



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

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## Chapter 23: Worth Meets a Panther

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To find themselves once more in their canoes, and to be gliding over unknown waters, with new scenes unfolding at every turn, was so exhilarating to the boys that they started up the river at racing speed, shouting and laughing as they went. They were about to disappear from the sight of the others around a bend of the stream when they were checked by a shout from Lieutenant Carey. As he joined them he said:

“We must keep together, boys, and regulate our speed by that of the cruiser, for, in case of unforeseen difficulties or dangers, it won’t do for us to be separated. I wouldn’t make any more noise than is necessary either. There is no knowing what the Indians, whose country we are entering, may take it into their heads to do. While I do not anticipate any serious trouble from them, I would rather avoid them as much as possible, and by proceeding quietly we may escape their notice—at least for the present.”

For the first mile or two the river-banks were hidden beneath a dense growth of mangroves, though above these they could catch occasional glimpses of the tops of pines and tall palmettoes. The mangroves grew smaller and thinner, until finally they disappeared entirely, and on tasting the water over which they floated our voyagers found it to be fresh and sweet.

“There is no danger of our suffering from thirst on this trip whatever may happen,” said Sumner.

They were close to one of the banks as he spoke, and from it there suddenly came a rushing sound, followed by the floundering splash of some huge body in the water, so close at hand that their canoes were violently rocked by the waves that immediately followed. The suddenness of the whole proceeding drew a startled cry from Worth.

“What could it have been?” he asked in a low tone, and with a very white face. “Was it a hippopotamus, do you think?” He had seen the “hippos” splash into their tank in Central Park.

“Not exactly,” laughed Sumner, who, after a slight start, had quickly regained his composure. “It was a big alligator, and he went so close under my canoe that I could have touched him with the paddle.”

“Suppose he had upset us?”

“There wasn’t any danger of that; he was more scared than we were, but he knew enough to dive clear of us.”

“But if he should take it into his head to attack us?”



“He won’t, though. Mr. Alligator is a great coward. If he is disturbed while taking a sunbath on shore, he makes a blind rush for the water in spite of all obstacles, but it is only because he is too frightened to do anything else. Once safely in the water, he is glad enough to sink quietly to the bottom without seeking the further acquaintance of his enemies. That has always been my experience with them, but then I have only known them where they were hunted a good deal. The fellows where we are going may be bolder, but I have never heard of alligators being anything but awful cowards.”

Partly reassured by this, Worth regarded the next alligator that he saw with greater composure, and before the day was over he hardly minded them at all. He certainly had an opportunity of becoming familiar with them, for they fairly swarmed in the river. Nearly every sand spit showed from one to a dozen of them, of all sizes, lying motionless in the warm sunlight.

Worth declared that some of them were twenty feet long; but Sumner laughed at him, and said that twelve or thirteen feet at most would be nearer the mark. In this statement he was supported by Lieutenant Carey, who said that even a fifteen-foot alligator would be a monster, and he doubted if one of that length had ever been seen.

Most of the scaly brutes, after finding themselves safely in the water, would rise to the surface for one more look at the cause of their fright. In thus rising, they only displayed the tops of their heads, and as the canoes approached these would imperceptibly sink until only four black spots, indicating the eyes and nostrils, were visible. Then these, too, would disappear without leaving the faintest ripple to mark the place where they had been. Often a quick spurt would take the canoes to the spot in time for the boys to look down through the clear water and see the great black body lying motionless on the bottom, or darting swiftly away towards some safer hiding place.

Sometimes they saw tiny fellows, brightly marked with yellow, and but recently hatched, sunning themselves on broad lily pads. These were never found in company with their elders, which, Lieutenant Carey said, was because their papas were too fond of eating them.

When Sumner spoke of alligators’ eggs and nests, Worth asked, innocently, if the mother alligators sat on their eggs like hens.

