

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 5

We had returned but a few days, and Lejoillie had scarcely had time to arrange the collections he had made during our late trip, when the *Great Alexander* anchored off the island, and Captain Crump came on shore to deliver some goods he had brought for my uncle. He was going afterwards down the east coast to the Florida Keys, as those coral reefs and islands which fringe the southern end of the peninsula are called. He intended to touch at several places on his way, and perhaps afterwards run up the west coast as far as Cedar Keys.

Lejoillie at once inquired whether he would convey passengers; and on receiving a reply in the affirmative, he invited Carlos and me to accompany him, and Tim if he wished to go.

My father and uncle willingly gave us leave, and we lost no time in making preparations for the voyage. This was soon done, and that very evening we went on board. Captain Crump had brought a fresh supply of ammunition; and as we had plenty of provisions, we were in want of nothing.

I took Caesar, and Carlos had two other dogs. I have already described the schooner, as well as that portion of the Saint John River which we now sailed over. Rounding the Hazard Lighthouse, we steered for Saint Augustine, not only the oldest city in Florida, but the most ancient built by Europeans in the whole continent of North America. It stands on a narrow peninsula formed by the Sebastian and Matanzas rivers.

Carlos had often been there before, as it is only a few miles across from the Saint John River, and he had friends and relatives of his mother residing there. It still contains many old Spanish buildings, which give it a very picturesque appearance. The streets are, however, somewhat narrow and paved with stone, or rather with a conglomerate of shells. As we remained there but a few hours, I can say little more about it.

From Saint Augustine, for three hundred miles southward, there extends a succession of long narrow banks, which form the outside of a series of lagoons, so shallow that only vessels drawing a very few feet of water can navigate them. We kept out to sea for about a hundred miles, when, passing through the Mosquito Inlet, we entered the Mosquito Lagoon. Outside, we had been tumbling about in the rolling Atlantic. We were now in perfectly smooth water; but our skipper and his mate had to keep a sharp look-out, to avoid running on the numerous shoals which lay in our course. The narrow strip of land outside was only a few feet in height, covered with pines, oaks, and palmettos. As it was impossible to navigate the lagoon at night, we came to anchor. The next morning we continued our voyage. Looking over the side, we could see the fish swimming about in vast numbers. Frequently we found ourselves scraping along over oyster-beds, which in some places rose to within a couple of feet of the surface. As we got farther to the south, the banks were fringed with mangroves, and the



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cabbage-palm and palmetto made their appearance. On some of these oyster-reefs the mangrove trees had struck root—thus forming islands, which are constantly increasing, and still further narrowing the channel.

Leaving the Mosquito Inlet, we entered another lagoon, known as Indian River, upwards of a hundred miles in length, and in some places only sixty or seventy yards across, though in others three miles in width. The most interesting objects on shore were the orange-groves, for which the banks of the Indian River are celebrated. Some of the plantations are of large size; and our skipper told us that one we were then passing produced in good years a crop of more than a quarter of a million of oranges.

One afternoon, the wind having dropped completely, we came to anchor off a sandy point which afforded an easy landing-place. Our skipper having lent us his boat, advised us to go on shore, and to make our way towards the south, when, as he said, “we should see what we should see;” adding, “Don’t let your dogs get ahead of you, friends, or they will spoil your sport.”

Making our way in the direction pointed out, we saw before us a creek falling into the lagoon. Extending some distance from it was a forest of dead trees, the stems and branches bare and gaunt, crusted with white, and supporting on their highest branches the roughly-constructed nests of a vast colony of pelicans, the most curious-looking birds of the feathered tribe.

As we approached the spot, our ears were assailed by a chorus of discordant sounds, proceeding not only from pelicans, but from numerous other aquatic birds collected on the shores of the creek. Holding back our dogs, we made our way through a tangled wood, concealing ourselves as much as possible, until we got within a short distance of the creek, where we lay hid behind some bushes, whence, on looking through the branches, we were rewarded with a most curious sight. An army of white pelicans was drawn up in a row across the middle of the creek, the water reaching half-way up their bodies, while they stood upright with their necks raised in the air, evidently engaged in some important occupation, in which they were so absorbed that they did not observe our approach. They were apparently waiting in the attitude of attention for a signal from a large, grave-looking old pelican, the chief of their band, who stood on the shore ready to issue his orders. Presently we heard him utter two loud cries in a hollow tone, which sounded like “Heou-korr, heou-korr!” The instant the signal was given the troop started forward, beating the water with their outstretched wings, and holding their necks far forward; their object being, as we soon afterwards discovered, to drive before them into shallow water the fish swimming in the stream.

