

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 3

“There’s where Nicholas Kearney lives,” observed the skipper, pointing to a small island off the left bank of the river, towards which we were steering. “I’ll send the boat on shore, gentlemen, with you and your traps, and will heave the schooner to until she returns. As we shall be up to the spot in a short time, the sooner you are ready the better.”

I looked eagerly ahead, but at first could distinguish only a wood of cabbage-palms and pines towering above the shrubbery of magnolias and laurels. As we got nearer, I caught sight of the roof of a house on the inner side of the island. We had enough to do, however, in getting our traps into the boat, which was hauled up alongside. The schooner was hove-to, and two blacks stepping in to pull, we wished the skipper farewell, and shoved off.

“I trust you may find your brother better than you expect, captain,” he said, as he waved his hand.

We had some little distance to go, as we had to row to the western or inner side of the island, where the captain told us we should find the only landing-place. As we approached, our astonishment was considerable on seeing the style of house inhabited by my uncle and his family. It was a building of considerable pretensions, erected on piles close to the edge of the water, above which it rose with a somewhat sombre and gloomy aspect. Not a window could be seen on the lower story, and the only entrance, which had the appearance of a gateway, with a portcullis, looked towards the mainland, to which access was obtained by a drawbridge, lowered and raised by two heavy chains. A broad veranda ran round the building above the ground-floor, on which the windows, unusually narrow, opened. From the part of the veranda above the entrance of the gate, projected the muzzles of two ship’s guns, commanding the approach to the house on the opposite side. The windows of the upper story were exceedingly small, and seemed intended to serve as loopholes for musketry, as well as to afford light to the rooms. The building was entirely surrounded by a strong palisade of stout timber; and besides this, there was, along the edge of the water, an outer line of defence of the same character, pierced here and there with loopholes. Altogether, it had the appearance of a regular fortress of the olden days; though, if attacked by an enemy possessing cannon, it could not have afforded protection to its garrison for a single hour. But it was well calculated to resist an attack from Indians, even if armed with musketry.

“How are we to get in?” asked my father. “Stop, massa cap’n, me holloa,” said one of the rowers. “Hi dare, Pedro Manoel, one ob you niggers dare. Some gen’lemen come to see padrone; hurry up an’ let dem in.”

Instead of a black, a youth appeared on the balcony with a rifle in his hand; but seeing us, he



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waved his hand, and quickly disappeared.

In a short time a small wicket in the palisade, which we had not before noticed, was opened, and the same youth appeared, and pointed to some steps by which we could reach it.

“Who are you?” he asked, as we got up.

“My son and I have come to visit my brother, Nicholas Kearney,” said my father.

“What! are you Uncle Michael, to whom my father wrote some time back?” exclaimed the youth. “He’ll be very glad to see you, for he has been doubting whether you would come.” And the speaker, who was, as I rightly conjectured, my cousin Carlos, turning round, shouted up a passage, when several blacks came rushing down, and forthwith began assisting Tim and me in landing our traps.

Dismissing the boat with a present to the crew, we followed Carlos up the dark passage which led into the interior of the building. On reaching the upper floor, we had abundance of light.

“I’ll tell my father of your arrival,” said Carlos. “It might agitate him too much if you walked in without being announced. In the meantime, you will find my mother and sisters in yonder room. As the windows look up the river, they did not perceive your arrival.—Go and tell the ladies that Captain Kearney and his son have arrived,” said Carlos to one of the blacks, who appeared to be a butler or major-domo.

By this time I had been able to observe my young cousin. His figure was small but well built, his features regular, his complexion and black hair showing his Spanish descent. He seemed to be wonderfully self-possessed, and his manners were those, as far as I could judge, of a well-bred young gentleman. That Carlos might have time to prepare Uncle Nicholas for our arrival, we followed the servant into the sitting-room.

“Who do you say?” asked a voice in Spanish, as the black announced us.

The man had time to repeat what he had said before we advanced. On entering the room we saw three ladies, the eldest one with a spinning-wheel by her side, the other two, evidently my young cousins, busily plying their needles.

On hearing our names, the two girls, jumping from their seats, hurried forward to meet us, exclaiming, “Uncle Michael!—Cousin Maurice!” and as they did so, they presented their fair cheeks to be kissed.

