

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 2

Early one morning I was taking a walk on deck with Rochford, when we heard a cry aloft of “Land! Land!”

“Ere long, then, I shall have an opportunity of commencing the glorious task I have undertaken!” murmured my companion.

As he did not exactly address me, I made no reply. We immediately went up the fore-rigging, but could only see a long faint line, distinguished from the ocean and the sky by the difference of tint. It was the coast of Georgia, the eastern portion of which is but slightly elevated above the water, though a hilly region exists in the northern part of the State. It was not till some hours afterwards, when we were approaching the mouth of the river Savannah, that we could see the land clearly from the deck.

The passengers having packed up their personal property in their portmanteaus and carpet-bags, ready for landing, we collected on the poop. As I stood near the judge and his wife, who were seated on the skylight, their little boy, guarded watchfully by black Rosa, playing near them, I heard the former say to Rochford that, as he intended to charter a schooner to convey himself and family up the Saint John River, he begged to have the pleasure of Rochford’s company on board.

“I purpose going on to Florida with Captain Kearney and his son and Monsieur Lejoillie; and as I cannot desert them, I regret that I am unable to take advantage of your kind offer,” was the answer.

“Get them to come with us then,” said the judge. “They can, if they wish it, pay a proper proportion of the expenses of the voyage; but I cannot allow you to do so. You must come under my wing, and you can join your friend Lejoillie whenever he starts on his proposed expedition in search of the wonders of our flowery land.”

When the judge made the offer to my father and Lejoillie, they at once accepted it, both being anxious to reach Florida with as little delay as possible.

We ran up the river until we anchored, seventeen miles from its mouth, off the city of Savannah, built on a sandy expanse, and elevated about forty feet above the level of the tide. I have little to say about the city, except that it struck me as a fine place, many of the streets being wide and bordered with trees, and that it contains numerous churches, hospitals, stores, and other public buildings.

On landing, the judge immediately engaged a schooner, known by the high-sounding name of the Great Alexander. Her skipper’s name was Ebenezer Crump. The craft was not unlike an Irish “hooker;” her great beam showed that she was likely to carry her canvas well. That very evening the judge and his family, my father, Tim, and I, accompanied by Rochford and Lejoillie, went on board, and dropped down the river with the tide, ready to sail the following morning.

We had plenty to amuse us. Crossing the bar at daybreak with a fair breeze, we ran along outside



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the line of islands which fringe the coast of Georgia, and which are devoted to the cultivation of “sea-island cotton.” The water teemed with fish, and birds innumerable came flying round us. The most remarkable of the latter were the scissor-bills, with black plumage, which went skimming along the surface, scooping up with their long lower mandible any unwary mollusc or fish of small size which came within their reach, and uttering every instant loud and discordant cries. Lejoillie told us that they were of the gull tribe, about twenty inches in length. The peculiarity of their beak consists in the lower mandible being considerably longer than the other into which it shuts. It is of an orange-red at the base, and deepens into black at the tip. To prevent the water rushing into its throat as it skims the surface with its beak, the bird is provided with a very small gullet. When unable to procure food by the method we saw it employing, Lejoillie said that it frequents the sea-shore as the tide is ebbing, where, finding mollusca with open valves, it inserts the lower mandible of its beak so as to prevent the shell from shutting; and then dashing it down on a rock, breaks it, and devours the inhabitant.

We frequently caught sight, too, of the frigate-bird, with its long forked tail sweeping behind as it came swooping down on its prey, which its keen eyes enable it to see from afar.

More curious to those who, like myself, have never been in the tropics, were the coveys of flying-fish, which rose out of the water, and even darted to great distances before their fins became dry and they fell again into their native element. Lejoillie told us that there were two species, one much smaller than the other. The larger are somewhat like red gurnards, and are said to prey on their smaller cousins, which are also pursued by bonitos, albigores, and dolphins of various species, as well as by numerous sea-birds. Several times we saw a large covey of the smaller kind rise above the surface, followed closely by another of the larger species, when at the same moment a dozen sea-birds would descend, and, quick as lightning, a dolphin would dart by, intent on sharing the prey. Looking down through the clear blue water, we could see the beautiful dorados, of pure turquoise hue, as they darted here and there, keeping away from the vessel while they gambolled round her.

