

CRUISING ON THE GULF COAST OF
FLORIDA

CHAPTER II

CRUISING ON THE GULF COAST OF FLORIDA

THE essence of cruising is exploration and adventure. It is the individual's response to "the call of the wild" which fills the canoes on the rivers and lakes of the country, lights the campfires which burn in its wildernesses, and puts fever in the veins of every man who has gazed upon the stars from the bosom of old Mother Earth.

I have no more thrilling memory than that of one long ago February night, when, with another truant, I rested upon a bed of hemlock boughs and first tasted the joys of the campfire. Without blankets, freezing in body but exalted in spirit, the very stars seemed to sing together for joy. Ten years later that comrade's name was given to his last camp, the Alamo of the plains, Beecher's Island.

An attraction, which can no longer be the enthusiasm of youth, draws me irresistibly from the roar of the machinery of modern civilization and gives rest when the wilderness is reached, whether I paddle amid rapids of icy water in the frozen north, or dreamily drift with the sluggish current of some tropical stream.

Cruising in the waters of Florida is the *ne plus ultra* of outdoor life. You are in the open all day,

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sleep on deck at night, wear little beyond your birthday suit, and treat the water around you with the familiarity of an amphibian. The life can be strenuous enough to strain the stoutest muscles and satisfy the wildest craving for excitement, or restful to the most worn-to-frazzles nerves.

The experiences of a recent cruise ranged from eating sapadiloes and sea grapes on a boat becalmed in the emerald water of the Bay of Florida, to being threatened by waterspouts and struck by lightning; from watching wonderful sunsets and talking philosophy to a girl, to chasing rattlesnakes with a launch and being towed by a devil-fish; from playing tarpon, to dragging a crocodile out of his cave, and from treading clams to a ride on a manatee.

In cruising it is what you do yourself that counts. You may take prescribed drugs by proxy with probable advantage, but you must live the cruising life for yourself. Catch your fish, shoot your game, gather your oysters and tread your own clams, and if you also cook them it will make for appetite and health.

Don't keep a sailors' boarding house. You will need a captain who knows the coast, but you should learn his trade for yourself. In a week you ought to understand the *rationale* of the simple navigation that concerns you and be able to execute all ordinary maneuvers. You will make mistakes as do all who make anything. I have myself borne the accusation that when during a heavy squall the sharp command came from my captain:

“Let go the peak halyards, quick.”

I promptly turned loose the big chain of the hurricane anchor.

It is now a score of years since the late Colonel Ingersoll, not Robert, but a relative, handed a pencil sketch to Fogarty of Braidentown, on the Manatee River.

“What’s this to Hecuba? I’m a builder of boats and you show me the plan of a house,” said the latter, in substance.

“But I want you to make that house and then build a boat around it.”

Thereafter, while the genial Colonel lived, the hospitable *Karena*, known to the natives as the *Ark*, threatened most of the water ways and ran aground on all the bars of the west coast of Florida, from Cedar Keys to Key West. It was the prototype of the cruising houseboat of that coast of to-day, and as the Colonel with prophetic instinct once remarked, lacked only a little steam tender to run its errands.

In place of the *Karena* we now see floating houses like the “Whim Wham” with every attribute of a home, from a chef to a canary, from a library to a pet cat, with sixty horse power engines in the basement, in which the owner changes his residence while he sleeps and only knows where he is living when his captain tells him. Glittering launches, polished dingies, and a uniformed crew go with this outfit, which suggests yachting rather than the cruising I care for.

Stately yachts, at stated times, rattle their anchor

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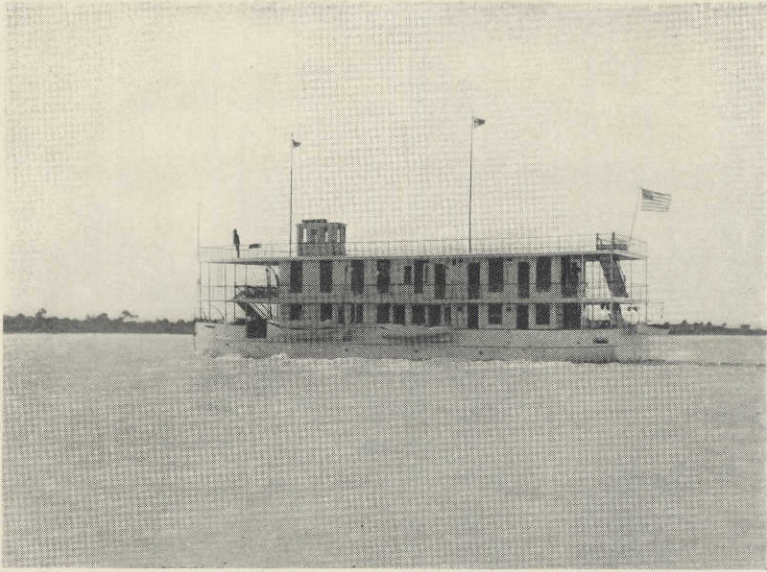
chains just within the mile-wide, ten fathom deep, Boca Grande Pass, while near-by their chartered craft lodge the guides who know the tricks of the tides and the tarpon, and reduce the labor of the fishermen to a minimum.

