

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 7

We five travellers had been for some time making our way eastward in as direct a course as we could steer by compass across a pine-barren. The ground was as level as a floor. Now and then a rivulet appeared, from which we quenched our thirst; while the magnolias and other flowering plants on its banks relieved the dull uniformity of the woods. The sun, however, beat down on our heads with intense force, and our legs were torn by the sharp teeth of the saw-palmetto which covered the ground. Here and there rose distant islands of pine, which give the name to the region. Not a human being could we see, the only animal life visible being some lean wild cattle, which found a scanty subsistence in the natural grasses which had sprung up where the palmetto-scrub had been burned. Frequently we had to turn aside to avoid the swampy ponds fringed with saw-grass. The surface of these ponds was covered with water-lilies of various hues, amid which alligators large and small popped up their heads, warning us not to approach too near. Tall sand-hill cranes stalked about uttering loud whoops, until, disturbed by a shot from one of our rifles, they flew off to a distance. Turkey buzzards, useful but disgusting-looking birds, were feeding on the carcasses of some of the cattle which had died from disease, or been bitten by rattlesnakes. Near the edges of the ponds we observed the tracks of numbers of these snakes. Probably the cattle, going down to drink, had trodden on some of the creatures, and been bitten in return. We killed several which lay in our path.

We had been unable to get near any of the wild cattle, nor had we come across any deer, so that, with the exception of a duck, two snipes, and a plover, we had shot nothing that would serve for our supper. At last a hummock appeared in the distance ahead, and towards it we directed our course, intending to camp near its borders at an early hour, so that we might have time to obtain a supply of large game. As we approached the hummock, we found it to be of considerable size, and apparently denser than usual; still we hoped to be able to make our way into it in search of deer.

I have already described the various trees which grow on these hummocks,—enormous cabbage-palms and cotton-trees, scarlet maples and cedars, black and white gum-trees, magnolias, and many others, the whole festooned with creepers and hung with air-plants of gorgeous hues. The spot we chose for our camp was a high sandy ridge, on which grew a group of pines, affording shelter and firewood, while a stream flowed near, into the bottom, where it was lost to view.

Carlos, who was tired and somewhat out of sorts, remained with Tim and Jup to form the camp, while Lejoillie and I set out with our guns in search of game. We had not gone far when my companion fired at a duck of peculiar and beautiful plumage, with a black body and white tuft on its head. We hurried forward in pursuit between the thick trees, eager to secure the prize. The duck, however, again rose just as we had got up to it, but fell once more in a still thicker part of



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

the hummock, where we could see through the trees the glitter of water. In spite of the numerous impediments in our way, we pushed forward until we found ourselves well-nigh in darkness, though the sun was still high above the horizon, the tree-tops which joined overhead being interlaced by numberless creepers of various descriptions, forming a roof impenetrable by the light of day. An almost insupportable mouldy odour, like the effluvium arising from a dead body, pervaded the atmosphere; but eager to obtain the bird, Lejoillie pushed on, and I followed. The pool into which the duck had fallen was covered with a green scum; and on throwing a piece of wood into it, the green changed into violet, as if some chemical product had been mixed with it. The ground itself was covered with a white efflorescence, which stuck to our feet, and made us slip at every step.

As our eyes became accustomed to the light, we discovered that we were in the midst of fungi or mushrooms of every shape and colour. Some were almost microscopic, collected on the bark of the decaying wood; others were of gigantic proportions, equal in circumference to the trunks of the enormous trees amid which they grew. No vegetables except moss and toadstool-like productions could exist in that airless and pestiferous region. In every direction lay the trunks of enormous trees blown down by some hurricane, so completely rotted by damp that a stick run into them went right through. They lay like vast skeletons, serving to nourish the mushrooms which grew vigorously in the rank vegetation.

