



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

Chapter 8: Life on the Lonely Island

THE influence of a brisk wood fire on a dark night is remarkable. Not only does it give freely of its heat and light, but gloom and despair are banished by its ruddy glow, while cheerfulness and hope spring forward as if by magic to occupy their vacant places. At least, this was the effect of the cheery blaze our canoemates had at length succeeded in coaxing into life, and though it had cost them two of their half-dozen cartridges, they felt that these had been well expended. Their prospects had looked dismal enough when they had been compelled to contemplate an existence without a fire; but with it to aid them, they felt equal to almost any emergency, and they turned to the preparing of their ducks for supper with renewed energy. Surely fire is well worthy of being classed with air and water as one of the things most necessary to human life and happiness.

Now that they had time to think of it, the boys were very hungry, for since an early breakfast they had eaten but a light lunch of crackers and jam. So they barely waited to assure themselves that their fire was going to burn, before the feathers from their ducks were flying in all directions. When the birds were plucked and cleaned, two sharpened sticks were thrust through their bodies. These were rested on one rock, with another above them to hold them in place, so that the ducks were lifted but a few inches above a great bed of glowing coals. Then the hungry lads sat down to watch them, and never, to their impatient belief, had two fowls taken so long to roast before. They began testing their condition by sticking the points of their knives into them long before there was a chance of their being done. At length Sumner declared that he was going to eat his even if it were still raw, and the half-cooked ducks were placed on two broad palm leaves that served at once as tables and plates.

"My! But isn't this fowl tough!" exclaimed Worth, as he struggled with his share of the feast. "Sole leather and rubber are nothing to it."

"Yes," replied Sumner; "ten-ounce army duck would be easier eating than this fellow. I wish we could have stewed them with rice, a few bits of pork, a slice or two of onion, and a seasoning of pepper and salt. How do you think that would go?"

"Please don't mention such things," said Worth, working at a drumstick with teeth and both hands.

"Ducks ought always to be parboiled before roasting," remarked Sumner, wisely.



“I believe this fellow would be like eggs,” replied Worth; “the more you boiled him the harder he would get.”

However, hunger and young teeth can accomplish wonders, so it was not very long before two little heaps of cleanly-picked bones marked all that was left of the ducks, and though they could easily have eaten more, the boys wisely decided to reserve the doves for breakfast.

Although the darkness rendered it a difficult task, Sumner managed to cut a few armfuls more of palmetto leaves. These, shredded from their heavy stalks and spread thickly over the floor of the lean-to, made a couch decidedly more comfortable than a bed on the bare ground would have been.

They could do nothing more that night, and lying there in the firelight they had the first opportunity since discovering the loss of their canoes to thoroughly discuss the situation.

“What would our mothers say if they could see us now, and know the fix we are in?” queried Worth, after a meditative silence.

“I’m awfully glad they can’t know anything about it,” replied Sumner.

“But I wish some one could know, so that they could send a boat for us. I am sure that we don’t want to stay on this island for the rest of our lives.”

“Of course not, and I don’t propose to, even if no boat comes here.”

“What do you propose to do?” inquired Worth, leaning on his elbow, and gazing at his companion with eager interest.

“Well, in the first place, I propose to explore this key thoroughly tomorrow, and see if any traces of the canoes are to be found, as well as what it will afford in the way of food and lumber. Then, if we don’t find the canoes, and no boat comes along, I propose to build some kind of a raft, on which we can float over to Indian Key. While boats rarely pass this way, some are certain to pass within a short distance of it almost every day. So from there we would have little difficulty in getting taken off.”

“Well,” said Worth, regarding his companion admiringly, “I’m sure I couldn’t build a raft with only a hatchet, and I’m awfully glad that I’m not here all alone. What can possibly have become of our canoes, anyway?”

“I’m sure I can’t imagine,” replied Sumner, “unless some one stole them, and I don’t know of any one on the reef mean enough to do that. Besides, we haven’t seen a sail all day, nor a sign of a human being. They couldn’t have gone adrift, either — at least, I don’t see how they could. So, on the whole, it’s a conundrum that I give up. You’d better believe that I feel badly enough, though, over losing Psyche. That worries me a great deal more than how we are going to get away from here, for I never expect to own another such beauty as she is. But there’s no use crying over what can’t be helped, so let’s go to sleep, and prepare for a fresh start tomorrow. Whenever you wake during the night you want to get up and throw a fresh stick on the fire, and I will do the same, for we can’t afford to let it go out.”

“All right,” said Worth. “But, Sumner, there aren’t any wild beasts or snakes on this key, are there?”

“I don’t believe there are any snakes,” was the reply, “while there certainly aren’t any animals larger than ’coons, and they won’t hurt any one. No, indeed, there is nothing to be afraid of here, and you may be as free from anxiety on that score as though you were in your own room in New York City. More so,” he added, with a laugh; “for there you might have burglars, while here there is no



chance of them. I only wish there was; for burglars in this part of the country would have to come in boats, and we might persuade them to take us off the key. Now go to sleep, old man, and pleasant dreams to you.”

“Good night,” answered Worth, and closing his eyes, the boy made a resolute effort to sleep. Somehow he found it harder to do so now than it had been on his first night of camping out. The loss of the canoes seemed to have removed an element of safety on which he had depended, and to have suddenly placed him at an infinite distance beyond civilization, with all its protections. It was so awful to be imprisoned on this lonely isle, in those faraway southern seas. He wondered what his father and mother and Uncle Tracy were doing, and if there was a dance at the Ponce de Leon that night, and what his school fellows in New York would say if they knew of his situation. He wondered and thought of these and a thousand other things, until finally he, too, fell asleep, and the silence of the lonely little camp was unbroken save by the voice of the great hoot owl, who called at regular intervals, “Whoo, whoo, whoo-ah!”

It still wanted an hour or so of moonrise, when the waning firelight half disclosed a human figure that emerged from the woods behind the lean-to, and stealthily crouched in the black shadow beside it. For some moments it remained motionless, listening to the regular breathing of the boys. Then it moved noiselessly forward on hands and knees.

Suddenly Worth awoke, and sprang into a sitting posture. At the same time he uttered a startled cry, at the sound of which the creeping figure drew quickly back, and disappeared behind the trunk of a tree.

“What is it?” asked Sumner, who, awakened by Worth’s cry, was also sitting up.

“I don’t know,” answered the boy, “but I am almost certain that some one was trying to pull my gun away.”

