

HOMOSASSA, THE BEAUTIFUL

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Florida Enchantments

CHAPTER I

HOMOSASSA, THE BEAUTIFUL

FLORIDA, the Fascinating, cast the spell of her witchery upon me many years ago. I felt it then, I know it now. We were sailing, my family and I, up the lovely Homosassa and approaching the little islet which sentinels the small bay that fronts on Tiger Tail Island, once the home of the famous Seminole, afterward the manor of the late David L. Yulee, and at the time of which I write, a realized Utopia. From the narrow channel at Shell Island, the mouth of the river, we had sailed through four miles of river that sometimes widened into bays and at others narrowed, until at Hell Gate the big white sail of the sloop that carried us, seemed to fill the gap between the forest-lined banks. The water was alive with fish, the trees filled with birds and on every hundred yards of shore could be seen an alligator resting on his bed and then gently gliding into the water when our boat approached him. There was nothing to suggest human occupation, until, as the bay behind the beautiful palmetto key at Hagan Gap began to open to our view, a wave of perfume

from a grove of blossoming orange trees rolled over us. Soon there spread before us the lawn, the old plantation house, from the piazzas of which orange blossoms or ripe oranges could then be gathered, and the orange grove which was dotted with little two-room houses singly, and in groups, through which any desired degree of isolation could be secured by guests.

As we reached the little dock we were met by the Boss of the island, a vivid personality, with a genius for housekeeping, who made of hospitality an art. In five minutes we were initiated members of her big family, the like of which for charm and congruity I have not since met. There were scholars and sportsmen, naturalists, geologists and botanists, travelers and scientists of national reputation, and neither a pedant nor a snob in the bunch. A little house in the orange grove, a hundred yards from the main hall, was assigned us, and within the hour we were settled there. Our nearest neighbor, a naturalist from Philadelphia, was working at his table, which was placed under an orange tree beside his cabin, mounting the skin of a rare bird which he had shot that morning. He showed me his room, filled with the tools of his profession, the weapons of a sportsman and the books and pamphlets of a student. It was all placed at my disposal so cordially that it seemed churlish not to accept something, so I borrowed his skiff and boatman for the afternoon, as one of the two skiffs for which I had arranged was not ready for me and I really couldn't keep off of that entrancing river. My little family followed in the



At the approach of our boat the alligator tumbled into the water.

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other skiff and a program that lasted for weeks was established. We were rowed up the Homosassa to Price's Creek, up which we were turning, when I saw the head of a deer showing above the tall grass as he stood in the water within a hundred yards of me. As I raised a warning hand my boatman stopped rowing and as the skiff steadied I shot my first Florida deer.

Within two hours of our arrival and one of our leaving the dock for a hunt, I had returned to it and was made acquainted with the custom of the community to welcome each day its returning members and congratulate or make friendly fun of them as the events justified. For dinner we had venison, wild turkey and duck, sweet potato pone and all the distinctively Southern dishes that the black chef in the kitchen could compass. After dinner the real life of the colony began. We gathered in the main room, in which was a big fireplace where burning red cedar logs filled the house with fragrance and left ashes of snow to pleasure the eye. The right kind of an appeal to the ladies of the family brought music of high degree from the piano, and a call in the big kitchen for darkeys and banjos always met with a response, but the chief charm of the evenings was the conversation. Each member of the community was expected to account for his day and descriptions of some of the incidents thereof were sure to drift into discussions that contributed pleasure and profit to all present.

My darky boatman was a young, sawed-off specimen, who wore a hat with a brim the size of an

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umbrella and who sat so low in the skiff that from a distance, as he rowed, nothing of him could be seen but a broad hat-brim resting on the gunwales and oars projecting from under it. On our second day we were rowed slowly up the river, viewing with much interest the oak, red cedar, palmetto and great flowering magnolia on its banks. Countless thousands of ducks were dotting the water on every side and in the broad shallows mullet leaped high in the air, hundreds in every minute. At the head of the river we floated on the famous Homosassa Spring out of which boils the river. The spring is almost circular, about a hundred feet in diameter and sixty in depth, and through its crystal clearness the smallest fish can be distinctly seen. As we lunched upon its bank a wild turkey lit upon a tree above us, mocking birds sang to us and a cardinal bird inquired if we intended to leave any crumbs. As I gazed on the marvelous spring, in the perfect peace of that balmy day, the spirit of the Fountain possessed me and I dreamed that I had found what Ponce de Leon so long and so vainly sought. Now, after many years which have taken their lawful toll of the body, I can yet believe that Perpetual Youth of the spirit is one of the Florida Enchantments.