The two ends of the line advanced faster than the centre, so that in a short time the birds formed a vast crescent, which stretched across a good-sized bay; and as the distance from one bird to another was measured exactly by the span of their wings, not a single fish could break through the circle of menacing beaks. Indeed, the pelicans enclosed the fish with their united wings in a regular line as close and compact as a trawl or drag-net. As the circle gradually contracted, the fish began to jump into the air, and to dart about in all directions, leaving many a muddy streak to mark their course.

Besides the old “fugleman”, there were several other patriarchs, who now advanced into the water to perform the office of fishermen. Standing perfectly motionless, they seized the fish as they passed, and stowed them away methodically in their enormous pouches under their beaks. The whole



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of this time the rest of the troop continued to beat the water with their wings, and appeared to be fully occupied in preventing their prey from escaping, without attempting to catch any in their own beaks.

This curious fishing appeared to have excited immense interest among the feathered tribes of the neighbourhood. Birds of every description were collected on the surrounding trees, filling the air with their discordant cries, apparently jealous of the pelicans, and eager to take a part in the feast which they were engaged in providing.

Clouds of gulls and sea-mews fluttered over the surface of the water, seizing any small fry they could reach, while robber crows quarrelled over scraps of stolen fish; and three or four bold grebes succeeded in getting into the circle, where they floated and dived at leisure, successfully avoiding the numerous thrusts aimed at them by the formidable beaks of the pelicans.

Several cormorants, perched on the trunks of submerged trees, now and then darted down like arrows on some big fish which their keen eyes had espied, and as they rose, tossing them up in the air with their tails, they never failed to catch them again by the head, and swallow them at a mouthful. The pelicans did not venture to interfere with these rovers of the deep, being probably well acquainted with the strength of their powerful beaks. Lastly, came a mob of egrets, crab-eaters, and little herons, which perched on the surrounding trees, stretched out their necks, rolled their wild eyes, and danced about on the dead branches, uttering their jealous cries, but not daring to interfere with the industrious pelicans.

The fishing over, the pelicans arranged themselves in a circle on the sand, when those who had been engaged in fishing proceeded to empty deliberately their pouches, spreading the contents before their grave old chief, each taking care to knock on the head any fish which was still living. Then, at a signal from the chief, a bird advanced, and taking a fish swallowed it; then came another croak, and another pelican walked forward and took his share, and so on until every bird had been fed.

The feast over, they began carefully to prune their damp plumage, turning their necks over their backs in a way of which I should not have supposed them capable. Having arranged their plumage, they moved off towards their roosting-places, and the rest of the birds which had been watching their departure darted down, hoping to pick up some of the fish they might have left.

Lejoillie all the time, though scarcely able to contain himself for laughter, was holding his gun, ready to obtain specimens for his collection.

At length, fixing his eye on a blue crab-eater, he fired, and the bird fell to the ground. At the sound of the shot the pelicans took to flight in good order, followed by the cormorants and crows; the gulls and terns flew off up the creek; but the herons, more courageous or more stupid, remained perched on the higher branches of the neighbouring trees.

Not to let them all escape, I aimed at a beautiful egret with white plumage, and to my great delight down it fell. It was nearly three feet in height, with a long tuft of silken and silvery feathers down the back of its neck. Carlos knocked over a beautiful little bird with a chestnut-coloured head, a perfect heron in miniature, but only the size of a thrush. Lejoillie was delighted, and would have hugged us both as we brought him the specimens.

As there was no chance of a breeze, we agreed to spend the night on shore, where we could stretch our legs and enjoy a cooler air than we could find in our close little cabin. We accordingly



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sent for a sail, rigged a tent, lighted a fire, and did our best to make ourselves at home, while Lejoillie skinned his birds and “potted” his insects, as Carlos used to call the operation.

