The Rudder Grangers Abroad and Other Stories

by

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Euphemia Among The Pelicans

The sun shone warm and soft, as it shines in winter time in the semi-tropics. The wind blew strong, as it blows whenever and wherever it listeth. Seven pelicans labored slowly through the air. A flock of ducks rose from the surface of the river. A school of mullet, disturbed by a shark, or some other unscrupulous pursuer, sprang suddenly out of the water just before us, and fell into it again like the splashing of a sudden shower.

I lay upon the roof of the cabin of a little yacht. Euphemia stood below, her feet upon the mess-chest, and her elbows resting on the edge of the cabin roof. A sudden squall would have unshipped her; still, if one would be happy, there are risks that must be assumed. At the open entrance of the cabin, busily writing on a hanging-shelf that served as a table, sat a Paying Teller. On the high box which during most of the day covered our stove was a little lady, writing in a note-book. On the forward deck, at the foot of the mast, sat a young man in a state of placidness. His feet stuck out on the bowsprit, while his mildly contemplative eyes went forth unto the roundabout.

At the tiller stood our guide and boatman, his sombre eye steady on the south-by-east. Around the horizon of his countenance there spread a dark and six-days' beard, like a slowly rising thunder-cloud; ever and anon there was a gleam of white teeth, like a bright break in the sky, but it meant nothing. During all our trip, the sun never shone in that face. It never stormed, but it was always cloudy. But he was the best boatman on those waters, and when he stood at the helm we knew we sailed secure. We wanted a man familiar with storms and squalls, and if this familiarity had developed into facial sympathy, it mattered not. We could attend to our own sunshine. At his feet sat humbly his boy of twelve, whom we called "the crew." He was making fancy knots in a bit of rope. This and the occupation of growing up were the only labors in which he willingly engaged.

Euphemia and I had left Rudder Grange, to spend a month or two in Florida, and we were now on a little sloop-yacht on the bright waters of the Indian River. It must not be supposed that, because we had a Paying Teller with us, we had set up a floating bank. With this Paying Teller, from a distant State, we had made acquaintance on our first entrance into Florida. He was travelling in what Euphemia called "a group," which consisted of his wife,--the little lady with the note-book,--the contemplative young man on the forward deck, and himself.

This Paying Teller had worked so hard and so rapidly at his business for several years, and had paid out so much of his health and strength, that it was necessary for him to receive large deposits of these essentials before he could go to work again. But the peculiar habits of his profession never left him. He was continually paying out something. If you presented a conversational check to him in the way of a remark, he would, figuratively speaking, immediately jump to his little window and proceed to cash it, sometimes astonishing you by the amount of small change he would spread out before you.

When he heard of our intention to cruise on Indian River he wished to join his group to our party, and as he was a good fellow we were glad to have him do so. His wife had been, or was still, a schoolteacher. Her bright and cheerful face glistened with information.

The contemplative young man was a distant connection of the Teller, and his first name being Quincy, was commonly called Quee. If he had wanted to know any of the many things the little teacher wished to tell he would have been a happy youth; but his contemplation seldom crystallized into a knowledge of what he did want to know.

"And how can I," she once said to Euphemia and myself, "be expected ever to offer him any light when he can never bring himself to actually roll up a question?"

This was said while I was rolling a cigarette.

The group was greatly given to writing in journals, and making estimates. Euphemia and I did little of this, as it was our holiday, but it was often pleasant to see the work going on. The business in which the Paying Teller was now engaged was the writing of his journal, and his wife held a pencil in her kidded fingers and a little blank-book on her knees.

This was our first day upon the river.

"Where are we?" asked Euphemia. "I know we are on the Indian River, but where is the Indian River?"

"It is here," I said.

"But where is here?" reiterated Euphemia.

"There are only three places in the world," said the teacher, looking up from her book,--"here, there, and we don't know where. Every spot on earth is in one or the other of those three places."

"As far as I am concerned," said Euphemia, "the Indian River is in the last place."

"Then we must hasten to take it out," said the teacher, and she dived into the cabin, soon reappearing with a folding map of Florida. "Here," she said, "do you see that wide river running along part of the Atlantic coast of the State, and extending down as far as Jupiter Inlet? That is Indian River, and we are on it. Its chief characteristics are that it is not a river, but an arm of the sea, and that it is full of fish."

"It seems to me to be so full," said I, "that there is not room for them all--that is, if we are to judge by the way the mullet jump out."

"I think," said the teacher, making a spot with her pencil on the map, "that just now we are about here."

"It is the first time," said Euphemia, "that I ever looked upon an unknown region on the map, and felt I was there."

