



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

Chapter 26: The Florida Everglades

PRESENTLY a man who was rebuilding the fire straightened up, and addressing one of the others, said:

"We're going to get out o' here today, ain't we, Bill?"

"Yes, you bet we are," was the answer. "We hain't got nothing more to stay yere in the swamps for, unless you think they might make another try for it, which I don't think they will."

"Not much they won't, after the way they skedaddled when we-uns began to yell. Hi! how they did cut downstream! I'll bet they hain't stopped yit. They must ha' reckoned the hull Seminole nation was layin' fur 'em. Ho! ho! ho! ha! ha! ha! Hit was the slickest job I ever did see!"

"You don't reckon they'll hanker after visitin' the 'Glades agin in a hurry, then?" asked another voice.

"Hanker fur the 'Glades? Not muchy, they won't. Why, they won't tetch foot to the mainland of the State of Fluridy again, not if they can help it. Leastways, not so long as they's a Injun left in hit. Hit's been a hard trip and a mean job for us fellers, but hit'll pay. The report thet ar Leftenant'll make when he gits home'll do mo' to 'd gittin' the Seminoles moved outen the kentry than ennything that's happened sence the Fluridy wah. Now mosey round lively, boys. Let's have a b'ilin' o' coffee, an' light outen hyar."

Lieutenant Carey had heard all that he cared to, and, without betraying his presence to the cowboys, he softly retraced his steps to where the canoe lay, and a minute later rejoined his party. Only telling them that the sooner they put a respectable distance between themselves and that place the better, he led the way into the main stream, that still flowed with considerable force through the grass beds, and turned in the direction of its source. Not until they had gone a good two miles did he pause, and then there were several reasons for calling a halt.

One reason was that they were far enough beyond the reach of the cowboys to defy discovery, and he wished to tell his companions what he had overheard. Another was that the sun was rising, and it was time for breakfast; and a third was that their watery highway having come to an end, it was necessary to decide upon their future course.

A small stove was carried in the cruiser, and as there was now nothing but water, with grass growing in it, about them, it was brought into service. The canoes gathered closely around the larger



craft, and while Quorum prepared breakfast, the Lieutenant related his recent adventure. In conclusion he said: "So you see, boys, our Indians turned out to be white men, and the shooting was only intended to scare us, after all."

"But I don't understand how they knew we were coming, or what they wanted to frighten us for, anyway," said Sumner, wearing a very puzzled expression.

"Neither did I at first," replied Lieutenant Carey; "but I remember now that a gentleman in Key West said the Florida cattlemen would be greatly put out on learning of my proposed expedition. He said that they were using every means, foul and fair, to have the Indians removed from the State, and that they would be bitterly opposed to having the Everglades Set apart as a permanent reservation. He advised me to look out for them, and I laughed at him. Now I realize that some one must have sent the news to them, and they got up this party to head us off in such a way that the blame would be placed upon the Indians. Yes, it is clear enough now; but it was a bit of a puzzle at first."

"Well," said Worth, "it is a great relief to know that they were not Indians, and that we are safely past them, with no danger of their following us."

"It certainly is," replied the Lieutenant. "Though it will be a greater one to me really to meet Indians, as we must sooner or later, and have them treat us decently, or rather leave us alone."

Here Quorum interrupted the conversation with the announcement of, "Breakfus, sah." The amount of cooking that he had managed to accomplish with that one-lidded stove was wonderful. Besides coffee, he had prepared a great smoking pot of oatmeal, and a dish of crisply fried bacon to be eaten with their hardtack; while these things were disappearing, he prepared and fried a panful of flapjacks that were as light and delicate as though cooked by a ten-thousand-dollar chef on the most modern of ranges. Out-of-door camp cookery deserves to rank as one of the exact sciences, and Quorum as one of its masters.

The old negro found perfect happiness in watching the relish with which his deftly prepared food was eaten, and his whole body expressed a smiling satisfaction at the words of praise lavished upon his skill. While Quorum was eating his own breakfast and the sailor was washing and stowing the dishes, the others stood up to take observations.

The main stream came to an end where they were, and from it a dozen narrow channels, filled with flags and lily pads, or "bonnets," as they are called in Florida, radiated in as many directions. As far as the eye could reach, and infinitely farther, in front of them and on both sides, stretched a vast plain of coarse brown grass, rising to a height of several feet, and growing in a foot or two of limpid water. Innumerable channels of deeper water, marked by the vivid green of their peculiar vegetation, crossed and recrossed each other in every direction, and formed a bewildering network. The limitless brown level was dotted here and there with heavily timbered islands of all sizes, from a few rods to many acres in extent. Near at hand these were of a bright green, in the middle distance they were of a rich purple hue, and on the far horizon a misty blue. The highest of these islands, as well as the largest one visible, rose on the very limit of their vision, in the northeast, and as it formed a conspicuous landmark, they decided to lay a course for it. Accordingly, in single file, with the Hu-la-lah leading and "de Punkin Seed" bringing up the rear, the little fleet entered the narrow path that seemed to lead in that direction, and the journey was resumed.



The clearness of the water in the Everglades is accounted for by the fact that it flows above a bottom of coralline rock, and is always in motion. In it stagnation is unknown; and though it is everywhere crowded with plant life, it is as sweet and pure as that of a spring. Another curious fact about the Everglades which is generally unknown is that within their limits but few mosquitoes are found. During the summer months, when all residents on the coast of southern Florida, even the lightkeepers away out on the reef, miles from land, are driven nearly crazy by these pests, the Seminoles, who retire to the Everglades to escape them, are rarely annoyed. The chief insect pests of the 'Glades are the midges, or Stinging gnats, that swarm for an hour or so at sunset and sunrise. Against these the Indians protect themselves by smudges and by nettings of cheese cloth.

From the difficulties of navigation experienced, during this their first day in the 'Glades, our explorers realized that in striving to journey across their width they had undertaken a most arduous task. The channels that they attempted to follow seemed to lead in every direction but the right one. They were generally so narrow and choked with bonnets that paddling or rowing was impossible, and the boats must be forced ahead by poling. Every now and then, too, the shallow waters sank to an unknown depth that no pole could fathom. In such a case, if one attempted to pull his canoe along by grasping the tough grass stalks on either side of him, he was rewarded by a painful cut that often penetrated to the bone. It did not require many sad experiences of this kind to teach the boys that sawgrass is not to be handled with impunity. It has a triangular blade, provided with minutely serrated edges that, green or dry, cut like razors. While it ordinarily attains a height of but four or five feet, the great Everglade lake, Okeechobee, is surrounded by a barrier of "big saw" grass that is well nigh impenetrable to man or beast. Even the scaly-sided alligators shun it. This big sawgrass attains the thickness of a cornstalk, with a height of ten or twelve feet, is closely matted, and its cutting edges are possessed of the keenness of Oriental scimitars.

Sometimes the narrow channels along which our canoemates poled with such difficulty opened into broad clear spaces, where sailing was possible for a mile or so. Full as often the channels ended abruptly in the grass, when the only thing to do was to get overboard in water waist-deep, and push the boats through it.

The sun poured down with an intolerable glare, but its heat was tempered by the strong, fresh breeze that blows every day and all day over the 'Glades with the utmost regularity.

As they slowly drew near the island for which they were steering, it gradually assumed a conical shape and the symmetrical proportions of a pyramid. Late in the afternoon, while they were still about a mile from it, a dense volume of smoke suddenly arose from its extreme summit. This as suddenly disappeared, and then reappeared again at intervals of a second.

"I wonder if it can be a volcano?" queried Worth, as they gazed curiously at this phenomenon.

