



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

Chapter 5: The Great Florida Reef

THE great Florida Reef, up which our young canoemates had just started on their adventurous cruise, is about 230 miles long. It extends from Cape Florida, on the Atlantic coast, completely around the southern end of the peninsula, and far out into the Gulf of Mexico on the west. The island of Key West lies some 70 miles off the mainland, and about the same distance from the Dry Tortugas, which group of little coral islets forms the western extremity of the reef. Between Key West, on which is a city of the same name containing nearly 20,000 inhabitants, who live farther south than any one else in the United States, and Cape Florida, 150 miles east and north, a multitude of little keys or islands, covered to the water's edge with a dense growth of mangroves and other tropical trees and shrubs, stretch in a continuous line. Between these keys* and the mainland lies a vast shallow expanse of water known as the Bay of Florida. Outside of them is the narrow and navigable Hawk Channel, running along their entire length, and bounded on its seaward side by the almost unbroken wall of the outer reef. This rarely rises above the surface, and on it the busy coral insects pursue their ceaseless toil of rock-building. Beyond the reef, between it and the island of Cuba, eighty miles away, pours the mighty flood of the Gulf Stream.

* The word "key" is a corruption of the Spanish Cayo or island. Thus Key West was originally "Cayo Hueso," or Bone Island, so called from the quantity of human bones found on it by the first white settlers.

For nearly 300 years these peaceful looking keys, with their bewildering network of channels, kept open by the rushing tide currents, and coral reefs were the chosen resorts of pirates and wreckers, both of whom reaped rich rewards from the unfortunate vessels that fell into their hands. Now the pirates have disappeared, and the business of the wreckers has been largely taken from them by the establishment of a range of lighthouses along the outer reef, at intervals of twenty to thirty miles. The first of these is on Loggerhead Key, the outermost of the Tortugas. Then comes Rebecca Shoal, halfway between Loggerhead and Sand Key Light, which is just off Key West. From here the lights in order up the reef are American Shoal, Sombrero, Alligator, Carysfort, and Fowey Rocks, off Cape Florida.

With this chain of flashing beacons to warn mariners of the presence of the dreaded reef, the palmy days of wreckers and beachcombers have passed away, and they must content themselves with



what they can make out of the occasional vessels that are still drawn in to the reef by the powerful currents ever setting towards' it. Consequently most of those who would otherwise be wreckers have turned their attention to sponging in the waters behind the keys, which form one of the great spongefields of the world, or to the raising of pineapples and coconuts on such of the islands as afford sufficient soil for this purpose.

There are four ways by which one may sail up the reef. The first is outside in the Gulf Stream, or by "way of the Gulf"; the second is between the reef and the keys, through the Hawk Channel; the third is through the narrow and intricate channels among the keys, or "inside," as the spongers say; and the fourth is the "bay way," or through the shoal waters behind the keys.

Of all these, the third, or inside way, was the one chosen by Sumner as being the most protected from wind and seas, the most picturesque, the one affording the most frequent opportunities for landing, the most interesting, and in every way best adapted to canoes drawing but a few inches of water.

As the Psyche and Cupid are running easily along the north shore of the key before a light southerly breeze, there is time to take a look at the "duffle" with which they are laden. In the first place, each has two lateen sails, the long yards of which are hoisted on short masts rising but a few feet from the deck. These sails can be hoisted, lowered, or quickly reefed by the canoeman from where he sits. The two halves of the double-bladed paddles are held in metal clips on deck, on either side of the cockpit. Also on deck, securely fastened, is a small folding anchor, the light but strong five-fathom cable of which runs through a ring at the bow, and back to a cleat just inside the forward end of the coaming.

On the floor of each canoe is folded a small tent made of gay-striped awning cloth, and provided with mosquito nettings at the openings. Above these are laid the pair of heavy Mackinaw blankets and the rubber poncho that each carries. These, which will be shelter and bedding at night, answer for seats while sailing.