The elderly lady rose more leisurely, and with stately politeness welcomed us to Castle Kearney. “My husband will indeed rejoice to see you,” she said in very good English. “He has been a sad invalid for a long time, and keeps much to his own room. He told us that he had written to you, and was sure that you would come if you were able, so that we had begun to look out for your arrival, though we scarcely expected that you could reach us so soon. He is full of anxiety about the present and future of the country, which, owing to the warlike character of the natives, he considers to be in a more alarming condition than most settlers will allow; hence the fortified state of our dwelling-house, with which you must have been struck as you approached.”

My father replied that he considered his brother had shown wisdom in protecting his family against any attack which might be made on the house by the Indians. He then explained how we had been fortunate in finding a vessel sailing for Savannah, and had come on without a moment’s delay. My cousins and I were soon engaged in a lively conversation, they rapidly asking questions which I



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had to answer.

On hearing that Judge Shurtleff and his wife and little boy had returned, they both declared that they must, as soon as possible, go and pay a visit to the lady, who was a great friend of theirs, though Juanita said that she could not admire her taste in marrying the old judge.

“But then she has such a charming little boy; he is a great pet of ours,” exclaimed Rita.

When I told her how nearly he had been lost, and how Rochford had leaped overboard to save him, she exclaimed,—

“Oh, I should so like to see your friend! He must be a fine fellow.”

“What if he were a little hump-backed man, with one eye?” I observed, laughing. “Still the gallantry he displayed would be the same, and probably he would have run still greater risk of being drowned. However, as he is staying with the judge, you will be able to form an opinion about him if you go over to see your friends.”

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of Carlos to summon us to his father’s room. My uncle, who had risen from a network hammock in which he had been reclining, stretched out both his hands, and grasping those of my father, exclaimed as he looked him in the face,—

“I knew, Michael, that we loved each other as boys, and that age would not diminish your affection more than it has mine. Your coming proves that I was right; and I thank you, I thank you.” As he spoke, he threw his arms round his brother’s neck and burst into tears.

My father then introduced me to my uncle, who gave me an affectionate reception. In a short time Carlos returned, and invited me to come with him, which I gladly did, that I might leave the two brothers to themselves.

“Would you like to inspect our castle, and see my guns, and dogs, and fishing-tackle? Or do you wish to go back to the girls, to whom you appear to have had plenty to say just now when I interrupted you?”

He spoke in a somewhat sarcastic tone, which I did not altogether like.

“I shall be happy to return to the young ladies if you think they wish it,” I answered.

“Oh, of course; they cannot fail to be delighted with a young gentleman who can give them all the news of the old country,” he answered, leading the way back to the drawing-room.

“Here, girls, Cousin Maurice puts himself at your disposal; talk away as long as you like, and when you have done with him send for me. I in the meantime have matters of importance to attend to.” Having made this remark, he hurried out of the room with an air which made me much inclined to laugh. My fair cousins, however, did not appear to notice the style of his exit, and talked on as before, asking all sorts of questions, and answering those I put to them. My aunt spoke little; indeed, I was struck with her reserved manner and melancholy expression of countenance. After a time Carlos returned.

“Well, are you now inclined to take a stroll round our castle and grounds?” he said.

“With much pleasure,” I replied.

“We’ll go too,” exclaimed the young ladies together; and each putting on a large straw hat which lay near them, they accompanied us.

Carlos led the way with the air of a person who considers himself master of the house. He first



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showed me the various rooms, which opened into a broad passage, and then going into the veranda, he pointed out how completely it commanded the approaches to the house on every side.

“You see these two guns, and you observe that we can wheel them round to any point which may be attacked. Not that I, for my part, believe the Redskins will ever venture to come near us.”

The house, I saw, was built on a point, so that, except on one side, it was surrounded by water. The upper floor to which he conducted us contained several rooms. The roof, however, was low, the windows narrow, and so placed that musketry could be fired from them in all directions, or missiles could also be showered down on the heads of any assailants who might reach the gallery below. The rooms were furnished in a way suitable to the climate, and wore an air of neatness and comfort. Two of them, I guessed, from their appearance, belonged to my fair cousins; while another, the walls of which were ornamented with guns and pistols, swords, bows and other Indian weapons, Carlos told me was his.

