

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 14

Eager as we were to reach Fort King, we made but slow progress, owing to the nature of the country. The men grumbled as they found their feet torn by the short palmetto which grew everywhere over the ground, frequently inflicting very disagreeable wounds on their almost bare legs. The sun moreover beat down with intense force on our heads; while in many places, as we tramped over the sandy tract, we were surrounded by clouds of dust, which prevented us from seeing to any distance on either side. Frequently we came to swampy ponds, to avoid which we had to make a wide circuit; for though they were not deep, it would have been impossible to have waded through them. As, however, we had scouts out both ahead and on either flank, we ran but little risk, while marching through the open country, of being surprised; and whenever we approached a wood, or mass of the tall saw-grass which fringed the ponds, the dogs were sent forward to ascertain whether or not an enemy lay in ambush under their cover. We soon also felt the want of provisions. The very scanty stock we had brought with us from the block-house was rapidly exhausted, and no large game of any description was to be met with on the prairie, the Indians having driven off or killed all the wild cattle, while the deer had retreated to the cover of the woods. We should soon have exhausted our ammunition had we continued to pop away at the wild-ducks and plovers which rose from the ponds; besides which, the captain had given strict orders that no shots should be fired, lest the sound might be heard by any of the bands of Indians prowling in the vicinity, who thus might have been induced, on discovering the smallness of our party, to attack us. Captain Norton was anxious, if possible, to avoid an encounter with the enemy; for although we might have succeeded in driving them off, it would have been almost impossible to have carried the wounded with us, and they would have had to be left behind to die of starvation, or to be scalped and killed by the Indians. We passed several ponds, but the water was so brackish that it could not be drunk, and we therefore suffered dreadfully from thirst. Our experience showed us what an army has to endure marching across a desert region.

The day wore on, and still we were a long way from our destination. The prairie was bordered on our right side by a thick forest. Besides the short palmetto, the ground in many places was covered with papaw, or custard apple, on which grew a profusion of party-coloured blossoms, while in other places numerous flowers of various hues appeared among the grass. At first I had scarcely noticed the countless bees which were feeding on them; but Black Hawk, who was marching in front, with a guard on either side keeping a strict watch over him, pointed towards an enormous pine-tree which grew somewhat in advance of a line of timber, and I saw that the bees as they rose, laden with honey, directed their course towards it. He addressed a few words to the captain, who observed,—

“Our Indian friend tells me that we shall find an abundance of honey in yonder tree, if we will



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take the trouble to gather it. We must, however, be careful, while we are so employed, that he does not give us the slip, and that no enemies are concealed within the wood, who might rush out and surprise us.”

We, eager to satisfy our hunger, at once directed our course towards the tree. As we approached, we observed countless bees swarming around the lower branches, which were thickly studded with honeycombs. A halt was ordered, and a strict search being made in the wood to ascertain if any Indians were concealed within, we piled arms. The men were then directed to gather wood for fires, while some of the best climbers prepared to ascend the tree and gather the coveted honey. The fires being lit under the branches, the smoke rising either suffocated the bees or drove them off to a distance; when wedges being driven into the trunk, steps were formed to enable the climbers to reach the combs. They took the precaution of covering their heads with handkerchiefs, leaving only two small holes through which they could see. No one was inclined to be longer about the task than was absolutely necessary, as, in spite of their precautions, they did not escape without several stings. In a short time they descended, each man laden with combs of various sizes. Other combs were found on the branches of trees in the immediate neighbourhood, and altogether honey enough was found to feed the whole party. The comb and the honey were eaten together. While it stopped the pangs of hunger, it seemed also wonderfully nutritious. Alone, the honey might not have afforded us sufficient nourishment, but our guide told us that at a short distance off we would come upon an opening in which grew an enormous quantity of cabbage-palms. A party was sent to procure them, and before dark they returned with a sufficient supply for all hands. As the bees were likely to revenge themselves should we remain in their neighbourhood, we advanced a short distance, and encamped in a small clump of pines, from which we could see the approach of an enemy, and defend ourselves should we be attacked. No Indians, however, came near us, nor was any trail discovered in the neighbourhood; and the next day, weary and footsore, with our trousers well-nigh torn off our legs, we came in sight of Fort King. On our right were several buildings. As we got up to them, we found that the houses were roofless, shattered, and blackened, while near them were the remains of what was once a large store. It was pretty evident that the work of destruction had been performed by Indians.

