



by Kirk Munroe

# Canoemates

*A Story of the Florida Reef and Everglades*

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## Chapter 31: A Closely Guarded Camp

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THE darkness, which comes so quickly after sunset in that far Southern country, with almost no intervening twilight, effectually prevented our explorers from seeing where they were going. They only knew from the stars that their general direction was east, or directly into the heart of the Everglades. They were even unable to study the countenances, dress, or general appearance of the young Indians who, standing in the bow and stern of each canoe, drove it forward with unerring judgment and at a considerable speed by means of long push poles. These poles were quite slender; but each terminated at its lower end in an enlargement, formed by fastening a short bit of wood to either side that prevented it from sinking deeply into the sand or grass roots against which it was set.

The canoes in which our voyagers were now traveling were as different from their own dainty craft as one boat can be from another. Nor did they bear the least resemblance to the bark canoes of Northern Indians, there being no Southern bark similar to that of the Northern birch, or suitable for canoe-building. They were simply dugouts, from twenty to twenty-five feet long by about three feet broad, hollowed with great skill from huge cypress logs. Their lines were fine, and, as our friends afterwards discovered, they are capital sailing craft in any wind, except dead ahead.

When a Seminole decides to build one of these canoes, he first selects and fells his tree, cutting off a section of the required length, and free from knots or cracks. The upper surface of this is hewn smooth, with a slight sheer rise fore and aft. On this smooth surface a plan of the canoe is carefully outlined with charcoal, and then the outside is laboriously worked into shape with hatchets. The hollowing out of the inside is accomplished by fire and hatchets, and, considering the limited supply of tools at the builders' disposal, the result is a triumph of marine architecture. Hatchets and knives are the only tools used in the making of the masts, spars, paddles, push poles, and spear handles that are needed for the equipment of each canoe. The ingenious builders also cut and sew their own sails, which they make of unbleached muslin bought from the trader on Biscayne Bay. Although they use no keels, centerboards, nor leeboards, they manage by holding their paddles firmly against the side of the canoe and deep in the water to sail closehauled, and to keep her up to the wind in a manner that is truly surprising. The Indians take great pride in their canoes and value them highly, for, as they are without horses, roads, or any considerable area of dry land, these are their sole means of



transportation and communication between the different parts of the vast territory over which they roam.

After traveling several miles, this first voyage of our explorers in Indian canoes ended at a heavily wooded islet, between the trees of which they could see the welcome glow of a campfire. To their great delight, as they reached the shore, they found their own canoes and the cruiser safely moored to it. In spite of their joy at again seeing these, they were too hungry and too impatient to visit the Indian village to do more just then than assure themselves that their own boats were all right. Then they hurried towards the fire.

There was a roomy palmetto hut standing near it; but to their surprise the firelight disclosed only a single human figure, which, as they drew near, proved to be that of Quorum. He was hard at work cooking supper, and only acknowledged their presence with a grin, and the announcement that it would be ready in a few minutes.

Turning to the hut, they saw that it had been recently erected, and that it contained their own rolls of bedding, besides the little bags of toilet articles belonging to Lieutenant Carey and the boys, which Quorum had thoughtfully taken from the canoes and placed ready for their use.

“I never realized the luxury of brushes and combs before!” exclaimed Worth, as he occupied the time before supper with making what was probably the most elaborate toilet ever seen in the Everglades.

Meanwhile the Lieutenant was questioning Quorum as to the location of the Indian village, and was disappointed to find the negro as ignorant on the subject as himself. Quorum thought it must be on some other island, as this certainly was not the place to which he had been taken the night before. He said that on arriving there he had found the canoes and cruiser, the hut built, and the fire lighted. The young Indian who had brought him had helped carry the things up to the hut, and also given him some venison and vegetables in exchange for a small quantity of coffee and sugar. He had remained there until shortly before the arrival of the others, and Quorum had not noticed when he disappeared. Before leaving, he had told Quorum that, by the chief’s orders, the white men would remain on that island until the following evening.

“Oh, we will, will we?” said Lieutenant Carey, whose pride chafed against receiving orders from an Indian, even if he was a chief. “With our own boats at hand, I don’t see what is to hinder us from leaving when we please. I wish that chief would hurry up and put in an appearance. I want to have a few words with him.”

He now for the first time realized that the young Indians who had brought them there had not followed them to the camp, and he stepped down to the water’s edge to see what they were doing. To his dismay he found that they had not only disappeared, but had taken the canoes and cruiser with them. Greatly provoked at this, he returned to the camp in a very unpleasant frame of mind, mentally abusing the Indians, and regretting that, by accepting their conditions, he had so completely placed himself in their power. His good nature was somewhat restored by the supper, which was most bountiful and well cooked, and by the soothing pipe smoke that followed it; for among other things, Quorum had not neglected to bring up a plentiful supply of tobacco.

After supper, as he and the boys lay outstretched on their blankets within the hut, the open side of which faced the fire, the Lieutenant acknowledged that their present position was a vast improvement



on that of the night before. The boys agreed with him, though at the same time they were even more disappointed than he at not finding themselves in an Indian village. That was one of the things they had most counted on seeing in the Everglades. Having finally decided to make the best of their situation, and to obtain the greatest possible amount of comfort and pleasure from it, they turned in, and slept soundly until morning.

They were so thoroughly tired with their various hardships and labors of the two preceding days and nights that they slept late, and the sun had already been up for several hours before they answered the negro's call to breakfast. He said that though he had been down to the shore several times after water, he had seen no signs of either canoes or Indians. Thus to all appearances they were not only the sole occupants of the island, but of the 'Glades as well.

As they had nothing else to do, the Lieutenant proposed to the boys that they should explore this new island, and make such discoveries of other islands and the intervening 'Glades as could be seen from its shores. They readily agreed to this, and the three set forth. They had not gone more than a hundred yards from camp when they were suddenly confronted by a young Indian, armed with a rifle, which he pointed at them, at the same time making other signs to them to go back. At first they were greatly startled by his unexpected appearance. Then the Lieutenant undertook to remonstrate with him, and to explain that they only wanted to walk harmlessly about and view the landscape, but all in vain. The stolid-faced young savage either could not or would not understand. He only shook his head without uttering a word, but continued to make signs for them to go back.

"This is one of the strangest and most irritating things that I ever heard of!" exclaimed Lieutenant Carey, after finding his efforts to communicate with the Indian unavailing. "If we only had our guns, I'd make that fellow let us pass or know the reason why. As we haven't any, and he has one, the argument is too one-sided, and we might as well retire from it as gracefully as possible. Let us try another direction, and find out if that is also guarded." They tried in two other places, only to be repulsed by other determined young guards who, mute as statues, were equally stolid and impervious to argument.

There was nothing to do but to return to the hut and make the best of the situation. From there no signs of an Indian was to be seen; but let one of the inmates of the camp stroll beyond its limits in any direction, and the woods seemed to swarm with them, though the guards probably did not number more than half a dozen in all.

The day was passed in eating, sleeping, and in discussing their peculiar situation. They were evidently prisoners, though to all appearances as free as air; but, as Lieutenant Carey said, there was no chance of their escaping from the island anyhow, so why they should be denied the privilege of walking about it he could not understand. Quorum was equally in the dark with the rest, and said that nothing of the kind had been intimated by the chiefs during their talk with him. It was finally decided that instead of being on a small island as they had supposed, they must be at one end of a large one that contained a village at the other, which, for some unknown reason, the Indians did not choose they should visit. With this solution of the problem they were forced to content themselves, and they waited with impatience the coming of night, when, according to what Ul-we had told Quorum, their journey was to be resumed.