



by Kirk Munroe
Canoemates
A Story of the Florida Reef and Everglades

Chapter 6: Pineapples and Sponges

THE next instant Worth uttered a startled cry and very nearly dropped his torch, as a mullet, leaping from the water, struck him on the side of the head, and fell flapping into the canoe.

“Never mind a little thing like that,” cried Sumner. “Hold your torch a trifle lower. That’s the kind!” Now the mullet came thick and fast, attracted to the bright light like moths to a candle flame. They leaped into the canoe and over it, they fell on its decks and flopped off into the water, they struck the two boys until they felt as though they were being pelted with wet snowballs; and at length one of them, hitting the torch, knocked it from Worth’s hand, so that it fell hissing into the water.

The effect of this sudden extinguishing of the light was startling. In an instant the fish ceased to jump, and disappeared, while the recent noisy confusion was succeeded by an intense stillness, Only broken by an occasional flap from one of the victims to curiosity that had fallen into the canoe.

“Well, that is the easiest way of fishing I ever heard of,” remarked Worth, as they stepped ashore, and turning the canoe over, spilled out fifty or more fine mullet. A dozen of them were cleaned, rubbed with salt, and put away for breakfast. Then the tired canoemates turned in for their first night’s sleep in camp.

Sumner’s eyes were quickly closed, but Worth found his surroundings so novel that for a long time he lay dreamily awake watching the play of moonlight on the rippling water, listening to the splash of jumping fish, the music of little waves on the shell-strewn beach, and the ceaseless rustle of the great palm leaves above him. At length his wakefulness merged into dreams, and when he next opened his eyes it was broad daylight, the sun had just risen, and Sumner was building a fire.

“Hurrah, Worth! Tumble out of bed and tumble into the water,” he called at that moment. “There’s just time for a dip in the briny before this fire’ll be ready for those fish.” Suiting his actions to his words, he began pulling off his clothes, and a minute later the two boys were diving into the cool water like a couple of frisky young porpoises.

Oatmeal and syrup, fresh mullet, bread-and-butter (which they had brought from home), and coffee, formed a breakfast that Sumner declared fit for a railroad king.

The sun was not more than an hour high before they were again under way, this time working hard at their paddles, as the breeze had not yet sprung up. Having left their first camp behind them, they felt that their long cruise had indeed begun in earnest.



For the next three days they threaded their way, under sail or paddle, among such numberless keys and through such a maze of narrow channels, that it seemed to Worth as though they were entangled in a labyrinth from which they would never be able to extricate themselves. Whenever a long sand spit or reef shot out from the north side of one key, a similar obstruction was certain to be found on the south end of the next one. Thus their course was a perpetual zigzag, and a fair wind on one stretch would be dead ahead on the next. Now they slid through channels so narrow that the dense mangroves on either side brushed their decks, and then they would be confronted by a coral reef that seemed to extend unbrokenly in both directions as far as the eye could reach. Worth would make up his mind that there was nothing to do but get out and drag the canoes over it, when suddenly the *Psyche*, which was always in the lead, would dash directly at the obstacle, and skim through one of the narrow cuts with which all these reefs abound.

For a long time it was a mystery to Worth how Sumner always kept in the channel without hesitating or stopping to take soundings. Finally he discovered that it was by carefully noting the color of the water. He learned that white water meant shoals, that of a reddish tinge indicated sandbars or reefs, black water showed rocks or grassy patches, and that the channels assumed varying shades of green, according to their depth.

They camped with Negro charcoal burners on one key, and visited an extensive pineapple patch on another. Having heard this fruit spoken of as growing on trees, Worth was amazed to find it borne on plants with long prickly leaves that reached but little above his knees. The plants stood so close together, and their leaves were so interlaced, that he did not see how any one ever walked among them to cut the single fruit borne at the head of each one; and when he tried it' stepping high to avoid the bayonet-like leaves, his wonder that any human being could traverse the patch was redoubled.

"I would just as soon try to walk through a field covered with cactus plants," he said.