At the mental picture thus presented Sumner laughed so heartily that he could hardly wield his paddle, but Lieutenant Carey explained that an alligator’s nest is built of sticks, leaves, and grass, very like a muskrat’s house. “In the middle of this,” he said, “are laid from twenty to forty thick-shelled, pure white eggs, about the size of the largest goose eggs. These are left to be hatched by the heat of the sun and of the decomposing mass surrounding them. When they break their shells, the little fellows immediately scramble for the nearest water, where they are left to care for themselves without a suggestion of parental guidance or advice. In fact, they are wise enough from the very first to keep out of the way of their elders, whose only love for them seems to be that of an epicure for a dainty dish.”

“Aren’t there crocodiles, too, in Florida?” asked Sumner.

“Yes. Professor Hornaday mentions genuine crocodiles as being found in Biscayne Bay, on the east coast, where I hope we shall get a look at them. They are described as differing from alligators in the head, that of the crocodile being narrower and longer. The snout is sharper than that of an alligator, and at the end of the lower jaw are two long canine teeth or tusks that project through holes in the upper lip.”



“Him big fighter, too,” remarked Quorum from the cruiser. “Him heap mo’ wicked dan de ’gator. De Injun call him ‘Allapatta hajo,’ an’ say hit mean mad ’gator.”

As the party advanced up the stream the current became so much stronger that the boys began to feel the effects of their steady paddling against it, and were no longer inclined to shoot ahead of the others. The foliage of the banks changed with each mile, and by noon the pines had given place to clumps of palmetto, bay, water oak, wild fig, mastic, and other timber. Here and there were grassy glades, in more than one of which they caught tantalizing glimpses of vanishing white-tailed deer.

The water began to assume an amber tint, and was so brilliantly clear that in looking down through it they could see great masses of coral rocks that often overshadowed the yawning mouths of dark chasms. Above these, whole meadows of the most beautiful grasses — red, green, purple, and yellow — streamed and waved with the ceaseless motion of the current. Schools of bright-hued fish darted through and over these, and turtles, plumping into the water from stranded logs or sunny sands pits, could be seen scuttling away to their hiding places among them.

The noontide heat of the sun was intense as the signal for a halt was given. The boats were turned in towards a bank where a grass plot, shaded by a clump of rustling palmettoes, offered a tempting resting place.

As they landed, Worth was certain that he saw a flock of turkeys disappear in a small hammock back of the clearing. With his new-born hunting instinct strong within him, he seized his gun and crossed the glade, in the hope of getting a shot. He had practised constantly on the call given him by his instructor, and now felt competent to deceive even the most experienced gobbler. Advancing cautiously within cover of the hammock, and seating himself on a log that was completely concealed by a screen of bushes, he began to call, “Keouk, keouk, keouk.” For ten minutes or so he repeated the Sounds at short intervals without getting a reply. Suddenly, a slight rustle in the bushes behind him caused Worth to turn his head. Within a yard of him glared a pair of cruel green eyes.

With a yell of terror the boy dropped his gun, sprang to his feet, burst from the bushes, and fled wildly towards camp. Reaching it in safety, but hatless and breathless, he declared that a tiger had been crouched, and just about to spring at him.

“Perhaps it was a ’coon,” suggested Sumner.

“’Coon, indeed?” cried Worth, hotly. “If you had seen the size of its eyes, you would have thought it was an elephant!”

“What has become of your gun?” inquired the Lieutenant.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” replied the boy; “and I don’t care. I wouldn’t face those eyes again for a thousand guns.”

Finally, however, he was persuaded to return with Lieutenant Carey and Sumner, both well armed, and point out the scene of his fright. They found his hat, the gun, and the log on which he had been sitting. Then in the soft earth close behind it they also found a double set of huge panther tracks — one made while cautiously approaching the supposed turkey, and the other while bounding away in fright at Worth’s yell.

“I don’t wonder that you were both frightened,” said the Lieutenant, with a smile; “but now that your skill as a turkey-caller is established, I wouldn’t go out on a hunting expedition alone again if I were you.”

“Indeed I won’t, sir. I’d rather never see another turkey than risk being stared at by such a pair of eyes as that panther carries round with him.”