I have seen a well-known yachtsman quietly enjoy his magazine and cigar, on the deck of his boat while his guide trolled for tarpon within a few hundred feet. When a tarpon was hooked, the sportsman laid aside his magazine and was rowed out to the skiff of his guide, from which he captured what was left of the fish.

There are house-boats of simple construction which are moved about by tugs and often anchored for the season in one place. They make inexpensive homes with attractive features, but they are not cruisers.

Occasionally a should-be cruiser becomes conventionalized and vibrates between Fort Myers, Punta Rassa and Boca Grande, fishing in orthodox fashion on predetermined dates.

The interest in a cruise is often in inverse ratio to its cost. Two young men, with some knowledge of sailing and a genuine love for the campfire, arrived on the west coast of Florida with two months in time and two hundred dollars in money to spend. They bought a sloop, with a small skiff, for one hundred dollars, enlarged and fitted up the cabin at a cost of seventy-five dollars, invested twenty-five dollars in supplies, and buried themselves among the Ten Thousand Islands. Two months later they emerged with clothing in tatters, faces and arms red as the



The conventional houseboat, with every convenience from a chef to a canary.



"Bealmed in the emerald water of the Bay of Florida."

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Indians with whom they had consorted, bodies rugged and stores of experience sufficient to illuminate their lives. They sold their outfit at cost, reducing their net expenses for two months to the twenty-five dollars paid for supplies, to which the wilderness had contributed without cost, fish, game and fruit.

A friend, of some mechanical skill, has a small cruising boat fitted with many conveniences of his own devising. He is something of a sailor and his wife is a better one. They are their own crew, and when a son and daughter are with them the family divide up the offices of captain, first officer, engineer and cook, and the outfit for cruising is ideal. A friend of the lady once said to her:

“Some day you’ll all be drowned together.”

“Yes, that’s another advantage, if we go we go together.”

Florida cruising is statistically safer than staying at home. Even taking cold seems impossible, although one seldom hesitates to go overboard on the instant to push the boat off a bar, dive up clams, or help with the nets.

On a recent cruise the girl of the party, who was enjoying the surf one evening, having been in the water continuously since the midday meal, replied to a remonstrance:

“My physician told me it would not hurt me to bathe four hours after eating, and I’m doing it.”

My latest cruise began as a family affair, with the girl, the Camera-man and a captain. Another girl was needed, and we borrowed the tree lady, who

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having just evolved from her inner consciousness a tree book, which was counted authoritative, was now anxious to see some real trees.

Our equipment was the result of compromises between the requirements of deep sea cruising, and shallow bay exploration, and between cabin capacity and seaworthiness. It consisted of a yawl rigged, flat bottomed boat of thirty-seven by fourteen feet, with a draft of three feet. Our cabin was twenty feet long by twelve in breadth and we had with us two skiffs and a small launch. Fittings and furnishings were severely practical and included dark room, tools for all ordinary repair work, and fishing, hunting and photographing outfits.

Starting from Marco we gave the tree lady her choice between tarpon and crocodiles, and as she selected the former, sailed for Charlotte Harbor and the tarpon resorts of Captiva Pass and Boca Grande, where the season was at its height.

