

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 6

I cannot stop to describe the many adventures we met with on our voyage, or the curious scenes we witnessed. We were now sailing among that group of islands at the southern extremity of Florida, inside the ill-famed Florida reef, on which so many stout ships have been cast away. The inhabitants were mostly ruffianly characters, who lived by the plunder they obtained from the vessels wrecked on their shores. We put into a small bay in one of the largest of these islands, called Cayolargo. Though it is composed of coral rock, there are numerous spaces covered with dark-red soil, from which the inhabitants raise pineapples in vast numbers, as well as lemons, oranges, limes, bananas, mangoes, guavas, tomatoes, alligator pears, peppers, and even sugar-canes; but as there was no near market for their produce, they depended more on the booty obtained from wrecks than on the produce of the soil. As, however, they were all well known to our skipper, who had constant dealings with them, they received us in a friendly way.

We afterwards passed numerous inhabited keys, among which was a group called by the Spaniards *Los Martires*, or *The Martyrs*, from the number of seamen wrecked on them who have lost their lives. In the shallow water among the keys we fell in with several boats manned by whites and negroes engaged in fishing for sponges. Some waded out from the rocks, having a long pole with a scythe-like knife at the end of it, with which the sponges were cut off from the rocks. Others sat in the boats, using a bucket with a glass bottom, which, being sunk a few inches below the surface, enabled them to peer down into the water to a depth of nearly three fathoms. The sponges were then cut off with the knife I have just described. In deep water, divers were employed; but of course the risk was great, as they were liable to attacks from sharks and other monsters of the deep.

We fell in with a countless variety of animal life in enormous quantities as we sailed along within the reef. The most curious were the beautiful paper-nautili, which swim with their long arms extended in a straight line, their bodies contrasting with their fragile shells, being remarkably ugly, and appearing as if scarcely connected with them. Porpoises rolled along in large shoals, numerous sharks showed their dark triangular fins above the water, and turtles of several species floated on the surface; while ospreys and other sea-birds flew above our heads, darting down ever and anon to pick up a luckless fish which came within their ken. As the breeze fell light, our skipper determined to obtain a supply of turtle to feed us and his crew, and to dispose of at the first port we might touch at. He had been a turtle-hunter from his youth, and knew their ways, he told us, as well as any man. There are four different species—namely, the green turtle, the hawks-bill turtle, the loggerhead turtle, and the trunk turtle. The first is that which makes its appearance at aldermanic feasts. It deposits its eggs twice a year, in May and June. Its first deposit, in which it lays about two hundred and forty



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eggs, is the largest. The flesh of the hawks-bill turtle is not considered equal to that of the green turtle, but its shell is of great value as an article of commerce. It also lays eggs twice a year, in July and August; generally three hundred at a time. The loggerhead lays three sets of eggs, each averaging one hundred and seventy. The trunk turtle is frequently of enormous size, with a pouch like a pelican's; the shell is soft, and the flesh is almost of the consistency of butter. It is the least valuable, having no shell, and the flesh being seldom eaten. They all lay their eggs much in the same way. On nearing the shore on a moonlit night, the turtle raises her head above the water to ascertain that no enemy is near, and if she thinks all safe, she emits a loud hissing sound to drive away any which may be concealed from her sight. Landing, she slowly crawls over the beach, raising her head, until she has found a suitable place for depositing her eggs. She then at once forms a hollow in the sand by shovelling it out from beneath her, first by her hind flippers, then with her fore ones, until a hollow has been dug nearly two feet in length. This operation she performs in about nine minutes. Having deposited her eggs in regular layers, which occupies about twenty minutes, she scrapes the sand over them, and then smooths the surface, so that any one passing would not discover that any creature had been there. This task accomplished, she rapidly retreats to the water, leaving the eggs to be hatched by the heat of the sun. On some parts of the shore, within the space of a mile, hundreds of turtles deposit their eggs. Each time they form a new hole, generally near the first. The young, when hatched, are scarcely larger than a dollar. Having scratched their way through the sand, they at once run towards the water, though a large number are picked up on their passage by birds and the numerous other enemies of their race. All turtles have beaks; but the loggerhead has the most powerful set of jaws, which enables it to crush the shells of mollusca of large size with as much ease as a man can crack a nut. Turtles swim through the water, in spite of their shape, at great speed, with the same ease apparently as a bird flies through the air; and we saw numbers of them, as we stood on the deck of the schooner, darting about in search of their prey.