We kept so close in-shore, that we could sometimes through our glasses distinguish the scissor-bills standing on the beach, and, in the distance, the buildings attached to the long staple cotton plantations for which the low islands are celebrated.

At length we came in sight of a line of sand-hills, with palmetto, pine, and live-oak growing at their summits, while below was a glittering beach, stretching away to the south; and close in front, low banks, over which the white-crested breakers dashed with a fury which made us careful not to get amongst them. To the south was a headland, which our skipper informed us was the north end of Amelia Island. Close to the island was a river of the same name, which united with another stream, the Saint Mary; they together made their way over a bar into the ocean. Crossing the bar, we passed close under the old Spanish Fort Fernandina, and shortly after brought up off a modern city called after the fort, consisting of half a dozen huts. We were now actually in Florida.

Lejoillie shrugged his shoulders, Rochford looked very blank, and I felt not a little disappointed; until the judge told us that we had only reached the most northern extremity of the country. The sight of what might some day become a thriving place did not afford us a favourable specimen of the scenery of Florida. Though there was not much to admire in the city itself, we saw several country houses surrounded by trees; but we were told that the sea-beach on the eastern side of the island, to



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the extent of thirty miles, is beautifully level, and so hard as to afford a delightful drive or ride.

The schooner having discharged her cargo, we again sailed, steering our course for the mouth of the Saint John River, twenty miles off.

As many of those who read my journal may be unacquainted with Florida, they may like to have a short description of the country. First, as to how it came to be called Florida. It was so named, it is said, by the Spaniard, Ponce de Leon, the first European who landed on its shores on Palm Sunday, 1513, either in honour of the day—Pasqua Florida—or because, being struck by the number and beauty of the flowers which covered the ground, he denominated it Terra Florida, or the Flowery Land. In shape it somewhat resembles a boot. The northern portion, joined to Georgia, is about three hundred miles from east to west; while the rest of the peninsula, which may be likened to the leg, extending from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico, is about one hundred miles across. On both shores are numerous islands and sand-banks. There are neither mountains nor hills even, the greater part of the country rising but a few feet above the level of the sea. It contains, however, a great many lakes and a few rivers. The largest of the latter—the Saint John River—rises far away in the south, frequently expanding during the early part of its course into broad lakes, and in some places closely approaching the Atlantic coast. The southern point of Florida reaches to within twenty-five degrees of the equator, so that the vegetation is of a tropical character. Alligators swarm in the streams and pools; flowering shrubs of rare beauty clothe the banks of every river; and birds innumerable inhabit the forests, lakes, islets sand-banks, and sea-coast.

At the time I speak of there were several forts, with small garrisons, scattered here and there, and a few huts and stores in their neighbourhood; but the white settlers generally were located on the Atlantic coast or on the banks of the Saint John; while over the rest of the country the Seminoles, a detached tribe of the Creeks, who inhabited Georgia, roamed at large.

“A short time ago,” observed the judge, “the State of Georgia resolved to compel the Cherokees, the most civilised and most powerful of the Indian tribes, to abandon their territories, and remove to the western side of the Mississippi. Though they had written laws and an established government, the legislature of Georgia refused to allow them the rights of citizens, and passed a law, declaring ‘that no Indian, or descendant of an Indian, residing within the Creek or Cherokee nations of Indians, shall be deemed a competent witness or party to any suit or in any court where a white man is defendant.’”

“Notwithstanding this, the Cherokees still determined to remain on the land of their fathers; but when they found that the whole of the white settlers of Georgia were arrayed against them, knowing that ultimately they would be compelled to succumb, they accepted the offers of government, and agreed, provided they were allowed time, to part with their lands and to remove to the territories allotted to them. The Creeks, then a numerous tribe inhabiting the western portion of Georgia, followed the example of the Cherokees, and consented to remove westward, although great opposition was offered by many of the chiefs to this treaty with the white men.