“I wish he’d pot these mesquitoes,” exclaimed my cousin, as clouds of what he called “blind mesquitoes” came round us, dropping into the pot in which our coffee was boiling, and covering all our food. As, however, they did not bite like the “galley nippers” of other parts, we soon got accustomed to them, and if they added to the strength of our coffee we did not mind. We were not, however, allowed to finish our night’s rest. A breeze unexpectedly getting up, the skipper called us on board, and we continued our course down the lagoon. I never remember seeing the water so phosphorescent in any other part of the world. We could distinguish the jew-fish, the saw-fish, and many other denizens of those Southern waters, which, disturbed by the schooner’s keel, darted away in all directions in a blaze of light, every scale on their bodies being clearly defined. Indeed, they looked like meteors, their rapid course marked by trails of light. The next day the wind was so light that we made but slow progress. The appearance of the shore on either hand was monotonous in the extreme. At length, passing the settlement of Saint Lucie, the most southern in Florida, we might have got out to the ocean through the Indian River Inlet, but the sea was breaking heavily on the bar; and as the weather looked threatening, we continued our course down the lagoon, steering for an opening called Jupiter Inlet. At night we lay-to among a number of mangrove islets, on the east bank of the sound, being just able to see our way until we dropped anchor.

Scarcely were the sails furled than the storm which had been brewing burst above our heads. The thunder roared, lightning flashed, and down came the rain in torrents, flooding our decks. We had to take refuge in the cabin, which we shared with the troops of cockroaches, centipedes, and numberless other creeping things. At length the rain ceased, and the thunder rolled away, and we were expecting to enjoy some sleep, when clouds of mosquitoes and sand-flies came off, literally filling the air, and, finding their way into the cabin, made a fearful onslaught on our bodies. In vain we endeavoured to shield ourselves from their sharp stings. They defied the clouds of tobacco smoke we puffed at them. We had no sulphur, or we would have submitted to inhale its noxious fumes in preference to being bitten by these abominable creatures.

“Have patience, my friends!” cried Lejoillie, when he heard Carlos, Tim, and me crying out as we slapped our hands and faces, and tried to drive off our assailants; “recollect we are suffering in the cause of science.”

“All very well for you who get the honour and glory, but, for my part, I hope never to endure such another night of misery again,” cried Carlos.

Daylight came at last, when, going upon deck, we found ourselves in the midst of a forest of mangroves, rising some forty or fifty feet above the water, the lower branches, stems, and spider-like limbs, within reach of high-tide, being completely covered with thick clusters of oysters.

“Sure, do them shell-fish grow on the trees?” exclaimed Tim. “Though I’ve been the world round, never did I see such curious fruit.”

Captain Crump explained that the young oysters seize on every hard object on which to fix themselves; and he pointed out the mud-banks, where they lay three or four feet in depth. Tim, jumping into the boat, rowed off, and soon brought back several branches of oysters, which he



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thought would serve us for breakfast. We found them, however, very bitter to our taste.

The skipper told us they were called 'coon oysters, as the racoons are very fond of them, or perhaps can get at them with greater ease than they can obtain the common oyster. While we were watching the shore, sure enough a racoon came down, and seizing several oysters which hung just below the surface, picked them off the branch, and shaking them violently backwards and forwards, ran back with his prize to a convenient spot on the beach, where, with his teeth and claws, he opened the shells, and speedily devoured the contents. Presently we saw him dart into the water, and return with a handful of shrimps, which his keen eyes had perceived; and he again immediately sat himself down to devour them, giving each of them a pinch as he placed them by his side. He appeared perfectly fearless of the neighbourhood of the vessel, though, no doubt, had we been on shore with our dogs and guns, he would quickly have concealed himself.

Lejoillie remained in the bows of the vessel watching its movements with his gun ready. As soon as the poor 'coon had finished its meal, destined to be its last, he fired, and over it fell, though still struggling violently. Tim and another man immediately jumped into the boat, and pulling to the shore, quickly put it out of pain, and brought it on board. It was about the size of a fox, being somewhat larger than the common racoon. Lejoillie called it the agouara, and our skipper said it was the crab-eater. The fur was of a blackish-grey, with a tinge of yellow. The tail was somewhat short and marked, with six black rings on a greyish ground.

As there was but little chance of our making progress for some hours to come, after breakfast we pulled off in the boat to secure some fish for dinner. Our skipper possessed a species of harpoon called grains, which consists of a two-pronged iron-headed barb, about ten inches in length. The head is loosely slipped into a socket at the end of a staff about twelve feet long, and the two are connected by a rope. A double prong is used for catching fish, but for killing turtle a single-pronged barbed head is employed, as it pierces the shell more easily. We had not gone far when Captain Crump, standing up in the bows like an old Triton, lowered his weapon close to the water; it flew from his hand, and immediately afterwards he drew up a red-fish of about twelve pounds weight, and threw it into the bottom of the boat. He then stood ready for another stroke. Again he darted down the deadly weapon. The head, which had a long line attached to it, by slipping off at once from the staff, remained sticking in the fish, which, after being allowed to struggle so as to exhaust its strength, was hauled on board. Three or four other fish having been caught in the same way, we had an ample supply for ourselves and dogs. We pulled back to the schooner, on our way collecting, off a bank, a number of fine oysters, very superior to those which the 'coons are addicted to eating.