Here also were vast gelatinous and transparent masses, from which oozed out a yellow-tinted liquid, of so venomous a character that a drop falling on the skin raised a blister. Other fungi were of dazzling whiteness, which Lejoillie likened to a casket of pearls, supported by an azure stalk. Many were in the shape of a Chinese hat, and of an orange-red colour, striped with silver bands; indeed, the whole tribe of fungi appeared here to have their representatives. Many were as tall as children, with heads upwards of two yards in diameter. Some were of rose colour, and resembled vast umbrellas. Still more numerous were those of a cup shape, and of a bluish tint, the interior resembling a huge pot.

We advanced in single file amidst the rows of giant mushrooms, not without considerable fear that in this gloomy valley some strange monster would suddenly appear before us, to resent our intrusion into his domains. Suddenly Lejoillie, who was a short distance in front, slipped on the slimy ground over which we were walking, as if on ice, and in falling struck one of the largest mushrooms, which, to my astonishment and dismay, immediately exploded with a report like that of a piece of artillery, throwing into the air a vast cloud of dust. Losing my balance almost immediately afterwards, I followed his example, when directly the whole valley resounded with reports, the mushrooms bursting on every side, as if defending their colony against the visit of strangers. Confused by the sound and blinded by the red dust which, filling our ears and irritating our eyes, made us sneeze and cough continuously, we beat a hasty retreat, entirely forgetting the duck we had come to seek. Not until we had got clear of the fusillade directed against us by the fungi, did we stop in our flight, when, clearing the dust from our eyes, and shaking it off from our heads and clothes, Lejoillie burst into a fit of laughter.

“You will like to understand how this happened, my young friend,” he observed. “Possibly others will be incredulous when they hear of our adventure. These mushrooms, like other vegetables, have the power of suddenly bursting without being touched, Nature having provided them with this means



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

of spreading their seed over a wide extent of ground. The red dust which so disagreeably filled our eyes is composed of imperceptible spores, each atom containing a germ. The shock produced when we fell caused the explosion of some of the largest of these, and they set all the others agoing, though who would have believed that two brave hunters could be put to flight by mushrooms!”

Comical as was the adventure, the result to us was far from pleasant, for we both had our faces and hands covered with pimples, while it was some time before we ceased coughing and spluttering from the quantity which had got down our throats; indeed, the mushroom germs had completely poisoned us. We were still more vexed at the thought of losing the bird after encountering so much annoyance, when Caesar, who had followed us, appeared, bringing it in his mouth. Although we did not venture back again into the bottom of the hummock, we succeeded in killing a couple of fat gobblers, which amply supplied us all with supper and breakfast the next morning.

Just outside the hummock was a cabbage-palm, which, as I have said, abounds in Florida. It rose in straight and graceful grandeur to the height of a hundred feet without a branch, then burst into a mass of dark-green, fan-shaped leaves. In the centre of this mass grows the far-famed cabbage, which is a tender white shoot, protected by numerous fibrous folds. We were wishing for some vegetable, when Jup undertook to obtain a cabbage. Fastening a belt round his waist and the trunk of the tree, he worked himself up to the summit, when, drawing his knife from his belt, he cut out the vegetable. He then chopped off a number of the large leaves from the summit for the purpose of forming a palmetto hut, which might afford us shelter. We cooked the cabbage, though it is often eaten raw, and agreed that it resembled a Spanish chestnut in taste. Carlos told us that the tree would die in consequence of having the cabbage cut out, and Jup confirmed the statement.

Our huts were of the very simplest description. Fixing in two uprights, we secured a horizontal pole between them at their tops; and from this pole we suspended the enormous cabbage-palm leaves, stretching them out at the bottom, thus forming a thatched roof impervious to rain or sun. Where cabbage-palms grow, the hunter, as I have shown, can in a few minutes form a very efficient hut, capable of holding two or three people.