“The government of the United States, having succeeded with these two tribes, came to the resolution to deal with the Seminoles in the same manner, and had already issued a notice to their chiefs, ordering them to make preparations for migrating westward.

“Such was the state of the country at the time of which I am speaking.”



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Rochford listened to the account given us by the judge, of which the above is only a brief outline. I observed his eyes flash, and the colour mount to his cheeks, but he restrained his feelings sufficiently to keep silence.

“I am more determined than ever to visit these ill-treated Indians, and endeavour, by some means or other, to serve them,” he said to me afterwards, as we stood together at a distance from the rest of the party.

“Let me know when you go,” I said; “for I should like to visit the red men in their native wilds, and learn their ways and customs.”

“I will not fail if I have an opportunity,” he answered. As Lejoillie joined us just then, he made no further remark.

In about three hours we were opposite some sand-hills and a lighthouse which mark the entrance to Saint John River; but as a long line of foam-covered breakers was rolling over the bar, our skipper ordered the sheets to be hauled aft, and we stood off, waiting until the tide had risen and we could pass with safety.

We had plenty of time to examine the lighthouse, which appeared to be entirely surrounded by the foaming sea. Many a gale it had stood, and being composed of solid masonry, it seemed capable of standing many more. Through our glasses we could distinguish a female form standing on the gallery. We inquired of the skipper who she was.

“She is the keeper’s wife; they say she’s not altogether right in her mind, so he brought her there, that she might be out of harm’s way. My idea is, she was fond of the bottle; but as she’s kept on short allowance out there, she is not likely to be the worse for liquor.”

“Poor creature! what a terrible existence for her, to be compelled to live from month to month surrounded by water, without seeing any one except her husband and his mate!” observed the judge’s wife.

“To my mind, marm, she’s better off up there out of the way of temptation than she would be if left at home alone hankering after the grog bottle. Maybe by the time she gets ashore she’ll be cured, and happier than she was before,” observed the skipper.

After making several tacks in sight of the lighthouse, we again kept before the wind, and the skipper taking the helm, we dashed on boldly towards the line of foaming breakers. The water bubbled and hissed around us, sometimes leaping up and falling with a splash on our deck. The schooner sailed on, and in a few minutes we were gliding calmly up the Saint John River, here a mile broad. We kept to the south shore for some time, till we came to a cliff some twenty feet in height, covered at the summit with palmetto, pine, and cedar.

Lejoillie inquired of the skipper the name of the cliff, and was told it was called Saint John Bluff; upon which he looked at it with great interest.

“Ah! I thought so,” he said; “it is the scene of the death of many of my compatriots. Have you not heard the story?”

“No,” I replied; “I thought the Spaniards were the only Europeans who held possession of the country until it was taken from them by the English, and being afterwards restored, was sold to the United States.”



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“Ah! but I speak of some centuries ago, as far back as the year 1562. The brave Admiral Coligny wishing to found a settlement in the New World, where his co-religionists might be freed from the persecutions to which they were subjected, sent out a stout Breton navigator, Jean Ribaut, to search for a suitable spot.

“Entering the Saint John River, he fixed on yonder bluff, and, taking possession of it in the name of the King of France, he erected a stone to mark the site, and returned home with a favourable report. In a short time three ships were got ready to convey a large party of colonists, under the command of a Huguenot gentleman, René de Laudônière. On their arrival in the river, the Huguenots built a fort, which they called Fort Caroline, and strengthened it by stockades, behind which they might be able to defend themselves against the Indians, who, ill-treated by the Spaniards, had learned to look upon all white men as their enemies.