At the back of the house were outbuildings and huts, in which the blacks on the property lived; and the whole of the rest of the island was occupied by an orange grove and garden, in which grew a great variety of vegetables.

“Now you must come down and see the lower regions of our castle,” said Carlos, descending the steps.

The ground-floor had but a few strongly-barred windows, opening on the water, which we had not observed on approaching, and a single door into the back of the house. There was a kitchen of large size on one side, and on the other the rooms of the domestics.

“We are not without our dungeon,” said Carlos, striking his hand against a strongly-barred door. “A captive would find it a difficult task to get out of this, and it has safely held more than one in its time.”

“As soon as Maurice is satisfied with a sight of this gloomy place, I hope that he will come and see the garden,” exclaimed Rita, I of course said, “Yes.”

Two fine dogs, whose kennels were near the entrance, came up, wagging their tails, and rubbing their noses against my legs, as if to know me again. A short distance to the right were some open sheds serving as stables, in which were several stout horses, generally called mustangs in that part of the world. The girls said that they and their brother frequently rode out on horseback, but that of late they were not allowed to go far from home. Passing the huts of the slaves, which for economy of space were huddled close to the stables, we entered the orange grove. It was the first I had been in. In all directions ran small aqueducts formed of bamboo, so that the ground might be easily irrigated. The water, my cousins told me, was let on every evening, and while we were there, we saw it trickling along the miniature canals, and almost instantly the flowers gave forth the most delicious perfume.

“That’s what the Spaniards call ‘returning thanks,’” observed Juanita. “It is a pretty idea, is it not?”

Carlos, fancying that I took more pleasure in the society of his sisters, left us, and I had a pleasant stroll round the whole island with my cousins. They showed me that the wild trees I had seen coming up the river were left there merely as a protection to the garden, and I saw that the stockades which surrounded the island were so placed as to prevent any persons landing, and might serve also as



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an outer fortification to the castle. When we returned to the house, we found supper prepared, and my uncle, accompanied by my father, entered the room.

“Why, papa, you are already better for Uncle Michael’s coming,” said Rita, giving him a kiss.

“I feel so,” answered Uncle Nicholas. “I hope, before long, to be myself again, and be able to show him and Maurice some of the wonders of the country.”

The young ladies, mentioning the arrival of the judge, begged permission to ride over the next morning to pay their friend his wife and little Paul a visit.

“You need have no fear of Indians,” observed Carlos; “for it is said that the few families which occasionally visited this neighbourhood have moved away west, having probably made up their minds to accept the offers of the government and vacate the country.”

When I mentioned our encounter with the Indians in the lagoon, he replied that they were probably a party of hunters who considered that they had a better right to the deer than we had, and that, notwithstanding the apprehensions of the old judge, they would not likely have molested us; besides which, as the place was a long way off, we should certainly not meet with them on our contemplated excursion. Though my uncle at first offered some objections to the proposal, he ultimately gave his daughters permission to make the excursion.

Tim came into my room before he went to bed, and expressed himself as highly satisfied with his quarters.

“Sure, it’s a fine place, Mr. Maurice,—a regular castle. The drawbridge is raised and the portcullis closed, so that a thieving Redskin would find it a hard matter to make his way in. From what I hear, it is not unlikely that before long they’ll be trying to drive the whites out of the country.”

“I heard very differently at supper,” I observed. “My uncle is satisfied they are peaceably disposed, and that there will be no more trouble about them.”

“That’s because he gets his knowledge from the whites, Mr. Maurice. The nigger boys know more of what’s going on than they do.”

After breakfast next morning we set out on our expedition. Carlos had provided me with a pony like those he and his sisters rode. We were accompanied by Toby, a black boy, who went to hold the horses and make himself useful in any other way, and by Tim, who carried a rifle. I took mine, and Carlos said that he never went out without a brace of pistols and a fowling-piece.