Our plans for travel and living were very simple. We had provided ourselves on starting with provisions for several weeks, and while on the river we cooked and ate on board our little vessel. When we reached Jupiter Inlet we intended to go into camp. Every night we anchored near the shore. Euphemia and I occupied the cabin of the boat; a tent was pitched on shore for the Teller and his wife; there was another tent for the captain and his boy, and this was shared by the contemplative young man.

Our second night on the river was tinged with incident. We had come to anchor near a small settlement, and our craft had been moored to a rude wharf. About the middle of the night a wind-storm arose, and Euphemia and I were awakened by the bumping of the boat against the wharf-posts. Through the open end of the cabin I could see that the night was very dark, and I began to consider the question whether or not it would be necessary for me to get up, much preferring, however, that the wind should go down. Before I had made up my mind we heard a step on the cabin above us, and then a quick and hurried tramping. I put my head out of the little window by me, and cried--

"Who's there?"

The voice of the boatman replied out of the darkness:--

"She'll bump herself to pieces against this pier! I'm going to tow you out into the stream." And so he cast us loose, and getting into the little boat which was fastened to our stern, and always followed us as a colt its mother, he towed us far out into the stream. There he anchored us, and rowed away. The bumps now ceased, but the wind still blew violently, the waves ran high, and the yacht continually wobbled up and down, tugging and jerking at her anchor. Neither of us was frightened, but we could not sleep.

"I know nothing can happen," said Euphemia, "for he would not have left us here if everything had not been all right, but one might as well try to sleep in a corn-popper as in this bed."

After a while the violent motion ceased, and there was nothing but a gentle surging up and down.

"I am so glad the wind has lulled," said Euphemia, from the other side of the centre-board partition which partially divided the cabin.

Although I could still hear the wind blowing strongly outside, I too was glad that its force had diminished so far that we felt no more the violent jerking that had disturbed us, and I soon fell asleep.

In the morning, when I awoke, I saw that the sun was shining brightly, and that a large sea-grape bush was hanging over our stern. I sprang out of bed, and found that we had run, stern foremost, upon a sandy beach. About forty feet away, upon the shore, stood two 'possums, gazing with white, triangular faces upon our stranded craft. Except these, and some ducks swimming near us, with seven pelicans flying along on the other side of the river, there was no sign of life within the range of my sight. I was not long in understanding the situation. It had not been the lulling of the storm, but the parting of our cable which had caused the uneasy jerking of our little yacht to cease. We had been blown I knew not how far down the river, for the storm had come from the north, and had stranded I knew not where. Taking out my pocket-compass I found that we were on the eastern shore of the river, and that the wind had changed completely, and was now blowing, not very strong, from the southeast. I made up my mind what must be done. We were probably far from the settlement and the rest of the party, and we must go back. The wind was in our favor, and I knew I could sail the boat. I had never sailed a boat in my life, and was only too glad to have the opportunity, untrammelled by any interference.

I awoke Euphemia and told her what had happened. The two 'possums stood upon the shore, and listened to our conversation. Euphemia was much impressed by the whole affair, and for a time said nothing.

"We must sail her back, I suppose," she remarked at length, "but do you know how to start her?"

"The hardest thing to do is to get her off the beach," I answered, "but I think I can do that."

I rolled up my trousers, and with bare feet jumped out upon the sand. The two 'possums retired a little, but still watched my proceedings. After a great deal of pushing and twisting and lifting, I got the yacht afloat, and then went on board to set the sail. After much pulling and tugging, and making myself very warm, I hoisted the main-sail. I did not trouble myself about the jib, one sail being enough for me to begin with. As the wind was blowing in the direction in which we wished to go, I let the sail out until it stood nearly at right angles with the vessel, and was delighted to see that we immediately began to move through the water. I took the tiller, and steered gradually toward the middle of the river. The wind blew steadily, and the yacht moved bravely on. I was as proud as a man drawn by a conquered lion, and as happy as one who did not know that conquered lions may turn and rend. Sometimes the vessel rolled so much that the end of the boom skimmed the surface of the water, and sometimes the sail gave a little jerk and flap, but I saw no necessity for changing our course, and kept our bow pointed steadily up the river. I was delighted that the direction of the wind enabled me to sail with what might be called a horizontal deck. Of course, as the boatman afterward informed me, this was the most dangerous way I could steer, for if the sail should suddenly "jibe," there would be no knowing what would happen. Euphemia sat near me, perfectly placid and cheerful, and her absolute trust in me gave me renewed confidence and pleasure. "There is one great comfort," she remarked, as she sat gazing into the water,--"if anything should happen to the boat, we can get out and walk."

There was force in this remark, for the Indian River in some of its widest parts is very shallow, and we could now plainly see the bottom, a few feet below us.

