cracker" characteristics are no longer recognizable. I have known the old gen-

tleman since 1879, and yearly, when I visit the lake on shooting excursions or for the purpose of investigating Indian mounds in the vicinity, I never fail to pay him a call.

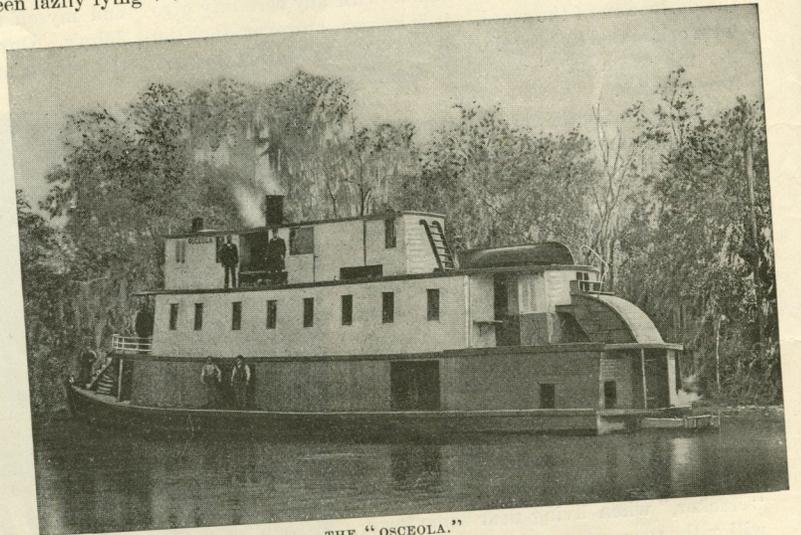
Leaving the steamer in the mouth of the picturesque Deep Creek, near the entrance to the lake, I rowed over with two friends to pay my respects to the "Captain." His cabin is situated back among the palmettos, and as our boat ran upon the white, sandy beach, we were greeted with the most terrific barking, while three gaunt hounds, apparently with no very peaceful intentions, came rushing towards us. I raised my paddle and my friends lifted their clubs. In approaching "cracker" houses I always carry my paddle and see that my friends have clubs, for dogs are very numerous South, and not always inclined to be sociable with strangers.

Just as things began to look critical, a loud voice from the cabin called, "Don't mind 'em, boys, they won't hurt you, they only want you to 'much' 'em."

Now to "much" is the "cracker" for the term "to caress"; and the dogs, if affectionately inclined, certainly had a strange way of showing it. Soon the old man came hobbling down and greeted us warmly.

"Yes," he said, "I am having trouble with my foot ag'in. You remember I never had no luck with that foot, nohow. Fust I run a nail into it, then a hoss kicked the ankle off, and then I split it with an ax. I give the ax to another man, and he split his foot, too; so we 'lowed the ax was onlucky, and throwed it into the lake."

"Yes, the Seminoles were all around here. You know they made General Harney swim the lake. His hoss saved him that time, for sure. Once there was a truce, and the Injun warriors would come into camp as sociable as you please. One day the boys were arguin'. Some said you could kill a turkey easier than a deer, and some said you



THE "OSCEOLA."

couldn't. And one of the boys spoke up, and says he, 'We'll leave it to that big Injun there, 'pointing to a Seminole brave who was standin' by. The Injun thought a while, an' then, says he: 'Deer feedin'. Injun walk up. Deer look up. Injun stand still. Deer say, "Mebbe Injun, mebbe stump," and go on feedin'. Injun walk up and shoot him.

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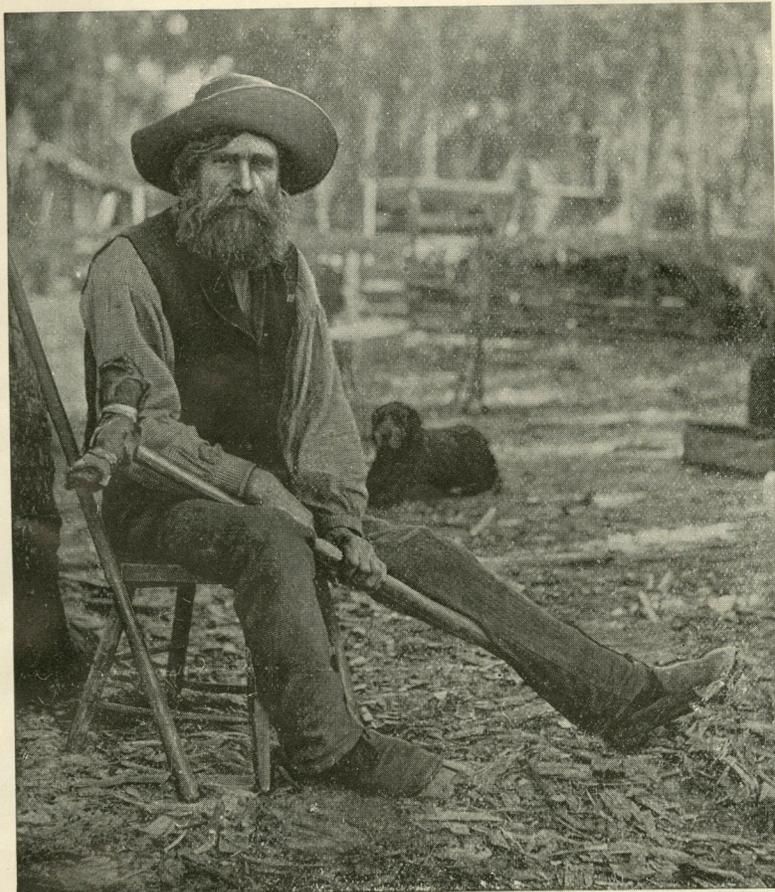
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"CAPTAIN" MANSFIELD.

