

In the Wilds of

Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



Chapter 8

We had been paddling on for some time, not making more than two miles an hour. At length the eastern shore of the lake began to grow nearer. It was low, with no trees of any size growing on its bank. We feared that on landing we should have to wade through a swamp infested by snakes, and probably by alligators, before we could reach dry ground. We could see the northern shore, which appeared to be of the same character; and this made us hope that the Indians would not have attempted to go round and intercept us. The western shore was still discernible, but too far off to enable us to see whether the Indians were still there.

"I wonder where those fellows were going?" observed Carlos; "they evidently did not belong to this part of the country, or they would have found us out before."

"Me tink dey go norf on war-trail to join de great chief Ocoola," observed Jup. "Dey say 'fore long de red men kill all de Palefaces in de country, an' agin have it for demselves."

"Not very likely they will make such a mad attempt," observed Carlos with a laugh. "The Palefaces would clear them off the face of the earth were they to play a trick of that sort."

Jup shrugged his shoulders. "Me only tell massa what oders say," he answered.

At last, beginning to grow hungry, we agreed to stop paddling and take some food, while Jup steered. The meat we had cooked was already rather high. We had only some small flour-cakes, and some baked roots to eat with it. Hunger, however, prevented us from being fastidious, and we had plenty of water alongside to wash it down.

As I was dipping my tin mug into the lake, a huge snout suddenly rose, and very nearly caught my hand, as well as the mug. Tim gave the monster a whack with his paddle, which made it quickly sink again. It was a lesson to us to be careful how we put our hands into the water. The wind now dropped, and the sun beat down with intense force on our heads; but we had to endure it and paddle on, for it was important to get on dry ground before darkness should overtake us.

"Hurrah!" I exclaimed, as I put my pole into the water; "I can touch the bottom. We shall soon be making better progress than hitherto."

I was right. The water shoaled rapidly. By shoving along with our poles, we made the raft move twice as fast as before. At length a line of tall reeds rose before us. The sight was not encouraging, for we could neither force the raft onwards, nor make our own way through them on foot. We therefore turned southward, hoping to find some dry ground at no great distance from the water. On and on we went, but still we could see only reeds and swamp. At last we caught sight of some pines; most welcome they were, as they betokened a dry and sandy soil. We now came to a bay. Although lined with a narrow belt of reeds, we hoped to force our way through them. We accordingly ran our raft



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

onwards as far as it would move, then wishing it farewell, with many thanks for the service it had rendered us, we plunged into the reeds—Tim, as the strongest of the party, leading the way, and holding his gun over his head in case he should unexpectedly fall into an unseen hole. Sometimes we were up to our waists in water. Still we worked our way forward. At last Tim gave a shout of satisfaction as he landed on dry ground. We all quickly followed, poor Caesar panting and blowing with his exertions as he made his way after us. Clouds of mosquitoes and other stinging insects had been attacking us in our progress, but we were by this time too well inured to them to think much about the matter. We agreed, at all hazards, to push on to the pine-ridge which we saw before us, that we might encamp there for the night.

As soon as we gained a spot of sufficient height to overlook the lake, we turned anxiously round to ascertain whether the Indians were following us, but we could see them nowhere on the water. We were still, however, uncertain whether or not they would pursue us by land, and Jup and I again climbed to the top of a high tree, to try and obtain a look-out over the country to the northward. To our relief nothing moving was seen; so descending, we made our way with our companions to the ridge.

It was hopeless to seek for any place of concealment in the hollows; besides the dangers from animals, we were certain to be attacked by innumerable stinging insects, and to run the risk of being bitten by poisonous snakes. We therefore lighted our fire on the top of the ridge.

Lejoillie, Carlos, and I went off with our guns in search of game, as we had exhausted our stock of provisions. We had gone on farther than we intended, when on looking round we could nowhere see the smoke of our fire; while a bank of clouds which had risen in the west, and gradually spread over the sky prevented us, as we had expected to be able to do, from making the sun our guide.

Lejoillie had shot a turkey; but as this was insufficient for our party, we were anxious to kill some larger game. We were still pursuing our search, and not far apart, when Carlos exclaimed, "See here! I have found a creature which will show us our way. Come here quickly and try it."

We hastened to the spot, where we saw, seated on a large leaf, a creature with a thin body like a walking-stick, with long legs, and antennae stretched out. "It is a yellow and black spectre," said Lejoillie, drawing one of his cases from his pocket; "a magnificent specimen. I must secure it ere it escapes."

