

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 1

I had just left school, in a very undecided state of mind as to what profession I should select. The honest truth is, that I had no great fancy for one more than for another. I should have preferred that of a gentleman at large, with an independent fortune. But it had been so ordained that I should not possess the latter very satisfactory means of subsistence; and it was necessary, if I wished to support myself like a gentleman, that I should choose some calling by which I could at least obtain an income, supposing that I had not the talent to realise a large fortune.

My father, Captain Michael Kearney, had a small estate, but it was slightly encumbered, like many another in old Ireland; and he had no intention of begging my brother and sister in order to benefit me. In a certain sense, it is true, they were provided for. Ellen had married Captain Patrick Maloney of the — Rangers, who had, however, little beyond his pay to live on. My younger brother, Barry, had entered the navy; but as he drew fifty pounds a year and occasionally other sums from my father's pocket, it cannot be said that he was off his hands. I also had once thought of becoming a sailor, for the sake of visiting foreign lands; but I had allowed the time to pass, and was now considered too old to go to sea. I then took a fancy for the army; but my father declared that he could not afford to purchase a commission for me, and I had no chance of getting one in any other way. I talked of the law; but when I heard of the dry books I should have to study, and the drier parchments over which I should have to pore, I shuddered at the thought, and hastily abandoned the idea.

My kind aunt, Honor Molloy,—the sister of my mother, who had been dead some years,—pathetically urged me to enter the church, in the hope, as she said, that that would keep me in the right way; but I honestly felt that the church was not my vocation, and that I was much more likely to go the wrong way if I assumed an office for which I was unfit. Then she proposed that I should become a doctor; but I declared that I hated physic, and could never bring myself to drug my fellow-creatures with stuff which I would not take myself. My father offered to try to get me into a government office, though he acknowledged that he had but slight interest with people in authority, and that I might have a long time to wait before I could obtain a satisfactory appointment. He suggested, in the meantime, that I might become a clerk in a mercantile house, and that I might one day become a partner; but that day seemed so very far off in the perspective, that I begged he would not trouble himself about the matter, deciding rather to seek for some government appointment, either at home or abroad.

“Well, Maurice, my boy, you'll become wiser as you grow older, and you'll be glad to accept the first offer made you,” remarked my father.

He, however, immediately wrote to Dublin, to the only friend of the family who was likely to render us assistance. This was Councillor Roacharty, who in the course of a few days replied that



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he would do his best; but that his friend Maurice must put his impatience under lock and key until Ireland had her rights, and Irishmen ruled their green island home. As I confidently hoped that this happy event would soon be an accomplished fact, I was content; but my father was not so well satisfied as I was with the councillor's reply.

Meantime I shot, fished, hunted, and visited our neighbours, and was rapidly adopting the habits and customs of Irish squireens, when one day, returning home from shooting, just before dinner, I found my father deeply engaged in reading a foreign-looking letter. So absorbed was he in its contents that he did not perceive my entrance. Not wishing to disturb him, I retired to get rid of my muddy boots and leggings; and on my return, dinner was on the table. During the meal he was unusually silent, not even inquiring what sport I had had. Dinner over, he drew his chair to the fire, and I followed his example. Taking the letter I had before seen out of his pocket, he glanced it over, and then looking up at me, he said,—

“Maurice, you'll be after wondering about the contents of this epistle. I have been thinking over it before telling you.”

“I observed that you had received a letter,” I answered. “I hope it contains no bad news.”

