



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

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## Chapter 37: Fishing for Sharks

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IN strolling along the outer beach, picking up curious sponges and bits of coral, the attention of the boys was also attracted to the shadowy forms of great fish that they could distinguish every now and then darting along the green base of the combers just before they broke.

“Do you think they can be sharks?” asked Worth.

“Yes,” replied Sumner; “I am almost sure they are.”

“My! but I wish we could catch one! I have never seen a shark out of water.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if we could. I’ve got a shark hook in the Psyche, and our Manila cables, knotted together, will make just the kind of line we want.”

Fifteen minutes later the hook and line had been prepared. For bait, they took one of a number of fish that Quorum had caught that morning.

The shark hook was a huge affair, over a foot long and made of steel a quarter of an inch thick. To it was attached by a swivel several feet of chain terminating in a ring to which the line was made fast.

Sumner had caught many sharks off Key West wharves, but they had been comparatively small, and with the monsters of the reef he had hitherto had no dealings. Consequently, he was almost as ignorant of their strength as was Worth. Therefore, without reflecting on the folly of the act, and fearing that the line might be jerked from his hands, he made its inner end fast about his waist.

Then whirling the heavy hook above his head, he cast it far out in the breakers. Within a minute it was tossed back to the beach, and had to be thrown again. This operation was repeated so many times without any result that the boys were beginning to tire of it, when all at once there came a jerk on the line that nearly threw Sumner off his feet. “Hurrah!” he cried. “We’ve got him at last! Catch hold, Worth, and help me haul him in.”

But it was soon evident that instead of their catching the shark, he had caught them. In spite of all their efforts, and no matter how deeply they dug their feet into the sand, the boys found themselves being dragged slowly but surely towards the water. At first they did not realize their danger; but when they were within a few yards of the creamy froth churned up by the breakers, it flashed over them, and they began to utter those shouts for help that attracted the attention of their companions in the camp.



Although Worth could have let go of the line at any minute, the thought of doing such a thing never entered his head. Even when the water was about his feet and the wet sand was slipping rapidly from beneath them, the plucky little chap held on and struggled with all his might to avert the fate that threatened his friend.

They were nearly hopeless before the three men reached them, and, rushing into the water, seized the line with such a powerful grasp that its seaward motion was instantly arrested. Not only that, but they walked away with it so easily that a minute later the shark was landed high and dry on the beach, where the sailor dispatched it with an axe.

It was a white shark of moderate size, being not more than seven or eight feet long. For all that, it was a monster as compared with those Sumner had been in the habit of catching, and he gazed with a curious sensation at its wicked eyes, and the row upon row of curved gleaming teeth with which the gaping mouth was provided.

"It was a close call for you, my boy," said the Lieutenant, gravely, "and has taught you a lesson that I am sure you will never forget. You may thank your lucky stars that the hook was taken by this little fellow instead of by one of his grandfathers or uncles. Now that we have started in this business, I am going to try and show you what might have happened."

Under his direction a hole some five feet deep was dug, a heavy timber, selected from those with which the beach was strewn, was thrust into it, and the sand was repacked solidly about it. To this, instead of to Sumner's body, the end of the line was attached, and the fishing for sharks was resumed. While the post was being set, Lieutenant Carey brought his rifle from the camp. Several sharks, some smaller and some larger than the first, were caught; but not until the hook was seized by one that dragged the entire party clinging to it slowly down the beach did the Lieutenant express himself as satisfied.

"Hold on to it!" he cried. "Brace yourselves! Snub him all you can!"

The strain on the line was tremendous, and it hummed like a harp string. But for the post to aid them, they must have let go. At length, even the enormous strength at the other end of the line began to be exhausted. Foot by foot the slack was gathered in and held at the post. Then a great ugly-looking head could be seen in the edge of the breakers, and the next minute a rifle ball crashed into it.

In the flurry that followed the line snapped, and the boys uttered a cry of dismay. But the bullet had done its work, and a few minutes later the huge carcass was rolling like a log in the surf. The sailor managed to get a bight of the line over its tail, and by their united efforts the great fish was drawn partly from the water; but beyond there they could not move it. It was nearly fifteen feet long, and Sumner shuddered as he realized how easily and quickly such a monster as that could have dragged him out to sea.

