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· Absalom Martin ·

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KASTLE KRAGS

A STORY OF MYSTERY

BY

ABSALOM MARTIN

NEW YORK
DUFFIELD AND COMPANY
1922

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KASTLE KRAGS

CHAPTER I

WHO could forget the Ochakee River, and the valley through which it flows! The river itself rises in one of those lost and nameless lakes in the Floridan central ridge, then is hidden at once in the live oak and cypress forests that creep inland from the coasts. But it can never be said truly to flow. Over the billiard-table flatness of that land it moves so slowly and silently that it gives the effect of a lake stirred by the wind. These dark waters, and the moss-draped woodlands through which they move, are the especial treasure-field and delight of the naturalist and scientist from the great universities of the North.

It is a lost river; and it is still a common thing to see a brown, lifeless, floating log suddenly flash, strike, and galvanize into a diving alligator. The manatee, that grotesque, hair-lipped caricature of a sea-lion, still paddles in the lower waters; and the great gar, who could

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remember, if he would, the days when the nightmare wings of the pterodactyls whipped and hummed over his native waters, makes deadly hunting-trips up and down the stream, sword-like jaws all set and ready; and all manner of smaller fry offer pleasing possibilities to the sportsmen. The water-fowl swarm in countless numbers: fleet-winged travelers such as ducks and geese, long-legged dignitaries of the crane and heron tribe, gay-colored birds that flash by and out of sight before the eye can identify them, and bitterns, like town-criers, booming the river news for miles up and down the shores. And of course the little perchers are past all counting in the arching trees of the river-bank.

In the forests the fleet, under-sized Floridan deer is watchful and furtive because of the activities of that tawny killer, the "catamount" of the frontier; and the black bear sometimes grunts and soliloquizes and gobbles persimmons in the thickets. The lynx that mews in the twilight, the raccoon that creeps like a furtive shadow through the velvet darkness, the pink-nosed 'possum that can only sleep when danger threatens, and such lesser folk as rabbit and squirrel, weasel and skunk, all have their part in the drama of the woods. Then there are the game-birds: wild turkey, pheasant, and that little red

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quail, the Bob White known to Southern sportsmen.

Yet the Ochakee country conveys no message of brightness and cheer. Some way, there are too many shadows. The river itself is a moving sea of shadows; and if the sun ever gets to them, it is just an unhappy glimpse through the trees in the long, still afternoons. The trees are mostly draped with Spanish moss that sways like dark tresses in the little winds that creep in from the gulf, and the trees creak and complain and murmur one to another throughout the night. The air is dank, lifeless, heavy with the odors of vegetation decaying underfoot. There is more death than life in the forest, and all travelers know it, and not one can tell why. It is easier to imagine death than life, the trail grows darker instead of brighter, a murky mystery dwells between the distant trunks. . . . Ordinarily such abundant wild-life relieves the somber, unhappy tone of the woods, but here it some way fails to do so. No woodsman has to be told how much more cheerful it makes him feel, how less lonely and depressed, to catch sight of a doe and fawn, feeding in the downs, or even a raccoon stealing down a creek-bank in the mystery of the moon; but here the wild things always seem to hide when you want them most; and if

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they show themselves at all, it is just as a fleet shadow at the edge of the camp-fire. These are cautious, furtive things, fleet as shadows, hidden as the little flowers that blossom among the grass-stems; and such woodsfolk as do make their presence manifest do not add, especially, to the pleasure of one's visit. These are two in particular—the water-moccasin that hangs like a growing thing in the wisteria, and the great, diamond-back rattlesnake whose bite is death.

The river flows into the gulf about half-way down the peninsula, and here is the particular field of the geologist, rather than the naturalist. For miles along the shore the underlying limestone and coraline rocks crop up above the blue-green water, forming a natural sea-wall. Here, in certain districts, the thickets have been cleared away, wide-areas planted to rice, and a few ancient colonial homes stand fronting the sea. Also the sportsman fishes for tarpon beyond the lagoons.

A strange, unhappy land of mystery; a misty, enchanted place whose tragic beauty no artist can trace and whose disconsolate appeal no man can fathom! Forests are never cheerful, silent and steeped in shadow as they are, but these moss-grown copses beside the Ochakee, and crowding down to the very shores of the gulf, have an

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actual weight of sadness, like a curse laid down when the world was just beginning. Yet Grover Nealman defied the disconsolate spirit of the land. He dared to disturb the cathedral silence of those mossy woods with the laughter of care-free guests, and to hold high revelry on the shores of that dismal sea.

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CHAPTER II

THE allurement of a September day had brought me far down the trail, past the neck of the marsh, and far from my accustomed haunts. But I could never resist September weather, particularly when the winds are still, and the sun through the leaves dapples the trail like a fawn's back, and the woods are so silent that the least rustle of a squirrel in the thicket cracks with a miniature explosion. And for all the gloom of the woods, and the tricky windings and cut-backs of that restless little serpent of a trail, I still knew approximately where I was. A natural sense of direction was seemingly implanted with less essential organs in my body at birth.