Turkey feedin'. Injun walk up. Turkey look up. Injun stop. Turkey say, "Injun, by gad!" and off he fly. There wasn't no more arguin' after that."

In the meantime we had reached the cabin. It was constructed entirely of palmetto thatch securely fastened to poles, and consisted of one large room. Behind was a small annex, or after-thought, forming an L, and connecting with the open-air kitchen. This was the spare room, or guest chamber; and at the time of our visit it was occupied by a female relative of the captain's, with a very small and active baby. The kitchen boasted a roof, but, doubtless through fear of fire, the four walls had been omitted. It was a veritable curiosity. The stable was another curiosity. It was constructed of palmetto logs roofed with palmetto thatch. On its sides, tacked up to dry, were the skins of wild-cats, 'possums, 'coons, herons, and egrets, trophies of Grant's prowess in the chase. The lower floor was occupied by the captain's horse, while Grant made use of the loft as a bedroom. To reach it he was compelled to go up the side like a ladder, by inserting his fingers and toes between the logs.

We were now joined by the "old woman," who, according to the captain, had been "fixin' up." What she wore previous to her "fixin' up," if the latter had wrought any change for the better, must have been a curiosity indeed.

"Well, boys," said she heartily, "I knowed you'd be here. Grant was down to the mouth of the lake last night, an' he seen the smoke of your steamer. I've got two fine guineas fur ye, an' a lot of eggs."

I thanked the old lady, and inquired if she had found any Indian relics since my visit of the year before.

"No," she replied, "I allow you foun' the last relics when you dug up them cow-bones, two year ago, that the old

man had buried;" this, with a somewhat quizzical look at my friends, who were indelicate enough to laugh. They had not been with me upon that occasion, and, for certain reasons, the fact had not been communicated to them.

The captain was soon deep in reminiscences of the Seminole War, some thrilling enough. He told of the Creek Indian who was taken by the Government when a baby, educated among the whites, and finally sent to West Point. At the breaking-out of the Seminole War a regiment of friendly Creeks was raised, and he was made its colonel. One day the army came to a stream, shoulder deep, while on the other side muzzles of rifles pointed from every tree. The Creek regiment was ordered to cross. It refused. The colonel, with all his West Point fear of dishonor, exhorted his men to follow him. They stood motionless. Turning from them he forded the stream alone, to his death.

The captain's stories were not all so tragic, however.

"One day, right near here on the lake, when food was scarce and the Injuns was troublesome, a man walks up to General Harney, and says he, 'General, we officers have a hard time in this campaign.'

"'And who might you be?' says the general.



THE "OLD WOMAN."



GRANT.

“ ‘Corporal in Captain Johnson’s company,’ says the man.

“ I tell you the general was mad ! ‘ Do you jump right into that stream,’ says he, ‘ or I’ll have you flogged.’ And the man kno^wed the general’s temper, and in he went.”

The old man next referred rather mournfully to his inability any longer to go with his hounds on a “ drive,” a sport beloved by the backwoodsman. All around this section are clumps of scrub palmettos growing shoulder high, called “ ponds” by the natives, and in these shady “ ponds” the deer love to lie during the heat of the day. The sportsmen are posted behind trees just beyond the farther end of a “ pond,” and the hunter with his hounds enters at the other. If any deer are there they spring to their feet and run, followed by the hounds, and are almost sure to pass near the trees where the sportsmen are stationed. This is called a “ drive.”

“ And don’t you forgit,” said the captain, “ to look for a besel-stone when you kill a deer.”

“ A ‘ besel-stone’?” inquired my friends together. For the benefit of my companions I explained, while the captain nodded his head approvingly, that after death the stomach of the deer is carefully searched for a besel-stone by sportsmen, not at Lake Harney alone, but in many other sections of the State.