On the first day at Captiva Pass the tarpon scored. The tree lady was in a skiff with the Camera-man, making tarpon jump while he photographed them; the girl was on Captiva Beach gathering shells, leaving me to fish by myself, which I did by placing my tarpon rod on the seat beside me with the bait trolling behind the skiff as I rowed in the swift current of the Pass. There came a highly pitched buzz of the reel, a wild leap six feet in air of a frightened tarpon, and my rod flew over the stern of the skiff, leaving a straight wake to the Gulf. I fancy that the whole outfit, rod, massive reel, and six hundred feet of

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costly line, was an exhibit that night at some club of tarpon, devoted to the baiting of fishermen. I should like to see the legend attached to it, to know at what my weight was estimated, and to hear the accounts of the contest, that I might compare the stories told by fish with those told about them.

We were fishing for the camera, and when the hooked tarpon ceased to pose they were turned loose, with a single exception. The tree lady wanted some tarpon scales big enough to weigh the fish stories she was preparing for her family.

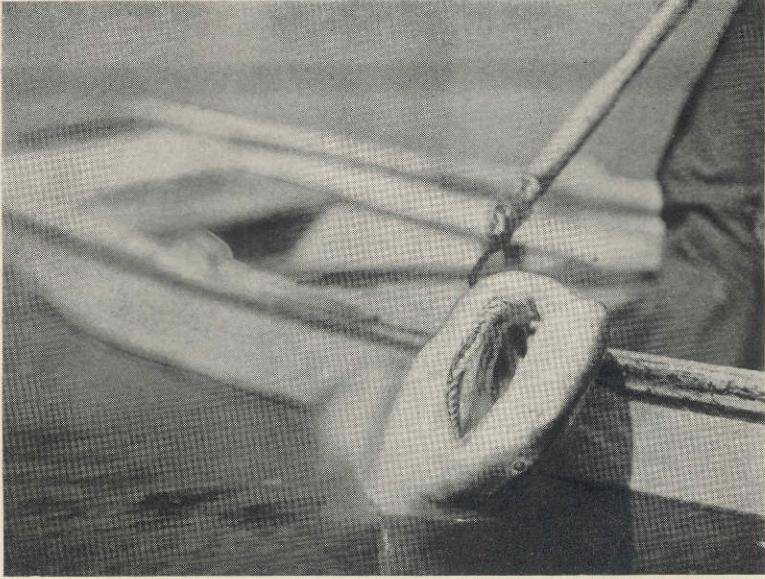
At Boca Grande we anchored north of the Pass, safe from everything but a gale from the northeast, which is what came to us with the setting of the sun. The strong tide held the boat in the trough of the sea and a wicked roll caused havoc in the cabin, where a bottle of oil breaking on the floor made walking thereon distressing. As the tide rushed past, it created a wake of phosphorescent fire, and an occasional wave breaking over us bathed the boat in liquid moonshine, while filling the cockpit with water that had to be bailed out.

We hoisted the jigger to hold the boat across the sea, and gave the hurricane anchor a few more fathoms of chain. Our captain was on shore unable to join us. Four times he dragged his skiff through the surf and tried to row to us, but four times he was capsized and swept back. As the night wore on, the launch filled and sank and the remaining skiff was swamped, broke her painter and was washed ashore.

In the morning the captain succeeded in reaching us, although his skiff sank under him just as he caught the line we threw him. We made tackle fast to the launch, lifted it until it could be bailed out, and then hoisting a sail with many reefs, spent an exciting quarter of an hour in clawing away from the beckoning beach. We sailed to a little land-locked harbor south of the Pass, and the next day returned and dug our skiff out of the sand where the waves had buried it, and recovered the widely scattered oars, lines, seats, and other boat furniture.

Following the storm, the fishing at Boca Grande was marvelous. The mile-wide Pass was filled with minnows by the thousand million, making dark patches upon the water, often many acres in extent. Among them porpoises rolled, thousands of tarpon leaped, the fins of hundreds of great sharks cut lanes through them, uncountable cavalli, Spanish mackerel, bluefish, ladyfish and other predatory small fry, devouring and being devoured, beat the water into surf-like waves, while, moved by a single impulse, here, there and everywhere, minnows by the yard or acre were leaping three feet in the air, filling it with rainbow tinted masses of spray. Everywhere the water was covered with dying minnows and spangled throughout with their scales.

As our skiff was rowed among them, tarpon leaped about it drenching us with water and throwing hundreds of minnows and other little fish in the boat. A small fish, which had fallen aboard, was put upon a tarpon hook and as it dropped overboard it was



The fisherman's *bête-noir*.



The lay of the loggerhead

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swallowed by a jack-fish which in turn was seized by a tarpon. A great shark took up the trail of the tarpon and a moment later had bitten him in two, at the same time striking the skiff so vicious a blow that I was glad to remember that, contrary to current superstition, the sharks in this country never attack a human being.