Numerous birds, inhabitants of the trees near our camp, amused us during the evening by their varied notes. One which we watched was of a graceful form, with a long fine beak, its plumage being grey-brown above and white beneath. Though larger than the nightingale, to which it has often been compared, it has a superior and more varied voice, but lacks that sweetness of expression and melancholy charm which have made the reputation of the plaintive Philomel. It has, however, a song of its own, composed of a dozen syllables, clear, sonorous, and harmonious, which runs over an extensive scale. At first, it entertained us with its own song, but in a short time began imitating those of other birds, which it did to perfection; indeed, Jup told us, and Carlos corroborated the statement, that it can imitate the human voice, as well as the hissing of serpents, the roar of alligators, the gobbling of turkeys, and the cry of all other birds. Lejoillie tried it by whistling a tune, when the bird imitated him, introducing a number of variations. The mocking-bird, for such it was, afforded us infinite amusement during the evening.

Another bird also made its appearance, called the red orpheus. It had a reddish-brown plumage, with a fawn-coloured breast spotted with black. It was about the same size as the mocking-bird, its



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

note being very similar to that of the European blackbird, but more sonorous and melodious, and superior in some respects to that of the mocking-bird. It is of an equally graceful form, and has the same long fine beak. We found numbers of them in the forest among the cedars and myrtles, whose fruit they eat, and where also they chase various winged insects. Both these birds build their nests six or seven feet above the ground, on thorny bushes, or in wild orange trees. The nests are composed of the downy mosses of plants fastened together with the fibres of flax. The eggs of the mocking-bird are blue with brown spots; those of the orpheus are of a beautiful azure tint.

Scarcely had we turned in to our leaf-covered huts when I felt some creatures crawling over me. I jumped up, and running to the fire, shook off two or three horrid-looking spiders. My exclamations aroused my companions, and they likewise found several of the same spiders crawling over them. Tim cried out that he had been bitten, and that he felt an extraordinary numbness in the limb. Lejoillie said immediately afterwards that he also had suffered; and Jup, on seeing the creatures, declared that they were the most venomous of spiders, and warned us that if we went to sleep they might actually bite us to death. Lejoillie recollected having heard of the species, which is called the sleeping-spider. We accordingly, making up our fire, gathered closely round it, hoping that the creatures would not approach its flames. On examining the ground in the neighbourhood, we found a number of small holes, out of which the spiders were creeping in search of prey; but, as we had hoped, they did not venture close enough to the fire to reach us. We spent an uncomfortable night, and I was glad when it came to my turn to walk sentry. As I moved about I kept a watch on my feet, lest any of the venomous insects should climb up my legs. The ground appeared literally swarming with them. In the morning, when we came to examine it, we found that the whole bank was mined below with the galleries of thousands of these sleeping-spiders. So poisonous is their bite that it sometimes causes a lethargy, during which the person bitten passes from sleep to death. During the day these insects stop up their holes with sand, and only come out in the night. A dark-red line runs down their back, and they have flat heads. To struggle against these venomous creatures was impossible; it would have been more easy to contend with a pack of wolves, or any other wild beasts. The instinct of my dog induced him to crawl close up to the fire, where he remained all night so near to it that he nearly burned off his coat.

At daybreak I proposed to start off, to be at once free from the dangers of the neighbourhood. But Jup observed, “No fear now, massa; de spiders all gone to bed.”

Such was found to be the case, as they are strictly nocturnal hunters, and keep their holes closely shut during the day-time. We had therefore no longer any fear of being bitten, and were able to take our breakfast at our leisure. As soon as possible, however, after breakfast, we were again on the move.

We had much the same description of country to pass through as on the previous day—mostly open prairie, with pine-barrens and occasional hummocks. I cannot describe each day of our journey. In the early morning we were aroused half an hour before sunrise by a wonderful chorus of birds and insects, the mocking-bird and cat-bird making the greatest noise. At that time the inhabitants of the woods seemed to awaken to active life as suddenly as day succeeds the night, and night the day, in those Southern latitudes. The deep-sounding whoops of the sand-hill cranes—the cries of herons, bitterns, and ibis—the gobbles of turkeys—the confused quacking of flocks of ducks—the chattering



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

of pelicans—the melodious voices of thousands of song-birds—the hum of millions of insects,—all combined to create a volume of sound which effectually banished sleep. As the sun rose above the summits of the trees, the various sounds gradually decreased, and during the heat of mid-day all seemed hushed in the stillness of death. As evening approached, once more the feathered songsters suddenly burst forth; then for a short time there would be silence; when again, towards midnight, the hootings and shrieks of numerous night-birds, and the more savage cries and hideous voices of alligators, wolves, and ocelots, would break our slumbers.

