



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

Chapter 25: Worth's Lonely Night-Watch

LIEUTENANT CAREY'S remarks were received by his companions with considerable incredulity. None of them had ever been under fire before, and it was hard to realize that the deafening volleys that had roared at them from the cypress forest had not been fired with deadly intent. To be sure, neither they, nor even their boats, had been hit; but that might as easily be attributed to poor marksmanship as to good intention on the part of the Indians. Of course, they did not doubt for an instant that those who had fired from that well-concealed ambush were Indians. Who else occupied that country, or who else would have done such a thing? Had not Rust Norris given the Indians false information concerning the objects of the expedition, and roused them to anger against it? Even if this first attack had only been intended for a scare, would a second prove equally harmless? What possible chance had their little band of making its way through the trackless leagues between there and the eastern coast, if the four hundred or so of Seminoles occupying the country had determined to prevent them? None at all, of course.

On the other hand, as Lieutenant Carey very justly urged, the Indians could not afford to go to war with the whites. Besides, did the way ahead of them present any greater difficulties than that they had so recently traversed? What could they do with their frail boats, even if they should return to the open waters of the Gulf? Could they hope to reach Key West in them? Then, too, how humiliating it would be to give up their undertaking merely because they had been frightened, and without having caught a glimpse of their enemies!

Lieutenant Carey declared his purpose of going on alone if the others refused to accompany him, and Sumner said that, as the son of a naval officer, he was bound to follow the Lieutenant. Worth said: "Of course, if you go, Sumner, I must go with you; but I'm awfully frightened all the same."

The sailor said that he had no thought of disobeying the Lieutenant's orders, and only deserted him as he did in the cypress swamp because Quorum was at the oars, and carried him off against his will.

Quorum said: "Ef Marse Summer an' Marse Worf gwine fight dem Injuns, ob co'se de ole man gwine erlong to pertec' 'em. Dem chillun can't be 'lowed ter go prospeckin' in de wilderness wifout Quor'm ter look after 'em, an' holp do de fightin' as well as de cookin'."

All this discussion took place after the canoes had been hauled from the water and concealed in a clump of bushes, and while coffee was being prepared over the alcohol lamps, which gave out great



heat with little light. They gathered closely about their little stoves and talked in low tones, while the night shadows settled down and shut out the surrounding landscape. After eating a hearty meal which showed their appetites to be in nowise impaired by their recent fright, and providing a supply of coffee for the morning, they rolled up in their blankets and lay down for a few hours' sleep on the bare ground. That is, all but Worth lay down. He, wrapping his blanket about him, and sitting with his gun across his knees, prepared to keep the first hour's watch. He was given this first hour because he was the youngest, and he was to wake Sumner when it had expired. Sumner was to rouse Quorum, he the sailor, and he the Lieutenant, who was to stand the last watch and decide upon the time for starting.

To be sitting there alone, surrounded by the unseen terrors of a Southern wilderness, was a novel and weird experience for Worth. He could hear the eddying and gurgling of the river, with frequent splashes that marked the nocturnal activity of its animal life. Innumerable insects filled the air about him with shrill sounds, and deep-voiced frogs kept up a ceaseless din from the adjacent swamps. Frequent vibratory bellowings, exactly like those of an enraged bull, and certain floundering in the water, attested the wakefulness of his newly-made alligator acquaintances. The forest rang with the tiresomely irritating notes of the chuckwills-widows and the solemn warnings of the great hoot owls.

Every now and then he was startled by the agonized cries of some unfortunate bird seized and dragged from its resting place by a 'Coon or other predatory animal. These, loud and shrill at first, gradually became weaker, until hushed into a lifeless silence. His blood chilled at the distant howl of wolves, or the human-like cry of a panther, and it required all the boy's strength of mind to refrain from arousing his comrades long before the expiration of that interminable hour.