“Faith, it is difficult to say whether it's good or bad,” he replied. “You have heard me speak about your Uncle Nicholas, who went away many years ago to America, but of whose subsequent adventures, or whether he was alive or dead, I had obtained no certain tidings. This letter is from him. He tells me that after knocking about in various parts of the Union, he found his way to Florida, down south, where he married a Spanish lady, Donna Maria Dulce Gallostra, of ancient family, young and beautiful, and, what was of no small consequence, considering his own financial condition, the owner of a fine estate. She has blessed him with three children,—two daughters, Rita and Juanita, and a son, Carlos: the former take after him, and are regular Irish girls, fair and pretty, fond of riding, fishing, and boating, full of life and spirits; while the boy, Carlos, takes after his mother, being a dark-eyed, handsome little chap, but restive as an unbroken colt, and passionate in the extreme when roused,—for his mother has humoured and spoiled him until she has lost all control over the young rascal, so that he fancies he can rule the roost better than his parents. Your uncle describes the country as being in a somewhat disturbed condition. The Indians are greatly irritated, and even threaten the destruction of the whites, in consequence of the intention of the United States Government to drive them out of the country across the Mississippi. His own health has lately been giving way, and he is very anxious as to what would become of his wife and daughters in the event of his death. His wife, Donna Maria, he says, though a charming woman, has very little notion how to manage the estate, and his son is too young to help her, or to take care of himself; while his daughters, delightful young creatures as they are, do not appear to possess the requisite qualifications. Having lately seen my name in an Irish newspaper, and knowing from this that I had come back to the old place, he determined to write to me, to implore me, by the brotherly affection which always existed between us when we were together, to come out and take charge of his daughters, whom he proposes to leave to my care in his will. Carlos will, on the death of his mother, inherit the Florida estate, unless in the meantime the boy succumbs, which my brother fears is not improbable. In that case his daughters would come into possession of the property; but as it is not in a part of the country in which it is desirable that they



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should live, he has arranged for the sale of the estate on the death of their mother. The girls have had three or four years' schooling in Philadelphia, and have only lately returned to the south. Although they appear at present to enjoy the untrammelled life they lead, he thinks they will soon grow tired of it, and wish for a more civilised state of existence. He appeals to me so earnestly that I am unwilling to refuse his request; and he urges me to cross the Atlantic immediately, if I desire to be of service to him before he dies."

"Sure then, father, what could be easier than to take me with you!" I exclaimed. "I would help you, and look after my cousins; and I daresay Carlos and I would get on together very well. Besides, I should like to see Florida. I have heard something about the country—that there is no end of game and sport of all sorts to be had in it."

"Bless my heart, I never thought of that!" exclaimed my father. "Well, as it may be some time before you can possibly obtain employment, perhaps you could not do better than accompany me. There will be the additional expense; but your uncle generously offers to pay the cost of my voyage, and I shall see what funds I can raise. We'll leave old Molly in charge of the place till we return, so that there will not be the expense of housekeeping. As my brother urges me to come without delay, we will forthwith set about our preparations. I have been too long in a marching regiment to require many hours for getting ready."

I was delighted that my father had agreed to my proposal, and that he could not think of any other way to dispose of me. We talked the matter over until we settled that we should start for Dublin the next day if possible, and thence crossing to Liverpool, look out there for a vessel bound for one of the southern ports of the United States,—either Charleston or Savannah.

As soon as we had finished our talk, I jumped up and set about getting our traps in order.

"You're the boy not to let the grass grow under your feet," observed my father, well pleased at my alacrity.

Our first care was to look over our guns and sporting gear; the next, to put up such clothing as we thought we should require. My father then sent off for his agent; and I, meantime, wrote by his direction several letters of business.

While I was thus engaged, Tim Flanagan—an old follower of my father, who had served in his regiment, and on getting his discharge had come to live with us, uniting the offices of butler, groom, and general factotum—made his appearance, I having told him to come in as soon as his work was over.

"Tim, I'm thinking of running across to America for a few weeks, or months it may be, with Maurice here. I have not quite made up my mind how to find you employment. In the meantime, Molly will look after the house, and Dan Rafferty will mind the farm."

