

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 10

I had fortunately a few dollars, with which I was able to recompense our negro hosts, who seemed, however, to expect no reward. With the one who had undertaken to be our guide we set off at daybreak, in the hope of reaching the River Saint John before dark. Though we were both, as Tim said, “as thin as whipping-posts,” we felt sufficiently strong to undertake the journey, and the fatigues we were likely to encounter, until we could fall in with some craft to convey us down the river to Castle Kearney.

The forest through which we passed consisted chiefly of cabbage-palms and pines on the higher ground; but we saw marshes extending on either side, which our guide told us reached to the river. Had we possessed ammunition, we could have shot deer, for numerous herds crossed our path. We saw also a few wild-fowl. Our guide said that in the winter the marshes were full of them, and that any quantity might be shot in an hour. We caught sight also of a number of wild cattle; but they kept at a distance, as did the deer, both being equally afraid of man. Vegetation became more dense as, towards evening, we approached the long-looked-for river, so that we had some difficulty in making our way through the thickly-growing cabbage-palms, live-oak, and water-oak, hung with crimson and white air-plants, trumpet-flowers, wild-vines, and innumerable other parasites. Our guide, however, soon discovered a narrow path, by which he led us, or otherwise our progress would have been altogether stopped, and we should have had to turn back and make our way by a longer route. At length we saw an expanse of water glittering brightly between the trees.

“Dere is de riber, sah!” exclaimed our guide. “Now we see if we find canoe; him here not long ago.”

We hurried eagerly forward, until we stood on the margin of the river, as near to the water as the tall grass would allow us to get. Our guide searched up and down the stream, looking amid the grass and under every thick bush as a dog hunts for game. At length he shouted out, “Hurrah! me thought to find canoe.”

We made towards him. There, sure enough, carefully concealed among the brushwood, was a canoe capable of holding three or four persons, with several paddles inside it.

“But it may belong to others,” I observed, “and it may be of serious consequence to them on returning not to find it.”

“Sure we have a right to it, now it’s deserted by its owners,” observed Tim; “maybe they’ll never come back.”

“What do you say?” I asked of our guide.

“Take him, massa,” he answered; “me t’ink dose who come up in him neber go back.”



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“Why?” I asked.

“Because de Redskins take dem scalps, an’ dey all dead.”

“That settles the question,” said I. “But now let’s look at the canoe.”

On examining it, we found several ugly-looking cracks, which, had we launched it, would have admitted the water in an inconvenient manner. With other articles in the canoe, we discovered a small iron pot, which had evidently been used for boiling pitch. We were not long in tapping a pine-tree, and obtaining as much pitch as we required, with some gum the black collected.

We made up a fire on a mud-bank, left dry by the falling waters, from which we disturbed half-a-dozen alligators who had been taking their siesta on it. It required our united strength to get the canoe up to the spot, when, turning it up, we stopped the leaks in the best way we could. Having done so, we launched it, and found that it floated very well. The black suggested that we should supply ourselves with a quantity of pitch-pine-torches, which we would find useful should we wish to proceed by night, or to assist in keeping alligators and wild beasts at a distance. He and Tim soon procured an ample supply. As it was by this time almost dark, and too late to start, we agreed to sleep in the canoe alongside the bank. We proposed to have a fire burning all night, to keep the alligators at bay. The black declared there was no risk; but Tim and I, not being so confident on that point, resolved to keep watch, rather than trust to our black friend. As soon as supper was served, he threw himself down in the bottom of the canoe, and was soon fast asleep. It was providential that we did keep watch; for scarcely an hour had passed when a “gator,” as Tim called it, swimming down the stream, was attracted by the smell of the remains of our supper, and, in spite of the fire, landed on the opposite side of the bank to which we were secured. Had we been all asleep, he would very likely have snapped up one of us. We shouted at the top of our voices, and threw fire-brands at his ugly face, which compelled him to retreat to his native element. He and his relatives kept up a horrible roar for several hours. We could hear their jaws clashing together as they snapped at their prey. Our shouts awoke the black, who, jumping up, very nearly tumbled overboard before he knew where he was.

“De ’gators no come here,” he said, when we told him what had made us cry out.

“Don’t they, my boy!” exclaimed Tim; “see! what’s that?”

At this moment a huge alligator shoved his snout above the surface, eyeing the canoe as if he should like to snap up it and us together. The black after this did not sleep as soundly as before; and Tim and I agreed that if the monsters abounded all down the river as they did near its head-waters, we should have a wakeful time of it.

Morning, however, came at last. Our guide was as anxious to return home as we were to proceed on our voyage. He again charged us before parting not to mention having met with him and his companions, thus convincing us of what we had before suspected, that they were runaway slaves. We should have been very ungrateful had we not given him the required assurances, agreeing that we would merely state the fact that we had found the canoe on the bank of the river, and that as, from the time it had been there, its owners were not likely to return, we had appropriated it.