Tarpon fishing with the camera is the apotheosis of sport. There is yet to be discovered anything more picturesque and thrilling than the leap of the near-by tarpon, filling the air with prismatic drops, and the gleaming silver of its gracefully contorted body brilliantly reflecting the rays of the sun.

Only less spectacular, because of its Lilliputian scale, is the leap of the lady fish, sometimes called skipjack, which rises to a fly and gives an acrobatic performance that makes the best work of any known game fish look like thirty cents.

Sea trout, Spanish mackerel, channel bass and other game fish kept the larder full and gave continuous sport at every pass in Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound from Gasparilla to Punta Rassa.

Half an hour with a landing net on the shore would fill a bucket with crabs, while on any moonlight night from May to July great turtles could be found crawling on the beach and turned over for stews and steaks, or followed to their crawls for the one hundred and thirty to one hundred and eighty eggs that would be there in the morning.

We beach-combed for shells, from Gasparilla to Big Marco Pass, all but the tree lady, who explained

that she was under contract to produce a standard work of reference on conchology and must approach the subject with a mind that was blank. She left a blank when she sailed for the north from Marco, whence we turned south for the crocodile country.

From Coon Key to Sand Fly Pass our course lay outside the Keys and we ran before a gale under jib and jigger, landing disgracefully among the bushes when we tried to stem the tide that flowed from Chokoliskee Bay. Here we found a party of Seminole Indians, laid pipe for a visit to their camp, and obtained a full-grown wild-cat, or lynx.

We made a cage for Tom, who day by day grew more ferocious and had to be fed at the end of a stick. He knew the exact length of his fore leg and just when it was worth while to strike at us between the bars. He nearly ate up his cage in his efforts to get free, but when the door was finally opened, hesitated long before he came out. He then walked slowly, growling at everybody but so surprised by the indifference with which he was regarded that he soon began to make advances, and finally laid a tentative paw upon the hand of the captain as he stood at the wheel. Thereafter he became friendly, sometimes too friendly, occasionally jumping playfully upon anyone who happened to be sleeping on deck, which, until we got used to it, was exciting.

From Pavilion Key south the coast is one vast bank of clams, perennially inviting the visitor to go overboard and tread for them. One night, when anchored with light tackle a few miles below this

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key, a gale from the southwest dragged the anchor, a big wave lifted us and at the top of a spring tide dropped us on a high coral reef.

The next morning we were many yards from water with the chances that we were settled for a month, but happily a favoring wind that day raised the water enough to enable us to haul the boat back into her element.

As our cruise led us through crooked channels in the shallow waters of the Bay of Florida, we often ran aground, but by promptly going overboard could usually push off into deeper water. Once we had to dig the boat out, loosening the mud under it with a hoe and washing it away by a current from the propeller of the launch.

At Madeira Hammock we anchored for a crocodile hunt in the interest of the camera, and for ten days in skiffs explored creeks and bays in the pursuit. We turned aside once to follow with a harpoon three big fins traveling tandem that belonged to a fourteen foot sawfish, whose thousand pounds propelled a broad four-foot saw, armed with fifty-two teeth, through schools of smaller fish. He belonged to the detested shark family and we wasted no sympathy on him as he towed us at racing speed through a mile of creek and bayou.

We caught a number of crocodiles and took with us, for shipment to the Bronx, one ten-foot specimen which we had captured in his cave, and sailed for Marco where the Camera-man left us for New York.

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On our way up the coast the cat and the crocodile quarreled and to save the eyes of the saurian we put him overboard one evening with a rope around his body. During the night he died, mysteriously. The lynx swam ashore in response to the crowing of a cock and perished in a hen roost, but not mysteriously. Both had been prematurely promised to the Zoo in New York and I was mortified, so I visited a rookery, captured and shipped a dozen pelicans to the Zoo, and again sailed for the crocodile country.

We started on Friday, wherefore the girl predicted disaster and reminded us thereof on the following day when a heavy rain squall struck us, shut us up in semi-darkness and proceeded to box the compass with the boat. When the squall got through with us we were under bare poles with the jib the only hoistable sail.