We were advancing in full expectation of a hearty welcome, when a bullet whistled past the captain's ear.

“Can the Redskins have captured the fort?” he exclaimed, ordering a halt.

“It looks like it,” observed my father. “We had better ascertain how matters stand before we go nearer. We are not prepared to assault the place if the enemy hold it in force. But if you will follow the advice of an old soldier, we will beat a retreat before we lose any of our number. I will go forward with a flag of truce. I don't know whether the Indians will respect it; but if I see anything suspicious, I will be careful not to allow them to take a steady aim at me.”

On hearing this, I begged my father to allow me to go instead, but this he refused. Tim then offered to go, but my father firmly persisted in keeping to his resolution.

Mounting one of the horses, which had hitherto been led in the rear to keep them fresh for necessary work, he fastened a flag at the end of a ramrod, and, while we halted, rode rapidly forwards, waving it over his head in a way which would distract the aim of any one firing at him.



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I anxiously watched his progress, expecting to see him wheel round and gallop back to us; but presently, to our great satisfaction, the gate of the fort opened, and an officer, followed by several men, came out.

“It’s all right,” cried Captain Norton, giving the word to advance, and in a few minutes we were shaking hands with the commandant of the fort. On the captain asking why we had been fired at, he was told that the musket had been discharged by one of the sentries—of course, an Irishman!—who had mistaken us for a band of Red Indians.

“I am glad my worthy countryman was not a better shot,” said my father, “or one of the best officers in the service would have been lost to his country.”

“We have no best officers among us; we are all excellent,” observed Captain Norton, laughing; “and I hope our friend Pat won’t be punished for being a bad shot.”

The commandant had a sad account to give us. A few days before, the general commanding the forces in Florida, with several officers, had been incautiously dining at the settlement we had just passed. Not an enemy was supposed to be in the neighbourhood. The evening had been spent pleasantly, and the guests were preparing to retire to their homes, either in the settlement or in the fort, when a loud war-whoop was heard, and a shower of bullets came rattling into their midst. Nearly the whole were shot down at once. Two or three managed to escape to the fort, aided by the darkness of night; but the Indians, springing on the remainder of the survivors, struck them to the ground, and carried off their scalps. The garrison had been afraid to fire for fear of wounding friends as well as foes. The Indians did not lose a man.

The garrison of the fort having been greatly weakened, the commandant expressed his satisfaction at our arrival, and at once informed Captain Norton that he must detain him and his men for the defence of the place. This, though a necessary measure, completely disconcerted all our plans for the discovery of my young cousin. My father, Lejoillie, Tim, and I, not being citizens, were at liberty to go if we liked. The commandant also did not insist on detaining Carlos, should he desire to return home or to continue the prosecution of our undertaking. The fort was amply supplied with provisions; and as there was a well within it, there was little fear of the garrison, even if besieged by the red men, being compelled to give in. Still, their limited numbers prevented them moving to any distance without the greatest risk of being cut off, as other parties had been.

We now much regretted that Rochford had left us, as from the knowledge he had obtained of the country, we might, under his guidance, have been enabled to recover Juanita.

We were all this time, I should have said, very anxious about my uncle and his party, for no tidings had been received of him; and being as much exposed as those who had been massacred, he ran the risk of sharing the same fate.

We had spent some days in inactivity. All this time my poor young cousin might be exposed to the greatest danger, and yet we were unable to devise a plan for rescuing her.

Finding my sleeping-place very hot, I had one morning turned out at daybreak, and was taking a turn on the gallery, or rather platform, above the stockade, when I caught sight of a person approaching the fort. I soon saw that he was a black, and that he was waving a white handkerchief at the end of a stick. The nearer he approached the more he waved, evidently not satisfied with the



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appearance of things. I looked round to see that none of the sentries were taking aim at the man. It struck me at once that he might be a messenger from Rochford. I hastened down to the gate to receive him. I was not mistaken.

"Me Pompey; bring message from Massa Rochford to de young white massa. You he, I guess," he said.

"I have no doubt that Mr. Rochford has sent to my father or me, as we are friends of his. I am anxious to hear what you have to say," I replied.