One evening we were nearly losing our black attendant, who not only had proved himself an intelligent guide, but was ready to serve us in every way he could. We had just encamped, when a short distance off an enormous eagle rose from a stunted tree on the borders of a neighbouring hummock. Lejoillie was anxious to obtain its eggs, or one of the young birds should they be hatched; and Jup immediately volunteered to climb up and procure one or the other. Supposing that the eagle had flown to a distance, Jup advanced to the tree, leaving his axe and knife, which he had been using, behind him on the ground. Some thick bark, and a few branches and twigs projecting from the trunk, enabled him to make his way up the tree in a manner none of us could imitate.

Lejoillie was engaged at the time in skinning a bird he had just before shot, and we were all busy in preparing the camp, when we heard Jup shriek out. He had ample reason for doing so. He had gained the branch of the tree on a level with the nest—filled with skeletons and bones of other birds and animals which the eagle had brought to feed its young. The parent bird, with its sharp eyes, though far beyond our sight, must have observed the intruder approaching its home. In an instant, down it swooped with discordant shrieks, and Jup with great difficulty managed to spring behind a branch to avoid its onslaught. Every instant it threatened to drive its sharp claws into his woolly head, or to peck out his eyes.

I was the first to see his danger, and rushing forward with my rifle, attempted to obtain a shot. I was afraid, however, that while trying to shoot the bird, I might wound the black. Jup shouted at the top of his voice, hoping to keep the eagle at bay.

“Come down, Jup! come down!” I cried.

“Bery well to say dat, massa, but not so easy to do dat,” answered Jup, who preserved his presence of mind.

I united my voice to his, and we were soon joined by Tim, who shouted as lustily as the black. This prevented the eagle from striking down at Jup, who now began to descend; and as there was sufficient distance between his head and the eagle’s beak, I fired. At the same moment I heard a crash, and thought the eagle had fallen; but when the smoke cleared away, what was my horror to discover Jup lying on the ground, while the eagle was clinging on to a branch just above its nest. Regardless of the bird, Tim and I ran to pick up the fallen black. Great was our satisfaction to find, on seeing him quickly get up, that no bones had been broken.

“Me go ’gain an’ get de eggs,” he said; “nebbber fear.”

“We must dispose of the eagle first,” I answered; and Tim and I both firing, the huge bird, fluttering wildly, fell to the ground.

As we approached, it endeavoured fiercely to defend itself with its talons and beak; but Tim,



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

clubbing his rifle, dealt it a blow on the head which put an end to its struggles. Its mate not making its appearance, Jup again ascended, and returned with a couple of eggs, greatly to Lejoillie's satisfaction.

Eager as we were to get on, we had to lie by during the heat of the day, selecting the thickest shade we could find. After the sun had begun to sink in the west, we marched forward until nearly dark. We found it, however, generally necessary to allow ourselves time for an hour's hunting, to secure a sufficient amount of game for our support.

We had, as may be supposed, kept a sharp look-out for Indians; but we had seen none, nor had we discovered any recent trails, though we occasionally came upon their abandoned camps, as well as the paths they had formed through the forest or across the prairie. We were somewhat surprised at this; but Carlos said he suspected that those who had inhabited that part of the country had moved northward, or had retreated to the Everglades in the south, where the Palefaces could not follow them. Circumstances afterwards occurred to show that he was right in both surmises—that the old men, women, and children had been sent into the impenetrable fastnesses in the south, while the warriors had gone north to join the forces at that time assembled under Powell, or Oceola, as the Indians called him.

We were now approaching Lake Kissimmee, which we intended crossing on our way to the Saint John. Reaching a pine-island—as those sandy elevations are called, rising out of the plain—where we intended to camp, we saw the lake before us. It was a question now whether we should march round its northern shore, or save ourselves a journey of twenty or thirty miles by crossing in a canoe, or on a raft which we proposed to construct. We held a consultation on the subject. Should a storm arise, we should be exposed to no small danger; while alligators, from the experience we had had before, might, we thought it possible, strike the bottom of the canoe or raft and upset it.