"How will you ever get hold of these fellows?" asked Carlos, as the skipper was preparing to shove off in the boat, armed with his harpoon.

"You shall see," he answered.

Tim and I took the oars, Carlos steered, and Lejoillie, note-book in hand, was ready to jot down his remarks.

Scarcely a minute had elapsed after leaving the side of the vessel, when the skipper told us to pull in the direction he pointed, while he stood in the bows of the boat, holding a single-pronged harpoon in his hand. He had seen a turtle floating just below the surface. Almost the next instant the weapon darted with tremendous force from his hand. To the harpoon a line had been attached, which had been carefully coiled away in the bows. This quickly ran out until the huge loggerhead turtle which had been struck reached the bottom, when we hauled taut the line and belayed it. We now sat quietly waiting until the turtle should be compelled to rise to the surface to breathe. About twenty minutes passed, when, as it came up, the skipper hurled another weapon into its body. Now began the tug of war. The turtle went rushing backwards and forwards, sometimes sinking, sometimes rising, the skipper taking care to keep the line over the bows, for had it slipped to the side, we should have been capsized in a moment so tremendous were the jerks the creature gave.



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For nearly an hour the struggle continued, until the turtle gave in, when, passing a rope round one of its flippers to prevent its sinking, we towed it alongside the schooner. The turtle, however, was not dead. As we hoisted it on board, by means of the windlass and a couple of tackles fastened to a rope secured round its flippers, its huge jaws, large enough to bite a man in two, opened and shut, biting furiously at everything near it. We calculated that the monster weighed fully six hundred pounds.

We afterwards killed a hawks-bill turtle and two small green turtles, the flesh of which was kept for the cabin table. The meat was preserved by being cut up into slices and hung in the rigging to dry in the sun. After this we had turtle-soup, and turtle-steaks, and turtle-hash, until we agreed that we should infinitely prefer some slices of mutton.

It was extraordinary to observe what tenacity of life was exhibited by the turtles. For some time after the head was cut off it would snap at everything near it. Even the tail wriggled about after it was severed from the body. Captain Crump gravely asserted that, cut up a turtle as we might, it would not die until the moon rose. No doubt the heads still retained their muscular power until nightfall.

While in search of turtle, we pulled over a coral reef, where the water was so clear that we could see to the very bottom; and beautiful indeed was the spectacle we beheld. From the rocks grew seaweeds of the most brilliant colours,—the peacock's tail, sea-fan, and other lovely forms, hanging in wreaths round the holes; while shells of every variety covered the surface of the rocks, amid which appeared sponges, sea-eggs with long spines, and sea-anemones. Hither and thither darted fish of every size and hue, from huge sharks to green, red, and gold fish of the size of minnows. On the shore of an island where we landed we found an enormous number of shells of the most brilliant colours and graceful shapes, from which Lejoillie selected so many that we could scarcely carry them back to the boat.

After touching at Key West, where the United States Government has a naval station, and in the neighbourhood of which a town of some size has sprung up, we steered due north, intending to proceed to Cedar Keys, where the Great Alexander was to finish her voyage. The first place at which we were to touch was called Punta Rassa, at the mouth of the river Caloosahatchee. High up the river was Fort Myers, the most westerly of the line of forts extending across the country to keep in check the Everglade Indians.

Lejoillie proposed that we should try to make our way by these forts to the head-waters of the Saint John River, by descending which we might return to Castle Kearney. Our skipper advised us, however, not to make the attempt. He warned us that the difficulties in the way—cedar swamps, rivers, lakes, marshes, wild beasts, and savage Indians—would prove insuperable, and that we should probably never again be heard of.

“Consider, my friends, how much we should add to our stock of scientific knowledge,” said Lejoillie, who was not to be turned from his object.