"It dis," said Pompey, trying to look very grave; "Massa Rochford found out whar de young missie is stayin'. He talk to her, an' she ready to come. Massa Rochford say if he had 'osses he bring her 'way, but oderwise he fear dey bof get caught; so he stop in a wood not far from deir lodges, whar no Indians find him. He stay dar till de young massa and captain come wid de 'osses, den he get de white girl an' carry her 'way all safe. Massa understand what Pompey say?"

"Very clearly; but how are we to find the place where Mr. Rochford is hiding?" I asked.

"Pompey him show you, massa; him come on purpose," said the black.

"How long will it take to get there?" I asked.

The black began to count on his fingers, with a knowing look.

"Maybe two days, maybe free, accordin' to circumstances; maybe only one, if 'osses go quick—but den Pompey not keep up an' show de way."

"Come in, Pompey, and you shall explain what you have told me to Captain Norton and my father, and I have no doubt that they will agree to Mr. Rochford's proposal."

Neither of them had turned out, but I roused them up, as there was no time to be lost. On hearing the information Pompey had brought, they at once went to the commandant and laid the matter before him. He consented to allow us to take the horses we had brought to the fort, with two or three others if we required them. I did not expect that he would give permission to Captain Norton to go; but the captain pressed him so hard that he at length consented, provided my father, who had been unwell for some days, would consent to remain. To this my father consented, fearing that if he went he might break down on the way, and be unable to proceed. It was finally arranged that Captain Norton, Carlos, Tim, and I, under the guidance of Pompey, should set out on our four best horses, with two led ones for Juanita and Rochford. The black declined mounting, declaring that he had never ridden a horse, but that he would keep the lead on foot. As soon as he had taken some food and a short rest we set out. He showed by his activity that he was well able to perform his promise. When, however, he got out of sight of the fort, he stopped and said,—

"Pompey guess he might stick on de 'oss, an' den we go faster." Without waiting for a reply, he sprang into the saddle, and from the way in which he sat showed that he was as well accustomed to riding as any of us. Where the ground would allow he took the lead in fine style. Away we went, allowing no ordinary impediments to hinder us.

"Take care that fellow doesn't play us a trick," observed Captain Norton.

"I feel pretty sure he is trustworthy. He merely feels in good spirits at riding, instead of having to use his legs," I replied.

We were obliged to stop to water the horses at a pool we had come to, for fear that there would



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be no water farther on. Soon after this we reached the borders of a wood, when, darkness coming on, we were compelled to halt for the night. We kept a double watch, two of us guarding the horses, while the other two slept. We allowed Pompey to sleep the whole time, as he required rest, and we thought it as well not to put implicit trust in him.

Next day our progress was slower, as we were unwilling to tire our horses, in the belief that they would be required before long to gallop as fast as their legs could carry them; besides which, the country was much more difficult to traverse than on the previous part of the journey, there being swamps, and woods, and sandy tracts, besides occasionally large pools, in our course. Pompey, who evidently knew the country well, assured us that we should reach Rochford's hiding-place by dark. Trusting to his assertion that there were no Indians in the neighbourhood, we ventured to dismount near a pool to kill a sufficient number of ducks to serve us for food. We had brought a supply of crackers with us, and a few other articles, so that we were not badly off. We had, however, once more to camp.

"Why, Pompey," I said, when we had unsaddled our horses, "I thought that we should have seen Mr. Rochford before this."

"Yee, massa; he no far off, dough," he answered. "Me think you better stop here, while Pompey go on an' tell him dat you come."

"Well, then, the sooner you let him know the better, as he will not wish to lose time," I replied.

I told Captain Norton what the black had said. "Let him go at once, but it will be as well for one of us to follow him and see what he is about," he said. "I am not quite satisfied with his manner; and yet I daresay he is honest enough."

Captain Norton did not object to my proposal to follow the black. As soon as he set off, I started close behind him, but at such a distance that he did not hear my footsteps. After making my way through the forest—not without considerable fear of losing him—I saw a bright light some way ahead, which I knew must proceed from a fire, and observed he was directing his course towards it. I therefore followed more leisurely, and at length caught sight of the fire, with several blacks near it, some apparently collecting wood, others cutting up a deer. I looked round for Rochford, but he was nowhere to be seen. Just then Pompey made his appearance among the people, and at once asked for "the white massa."