"Sure, if your honour's going to foreign lands, you wouldn't be afther leavin' me behind?" interrupted Tim. "An' the young masther going away too! Though there might be work enough for me, I had much rather be followin' you, capt'n, whether it's fighting or hunting you'd be afther. It isn't wages I want; so just let it be settled, if you plase, that I go with you and the young masther. I've heard say that there are Indians, rattlesnakes, and panthers, and all sorts of wild beasts out in them parts, an' he'll be wantin' a steady man to be at hand to help him; and sure Tim Flanagan's the right



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person to be following his masther's son. So just say the word, capt'n dear, an' I'll be ready to march the moment I get the route."

To my infinite satisfaction, my father answered, "If you wish it, Tim, you shall accompany us. In case anything should happen to me, I should be glad to think that Maurice had some one ready to stand by his side; and there's no human being to whom I would so readily intrust him as to you."

"It's mighty thankful I am to ye, capt'n; an' we'll be afther seeing about the baggage, and getting all things ready for the march."

Molly came in after Tim, and frequently applied her apron to her eyes, as my father went on to describe his plans. She was distressed at hearing of the illness of Master Nicholas, as she called my uncle, and at the thought of our going away.

"It's your honour and Mr. Maurice going off that grieves me," she said. "Sure, if you must go, you must I'll not let the house go to ruin for want of dusting and cleaning, and looking afther the poultry and the pigs, and Dan Rafferty and the boys!"

Molly was much comforted when my father assured her that he could intrust the place to her care with perfect confidence.

In pretty good spirits she set to work to overhaul our wardrobe, and prepare everything for packing. There was little sleep for any of us that night; and the next morning, as soon as my father had made certain necessary arrangements with Mr. Nolan, the attorney, his agent, we started for Dublin by Bianconi's car, which passed our gate. Having settled some money matters, we visited Councillor Roacharty, who, with a bland smile, assured me that he would not forget my wishes during my absence. We then went on to Belfast, whence we crossed to Liverpool. Here, on our arrival, we immediately called on various shipping agents, and, much to our satisfaction, found that a vessel which was to sail that evening for Savannah had cabin accommodation for two or three additional passengers. A few hours after, we found ourselves again afloat on board the good ship *Liberty*, of four hundred tons, belonging to Liverpool, gliding down the Mersey with a fair breeze, which, we hoped, would carry us quickly across the Atlantic.

My father and Tim, who were old voyagers, lost no time in making themselves at home—the former with the captain, mates, and cabin passengers; the latter with the seamen and his companions in the steerage.

We had an assemblage of various nationalities. Almost every one on board was interested to some extent in the growth of cotton, the chief produce of Georgia, to the principal port of which we were bound. While we sat round the table at supper, the relative values of sea-island cotton and upland cotton, and the best modes of manufacturing sugar and tobacco, were the general subjects of conversation; but as I knew no more about these articles than I did of the cultivation of cloves and nutmegs, I could only sit and listen: though I was able to note the remarks of others, and tried to gain some idea of the character of the speakers. Two other persons were at first as silent as myself. One of them at length began to ask a few questions, speaking with a strong French accent. He appeared far more interested in what was said than the other. I heard him addressed as Monsieur Lejoillie. On inquiring about him from the gentleman who sat next me, he replied,—

"What! don't you know him? If you had seen his luggage coming on board you would have



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guessed—cases of all sorts, mostly empty, except a few containing instruments and bottles. He is a great naturalist,—and, I may add, linguist, for I don't know how many languages he speaks. Not equal to our own Audubon, I guess, but a man of wonderful talent, notwithstanding. But, to confess the truth, I am not very well versed in the matters in which he excels.”

This information impressed me with a due respect for Monsieur Lejoillie, and I hoped to become better acquainted with him before long.

A remark made by the hitherto silent personage on the subject of slavery, which caused many of the party to prick up their ears and cast angry looks at the speaker, showed me that he was a fellow-countryman.

I heard Monsieur Lejoillie say to him, in a low voice, “Hush, my young friend! Liberty, equality, and fraternity may be very fine things to talk about in the Old World; for being incompatible with our advanced state of civilisation, people can there afford to laugh at such notions. It is quite a different thing in the New World, where hostile races are brought close together; and I would advise you not to give expression to your opinions except among intimate friends, or they may prove inconvenient, if not dangerous to you.”