The black, having wished us good-bye, commenced his journey through the forest; while we, shoving off from the bank, began to paddle down the sluggish stream. We kept in the centre, where the current appeared strongest, resolving to paddle all day so as to lose no time. Often our progress



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was stopped by immense quantities of water-lilies and other aquatic plants which spread over the stream; and in many places it was so shallow that we could touch the bottom with our paddles. Here the water was of a rich brown colour, in many places with a green scum on it, which so completely concealed the alligators moving beneath the surface that we ran against several of the monsters, the whisk of whose tails sent the water flying over us, and very nearly, on more than one occasion, upset the canoe. How we longed for ammunition to kill some of the water-fowl which rose from the sedgy shores! Sometimes our course led us through immense expanses of marsh covered with saw-grass, with here and there islands formed by uprooted trees, brushwood, and reeds matted together. In other places the vegetation which clothed both sides of the river was rich and beautiful in the extreme. Sometimes we found ourselves sweeping by the edge of a cypress swamp, huge trunks, or “knees,” as the distorted stems are called, projecting far into the water, and we had to keep a bright look-out not to run against them.

Though sleepy and tired enough, we agreed to paddle on all night, or as long as we could keep awake. Often the river was not fifty yards wide, sometimes much less; then it would expand into lakes two or three miles in width. I was under some apprehensions that should a storm suddenly arise while crossing them, we should be upset; but, as Tim observed, when I made a remark to this effect,—

“It’s no use troubling ourselves about what might not happen. We will just trust in Providence, an’ do our best.”

The first night we lit one of our torches, and paddled on as long as we could keep our eyes open. During the time, we passed through another cypress swamp, when the light from the torch, as we twisted in and out among the stems of the trees, made them assume weird and strange forms; while the occasional cry of some night-bird or wild beast, coming sometimes from one side of us, sometimes from the other, had a very depressing effect, and I could have fancied, had I believed in the existence of such things, that the forest was the habitation of evil spirits or satyrs. I was thankful when we got clear of it, and managed to moor the canoe to a tree which grew close to the water. Here we landed and lighted a fire, to boil some porridge in a pot we had obtained from the blacks, and to heat up some cakes; for we had no animal food except a little salt pork and some dried fish, which we kept in case of being pushed to extremities.

Hitherto we had met with no white settlers, for those who had penetrated thus far south had established themselves mostly on the sea-board, where they were less likely to be annoyed by the Indians than on the river. We were not aware of this at the time, and were constantly on the look-out, in the hopes of coming in sight of the dwelling of some white man, from whom we naturally expected to receive a hospitable welcome. Tired as we were, Tim sat up one part of the night, and I the other, to keep the fire burning, so that we might preserve ourselves from being snapped up by one of our friends the alligators. The monsters roared as loudly as usual, and we could hear their jaws snapping and their tails whisking about in the water. It was far from pleasant music, but it did not keep me awake one moment after my watch was over.

We started, by the light of our fire, before daybreak, and continuing our course, entered at sunrise a broad lake, five or six miles in length. We were afraid that, as the sun rose, a strong breeze might spring up; and we could easily suppose how heavy a sea might in a few minutes be created. The



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weather, however, continued calm; and by dint of hard paddling we re-entered the narrow channel of the stream, down which we continued our course.

Two more days had passed. Our supply of provisions was exhausted, and we were compelled to stop and try to catch some fish. We were less successful than we expected; either the alligators had eaten them up, or the bait we used was not of an attractive nature. At length we caught a big fellow, which from its appearance we considered fit to eat, and soon had some slices roasting before a fire. There was no use in carrying any of it away, as a few hours afterwards it would have been unfit for food.

Some time afterwards, passing a sand-bank, Tim proposed landing to look after turtle eggs. "Hurrah! here they are by dozens," he cried out; and he brought as many as he could carry. They looked to me unusually large for the eggs of the fresh-water turtle, but I did not wish to raise unpleasant doubts in his mind as to what they were. Hunger compelled us to cook some of them. They were certainly rather rank; but not until we had taken the edge off our appetites did I observe to him that perhaps they were crocodile eggs.

"Suppose they are," said Tim, without being at all horrified; "I'd sooner eat them than their mother; but if I was hungry, and could get nothing else, I'd dine off her flesh with the greatest pleasure in the world."

The banks now rose in some places several feet above the water, and were clothed with pine, live-oak, magnolia, laurel, and other trees. There were fewer marshes, and the country appeared more suitable for settlements than it did higher up. At last we came in sight, on the right bank, of a house surrounded by an orchard and a garden. No one waved to us, however, as we approached, and not a human being was to be seen. As we drew nearer we saw that the roof was gone, and that the orchard and garden were overrun with creepers and weeds. We landed and collected a supply of oranges and other fruit, which we found very refreshing. We were on the point of returning to the canoe, when I heard a cackling sound. It was that of some tame hens. We made our way to the spot from which it proceeded, where we found a hen-house and several fowls, with three nests of eggs, one of which contained eight or ten freshly laid, but on the other eggs the hens had been sitting for some time. This was indeed a godsend, for we could eat the eggs raw should we have no time to land and cook them. I secured the eggs.