"Him gone," answered one of the blacks. "Him not come back since yesterday; bery likely Redskin got him."

"Redskin got him! oh dat bad news!" exclaimed Pompey in a truly sorrowful voice. He then, in the peculiar jargon of the blacks, informed his companions that a party had arrived from Fort King, who would be bitterly disappointed at not finding Massa Rochford. They now held a consultation as to what should be done. Pompey finally announced his intention of returning to tell us of Rochford's absence, and to say that, should we wish it, he would accompany us farther, and, though at the risk of his life, try to find our white friend. From what I heard him say, I was now convinced of his honesty, as also of his affection for Rochford. His unwillingness to take us at once to the camp was fully accounted for. The people before me, I saw, were evidently a party of runaway blacks; two, indeed, I recognised as those who had deserted from us, and I had little doubt that Rochford had persuaded



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them that he would obtain their freedom. I felt very doubtful whether I should find my way back. As I had been guided by Pompey in going towards the negro camp, I had forgotten the difficulties I should experience in returning to our own. My anxiety also as to what had become of Rochford made me at first forget the risk I ran of losing my way. I might tread on a snake or encounter a panther, or tumble into a hole, or get smothered in the trunk of a rotten tree or some black pool full of noxious creatures. As long, however, as I could see the light of the blacks' fire, by occasionally looking back, I managed to make my way in the direction leading to our camp; but after that I could only guess whether I was going the right way by the momentary glimpse of a star overhead. At last, however, when trying to pass through a thick part of the forest, I was fairly bewildered. Still, as I could not contentedly remain where I was, I pushed forward. It was with an intense feeling of relief that I caught sight, far away before me, of a slight ruddy tinge on the trunks of the trees, which, I was convinced, was produced by the camp-fire of my friends. I advanced, not without many a scratch, while my clothes were well-nigh torn to pieces. Suddenly the thought occurred to me that the distance was greater than I had come, and that the fire might possibly be that of an Indian camp. I stopped to listen, but no sound reached me. Then again I went forward. The glow increased, and I was sure I was approaching a camp. Still I could hear no one speaking. Suddenly, however, a hail reached my ears,—

“Arrah! who goes there?” and, to my infinite satisfaction, I recognised Tim’s voice.

“It’s Maurice; don’t be after shooting me,” I cried out; and I was soon in the midst of my friends.

The information I brought caused them considerable anxiety; still they hoped that Rochford might after all return. They resolved, however, to wait until Pompey made his appearance before deciding on what to do. He at last arrived, looking very crestfallen. We, of course, did not tell him that we already possessed most of the information he had to give. He told us, in addition to what we already knew, that a party of Indians had been seen following up Rochford’s trail. Fears were entertained, therefore, that he had been overtaken, especially as one of the Indians was on horseback.

“Then it must be that rascal Spotted Wolf!” exclaimed Carlos. “I guessed from the first that he was plotting some mischief, and I wish that he had been shot at once.”

Cross-questioning the black, we found that the Redskins had been seen on the previous day, so that should they have fallen in with Rochford, they could not as yet have got very far away. Pompey offered to bring another black, who had caught sight of them, and who, knowing the country well, would assist in guiding us.

I could not sleep when off my watch for thinking of the work we should have to do on the following day. Perhaps we should find Rochford killed and scalped.

As may be supposed, we kept a very vigilant watch; for Indians being close at hand, we might should they for a moment find us off our guard, be attacked and murdered. Captain Norton, though not exactly despising them, was of the opinion that their successes had arisen from the carelessness of the whites, who, had they not been taken completely by surprise, could with ease have driven off their Redskin foes.

The night passed away, and at the earliest dawn Pompey getting up, gave himself a shake, and offered to go and obtain the assistance of one of his companions, should Rochford, in the meantime, not have arrived. He was evidently anxious that none of us should accompany him, as we might



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suspect that his friends were runaway blacks. Of course, he was not aware that I was very well assured of that fact. We had barely time to take a hurried breakfast when he returned, accompanied by another negro, who undertook to put us on the Indians' trail. As there was not a moment to be lost, we immediately mounted, and, led by the two blacks, pushed on as fast as they could run. At last they stopped and pointed to the north-west.

"Dis nigger say dat way dey go," said Pompey.

That he spoke the truth we had no doubt, as the trail was sufficiently distinct even for us to distinguish. There were numerous footprints, as well as the marks of a horse's hoofs.