At length a light breeze sprang up, sufficient to carry us at a slow rate down the sound. We passed vast numbers of the Florida cormorants—a small species, which breeds in the mangrove islets. They were feeding on shoals of mullet, which rushed along the surface of the water, endeavouring to escape the attacks of sharks, porpoises, and other cruel foes beneath the surface. The cormorants, however, did not have it all their own way; for, watching their opportunity, numbers of ospreys and pelicans incessantly splashed down among them to rob them of their prey. Whenever we brought up, we pulled off in the boat to supply ourselves with fish, which we seldom failed to take with hook and line, even when the skipper was unsuccessful with his grains. We baited with land-crabs, which



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abound in the mangrove swamps. Frequently within a quarter of an hour we caught red-fish, dark-fleshed jack, and black and white banded sheep's-heads, in numbers sufficient to feed all on board. Indeed, we agreed that no one need starve in Florida, if only provided with guns and ammunition, hooks, lines, and harpoons.

At length Jupiter Inlet was reached. It is narrow, and very shallow, and is occasionally closed by a strong easterly gale. We were now once more in the open sea, steering southward for Key Biscayne, at the north end of a line of keys or islets which sweep round the whole southern coast of Florida. Our skipper kept a sharp look-out for wrecks, numbers of which occur on this dangerous coast. His object was, he said, to assist the crews, and to take possession of the cargoes. There were, he told us, a number of vessels so employed—cutters and schooners constantly cruising about in search of wrecks. Their skippers were honest men; but there were others—"beach-combers," he called them—who not only plundered shipwrecked crews, but endeavoured to allure to their destruction, by means of false lights, any vessels approaching the coast. Many a stout ship has thus been lost, their crews miserably perishing.

Although our skipper spoke with just indignation of such a mode of proceeding, he had no objection whatever, when a ship was on shore, to get out of her all the booty he could obtain. We passed the skeletons of several wrecks; but they had long before been visited by the ever-vigilant wreckers, and everything of value on board carried away.

Lejoillie had a great desire to visit the Everglades—a large tract extending over the greater part of the southern end of Florida. It consists of a vast plain of coarse saw-grass; above which, here and there, rise well-wooded and fertile islands, composed of coral rock of a crescent form, which they assumed when first forced up, by some convulsion of nature, above the surface of the ocean. The plain is swampy; and down it narrow channels exist, which drain the water in a great measure towards the west.

As our skipper wished to obtain some cocoa-nuts which grew abundantly on the shore, and proposed to employ the time of our absence in catching turtle, he consented to bring up for a few hours; advising us to keep a sharp look-out for Indians, and to avoid them, as they would certainly rob us, and perhaps take our lives, should they find us off our guard. He offered to allow one of his crew to accompany us, who, being well acquainted with the country, and a good sportsman—as most wreckers are—would act as our guide.

Standing into a small bay, lined on either side with mangroves and cabbage-palms, having at the farther end a grove of cocoa-nut trees, we came to anchor. At the outer point was a deserted lighthouse, which we agreed would serve as a guide to us should we have any difficulty in finding our way back. We lost no time in going on shore, accompanied by Tim and Bill Dixie, boatswain of the *Great Alexander*, and forthwith made our way west towards the nearest point on the Everglades. We had not gone far before we fell in with a deer, which I shot. Knowing how welcome it would be on board, and hoping the schooner had not sailed, we despatched Bill to request the captain to send for it. In the meantime, leaving Tim to guard the game, we went forward, and were fortunate enough to shoot a couple of parrots, which were sent on board with the men who shortly afterwards made their appearance.



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Having as much game as we required, Lejoillie begged that we would at once push forward, as our object was to visit the Everglades, which we had not hitherto reached.

The Everglades answered the description I had heard of them. Carlos and I agreed that there was so little attractive in the region, that except for the sake of saying we had been there, we would rather have remained on board and amused ourselves by fishing or spearing turtle with the skipper. However, as we had come, and our friend wished to proceed, we went on with him. Though we had shot several birds, Lejoillie wanted to reach one of the woody islands I have described, which appeared some way ahead; so on we went.

“Keep a look-out for snakes,” said Carlos, “or we may very likely step on one before we see it.”

“It will not be very easy to avoid the creatures in this high grass,” I observed. “Don’t you think we had better turn back?”

