

THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP.

By Alexander Hunter.

THE great Dismal Swamp, covering an area of eight hundred square miles, extends twenty-five miles in Virginia and twenty-one in North Carolina. It is a vast sponge, eight or nine feet above the level of the surrounding country; an enormous reservoir that collects the rain, and supplies five rivers with a never failing flow.

Scientists have never satisfactorily explained the origin of this singular place; they all agree that it was formed in some convulsion of nature in distant palæocrystic age. The soil of the swamp is composed of black vegetable matter, the rich mold of untold centuries of decomposition of trees, vines and bodies of fish, flesh and fowl. The ground alternates greatly; most of it is as treacherous as an oozing quick-sand. In dry weather it will bear the weight of a man, but in a rainy spell the surface is full of stagnant pools and miry stretches that make traveling on foot an impossibility. The depth of this mold varies from fifteen to eighteen feet. Not all the swamp is this way, however; there run at intervals through it "hog-backs" or ridges, that, rising a few feet above the level of the swamp, make islands of solid land ranging from a few rods square up to twenty and thirty acres in extent. These plateaux are heavily wooded with oak and beach trees of no very lofty growth but of great, spreading width. These haunts are natural game preserves and many of them have not been explored.

As I determined to explore the swamp as much as possible, I chose the Suffolk route, which is connected with Lake Drummond by a narrow canal some twelve miles long. Suffolk is situated at the northern half of the swamp, and draws most of its sustenance from it. One long street, "Avenue" the natives call it, runs through pretty much the whole burgh.

All day Saturday was spent by my comrade and myself in laying in supplies; and, among the farmers who came to market with produce, we soon selected one who had lived on the bor-

ders of the swamp all of his life, and knew as much about the interior as any man could.

Early Sunday morning we were aroused by the guide, and, placing our traps in a cart, drove about a mile out of the place, where the boat was awaiting us. This craft was a home-made, flat-bottomed affair, about nine feet long by three wide. It fortunately did not leak, and drew but a few inches of water. The canal here was about ten paces across, and, for several hundred yards, it was as stagnant and dirty as a mud-hole. For three or four miles the scene was the very abomination of desolation. A great fire had, a few months before swept over the swamp, burning vines, trees, logs and soil, leaving nothing visible but a vast expanse of humid black. Every bird, reptile and animal had fled, and Dante never conceived of a more caliginous picture. The scene, as far as the eye could reach, was one vast lack-lustre expanse, over which brooded the spectre of loneliness.

Further on the vista changed; great trees, half killed by the action of the fire, waved their skeleton branches in the air; many had fallen one on top of another, their huge trunks scorched and blackened. Gradually, as the surface of the swamp got more liquid, the action of the fire became more feeble; the underbrush had burned away, but the great trees were untouched and unmarked by the devouring element, and the measured stroke of the guide's oar soon carried the boat into the majestic solitude of the Great Dismal.

It is difficult to get rid of the feeling that you are the discoverer of this unknown place. The solitude is so oppressive, the surroundings so different from all you have hitherto seen, that one unconsciously feels that he is traveling in a primeval region.

Great cypress and gum trees line the canal, the branches of which almost interlace a hundred feet above. The heads of the terrapins and snappers pop up in the water by the hundreds. The autumn days in the swamp are as sultry

summer days outside, the vast forest and the dense fringes of canebrake keeping off the north wind, and the moisture and warm exhalation from the swamp neutralizing the cold air.

