



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

Chapter 38: Little Ko-Wik-A Sails out to Sea

THERE was a long swell heaving in over the bar at the mouth of the river, but no breakers; and the little fleet, crossing it easily, laid a course down the coast. A stretch of twenty miles lay before them ere they would find another opening into which they could run for shelter, and they were therefore desirous of making the run before night. On most waters this would not have been difficult; but just here was a strong head current, that of the Gulf Stream, running fully three miles an hour, and they knew that to overcome this, and also to make twenty miles during the day, would tax the sailing powers of their small craft to the utmost. Nor could they all sail. The Hu-la-lah had no centerboard, and with the wind somewhat forward of abeam, the use of her sail would only have driven her off shore. The Lieutenant was therefore obliged to rely upon his paddle and keep close to the coast. The cruiser, being a slow sailer close-hauled, kept him company, but the Psyche and Cupid drew gradually ahead, and were soon out of hailing distance.

It was so delightful to find themselves again sailing, and their canoes were doing so splendidly, that the boys hated to stop. And why should they? There was nothing to fear. They knew where they were going, the others were in company, and a halting place for the night had been agreed upon. They would stop when they reached it, and that would be soon enough.

Until noon the breeze was very light, but after that it freshened and soon came off the land in angry little gusts that suggested the propriety of reefing. With a single reef in each of their sails, they ran until late in the afternoon, when they sighted a cut leading into the great landlocked sheet of Biscayne Bay. They were to enter this bay and cruise down behind its outer keys to Cape Florida, but it had been decided that they should camp on the upper side of the cut for that night.

The wind had increased in strength until now even double-reefed sails could hardly be carried on the canoes. The whole sky was covered with dark clouds, while a bank of inky blackness was rising in the west. It was evident that a wind squall of unusual violence would shortly burst upon them, and almost at the same moment both the canoemates lowered their sails, jointed their paddles, and headed straight in for land. As he lowered his sail and cast a glance astern in search of the other boats, Sumner noticed a large steamer coming down the coast. He wondered if she were not too close in for safety, but the immediate demands of his situation quickly drove all thoughts of her from his mind.



In the teeth of the spiteful gusts, and facing the ominous blackness, they worked their way in until they could see the very place that the station keeper had described to them as being a suitable camping ground. Five minutes more would take them to its shelter. Just then Sumner shouted to Worth, and drew his attention to a strange craft that he had been watching for several minutes. It was coming out of the cut, running dead before the wind, but yawing and gybing in a manner that indicated either utter recklessness or absolute ignorance on the part of its crew. The two canoes were so close together that Worth could hear Sumner plainly as he shouted:

“It’s an Indian canoe, and apparently unmanageable. I’m going to up sail and run down for a look at it. Do you paddle in to shore, and be out of harm’s way before that squall bursts.”

“Oh, Sumner, don’t run any risks!” shouted Worth.

“All right, I’ll be careful. But you’ll make things a great deal easier for me if you will start at once for shore. That’s a good fellow.”

So Worth did as his friend desired, and Sumner, hoisting his double-reefed mainsail, bore down on the strange canoe, which would otherwise have passed him at quite a distance. It was going at a tremendous pace, and as the two craft neared each other, Sumner saw to his consternation that the sole occupant of the dugout was a child who stretched out its little arms imploringly towards him. He saw this as the runaway canoe, under full sail, shot across his bow.

A tumult of thought flashed through the boy’s mind like lightning. He was near enough to land to reach it in safety. That child, if left alone, was rushing to certain destruction. He might be able to rescue it, and he might not. The chances were that he would lose his own life in the attempt. Very well; could he lose it in a better cause? What would his father have done under similar circumstances? That last question was sufficient. There was no longer any room for argument.

Even during his moment of hesitation the boy had been loosening the reef line of his mainsail, and simultaneously with his decision a quick pull at the halyard exposed its full surface to the wind. Over heeled the canoe, with Sumner leaning far out on the weather side. Then her head paid off, and under the influence of the first blast of the squall she sprang away like a frightened animal, in the direction taken by the runaway.

That same afternoon a fleet of Indian canoes, containing Ul-we and his companions, had crossed Biscayne Bay from the mainland. Instead of descending the river on which they had left our explorers, they had skirted the edge of the ’Glades to another that flowed into the bay, the secret of which they did not choose to have Lieutenant Carey learn. Although it still lacked a day of new moon, they decided to take advantage of the fair wind, cross the bay, and spend the intervening time in catching and smoking a supply of fish at a point several miles above Cape Florida.

In the canoe with Ul-we was his six-year-old brother, the little Ko-wik-a, who was sometimes allowed to hold the sheet while they were sailing, and who considered himself fully competent to manage the boat alone. However, being very wise in some things, he did not say this nor express in words his longing for a chance to prove his skill. He simply waited for an opportunity that was not long in coming.

After the Indians had pitched their camp, Ul-we, taking Ko-wik-a with him, went up to the cut to set a net into which fish would run with the flood tide. Beaching the place, he went into the mangroves to cut some poles, leaving his little brother in the canoe.



This was Ko-wik-a's chance, and he was quick to seize it. He would now show Ul-we that if he was little, he could sail a boat. The big brother had hardly disappeared when the little one shoved the canoe out from the mangroves and grasped the sheet in his chubby hands. The sail was already hoisted. He did not try to steer, but the wind and swiftly ebbing tide did that for him. In a minute later and he was running out of the cut at racing speed, wholly jubilant over the complete success of his experiment. When he got ready to turn round and go back, he became a little frightened to find out that something more than wishing to do so was necessary. When his craft shot out from the cut, and, leaving the land behind, headed out into an infinitely larger body of water than the little fellow had ever before seen, he became thoroughly demoralized, and began to call loudly for Ul-we.

Poor Ul-we had just discovered that both his little brother, whom he loved better than anyone or anything in the world, and his canoe had disappeared, and was rushing frantically towards the outer beach. His instinct told him what had happened, and his one hope was to reach the end of the cut in time to swim off and intercept the runaway.

When he did get there it was only in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of his own well-known sail far out at sea, with another much whiter and smaller one behind it. Then a cruel squall burst over the ocean. In a cloud of rain and mist, borne forward by the fierce wind, the two sails disappeared and the whole landscape was blotted from view.

From a place of safety on the opposite side of the cut, though unseen by Ul-we, Worth Manton strained his eyes for a last glimpse of the Psyche's fluttering signal flag, and the others, rapidly nearing him, wondered at his gesture of despair as it was blotted out.

The squall was long and fierce, and by the time it had passed, the darkness of night had shut in and the stars were shining.