"So would I," laughed Sumner, "if I had to walk as you do. In a pineapple patch you must never lift your feet, but always shuffle along. In that way you force the prickly leaves before you, and move with their grain instead of against it."

Although the crop would not be ready for cutting much before May, they found here and there a lusciously ripe yellow "pine," and after eating one of these, Worth declared that he had never before known what a pineapple was. He did not wonder that they tasted so different here and in New York, when he learned that for shipment north they must be cut at least two weeks before they are ripe, while they are hard and comparatively juiceless.

At the end of three days an outgoing tide, rushing like a millrace, swept the canoes through the green expanse of "The Grasses," that looked like a vast submerged meadow, and into the open waters of the Bahia Honda, or, as the reefmen say, the "Bay o' Hundy." Here they first saw spongers at work, and devoted an entire day to studying their operations.

Worth had always supposed that sponges were dived for, but now he learned his mistake. He found that in those waters they are torn from the bottom and drawn to the surface by iron rakes with long curved teeth attached to slender handles from twenty to thirty feet in length. The sponging craft are small sloops or schooners, each of which tows from two to six boats behind it. When a sponge bed is discovered, two men go out in each of these boats. One of them sculls it gently along, while



the other leans over the gunwale with a water glass in his hands, and carefully examines the bottom as he is moved slowly over it. The water glass is a common wooden bucket having a glass bottom. This is held over the side of the boat so that its bottom is a few inches below the surface of the water, or beyond the disturbing influence of ripples. With his head in this bucket, the sponger gazes intently down until he sees the round black object that he wants. Then he calls out to the sculler to stop the boat, and with the long-handled rake that lies by his side secures the prize. It is black and slimy, and full of animal matter that quickly dies, and decomposes with a most disgusting odor. To this the spongers become so accustomed that they do not mind it in the least, and fail to understand why all strangers take such pains to sail to windward of their boats.

When the deck of a sponge boat is piled high with this unsavory spoil of the sea, she is headed towards the nearest key on which her crew have established a crawl,* and her cargo is tossed into it. The crawl is a square pen of stakes built in the shallow water of some sheltered bay, and in it the sponges lie until their animal matter is so decomposed that it will readily separate from them. Then they are stirred with poles or trodden by the feet of the spongers until they are free from it, when they are taken from the crawl, and spread on a beach to dry and whiten in the sun. When a full cargo has been obtained, they are strung in bunches, and taken to Key West to be sold by the pound at auction. There they are trimmed, bleached again, pressed into bales, and finally shipped to New York.

Sponges are of many grades, of which the sheep's wool is the finest, and the great loggerheads the most worthless. As spongers can only work in water that is smooth, or nearly so, half their time is spent in idleness; and though they receive large prices for what they catch, the average of their wages is low.

One hot afternoon at the end of a week found our canoemates halfway up the reef, and approaching a key called Lignum Vitae which is for several reasons one of the most remarkable of all the keys. It is a large island lifted higher above the surface of the water than any of the other keys, and it contains in its center a small freshwater lake. It is covered with all almost impenetrable forest growth, and concealed by this are ancient stone walls; of which no one knows the origin or date.

* Crawl is a corruption of corral, meaning a yard or pen.

Sumner had told Worth so much concerning this key as to arouse his curiosity, and they both looked forward with interest to reaching it. All day they had seen it looming before them, and when they finally dropped sail close beside it, Worth proposed that they take advantage of the remaining daylight to make a short exploration before unloading their canoes and pitching camp. To this Sumner agreed, and as they could not drag the laden boats up over the rocky beach, they decided to anchor them out and wade ashore. So the Psyche's anchor was flung out into the channel, the Cupid was made fast to her, and a light line from its stern was carried ashore and tied to a tree. Then, taking their guns with them, the boys plunged into the forest.

When, an hour later, they returned from their exploration, bringing with them a brace of ducks and half a dozen doves that they had shot, they gazed about them in bewildered dismay. The canoes were not where they had left them, nor could any trace of them be discovered.