"Oh, don't do that!" cried Carlos; "I have heard it said that if we ask it the way, it will stretch out one of its arms in the right direction; and we shall have no difficulty in making our way back to camp."

Lejoillie laughed. "From whom did you hear that?" he asked.

"The Indians believe that it has that power; and, of course, as they are better acquainted with the creatures of this country than any one else, they must know."

"Bah!" exclaimed Lejoillie; "I thought, Carlos, you had too much good sense to be influenced by so foolish a superstition."

"Look at it!" cried Carlos; "it is lifting up its paws and praying. What else can it be doing?"

Lejoillie afterwards explained that it belonged to the Mantis family; that instead of being a praying insect, it is one of the most combative and savage in existence. "It lives upon beetles and flies of every description," he added. "When two of the creatures of the same species meet together, they



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

engage in a fierce combat, cutting at each other with their fore legs with such force as sometimes to sever the body of an antagonist with a single blow, when the victor generally eats up its opponent. There are many others of the same family, some resembling leaves. The Chinese in the southern part of their country keep these creatures in cages, and make them fight with each other.”

While the naturalist was giving us this lecture, he was suffocating the spectre, and pinning it down in his case. We soon after this separated for the purpose of creeping up towards a herd of deer of which we had caught sight. I had got some way to the right of Lejoillie and Carlos, when I caught sight of a buck feeding near a clump of trees. I was afraid of calling to my friends lest the animal might hear my voice. Stooping down, I crept on, concealed by some tall grass, till I got within thirty yards of the deer, when I fired. From its movements I knew that I had hit it, and expected to see it fall immediately. Instead of doing so, off it ran, leaving a trail of blood behind it. I felt assured from this that it would soon drop, and I pursued as fast as my legs could carry me, reloading as I ran. It had, however, got out of shot. Still I followed, certain that it would slacken its speed, and that I should again get it within range of my rifle. On and on I went, not having time to look behind me to ascertain if my companions were following, as I supposed they were doing.

After some time the deer began to slacken its pace, and I felt more confident than ever that I should overtake it before dark. I had scarcely observed, however, that the gloom of evening had already commenced. The form of the deer became more and more shadowy, but still keeping it in sight, I followed, until it suddenly disappeared. It must have fallen to the ground, I thought, which accounted for my not seeing it; and so on I went. I was not mistaken; before long I stumbled over the body of the animal, still living, but fast bleeding to death. With my hunting-knife I at once put an end to its sufferings. It was too large an animal to carry back whole to the camp, so I began as well as I could in the gloom of evening to skin it, and cut off the best portions of the meat,—an unpleasant operation, and one in which I had had but little experience, though I had frequently seen deer cut up by others. I prepared as much as I could carry, with part of the skin when, considering in which direction I should turn my steps to reach the camp, I felt myself utterly at a loss to decide. I had several times turned the deer about, so that I could not ascertain the position in which it had fallen. To attract the attention of my friends, I fired off my gun. I listened for a reply, but could hear none. Still, I hoped, by proceeding across the pine-barren, that I should in time see the light of their fire. I, accordingly, shouldering my load of meat, set off.

The night became unusually dark, and it was with difficulty that I avoided stumbling over fallen trunks or running against the stumps of trees. I occasionally shouted, and several times fired off my rifle. I should have fired oftener, but was unwilling to expend more of my powder. I thought I was going straight forward, and had gone on for about two hours or more, when I found my feet strike against an object on the ground. I felt it was part of an animal. A further examination convinced me it was the body of the deer I had killed; and I found, to my annoyance, that I had been going in a circle, and had reached the very spot whence I had set out. It would be useless, I felt, to make another attempt to reach the camp, and I made up my mind to remain where I was. I had my flint and steel, and so I searched about for broken branches to make up a fire. I had not forgotten the risk I ran of being bitten by a snake. I searched and searched for some time, but in the dark I could only find a few



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

sticks, though very likely I passed by many which would have served my purpose.

I was thus employed, when I heard a howl at no great distance off. It was the voice of a wolf. It was repeated by another and another. The sounds grew nearer and nearer, until it appeared to me that a whole pack must be collecting around me. Had I been able to make up a large fire, I should have had no fear of the savage creatures. I threw down my sticks, with a handful of leaves which I had picked up, and endeavoured to strike a light; but the leaves were damp, and would not catch the sparks I sent among them.

All this time the howling increased. The wolves were attracted, I had no doubt, by the carcass of the deer, and they might be content with that instead of attacking me; but when they had finished it—and it could not last long—I thought it probable that I should become their victim. I tried again and again to light the fire, but in vain.