Favored by the tide our launch carried us into Everglade where we found material to put our rigging in order. Here I borrowed a couple of youngsters not quite in their teens, for the sake of the youthful enthusiasm they presumably possessed. Yet when we reached Madeira Hammock they fished, hunted wild sapadillo trees and gathered the fruit, and cruised around in the launch, with tears of homesickness streaming down their cheeks.

At Madeira Hammock I stood again, harpoon pole in hand, in the bow of the skiff which my perspiring boatman patiently sculled among the keys, over the flats, and through the labyrinthic rivers that lie between the Bay of Florida and the saw-grass of the

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Everglades. The harpoon was simply a pointed bit of barbed steel, only capable of penetrating one inch beyond the barb and intended merely to maintain communication with the quarry until it could be secured by other means.

One morning, just after we had started on our daily cruise, a series of swirls in the water near us, the language of which was then unfamiliar, seemed to tell of a frightened crocodile and that the hunt was on. We followed the zigzagging trail of muddy water as fast as we could scull and pole, getting occasional glimpses of a fleeing something, until the full view of it under the bow of the skiff gave me the chance I was seeking.

As the harpoon struck a broad back, which was not that of a crocodile, the creature rose above the surface, and as it did so its big beaver like tail covered me with a deluge of water. Then as it struck and nearly swamped the skiff, I realized that I had at last found the manatee, which I had vainly hunted during many years.

For hours we chased the creature, keeping a light strain on the harpoon line, frightening him as he came up to breathe, until, exhausted, he rose more and more frequently. I then made a score of unsuccessful attempts to lasso this specimen of the wild cattle of the sea.

Finally, the manatee came to the surface to breathe, so near the skiff that I put my left arm around his neck as far as it would go, and tried to slip the noose over his head with my right. The sudden lifting of

his head threw me upon his back, while a twist of his big tail sent me sprawling.

We were swamped four times while working the manatee into shallow water, where we got overboard, fastened a line around him and soon had him under control, although when the captain got astride of the creature, he was promptly made to turn a back somersault. Docile as our captive had become, he was yet eleven feet long, of massive proportions and a weight which was difficult to handle. We tore the seats out of the skiff, sunk it to the bottom and standing upon it succeeded in getting the sea cow over it. We lifted on the boat, bailed out the water and were paddling the over-laden craft out in the bay when a cataclysm left us swimming side by side while a submerged skiff was being towed gulfward by a rejoicing manatee.

We soon recaptured the animal and persuaded him into shallow water, where I herded him while the captain went to the big boat for an anchor and cable with which we made our captive fast, giving him two hundred feet of rope in an excellent sea cow pasture.

We were now candidates for a dungeon and liable to a big fine because of our unlawful detention of this highly protected mammal, so we sailed for Miami in pursuit of an *ex post facto* permit.

The authorities were good to me when convinced of the educational destiny of the manatee and in a week I returned with permits in my pocket, promises of free transportation by rail and steamer to the New York Aquarium, telegrams of congratulation from

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the Zoo people, and lumber for a tank for the manatee, only to find no trace of anchor, cable or captive. Our cruising boat had been struck by lightning in Miami and the shock had been serious to all of us, but it was as nothing in comparison with this.

For a day we followed the zigzag trail of the anchor flukes, through a water glass, over half a mile of the bottom of the bay until we came upon the anchor, cable, and worn-through harness from which the manatee had escaped.

I returned to Marco, where I left the girl, took aboard a thousand miles of gasoline and four weeks' provisions for two, and sailed south with my boatman to capture a manatee. We explored the waterways between the Everglades and the Gulf, from Capes Romano to Sable. We sailed up broad rivers which narrowed until the bowsprit plunged into the bushes at every tack, and the towed skiff gathered oysters from overhanging mangrove branches as it swung against the bank. We followed the contracting channels with the launch until we were flying at full speed through crooked creeks, with bushes from the banks sweeping our craft on either side. When the branches closed over the stream, we dragged the skiff under them to the Everglades or the end of the creek.

As we followed rivers through shallow bays the churning of the propeller and waves rolling up behind us gave warning when we left the channel. Being lost among the Ten Thousand Islands is one's normal condition and without significance. So long as one

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remembers that the sun rises in the east, he can find himself, but if he leaves his boat for an inland tramp—that is different. Alligator hunters have told me that they seldom knew and never cared where they were when hunting in the swamp. They just went anywhere for a month or two and came out when they got ready.