A besel-stone is occasionally found in

the stomach of a deer, perhaps one among a thousand. It is hard, polished, and about the size of a butternut, and when exposed to the sun’s rays seems to change its color. Throughout Florida it is supposed to have the virtue of a mad-stone, and to be a sovereign cure for snake bite.

“ Did you ever see one, captain ?”

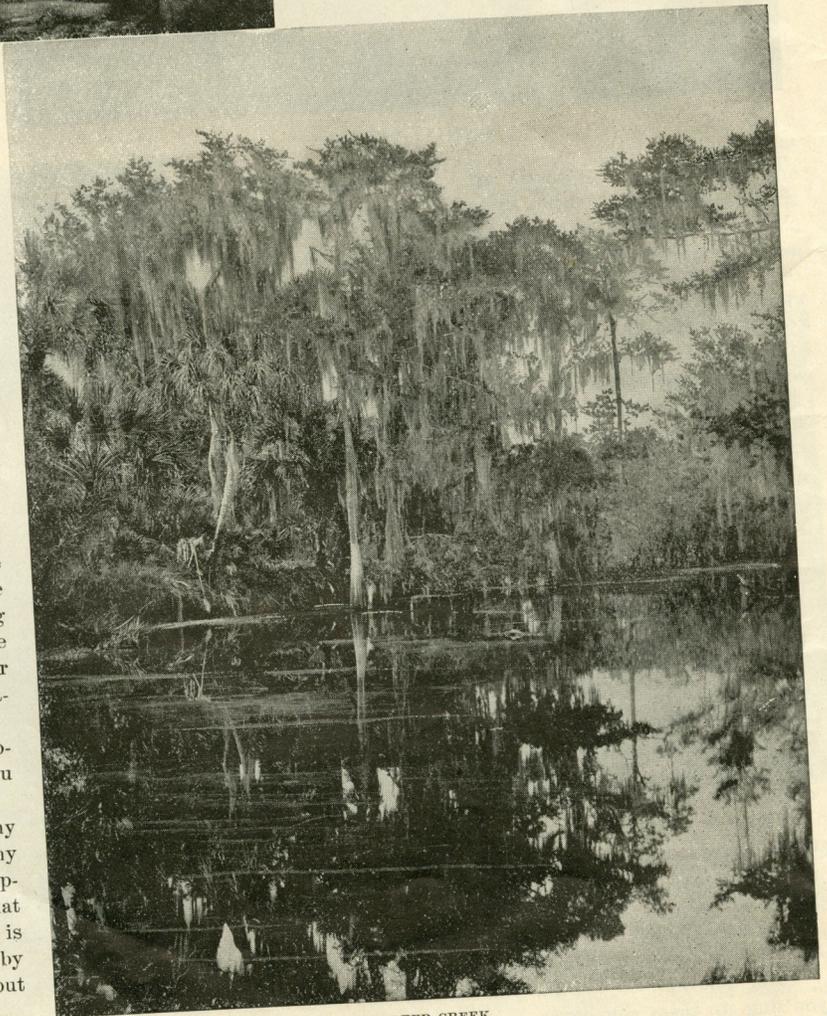
“ Oh yes : a man at the Indian Fields above here has one. He wouldn’t sell it for no price.”

“ Surely you don’t believe in them, captain ?”

“ Oh yes I do, though ; but I’d rather not be snake-bit than own a dozen besel-stones.— You had a narrer squeeze eight year ago next February,” said the captain, addressing himself to me, “ an’ if moccasins was as quick makin’ up their minds as the rattlers, you’d ‘ a’ been bit, for sure.”

The event to which he referred had by no means escaped my memory. The captain and I had started out after deer, and after quite a tramp were crossing a narrow marsh interspersed with tussocks of grass. Not caring to wet my low shoes, I was proceeding rather carefully, choosing my footing, when, just as I was poised to leap from one tussock to another, I was startled by a sharp cry from the captain,

“ Take care ! or you’ll be on that moccasin !”



DEEP CREEK.

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THE CABIN.