"Is that the reason you have seemed so trustful and content?" I asked.

"That is the reason," said Euphemia. On we went and on, the yacht seeming sometimes a little restive and impatient, and sometimes rolling more than I could see any necessity for, but still it proceeded. Euphemia sat in the shadow of the cabin, serene and thoughtful, and I, holding the tiller steadily amidship, leaned back and gazed up into the clear blue sky.

In the midst of my gazing there came a shock that knocked the tiller out of my hand. Euphemia sprang to her feet and screamed; there were screams and shouts on the other side of the sail, which seemed to be wrapping itself about some object I could not see. In an instant another mast beside our own appeared above the main-sail, and then a man with a red face jumped on the forward deck. With a quick, determined air, and without saying a word, or seeming to care for my permission, he proceeded to lower our sail; then he stepped up on top of the cabin, and looking down at me, inquired what in thunder I was trying to do.

I made no answer, but looked steadily before me. Now that the sail was down, I could see what had happened. I had collided with a yacht which we had seen before. It was larger than ours, and contained a grandfather and a grandmother, a father and a mother, several aunts, and a great many children. They had started on the river the same day as ourselves, but did not intend to take so extended a trip as ours was to be. The whole party was now in the greatest confusion. I did not understand what they said, nor did I attend to it. I was endeavoring, for myself, to grasp the situation. Euphemia was calling to me from the cabin, into which she had retreated; the man was still talking to me from the cabin roof, and the people in the other boat were vociferating and screaming; but I paid no attention to any one until I had satisfied myself that nothing serious had happened. I had not run into them head on, but had come up diagonally, and the side of our bow had struck the side of their stern. The collision, as I afterward learned, had happened in this wise: I had not seen the other boat because, lying back as I had been, the sail concealed her from me, and they had not seen us because their boatman was in the forward part of their cabin, collecting materials for breakfast, and the tiller was left in charge of one of the boys, who, like all the rest of his party who sat outside, had discreetly turned his back to the sun.

The grandfather stood up in the stern. He wore a black silk hat, and carried a heavy grape-vine cane. Unsteadily balancing himself on his legs, and shaking his cane at me, he cried:--

"What is the meaning of this, sir? Are you trying to drown a whole family, sir?"

"If he'd run his bowsprit in among you," said the boatman from the cabin roof, "he'd 'a' killed a lot of you before you'd been drowned."

Euphemia screamed to me to come to her; the father was standing on his cabin roof, shouting something to me; the women in the other boat were violently talking among themselves; some of the little children were crying; the girls were hanging to the ladies, and all the boys were clambering on board our boat. It was a time of great excitement, and something must be instantly said by me. My decision was quick.

"Have you any tea?" I said, addressing the old gentleman.

"Tea!" he roared. "What do you mean by that?"

"We have plenty of coffee on board," I answered, "but some of our party can't drink it. If you have any tea, I should like to borrow some. I can send it to you when we reach a store."

From every person of the other party came, as in a chorus, the one word, "Tea?" And Euphemia put her pale face out of the cabin, and said, in a tone of wondering inquiry, "Tea?"

"Did you bang into us this way to borrow tea?" roared the old gentleman.

"I did not intend, of course, to strike you so hard," I said, "and I am sorry I did so, but I should like to borrow some tea."

Euphemia whispered to me:--

"We have tea."

I looked at her, and she locked her lips.

"Of course we can give you some tea, if you want some," said the red-faced boatman, "but I never heerd of a thing like this since I was first born, nor ever shall again, I hope."

"I don't want you to give me any tea," I said. "I shall certainly return it, and a very little will do--just a handful."

The two boats had not drifted apart, for the father, standing on the cabin roof, had held tightly to our rigging, and the boatman, still muttering, went on board his vessel to get the tea. He brought it, wrapped in a piece of a newspaper.

"Here comes your man," he said, pointing to a little boat which was approaching us. "We told him we'd look out for you, but we didn't think you'd come smashing into us like this."

In a few moments our boatman had pulled alongside, his face full of a dark inquiry. He looked at me for authoritative information.

"I came here," I said to him, "after tea."

"Before breakfast, I should say!" cried the old gentleman. And every one of his party burst out laughing.

Much was now said, chiefly by the party of the other part, but our boatman paid little attention to any of it. The boys scrambled on board their own vessel. We pushed apart, hoisted sail, and were soon speeding away.

"Good bye!" shouted the father, a genial man. "Let us know if you want any more groceries, and we'll send them to you."

