



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

Chapter 24: Rattlesnakes and Rifle-Shots

WHILE they were returning through the grassy glade, the Lieutenant, who was a few steps in advance, suddenly stopped and sprang back. The boys barely caught a glimpse of a flat, wicked looking head, from which a forked tongue was viciously thrusting, and heard a sound like the whir-r-r-r of an immense locust, when Lieutenant Carey fired, and the head disappeared in the tall grass.

“It was a snake, wasn’t it?” asked Worth.

“Worse than that,” replied the Lieutenant. “It was a diamondback rattler, the most venomous snake known to this country, and with another step I should have been on him. I’d rather face your panther unarmed than to have stepped on that fellow.”

“What would you have done if you had met it without a gun in your hand?” asked Sumner, curiously.

“Huh,” answered the Lieutenant, laconically, as he grasped the lifeless body of the snake by the tail, with a view to dragging it into camp.

“But if he had caught and bitten you?”

“He wouldn’t have caught me, because, in the first place, he would have been content to be let alone, and wouldn’t have chased me. In the second place, the rattlesnake is such a sluggish reptile that I could run faster than he, and could easily have kept out of his way.”

“Well, then, what would you do if you were bitten?”

“If it were on an arm or a leg, I should tie my handkerchief above the wound, and twist it with a bit of stick as tightly as possible, so as to impede the circulation. Then I should enlarge the wound with my knife, and, if I could reach it with my mouth, I should suck it for five minutes, frequently spitting out the blood. After that I should get to camp as quickly; as possible, put a freshly-chewed tobacco plaster on the wound every ten minutes for the next hour, and at the same time drink a tumblerful of whiskey or other alcoholic liquor. If I could do all that, and the fangs had not struck an artery, I should feel reasonably sure of recovery.”

“Suppose they had struck an artery, what would you do?”

“Reconcile myself to death as quickly as possible, for I should probably be dead inside of three minutes,” was the grim reply.



Worth shuddered as he gazed at the scaly body that, marked with black and yellow diamonds, trailed for more than five feet behind the Lieutenant, and remarked that the sooner they got away from the haunts of panthers and rattlesnakes, and back among the good-natured alligators, the better he should like it.

“I shouldn’t think Indians would care to live in such a rattlesnaky country,” he added.

“They don’t mind them,” laughed the Lieutenant. “Their keen eyesight generally enables them to discover a snake as soon as he sees them. Then, too, they have an infallible antidote for snake bite, the secret of which they refuse to divulge to white men.”

“How many rattles has this fellow?” asked Sumner.

“Only seven,” answered Lieutenant Carey, counting them.

“Then he was a young fellow. I thought from his size that he must be pretty old, and would have twelve or thirteen rattles and a button at least.”

“The number of rattles does not indicate a snake’s age,” said the Lieutenant, smiling. “They get broken off, as do long fingernails. I have seen very large snakes with fewer rattles than others that were smaller and evidently younger.

While they were eating lunch Quorum skinned the snake, rubbed the beautiful skin thoroughly with fine salt, and rolled it into a compact bundle, in which condition it would keep for a long time.

After lunch and the hour’s rest that followed it the little fleet was again got under way, and proceeded up the swift river. About the middle of the afternoon they entered the broad belt of cypress timber that borders the Everglades on the west. Here the serried ranks of tall trees, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, held out their long moss-draped arms until they met overhead, and formed a dim archway for the passage of the rushing current. The water flowed with strange gurglings against the gray trunks, and the whole scene was one of such weird solitude, that on entering it the explorers shivered as with a chill. Through the semi-twilight fluffy night herons flitted like gray shadows, and the harsh scream of an occasional waterfowl, startled by the dip of paddles, echoed through the gloomy forest like a cry of human distress.

The atmosphere of the place was so depressing that no one spoke, but each bent to his paddle or oars with redoubled energy, the quicker to escape into the sunshine that they knew must lie somewhere beyond it.

Quorum, who had been sitting in the stern of the cruiser while the sailor rowed, was finally made so nervous by his uncanny surroundings that he begged his companion to change places with him. He wished to row that his thoughts might be occupied with the hard work. The sailor complied, though laughing at the negro’s fears as he did so. While Quorum was working with desperate energy to catch up with the other boats, there came an incident of so startling a nature that in relating it afterwards he said: “I tell yo, sah, de ole niggah so skeer dat him come de neares’ in he life to tu’ nin’ plumb white!”

It was a volley of rifle shots that flashed and roared from the forest on the right bank of the river like thunder from a clear sky. A second volley followed almost immediately, and then succeeded such a din of yells, whoops, and howlings as would have dismayed the stoutest heart.

For an instant each one of the explorers imagined himself to be the sole survivor of a wholesale massacre, and the surprise of the volleys was fully equalled by that of seeing his companions still alive.



While the echoes of the first volley were still reverberating through the dim arches of the forest, Quorum whirled the cruiser around as on a pivot, and despite his companion's remonstrances, started her down the river with a rush. The canoemen sat for a couple of seconds with uplifted paddles as though paralyzed, and in that space of time the powerful current did for them what Quorum had done for the cruiser. There seemed nothing to do but to fly from those crashing rifles and demoniac yells. So fly they did, paddling furiously, and casting fearful glances over their shoulders to note if they were pursued. It must be stated, however, that the Lieutenant tried repeatedly to rally the fugitives, and when he found this to be impossible, he held his own canoe in check until certain that 'no immediate pursuit was being undertaken.

It was nearly sunset when he overtook the others at a place beyond the lower edge of the cypress belt, where they had halted to wait for him. He found them still badly demoralized, and ready to continue their flight at the first intimation of further danger.

"Well, boys," he cried, cheerily, as his canoe swept down beside them, "I suppose we might as well call this the end of our day's work, and go into camp."

"Camp?" almost gasped Worth. "You don't mean, sir, that you propose to go into camp while the whole country is simply swarming with savage Indians?"

"I certainly do," replied the Lieutenant. "We shall be safer in camp, where we can work together, than on the river, where we must necessarily be separated, especially in the dark. Moreover, I don't believe we shall be molested here. The mere fact that they have not pursued us so far is, to my mind, an indication that they don't intend to. Indeed, boys, in thinking over this matter, I am inclined to believe that the Indians, or whoever fired those shots, for I didn't see a human being, only intended to frighten us, in the hope that we would give up our undertaking. I believe that the cartridges they fired were blanks. Certainly some of us would have been hit if they had been loaded. I cannot remember seeing a bullet strike the water or anywhere else; can you?"

No; none of them had noticed anything of the kind.

"That they have not pursued us is another indication that they do not desire our lives," continued the Lieutenant. "Besides all this, the Seminoles are fully aware of the consequences to themselves in case they should kill a white man, and I have no idea that they desire a war or anything like it. Thus I say that they only meant to frighten us, and I must acknowledge that they succeeded. I, for one, was never more startled and scared in my life. Now I propose that we camp here, without lighting a fire to betray our presence, or let them know that we have stopped running, until towards morning. Then I intend to try the passage of that cypress swamp again."