“My heart burns with indignation when I think of the wrongs inflicted on those noble red men, the rightful inheritors of the soil, and on the down-trodden negroes, dragged from their native land to become the helpless slaves of arbitrary tyrants,” answered the other.

“Hush, hush, my friend!” again repeated Monsieur Lejoillie. “Such words, just as they may be, are not suited to the atmosphere of the land for which we are bound. I entreat you not to let them pass your lips in mixed society, such as is here assembled.”

Fortunately at this moment a warm discussion engaged the attention of most of the persons at table, who failed to hear the remarks made by my countryman, or the friendly advice given him by the naturalist. I saw that an old gentleman was seated near the former, a young lady only intervening. The old gentleman, who was listening to what was said, cast a look more of pity than of anger at the young man, but did not speak. The lady smiled, and said in a pleasant, sweet voice, “I would counsel you, Mr. Rochford, to follow the advice of Monsieur Lejoillie. There are some on board who would resent such remarks as you have made. You must pass some time among us before you can form a correct opinion as to the way the Indians or the slaves are treated. You may discover that the red men are not quite the heroes you suppose, and that the negroes are far better off with us than they would be in their own country.”

“Faith! I cannot but desire to be guided by so fair an adviser,” answered Rochford, in a rich Irish brogue, bowing as he spoke.

The next day, as we were sailing down the Channel, I spoke to my countryman, Maulins Rochford—for such I learned was his name—not letting him understand that I had overheard his remarks on the previous evening. When he found that I was a countryman, he became frank and communicative. He was two or three years older than myself. His appearance and manner were prepossessing, and we at once became intimate. He had lately, by the death of his parents, come into a small property; but instead of spending his time idly at home in hunting and shooting, as many in his position do, he was anxious to be of use to his fellow-creatures. Having but a limited knowledge



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of the subject, and no one to consult, he had taken it into his head that he might aid the red men in retaining their rights, and the slave population in obtaining theirs. He was warm-hearted and generous, and from his manner, I had little doubt, as brave as steel. By many he would have been looked upon as a crazy enthusiast or a dangerous character, for whom the walls of a prison or a mad-house would prove the safest abode. He, however, had the discretion to follow the advice he had received, and did not again in public broach the subject of Indian rights or the iniquity of slavery. They were, however, common subjects of conversation between us, and he almost won me over to his opinions. What he intended to do he did not say. Indeed, I found that he had no very definite plan of proceeding. Had I been by myself, I do not know how I might have acted, but I fortunately did not commit myself by promising to aid him in any of his schemes.

I found the old gentleman I have spoken of was Mr. Archelaus Shurtleff, a judge, whose residence was in Florida. The young lady, whom I at first supposed to be his daughter, was his wife. They had but one child, called Paul, a fine little fellow four or five years old, who happened to be with his black nurse in their cabin when I first saw them, and hence I did not discover my mistake until the next day. The kind old gentleman told my father and myself that he should be very happy to see us at his house, which was not far from that of my Uncle Nicholas, with whom he was well acquainted. My father replied that he would gladly pay him a visit, provided the state of his brother's health and spirits would allow him to do so.

"Sorry to hear that our friend Nicholas is ill," said the judge. "As to his spirits, he is over anxious about the state of the country. He is always apprehending an attack from the red men. It is a mistaken fancy of his. They'll never dare to interfere with the settlers. They know too well the fearful retribution that would overtake them."

The worthy judge and his wife, who appeared to have taken a liking for Rochford, had frequent conversations with him, and he told me that they had given him an invitation to their home, which he had gladly accepted.

"I hope that we shall meet there," I observed. "At all events, as we shall not be far away from each other, we may have some sport together, and kill no end of crocodiles, bears, deer, and other wild beasts and birds of all sorts."

