

(Chap. XIX)

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Prints to St. Michael's Mount
Preface - w.s.

this?

The week - the end of about 1900, a dream of my boyhood has been fulfilled, I have seen the Dismal Swamp! My success in life began with a geography prize - one of Johnston's Atlases - I have it and prize it still. The old fashioned school geography which we studied had many attractive pictures of the great natural objects - Niagara Falls - Mammoth Cave - but the picture which fascinated me & which remains photographed on my mind was that of the Dismal Swamp - with huge cypress trees with snakes hanging from the boughs. Later I read "Dred a tale of the Dismal Swamp" & Southey's poem has rung in my ears these forty years. I could never pick up an atlas without turning to the map of the United States and refresh my imagination with the vastness of the area indicated & I invariably made a mental resolve some day to see it. I had read much & thought more of the band of runaway slaves that lived in its recesses and I knew there were many who had not heard of Lincoln's 'declaration' and I felt that perhaps some day I might take the message to them. All this was long ago. A few years after I moved to Baltimore, one evening after dinner a party of gentlemen were talking of the Dismal Swamp Canal & as a shock it came to me that I was within easy distance of realizing the dream of my boyhood. Not until this week has it been possible, but the long delay has only made the reality more real & I have had the accumulated joy of years of anticipation. We left Deep Creek one morning about 9 o'clock - in the steam launch of the Canal Contractor, taking with us an ample supply of provisions & a copy of Lincoln's Proclamation. Four pictures in my mind remain. The D. S. silent with deep sense of [blank] - the great cypresses with divided roots far out in the water, the moccasin snakes, the red lizards that dropped from the trees on to one's hat, & the negroes deep in the recesses of the Swamp to whom Lincoln's Pro-

clamation was yet unknown. From Deep Creek the Canal runs through an uninteresting portion of the swamp for ten miles & then the launch entered a narrow ditch - the feeder of the Canal from the Lake - two miles in length. The banks of the ditch are literally roots & peat with here & there white patches made up of oyster & clam shells of the post-tertiary period. A quarter of a mile from the Lake is the main lock of the feeder - there we found a group of men, chiefly negroes, making a new sluice. As we were locking through my heart leapt up as I beheld a dugout canoe corresponding exactly to the picture in Southey's poem. The man in charge of the Lock we named Sir Michael for an extraordinary resemblance to our distinguished friend the physiologist. He was both civil & humorous and offered us the hospitality of his garden as his bungalow was small & full. He received the daily papers which we offered with a visible start which was explained a few minutes later when he asked me to read a letter which the skipper had brought him from Deep Creek. Through the Lock we quickly reached the shoreless lake of the Dismal Swamp & no sooner had we left the ditch than the first of my vision came true. The launch ran close to the magnificent view of a huge cypress with at least 12 ^{tough} huge roots, all separate, between which a canoe could go and reaching down into 6 or 8 feet of water. The top was battered & leafless, the trunk was bare, but what of that, the giant roots did emerge from the water & light, much light could be seen between them. The Lake is surrounded by these remarkable trees which present a strange appearance to one accustomed to northern forests. Lifeless, silent - monotonous, not a habitation visible & nowhere an apparent outlet, ^{is a} ~~to~~ the Lake of the Dismal Swamp. ^{but} I must say I returned to our Camp a little disappointed. It was 6 o'clock before we returned to the Lock where we made arrangements to camp for the night. About dusk as we sat smoking around a camp fire a fine looking young negro called Hampton came up & asked in a hesitating way if one of us was not a doctor. He had that ~~semi-~~

Jim

^{blurred} ternal malady known ⁱⁿ as Leviticus & among the coloured folk as 'running ⁷veins' for which Dr. F. provided him with substantial comfort. I was attracted by a remarkable conformation of his right eye which was inserted vertically in the socket & gave him a remarkably ferocious appearance. As I was examining him something in his aspect - the phenomenal optic, took me back 6 years to the Ward for Coloured patients in the J.H.H. I found on my visit an elderly negro, jet black but of remarkable intelligence, with this still more remarkable conformation, at which the Head Nurse assured me the other coloured patients were greatly disturbed, as they dreaded such an eye as a Hoodoo After gaining the confidence of the old man, he told me that he belonged to an important secret society among the negroes which had its origin & was connected with the escape of runaway slaves into the Dismal Swamp. The members of this Society knew each other by a secret digital sign of extraordinary simplicity which out of regard for my kindness he showed me. In a flash all this passed through my mind as I saw the big negro boy by the camp fire with his cock eye. At a venture I gave him the sign, received a reply & to my surprise he stooped down, grasped my by both legs in the attitude of a supplicant, motioned me to come aside & in a voice stricken with fear asked how I came to be a member of the Society. It turned out that Hampton the old coloured patient in Ward M was his uncle & the whole family had this ocular peculiarity. I asked him where he lived, he said his people were far on there, pointing towards the Lake & that he came out every week to work with the Lock Master. There was the very opportunity I sought. In a few words I asked him if he would take us into the Swamp in his dugout - As he hesitated I gave him the sign, he at once said yes but it must be at night. Tonight then I replied be at the top of the Lock at Midnight Too excited to sleep we sat by the fire¹⁸ amid a silence so profound it made the senses thrill.¹¹ The ripple of the Sluice alone broke the awful silence. At 12 we found Hampton