“Not until we have attained the object of our visit to this region, my friends,” answered the naturalist. “The love of science should make us despise all dangers and difficulties.”

The next instant Carlos fired. Running forward, we found that he had blown off the head of a huge rattlesnake which his keen eye had detected in the grass, though the rest of us had failed to see it. It proved that his warning was not unnecessary. The creature was over seven feet long, and a bite from its fangs would quickly have proved fatal.

Still, Lejoillie insisted on going forward, and we were ashamed of deserting him. At length the island for which we were aiming was reached. It extended for several miles, in a crescent form, from north to south-west, rising abruptly eight or ten feet above the plain. It was composed entirely of coral, though covered over thickly with creepers of various sorts. On the summit grew enormous trees mostly of the palm species, such as I have before described.

We halted on the top to refresh ourselves with the provender we had brought. Not until then did we discover how large a portion of the day had gone by. We lighted a fire to boil our kettle, and were seated round it, the smoke partially keeping at bay the mosquitoes and other stinging creatures, when Tim, who had gone a short distance from the camp, came running back.

“We had better be afther puttin’ our best foot foremost, gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “As I was lookin’ away to the westward, my eye fell on a number of creatures moving among the grass. I stopped until they came to an open space; then I saw that they were Redskins, with feathers on their heads and firelocks in their hands. I counted twenty of them, at least; and there were more behind. Maybe they have seen the smoke of our fire, and are coming to see who we are and what we are about. They may be friendly; but I’m afther thinkin’ that if they find they outnumber us, they’ll be for taking our scalps, if they can get them. I’m an old soldier, and I wouldn’t be afther sayin’ ‘run’ from an enemy if there was a chance of driving him back; but still the best thing we can do is to beat a retreat in time.”

“I believe that Tim’s advice is good,” observed Carlos.

“I am sure it is,” I added. “If we were to stop here and try to defend ourselves, the Indians would starve us out, at all events. What do you say, Lejoillie?”

“Ma foi! that we had better retreat,” exclaimed the naturalist.

“Well, then, gentlemen, we will throw a few more sticks on the fire, to cause plenty of smoke;



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and that'll make the Redskins fancy that we have a large party encamped, so that they will approach more cautiously, and we shall have time to get well ahead," said Tim.

The old soldier's advice was therefore acted upon. We gathered up our rifles and the various articles which lay on the grass, and began to retreat, as far as I could judge, by the way we had come. The sky, however, which had hitherto been clear, had, unfortunately for us, become obscured, and it was difficult to decide which was the right direction. We pushed forward as fast as we could; but the old wrecker, our guide, seemed, as we thought, somewhat uncertain of the path we ought to take. We frequently looked back, and, as long as we could see the island, it assisted to guide us. Nothing of the Indians could be discovered; but that was no proof that they were not near, as they would keep concealed in the tall grass, and wait until they had a favourable opportunity of pouncing suddenly upon us. I must say that we felt rather ashamed of ourselves for running away from what, after all, might prove an imaginary danger. Still, it was better to run than to be overpowered and scalped,—our probable fate should the Indians prove to be hostile; and, from Tim's account, they were certainly on the war-path. The sun had sunk beyond the vast plain of grass stretched out behind us, when we emerged from the Everglades, and found ourselves in the forest-belt which separates that region from the sea. We now called a halt, to consider what course to pursue. It was evident that we had not returned by the same way we had come, for we could discover no signs of having been on the spot before.

"We cannot be more than a couple of miles from the shore, and when we reach it, we shall know which direction to take," said our guide. "We may still, if we push on, keep ahead of the Redskins."

Though tired and hungry, we agreed that it would be more prudent to push on than to halt longer. Scarcely, however, had we got among the palmetto-scrub, than looking back, to ascertain if we were followed, I caught sight, amid the thickening gloom, of a number of dark figures following up our trail. I pointed them out to Tim.

"Do you advise that we should halt and face them, or continue our course?" I asked.

"No use halting unless we are prepared to fight it out to the last," he answered; "better to keep moving on, while we can see our way. And maybe they don't intend to attack us at all until we have encamped, in the hope to find most of us asleep."

Lejoillie and Carlos agreed with Tim. We spoke in undertones, so that our voices might not reach our pursuers. They, probably, were well aware that there were only five of us; but they knew that five rifles might bring down as many of their number before they had killed us, and this made them afraid of approaching too near until they could find us, as they hoped, off our guard. It was not a pleasant feeling to know that a party of savages was close upon our heels, and yet not to be able even to get a sight of them; for after the momentary glance Tim and I had obtained of our pursuers, they did not again show themselves, though we felt sure that they were skulking along under cover of the trees and bushes.