The ground in the immediate neighbourhood of Castle Kearney was part of my uncle’s property, and was well cultivated; but we very soon got into the primeval forests, where the woodman’s axe had been employed only in cutting a path along which baggage animals could proceed in single file. The trees were mostly live-oak or pine, amid which grew magnolias and laurels. The ground was very uneven, though from the river it looked level. We had to cross what is called a hummock, which was in reality a depression, but not low enough to be swampy. Here grew huge cabbage-palms, cotton-trees, and scarlet maples, with a dense undergrowth of sumach, hydrangeas, azaleas, and many other shrubs; while from the branches hung in profusion wild-vines, convolvuli of many colours, and numerous other parasites. The path was so narrow, that although we had previously contrived to ride two abreast, we were now obliged to allow one to go before the other. Rita, with whom I had been riding, whipping on her pony, dashed forward, exclaiming,—“I am in my native land; it is my duty to



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show you the way, Maurice.”

Several trees had fallen over the path, which was exceedingly rough. Her little mustang leaped them, however, with wonderful activity, and mine followed. She had got some distance ahead, when suddenly I heard her utter a cry; her pony stopped short; I saw her clasp her hands as if paralysed with fear. She had cause for alarm. Not five paces off, crawling along the top of a bank, was a huge puma, apparently about to spring upon her. In another instant the monster might have seized her in its paws and carried her into the jungle, where none of us could have followed. I shouted to try and frighten the brute, and endeavoured in the meantime to unsling my rifle; but my pony, alarmed, endeavoured to turn round, and I was compelled to handle my rein to make him go forward: indeed, it would have been difficult to fire without a fearful risk of injuring my cousin. While I was endeavouring to make my horse move forward, and at the same time to unsling my rifle, expecting every moment to see the puma make its fatal spring, I heard a shot, and the animal, leaping into the air, fell over dead close to the pony's feet. On looking round, I saw that it was a stranger on horseback who had fired the shot.

I made my way up to Rita's side, for I thought she would have fallen, but she quickly recovered herself.

“I was in a dreadful fright, Maurice,” she said; “but you saved me from the creature's claws by your timely shot.”

“No, it was that person out there,” I said, pointing to the stranger, who now, leaping over the fallen trunks, joined us close to where the puma lay.

He bowed politely to Rita, and I now saw by his uniform that he was a military officer. Of course, I thanked him, as did my cousin. On the rest of the party coming up, they joined us in expressing our gratitude.

He laughed as he answered, “I should have been glad to have killed the beast at all events, so pray don't thank me. Let me ask where you are going. I don't think it prudent for ladies to be riding through the country without a large escort.”

On hearing that we were going to the judge's, he advised us to hasten on, saying that he was going in the same direction, and would be happy to accompany us. He introduced himself as Captain Norton, and told us that he had received information that a band of Indians was in the neighbourhood, and that he was about to collect a party of volunteers to defend the settlement should they exhibit any hostile intentions. Hearing this, I proposed to Carlos to return; but he was of opinion that as we had already performed three-fourths of the distance, we should proceed to the settlement, observing that there were plenty of people to defend Castle Kearney, that a sharp look-out was always kept there, and that it was very improbable that the Indians, even if they were intent on mischief, would venture to attack it.

Captain Norton agreed with Carlos; and as Rita had now recovered from her fright, we continued our course as before.

Getting clear of the hummock, we were now in more open ground. In a short time a hut came in sight, then another and another, and we found that we were in the suburbs of Roseville. The huts varied in character, though most were of the roughest description. Some were built of logs placed



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horizontally one upon another, others were frame erections covered with boards; very few were of a more substantial character. At last several edifices of superior architectural pretensions, having two stories and broad verandas on all the sides, and surrounded by gardens and orchards, came into view.

Captain Norton parted from us at the outskirts of the settlement, saying that he should have to call officially on the judge, and hoped to hear that Miss Kearney had not suffered any ill effects from the alarm she had experienced.

"You need be under no apprehensions on that score, captain," said Rita, laughing; "I am quite myself again, though none the less grateful to you for having saved me from the claws of that hideous creature."

The judge was pacing up and down the broad veranda surrounding his house, while little Paul, with a hobby-horse between his legs, was trotting about, watched over by black Rosa. The judge waved his hand while he shouted indoors to his wife, "Marian, Marian, here come our friends from Castle Kearney." Then taking hold of Master Paul's hand, he ordered Rosa to call the boys to look after the horses.

