



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

Chapter 36: One of the Rarest Animals in the World

AFTER their day of excitement, terror, and anxiety the explorers passed a happy evening around their campfire, and Lieutenant Carey gained a clearer idea of the boys' adventures and escapes. He admitted that the kindness shown them in the Seminole camp gave him a new insight into the Indian character, and wished that he might have had a chance to thank and reward Ul-we for his brave rescue of the young canoemates. He also regretted that he, too, could not have visited that Indian camp, and hoped that the appointment made by the boys with Ul-we might be kept.

In spite of their recent hearty meal of sofkee, a preparation of which they spoke in the highest terms, the boys were able to do ample justice to Quorum's venison steaks, greatly to the satisfaction of the old negro. He would have felt deeply grieved if they had allowed any amount of feasting in an Indian camp to interfere with their enjoyment of a meal that he had cooked, no matter how short an interval might have elapsed between the two.

Although the boys felt rather stiff and lame the next morning, it did not prevent their being ready bright and early to continue their journey. It was a great pleasure to be once more afloat in their own canoes, and this was increased by the fact that they now had a swift current with them. It was a glorious March day, and all nature seemed to share their high spirits as they glided smoothly down the beautiful river. The water swarmed with fish and alligators, and the adjacent forest was alive with birds. Among the innumerable fish that darted beneath them they soon recognized several saltwater varieties, which assured them that the ocean could not be far off.

As the three canoes were moving quietly along abreast of each other and close together, the Psyche suddenly glided over a huge black object that for an instant seemed inclined to rise and lift it bodily into the air. As it was dropped back, there was a tremendous floundering, and all three of the light craft were rocked so violently that only the skill of their navigators saved them from capsizing.

"Was it a waterquake?" inquired Worth, with a very pale face, as soon as his fright would allow him to speak.

"Yes; and there it goes," laughed the Lieutenant, pointing to a great dim form that could just be seen moving swiftly off through the clear water.



“It must have been a whale,” said Sumner. “No,” answered Lieutenant Carey; “but it was the next thing to it. It was a manatee or sea cow. I have seen them in the lower Indian River, but did not know they were found down here. I wish you boys might have a good look at him, though, for the manatee is one of the rarest animals in the world. It is warm-blooded and amphibious, lives on water grasses and other aquatic plants, grows to be twelve or fifteen feet long, weighs nearly a ton, and is one of the most timid and harmless of creatures. It is the only living representative of its family on this continent, all the other members being extinct. The Indians hunt it for its meat, which is said to be very good eating, and for its bones, which are as fine-grained and as hard as ivory. In general appearance it is not unlike a seal. It can strike a powerful blow with its great flat tail, but is otherwise unarmed and incapable of injuring an enemy. Several have been caught in nets and shipped North for exhibition, but none of them has lived more than a few weeks in captivity.”

“What made that fellow go for us if he isn’t a fighter?” asked Worth.

“He didn’t,” laughed the Lieutenant. “He was probably asleep, and is wondering why we went for him. I can assure you that he was vastly more scared than we were.”

“He must have been frightened almost to death, then,” said Sumner.

Soon after this they saw a landing place on the left bank. Stopping to examine it, they discovered a trail leading through a fringe of bushes, behind which was an Indian field covering an old shell mound, and in a high state of cultivation. In it were growing sweet potatoes, melons, squashes, sugarcane, and beans — a supply of which they would gladly have purchased had the proprietors been present. As they were not, and necessity knows no law, our canoemen helped themselves to what they needed, and when they left, the load of the cruiser was materially increased.

At length they heard the dull boom of surf, and realized that only a narrow strip of land separated them from the ocean. Late in the afternoon they reached the mouth of the river, and the boys uttered joyous shouts as they looked out over its bar and saw a limitless expanse of blue waters, unbroken by islands, glistening in the light of the setting sun.

With light hearts they went into camp on the inner side of the sandy point separating the quiet waters on which they had been floating from the long swells of the open sea. They intended running out of the river and down the coast in the morning, for from their surroundings, as well as from the general course they had taken through the ‘Glades, the Lieutenant was satisfied that they must be considerably to the north of Cape Florida.

The boys determined to sleep in their canoes that night, and rigged up the little-used striped canoe tents for that purpose. While they were doing this, and the Lieutenant was pitching his own tent on shore, and the others were collecting driftwood on the beach, there came a hail from across the river.

“Hello there! Bring a boat over here, can’t ye?”

It was the first white man they had seen since leaving the *Transit*, and going over in the cruiser, Sumner brought him back. He proved to be a barefooted boy, a year younger than Worth, and yet he was the mail carrier over the most southerly land route, and one of the most lonesome, in the United States. It is the seventy-mile stretch between Lake Worth and Biscayne Bay, and every week this boy or his younger brother walked the whole distance and back along the beach, with a mail sack on his



back. He had to cross the mouths of two rivers, for which purpose he kept an old skiff at each one. It sometimes happened, as in the present case, that some other beach traveler would appropriate his boat, and leave it on the wrong side. Then, unless fortunate enough to find some one to set him across, he would be obliged to brave the sharks and other sea monsters, with which these rivers swarm, and swim over after his own boat. Along his route were three houses of refuge, situated twenty miles apart, and belonging to the Life Saving Service. Each of them contained a single keeper, and these were the only persons seen by the lonely mail boy while on his toilsome tramps.

The boy was greatly interested in the canoes, which he declared were the neatest little tricks he ever did see, but he scouted the idea of sleeping in them. "Why," said he, "some of them sharks or porpusses what uses round here nights will run inter ye an' upsot ye quicker'n wink."

He was amazed that they should cruise in such tiny craft, and begged them not to think of attempting to run down the coast in them. On the whole he regarded our young canoemates as being particularly daring and reckless fellows, and they regarded him in much the same way, though he made light of his lonely beach tramps, on which he often met bears, panthers, or other wild animals.

He told them that they were about twenty-five miles north of Cape Florida; that there was a "station" on the beach six miles north of them; that turtle were beginning to lay eggs, and bears to frequent the beach in search of them; that sharks grew larger in those very waters than anywhere else on the coast; and that an easterly wind would blow in the morning, which would prevent their crossing the bar. Having delivered himself of this information, and saying that he must make the station that night, the boy slung his mail sack over his shoulders, and started off at a brisk pace up the soft shelving beach.

After what he had told them about sharks, Sumner and Worth concluded not to sleep in their canoes that night. They might have done so with perfect safety, however, for no shark was ever known to overturn a boat for the sake of getting at a human being inside of it.

The next morning the mail boy's prediction in regard to the east wind was verified. It was blowing briskly at sunrise, and already a big sea was rolling in, combing and booming on the bar. Their boats would not live in it a moment, and consequently they must stay where they were until the wind changed.

After breakfast the Lieutenant sat in his tent writing, the sailor was repairing a torn sail, Quorum was taking a nap, and the boys were left to their own devices for amusement. An hour or so later Lieutenant Carey, the sailor, and Quorum were startled by loud calls for help from the beach, and hurried in that direction to see what new scrape the "young rascals," as the Lieutenant called them, had got into now.

