



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

Chapter 35: The Boys in a Seminole Camp

ALTHOUGH UI-we started out from the slough that had proved such a haven of safety in one direction, he quickly found cause to change it for another. This cause was the lameness of the boys, for their blistered feet felt as though parboiled, and each step was so painful that it seemed as if they could not take another. They were also faint for want of food, and exhausted by their recent terrible experience. The young Indian was also suffering greatly. The moccasins had been burned from his feet, and the act of walking caused him the keenest pain; but no trace of limp or hesitation betrayed it, nor did he utter a murmur of complaint.

He had intended leading them directly to their own camp; but that was miles away, and seeing that they would be unable to reach it in their present condition, he changed his course towards a much nearer place of refuge. He soon found that to get Worth even that far he must support and almost carry him. As for Sumner, he clinched his teeth, and mentally vowing that he would hold out as long as the barefooted Indian, he strode manfully along behind the others with his gun, which he had retained through all their struggles, on his shoulder.

In this way, after an hour of weary marching, they entered a live oak hammock, into which even the fierce forest fire had not been able to penetrate. Here they were soon greeted by a barking of dogs that announced the presence of some sort of a camp. It was that of the Seminole party which had been detailed to conduct our explorers across the Everglades, and act as guards about their halting places. There were about twenty men in this party, and as they had brought their women and children with them, and had erected at this place a number of palmetto huts, the camp presented the aspect of a regular village. Poor Worth had just strength enough to turn to Sumner, with a feeble smile, and say, "At last we are going to see one, □ when he sank down, unable to walk another step.

A shout from UI-we brought the inmates of the camp flocking to the spot. Both the boys were tenderly lifted in strong arms and borne to one of the huts, where they were laid on couches of skins and blankets. They were indeed spectacles calculated to move even an Indian's heart to pity. Their clothing was in rags, while their faces, necks, and hands were torn by the saw palmettoes through which they had forced their way. Worth was found to have received several cuts from the sharp hoofs of the wounded deer, and he was bloodstained from head to foot. Besides this, they were begrimed



with smoke and soot until their original color had entirely disappeared. They were water-soaked and plastered with mud and ashes. Certainly two more forlorn and thoroughly wretched-looking objects had never been seen there, or elsewhere, than were our canoemates at that moment.

But no people know better how to deal with just such cases than the Indians into whose hands the boys had so fortunately fallen, and within an hour their condition was materially changed for the better. Their soaked and ragged clothing had been removed, they had been bathed in hot water and briskly rubbed from head to foot. A salve of bear's grease had been applied to their cuts and to their blistered feet, which latter were also bound with strips of cotton cloth. Each was clad in a clean calico shirt of gaudy colors and fanciful ornamentation. Each had a gay handkerchief bound about his head, and a pair of loose moccasins drawn over his bandaged feet. Each was also provided with a red blanket which, belted about the waist and hanging to the ground, took the place of trousers.

Thus arrayed, and sitting on bearskin couches, with a steaming sofkee kettle and its great wooden spoon between them, it is doubtful if their own parents would have recognized them. For all that they were very comfortable, and by the way that sofkee was disappearing, it was evident that their appetites at least had suffered no injury. They at once recognized sofkee from Quorum's description. They also knew the history of the wooden spoon; but just now they were too hungry to remember it, or to care if they did.

At length, when they had almost reached the limit of their capacity in the eating line, and began to find time for conversation, Worth remarked, meditatively:

"I belie'e, after all, that I like fishing better than hunting. There isn't so much excitement about it, but, on the whole, I think it is more satisfactory."

"Fishing for what?" laughed Sumner. "For bits of meat, with a wooden spoon, in a Seminole sofkee kettle, and looking so much like an Indian that your own father would refuse to recognize you?"

"If I thought I looked as much like an Indian as you do I would never claim to be a white boy again," retorted Worth.

"I only wish that I could hold a mirror up in front of you," replied Sumner; and then each was so struck by the comical appearance of the other that they laughed until out of breath; while the stolid-faced Seminole boys, stealthily staring at them from outside the hut, exchanged looks of pitying amazement.

After this, Sumner still further excited the wonder of the young Indians by performing several clever sleight-of-hand tricks, while Worth regretted his inability to dance a clog for their benefit. Then calling Ul-we into the hut, Sumner presented him with his shotgun, greatly to the "Tall One's" satisfaction. Worth was distressed that he had nothing to give the brave young fellow; but brightened at Sumner's suggestion that perhaps Ul-we would go with them to Cape Florida, where Mr. Manton would be certain to present him with some suitable reward for his recent service.