For the sake of obtaining a variety of food, Tim and I set off with our fishing-tackle—of course, carrying our guns—towards a large stream, which we discovered running into the lake. We saw plenty of birds on our way; among them the white ibis, the white heron, the snake-bird, and vulture. We found a bluff, with deep water below it, into which we had scarcely thrown our lines when we each hooked a large black bass; after which we caught several bream, cat-fish, and perch, until we had as much as we could carry.

I had gone down to the water to clean our fish; and I was so employed when, stooping down, I saw the snout of an alligator raised above the surface. Without moving, I imitated the grunt of a pig. The monster saurian, expecting to have a porker for supper, swam on, with jaws open, its wicked eye turned towards me. I had taken up my rifle, and when it was about eight paces off, suddenly rising, I fired directly down its throat. What was my horror to see it rushing forward at an accelerated speed. As may be supposed, I sprang up the bluff, not stopping to collect my fish; when the monster ran its nose right against the bank, and, in a vain attempt to land, rolled back again, fiercely lashing the water with its tail. Having made its way to the opposite side, after several convulsive struggles, it turned over and died. Had my foot slipped on the grassy bank, my adventures would probably have been ended. I was quickly joined by Tim; and while finishing the cleaning of our fish, we kept a sharp look-out.

Near the spot where we were encamped was a hummock, on which grew mulberry-trees,



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

boxwood, and gigantic cypresses, six feet in diameter, their trunks and branches being completely enclosed in the india-rubber vine, which in this part of the country grows in great profusion.

On our return to camp, Tim and I were passing near a thicket when we were saluted with strange cries, resembling the mewings of a number of deserted kittens. As we approached to ascertain what creatures were uttering these strange sounds, they grew louder and louder. We caught sight, however, only of several birds, about the size of a thrush, flitting in and out among the branches, and stopping every now and then to look at us. As we passed on they followed, until we got close to the camp. We then called Lejoillie to come and see them.

He at once pronounced them to be cat-birds. Their plumage was brown, with black caps on their heads, their rumps being of a red orange tint. They seemed to have no fear of us; for, gathering on the boughs of the trees near the camp, evidently seeking our society, they began a most extraordinary concert, if such it could be called, for certainly it was not singing. Sometimes one of them would speak in a hollow voice, then another would bark, imitating Caesar; now one fellow would yelp like a fox, and make a rattling sound like that of a rattlesnake. Others croaked like frogs, and imitated the sneeze of a human being. Had we heard them without seeing the birds, we should have thought some strange creatures inhabited the wood; but, in reality, the birds were only trying, by producing sounds familiar to our ears, to tell us that we were welcome to their native forest.

It is very difficult to keep a cat-bird in captivity, as it soon pines and dies; or it would certainly be preferred to a parrot, on account of its far superior talent of imitation. Lejoillie refrained from killing any of our amusing friends, who remained watching us all the time we were in camp.

We required a day's rest before proceeding farther on our journey; for we could not tell what difficulties we might have to encounter, and it would be necessary to be in full strength to overcome them. Having examined the ground thoroughly, to ascertain that it was not inhabited by spiders, like our last camping-place, we built three cabbage-palm huts, and collected fuel sufficient to keep up the fire during the night. Before turning in, we had another talk about our future proceedings. I undertook, the first thing in the morning, to climb to the top of the highest tree, from which I could get a look-out over the country to the eastward and north-east, round the northern end of the lake. Should it appear practicable, we resolved to proceed by land; but if not, we determined to spend the next day in building a raft to cross the lake. We expected to find it sufficiently shallow to enable us to pole most of the way over. We agreed to make some paddles, and, in case the wind should be favourable, to use our blankets as sails. Jup was the most experienced sailor among us, though we all knew enough about boating to undertake such a voyage without fear. We kept a watch during the night, so that, should any hostile Indians approach, we might fight for our lives, and not be murdered in our sleep, as might be the case should we be caught napping. For the sake of health, and to avoid mosquitoes, it was always necessary to camp on the highest ground we could find. We were more exposed to view from a distance than we should have been had we been able to light our fires in the hollows, where, during the night, we should have had the advantage of concealment. At the same time, from the high ground we could the better see an enemy approaching. Still, we had gone thus far and had not met any Indians, so that we might hope to perform the rest of the journey without encountering them.