I had expected that in crossing the Atlantic we should have encountered at least a gale or two of wind, and witnessed the sea foaming and roaring and running mountains high. Instead of this, with the exception of a little tossing and pitching for a week or two, we ran along over a smooth ocean, generally with a fair wind and delightful weather. Occasionally, when we were becalmed, the sun shone down on our heads, and sent us in search of every shady spot that could be found. Most of our companions were accustomed to a hotter atmosphere, which they told us we should find when we got on shore; but even they kept out of the rays of the sun as much as possible. When a breeze sprang up, we glided along with studding-sails on either side at the rate of some seven or eight knots an hour, and the look-out forward shouted, "A sail on the starboard bow!"

The captain remarked that, from the way she was standing, she would pass close to us. Most of the passengers on deck hurried across to look at the stranger. Rochford, who was seated on a coil of rope writing in his note-book, continued his occupation without moving.



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Lejoillie, who had just come from the cuddy, sauntered along the deck towards him.

“What, my friend, are you inditing sonnets to your lady’s eyebrow, or composing your first speech as president of your model republic?” he said in his bantering way.

“Whatever I am about, I am not fond of being interrupted,” answered Rochford, looking up with a more angry glance than I had yet seen on his countenance.

“My dear friend,” exclaimed Lejoillie, taking his hands out of his pockets and stepping forward, “I am sincerely sorry, and beg your pardon. I thought you would like to see yonder fine ship as she passes us. Happily the world is at peace, or I should fear she was an enemy, and had some intention of attacking the Liberty; neither can she be a pirate, as our captain does not endeavour to keep out of her way.”

Rochford, quickly appeased, rose to look at the stranger. Instead, however, of crossing to where the rest of the passengers were standing, I saw him dart aft towards one of the ports, all of which had been left open to admit of a free current of air. At the same time, little Paul’s black nurse, Rosa, uttering a wild shriek, fell to the deck. I guessed what had happened. The child had escaped from her arms, and running heedlessly away, had fallen overboard through the port. Rochford, who had seen the occurrence, without stopping for one instant, plunged in after him. I felt inclined to follow, but I distrusted my own powers of swimming. I had, however, what was of far more use, presence of mind to run aft and drop a grating, which was fortunately at hand, over the side, and shout out, at the top of my voice, “Man overboard!”

While some ladies gathered round the poor mother, who was almost frantic with grief, and others attended to the nurse, who had gone off in a swoon, the captain issued the necessary orders for shortening sail; for, with all the flying-kites set, it was impossible, until the canvas was taken off the ship, to bring her up to the wind.

The judge, in the meantime, retained his calmness and presence of mind in a wonderful manner. My father, Lejoillie, Tim Flanagan, and two or three others, made preparations, under the superintendence of the second mate, for lowering a boat, every man of the crew being required to shorten sail. The helm was put down, the yards braced up, and the ship quickly brought to the wind. I was going to assist in lowering the boat, when the captain called me aft, and told me to keep an eye on Mr. Rochford and the child.

Not having stopped to throw off his clothes, the moment he reached the water he struck out towards the boy, who had just risen after his first plunge: his head, I saw, was above the surface, and he had unconsciously turned on his back, stretching out his little arms for help. In another instant Rochford got up, and holding the child’s face well out of the water, was evidently trying to dispel his fears; then looking round, he saw the grating, towards which he at once swam, and placed the child upon it. All this time the ship was, of course, running away from the spot, and gradually he and his little charge became less and less distinct. I saw, however, that he was holding on to the grating, which, I was thankful to see, perfectly supported the child. A very long time seemed to elapse before I heard the order to put the helm down, and I even fancied that the ship was running away altogether from where little Paul and Rochford were floating. But what was my horror just then to see a black



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fin come gliding by. On the previous day we had passed several huge monsters of the deep. What if the shark should discover our fellow-passenger! I longed to be able to shout out to him to keep his legs moving; but he could not have heard me, even if I had shouted ever so loudly, and by so doing I should have still further alarmed the judge and his poor wife. Had Rochford been seized, there would have been little hope of the child escaping.