The old wrecker kept us at a good pace, scrambling and leaping over fallen trunks, until we saw the top of the old lighthouse, for which we had been looking, rising above the palmetto-scrub. The dense foliage had hitherto concealed it, though it was not more than a hundred yards off. We hurried on. Its massive walls would, at all events, afford us a place of safety until daylight. At that instant our



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ears were assailed by a fearful war-whoop, and a shower of bullets and arrows whistled about our heads; but, happily, not one of us was hit.

“Keep together, gentlemen,” cried Tim; “and don’t fire until we can see our enemies. If we do, they’ll take the opportunity of springing upon us before we have time to reload, and we shall be done for.”

Happily the ground between us and the lighthouse was pretty open. As we made our way over it, lighted by the moon, which had just risen, I could see our schooner in the distance, standing in for the bay, and another vessel farther off.

We dashed across the open as fast as our legs could carry us, expecting every moment to have another shower of missiles sent rattling after us; but the Indians were either stopping to reload, or were so much astonished at seeing us unhurt that they thought it useless to fire again. At all events, we gained the lighthouse in safety. There was a strong door at the base, which, happily, had been left unbarred. We dashed in and secured it, while we made our way up the winding steps to the first landing-place, whence two narrow windows commanded the ground below on either side. Scarcely had we reached it than we saw the Indians bursting out from among the trees, not aware, apparently, that we had already gained a place of safety. As we had not fired, they might possibly have supposed that we were unarmed; for they advanced fearlessly, shouting and shrieking, close up to the walls of the tower.

“Let them shout on,” said Lejoillie, “their shrieks cannot hurt us; and, unless they attempt to break in, it would be useless to shoot the poor wretches.”

The enraged cries of the Indians increased when they found that the door was closed. They attacked it with their tomahawks; but their weapons were blunted against the hard oak, clamped with iron as it was. By Tim’s advice we still reserved our fire, as our stock of ammunition was small, and we might require it for an emergency.

The closed door must have showed the Indians that we were within, though, as we took care to conceal ourselves, they might not otherwise have known it.

The door was, fortunately, fitted into the wall of the building, and was so strongly and tightly closed as to prevent the entrance of water, which we saw, from the marks on the walls, must occasionally rise some feet in depth round it. As we did not venture to look out of the window, we could only judge, by the sounds which reached us, what the Indians were about. There was not much to fear from the blows of their tomahawks, though in time they might have contrived to cut a small hole through the door. We could, however, hear the sound of chopping again and again repeated, while the shouts and shrieks of the savages, as they ran round the building looking out for an opening, became more and more vehement. At last they were silent. Wishing to ascertain what they were about, I crept up to the window, and put out my head far enough to take a glance round one side of the tower and over the ground below me for some distance. I saw that a party of Indians were engaged in bringing up a long log of wood, which they evidently intended to use as a battering-ram. I must have been seen, for, although I withdrew my head as rapidly as I could, the next instant a couple of arrows entered the window, and several others struck the wall outside. Had I remained a moment longer, I should probably have been killed or wounded.



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“We must prevent them battering in the door,” I exclaimed, after telling my companions what I had seen. “We must show the fellows that we have got fire-arms, and know how to use them.”

The difficulty, however, was to reach our assailants without exposing ourselves. One window only commanded the approach to the door. Here Tim offered to station himself, and begged us to hand the rifles up to him as fast as we could load them.

“I’ll teach the spalpeens a lesson they’ll not forget,” he said, as he took aim with his rifle. He fired, but with what result we could not tell.

“Hand up another,” he cried; “quick, quick!” Again he fired, while I loaded the first. In this way one after the other was discharged and reloaded, so that Tim was able to fire with a rapidity which must have astonished the Indians, who had not, apparently, until then discovered the existence of the window, as he fired eight or ten times before any arrows were shot in return. Still the savages, with unusual perseverance, rushed forward, carrying the log in their arms, and drove it against the door, which creaked and groaned under their repeated blows. From the sounds which reached us, it appeared too probable that they would succeed in breaking it in. But even should they do so, we might still defend ourselves on the staircase; for, as it would allow only one person to ascend at a time, we should be able to keep the whole horde at bay. How many Indians had fallen from Tim’s fire we could not ascertain, on account of the uncertain light and the rapid way they were moving about. He had probably oftener missed than struck an enemy. It was evident, however, that his fire had at length become too hot for them, as the blows on the door ceased, and he told us that they had thrown down the log, and were retreating.