As we had some hours to spare, I told the family that Tat and I would get an alligator to take home. Within a few hundred yards of the spring we found a small one about five feet long, which I shot and stowed in the skiff under the thwarts with his head toward the stern. Just as we reached the spring

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and I had assumed the air of nonchalance becoming a successful hunter, the reptile came to life and scrambled toward me. Tat dropped his oars and grabbed him by the tail, while I stood up on the seat, slowly backing to the extreme end of the skiff as the head came on, until the jaws opened wide and I went over the stern. As I swam to the bank where we had picnicked, the two children were rolling on the ground in convulsions of joy, while their mother was struggling to repress the manifestation of a kindred emotion. Tat secured the alligator before he could escape, and after I had killed him again he tied him securely and carried him home. As we approached the dock and I witnessed the gathering of the clans and realized my soaked and shabby appearance and the public inquisition I must submit to, I longed for the ring of Gyges.

Owing to the sporadic character of the supply of venison provided by her guests, the Boss contracted with a Cracker hunter for regular deliveries of that staple. She also bargained to teach him to read and whenever he came to the house the well-thumbed spelling book was produced from an inner pocket and the lesson recited. He was deeply interested, but the nearest I ever knew him to come to identifying the words of his lesson was when he spelled and pronounced "D-o-g" "Squeal." His camp was twelve miles from Homosassa, two of water, four of cypress swamp, and six of pine timber. One day an enthusiastic young member of the family insisted on going home with him for a hunt. The Cracker brought

him back the next day in a chastened frame of mind. After the first mile of swamp the hunter carried the rifle of the youth, after the second he added to his own load a buck that he shot. Three miles before the journey's end, he fixed up a camp and built a fire for his companion who could walk no farther. Then he tramped three miles to his camp, got bread, coffee, flour and blankets and returned to the youth. The colony did laugh a little, until an old hunter suggested that to qualify a man to laugh intelligently would require him to take a twenty-four-mile tramp with Hodges himself.

The laugh was not always on the man from the city. A Cracker, with a hound for driving deer, called at the Island one morning to take a sportsman, who lived in a Western city, out hunting. Mr. Mears, the sportsman, appeared with a rifle, and Wheeler, the Cracker, refused to take him unless he would exchange his rifle for a shotgun with buckshot cartridges. He said he was tired of making deer run over city folks, who couldn't hit them with a rifle at ten feet. Mears smiled at Wheeler's earnestness and pointing out an osprey that was sailing high in the air over them, said, "If I put a bullet through that bird can I go?"

Wheeler didn't reply.

"If I put two bullets through him can I go?"

Again there was no reply. Mears brought his rifle to his shoulder, sent a bullet through the bird, and as it was falling, pierced it with another. He then went hunting with Wheeler. My neighbor, the



An alligator at home.

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naturalist, took Mears duck shooting, over decoys from a blind, and the latter with his rifle made a larger score than the former who used a fowling piece.

The late Doctor Ferber, beloved of the colony, its fisherman *par excellence*, was the friend of all animals. Under his chair could be found the dilapidated family cat, whose series of misfortunes culminated in a lightning stroke that partly paralyzed her. The humorous donkey, who lifted pigs out of their pen with his teeth and then chased them around the grounds, was believed to have been trained by the doctor. Pat and Bridget, tame bears and the pets of the colony, obeyed him only, and when Pat got in the dining room and, sitting in the middle of the table, proceeded to eat the dinner which was just ready to be served, it was the doctor who took him by the ear and led him out of the house. When Bridget broke her chain in the night and, climbing on the roof, dragged six feet of trace chain back and forth along the ridge-pole for an hour, it was the doctor who coaxed her back to her post on the lawn and chained her there. Pat's wrestling matches with the colored boys were refereed by the doctor who mourned greatly when Bridget clawed the clothing of a lady guest to ribbons and was sentenced to be shot. When the hour of execution approached he fled from the island and on the following day refused to take his usual place of honor at the head of the table, because it involved the carving of the roast of that day.