When Ul-we was made to comprehend what was wanted of him, he explained that it would be impossible to go with them then, but that he would meet them at Cape Florida on any date that they might fix. So Sumner fixed the date as the first night of the next new moon, and Worth added a request that he should bring with him all the occupants of the present camp, which he promised to do, if possible.



Although the boys had no idea of where they were, they felt confident that somehow or other they would be able to keep the appointment thus made, and also that the Mantons' yacht would be on hand about the same time. They tried to find out from Ul-we how far they were from Cape Florida at the present moment; but he, having received orders not to afford any member of Lieutenant Carey's party the slightest information regarding the country through which they were passing, pretended not to understand the boys' questions, and only answered, vaguely, "Un-cah" to all of them.

By this time the day was nearly spent, and it was sunset when the boys' own clothes were returned to them, dried, cleaned, and with their rents neatly mended by the skillful needles of the Seminole squaws. Then Ul-we said he was ready to take them to their own camp, and though they would gladly have stayed longer in this interesting village, the boys realized that they ought to relieve Lieutenant Carey's anxiety as soon as possible. So they expressed their willingness to accompany Ul-we, but hoped that the walk would not be a long one.

"No walk," replied Ul-we, smiling. "Go Injun boat. Heap quick."

Accompanied by half the camp, and shouting back, "Heep-a-non-est-cha," which they had learned meant goodbye, to the rest, they followed their guide a short distance to the head of a narrow ditch that had evidently been dug by the Indians. Here they entered Ul-we's canoe, and after a few minutes of poling they realized, in spite of the darkness, that they were once more on the edge of the Everglades.

After skirting the forest line for some time, they turned sharply into a stream that entered it, and again the boys found themselves borne rapidly along on a swift current through a cypress belt. An hour later they saw the glow of a campfire through the trees, and their canoe was directed towards it. Stepping out as the canoe slid silently up to the bank, the boys, wishing to surprise their friends, stole softly in the direction of the circle of firelight. On its edge they paused.

At one side of the fire sat Lieutenant Carey, looking worn and haggard; Quorum stood near him, gazing into the flames with an expression of the deepest dejection, while the sailor, looking very solemn, was toasting a bit of fresh meat on the end of a stick.

"No," they heard the Lieutenant say, "I can't conceive any hope that they have escaped, for the only traces that I found of them led directly towards the fire. How I can ever muster up courage to face Mrs. Rankin or meet the Mantons with the news of this tragedy, I don't know."

"Hit's a ter'ble ting, sah. Ole Quor'm know him couldn' do hit."

"Then it's lucky you won't have to try!" exclaimed Sumner, joyously, stepping into sight, closely followed by Worth.

"Oh, you precious young rascals! You villains, you!" cried the Lieutenant, springing to his feet, and seizing the boys by the shoulders, as though about to shake them. "How dared you give us such a fright? Where have you been?"

"Out deer hunting, sir," answered Sumner, demurely.

Quorum was dancing about them, uttering uncouth and inarticulate expressions of joy; while the sailor, having dropped his meat into the fire, where it burned unheeded, gazed at them in speechless amazement.

They told their story in disjointed sentences, from which their hearers only gathered a vague idea that they had killed a deer in the burning forest, been rescued from the flames by an Indian, and borne



in his arms to a Seminole village in the Everglades, from which, by some unseen means, they had just come.

“I’ll bring him up, and he can tell you all about it himself,” concluded Sumner, turning towards the landing place, to which the Lieutenant insisted on accompanying him, apparently not willing to trust him again out of sight.

But neither Ul-we nor his canoe was there. He had taken advantage of the momentary confusion to disappear, and the Lieutenant said he was thankful their canoes had not disappeared at the same time.

When they returned to the fire, they found Quorum hard at work cooking venison steaks.

“Then you did get a deer, sir, after all?” queried Sumner.

“No, I only wounded one, and he escaped. This fellow was one of a herd that, terrified by the fire, came crashing right into camp, and was shot by the sailor.”

“That’s the way I shall hunt hereafter,” exclaimed Worth — “stay quietly and safely in camp, and let the game come to me!”