"You find Massa Rochford, come back to de wood, we stay dar free days, in case you want us," he added.

We thanked him for the assistance he had given us. He neither asked for, nor evidently did he expect any, reward; indeed, had he done so, we had nothing to give him.

He and his companion hurried away, anxious to escape the risk of encountering any of the Indians, although the blacks were generally treated kindly by the natives; and we pushed on at a much faster rate than before.

At length we came to a spot where it was evident, from a still smouldering fire, that the Indians had encamped during the previous night, and had probably only lately left. The trail, which led off to the right, showed that there were not more men than we could easily cope with. We pushed on, therefore, in the hope of soon coming up with them, and ascertaining whether Rochford was among them, and if so, whether he was a prisoner or at liberty.

In a shorter time than we expected we caught sight of a party of Redskins—there might have been about a dozen—with a man on horseback in their midst. They did not appear to have discovered us, as the turf over which we were galloping was soft, and prevented the sound of our horses' hoofs being heard. As we got nearer, to my surprise I saw that there were two men instead of one on the horse. The hindmost looked round for a moment and caught a glimpse of us. His dress showed that he was not an Indian, though he was at too great a distance to enable me to distinguish his countenance. Suddenly the horse started off from among the Indians on foot, and galloped forward at right angles to the course they had been pursuing.

"Why, that is Rochford," cried Carlos; "and the Indian is that rascal Spotted Wolf."

Scarcely had he spoken than we saw the Indians bend their bows; but they apparently dared not shoot for fear of killing Spotted Wolf as well as Rochford,—thus enabling the horse to carry both the Indian and his prisoner to a considerable distance from them. We immediately pursued them, regardless of the party on foot; but Tim having charge of one of the led horses, and I of the other, we dropped somewhat behind Captain Norton and Carlos. I could see that Rochford was struggling violently with the Indian, when presently he managed to free his arms from the rope which bound them behind his back, and pressing those of the Indian close to his side, he seized the reins, and endeavoured to check the horse's course.

The captain and Carlos, urging on their steeds, were in a short time almost up alongside them. I saw Rochford turn to one side, as if speaking to Captain Norton; and while he was doing so, what was my horror to see Carlos, making his horse spring forward, plunge his long knife into the Indian's



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breast, exclaiming, as I afterwards learned,—

“Take that, you wretched spy; you’ll no longer play us any of your tricks!”

He had driven his weapon right home, and as he withdrew it, the blood, which flowed in a full stream, showed the fatal nature of the wound.

Tim and I now came up. Carlos, with the greatest unconcern, handed his knife to Rochford, saying,—

“Here, Rochford, take this and cut the thongs which bind you to the Indian, and tumble the body out of the saddle.”

“What have you done, Carlos?” cried Rochford. “We might have kept the man as a hostage, and have made him useful.”

“It is too late to think of that now; see, he is already dying!” replied Carlos.

Rochford took the knife, and cutting the cords allowed the Indian’s body to fall from the horse. I was horrified and grieved at what my young cousin had done; but he, apparently considering that he had done nothing unusual, exclaimed,—

“Let the savage lie where he has fallen; we must push on if we wish to save our lives.”

That he was right in this respect was very certain. Rochford, who was a first-rate rider, without stopping the horse, seated himself in the saddle, and galloped on alongside Captain Norton. I made up to them, eager to learn what had happened.

Rochford, in a few words, told us that he had arranged everything for Juanita’s escape; and would have carried her off the previous night had he not been captured by Spotted Wolf and his followers, who were conveying him to Ocoola’s camp to accuse him of treachery, when we fell in with them. He added that he had still hopes of success, as Juanita would be on the watch for him; and that, if we could manage to distance the Indians—who were not likely to hurry themselves without their leader—we might reach the Indian village, place Juanita on horseback, and reach either Fort King or some other place of safety before any pursuers could overtake us.

Wrong as it was in Carlos to kill the Indian, who was at the time virtually a prisoner, yet we gained an advantage by the act; for his followers would probably abandon the pursuit of us, as they could not carry him along with them, and they would not venture to leave him unprotected behind. We, at all events, on looking back, could see nothing of them, and therefore stopped to breathe our horses, and thus enable them to put on fresh speed should it become necessary.