Carlos and I were ready to accompany him; but Tim, who had listened attentively, took an opportunity of speaking to me on the subject, saying,—

“It's all very fine, Mr. Maurice, for Mr. Jolly to wish to know about the birds an' bastes of the country; but what would be the good to him or any one else, if he got knocked on the head and



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scalped?—an' from the capt'n's account that seems to me mighty likely to happen. I'd stick to the Great Alexander, an' return home in her. The longest way round may prove the shortest way back. Or I'd wait at Cedar Keys until we can find a party of soldiers crossing the country to Saint John River; for, depend on it, the Indians are in a bad temper, an' it wouldn't be safe to cross the country with a small party."

I was much inclined to agree with Tim, and told him I would have a talk with my cousin about the matter.

The river with the long name is the southernmost of three streams which fall into a deep bay full of islets, called Charlotte Harbour. We had nearly reached a mangrove island, called Sanibel, when a squall from the eastward struck the schooner and almost laid her over on her beam-ends. The after-sails were quickly lowered, and as she righted away she flew before the gale, leaving the port for which we were bound far astern. The farther we got from the land, the heavier the sea became. At length the tossing and tumbling to which the old schooner was exposed began to tell on her hull, the seams opening and letting in the water at an unpleasant rate. The pumps and buckets were therefore set agoing, and we all turned-to, labouring at one or the other; but in spite of all our efforts there appeared a great probability that the Great Alexander would go to the bottom. Happily, however, the gale abated in time to prevent that catastrophe. Once more we hauled our wind and stood back, steering, however, for the northern entrance to the harbour, as our skipper intended to touch at Hickory Bluff, near the mouth of Pease Creek, instead of Punta Rassa, as he at first proposed doing. On standing in, however, we ran on one of the many oyster-banks which exist between the islands. As the tide was falling, we in vain endeavoured to haul off the schooner, which bumped pretty severely for some time,—an operation not likely to improve her seaworthy qualities. At last we were left almost high and dry,—the only advantage we gained from this being the power of collecting an ample supply of very fine oysters.

"Ah!" exclaimed Lejoillie as he popped one after another down his throat, "this is indeed a fine country, and might maintain a population as dense as that of China with the abundance of food its shores and surrounding seas afford."

"What are we to do next?" asked Carlos, when we had finished our oysters.

"Wait till the tide rises, and then, if we can keep the craft afloat, make for Hickory Bluff, where I guess we shall have to put her on shore and try to patch her up," answered the skipper.

"And how long will it take to perform that operation?" inquired Lejoillie.

"Maybe a week, or maybe a month," was the answer. "I guess we shall have to put a new bottom into her, for most of her planks are as rotten as touchwood."

This was not pleasant information, as we had still some miles to sail; but we were thankful that we had made the long stretch from Key West without going to the bottom. At last we did get off, and by dint of hard pumping and baling the Great Alexander was kept above water until we reached the neighbourhood of Hickory Bluff, on the northern shore of Pease Creek, when, the wind being favourable for the purpose, we ran the craft at high-water right up on the sandy beach just in time to prevent her sinking. As the tide on ebbing left her dry, we surveyed her bottom, when it seemed doubtful whether she would ever float again, and we had therefore to decide as to our future



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proceedings. Lejoillie, after examining the map, proposed that we should pull up Pease Creek to its head-waters, whence he calculated it was about a hundred miles to Lake Washington, through which the Upper Saint John River flows. We might perform the journey after leaving the canoe, he calculated, in ten days or a fortnight, or, by crossing another large lake in the intermediate space, considerably shorten the distance by land.

As we found no vessel sailing northward, Lejoillie's plan appeared the best; and we accordingly, the next morning, having engaged a canoe, with two blacks to paddle and a white man to act as pilot, put up our goods in compact bundles, and bade farewell to the Great Alexander, her mosquitoes, cockroaches, scorpions, tarantulas, fleas, and bugs, as well as to her worthy skipper and his crew.