"It seems to me," said Worth, "that some kinds of fishing are as dangerous as deer hunting, and just as exciting."

While they were still looking at the big shark their attention was attracted to a loud barking in the beach scrub behind them, and by a man's voice shouting: "Wus-le! Wus-le! You, sir! Come here!" It was evident that Wus-le was a dog, and that he was engaged in some absorbing occupation that forbade him to pay any attention to the calls of his unseen master.

Going to the place from which the barking came, the shark fishers were in time to witness a most interesting performance. A small brindled bull terrier was tearing in a circle round and round a coiled



rattlesnake. The former was barking furiously, and the sound so enraged the snake that the angry whirr-r-r of its rattles was almost continuous. At the same time it was dazed by the rapidity of the dog's motions. At length it sprang forward, struck viciously, and missed its mark. At the same moment the dog dashed in, seized the snake by the back, gave one furious shake, and jumped away. The snake was evidently injured, for it re-coiled slowly. Once more, enraged beyond endurance, it struck at its agile adversary, and then the dog had him. in an instant the snake's back was broken, and a minute later it lay motionless and dead.

As soon as he was certain of his victory, the dog paid no more attention to his late enemy, but with panting breath and lolling tongue that betrayed the energy of his recent exertions, he ran to meet his master, who appeared at that moment from the direction of the river.

He was a powerfully built man, dressed partly as a hunter and partly as a sailor. He carried a rifle, and introduced himself as the keeper of the house of refuge a few miles up the coast. He upbraided the dog as though it were a human being for tackling a rattlesnake, and then remarked apologetically to the spectators of the recent fight: "I have to scold him on general principles, but it don't do any good. He is bound to fight and kill snakes till they kill him, which I am always expecting they will. They haven't done it yet, though, and he has killed more than twenty rattlers, besides more Of other kinds than I can count. He's a good dog, Wus-le is, and he's a terror to snakes."

The man said he had learned of the Lieutenant and his companions being in the river from the mail carrier, and, feeling lonely, had come to invite them to go to the station and stay with him until the wind changed. As he assured them that this was not likely to happen for several days, and as they were ahead of the time set for their arrival at Cape Florida, Lieutenant Carey accepted the invitation.

On their way up the river their guide pointed out a grove of coconut palms, marking the site of a fort erected during the Seminole War, the name of which was at one time familiar to all Americans. It was the scene of the treacherous seizure of the famous chief Osceola, who was lured into it under the pretense of considering a treaty. From there he was hurried to Fort Moultrie, in Charleston Harbor, where he soon afterwards died of a broken heart.

They found the station to be a low, roomy structure, surrounded by broad piazzas, built in the most solid manner so as to withstand hurricanes. It stood on top of the beach ridge, and commanded a glorious view of the ocean, as well as of the low-lying back country. At one end was a small separate house containing a great cistern, in which a supply of water was collected during the rainy season of summer, to last through the long winter drought. At the opposite end stood a building in which was kept a metallic lifeboat and a quantity of canned provisions for the use of sailors who might be wrecked on that lonely coast.

Here the exploring party remained for nearly a week, while the wind still held steadily to the east, and they all declared it to be the happiest and most interesting week of their cruise.

They hunted, fished, and sailed on the inland waters behind the beach ridge to their hearts' content. Quorum was kept constantly busy cooking on the station kitchen stove the venison, fish, turtle, ducks, quail, 'possum, and other food supplies with which the surrounding country abounded.

Worth felt that his reputation as a hunter was fully restored when he shot a wildcat that Wus-le had treed, and Sumner was more than proud over the killing of a black bear, which the same



enterprising dog discovered one night digging for turtle eggs on the beach but a short distance from the station. The Lieutenant worked at the report of his expedition, while the sailor and the keeper labored at the frame of a light-draught, seagoing boat, which the latter wished to build for his own use, and for which Sumner furnished the plans and model.

At length the wind, which in that country always boxes the compass, worked around to the westward, and as it was the end of March, the canoes were again loaded, and the pleasant life at the station came to an end.