The night passed away without our being disturbed. Occasionally a few creatures would pass by,



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

their shadowy forms scarcely distinguishable through the gloom. We knew that they were either deer or wild cattle. Now and then a wolf would approach, or a puma, or ocelot; but a shout would send them to the rightabout.

As soon as daylight appeared, with the aid of Jup, who accompanied me, I succeeded in getting to the top of a tall pine. On looking out I was convinced, from the clear green to the north of the lake, and from its flat appearance, that it was swampy. As far as I could judge, the swamps extended to the shore of another small lake, still farther to the north, Jup agreed with me that it would save a troublesome journey through marshes if we were to cross the lake, as had at first been proposed.

Directly breakfast was over, therefore, we set off for the shore of the lake, where we were fortunate in finding a hard piece of ground by the side of a stream which ran into it, a point extending out into the water; and we could only hope that we should find a similar landing-place on the opposite side. On the hard ground, a couple of feet above the water, grew a number of pines. Several of the smaller as well as larger trees had been blown down by a hurricane, and were sufficiently dry, and yet not rotten, for our purpose. Lopping off the roots and branches, we collected six trees, each about thirty feet long, which one by one we managed to roll into the water. The cross-pieces were more easily obtained. The whole were fastened together with what the Spaniards call sipos, or creepers, which make a very tolerable rope for such a purpose. On the top of this framework we placed a sort of platform of reeds, which would, we hoped, keep us free from the water. We had still to cut some long poles; a couple of spars for masts, and two more for yards; a paddle to steer by, and one for each of us. Night was approaching by the time we had quite finished. Altogether we were well content with our performance, though perhaps a more experienced sailor would have hesitated to trust himself on such a structure. As the mosquitoes would have allowed us but little sleep had we attempted to remain near the lake at night, we returned to our camping-ground on the ridge, having previously dragged the raft up on shore. On our way I saw Lejoillie eagerly eyeing the branches of a tree producing a sweet gum.

“Stop, stop!” he exclaimed, “in case you may alarm it.” And he began opening his butterfly-net, which lay in a case he always carried in his pocket.

I looked in the direction towards which his eyes were turned, and saw a magnificent moth sucking gum exuding from a branch. It was more beautiful than any I had seen. The body was of a flesh colour; the wings broad and of a tender green, with blue, crimson, and orange spots. I stopped while he advanced, trembling lest the specimen might escape him. With what eagerness he closed the net over it! and I felt almost as rejoiced as he seemed to be that he had captured the treasure. He told us that it was called the “Attacus luna,” and that it was the most beautiful moth in Florida. The caterpillar produces silk, though it is not equal to that of the better known silkworm.

The naturalist appeared as delighted to have secured the moth uninjured as most people would have been to pick up a nugget of gold. By degrees we had expended a portion of our ammunition and provisions; but as Lejoillie added to his collection, our loads were not much lightened, though his bird-skins, moths, and insects were not very weighty articles.

Tim, who had the morning watch, averred that he had seen a human being approach the camp, and apparently having examined it, steal off again. He had advanced and challenged, but no reply was made. His first impulse, he acknowledged, had been to fire; but he recollected in time that the intruder



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

might have had no hostile intentions, and, at all events, as we were not in an enemy's country, he had no business to shoot the man, whoever he was. Tim was so positive on the subject that we could not doubt him.

We breakfasted at daybreak, and strapping on our packs, marched down to the lake, prepared to commence our voyage. Before starting, Jup and I again ascended a tree overlooking the lake, that I might ascertain whether there were any islands in our course, or whether, as is often the case, the surface was covered with water-plants, which might impede our progress.