We then embarked on our adventurous voyage. Besides our crew, the canoe held Lejoillie, Carlos, Tim, and me, our stores (including powder and shot), and my faithful dog Caesar, who at once took up his position in the bows, where he sat, as if on the look-out to warn us of danger ahead. There were two spare paddles, of which Tim and I made use, as we were ashamed of sitting idle, and we found that we could greatly add to the speed of the canoe. Several times I felt something bump against the bottom of our craft, and, on asking our pilot what it was, he replied,—

“Only maybe a shark or a devil-fish; they are pretty plentiful hereabout.”

Upon looking over the side indeed, so clear was the water that we could see vast numbers of monster fish,—not only sharks and devil-fish, but saw-fish, jew-fish, sting rays, whip rays, and other specimens of the finny tribe, of great size,—swimming below and around us in such numbers that they threatened to upset the canoe, and we actually struck them over and over again with our paddles.

By the time we had gone about a mile, having reached the centre of the river, a strong breeze sprang up, and a good deal of sea constantly broke over us, and compelled Carlos and Lejoillie to employ themselves in baling. Our pilot, however, assured us that, in the course of half an hour or so, we should be in smooth water, if we were not upset in the meantime. It made us shudder at what would be our fate should such an event occur. However, we were in for it, and determined to keep our course up the river. Our canoe, I should have said, was a dug-out, made from a cypress trunk, about forty feet in length and three feet in breadth, and sharp at both ends. She had eight thwarts, on which the paddlers sat, and a seat aft for the helmsman, who also used a paddle for steering. For several miles mangrove trees bordered the river on either side, without a single spot, so far as we could see, where we could land should it become necessary. Wind and tide being in our favour, we made good progress; but still the water bubbled over the gunwale, and the canoe leaked considerably. Our guide assured us that this was nothing, and that he would soon stop the leaks when we got on shore.

“If we don't go down in the meantime, my friend,” said Lejoillie. “I rather think that in leaving the Great Alexander, we only tumbled out of the frying-pan into the fire.”

“Don't trouble your head about that,” observed our guide, Silas Munch, whom, by-the-by, I ought before to have introduced. Born in the Bahamas, of British parents, he had come over to the States, and had become a naturalised citizen, such characters being known in that region as Conches. Hot sand and sea air had burned his countenance to a mahogany tint. He was small and wiry. His costume consisted of a broad-brimmed hat, a coarse blue cloth jacket worn above a jersey, while his nether man was clothed in leather gaiters reaching to the thighs, and strong boots, so that he was



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prepared for service either afloat or ashore. He carried a rusty rifle, with a powder-horn and belt slung over his shoulders, and an axe and long knife stuck in his belt.

We had paddled on all day. Still the banks appeared as far off as ever, and the water as rough as at first. Just, however, as the sun was sinking, Munch pointed out a sand-bank, where he thought that we could land and pass the night. We were very glad to get on shore, and haul up the canoe. While some of the party collected wood for a fire, and made other preparations for camping, Munch, taking his gun and a small iron pot, asked me if I would accompany him into the forest. In a short time we reached a group of pitch-pines, one of which he tapped, and collected the juice in the pot. Not far off also were some gum-trees, from which he gathered a handful or two of gum. With these we returned to the camp; when, mixing the juice of the pitch-pine with the gum, he boiled it down in a small tripod. The canoe being by this time dry, he spread the mixture over the leaks, and assured us that she would thus be perfectly water-tight. Though we kept up a blazing fire, the sand-flies and mosquitoes nearly drove sleep away, and we were all ready at early dawn the next morning to continue our voyage. We had now got beyond the influence of the tide, and had the current against us; but as it ran with no great strength, we made good way.

The river was still of considerable width, though the water was perfectly fresh. As we passed along the banks, alligators innumerable were seen. On one occasion a strong blast struck us as we were rounding a point, and almost drove our canoe among the tangled brushwood which lined the banks, where a dozen or more of these enormous reptiles were disporting themselves. They refused to move, until we were within a few feet of them, when half of their number plunged into the water right under our canoe, striking her bottom so violently with their scaly backs that we fully expected to be upset.