“For many months the colonists were ill supplied with provisions, but hoping to receive them from home, they struggled on, though closely surrounded by hostile natives. At first they endeavoured to win over the red men; but, pressed by hunger, they made prisoners of some, whom they detained as hostages, threatening them with punishment if food were not brought to the camp. The Indians, resenting this treatment, informed the Spaniards of the state of the French settlement, when Pedro de Menendez, who was engaged in the colonisation of the West Indies, landed on the coast, some miles south of the River Saint John, at the head of a large band of ruffian troops. Guided by a party of the treacherous Indians, he and his band made their way through the forests, and fell suddenly, sword in hand, on the almost defenceless colonists. Not a human being who could be overtaken was allowed to escape; men, women, and children were ruthlessly slaughtered by Menendez and his savage followers. When the work was done, he set up a stone, on which he caused to be engraved, ‘Not to Frenchmen, but to Lutherans and heretics.’ Laudônière, with a small party of followers, had been outside the fort when it was attacked. Getting down to the shore, they made their way on board a ship, one of a small squadron, under the command of Jean Ribaut, which had just arrived with new settlers and fresh provisions for the colony. The ship on board which the gallant Breton sailed had not reached the mouth of the river, but, encountering a storm, it had been thrown on shore some leagues farther to the south. Menendez, on hearing of this, immediately marched in search of the shipwrecked crew, numbering nearly one hundred men. Ribaut, on finding that Fort Caroline had fallen, agreed to surrender under a solemn promise from Menendez that his life and that of his companions would be spared. But no sooner had Ribaut and his party laid down their arms than they were set upon by the Spaniards, and slaughtered to a man. When Laudônière and the surviving colonists returned to France and told their sad tale, most of their countrymen only shrugged their shoulders, declaring that it was a fate Huguenots well merited, and the government declined to take any steps to punish the murderers.

“The history of the cruel act, however, inspired a Breton gentleman, Dominic de Gourgue, with the desire of avenging the outrage committed on his co-religionists. He soon collected round him a small body of friends animated by his spirit; but as the government would have put a stop to the expedition, they kept it a secret, giving out when they sailed that they were bound for the coast of Africa.

“Menendez had, in the meantime, rebuilt Fort Caroline, and established a colony on the spot.



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On the arrival of De Gourgue in Florida, he made friends with some Indians, who, having been cruelly treated by the Spaniards, gladly welcomed him. Guided by his Indian friends, he made his way through the forests and swamps, just as Menendez had done three years before. The French, rushing on, surprised the fort, and put every Spaniard within it to the sword. This act of retribution accomplished, De Gourgue erected a monument, on which he inscribed the words, 'Not to Spaniards, but to robbers and murderers.' He then set sail for France, where he arrived in safety.

"Since that day my countrymen have made no attempt to colonise the country; and from the view we have had of it hitherto, I consider they have acted wisely."

I thought Monsieur Lejoillie's account very interesting; but I have since reflected that although De Gourgue's act of vengeance was sanctioned by the opinions of those days, it was utterly at variance with the spirit which should animate Christians, who profess to be guided by the precepts of the gospel.

After this the Spaniards made no attempt to rebuild Fort Caroline; and Saint Augustine, which was founded shortly after it some thirty miles farther south on the east coast, may therefore be considered the most ancient city on the American continent.

Not a vestige remains of Fort Caroline, which, probably being built of wood, soon fell into decay.

We continued our course west, up the broad river,—which has the appearance of an estuary, the country being flat and wooded on either side,—until, rounding a point, we began to steer due south, in the direction whence the river takes its rise, three hundred miles or so away.

Passing Cowford, near which now stands the very flourishing town of Jacksonville, then not in existence, we continued our course up the stream, here between two and three miles wide. We could see but little vegetation on the banks; but as we neared the shore, we saw that they were covered with forests of pine, live-oak, magnolia, and laurel, with occasional cypress swamps in the lower ground. The current was so sluggish that it impeded us very little; and as we made good way, the judge expressed a hope that we should reach his house—Roseville—early the next day. My uncle's estate was only a few miles farther on, and the judge invited us to go on shore at his house, and to proceed there by land; but as my father was anxious to see his brother, he thanked the judge, and got the skipper to undertake to convey us thus far in the schooner, which was afterwards to go on to Bluespring, the most southern settlement then existing on the river.