"Sure it will be as well to have the birds too," observed Tim. "They'll keep alive, and we can kill and eat them as they're wanted."

Saying this, he caught four of the hens, and securing them by their legs, threw them over his shoulder, where they hung screaming and struggling.

"I am afraid these will betray us, should any Indians be near," I observed.

"They'll be quite aisy soon," answered Tim. "They've got sense enough to know it's of no use makin' a fuss when they cannot help themselves."

Fortunately Tim found some corn in an out-house, the door of which had been closed, so that the hens had been unable to get at it. We filled a basket full, to serve as food for the fowls, as well as for ourselves should we be hard pressed. The rest of the hens had, in the meantime, made their escape.

As we were unwilling longer to delay, we returned with our prizes to the canoe. Though the eggs



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were little more than sufficient for a single meal, the birds, if we could keep them alive, would last us for four days.

Soon after this we came to another settlement, but were again disappointed. The blackened walls of the houses alone remained. We again landed, but had not wandered far when we came upon the dead body of a man. It was too clear how he had been slain; the Indians had done the deed—he was scalped. Others lay dead within the walls, all of whom had been treated in the same manner. We shouted, but no voice replied. We hurried from the spot, filled with apprehensions. The reports we had heard were now fully corroborated. The red men had raised the standard of revolt against the pale-faced intruders, as they called the whites. We were in great doubt as to what might have been the fate of our friends. All this time we had found no traces of Carlos and Lejoillie. Still we could not but suppose that they had long ago made their way down the river, and we hoped that they had arrived at Castle Kearney long ago.

Evening was approaching. We were again passing through a cypress swamp, which extended on both sides of the river. Knotted and twisted trunks projected far into the stream; the tall stems of trees rose high above our heads; while here and there the rays of the sun, penetrating a short way into the forest, and falling on the lower parts of the trunks, the huge roots, and the enormous creepers suspended from the boughs, served to render the rest of the forest more dark and gloomy. Now and then a vulture croaked at us as we passed; and we could see huge snakes twisting and wriggling among the trunks in search of prey.

We were approaching the right bank, to cut off a bend of the river, when Tim exclaimed,—

“Look there, Mr. Maurice! I saw some one moving. Yes, sure enough, there’s a Redskin; and he has a rifle in his hand.”

I looked in the direction to which Tim pointed. There, indeed, was an Indian, in war-paint and feathers, cautiously making his way amid the tangled roots.

“Better show him our rifles, Mr. Maurice,” observed Tim; “he won’t be after suspecting that they’re not loaded, an’ it will prevent him playin’ us a scurvy trick, which he’ll do, if he can.”

I lifted up my rifle, as Tim also did his, while with a turn of my paddle I steered the canoe away from the shore. Whether he had been on the watch for us or not we could not tell. Fast as we paddled, he made his way almost as rapidly through the swamp, and it soon became evident that his object was to keep up with us. Replacing our rifles at the bottom of the canoe, we took the paddles in both hands, and thus increasing our speed, had hopes of distancing him. Should he, however, reach level ground he might soon overtake us.

Ere long we were convinced that his object was hostile, for a bullet whistled close to my head. Night was approaching, and perhaps he thought we should escape him in the darkness, and so he endeavoured to put a stop to our progress. If so, he was mistaken, for we managed to keep down the centre of the stream, paddling with might and main. We incurred the danger, we knew, of running against a floating log or a snag, or sticking fast on a shallow; but it was better to run these risks than be shot by Indians, for although we had only seen one there might be dozens of them. It became more and more evident that the red men had revolted against the whites. Perhaps the man who was following us was one of those who had murdered the settlers in the houses we had stopped at, and had



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seen us at a distance.

When morning broke we found that the river had greatly widened, and we had every reason to believe that we had distanced our pursuer. Still, it would probably narrow again, and should any Indians possessed of canoes perceive us they might put off in chase.

After our long paddle during the night we both required sleep, but thought it imprudent to land, lest we should be surprised. We therefore agreed that one should lie down at a time, while the other guided the canoe. The eggs and fruit we had brought supplied us with food, so that we had not to land to obtain any. Tim insisted on my lying down first; and just before I closed my eyes I saw him sitting bolt upright, and as grave as a judge, with deliberate strokes moving his paddle from one side to the other.

I was surprised to find, when I awoke, how low the sun had sunk. The faithful fellow declared that he had not the heart to awake me—that I wanted sleep more than he did. He then lay down, but insisted that I should call him at sunset, as two pair of eyes would then be required.

I waited until the last moment, when I could no longer see my way, and then I roused Tim. He instantly jumped up, and seizing his paddle, began to work away with all his might, as if he thought we had a fleet of Indian canoes astern of us. At last, feeling very hungry, I begged him to stop. Having eaten the last of our eggs and a few oranges, we paddled on, intending to continue our course throughout the night.