We paddled as hard as we could to get off the shore. Had we been capsized, our fate would have been sealed, for many of them were twenty feet in length, and could have crushed us and our canoe with one snap of their jaws. Happily, the brutes are as cowardly as they are powerful in appearance, and they were probably more frightened at us than we were at them. I rather think that Lejoillie, judging by his countenance, heartily wished himself safe on shore.

As we paddled on, the scenery changed, and animal life became more abundant. Snake-birds, uttering their shrill cries, flew off from every overhanging bough; kingfishers darted hither and thither, astonished at the appearance of our canoe; bitterns flew from tree to tree, and terrapins splashed hastily into the water, as we approached. Tall lilies, with large white, crimson, or purple blossoms, and beautiful flowers of various descriptions, fringed the water's edge; while the banks were overhung with tangled masses of the densest tropical vegetation, beyond which rose forests of cabbage-palm, backed on the higher ground by tall pine-trees. The alligators continued as plentiful as ever; numbers of them lay on the banks, watching us with savage eyes. Lejoillie shot one of the fellows, who refused to get out of our way; indeed, had we not been unwilling to expend our ammunition, we might have killed scores of the monsters. We passed one huge fellow swimming slowly down the stream, with a number of birds on his back, to which also was attached a whole forest of boughs, reeds, and water-plants, so that he had the appearance of a floating island. Lejoillie was of opinion that he had been wallowing in the mud, as his back was thickly covered with slime, to which the water-plants and



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boughs had become attached so firmly that he was unable to shake them off. It was curious to see several birds flying about him; or settled on his back, exhibiting the most perfect fearlessness.

We encamped on a spot of much the same character as we had chosen on the previous night. A short distance behind rose a rich hummock, where live-oak, mahogany, mulberry, gum, cabbage-palm, and other valuable trees and shrubs, grew together in the greatest luxuriance. Beyond it stretched a savanna, where our pilot told us we should find abundance of small birds. At daylight we took our guns, and went in search of them. We saw plenty of quails, gorgeously coloured red-birds and blue-birds, and mocking-birds of sweet tone, but no animals of any size, though we came across not a few black snakes and rattlesnakes; the former, being harmless, were allowed to live, but we never failed to shoot off the heads of the latter.

We returned with a good bag of quails, which afforded us a luxurious supper. As game would not keep many hours, we had to eat it at once, or throw it away. We formed our camp with more care than usual, as our guide suggested that there might be Indians in the neighbourhood, or that a panther or a bear might pay us a visit, while it was not impossible that an alligator might come foraging into our camp. We kept up a large fire, therefore, and one of the party remained on watch, each man taking a turn of a couple of hours. About midnight we were aroused by a most fearful bellowing. We started to our feet, and, supposing that some unknown monsters were approaching, seized our rifles and pistols, ready to defend ourselves. On looking about, however, we could see nothing. Our pilot's laugh reassured us.

"Those are only 'gators," he said; "it's the sort of music they're fond of, and it's no use trying to stop them. They'll not come on shore while the fire burns brightly. As long as they keep in the water, they're welcome to make all the noise they like."

Never having heard the sound of the alligator's voice before, I had no idea that it could give forth such fearful roars. As our guide had observed, there was no use in attempting to stop them; so they continued their horrible concert, preventing us taking a wink of sleep, until morning dawned, when we turned out, and gathered round our fire to enjoy our breakfast, for which our wakeful night had given us an appetite. As soon as our meal was over, we started; but we met with no particular adventure.

It was time again to land for dinner, or rather forage for our dinner, for we had no meat on board fit to eat.

Carlos and I accompanied Lejoillie, while the rest of our party remained to catch fish, and make up the fire for cooking them.