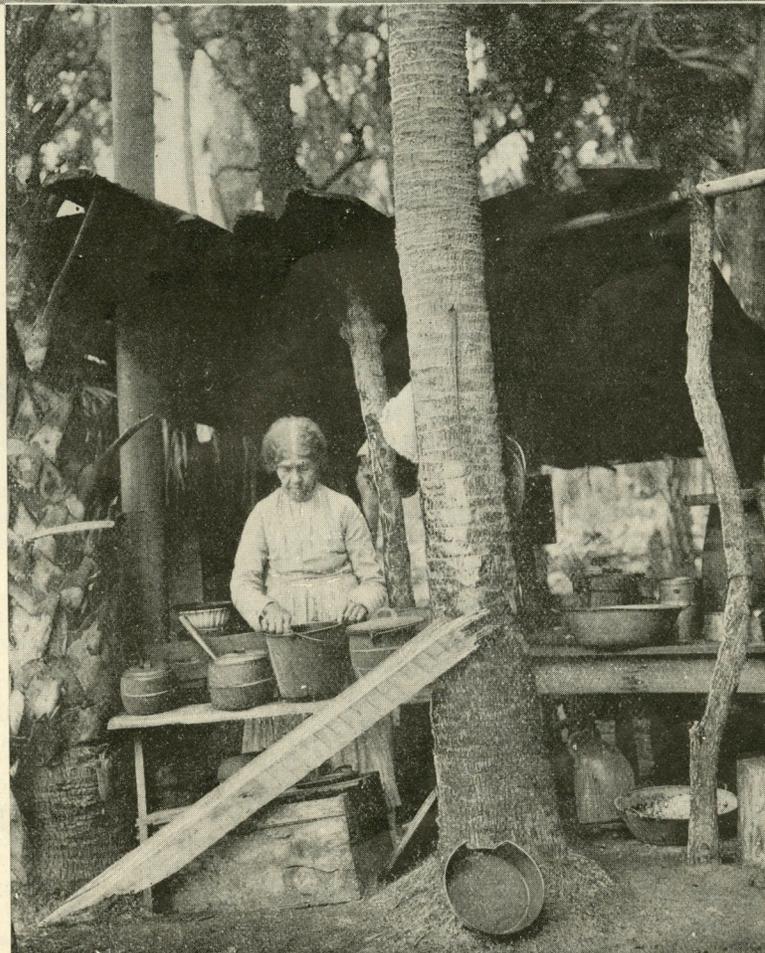
The warning came too late, however, for me to entirely save myself; but I managed to change my direction, and landed in the mud at a short distance from my original destination, not only to the detriment of my shoes, but I almost lost my equilibrium as well, as I struck the slippery ground, and had I done so, would have fallen directly on the serpent which I had made such a strenuous effort to avoid.

There in the bunch of grass on which I had calculated to land, lay a huge, dark chestnut-brown coil, faintly barred with white, above which was a head, waving from side to side, its jaws filled with a mass of white foam. It was a fine specimen of the cotton-mouth moccasin, which derives its name from the foam which fills its mouth when it is excited.

The moccasin, unlike the rattlesnake, is slow to strike, which gave me a chance to fill it with buckshot before it attempted to bite.

"That's as narrer a squeeze as I ever see," said the captain as we proceeded to examine the reptile. "Guess if you'd landed where you started for, you'd 'a' had some use for a besel-stone."

It was growing late. After shaking hands with the "old woman" and giving an affirmative answer to the captain's hearty "Good-by, boys, come ag'in next year," we walked down to our boat ac-



THE KITCHEN.



TELLING A TALE OF THE SEMINOLE WAR.

accompanied by the now peaceful dogs, and with Grant carrying our purchases in the shape of chickens, eggs, and two young guinea-hens. In a few moments we were pulling toward the river, and the "cracker" home among the palmettos was speedily lost to view.

CLARENCE BLOOMFIELD MOORE.

The Gift of Song.

I HAVE not asked of Fate her richer gifts,
But, as I dream of all for which I long,
Through her swift-flying fingers lightly drifts
Some silver strands of song.

And if I weave them in a waking hour
Round some sweet semblance of my dream's ideal,
It is not that I claim the poet's power
To glorify the real.

I only seek to twine those gleaming threads
Into a mesh of linked thoughts and rhymes,
Prisoning the vision which my fancy weds
To dream-land's silver chimes.

I wander far in Poesy's vernal clime,
Where radiant, roseate mists of dream-dawns rise,
While softly flowing cadenced falls of rhyme
Make crystal melodies.

My soul oft droops her wearied wings of thought,
'Neath sadness, grief, and wrong,
Yet has she one rare joy that kings have sought,—
The priceless gift of song.

LEILA SOUTHARD FROST.

Vilanelle.

THESE half-blown roses, yesternight,
My lady gathered laughingly,—
A crimson rosebud, and a white.

She smothered them with fern-leaves quite,
Till through the green you scarce could see
These half-blown roses, yesternight.

Her face was flushed with rosy light;
On each fair cheek shone charmingly
A crimson rosebud, and a white.

I cannot surely tell aright
With what sweet grace she gave to me
These half-blown roses, yesternight,—

Gave me, in pledge of all delight
That in the coming days shall be,
A crimson rosebud, and a white.

Lady, my days are golden-bright,
Because you plucked, half-playfully,
These half-blown roses, yesternight,
A crimson rosebud, and a white.

H. D. LOWRY.

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