“Hand me up another rifle,” he cried; “I’ll give them a few parting shots.”

“Oh, let them escape without further punishment, my friend,” said Lejoillie. “We should not wish to take their lives. They only acted according to their instincts, and considered that we were trespassing on their property.”

Tim did not seem to understand this idea; nor did Carlos, who, having his musket ready, sprang to the window and fired. The act nearly cost him his life for at that moment an arrow flew in, and, grazing his head, struck the wall behind him. This showed us that the Indians were on the watch, and that we must be careful how we exposed ourselves.

In the meantime, Dixie, our guide, had gone down to examine the door, and came back to report that it still stood firm, although the Indians’ weapons had made some impression on it, having formed a slit in the upper part, two or three splinters being actually driven in. It was thus evident that had they persevered they might in time have cut through the door; though the aperture would have enabled us to fire at them, and would probably have given us an advantage which they little expected. As it would have been difficult to stop up the hole, we allowed it to remain.

Doubting, however, that the Indians had gone off altogether, we kept a vigilant watch for their return. We soon found, indeed, that they were not so easily defeated as we had hoped. Again looking out of the window, I saw them coming back, each man loaded with a mass of brushwood. Their object was evidently to kindle a fire round the door; and having burned it down, to rush in and capture us while we were smothered with smoke. It was of the greatest importance to prevent them from placing the fagots as they intended; and Tim once more resumed his post at the window to fire at them as



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they approached. The wood they carried served as shields, which they held over their heads, and trusting to this protection they rushed forward, each man throwing down his load as he got near the door; but the bullets from Tim's rifle struck several of them before they got as close as they intended. Notwithstanding this, however, a heap of firewood was piled up, in a short time, close to one side of the building. The Indians must, however, have known that the moment the flames burst forth, they would be brought into sight, and be more exposed than heretofore to our shots, and they therefore seemed very unwilling to set fire to it. At length the last fagot was thrown down, and Tim told us that he saw an Indian approaching with a flaming torch, which he had kindled at a distance.

"The fellow keeps leaping about like a regular Jack-o'-lantern; but I'll soon put a stop to his dancing," he added.

The Indians, however, must have foreseen that the torch-bearer would be specially exposed, and to cover his advance they began shooting their arrows with a rapidity which compelled Tim to keep under shelter. Several came through the window, while others struck the stones on either side. Still undaunted, Tim stood ready to fire. It must be remembered that we were in comparative darkness, the faint light which came through the windows alone enabling us to load our rifles, and see our way about the little rooms in which we were stationed. Again Tim stepped forward; the crack of his rifle was heard.

"I'm mightily afraid that I missed him," he cried, as he sprang back under shelter. "Hand me up another rifle."

Once more he fired.

"I've hit him this time," he cried out; "but sure the fellow has thrown his torch among the fagots."

The thick smoke which in another minute came curling up around us proved too truly that the Indian had effected his purpose; while the arrows which flew in at the window prevented us from firing. We could hear their shrieks and cries of triumph, as they believed that in a short time we should become their victims. None of us, however, thought of yielding. To avoid the smoke we went down to the lower story. Although a small quantity made its way through the crack, we could breathe freely, and we calculated that it would take some time before the outer door was burned through. We held a consultation as to how we should act when that should happen. Carlos was for rushing out, firing a volley at our assailants, and endeavouring to drive them back with our hunting-knives. Tim advised that we should hold the fort to the last.

"Sure, a little smoke won't do us any harm," he exclaimed. "The Redskins will have to clear away the ashes before they can get in, an' we shall then have an opportunity of shooting down not a few of them when they do that."

Lejoillie proposed that we should retire to the upper story, to which the Indians would not probably venture to ascend, as it could only be reached by a trap-door.

I, however, pointed out that they might fill the interior of the building with fagots, and setting them on fire, literally roast us. I therefore thought our safest plan would be to remain on the ground-floor, as Tim had proposed. Our guide also thought Tim was right, and we soon won Carlos and Lejoillie over to our opinion.