The wolves now broke into loud cries and howls, and I could now distinguish their forms as they approached the spot. I shouted at the top of my voice, hoping to drive them off. They halted, apparently; but the moment I was silent they again advanced. I might have shot two or three of them, but should have expended my ammunition before I could kill the whole pack. I remembered that near at hand was a tree, with branches at a height from the ground to which I could reach. I searched about for it, and found it was close at hand. Slinging my rifle over my shoulder—for I felt the importance of not abandoning it—I caught hold of the lowest branch, and, hauling myself up, got my feet upon it. I was thus able to climb up to another, out of the reach of the wolves, which could, I knew, leap up to a considerable height, and might have attacked my feet had I remained on the lower branch.

Unless the brutes should go off in search of other prey when they had finished the deer, I should have to remain in the tree all night. It was a far from comfortable position; still it was better than being torn to pieces by the brutes. I was afraid of moving about when once I had fixed myself on the branch, lest I should fall, as my rifle and load of venison greatly impeded my movements. I managed, however, to unsling my rifle, and seat myself in a position whence I might fire at the wolves.

Scarcely was I secure in the tree, than on they came, rushing at the deer, which must quickly have been torn to pieces. I could see only their backs and tails in a thick mass surging about in the gloom. I fired and killed one, which its companions quickly devoured. I was about to fire again, when I reflected that by so doing I should only detain the horrid brutes close to me, and that they were much more likely to take their departure should they find nothing on which to feast. They must, however, have scented the venison I had, for they came round the tree, howling, and snapping, and snarling, trying to get at me. It was like a hideous dream. I shouted again and again, in the hope of driving them away; but they seemed resolved on my destruction. I may say that I never passed a more unpleasant night in my life. The only hope I had was that my friends would come to search for me in the morning, and that they might be attracted to the spot by the howling of the animals. I had no fear of going to sleep while the wolves kept up their hideous chorus.

Towards morning a drowsiness crept over me, and I had the greatest difficulty in maintaining my perilous position. I kept myself awake, however, by uttering every now and then a loud shout. At last I became conscious that the light was increasing, although I could nowhere see the bright streaks which usually usher in the dawn. Looking up, I saw that the sky was overcast, as on the previous evening;



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

and I feared that I might still find it a very difficult matter to make my way, even should the wolves go off and allow me to descend the tree.

I was getting very hungry, and, as I had left my pack at the camp, I had only the raw venison to eat. As the light increased, I broke off some rotten branches, with which I pelted the wolves, uttering at the same time loud cries; but they only snapped at the pieces of wood, proving how they would have treated me had I fallen among them. I was greatly tempted to kill some more of them, but, remembering how they had devoured the one I had before shot, I refrained. Though almost overpowered with the desire to sleep, the dread of falling into their midst kept me awake.

Hour after hour passed by. In vain I looked out for my companions; no signs of them could I discover, though I climbed to the highest part of the tree, nor could I anywhere see the smoke of their fire. It was already past noon, when I caught sight of a solitary deer making its way across the open pine-barren. One of the wolves must have seen it too, for the brute, giving a peculiar cry, set off, followed by the whole pack. The deer saw them coming, and endeavoured to increase its speed; but it was, I suspect, wounded, perhaps by one of my friends, thus giving me hopes that I might before long fall in with them.

As soon as the wolves disappeared I descended the tree; and feeling desperately hungry, I lost no time in collecting sticks, which I could now easily do, and lighting a fire, aided by some rotten wood which I found in a hollow trunk near at hand. My venison was but very partially cooked when, unable to restrain my appetite, I began to eat it. After a few mouthfuls, however, the thirst which came on made me look about in search of water; but I could find none near at hand. The meat was in the meantime cooking. I ate enough to satisfy my hunger, and would have given much for a drop of pure water. Without it, I felt that I should not have strength sufficient to resume the search for my companions. I should have left the greater part of the venison behind me, as I knew that it would not keep long, but that I hoped to fall in with them before long, and guessed, in case Lejoillie and Carlos had failed to kill a deer, they would be very glad of it.

My difficulty was now how to direct my course. I looked round in every direction. The country wore so uniform an appearance that I could not determine from what point I had come. Had there been water near at hand, I should have remained where I was—the wisest thing to do under such circumstances; but water I must have, or I should perish. I accordingly set off intending to keep a straight line, and hoping to fall in with my companions, or to discover their trail should I strike the lake. I should then obtain the necessary water, and know afterwards how to direct my course. Praying that I might be successful, I took my rifle in my hand, ready for use, and marched forward. On and on I went, keeping along the pine-barrens, and avoiding two hummocks I met with. I had no longer any desire to eat, though I felt fearfully faint from thirst; but, unfortunately, I could discover no fruits with which to assuage it.

