

KASTLE KRAGS

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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

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

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

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 coralline 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

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.