Only a frequent reaching out of the hand and touching Sumner, who lay close beside him, gave him courage to maintain his solitary vigil. His mind was so actively occupied by what he heard, and by listening for what he dreaded still more to hear -- the dip of paddles or other sounds indicating the approach of human enemies, that he had not the slightest inclination to sleep. He never was more wide awake in his life, with all his senses more keenly alert, than during that hour. He wondered if, with all those uncanny sounds ringing in his ears, he should dare even to close his eyes when his turn for sleeping came. He kept track of the time by occasionally striking a match, and looking at his watch beneath the sheltering folds of his blanket.

When the time came to waken Sumner, he hated to do so; but realizing that his own strength for the ensuing day depended upon his sleeping that night, he finally laid his hand gently on his comrade's forehead. From long training in being aroused at unseemly hours, Sumner sat up, wide awake, in an instant. The boys exchanged, a few whispered words, and then Worth lay down. He closed his eyes, determined to try and sleep, though without the least idea of being able to do so.

When he next opened them Lieutenant Carey was bending over him, and saying that it was three o'clock in the morning. It seemed impossible that he could have been asleep for hours, and as the boy sat up rubbing his eyes, he was certain that the Lieutenant must have made some mistake.

In spite of the darkness, which was still as intense as ever, the boats had been almost noiselessly got into the water, and Quorum had heated the coffee made the night before. A cup of this, hot and strong, roused the boy into a full wakefulness, and fifteen minutes later he was seated in his canoe, prepared once



more to undertake the passage of the dreaded cypress belt. The Lieutenant led the Way, Sumner and Worth, keeping as close together as possible, followed, and the cruiser, with muffled oars, brought up the rear.

If the cypress forest into which they almost immediately plunged had seemed weird and gloomy by daylight, how infinitely more so was it in the pitchy darkness by which it was now enshrouded! Still, the black walls of tree trunks rising on each side could be distinguished from the surface of the river, and thus the voyagers were enabled to keep in the channel. The air was motionless, and heavy with dampness and the rank odors of decaying vegetation. The rush of waters, the splash of their paddles, and the unaccountable night sounds of the drenched forest, rang out with startling distinctness. They proceeded with the utmost caution, and uttered no word; but it seemed as though their progress must be apparent to any ear within a mile of them.

For two hours they worked steadily and without a pause. They felt that they must have passed the scene of their previous evening's adventure. They were certain of this when at length the cypresses began to grow smaller; and their branches no longer meeting overhead, a faint light began to show itself in the lane of sky thus disclosed.

NOW they knew that they must be approaching the confines of the belt, and that the open 'Glades must be close at hand. They breathed more freely than they had for hours, and with each foot of progress their spirits became lightened.

The stream which they were following began to branch off in various directions, and the strength of its current was sensibly diminished. By the time the light was sufficient for them to discern clearly surrounding objects, the cypress belt was behind them, and the limitless expanse of the open 'Glades stretched away in their front. On the very edge of the cypress forest was a tiny hammock surmounting a slight elevation of solid ground. As the little fleet was passing this, its several crews were beginning to exchange a few words of conversation for the first time since leaving their camp.

Suddenly their voices were hushed by something almost as startling as the rifle shots of the previous evening. This time it was the sound of a loud voice, evidently that of a white man, not more than a few rods from them, calling:

"Come, you fellows, wake up! Here it is daylight, and no fire started yet."

The startled canoemen looked at each other wonderingly, and Sumner was about to utter a shout that would betray their presence when a warning sign from Lieutenant Carey restrained him. Beckoning them to follow him quietly, the Lieutenant led the way past the hammock from which the voice had issued, and into a thick clump of tall sawgrass, by which they were effectually concealed. Bidding them remain there until his return, and on no account betray their presence by sound or movement, he left them, and cautiously guided his canoe back to the hammock. Stepping lightly from it as it touched the land, he made his way quietly through the trees and bushes composing the hammock until, without being seen or heard, he could command a view of an open space in its centre.

Rough looking cowboys About the smoldering ashes of a campfire ten rough-looking characters, whom he at once recognized as South Florida cowboys, were sitting up, yawning and rubbing their eyes into wakefulness, or lay still stretched on the ground enveloped in the blankets that formed their beds.

As there was but little danger of their discovering him, the Lieutenant waited where he was, to learn something of their character from their conversation, before either showing himself or retiring without disclosing his presence.