A mile or two further on and we got into the home of the shingle getters. We met several flat-bottomed scows loaded with this article, bound for Suffolk. Their mode of propelling the craft is unique. On one side of the canal is the towpath, which consists of but the single trunk of a tree laid down, the butt of one touching the end of another. These logs are not secured in any way. A pole is attached to the bow of the lighter; the other end is held by a bare-footed negro, who walks along on the treacherous foothold. There are generally two polers to each lighter, and when one slips and goes up to his hips in the mud and mire, the mishap is signaled by a burst of boisterous laughter. They are a careless, happy set, these shingle getters; they live well, have only moderate work, love the swamp, and have fat coons for meals seven days out of the week. Most of the lightermen sleep on their boats under the shelter of a home-made tent. Others, who remain in the swamp, show considerable ingenuity in constructing their huts. It is impossible to build them on the ground, so they choose four short trees that form a square, and lash horizontal beams several feet above the soil; a solid flooring is next made, and upon this platform is erected a cabin of light boards. A big iron pot, suspended from a tree in convenient reach, is filled with light wood-knots, that serve to cook their food by day and act as a lantern by night. When solid cooking is required, several large green gum logs are placed together and a fire built upon them; but all culinary labor must be done quickly, for in an hour or so the logs, pressed down by their own weight, sink in the ooze and extinguish the embers. On a clear, warm night the darkeys make the swamp resound with the fiddle and the banjo, and their melodious voices can be heard for miles.

The Great Dismal, in the *ante-bellum* days, was a famous resort for runaway slaves, and once in its recesses they were never heard of more. When the pursuers reached the borders of the

swamp, they turned and gave up the chase. It was only slaves of extraordinary hardihood and resolution who fled to the swamp; for they knew they would be safe, yet it was the same as being buried alive, and meant a final separation from their families and the delights of a civilized life. It may be asked, how did these runaways succeed in living in the swamp? The explanation is simple. They herded with the shingle getters, and, as a contractor generally worked the men, it was none of his business to interfere and get the ill-will of his workmen, especially as the runaways were the hardest workers of his gang; and, as he was supposed to be unaware of their existence, he never paid them anything. I had a long talk with a "runaway" just after the war, in Suffolk, who told me he had remained hidden in the swamp for nineteen years, and in all that time had never seen the face of a woman. He said that he had plenty of whiskey and tobacco, but what he longed for was a real old plantation corn shucking.

Around and on the hogbacks, the coons swarmed, if we could judge from the signs; we smelled coons, we saw coon-skin coats, coon-skin hats, coon-skin waist-coats, while on the trees around the shingle camp were nailed scores of coon skins. The darkeys catch them in a peculiar trap; a great log, some eight feet long, is laid on the ground, and fenced in by shingles or palings being driven down on either side, thus when one of the logs is raised there is apparently a hollow running beneath it. A trigger is set and baited, and the coon has his life crushed out if he meddles with the dead chicken or fish on the end of the blade.

Leaving the lighters and their dwellings, our skiff continued its way down the canal, that had now degenerated into a mere ditch, in some places not over six feet in width. The scene was now strange and bewildering. Great trees locked their branches overhead; tall canes bent gracefully over the narrow passage, long vines trailed above, trellised wild flowers hung aloft—all combined to shut out the sun's rays, that only here and there darted through the foliage and sparkled on the water. The route seemed like a long cathedral

aisle, hallowed with a dim, religious light that moved the feelings strangely. At intervals the canal on both sides would be lined with holly trees, the dark green flecked with glowing red berries. At one or two places the trees were further apart, and the long arbutus vines formed a perfect canopy that bellied downward like a vast sail. Some of the stately hemlocks were draped with the funereal cypress moss and trailing creepers, conjoined in a beautiful tracery.

The silence amid all this lavish display of Nature, decked in her fairest attire, is depressing. It seems as if the whole scene was a waking dream, such as the "Lotus Eaters" saw with half closed eyes, or like the golden vision of Alnasha.

Suddenly the canal ends, and Lake Drummond appears to the view; and if a more beautiful sheet of water exist in all the world, it has been hidden from mortal gaze. Here it lies in the very midst of this mighty swamp, pure and undefiled, a rose in the mire, a violet in a muck heap. Its water, tinged by the health preserving juniper, is touched to the color of ruby wine that sparkles and glints like gold in the sunshine.

What most impresses one, as his eye roves over this broad expanse of water, is its utter solitariness; no gulls flash with their white wings on its surface, no sails gleam in the distance, no narrow trail of vapor against the blue sky shows that steamer or tug plows its waters.

The water of this wonderful lake is tintured by the juniper and gum, and its virtues are so remarkable that invalids in the vicinity, afflicted by pulmonary diseases, use it exclusively. Nor is this all; it keeps pure and uncontaminated for years, and in the past, when a squadron of the navy was ordered to cruise off the coast of Africa, the casks and butts of those ships were filled with the medicinal waters of Lake Drummond.