In those days alligators were accepted as natural enemies of mankind and the thought of holding back

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from slaying them never occurred to any one. For a while it was my daily program to find an alligator's bed in the grass, lie down upon it under a big linen hat, with a novel, a field glass and a Winchester, sending the darky boatman to hide with his skiff in some near-by creek, and then, basking in the sunlight, reading and dreaming by the hour, I would now and then lazily sweep with the glass the river's mirror-like surface, until a pair of shining eyes resting thereon some few hundred yards distant, announced the home-coming of the proprietor.

Quietly the glass would be laid down and the rifle slowly brought into position, with its sights aligned upon the advancing eyes. Soon the nose appeared, the top of the head rose above the water, its whole outline became visible, sank out of sight, reappeared and approached warily until I fired. The poor alligator would come to the surface, its four paws pathetically uplifted and its yellowish white belly showing. In a minute or two the body slowly sank into the depths, to be grappled for later.

I remember once having watched the water till my eyes ached, read Clark Russell's "Marooned" until I became drowsy, and was dreamily admiring the assurance of the author, in picturing his hero upon a deserted island alone with the girl he loved, and then adrift with her for days and nights in a small boat, and pretending that he didn't kiss her, and that she really married the idiot afterward, when I was startled by a slight rustling in the long grass beside me.

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I rolled over and "all the conduits of my blood froze up," Within two feet of my face was the end of the tail of a big alligator, whose great form, partly traceable through the tall sedge, half encircled me as I lay beside him. Whether he was asleep or only playing possum was quite immaterial. I was in a trap sure enough.

A plunge into the sluggish Homosassa would have only transferred the trouble to an element even less favorable to me. For long minutes I lay breathless, wondering whether my "victim" would "open the ball" with his teeth or his tail. Perhaps the delay was due to his inability to decide between two weapons of equal availability and efficiency. The beating of my heart sounded to me like the trumpet of Gabriel. I dared not shout for my boatman, and that black imp had been trained not to come until he was called.

Apparently the big saurian had eight or ten peaceful hours in which to arrange his program undisturbed. I thought of turning my thumb down as a hint to him to hurry up. The interminable minutes seemed slowly transforming themselves into days. A dark, familiar body swooped past within a few feet of my face. It was the pioneer of a flock of buzzards which followed me daily up and down the river and the coast. I recognized this particular villain by the familiarity of his manner, as well as the bullet-hole in his wing and his one game leg. He had become the living echo of my rifle and had kept tab on my victims for many weeks. Hitherto I had

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willingly fed him and his family, but now—I felt differently. However, the outlook now was that the alligator would save me from the buzzard. I could no longer see the bird, but felt that he was on some near-by skeleton of a tree, waiting and watching with that cold-blooded patience which I had until now admired.

Time and again the waving of a blade of grass sent discordant vibrations through my nerves until the chills and fever of suspense became intolerable. Slowly I turned the rifle, which was pointed over the river and away from my bed-fellow, until its muzzle was directed toward the head, which I vainly wore out my eyes to locate exactly. As the hammer was raised, while the held-back trigger prevented any warning click, some measure of hope returned. One little glimpse of eye or ear and the brute's brains might be distributed outside the zone of mischief. But in a random shot there are many blanks and few prizes. The outline of the body was fairly indicated, but a reptile, shot through the body, is given until sundown to die, which would have left many hours with mischief in each minute.

Another rustling in the grass dispelled the vacillation which had afflicted me. The muzzle of the weapon was shifted to bear upon the body just behind where the fore shoulder was believed to be. The slow pressure upon the trigger was followed by a roar which broke a great silence, and a head was lifted high above me, with wide-open jaws, from which proceeded a hiss like that of many serpents. For-



The sunset was magnificent.

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ward and back flashed the lever of the Winchester, and echo-like came a second report, while a stream of flame scorched the mouth of the reptile as a fortunate bullet passed through its brain.

As I gazed reflectively upon my late bed-fellow, the silence was broken by the voice of my boatman:

“Did he crawl on the bank while you’s asleep?”

“Yes, Tat, he crawled on the bank while we were asleep.”