Once more evening was approaching. I scarcely expected to get through another night without water. I was almost dropping with fatigue, when I caught sight, between the trees, of what looked like a pool in a hollow. I hurried forward as fast as my strength would allow me, and discovered that it was the bed of a river. Though a large portion was dry, there were here and there pools along its course. I did not stop to ascertain whether the water was pure or foul, or whether the pool was full of alligators;



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

but stooping down, I eagerly dipped in my hand, and conveyed the precious liquid to my mouth.

The clouds had cleared away from the horizon, and I was thus able to ascertain the whereabouts of the west by seeing the sun setting with a fiery aspect in its full circular form. By this I knew full well that a sultry day would follow. Multitudes of insects now filled the air, buzzing round my head; hundreds of piping frogs rose from the pool at which I had drunk; the birds flew to their roosts; the squirrels ran to their nests; and I could hear the voices of several herons as they wended their way to the distant swamps. Now the night-birds broke forth with their shrill cries; but overpowering sleep oppressed me. Even the roar of an alligator or the cry of a puma could not have kept me awake. Darkness rapidly came on, and there was no moon to light me on my path. Making my way to the nearest tree, whose spreading branches afforded some shelter from the night-dews, I knelt down and prayed for that protection which I felt I so greatly needed. Then I stretched myself on the ground, and almost in an instant was asleep.

I awoke, conscious that some animal was near me. I felt its breath on my face, and it had taken my hand in its mouth. I expected the next moment to have its fangs fixed in my flesh; but still I could not move. Then I heard a low whimper, followed by a bark. I started up, and opening my eyes, discovered my faithful dog Caesar, who was endeavouring to arouse me to consciousness. I returned his caresses as he fawned on me, finding me not dead as he supposed. It was still dark; but I no longer dreaded having to wander about by myself; he would prove my guide and protector. He seemed by his actions to indicate that he wanted me to get up and follow him. I at once came to the conclusion that my friends were encamped not far off, and that he would lead me to them. I was about to strap on the remainder of the venison, when the horrible smell which proceeded from it showed that it was no longer fit for human food; though Caesar, who appeared to be very hungry, willingly made a substantial meal off it, when I gave him leave to take what he wanted. As I looked round, great was my satisfaction to see, by the warm tints in the sky, that day was already breaking.

Caesar, having finished his meal, once more bounded on, and then came back to ascertain that I was doing as he wished. I followed him, eagerly running forward. He kept along the bank of the stream, which apparently, in the wet season, spread out over the rocky bottom, now perfectly dry. On either side grew oleander, acacia, laurel, paw-paw, and many flowering shrubs; while in the distance, against the sky, I could see a tall tree scathed by lightning, and leafless.

In vain I looked out for a fire, to indicate the camp of my companions, when suddenly Caesar, starting forward, gave a loud bark. Hurrying on after him, I caught sight of a man stretched on the ground, with his rifle by his side; and, to my great joy, I recognised Tim Flanagan. On hearing the dog bark, he started up and rushed towards me with outstretched arms.

"Is it you, Mr. Maurice, yourself?" he exclaimed, as he eagerly took my hand. "I thought that you had been lost entirely; an' all yesterday, an' all this night, an' the best part o' last night, too, I've been huntin' for ye until my legs would carry me no longer; an' I sank down on the ground, thinkin' if I didn't find you I'd never show my face at Castle Kearney again. If it hadn't been for Caesar, I never should have found ye, for not a foot farther could I have stirred without some food; an', sure, that's what I've not had since yesterday mornin'."

My first inquiry was as to where our friends were encamped.



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

“Faith, Mr. Maurice, that’s jist what I cannot tell,” he answered. “I set off to try an’ find ye as soon as Mounseer Jolly an’ Mr. Carlos came back; an’ next mornin’, when I returned, not a sign of them could I see at the camp. Why they moved on is more than I can say, except that they thought we should follow in their trail. Maybe they imagined the Indians were comin’ after them; or perhaps they wanted water, and went to look for it.”

I, of course, could not conjecture what could have induced Lejoillie and Carlos to proceed on their journey without waiting for Tim and me. “But how came you not to shoot some game?” I inquired.