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We spent, as may be supposed, a very anxious time. The fagots, being composed chiefly of green wood, though they caused a great smoke outside, did not burn as rapidly as we expected, and as yet the door, when we felt it, was not even hot. This satisfied us that hours might elapse before it was burned through. I again ran upstairs, and in spite of the smoke which came through the window, on looking out as the wreaths were occasionally blown aside, I saw that the Indians were keeping under cover to avoid our bullets, and waiting until the fire had done its work. They, of course, knew that the glare of the flames would expose them to view should they venture into the open. Finding that the top of the tower was tolerably free from smoke, I climbed up to the lantern whence I could obtain a view over the sea. I looked out eagerly for the schooner. She must have come up to the spot where we had left her, but she was nowhere visible. One thing I observed, however, was, that the tide, having already risen, was washing round the mangrove trees at the base of the tower; and it appeared to me that in a few minutes it would be surrounded.

As our distance from the schooner could not be great, I hoped those on board had heard the firing, and, guessing that we were attacked, would come to our rescue. On that point, however, I was uncertain, as the skipper would be unwilling to leave his vessel, and the few hands he could bring with him would, he might think, be insufficient to drive back the Indians. I was, therefore, not very sanguine that we should receive assistance from him.

I did not remain long in my exposed position, as, should I be seen by the Indians, I thought that some of them might steal up and make me a target for their arrows. I therefore hurried down again, to report my movements to my companions. That I was right in my conjecture as to the rising of the tide we soon had proof, for the water was already bubbling up under the door, loosened somewhat by the blows of the Indians' battering-ram; and to avoid wetting our feet, we had to retreat from the lower steps of the stair. A hissing sound soon after showed us that the water, rushing in, was extinguishing the fire burning nearest the ground, though the upper part of the pile of brushwood still crackled and smoked as before. We now hoped that it might be an unusually high-tide, so that the tower would be completely surrounded.

Our hopes were not disappointed; the hissing sound increased, while the smoke decreased. In a short time the floor of the tower was a foot deep in water, and the smoke ceased to come through the slit in the door. I ran upstairs, though I could see the glare of fire. On looking out, I discovered that it was produced by portions of the burning brushwood, which were being carried away by the water as it swept in a broad sheet round the base of the tower. I uttered a silent prayer of gratitude. We were safe for the present. The attempt of the Indians to burn us out had failed; and after the reception they had met with from our fire-arms, they were not likely to venture again up to the tower by wading through the water. I called down to my companions, who soon joined me.

"We must not trust too much to them, though," observed Carlos. "I know the cunning of the Redskins; they'll wait until the tide falls, and then again attack us."

As we watched the water, it seemed as if about to cover the whole level ground, leaving only a rock here and there above the surface.

"At all events, we shall be safe till daylight, as the tide won't go down for some hours after then," observed Dixie; "and by that time it will be curious if Captain Crump doesn't send to look for us."



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On hearing this, I proposed that we should fire off our rifles from the summit of the tower, when probably the sound would reach him. Just as we were about to do so, Carlos exclaimed,—

“Can that be a boat coming round the point there?”

I looked in the direction he pointed. I had little doubt about the matter. In a short time we clearly made out a boat pulling towards us. I fired off my rifle, and we all shouted at the top of our voices. She came on quickly, and we now saw her directing her course to the tower. The water was perfectly smooth; she was thus able to get up close to the base. Captain Crump himself was seated in the stern. He hailed, to know what had happened. A few words explained this. The difficulty was to get into the boat. Should we open the door, the water, which was of considerable height outside, would rush in and wet us all through, if it did not drown us. There was, fortunately, a long rope in the boat. By means of the straps to our knapsacks, our handkerchiefs, and some pieces of string which we mustered among us, we formed a line of sufficient length to lower down and haul up the rope. The end of this we secured to an iron hinge, to which a shutter had once been fixed.

Dixie, as the only sailor amongst us, offered to go first. He very quickly descended into the boat. We followed in succession; when the captain, standing up, cut the rope above his head.

“Now, lads, let’s make the best of our way back,” he said; “the tide will soon be falling, and I have no fancy to be stranded and have to fight a battle with Indians, or, what would be worse, find that they had made their way on board the schooner during our absence.”

We, of course, were equally anxious to get away from the dangerous neighbourhood; and pulling the boat out through the slight surf which broke on the shore, we were soon clear of the land.

On hearing our account, our worthy skipper congratulated us on our escape, and blamed himself for having allowed us to go on shore.

“I ought to have warned you not to go so far, for the Indians hereabouts are always ready to attack white men, if they can find them unprepared for resistance; and they have already cut off several settlers and hunters, whom they took by surprise,” he observed.

It was nearly morning by the time we reached the schooner, and as there was a light wind off shore, the captain immediately got under weigh. We were then glad enough to wrap ourselves in our blankets, and lie down on the deck to obtain the rest we so much needed.

