



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

Chapter 27: A Prehistoric Everglade Mound

THE whole party had come to a halt on first seeing the mysterious smoke, and now, with their boats grouped close together, they watched it curiously. Its several puffs did not last more than a minute, and then it was seen no more. Nobody but Worth mentioned volcanoes, and his suggestion caused a general smile. Quorum uttered the single word, "Injuns," and Lieutenant Carey agreed with him. He said:

"Such a smoke as that must result from human agency, and as I do not believe there is a white man besides ourselves within the limits of the 'Glades, it is probably the work of Indians, and is doubtless a signal of some kind, referring to our presence. I hope it is, for one of the objects of my mission being to reassure the Everglade Indians of the kindly intentions of the Government towards them, I shall be glad to meet them as quickly as possible. Let us go on, then, and have our first interview with them by daylight."

Half an hour later the canoes reached the island, close to which was a wide channel of open water that apparently extended wholly around it.

So dense was its encircling growth of custard apple and cocoa plum bushes, that not until they had cut a passage through these could they reach the dry land behind them.

Anxious to discover the occupants of the island before darkness should set in, the Lieutenant, taking Sumner and the sailor with him, and leaving Worth and Quorum to guard the boats, set out for the mound, which, rising to a height of fifty or sixty feet, seemed to occupy the centre of the island.

Besides being desirous of meeting with Indians, Lieutenant Carey was most curious concerning the formation of this strange mound. Until he had seen the smoke rising from its summit, he had believed it to be merely a growth of tall forest trees surrounded by lesser trees and bushes that grew smaller as they neared the water. This is a common feature of that level Southern country, where the outer lines of vegetation are stunted by the constant high winds. Behind their protection, the inner circles of trees rise higher and higher until they attain a maximum size, and present an appearance of hills and mounds that proves most deceptive to strangers. The character of the smoke rising from the summit' of this one had proved it to be something more than one of these ordinary tree mounds. Consequently the explorers were not surprised, after making their toilsome way through a forest of trees bound together with luxuriant vines, and brilliant with the blossoms of flowering air plants, to



find a veritable hill of earth rising before them. The forest encircled it, but ended at its base, and its sides were clothed only with a low growth of shrubs. They had hardly begun the ascent when they ran across a narrow but well-worn path leading to the summit.

On reaching the top they were disappointed to find it as lonely and unoccupied as the forest through which they had just passed. What they did find was a small cleared space from which even the grass had been worn away, and in the centre of which stood a sort of an altar of rough stones. It was about six feet square by four high, and was built of the ordinary coralline rock of the 'Glades. From this, or near it, the smoke must have ascended; but they looked in vain for ashes or other traces of a recent fire. The appearance of the altar showed that fires had been built on it; but there was nothing to indicate that one had burned there within an hour, and the mystery of the smoke became greater than ever.

If they had only been familiar with the Seminole method of making signal smokes, they would not have been so puzzled. A bright blaze of dry grass is smothered for an instant by a thick branch of green leaves. This is lifted and dropped again as often as the operator wishes to make a puff of smoke. Then the grass is allowed to burn out, and the wind, quickly dispersing the light ashes, removes every trace of the fire.

While disappointed and puzzled at finding no remnants of the fire that they were certain had recently burned there, nor of those who had lighted it, the explorers were enchanted with the beauty of the scene outspread on all sides of them. To the west the sun was sinking in wonderful glory behind the distant belt of cypress forest. Everywhere else the brown 'Glades, dotted with blue islands, seamed with the green threads of interlacing channels, and flashing with bits of open water, stretched beyond the limits of their vision. Over them hung a tremulous golden haze in which all objects were magnified and glorified. The all-pervading silence was only broken by the occasional rush on heavy pinions of flocks of snow-white ibises home-returning from their distant fishing grounds.

"No wonder the Seminoles love this country, and dread the very thought of leaving it," said Sumner, at length breaking the silence in which they had gazed on the exquisite scene.