As night approached, the weather suddenly changed, dark clouds gathering in the sky. The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, and the wind blew with a force which threatened to drive the schooner on the tree-fringed shore. We shortened sail, and endeavoured to gain the eastern bank, where we might have anchored in comparative safety. The generally calm surface of the river was broken into foaming seas, which dashed up over us, while the schooner heeled over to the blast. Sometimes I thought that our voyage would end in our being carried to the bottom to become the food of alligators. Before, however, so undesirable a catastrophe happened, our skipper bore up and ran for a creek on the western shore, with the navigation of which he was fortunately acquainted. After tearing along for a few minutes before the wind, we saw by the fast waning light an opening in the



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trees, towards which we steered, the branches almost catching our rigging. After lowering every stitch of canvas, we ran on a short time longer, and, rounding a point, brought up in what had the appearance of a lagoon, under the lee of some tall trees. Darkness suddenly came down upon us,—such darkness as I had never before witnessed, making the flashes of lightning which darted through the air, and crackled among the cypress-trees, appear still more vivid. The thunder crashed louder than ever; the wind roared and howled through the forest. The judge's wife sat in her cabin, holding her boy in her arms and trying to quiet his alarm, while she herself retained her composure. Black Rosa, however, looked dreadfully frightened, and, crouching at the feet of her mistress, hid her eyes whenever a louder crash of thunder was heard.

We at length lay down, wrapped in our cloaks, in different parts of the vessel—on the top of the cargo, or wherever we could find room to stretch our legs—leaving the little cabin to the judge and his family. But what with cockroaches crawling over us, and the mosquitoes buzzing round our ears and running their sharp stings into our flesh, sleep appeared out of the question. However, I at length did close my eyes.

When I awoke I went on deck. The storm had passed away. Not a breath of air ruffled the surface of the lagoon, or stirred the boughs of the surrounding trees,—among which were cypresses, live-oak, water-oak, the cabbage-palm, and many others, festooned with wreaths of the gorgeous trumpet-flower of crimson hue, wild-vines, and parasites innumerable; while a short way off I could distinguish a meadow of tall grass or reeds a dozen feet in height at least. All nature seemed alive. Numberless birds, many of large size, flew through the air or waded on the banks. Among them were the black and white wood-ibis, which appeared in large flocks from among the branches of the trees; there were blue herons, snow-herons, pelicans, and cranes. Ever and anon an osprey could be seen darting into the water, to rise with a fish in his claws, which he was quickly compelled by the baldheaded eagle to drop. This true pirate of the air, soaring above on the look-out to deprive the weaker bird of its prey, generally seized it before it reached the water. Here and there, among the water-lilies, I caught sight of a happy family of small alligators, waiting for an opportunity to lay hold of the legs of some of the waders, who were, however, too cautious to be so entrapped.

While I was watching, a herd of deer, headed by a fine stag with branching horns, came down to the water to drink. The sight excited my sporting propensities; and rousing my father, Lejoillie, and Rochford, I proposed that we should borrow the schooner's boat, and try to get a shot at them. The skipper, who had turned out of his bunk forward, consented to lend it, but advised us to look sharp, as, should a breeze spring up, he would sail immediately. Rochford, though the best sportsman of the party, as he shortly afterwards proved, declined to come. Tim and I took the oars, while my father and Lejoillie held their rifles ready to fire, as soon as we got near enough.

On leaving the schooner we kept close to the bank, so that we might approach the deer without being observed. "We should be after keeping to windward; but when there is no wind, sure it's a difficult matter to say which side to pull," whispered Tim to me.

We selected the side from which a point projected thickly covered with long grass; and on rounding it, we expected to be close to where the deer were standing. We roused numberless water-



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fowl, many of magnificent plumage; and I saw Lejoillie lift his rifle, as if inclined to fire.

“If you do, we shall miss the deer, to a certainty,” observed my father. “The birds will stay for us until we come back, so that we can bag them by-and-by.”