The moment the ship was hove-to, having pointed out to the captain the exact position of those in the water, and being unable to restrain my eagerness, I sprang forward, and just had time to glide down the falls into the boat, which, under the charge of the mate, pulled by her crew, was shoving off.

“Glad you have come, sir,” said the mate; “you can nurse the child when we get him into the boat.”

“If we do,” I said, and I pointed with a thrill of horror to the fin of the shark as its wicked eye glanced up at us. The fear seized me that it might follow the boat and discover Rochford. “I wish I had a pistol to shoot it!” I exclaimed.

Without answering, the mate seized the after oar and struck with all his force, the edge of the blade entering the water at the shark’s back.

The brute disappeared, and, I trusted, had sunk far down into the depths of the ocean. Away we pulled as hard as the men could lay their backs to the oars, the appearance of the shark making them still more eager to get up to the assistance of the brave young man and the child. To my joy I saw, as I got closer, that little Paul was resting securely on the grating, while Rochford was striking out with his feet, and one of his hands being still at liberty.

“Bear a hand, friends!” he cried out. “Take the child on board first, and the sooner you help me in I’ll be obliged to you. There are some ugly brutes cruising about here who have a mighty fancy for my legs.”

The boat approached the grating. I leaned over to grasp the little boy as soon as I could reach him, and as I did so I heard the mate tell the men to keep striking the water with their oars.

We soon had Paul safe. Not until then would Rochford allow the crew to help him on board. He had a providential escape as it was, for scarcely were his feet well over the gunwale, when the brute of a shark shoved its hideous snout above the surface, getting, however, an ugly prick in the nose for his pains from a boat-hook.

Rochford was well-nigh exhausted; but owing to his courage and presence of mind, the child appeared very little the worse for its plunge. What would have been his fate, however, had the monster of a shark we saw been near at hand at the moment he fell overboard!

We were speedily alongside, and I had the satisfaction of handing the little boy to his parents. The poor mother was about to thank me, supposing that I had been the means of saving him; but I pointed to Rochford, who stood dripping wet on deck, as the man who had performed the gallant act.

The judge wrung his hand. “I thank you, sir! I thank you!” he exclaimed.

The mother burst into tears as she held the child to her heart; then taking Rochford’s hand, she pressed it to her lips. The nurse, seeing the child was saved, quickly recovered, and exhibited her gratitude in even a more demonstrative way than her master and mistress.

I came in for a share of their thanks when they were informed that I had thrown the grating



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overboard which had contributed so much to save the lives both of the little boy and our friend.

Rochford having assured those who had collected round him to pay compliments, that he had really done nothing to deserve all the fine things that were said, dived below to change his wet garments. In a short time afterwards he appeared on deck as if nothing particular had happened.

As may be supposed, he became a greater favourite than ever with the judge and his wife; and even some of those who had before looked at him askance, acknowledged that he was a very fine fellow.

The ship was again put before the wind, and away she stood on her westward course.

Among those who looked upon Rochford as a hero was Tim Flanagan, who regarded his fellow-countryman with unbounded admiration, and declared himself ready to go through fire and water to serve him. Lejoillie had also taken a great liking to him, and they frequently walked the deck together, engaged in earnest conversation. Following the Frenchman's advice, Rochford had been very careful not again to express his political opinions in public, though he did not hesitate to talk freely to me, as I have no doubt he did to the naturalist.

He was thus generally liked, and with the ladies, especially, he became a great favourite. No one, indeed, would have considered him a dangerous character, if one had seen him, whenever he could get little Paul out of the black nurse's arms, carrying the child about and playing with him on deck, but taking very good care that he should not again slip through a port.

The weather continued brilliant; and the numerous sea-birds, which flitted high in the air or hovered round the ship, told us that we were nearing the end of our voyage.