Under the deck, at one side of each cockpit, hangs a double barreled shotgun; and on the other side are half a dozen tiny lockers, in which are stowed a few simple medicines, fishing tackle, matches, an alcohol lamp (*flamme forcé*), loaded shells for the guns, etc. In the after stowage lockers are extra clothing and toilet articles. The Psyche carries the mess chest, containing a limited supply of tableware, sugar, coffee, tea, baking powder, salt, pepper, etc., and a light axe, both of which are stowed at the forward end of the cockpit. The Cupid carries in the same place a two-gallon water keg and a small, but well-furnished tool chest. The provisions, of which bacon, flour, oatmeal, sea biscuit, a few cans of baked beans and brown bread, dried apples, syrup, cocoa, condensed milk, corn meal, rice, and hominy form the staples, and the few necessary cooking utensils, which are made to fit within one another, are evenly divided between the two canoes and stowed under the forward hatches. By Sumner's advice, many things that the Mantons brought with them have been left behind, and everything taken along has been reduced to its smallest possible compass. Besides the shotgun that Mr. Manton had given him as part of the Psyche's outfit, Sumner was armed with a revolver that had been his father's.

Late in the afternoon they passed the eastern point of the island of Key West, and crossing a broad open space, in the shoal waters of which, but for Sumner's intimate knowledge of the place,



even their light canoes would have run aground a dozen times, they approached the coconut groves of Boca Chica, a large key on which they proposed to make their first camp.

The western sky was in a glory of flame as they hauled their craft ashore, and from the tinted waters myriads of fish were leaping in all directions, as though intoxicated by the splendor of the scene.

“We will catch some of those fine fellows a little later,” said Sumner, as they began to unload their canoes and carry the things to the spot they had already chosen for a camp.

“But it will be dark,” protested Worth.

“So much the better. It’s ever so much easier to catch fish in the dark than by daylight.”

There was plenty of driftwood on the beach, and in a few minutes the merry blaze of their campfire was leaping from a pile of it. While waiting for it to burn down to a bed of coals, each of them drove a couple of stout stakes, and pitched their canoe tents near a clump of tall palms, just back of the fire, looped up the side openings, and spread their blankets beneath them.

“Now let’s fly round and get supper,” cried Sumner, “for I am as hungry as a kingfish. You put the coffee water on to boil, while I cut some slices of bacon, Worth, and then I’ll scramble some eggs, too, for we might as well eat them while they are fresh.”

With his back turned to the fire, the former did not notice what Worth was doing, until a hissing sound, accompanied by a cry of dismay, caused him to look round.

“I never saw such a miserable kettle as that!” exclaimed Worth. “Iust look; it has fallen all to pieces.”

For a moment Sumner could not imagine what had caused such a catastrophe. Then he exclaimed: “I do believe you must have set the kettle on the coals before you put the water into it.”

“Of course I did,” answered Worth, “so as to let it get hot. And the minute I began to pour water into it, it went all to pieces.”

“Experience comes high,” said Sumner, “especially when it costs us the loss of our best kettle; but we’ve got to have it at any price, and I don’t believe you’ll ever set a kettle on the fire again without first putting water or some other liquid inside of it.”

“No, I don’t believe I will,” answered Worth, ruefully, “if that is what happens.”

In spite of this mishap, the supper was successfully cooked, thanks to Sumner’s culinary knowledge, and by the time it was over and the dishes had been washed, he pronounced it dark enough to go fishing. First he cut a quantity of slivers from a piece of pitch pine drift wood, then, having emptied one of the canoes of its contents, he invited Worth to enter it with him.

“But we haven’t a single fish line ready,” protested Worth.

“Oh yes, we have,” laughed Sumner, lighting one end of the bundle of pine slivers, and giving it to Worth to hold. “You just sit still and hold that. You’ll find out what sort of a fish line it is in a minute.” Then he paddled the canoe very gently a few rods off shore, at the same time bearing down on one gunwale until it was even with the surface of the water. “Look out, here they come!” he shouted.