“Faith, Mr. Maurice, I had an accident, an’ lost all my powder; an’ it’s a mercy I didn’t lose my life too. I was tryin’ to light a fire, which wouldn’t blaze up, seein’ the sticks were green, when what should I do but take my powder-flask an’ begin to shake a few grains on it. On a sudden away went the flask out of my hand with a loud bang, gettin’ shivered to pieces, an’ knockin’ me over. I picked myself up, thinkin’ I was kilt entirely; but I wasn’t the worse for it, barrin’ the loss of the powder an’ the duck which I had put ready to roast; an’ Caesar had a little of his coat singed. The worst of the business was, that I could no longer hope to shoot any game.

“Fortunately I can spare you a few charges; and we must make our stock last as long as possible,” I said. “The first thing we have to do is to shoot something for breakfast, and to look out, on our way, for any fruit which may help us to enjoy it.”

While wandering alone, I had often been almost in despair of ever finding my way. With Tim as my companion my spirits rose, and I felt perfectly happy when, shortly afterwards, I brought down a fat gobbler, which Caesar routed out of a bush close to us; while Tim, the next instant, killed a duck. We lost no time in making up a fire to cook our game; and we enjoyed a hearty meal, while a neighbouring pool afforded us water to quench our thirst.

Greatly revived, we prepared to set off eastward fully expecting that before nightfall we should be with our friends. Tim said he was certain they were to the right of us. We had, however, gone on but a short distance when a thick mist came sweeping along from the eastward, completely shrouding the whole country, as well as the sun above our heads, so that we had no object by which to direct our course. In a country like Florida, where there are no mountains, and the taller trees grow in hollows, it is most difficult to find one’s way, except by compass, when the sun is obscured; still we thought we knew the direction of the east, and continued on, every now and then uttering a loud shout, hoping that our friends might be within hearing. We agreed at last that, although they might not hear our voices, they might hear the report of our guns; but that we might expend our powder with some benefit to ourselves, we agreed to wait until we saw an object to fire at.

We were passing, soon afterwards, near some ponds, when we shot three or four birds, and coming near a hummock, we killed several others, which we thought would be welcome to our friends, or would, at all events, supply us and Caesar with food for the next day. We still fancied that we were going right. Shortly afterwards, we entered a pine-barren, or, rather, I might call it a pine-forest, through which we struck on a well-defined track, the grass on either side being so tall that we could scarcely see over it.

We had been going on for several hours, when we suddenly found ourselves in a more open



In the Wilds of Florida

Chapter 8

space. On one side was a deserted hut, near a pool of fresh-water, while a number of tall trees, which had been cut down by the woodmen's axes, lay prostrate on the ground. We examined the hut. There were bed-places for three or four men; and just outside was a circle of blackened stones, with ashes in the centre, which had evidently formed the fire-place; but everything else had disappeared. While searching about, Tim exclaimed that there were marks of blood in one of the bed-places; and, on examining the spots, I agreed with him that the stains were those of blood. His opinion was, that one of the party had been surprised asleep in the hut by the Indians, but that the rest, being out at the time, had made their escape, and were afraid to venture back.

On leaving the hut, Caesar ran to a little distance from it and barked. We followed him, when great was our horror to see the body of a man stretched on the ground. The poor fellow had been scalped, clearly showing by whom he had met his death. His jacket had been carried off; his shirt was torn, as if the savages had been about to take it off him when they were interrupted. From the appearance of the body, he had, we conjectured, been dead two or three days, perhaps longer, for, as it lay in the shade, it was not so decomposed as it might otherwise have been.

"I'm afther thinkin' the sooner we get away from this place the better," said Tim, as, having hurried from the spot, we stood near the pool I have described, from which Caesar was lapping the water.

"I don't see that we run much risk while we remain here, as the Indians are not likely to come back again," I answered; "at the same time, I more than ever regret having parted from our companions, and I shall be thankful when we find them again."

The result of our consultation was, that we agreed to push forward as long as daylight lasted, and should we not find our friends in the meantime, to camp at nightfall. Had we been amply supplied with powder I should have been less anxious about our possible fate. The Indians who had murdered the poor woodcutter had, I trusted, passed by; and we earnestly hoped that we might not fall in with any other bands on their way to the north. We thought it possible that we might come upon the settlement to which the woodmen belonged; but we had, as yet, fallen on no trail which might lead to it, and as the mist still hung over the face of nature, we had nothing to guide us. Still we went on, both of us believing that our faces were directed eastward.