The Ochakee River wound its lazy way to the sea somewhere to my right. A half mile further the little trail ended in a brown road over which a motor-car, in favorable seasons, might safely pass. The Nealman estate, known for forty miles up and down the shore, lay at the juncture of the trail and the road—but I hadn't the least idea of pushing on that far. Neither fortune nor environment had fitted me to move

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in such a circle as sometimes gathered on the wide verandas of Kastle Krags.

I was lighting a pipe, ready to turn back, when the leaves rustled in the trail in front. It was just a whisper of sound, the faintest scratch-scratch of something approaching at a great distance, and only the fact that my senses had been trained to silences such as these enabled me to hear it at all. It is always a fascinating thing to stand silent on a jungle-trail, conjecturing what manner of creature is pushing toward you under the pendulous moss: perhaps a deer, more graceful than any dancer that ever cavorted before the footlights, or perhaps (stranger things have happened) that awkward, snuffling, benevolent old gentleman, the black bear. This was my life, so no wonder the match flared out in my hand. And then once more I started to turn back.

I had got too near the Nealman home, after all. I suddenly recognized the subdued sound as that of a horse's hoofs in the moss of the trail. Some one of the proud and wealthy occupants of the old manor house was simply enjoying a ride in the still woods. But it was high time he turned back! The marshes of the Ochakee were no place for tenderfeet; and this was not like riding in Central Park! Some of the quagmires

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I had passed already to-day would make short work of horse and rider.

My eye has always been sensitive to motion—in this regard not greatly dissimilar from the eyes of the wild creatures themselves—and I suddenly caught a flash of moving color through a little rift in the overhanging branches. The horseman that neared me on the trail was certainly gayly dressed! The flash I caught was *pink*—the pink that little girls fancy in ribbons—and a derisive grin crept to my lips before I could restrain it. There was no mistaking the fact that I was beginning to have the woodsman's intolerance for city furs and frills! Right then I decided to wait.

It might pay to see how this rider had got himself up! It might afford certain moments of amusement when the still mystery of the Floridan night dropped over me again. I drew to one side and stood still on the trail.

The horse walked near. The rider wasn't a man, after all. It was a girl in the simplest, yet the prettiest, riding-habit that eyes ever laid upon, and the prettiest girl that had ridden that trail since the woods were new.

The intolerant grin at my lips died a natural death. She might be the proud and haughty daughter of wealth, such a type as our more

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simple country-dwellers robe with tales of scandal, yet the picture that she made—astride that great, dark horse in the dappled sunlight of the trail—was one that was worth coming long miles to see. The dark, mossy woods were a perfect frame, the shadows seemed only to accentuate her own bright coloring.

It wasn't simply because I am a naturalist that I instantly noticed and stored away immutably in my memory every detail of that happy, pretty face. The girl had blue eyes. I've seen the same shade of blue in the sea, a dark blue and yet giving the impression of incredible brightness. Yet it was a warm brightness, not the steely, icy glitter of the sea. They were friendly, wholesome, straightforward eyes, lit with the joy of living; wide-open and girlish. The brows were fine and dark above them, and above these a clear, girlish forehead with never a studied line. Her hair was brown and shot with gold—indeed, in the sunlight, it looked like old, red gold, finely spun.

She was tanned by the Florida sun, yet there was a bright color-spot in each cheek. I thought she had rather a wistful mouth, rather full lips, half-pouting in some girlish fancy. Of course she hadn't observed me yet. She was riding easily, evidently thinking herself wholly alone.

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Her form was slender and girlish, of medium height, yet her slender hands at the reins held her big horse in perfect control. The heels of her trim little shoes touched his side, and the animal leaped lightly over a fallen log. Then she saw me, and her expression changed.

It was, however, still unstudied and friendly. The cold look of indifference I had expected and which is such a mark of ill-breeding among certain of her class, didn't put in its appearance. I removed my hat, and she drew her horse up beside me.

It hadn't occurred to me she would actually stop and talk. It had been rather too much to hope for. And I knew I felt a curious little stir of delight all over me at the first sound of her friendly, gentle voice.

"I suppose you are Mr. Killdare?" she said quietly.

Every one knows how a man quickens at the sound of his own name. "Yes, ma'am," I told her—in our own way of speaking. But I didn't know what else to say.

"I was riding over to see you—on business," she went on. "For my uncle—Grover Nealman, of Kastle Krags. I'm his secretary."

The words made me stop and think. It was hard for me to explain, even to myself, just why

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they thrilled me far under the skin, and why the little tingle of delight I had known at first gave way to a mighty surge of anticipation and pleasure. It seems to be true that the first thing we look for in a stranger is his similarity to us, and the second, his dissimilarity; and in these two factors alone rests our attitude towards him. It has been thus since the beginning of the world—if he is too dissimilar, our reaction is one of dislike, and I suppose, far enough down the scale of civilization, we would immediately try to kill him. If he has enough in common with ourselves we at once feel warm and friendly, and invite him to our tribal feasts.