We had shot several snipe and a fat turkey, when, as we were clambering up a bank, being somewhat before my companions, I was not a little surprised to see, within four paces of me, the huge head of a black bear, peering over the tops of the palmetto to ascertain what was approaching. I mechanically raised my rifle to fire, calling at the same time to Lejoillie and Carlos to come to my assistance should I miss. I never felt more nervous in my life, for although I believed that I should wound the bear, yet I might the next moment find myself in his embrace, with his jaws applied to my neck. Aiming at his chest, I pulled the trigger, and then leaped back to avoid him should he spring



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on me. He, however, had been more frightened than I was. When my shot entered his body, he must have been on the point of turning to fly; but the bullet had taken deadly effect, and he had not gone ten paces, when over he rolled, and lay struggling on the ground. Lejoillie and Carlos coming up, fired into his head and killed him. We at once set to work to cut him up, and procured an ample supply of steaks for all our party.

Paddling on again, as usual, we continued our journey, until a favourable camping-place presented itself. During the night, while I was on watch, I heard a singular cry, ceaselessly repeated, which resembled the words, "Down-ka-dou, down-ka-dou," accented in a guttural tone. I waited until I was relieved by Carlos; then, instead of lying down, rifle in hand I crept towards the point whence the sound proceeded, when I saw a tall bird standing in the water, every now and then darting forward, poking his long bill amid the reeds which grew around. I should at once have shot it; but I knew that, if I did so, I should be unable to pick it up without the risk of being caught by an alligator. Thinking that probably the bird would remain until the morning, I returned to camp.

As soon as Lejoillie awoke, I told him what I had seen. He and I at once set out with Caesar in search of it. We had not gone far, when, on dashing forward, a large bird rose, and was flying over our heads. Lejoillie fired, and brought it down. He uttered an exclamation of delight as he ran forward, observing that it was a bittern of a peculiar and rare species, of which he had not a single specimen in his collection. It stood nearly two feet high. The plumage was of a rich brown, streaked with black; its breast grey; its beak as sharp as a dagger. The loose plumes on its neck, with its large yellow eyes dilated, like all night-birds, gave it a stupid look. Lejoillie hurried back to the camp to skin it. On cutting it open, we discovered that it ate small birds, as a water-rail, which it had swallowed whole, was found in its stomach.

It took us ten days to ascend Pease Creek. Though the current ran at no place very strongly, it was against us; and as we got higher up, our course was obstructed by the trunks and branches of trees blown down by a tempest, through which we had to cut our way.

At length we reached a small shallow lake, from which the eastern branch of the river takes its rise. We had come to the termination of our voyage.

"I have brought you thus far in safety, gentlemen," said Munch, as we paid him the stipulated price for his services, and the hire of the canoe. "I wish that I could accompany you farther, and that I could be certain you will get through without misadventure. I have little doubt about your finding the food you require; but I am not quite satisfied that you will escape the Redskins. Keep out of their way if you can; or if you fall in with any, show them that you are not to be trifled with."

"I have a favour to ask, my friend," said Lejoillie. "Will you allow your black, Jupiter, to accompany us? I have spoken to him, and he is willing to go if you will give him leave. I'll pay for his journey back to Hickory Bluff, when we reach Castle Kearney. We should not wish to part with him until then."

Munch hesitated. "Toby and I will find it a hard matter to paddle the canoe back without him. Still, as we shall have the current with us, I won't prevent him, if he wishes to go. What do you say, Jup?"

"Me like to go with Massa Jolly, an' Tim, an' young gentlemen. Maybe dey not find de way



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without me,” answered the black.

“In that case you may go, if they pay your wages from the time we left Hickory Bluff,” answered Munch, who had an eye to business, and would thus save several dollars. To this Lejoillie at once agreed; and it was settled that Jupiter, or “Jup,” as he was more familiarly called, should join our party. We were very glad to have him, for he was an active, intelligent fellow; born of free parents in the country, and well acquainted with every part of it. He had frequently joined hunting expeditions into the interior, and knew the habits of the Indians as well as he did those of the animals we were likely to meet with.

The lagoon was filled with alligators, who shoved their noses up among the lilies and other water-plants, looking at us with hungry eyes, as if they would very much like to feast on our bodies. We managed, not without difficulty, to reach the shore, and, carrying our traps to a pine-ridge elevated three or four feet above the lake, we encamped. The next morning, having strapped on our knapsacks, we commenced our march eastwards; while Munch and his companion set off on their return voyage down Pease Creek.