The lake was generally considered as fathomless, but just before the war, Commodore Barron, acting under instructions of the Navy Department, made extensive soundings and reported that the average depth was only twelve

feet; in some places it was twenty feet. The bottom was generally of mud, but at rare intervals of pure sand.

After spending half an hour in contemplating this lake, I instructed the guide to paddle along its edges. I found that the lake had no beach at all, the cypress trees standing close to its boundary; a couple of yards off the water had a depth of ten feet. It would be an interesting study to a geologist or a scientist to explain by what convulsion of nature the centre of this swamp could be thus scooped out and hollowed, as if by the hand of a Titan, and how its waters could be protected from the encroachments of the *débris* of the dissolving material of the swamp. I must confess that, in all my explorations of this mystic region, this fact puzzled me more than all others. A heavy rain makes this soil spread and wash to an unprecedented degree. Even a moderate rain would wash a hog hole into a pond. Why, then, after a week's rain, with millions of tons of loose soil percolating and falling into the lake, would it not be filled up? Certainly, by all calculations, it should be; but, stern fact against theory, the lake has not decreased an inch in depth.

We spent several hours in cruising along the rim of the lake. In some places heavy growths of reeds grew to the water's edge; again, there would be dense canebrake, through whose midst we could often hear the plunging of some wild animal. Sometimes the swamp would show long vistas, destitute of vegetation; only the gnarled trunks of the cypress trees twisted into queer and fantastic shapes could be seen. Occasionally a wild duck would start up in our front. We saw no other wild fowl, it was too early in the season; but we managed to bag about a dozen ducks, which were unusually unsuspecting and tame. Judging from the water and lack of the proper food, I do not think that Lake Drummond could be more than a temporary stopping place for this migratory wild fowl.

The slanting sun behind the trees cast broad shadows across the lake, and we interrogated the guide about making for some port to spend the night. We were tired and hungry, and wanted first a fire and next a cup of coffee.

We ran the boat to the bank and made preparations to pass the night. The first thing to do was to get supper. A dead white cedar tree furnished fine material for a fire, and the guide's axe soon felled it; in a few minutes a brilliant blaze lit up the gloomy recesses of the swamp. The bacon was frying in the pan, the coffee had commenced to boil, when slowly the blazing coals sank out of sight, leaving only the flickering light of the top embers. It was just as Colonel Byrd wrote in his diary. The top mold, or peat, was burned away, and all that remained in place of our cheering blaze was a black pool of water.

We kindled a fire in another place, and, by hurrying matters, managed to finish our supper before the flames were quenched.

Then the guide piled some lightwood knots in the frying pan and touched them off. We then swung our hammocks, and lighting our pipes prepared to spend an hour or two in a social chat. Before we had finished our first smoke, all hands were slapping, kicking and using bad language, for the mosquitoes, awakened to life by the warm day, had come out in full force, and attracted by the glare of the fire, swarmed in clouds. In vain we covered our heads with clothing; they would manage to find their way to some unguarded spot, and a sudden sting would cause the sufferer to disarrange the blanket, and let in a horde of fresh, blood-thirsty insects. Could we have built a smudge we would willingly have endured the smoke rather than the bites; but as a fire was out of the question we simply had to stand it. Soon the improvised torch went out and left us in pitchy darkness. To sleep was impossible, the humming of the mosquitoes, the plunging of the coons in the lake some fifty yards off; the bellowing of the frogs, within a few feet of us; the noises of moving bodies through the canes; the utter solitude of the place as far as human companionship was concerned, for though we could hear, we could not touch or see each other, kept all senses on the alert. What a noisome, fearful place. De Quincy, in his opium visions, never dreamed of a more uncanny spot. Swung there in space, with the darkness

encompassing us like a pall, one could imagine all sorts of horrible things. The place was a fit Inferno where Dante's shades "under ban and curse" wandered aimlessly. The lugubrious croak of the frogs sounded like their moans; the boding cry of the owl was their lamentations. Fancy could people them more vividly than even Gustave Doré's magic pencil could illustrate.

