



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

Chapter 22: Good-Bye to the Transit

THAT night the Norther broke, and by the following morning the weather was of that absolutely perfect character that makes the winter the most delightful season of the year in southern Florida. The sun shone with unclouded splendor, fish leaped from the clear waters, gay plumaged birds flitted among the mangroves, and made the air vocal with their happy songs. All nature was full of life and rejoicing.

Although Lieutenant Carey was much disturbed by learning that false reports had been spread among the Indians concerning the nature of his expedition, and realized that its difficulties would be greatly increased thereby, he had no thought of abandoning it. Therefore, by the earliest daylight, preparations were made for repairing the damaged cruisers, and putting them in condition for a new start. The stanch little Psyche had been brought down the beach the day before. There was a good supply of tools aboard the schooner, and Sumner, who had fully recovered his strength, was found to be so expert a shipwright that he was intrusted with planning and directing the repairs to the cruisers, while the Lieutenant, with several men, went to examine into the condition of the wrecked sloop, and see what could be done with her.

They found her injuries so much less than was expected, that within three days she had been hauled off the reef and rendered sufficiently seaworthy for the voyage back to Key West.

In this time also Sumner finished his job on the cruisers, and they were again in thorough order for the work required of them.

Rust Norris was able to render them one service, by guiding them to some cisterns from which they obtained the supply of fresh water, without which they would not have dared proceed on their cruise. His companion, who was a good hunter and well acquainted with the game resorts of that vicinity, provided them with plenty of fresh venison. He also won Worth's regard by giving him a turkey call, or whistle, made from one of the wing bones of a wild turkey, and taking him off before daylight one morning on a turkey hunt. From this the boy returned fully as proud as the fine gobbler he had shot had been a short time before. So elated was he by this success that he declared himself to be the hunter of the expedition from that time forth, and promised to provide it with all necessary meat.

By the close of the third day after the storm everything was in readiness for a new start. That evening was spent in writing letters to be sent back by the sloop, and daylight of the following



morning saw both vessels standing out of the lagoon. Once outside, the sloop bore away to the westward, its occupants waving their hats and shouting good wishes to those whom but a few days before they had tried their best to injure.

“I declare!” said Sumner to Worth, “I don’t know of anything that makes a fellow feel better than to succeed in turning an enemy into a friend. Now I shall always like Rust Norris, and he will always like me, while if no difficulty had arisen between us we might have been on speaking terms all our lives without caring particularly for each other.”

“But, Sumner!” exclaimed Worth, in a grieved tone; “aren’t you ever going to care particularly for me, because we have never been enemies?”

“Care for you, old man! After all we have gone through with together, and after all the anxiety we have had on account of each other? Why, Worth, if I cared any more for you than I do, I’d pack you up in cotton and send you home by express, for fear you might get hurt.”

“Then please don’t,” laughed the boy, “for I want to see the Everglades, and do some more hunting before I am sent home.”

Although Worth was so impatient to see the ’Glades, and though the *Transit* was headed directly for them, he was obliged to content himself with seeing other things for some days to come. For a whole week the little schooner threaded her way through the most bewildering maze of islands, reefs, and channels known to this continent. There were thousands of keys of all sizes and shapes, and all covered with the mangroves that had built them. As for the oyster bars, sandbars, and reefs, they were so numerous that, in finding her way through them, the *Transit* was headed to every point, half-point, and quarter-point of the compass during each hour of her sailing time. The number of times that she ran aground were innumerable, as were those that she was compelled to turn back from some blind channel and seek a new one.

Through all this bewildering maze of keys and channels great tide rivers of crystal water continually ebbed and flowed. In them uncounted millions of fish, from huge silvery tarpon, vampirelike devil-fish, and ravenous sharks, down to tiny fellows, striped, spotted, or mottled with every hue of the rainbow, rushed and sported, chased and being chased, devouring and being devoured, but always affording a fascinating kaleidoscope of darting forms and flashing colors.

Nor was the birdlife of these Ten Thousand Islands less interesting. It seemed as though the numbers of the great Wader and Soarer families collected here were almost as many as the fish on which they feasted. Whole regiments of stately flamingoes, clad in their pink hunting coats, stood solemnly on the mud flats. Squadrons of snow-white pelicans sailed in company with fleets of their more soberly plumaged comrades. Great snowy herons, little white herons, great blue herons, little blue herons, green herons, and yellow-legged herons mingled with cranes and curlews on the oyster bars. Ducks of infinite variety, together with multitudes of coots and cormorants, floated serenely on the placid waters. Overhead, clouds of snowy ibises, outlined in pink by edgings of roseate spoonbills, rose and fell and glinted in the bright sunlight. Gannets, gulls, and ospreys hovered above the fishing grounds. Bald-headed eagles watched them from the tops of tall mangroves, ready at a moment’s notice to pounce down and rob them of their prey. Far overhead, black specks against the brilliant blue of the sky, sailed, on motionless pinions, stately men-of-war hawks or frigate birds — most graceful



of all the soarers. All these, and many more, the mere naming of which would fill a chapter, flocked to these teeming fishing grounds, and afforded a never-ending source of wonder and amusement to our young canoemates and their companions.

Still, with all these, besides the unending difficulties of the navigation to occupy their minds, the end of a week found the boys heartily tired of mangrove keys and blind channels, and anxious for a change of scene. It was, therefore, with a feeling of decided relief that a dark, unbroken line, stretching north and south as far as the eye could reach, was finally sighted and pronounced to be the pine woods of the mainland. Approaching it with infinite difficulty on account of the rapidly shoaling water, they at length discovered a large stream, the water of which was brackish. It was evidently one of the numerous waterways draining the vast reservoirs of the 'Glades into the sea. Here the exploring party was to leave the *Transit* and take to the smaller craft, in which they proposed to penetrate the interior.

Again an evening was devoted to writing letters to be sent back by the schooner, and again all hands were ordered to turn out by daylight.

Lieutenant Carey had decided to send one of the cruisers back, and to take but one besides the three canoes into the 'Glades. The recent difficulties of navigation had shown him that a full crew would be needed to carry the schooner back to deep water, and he also imagined that the fewer boats the explorers had to force through the 'Glades the easier they would get along. The Indians, too, would be less suspicious of a small party than of a large one. Thus he decided to limit the party to himself and the two boys in the canoes, with *Quorum* and one other man in the cruiser, or five in all.

With a breakfast by lamplight, and the final preparations hurried as much as possible, the sun was just rising when the little fleet shoved off from the *Transit*, and with flashing paddles entered the mouth of the dark looking river, the waters of which, in all probability, the keels of white men's boats were now to furrow for the first time.

"Goodbye, Mr. Sloe! You want to hurry round to Cape Florida, or we'll be there first!"

"Goodbye, *Quorum*! Look out for that woolly scalp of yours!" came from the schooner.

"Goodbye! Good luck! Goodbye!" and then the canoes rounded a wooded point, and were lost to sight of those who watched their first plunge into the trackless wilderness.