"Yes, no wonder," replied the Lieutenant; "for in all my travels I don't know that I have ever seen anything more beautiful. But the most interesting of it all to me," he continued, "is this mound. It is evidently a structure of human erection, and must be contemporaneous with the famous earth pyramids of Mexico. Perhaps it was raised by the same wonderful prehistoric race. I have examined many of the well-known shell mounds of Florida, including those of Cedar Keys, and from there at various places down the west coast. I have also seen the great Turtle Mound on the Atlantic side, and those on the St. John's River; but all of them were evidently feast mounds, and showed in themselves the reason for their existence. I have heard of the earth mounds and ancient canals of the upper Caloosahatchie and Fish-eating Creek, but I have never heard it even intimated that similar structures might be looked for in the Everglades. Consequently I regard this one in the light of an important discovery. It is certainly sufficiently so to warrant us in spending tomorrow on this island investigating the mound as thoroughly as our means will allow."

"Doesn't that altar look as though the mound had been used as a place for offering sacrifices?" asked Sumner.

"No; that altar, as you call it, is evidently of recent construction, and was probably built by the Indians now inhabiting this country as a place from which to make signal smokes, or possibly as a



sepulcher. We will try to find out which tomorrow. These mounds were undoubtedly erected as places easy of defense, and perhaps this one may yield us some ancient weapons, as the 'kitchen middens,' or feast mounds, of Cedar Keys have so abundantly. I have seen quantities of celts and other stone implements taken from them, while the most exquisite quartz spearhead I ever saw was taken from a Caloosahatchie mound, which from descriptions must be very similar to this one. Oh yes, we certainly must spend another day on this island. Now we'd better be going, for it will soon be dark, and — ”

Here the Lieutenant was interrupted by two shots fired in quick succession from the direction in which they had left Worth and Quorum.

“I am afraid that means trouble of some kind, said Lieutenant Carey, anxiously, after he had fired two answering shots.

Hurrying down the pathway, which they found led to the water on the opposite side of the island from that on which they had landed, they plunged into the forest, and were surprised to notice how dark it had already grown. Its intricacies were so bewildering and its difficulties so numerous that it was nearly an hour after they heard the shots before they came within sound of a voice answering their repeated calls.

At length they reached the place where they had left the boats, and here they found Worth alone, and so panic-stricken that it was with difficulty he could answer their eager questions.

“Why had he fired those shots?”

“Where was Quorum?”

“Where were the boats?”

“I fired them to call you back,” answered the boy, “and I don't know where Quorum is nor where the boats are. They were here when I left, and when I came back they were gone. This was all I found here.” With this Worth pointed to a bag of hardtack that lay on the ground at his feet. “And I'm afraid poor Quorum has been killed, for I know he never would have left us. I thought perhaps you were killed too, and that I was left here all alone, and I've been getting more and more frightened, until I think I should have gone crazy if you had not come when you did.”

“You poor boy!” said the Lieutenant, soothingly, “I don't wonder that you were frightened. I should have been myself. But how did you happen to leave Quorum ? and what was he doing when you left him?”

“He was sitting in the cruiser, and I only left him for a minute, because I heard such a big turkey gobbler right here in the woods close to us. I thought it would be such a pleasant surprise for you to have me get him for supper, and I was sure there weren't any panthers or rattlesnakes here. So I just crept into the bushes to get a shot at him, and he kept going farther and farther off, and I kept following him. I didn't see him at all, and after a while I didn't hear him any more either, so I thought I'd better come back. When I got here, I couldn't find Quorum or the boats, so I fired my gun as a signal.”

“And you haven't seen nor heard anything of Quorum since?” inquired Lieutenant Carey, looking puzzled and anxious.

“No, I haven't heard a sound nor seen a sign a living thing,” answered Worth.

“There can't be any doubt of this being the right place,” said the Lieutenant, reflectively, “for there is where we cut our way through the bushes.”

“And here is the bag of biscuit,” added Worth.



“I am not a bit surprised at the disappearance of the canoes,” said Sumner. “I am getting used to that. But to have Quorum and the cruiser go too is certainly very strange.”

“And leaves us in a most awkward predicament,” added the Lieutenant. “If Quorum had only gone with one boat, we might expect to see him back at any moment; but to have them all go looks very suspicious. I greatly fear the poor fellow has been the victim of some foul play. However, it is too dark now to do anything but light a fire and prepare to pass the night where we are as well as we can under the circumstances.”