Perhaps this was the way it was between myself and Edith Nealman. She wasn't infinitely set apart from me—some one rich and experienced and free of all the problems that made up my life. Nealman's niece meant something far different than Nealman's daughter—if indeed the man had a daughter. She was his secretary, she said—a paid worker even as I was. She had come to see me on business—and no wonder I was anticipatory and elated as I hadn't been for years!

"I'm glad to know you, Miss——" I began. For of course I didn't know her name, then.

"Miss Nealman," she told me, easily. "Now

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I'll tell you what my uncle wants. He heard about you, from Mr. Todd."

I nodded. Mr. Todd had brought me out from the village and had helped me with some work I was doing for my university, in a northern state.

"He was trying to get Mr. Todd to help him, but he was busy and couldn't do it," the girl went on. "But he said to get Ned Killdare—that you could do it as well as he could. He said no one knew the country immediately about here any better than you—that though you'd only been here a month or two you had been all over it, and that you knew the habits of the turkeys and quail, and the best fishing grounds, better than any one else in the country."

I nodded in assent. Of course I knew these things: on a zoological excursion for the university they were simply my business. But as yet I couldn't guess how this information was to be of use to Grover Nealman.

"Now this is what my uncle wants," the girl went on. "He's going to have a big shoot and fish for some of his man friends—they are coming down in about two weeks. They'll want to fish in the Ochakee River and in the lagoon, and hunt quail and turkey, and my uncle wants to know if—if he can possibly—hire you as guide."

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I liked her for her hesitancy, the uncertainty with which she spoke. Her voice had nothing of that calm superiority that is so often heard in the offering of humble employment. She was plainly considering my dignity—as if anything this sweet-faced girl could say could possibly injure it!

"All he wanted of you was to stay at Kastle Krags during the hunting party, and be able to show the men where to hunt and fish. You won't have to act as—as anybody's valet——and he says he'll pay you real guide's wages, ten dollars a day."

"When would he want me to begin?"

"Right away, if you could—to-morrow. The guests won't be here for two weeks, but there are a lot of things to do first. You see, my uncle came here only a short time ago, and all the fishing-boats need overhauling, and everything put in ship-shape. Then he thought you'd want some extra time for looking around and locating the game and fish. The work would be for three weeks, in all."

Three weeks! I did some fast figuring, and I found that twenty days, at ten dollars a day, meant two hundred dollars. Could I afford to refuse such an offer as this?

It is true that I had no particular love for

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many of the city sportsmen that came to shoot turkey and to fish in the region of the Ochakee. The reason was simply that "sportsmen," for them, was a misnomer: that they had no conception of sport from its beginnings to its end, and that they could only kill game like butchers. Then I didn't know that I would care about being employed in such a capacity.

Yet two or three tremendous considerations stared me in the face. In the first place, I was really in need of funds. I had not yet obtained any of the higher scholastic degrees that would entitle me to decent pay at the university—I was merely a post-graduate student, with the complimentary title of "instructor." I had offered to spend my summer collecting specimens for the university museum at a wage that barely paid for my traveling expenses and supplies, wholly failing to consider where I would get sufficient funds to continue my studies the following year.

Scarcity of money—no one can feel it worse than a young man inflamed with a passion for scientific research! There were a thousand things I wanted to do, a thousand journeys into unknown lands that haunted my dreams at night, but none of them were for the poor. The two hundred dollars Grover Nealman would pay me would not go far, yet I simply couldn't afford to

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pass it by. Of course I could continue my work for my alma mater at the same time.

Yet while I thought of these things, I knew that I was only lying to myself. They were subterfuges only, excuses to my own conscience. The instant she had opened her lips to speak I had known my answer.

To refuse meant to go back to my lonely camp in the cypress. I hoped I wasn't such a fool as that. To accept meant three weeks at Kastle Krags—and daily sight of this same lovely face that now held fast my eyes. Could there be any question which course I would choose?

"Go—I should say I will go," I told her. "I'll be there bright and early to-morrow."

I thought she looked pleased, but doubtless I was mistaken.

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CHAPTER III

It didn't take long to pack my few belongings. At nine o'clock the following morning I broke camp and walked down the long trail to Kastle Krags.

No wonder the sportsmen liked to gather at this old manor house by the sea. It represented the best type of southern homes—low and rambling, old gardens and courts, wide verandas and stately pillars. It was an immense structure, yet perfectly framed by the shore and the lagoon and the glimpse of forest opposite, and it presented an entirely cheerful aspect as I emerged from the dark confinement of the timber.

It was a surprising thing that a house could be cheerful in such surroundings: forest and gray shore and dark blue-green water. The house itself was gray in hue, the columns snowy white, the roof dark green and blending wonderfully with the emerald water. Flowers made a riot of color between the structure and the formal lawns.

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