For six days from our time of starting we sailed down the Indian River. Sometimes the banks were miles apart, and sometimes they were very near each other; sometimes we would come upon a solitary house, or little cluster of dwellings; and then there would be many, many miles of wooded shore before another human habitation was to be seen. Inland, to the west, stretched a vast expanse of lonely forest where panthers, bears, and wild-cats prowled. To the east lay a long strip of land, through whose tall palmettoes came the roar of the great ocean. The blue sky sparkled over us every day; now and then we met a little solitary craft; countless water-fowl were scattered about on the surface of the stream; a school of mullet was usually jumping into the air; an alligator might sometimes be seen steadily swimming across the river, with only his nose and back exposed; and nearly always, either to the right or to the left, going north or going south, were seven pelicans, slowly flopping through the air.

A portion of the river, far southward, called "The Narrows," presented a very peculiar scene. The banks were scarcely fifty feet apart, and yet there were no banks. The river was shut in to the right by the inland shore, and to the left by a far-reaching island, and yet there was no inland shore, nor any island to the left. On either side were great forests of mangrove trees, standing tiptoe on their myriad down-dropping roots, each root midleg in the water. As far as we could see among the trees, there was no sign of ground of any kind--nothing but a grotesque network of roots, on which the forest stood. In this green-bordered avenue of water, which extended nine or ten miles, the thick foliage shut out the breeze, and our boatman was obliged to go ahead in his little boat and tow us along.

"There are Indians out West," said Euphemia, as she sat gazing into the mangroves, "who live on roots, but I don't believe they could live on these. The pappooses would certainly fall through."

At Jupiter Inlet, about a hundred and fifty miles from our point of starting, we went into camp, in which delightful condition we proposed to remain for a week or more. There was no trouble whatever in finding a suitable place for a camp. The spot selected was a point of land swept by cool breezes, with a palmetto forest in the rear of it. On two sides of the point stretched the clear waters of the river, while half a mile to the east was Jupiter Inlet, on each side of which rolled and tumbled the surf of the Atlantic. About a mile away was Jupiter Light-house, the only human habitation within twenty miles. We

built a palmetto hut for a kitchen; we set up the tents in a permanent way; we constructed a little pier for the yacht; we built a wash-stand, a table, and a bench. And then, considering that we had actually gone into camp, we got out our fishing-lines.

Fishing was to be the great work here. Near the Inlet, through which the waters of the ocean poured into and out of our river, on a long, sandy beach, we stood in line, two or three hours every day except Sunday, and fished. Such fishing we had never imagined!--there were so many fishes, and they were so big. The Paying Teller had never fished in his life before he came to Florida. He had tried at St. Augustine, with but little success. "If the sport had been to chuck fish into the river," he had said, "that would be more in my line of business; but getting them out of it did not seem to suit me." But here it was quite a different thing. It was a positive delight to him, he said, to be obliged so often to pay out his line.

One day, when tired of struggling with gamy blue-fish and powerful cavalios (if that is the way to spell it), I wound up my line, and looked about to see what the others were doing. The Paying Teller stood near, on tiptoe, as usual, with his legs wide apart, his hat thrown back, his eyes flashing over the water, and his right arm stretched far out, ready for a jerk. Quee was farther along the beach. He had just landed a fish, and was standing gazing meditatively upon it as it lay upon the sand. The hook was still in its mouth, and every now and then he would give the line a little pull, as if to see if there really was a connection between it and the fish. Then he would stand a little longer, and meditate a little more, still looking alternately at the line and the fish. Having made up his mind, at last, that the two things must be separated, he kneeled down upon his flopping prize and proceeded meditatively to extract the hook. The teacher was struggling at her line. Hand over hand she pulled it in. As it came nearer and nearer, her fish swam wildly from side to side, making the tightened line fairly hiss as it swept through the water. But still she pulled and pulled, until, red and breathless, she landed her prize upon the sand.

"Hurrah!" shouted the Paying Teller. "That's the biggest blue-fish yet!" But he did not come to take the fish from the hook. He was momentarily expecting a bite.

Euphemia was not to be seen. This did not surprise me, as she frequently gave up fishing long before the others, and went to stroll upon the sea-beach, a few hundred yards away. She was fond of fishing, but it soon tired her. "If you want to know what it is like," she wrote to a friend in the North, "just tie a long string around your boy Charlie, and try to haul him out of the back yard into the house."

But Euphemia was not upon the sea-beach to-day. I walked a mile or so along the sand, but did not find her. She had gone around the little bluff to our shark-line. This was a long rope, like a clothes-line, with a short chain at the end and a great hook, which was baited with a large piece of fish. It was thrown out every day, the land end tied to a stout stake driven into the sand, and the whole business given into the charge of "the crew," who was to report if a shark should bite. But to-day the little rascal had wandered away, and Euphemia was managing the line.