All appeared clear, however, as far as my eye could reach. I was about to descend, when, looking to the south-west, I caught sight of a number of objects moving across the prairie. I pointed them out to Jup.

"Injins!" he exclaimed. "Dey comin' dis way; better git off, or maybe dey take our scalps."

As I agreed with him, we hurriedly descended, and rejoined our companions, who were already beginning to launch the raft. It was no easy matter to do so, and we had to cut some stout sticks for handspikes before we could manage to get it into the water. While thus engaged, several alligators poked their noses above the surface to look at us, but the shouts we raised quickly made them disappear. Scarcely was the raft in the water, when, happening to look round, I caught sight of thirty or forty Indians, bedecked in war-paint and feathers, fully armed, emerging from the brushwood, and not a hundred yards away.

"Shove off! shove off!" I cried. "Their bows carry far, and we must put a wide distance between them and us."

Springing on board, we each seized a pole and began impelling the raft from the shore. The Indians, seeing that we were about to escape, ran forward, uttering loud shouts and calling on us to come back.

"Very likely we'll be afther doin' that," observed Tim.

No one else spoke; we were labouring for our lives, for it was evident, from the savage shrieks of the Indians, that they intended mischief.

"Let us fire and bring down some of those fellows," cried Carlos.

"Very little satisfaction in doing that," observed Lejoillie. "Shove away, my friends, shove away; the farther we can get from them the better, for, packed together as we are, they may shoot us down at once. Shove away, shove away, I say."

We followed Lejoillie's advice. We had got to a considerable distance from the bank before the Indians reached it. The moment they did so, they drew their bows and let fly a flight of arrows, which plunged into the water close behind our raft; but happily we were just beyond their range, or not one of us would have escaped. The water by this time was deepening, and we had to take to our paddles, and endeavour still farther to increase our distance; for the savages, intent on capturing us, had begun to wade off, with fresh arrows in their bows, ready to send another flight, at the same time uttering loud cries and shouting out to us to return. They were possibly not aware that we had provided ourselves with paddles and had already got into deep water.

Rushing forward until the water was up to their waists, they again sent their arrows whistling towards us, several actually striking the raft, though not with sufficient force to stick into it. When



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 7

they saw that we were really beyond their reach, they vented their disappointment in fearful yells.

“Shriek away, ye redskin savages,” cried Tim; “your noise doesn’t hurt us. If you don’t look out for yourselves, you’ll have some of the ’gators snapping off your legs presently.”

The cries of the Indians, however, had the effect of keeping the creatures at a distance, and several swam past us, evidently alarmed at the unusual sounds.

We were now all paddling away with might and main, two on each side, the black steering and sculling with his paddle at the same time. Fortunately, the weather remained fine, and the wind, which was light, was in our favour. What we had to dread most was a strong wind springing up from the eastward, which might have driven us back and placed us at the mercy of the savages. We were still uncertain whether we should altogether escape them. They might build a raft and pursue us; or might be acquainted with some path leading along the northern end of the lake, by which, light-footed as they were, they might get round to meet us when we landed, or to follow up our trail.

We found paddling a raft harder work than we had expected, and our arms soon began to ache. Stopping for an instant, I tried the depth of water. It was still too great to enable us to use our poles with advantage. At length, however, the breeze increased, and I proposed that the masts should be stepped, as they were all ready, and that we should hoist our blankets for sails.

This we at once did; but they did not hold enough wind to help us as much as we expected, and we still had to keep the paddles going. Looking back, we could see the Indians on the shore; which was satisfactory, as it made us hope that they did not intend to follow us by land.

“It will take them some time to build a raft,” observed Carlos. “If they do, we shall then encounter them on equal terms, for we could pick them off with our rifles before they could get near enough to shoot their arrows at us.”

We continued our course to the opposite shore, which appeared as far off as ever. We had, however, reason to be satisfied that we had decided on crossing the lake on a raft; for had we attempted to go round by land, we should inevitably have been overtaken by the Indians.

