

A CHRISTMAS MORNING IN CAROLINA



BY F. A. OLDS.

AT the mouth of the Cape Fear River, thirty miles from Wilmington, lies the queerest island in the United States. The late State geologist, Kerr, used to say that it was a bit of South Florida which had gotten adrift, been carried northward by the Gulf Stream, and had become embayed on the North Carolina coast. The island contains some fourteen thousand acres, and on it are many trees and plants entirely sub-tropical, not found upon the mainland, only four miles away, and which will not live there even for a year.

The seaward face of the island is a vast bank of sand, which as it advances carries destruction before it. Its incline seaward is but slight, but on the land face is about forty-five degrees, and there the sand is steadily falling. The "spill" of the grains is incessant, and at the foot of the remorseless drive, half in its embrace, or entirely covered, are noble live-oaks and palmettos. Looking from the crest of the white drive across the island, the tops of the live-oaks seem like a vast umbrella. Here and there rise the delicate and daintily green fronds of the palmettos.

On this island, known as Bald Head, or Smith's Island, are myriads of 'coons and squirrels, but no 'possums, deer or rabbits. There are, several waterways through it, with rather wide borders of marsh, the feeding ground of the 'coons, which live entirely upon shell-fish, mainly the palatable little raccoon oysters, while the squirrels find a favorite food in the acorns of the live-oak, which everywhere abounds.

Landing on the island one bright Christmas morning the hunt began. Amos, a faithful darky, to whom a hunt on Bald Head is a never-failing delight, had charge of the dogs, a sort of spaniel named "Jumbo" and a nondescript cur named "Pete." Amos, when asked what sort of a dog Pete was, said, "Jes one o' dem standard cur dogs, de most reliablest dog a nigger kin and have." His faith in Pete was justified by results.

At low tide the 'coons go into the marsh and feed. When the tide comes in they go into the trees, and if there be no cause for alarm lie along the spreading limbs of the live-oaks, and take a sun-bath or a rest. Before we had gone fifty yards from the boat, there was a sharp bark.

"Dere's Jumbo!" yelled Amos, and away we went, parting the immense "fans" of young palmettos, and dodging tangles of vines. The dog had "treed" in a rather open space, where a holly fifty feet high, a red cedar, and a palmetto nodded their heads together. Sharp eyes were on the watch, for a little while in vain. Finally, the 'coon was spied in the cedar. There was no way of getting him save by shooting. A rifle cracked, and he was on the ground, all life gone out of him save a last nip at a dog.

Over a long roll of the ground the dogs make their way. Presently little Pete, with alert eyes and ears, is observed standing upon a fallen log, Jumbo is nowhere visible.

"He's in de log," says Amos. And so he is. There is a sound of growling by

the dog, and a sharper note by a 'coon. For several minutes. the worrying by the dog goes on. On his knees, working with fingers which are as claws, Amos is trying to make wider the hollow at the butt of the fallen oak. Presently he leans far in, and then pulls and tugs for dear life. He has hold of Jumbo, and Jumbo has hold of the coon, Both the holds are good, and out comes the 'coon.

A battle royal follows. The 'coon is a patriarch, and is an acrobatic fighter. The spectators, laughing at the 'coon's absurd attitudes, and astonished at his tenacity and pluck, laugh and cheer. He is killed, and there is a pause for breath, Jumbo suddenly gives himself a shake, and then, without a sound, fairly dives into the log. Amos yells, "Another 'coon, gentlemen!" The scene just ended is re-enacted. The leaves and twigs fly under the feet of the fighters. A pair of big 'coons lie side by side, and then are dumped into the capacious gunny sack which swings from Amos' shoulders.

"Look into all dem palmetto stumps you passes," says Amos. His warning is timely. Such stumps are plentiful, some rising only a few inches above the ground, some several feet above it, while in other places the stump is marked by a black ring in the earth. In the interior of these stumps the stringy substance of the palmetto forms a soft bed, such as any 'coon would delight in. With a snarl, Pete almost sinks into one of the holes, and in a minute emerges again with a 'coon hanging to him. A not-to-be-forgotten fight follows, with the inevitable result, the death of the 'coon, but he has left his marks on both the dogs. Not fifteen feet away is a palmetto stump, perhaps ten feet in height. One of us pushes it over. From it, as it crumbles in ruins, emerges another 'coon, who has been lying *perdu*, hoping to escape attention. With blood in their eyes, and on their noses, too, the dogs tackle him, and there is a scrimmage in comparison with which a football game would be as tame as croquet.

A noise among the palmettos is heard, their giant leaves part and half a dozen men come up. Picturesque they are, in white suits, sou'wester hats and high boots of rubber. They are from the life-saving station on the isl-

and, and are as great devotees of the sport of 'coon-hunting as even Amos himself, and so, after handshakes and kind words, they join in the hunt.

The next "find" is in a great live-oak with five limbs, if so they can be termed, since they all spring from the ground level. In each limb there are holes. The dogs dash up one limb and then up another, barking furiously and sniffing at such holes as they can reach. Two of the life-savers ascend the broad and slightly sloping limbs.

"Coons," they say; "we'll have to smoke them out." All hands gather the dead "fans" of palmettos, and these are stuffed into lower openings and fired. A white smoke curls up of some of the openings, and out of one or two rise little jets of flame. In two or three limbs there is a crackling sound, but no smoke. In a couple of minutes sounds as of muffled sneezing are heard.

"Dem's de 'coons," yelled Amos. He is right. The hunters form a ring. Suddenly a 'coon runs out of an upper opening and makes for the top of the tree, where a bullet knocks him out.

Another 'coon stands the fire a little longer and then pokes out his head, sees the hunters and draws it back; but something must be done. So he tries to get up the tree, out of the hole, but his feet slip and he falls.

As he strikes the ground he rolls on his back, and has instantly set before him the task of fighting a pair of game and half-crazy dogs. This is a fine specimen of a 'coon. On none were the bands of black on the back and tail so conspicuous and so deep in color. He fought desperately, and, as Amos put it, "never gin in until de dogs cut his throat."

As we passed through these woods a constant watch was kept for squirrels. Wherever nests were noticed the wild grape or the bamboo vines which form a network were always pulled, and numbers of squirrels were thus rudely awakened, and dashed out only to be greeted by a fusillade. Into one very large nest a rifle was fired, and after a second's pause, the bottom of the nest was observed to shake violently. Then a 'coon of large size slowly appeared, sank through the opening his weight was making, grasped at the limbs with his fore feet, and fell like a stone—dead, shot through and through.