We struck waterspout weather off Shark River when conical clouds sent swirling tails dancing over the surface of the water which they sometimes touched and drew upward in huge swaying columns. The next day our boat lay becalmed at the mouth of Rodgers River, which we explored in the launch. As we started, graceful frigate pelicans floated high above us with motionless wings, while on the water about us their awkward namesakes filled pouches with food for their families and flew homeward with the curious intermittent strokes peculiar to these birds. The round head and bright eyes of the grass-eating green turtle bubbled up for a moment above the water, in pleasing contrast with the grosser head of his loggerhead cousin. Water-turkeys dropped heavily in the river as we passed, then quickly thrust out snake-like heads above its surface to gaze at us. Herons, big and little, blue, white and green, flapped lazily out of our way with discordant cries; brown curlews, roseate spoonbills, and white ibis sat undisturbed upon near-by trees; egrets and long whites forgot the bitter lessons that man's cupidity and woman's vanity had taught them, and even a monkey-faced owl, big and white, unknowing how rare a



Shell mounds of aborigine antecedents, flanked by cocoa and date palms.

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specimen he was, turned goggle eyes upon the gun beside me.

At the head of the river a tropical storm burst upon us, followed by a calm, and filled the western sky with massive clouds wonderfully colored, which were duplicated in the mirror of the water until the illusion of a sky beneath us of infinite depth made me cling to the boat for dizziness. At the end of a long vista, the middle ground of slim palmetto and towering royal palm completed an unforgettable picture.

We had explored Lossmans River to the Everglades and were cruising the bays near its head when about dusk we saw a big rattlesnake swimming toward a mangrove key. To cut him off compelled us to run the launch full speed into the key. The skiff in tow came surging up beside us and the snake was between the two boats. We got the snake in the skiff, where the captain held him down with an oar, until I had him safely by the neck. After extracting the reptile's fangs I tied him in the skiff to be skinned for mounting the next morning. He was six and one-half feet long and had ten rattles.

Sometimes as we cruised, the big eyes of a wondering deer gazed upon us from a bit of meadow. Once I snapped the camera shutter on a black face with white eyeballs framed in an opening in the mangrove bushes, and on the same day we exchanged nods of half-recognition with an alligator hunter in the depth of the wilderness upon whose head was a price.

The days left us were few. Sweet bay leaves had taken the place of coffee, palmetto cabbage was our

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principal vegetable, cocoa plums, custard apples, wild limes and lemons, our fruit; and hour by hour we measured the gasoline left in the tank. One morning, with scarce two inches left, I estimated that we could go through Shark to Harney River, up that to the Everglades and return.

Far up the river we went, among beautiful keys, between richly wooded banks, past Golgotha camps of alligator hunters and trappers of otter, in channels choked with grass which had to be cleared from the propeller every few minutes, along shores covered with wading birds, over waters alive with alligators and thickly dotted with the heads of fresh water terrapin, until the launch was stopped by a solid mass of lily pads covering the stream and held in place by stems eight feet long, through which startled alligators made their way along the river bed setting the pads above to dancing mysteriously. Forcing our way in the skiff through half a mile of the pads we reached the Everglades, and following an Indian trail pushed far out on its surface for a final interview with a region which, although desolate, was yet strangely fascinating.

When but a mile was left of our return trip, a frightened manatee just ahead of our launch rolled his body half out of water, like a porpoise, and throwing his tail in the air started down the river. This was our last chance and we followed his every turn. When he turned and headed upstream to escape us we were so near that again he leaped half out of water and soon was so exhausted that he rose for

breath every few seconds. My hopes, which had died, were resurrected and already I was drawing up the skiff for the final act, when the motor stopped with its last drop of gasoline and the manatee chase was ended.

As we silently poled the launch homeward, my mind ran over the results of the hunt. We had seen a dozen manatee and had a calling acquaintance with half that number. We were familiar with their slightest appearance above the water and with the signs they left beneath it. We had seen them as Romeos and Juliets and often when within a few feet of one had only been thwarted by the darkness of the water which in the rainy season pours from the cypress and mangrove swamps.

A tiller rope broken during the excitement of a quick turn had saved one from probable capture, and as I remembered that an impulse of emotional insanity had held my hand when a mother manatee, with an unweaned calf pressed close to her side, rose beside me, I thought with bitterness of the poet who wrote:

“The quality of mercy is not strained.”

But I knew where the creatures lived and when we reached our boat, just as the stars came out, I had determined that in the hunt for a manatee it was only the first chapter that had closed.