"By the gray woods by the swamp,
Where the toad and newt encamp,
By the dismal tarns and pools
Where dwell the Ghouls."

"This place is intolerable," I shouted to my companions; "let us shift our quarters."

"All right," replied my comrade, "it's like being entombed alive. Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere; Jim, are you awake?"

In a few moments we had all our traps stowed away in the boat, along with a big pile of lightwood in the bow, and soon we were heading for the centre of the lake. Upon getting from under the sombre shadows of the trees I drew a long breath of relief, for shadows and mosquitoes departed.

It was a gorgeous autumn night. The vaults of Heaven were jeweled, or as Hamlet has it "were fretted with golden fire," which was reflected by the mirror-like water. Millions of fire-flies sporting in the air lit up the scene with a phosphorescent glow, that made everything unreal. The tremulous gleams of light, the scintillating luminosity, pervaded sky, air and water, making a scene of entrancing loveliness. A silvery, silken veil, gemmed with coruscations, was around us. The water seemed sown with translucent gems that by turns flashed, shimmered and sparkled. Coming from the Stygian obscurity of the swamp into the sheen of this chromatic splendor was like slipping from a rayless dungeon into fairyland. The surroundings seemed all unsubstantial, more lovely than a dream, fairer than a trance, and more vivid than any coinage of the brain could conceive. Fancy, all unchecked, played many a fantastic trick.

There, across the way, is the enchanted palace of Circe. Its steps of marble, its pillars of pearl, faintly visible through the opaline glints of flame.

Off to the right a flashing glimpse could be had of the galley of Ulysses, with banked oars, forging steadily through beryl waters. Calypso floats by on her raft, and the Lotus Eaters drift by in a boat. That huge tree half submerged, with its long skeleton branches waving in the air, is the barge of Arion manned by the Euxine mariners, and followed by the Nereides, who swam beside the vessel. Merlin never wove a greater spell, nor conjured up a more delicate fairy scene.

Who could not imagine, in the glamour of those unearthly surroundings, that he could see the lost Indian ever seeking for his bride, which tradition the genius of Moore has immortalized. There, by the glow-worm's fitful light, the shadowy warrior and spectre boat

"Are seen at the hour of midnight damp
To cross the lake by the fire-fly lamp,
And paddle his white canoe."

For hours my friend and I sat there in the motionless craft, entranced and enthralled. Certainly in all my life I never beheld such a delicate and exquisite demonstration before. It was literally as if we were floating in some empyrean region apart from the earth.

At last tired nature overcame fancy, and imagination only existed in our dreams.

In the morning we took a plunge bath in the lake; all excepting the guide, who made his toilet by dipping one hand in the water, smearing his face, and wiping his damp countenance with a handkerchief. Then we paddled ashore and, cooking our breakfast, smoked our pipes and discussed our next step. It was no use trying to explore any portion of the swamp on foot; the guide positively refused to join in any such proceeding. It was impossible to get any game merely by cruising along the rim of the lake. The guide repeated his statement that he knew of a farmer who lived on the border of the swamp, who had a good pack of dogs, and that by putting up there we could be reasonably certain of getting a bear or a deer. We, therefore, adhered to our first conclusion, to retrace our steps and return to the mainland; so we left the place in the early morning, and as we reached the inlet, where the lofty trees rimmed its boundaries, we turned our

eyes to the lake for the last time. The waters lay now as still and tranquil as they will rest for ever. The glinting rays of the sun tinged its surface, until it glowed like opal and ruby in its setting of jet. We were loath to leave it, but the unsympathetic guide sent the boat gliding up the canal.

We reached our old quarters at Suffolk that night, and the next morning hired a team and drove some fifteen miles to the home of a Mr. Seabright, whose farm lay on the borders of the Dismal. Our host was a genial, companionable man, who loved hunting better than he did farming. He was a bachelor, some forty years old, and took life easy. His cornfield furnished him with bread, his hogs and the game he killed with meat. One suit of clothes lasted him a long time, a tobacco patch filled his pipe and kept his jaws moving all the year round. He did not care for style, was never sick a day in his life. His apple orchard, planted by his father, furnished him in trade with a barrel of brandy yearly—so what more did he want.