I kept my rifle by my side, ready for service. We rowed on, now and then knocking a young alligator on the nose as he popped his ugly head out of the water to have a look at us.

“Faith it isn’t a place I’d like to be capsized in,” observed Tim in a low whisper.

At length we got close to the end of the point. “Now, give way, boys,” said my father; and we pulled round it as quickly as we could.

In another instant we were face to face with the deer, not thirty yards away from us. I drew in my oars. The herd gazed at the boat a few moments, giving us time to take a steady aim. My father hit the buck; and the same instant I shot a doe, which had turned to fly, but dropped before she had got many paces. Lejoillie wounded another; but, notwithstanding, the animal went off with the rest of the herd.

Tim and I having resumed our oars, we pulled in to secure our prey. Rushing in among the reeds, we sprang on shore, and quickly put out of suffering the deer which had first fallen. Not to lose time, we carried it to the boat, that it might be cut up on board. We were returning for the other, when a number of figures, bursting out of the forest, rushed towards us; some running to intercept the deer wounded by Lejoillie, others bounding along in the direction of the one I had shot. A glance showed us that they were red men, with feathers in their hair, their leathern dresses ornamented with coloured beads and cloth.

“Shove off!” cried my father. “These fellows don’t look very friendly; and it will be as well to be out of their reach, until we see what temper they are in.”

Doing as he directed, we pulled the boat a short distance away from the shore, when the Indians, lifting the deer, carried it off, casting a look of triumph behind them.

“Sure, that’s pretty impudent, to carry off our game before our very eyes!” exclaimed Tim. “You’ll be afther shootin’ them, captain, won’t you?”

“I should certainly be sorry to shed blood for a deer,” answered my father; “but we will show them that they do not escape from our want of the means to punish them.” And lifting the rifle he had just reloaded, he sent a shot which struck a tree a considerable distance beyond the Indians. Observing it, they redoubled their speed, and were soon beyond our reach. We had, however, secured one deer, which would afford us more venison than we could use.

On our return, Lejoillie shot a number of birds of various species, being highly satisfied with his morning’s sport. Disregarding the neighbourhood of the Indians, he set up the birds on reaching the schooner, and began drawing them as rapidly as he could.

The judge seemed greatly surprised at the appearance of the Indians, and their behaviour. “I thought that they had all beat a retreat from this part of the country,” he observed. “It is fortunate that they did not catch you, for they are treacherous fellows, and would probably have taken your scalps, as well as your rifles and ammunition; and if they could have got hold of the boat, they would have boarded the Great Alexander, and to a certainty put us all to death.”

Mrs. Shurtleff looked dreadfully frightened, and hugged her boy as the judge spoke.



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“I cannot believe that the noble Indians would have been guilty of so barbarous an act,” exclaimed Rochford. “They probably considered the deer their own, and that they were justified in carrying it off.”

“Wait, my dear sir, till you have seen more of these red-skinned gentlemen before you pronounce an opinion,” said the judge; and Rochford was silent.

We lost no time in cutting up the deer, and had some of the venison steaks for breakfast. Soon after, a light breeze enabled us to get clear of the creek, and once more to continue our course up the main stream.

The judge talked a good deal about the Indians. “The Redskins require to be kept in order,” he remarked. “They will not, however, dare to face white men who show a bold front, as our settlers are sure to do if attacked.” I did not forget the judge’s remarks. Before long we were to have fearful proof of the mistaken character of his views.

It was some time past noon when we came in sight of several huts or shanties scattered along the shore, with a store or two, a chapel of unpretending architecture, and a few other public buildings, which the judge pointed out as the commencement of a city. Soon afterwards, running into a small bay, we hove-to before a house of superior pretensions, with a veranda round it, backed by an orange grove, a vegetable garden and orchard on one side, and plantations of various sorts on the other. It was the judge’s home. He warmly pressed my father and me to accompany him on shore, Rochford and Lejoillie having accepted the invitation he had given them. But my father, eager, as I before remarked, to reach my uncle’s house, declined promising, however, if possible, to visit him on a future day.