Mrs. Shurtleff quickly made her appearance, and she and her husband greeted the young ladies as they ran up the steps, and gave Carlos and me a cordial welcome. When the judge heard of Rita's narrow escape, he exclaimed,—

"We must have a broad road cut through that hummock. It will not be safe to traverse until that's done. We are all deeply indebted to Captain Norton for his timely shot, and I shall be happy to make his acquaintance if he comes here."

We inquired for Rochford and Lejoillie.

"They went away at daybreak into the forest—the one bent on slaughtering game, the other on collecting objects of natural history. A clever fellow is that Frenchman, and I have begged him to remain here as long as he can find subjects for scientific research," he answered.

When we told him the object of Captain Norton's visit to Roseville, he laughed, and replied,—

"I don't believe the Indians will venture near the place; they know too well the effect of our fellows' rifles. Since I came home, I find that a treaty has been entered into with them. The meeting took place at Payne's Landing, on the Ocklawaha River, and they have agreed, in the course of a few months, to move westward across the Mississippi, where the Creeks and Cherokees are also about to migrate; so that we shall, in a short time, I hope, see the end of all these Indian troubles."

We found that the judge had business to attend to, and Carlos suggested that we should take a stroll through the settlement. We had got some little distance, when my companion pointed out, with a laugh, the chief inn of the place, in front of which, nailed to a tree, hung the sign of "The General Washington." It was a weather-boarded shanty, fixed up in an open space between several trees, which the builder had not thought it worth while to cut down. From the boughs hung several cages full of birds, while a number of hideous little mongrel dogs ran about, attended by a black boy, who sat on the steps, apparently having nothing else to do than to scratch his woolly pate. As we approached, Captain Norton rode up, and calling to the boy, directed him to summon his master.

"What you want him for, massa cap'n?" asked the black.



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"I tell you to call him," answered the captain.

"Him fast 'sleep in him hammock now. No want to be 'sturbed."

"Go and call him, whether he is asleep or awake," said the captain, getting angry.

Just then a person, who I had no doubt was "mine host," appeared at the door, though as unlike my notion of what a landlord should be as possible.

"Wal, cap'n, what do you want?" he asked.

"I am sent to require you, and all able-bodied men to turn out armed, for the defence of the country, and of this settlement in particular, against the Redskins, who, we have information, are approaching the place with the intention of attacking it."

"I guess though we'll soon put them to the right about," answered mine host. "Won't you step in and liquor?"

The officer excused himself, and having mentioned the spot where the volunteers were to rendezvous, he turned his horse and rode towards us. We asked him what success he had had in obtaining recruits.

"Those living on the outskirts are willing enough," he said; "but some of those whose houses are near the river, and who believe that the Indians will not molest them, are less inclined to turn out."

As our new friend had to hurry on, we parted with him; but he promised to call at the judge's in the evening.

Wherever we went, we found people talking about the supposed approach of the Indians, though no one seemed to think there was much chance of their attacking the settlement. We hoped, on getting back, to find Rochford and Lejoillie; but they had not returned. Soon afterwards, Captain Norton came in, and the judge and Mrs. Shurtleff, by their kind reception, at once made him feel at home. He appeared to be much struck with my cousins, and I heard him observe to the judge's wife that he was not aware such charming young ladies were to be found in that part of the country. Rita was, at all events, well pleased to listen to his conversation, which was lively and sensible.

Late in the evening Lejoillie arrived, guided by a black whom he had engaged for the purpose. He had lost sight, he said, of Rochford, and though he had hunted about in every direction, he could not rejoin him. He hoped, however, that he would before long find his way home.

Latterly we became somewhat uneasy at the non-appearance of our countryman. Could he possibly have fallen into the hands of Indians? If so, anxious as he was to serve them, they, ignorant of this, would kill and scalp him as certainly as they would any other white man.

The night passed on. The judge sent us to our sleeping-rooms, saying that he would have a watch kept to let our friend in, should he appear. The captain had, I found, also sent out scouts, to prevent the risk of the settlement being surprised; and before he turned in, he rode round, to ascertain that they were on the alert.