"I never had the blues but once," he said to me, "and that was some years ago, when a Suffolk gal kicked me, and I am durned glad of it now."

Milton, or Milt, as he was called, was a true philosopher, and as he had but little need of money, he never bothered his brains about accumulation. He kept a pack of eight dogs of very uncertain lineage, though they showed the hound more than any other breed. Two of the pack were of unusual size, strength and ferocity, and, what with the battles among themselves and their fights with the bears and coons, their dewlaps and ears were torn to ribbons.

"A good bear dog," said Milt, "must be a mongrel; a cross of the hound with the mastiff or bull-dog is the best; the first gives him the nose, the second the pluck. An ordinary hound will trail a bear, but he won't tackle him and make him take to a tree. When them dogs close on a bear, it's shindy or skedaddle, and it don't take 'em long to make up their minds, nuther! I killed last year twenty-one bears. Most on them, though, I shot outside the Swamp, when they come prowling around after roasting ears and melons. A few I treed in

the swamp, but its tough work, as you'll find out to-morrow."

Milt was right,—we did.

Milt's weapon was a muzzle-loader, with eighteen buckshot in each barrel, the dogs delaying the bear in the open until he closed up on them. When treed, one load was generally sufficient to make bruin descend to find new quarters, and as he came down the second barrel would be sure to finish him.

We ate our breakfast by candle light, and Milt, my comrade and myself started out at dawn for the swamp, about a mile away. The night had been an unusually sultry one for this season of the year, and there was every prospect that the day would be, as Milt expressed it, "a blazer." The dogs spread out in fine form, and loped along through a big cornfield, snuffing the ground at intervals. Once in a while one would give a yelp, but the rest of the pack never noticed it. We kept along the edge of the swamp for a couple of miles without stirring up any fur larger than a rabbit. The birds, though, were in the greatest profusion, covey after covey of partridges were flushed, and sped whirring away into the woods and branches. A huge flock of swamp blackbirds covered the ground, it seemed, solidly, for an acre or more. Doves, too, were flying in flocks of hundreds. I never saw so many at one time. They darted all around us, offering beautiful shots. Certainly, had we known of this profusion of small game we would have preferred a rattling bird hunt to a tedious chase after a bear. But we consoled ourselves with the thought that we would let ourselves loose at them the next day.

We were drifting along in an aimless fashion, when Jack, the grizzled veteran of the pack, uttered a melodious howl, long drawn out. Every dog rushed to his side, and, after sniffing, they all gave tongue.

"Is it a bear or deer?" I asked, when we reached the spot.

"Bar; see the hair arising on them dogs' backs? That's a sure sign; it means fight to them—and they are getting their mad up. If it was a deer trail they'd be off like a shot. Here's the footprints."

The dogs now went in a run and

disappeared in the gloom of the swamp, and we plunged after them. The canebrake was composed of reeds,—great, strong, lofty poles, such as are used for fishing rods; and growing together as thick as one's fingers. It was slow and tough work forcing our way through them, and before we had gone a couple of hundred yards, the sound of the dogs' voices ceased entirely. We came to a standstill, Milt sounding his horn frequently and getting no responsive cry. It was an hour by my watch before we heard anything, and then there was a slight rustling in the cane, and all unexpectedly, a full grown doe ran almost on us; before we could jerk our guns up, she made a mighty leap sideways and was out of sight in a second. The canebrake was so dense that it was impossible to see ten feet ahead. All threw up their guns, but none pulled trigger, realizing that we might as well fire in the dark.

"Dog-gone the luck," growled Milt, "that doe was as fat as butter. It ain't any use staying in here any longer; that bar has struck for the lake and the dogs never will catch up with him."

We retraced our steps, getting in the open, and sat smoking and talking for some time. Just as our patience was becoming exhausted, and we were thinking of returning home, one of the pack—a long-limbed gyp named Queen, came out of the swamp all covered with black pitch-like mud. A long blast from Milt's cow-horn brought the others, all mud coated from the tip end of their nose to the end of their tails. Their lolling tongues and heaving sides showed that they had toiled hard.

