



THE EVERGLADE GHOST*

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As you enter the winding ways that lead into the Everglades of Florida, life and color and movement are bewildering. Birds are on the water and in the air, their voices confuse the ear like the whirr of machinery, and are as harsh. Their numbers weary the eye, and their colors are kaleidoscopic. Birds, little and big, with voices shrill and harsh and low, but never soft or sweet; with long legs for wading and short paddles for swimming; birds of every shape and hue and bill that wade or swim or fly to find homes in this strange Sargasso Sea of waving grass. And the flowers—they float in great rafts that look like meadows, except that they are greener and smoother than earth can show, and they gleam and shine with fairy forms that blaze like stars in the moonlight, and whirl in the slow eddies of the wind in the deep black pools. For every leaf there is a bloom, and festoons of them twist and twine around each other to gain a little life in the world, yet their beauty is for the eye alone—they are as devoid of fragrance as our forgotten hopes. But your dream is broken for a pair of soft black eyes are all too near the boat, and under them are set the gleaming teeth and lipless mouth that proves the alligator. The shining water clearly defines his knotted back, and you fire hastily. There is a splash and a struggle. He disappears, but comes again to the surface and writhes and strikes with his great oar of a tail, and

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bleeds till he drifts away and catches in a mass of vines while you feel that murder has suddenly entered a fairyland, and you are guilty. But the blood has attracted others, till they crowd around and snarl and grunt and pull for their friend's legacy till conscience ceases to torment you, and you wish that all alligators had but one head, and that was within range.

But within the depths there is solitude utter and complete. There are no insects even to relieve your loneliness and excite your wonder at the deformed shapes that the Seminole says are "born of the bad words that come from the lips of wicked men." There is only the green of the vegetation and glare of the brazen sky across which an eagle or a vulture sometimes goes with hurrying wing. As your sole landmark there stands a great cypress like a sentinel on duty, near which no Indian will pass, and under which no man who knows its history would sleep for the world. There are great scars on the trunk which were once elaborate carvings. No vines hide these with soft green or tender blossom, and even the winds moan as they pass. Other marks show that once a great slab was cut out and then fastened back with strong spikes, and the roots show blotches and scars that make you shudder.

Sitting at the white man's campfire, Tomalista Hotalgee, of the family of the Wind, which traces its history back to Mexico, and ruled the Creek confederacy through those great chiefs we know as Alexander McGillivray and Billy Weatherford, and a thousand others—told in hushed tones why the great tree bore such marks and was so shunned.

Omathla, the Tustenuggee of the Seminoles, was dead. He left two sons, but his widow was wise, and the tribe listened to her, though her son was chief. Soctomassee, the red man's god, spoke to her and she lived long till her head was like the cotton of the paleface and her hand shook with extreme age.

Then she called her sons and the chiefs about her in a voice that was sharp as the chirp of the kee-way-chick, and she told them that she must die. And they all promised that what she wished should be done. And she called for Nigger Jim, that was her slave, and told him what he must do. And he said it should be so. And she told her son the chief that when Jim had done her bidding he must be a free man and go away. And he promised it should be done.

Then the widow of the old chief died, and the women of the tribe unbound their hair and made fires about in the woods,

and sat around them and mourned. The men went not to the woods for game, nor to the rivers for fish, but all mourned save the little children.

Then Jim took his tools for boat-building and went to the great cypress that stands alone to overlook the land the pale-face took, and the land of the Seminole, and he cut off a great slab. He dug into the heart of the living tree as a warrior digs a canoe, and made a grave so deep in the tree that its leaves withered as in a dry summer, and it made sad groans in the wind. Then he came back and told the chief.

And the chief and his brother took their mother, according to her word—she that had been the wise, the daughter of many chiefs of a line beloved of Soctomassee, and all the tribe followed her to the cypress where she wished to rest at last. And they put her in the heart of the tree, on her feet, that she need not fall. And they put with her what she might need when she came to the home of Soctomassee, and they put back the slab and nailed it fast, and cut many messages on the bark that she might not forget she was the daughter of many chiefs. Then they killed, at the foot of the tree, the pony she had loved and her cow and a white dog. And all the tribe returned to the village and mourned no more, but feasted.

Now Nigger Jim was free, and the chief told him to go. But he did not go. And when the days went by as many as the fingers on both hands, the chief said Jim must go. And Jim said he would go if his sister went with him. And the chief said the woman must stay. Then Jim said he would stay, too, and he would take a woman from the chief's brother for his wife. This the chief told his brother, and they beat Jim with sticks. Then Locosomo, the bad spirit, entered into Jim and sat always in his heart.

Next day the chief and the men were in the woods, except the chief's brother. Then Nigger Jim walked away, but came back with a red rag tied around his leg, for he gave himself up to Locomoso and did not fight against the evil that came in with his breath, but did not go out. Then the woman that Jim said he would take spoke bitter words to him, and the chief's brother drove him away with a stick. Then Jim took a rifle and shot the chief's brother, and he killed five of the squaws, and the rest ran away and found the chief in the woods and told him.

Then one of the men came back and saw Jim sitting on a

log with his rifle in his lap, and he crawled up like a snake and shot Jim, and then shot him again, so that Jim died. And when the warrior saw that Jim was dead he gave the scalp-yell and all came in. And they buried the chief's brother and the women, and gave them cows and white dogs and horses that they might not be shamed when they appeared before Soctomassee and told the tale to her that had lately gone before, but whose name was now "holowaugus."

But they did not bury Jim, and the birds ate him, and the sun whitened his bones. Then Jim was angry, and would not stay dead, but walked, so that the chief moved his village. But Jim followed and walked about the town, and he was too strong for the medicine man of the chief, for he walked like a great bear, and the game fled away. Then the chief sent for the Big Medicine Man of the Family of the Wind, the Tsatse-ta-hatchee, and word was brought to the chief, and he did what the Medicine Man said, for they went back and piled up the bones of Jim and burned them and scattered the ashes on the swift waters of the Loxahatchee, so that Jim would have no strength to walk, but would pass away.

But the dead wife of the old chief in the heart of the big cypress would not have it so, and she was stronger than the Wise Man of the Wind, for she called Jim to her, and he sits under the big cypress of the Alpattiokee, but he is nothing but a sound that laughs and groans and yells when the wind and the rain wakes him, for he has no strength since his bones are fine like dust before his spirit grew in the new country.

And the old squaw looks over the land of the white man and the homes of her children, and she calls down to Jim in the night when the wind blows and Jim answers back. But no red man must hear the talk under that tree, for it is "holowaugus," and Locosomo is near when they pow-wow.