with the canoe in the bottom of which we sat one in the middle - one at the bow while Hampton with a string paddle sat on a low movable seat in the stern. It was a glorious night at the full moon, the sheen of which was reflected along the entire length of the Canal and as we entered the Lake the soft brilliancy of the light, just enough to show the low outline in the distance, displayed in vivid weirdness the giant cypresses. In the launch we had stood away from the shore, as we must call it, but Hampton paddled at once towards the South margin & went in & out among the cypresses like a skilful driver in a crowded street. I asked him if it were possible to paddle between the roots of the large trees, to which he replied, "Wait." After skirting the South side of the Lake for about two miles Hampton headed the canoe directly for the largest tree we had seen as if he meant to strike it. Turning suddenly to the left around a huge root & as suddenly to the right, he passed into a wide channel made by eight roots to the right & seven to the left, all wonderfully symmetrical & uniform reaching about 6 feet above the water. Perfectly enchanted I motioned to Hampton to stop but he shook his head [insisted] No & shoved the canoe against one of the roots, at that moment we heard a splash in the water & a moccasin snake at least 4 ft. long dropped from one of the roots just missing the edge of the canoe. Hampton gave a start but in a flash I seized a paddle, shouted to Dr. F. to steady the canoe & with the flat side pinned the snake against a root just at the water line. Hampton yelled "It is death to touch it, let me go on" - but seeing I had the creature firmly caught close to the head so that he could not possibly strike I grasped it by the neck & lifted it into the canoe. It was a perfect beauty and shone in the moonlight with a wonderful lustre. The second of my boyish dreams was more than fulfilled. I had not only seen but caught a moccasin. In a moment while T B F held a lighted match I made the snake harmless extracting the fangs with my knife & remembering a trick Dr

? Kelly had taught us I looped it in the Coluber Knot which even a snake cannot untie & laid it harmless and safe in the bottom of the canoe. From under the cypress we emerged into a little bay of open water & heard a distinct ripple as of a brook running out of the Lake into the thickest bushes - so that we had to duck our heads. We came upon a miniature rapid, up which with a strong effort Hampton forced the canoe & we found ourselves in a stream - the outlines of which were scarcely visible so thick were the trees about & above. Growing wider as we proceeded, we got once more into open spots in which the moonlight showed islands of moss, supported by spiderlike roots of trees. After paddling far at least 2 hours the trees seemed less tall, the islands larger & the proportion of land & water was reversed & we passed several oases. On one of these Hampton stranded the canoe, gave a shrill whistle between his fingers & then helped us out. A fine looking half naked negro with a lighted pine torch in one hand came out to greet us in evident terror until Hampton shouted "all right." In a few minutes Hampton's Mother joined the group. Both were much excited to know why he had come at such an hour. Speaking together for a moment, he asked me to step forward & as I did, gave the sign at which they bowed & made signs of the greatest respect. The house was a 2 roomed log structure, very comfortable, quite rain proof but devoid of ordinary furniture, neither bed or bedding table or chairs. I was not interested in any of the externals, the thought alone absorbed me "Had these poor souls heard of Lincoln's Proclamation or not." They had both of them been born in the swamp - ^{The how?} the name long ago they did not know - To the question to whom ?? they belonged the man replied "Massa ^{Rawson?} Rawson" & fortunately added "Old Aunt Letty" meaning his mother "can tell all about it." In a moment the woman came out leading a much bent old woman evidently a great age, who was one of the last runaway

slaves in the Swamp. She & her husband had escaped years ago from the Ransom plantation on the Roanoke & aided by their secret society had reached the slave resort in this Dismal Swamp, where she had lived & brought up a large family. As I had been at the Ransom plantation & knew something of her family I questioned her & gathered that she had escaped as far back as 1840 as she knew nothing of the Mexican War in which the Ransoms were engaged. Her mind was extraordinarily bright & she told some touching incidents in the life of the family. Then I put the question "Did they know of the War?" Yes - they replied Silas had told them and he wanted to be a soldier; of the Secession they had never heard. I suggested it would be better for Aunt Letty to return to the Ransoms - she said she preferred the free life of the swamp and was "no good nohow" at her time of life. The third dream was realized - Here were negroes in the swamp who had not heard of the freedom declaration. With trembling hand I took out the paper & by the light of the fire read the Historical Proclamation. When I came to the words "all men are born free & equal" Aunt Letty raised her seamed sunned face & with a chuckle said "No sah - dat aint so - dere's a heap of difference twist my son Job & his son Silas." As it was just 4 a m & Dr. F & I were starving I asked Silas if he thought there was anything to eat in the house. He suggested that Aunt Letty would like nothing better than to cook the moccasin which was a great delicacy - but I was loth to give up my prize. Silas' mother came out in a few moments with the shells of 2 terrapin as I thought to give us as momentos but she raked the hot ashes & put the shells into them - as she did this I saw they were half full. It was terrapin on the half shell - real Dismal Swamp Diamond Backs fed on the succulent root of the Mangoe Tree & therefore far more flavour than the Chesapeake Bay Diamond Back - but I did not come here to describe the edible luxuries of the Swamp. We left with but one regret - that Dr F had not brought his moonlight camera.

I would give \$200 for a picture of the group which sat about that camp fire. 5 o'clk saw us starting on our return journey. In the early dawn we entered the depths of the Swamp. Once we passed through a long aisle of cypresses still shadowed in gloom. Down such a one the spirit guided Poe to the Vault of his ⁹last Ulalume.