Another long wait occurred, to give the pack time to recover wind, and we continued the hunt. The sun was by this time high in the heavens, and its beams were scorching. The next place the dogs were thrown off was an old meadow that had not been cultivated for some years, and was fast relapsing into its primeval wilds. Young pines, bunches of briars, dotted the field throughout. The land trended far into the swamp, and was in the shape of a horseshoe. We kept across, while the dogs followed its borders around. All at once a simultaneous cry broke from the pack, and an antlered buck leaped

in easy bounds through the field; the dogs had cut him off from the swamp, and he was striking for the woods behind us. In his flight he never saw us; his fear was from the dogs. His course was diagonally across the field, which would bring him within easy range of our guns. We dropped silently in a patch of broom-straw and waited for him. He never swerved a hair's breadth from his line of flight, and just as he passed through an open space, between forty and fifty yards distant, every gun exploded; the deer gave a mighty bound and vanished from sight; the hounds were right behind him, baying with all their might. By the time we slipped fresh shells in our guns, a frenzied outcry from the pack showed that they had overtaken their game. In a few seconds we were with them and found the animal prone on the ground, feebly gasping for breath. He was an eight-tined buck, and his hide was literally perforated with holes. It being so warm, Milt skinned him then and there, and hung the carcass to a limb of a tree. It was so intensely warm that we were glad to take a long rest in the shade, and nothing but a sense of pride kept us from going back home and loafing through the rest of this worse than mid-summer day.

Once more the dogs were sent out, and we proceeded slowly along the brink of the swamp. In passing through a dense coppice, we came to a dead cedar which was covered with vines heavily weighted with an enormous quantity of fox grapes. Here it was that the pack gave a savage howl and rushed, with a common impulse, into the canes.

"Come on," yelled Milt, "that bar is not far off; he was eating them grapes when he heard us coming."

Into the canebrakes once more, pushing our way through by main force for nearly a mile. It was hot enough to roast an ox, and the tremendous exertion made the perspiration pour out of every pore. The dogs suddenly deflected to the right, and we could hear them crashing through the cover; and at last the faintest vestige of sound died away. And here we were for the second time, stuck fast in the brakes. It was now high noon, and Milt's prediction came true; it was "as hot as blazes," and

growing hotter, not a breath of a breeze could reach through this dense, impenetrable cover, and the moisture from the swamp, changed into steam by the heat, almost par-boiled us. Just as we were about to leave in utter disgust, our discomforts were forgotten, for the bear had evidently been overtaken and had turned and was fighting his way to the higher ground of a ridge where the large trees grew.

"Follow me," yelled Milt. "We've got him now, sure!"

He pushed forward, and we kept close to him. Shades of Acteon! what a rush we made. Each man was soon puffing and blowing like a miniature locomotive, and steaming like one, too. Bursting, tearing and ripping a path through the thick canebrake with a desperate energy, we came to higher ground, where the cat-o-nine-tails took the place of reeds and vines, and here we made better progress, and, at last, gasping, weakened and reeling, we reached the dogs, who were barking around a thick, but scrubby, black jack tree. Gazing upward, we saw the bear sitting on his hams in the crotch of a big limb.

"Aim at his head," said Milt. The gun rang out, and the animal fell like a bag of meal.

Well, I had killed a bear, but he was only half as large as I expected, and I certainly would not have gone through so much to shoot such a small animal.

"Why!" said my companion, giving the carcass a contemptuous kick, "a policeman could have arrested that bear by himself and carried it to the station house."

We lay on the ground utterly spent, and almost mad with thirst. Oh! for a draught of seltzer or bottle of Bass. The very swamp smoked with the heat, and the gaseous caloric seemed as if it would melt the solid flesh. I thought of the Arab maxim—"Bagdad is a stove, Cairo a furnace, and Aiden hell." We lay on the roots of the trees, incapable of exertion; the dogs had crawled off in search of water, and that is the last we saw of them. I have been in some hot places in my life, but never experienced such intense, steaming, prostrating heat as filled the Great Dismal. It was positive, actual suffering, a burning fever, a cremating nightmare.