

THE CAPTURE OF THE MANATEE

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTURE OF THE MANATEE

IT was due to the Aquarium, and my own self-respect, that I made good to them my tender of a manatee which was lost through my own indiscretion. It was for this that the Camera-man and I, with our outfit, returned to the manatee country.

For weeks, in our efforts to capture a sea cow, we exhausted our ingenuity and used up our material. We stretched nets between the banks of rivers which had been their highways, but sophisticated manatees turned back and traveled by some other route, while what was left of our costly linen net after it had been set across the channels of a few deep rivers, with strong tides and bottoms of jagged coral rocks, was mostly tears and tangles. We built a platform on a skiff to hold a long net of large mesh amply provided with corks and sinkers, and towed it behind the launch over the bays containing the richest areas of manatee pasture. Bits of floating grass, rising bubbles, streaks of roiled water, swirls on the surface or black dots in the distance that melted from our sight as we looked, put us on the trail. The "chug-chug" of the approaching propeller frightened the quarry which sprang half out of water, throwing barrels of it high in air, and spurted away. Then

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the hunter-boy with telescopic eyes got upon the bow of the launch, the sailor boy sprang into the skiff with the net, the Camera-man stood by the motor while I held the wheel, and all studied intently the surface of the water. At first, a line of swirls rising in the water made pursuit easy, then the wheel rolled to the motion of the hand of the boy on the bow, until we overran the creature or, no signs appearing, the motor was slowed down, waiting for the cry of the first to recover the lost trail. Once in five minutes that black head rose to the surface for a second for breath, and in deep water this often proved our only guide.

If we succeeded in keeping the trail for a few hours, the manatee became tired, or flurried for want of breath, came up oftener and swam more slowly, until at a signal the boy in the towed skiff cast overboard one end of the net with its anchor, and with the launch at full speed we tried to run the net around the animal. A dozen times the bobbing corks told us that he was against the net and our hopes ran high, only to fall as he backed out and sought until he found an avenue of escape. Leaving the boy with the skiff to take in the net, we again followed the manatee, sometimes throwing over his head a cast net, only to see it slide harmless down his back, and sometimes throwing a lasso weighted with lead over his head and getting in return a blow from his tail upon the bow of the launch that nearly swamped it and always knocked somebody overboard, while his handy flipper pushed the lasso over his nose. When-



A sudden dash of the creature nearly swamps us.



The powerful tail lifts the skiff.

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ever success seemed really near, darkness always stepped in to thwart us.

We found one day a manatee so big that we didn't care to fool with her until some of her surplus energy had been worn down. The Camera-man struck her from the skiff, in the middle of her broad tail, with a tiny harpoon attached to three hundred feet of light line. After the first dash was over and the manatee swimming quietly, I held the skiff as near her as possible until she came up to breathe, when the Camera-man laid a noosed rope over her nose. After we had hauled the Camera-man aboard and bailed out the boat, which had been nearly swamped, he insisted on trying again. This time he stayed under water longer and came up on the wrong side of the boat just as I was getting mighty anxious looking for him on the side he went down. He then consented to play the creature a little before tying her up. For hours the manatee towed us through a labyrinth of waterways to an unknown region which I am ready to identify as the mosquito center of the earth. One of the boys tried to follow us with the launch, but got in trouble with the motor. I exchanged places with him and got in more trouble. As the hours rolled on and darkness settled upon us, the manatee was the only one of the party who wasn't lost. The launch propeller choked up every few minutes with manatee grass and I had to hang overboard, half under water, to clear it. Then I went tearing through creek after creek in search of the skiff, which I once lost for half an hour. Every quarter of a

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mile I stopped the motor, and blowing a horn listened for the shouts that came faintly to me across the keys, and after a few strenuous moments with an exasperating fly wheel, was again plunging through the darkness, searching for an opening that might lead in the direction of the calls I had heard. Finally the motor broke down altogether and it was only a fortunate turn in the course of the manatee, aided by a lot of poling, that reunited us. I undertook to play the sea cow from the bow of the launch while our engineer, the Camera-man, put the motor in commission. Soon there was a sound of cranking and the machine chug-chug'd for a few strokes, after which there was silence broken only by heavy breathing. To a courteous inquiry, which I threw over my shoulder, the reply sounded like:

“Damn the engine.”

We organized the work to be done. I sat upon the bow of the launch, with the line tub between my knees and the line in my hands. The manatee was to tow us through the night, but fifty pounds was about the maximum of strain I dared put on the little harpoon. Foot by foot the line must be yielded as the animal increased her speed, and foot by foot taken back when it slackened. The Camera-man and I must share this work, to night, to-morrow night and all other nights until the end.

Our sailor boy had sprained his wrist while trying to start the engine and could hold the wheel, but not the harpoon line. The hunter boy stood by the skiff, ready for the emergencies which proved to be

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the most constant features of the work. He made a dash through the darkness for the near-by shore and got bits of dead wood, pieces of buttonwood and rotting black mangrove, from which a smudge made the launch, within its drawn curtains, solid with smoke. But the man in the bow, who held the harpoon line, must keep his head and arms outside. When I swept my hand across my smarting face, it became smeared with blood and mosquitoes. The bursting upon us of a tropical thunder storm, pouring water down in masses so nearly solid that it was hard to breathe, relieved us of the insect plague. Each blaze of dazzling light, so brief as to be almost useless, was followed by the blackness of Erebus. We were carried east, west, north and south, through lagoons, bays, creeks and rivers in darkness that could be felt, knowing nothing of where we were, steering always as the line to the manatee led.

We had had a strenuous day, with nothing to eat since an early breakfast, and the hours of the night passed slowly. The storm was followed by a heavy gale from the southwest, but the stars came out and we recognized the big river we were on and knew that we were heading for the Gulf. Already we could hear the waves breaking outside and our sailor boy was nervous.

“What shall we do, we can’t live out there?” said he. I told him we could live if the manatee turned north, outside the river, and kept inside the shoals, but if she headed down the coast in the channel we would cut loose. The mouth of Broad River forms

a delta and the hunter boy, by rowing ahead of the manatee in his skiff and splashing with his oars, turned her into the north channel which was shallow and full of oyster bars. Here we turned her again, just as the Gulf opened out to us, and as we passed the south channel, going back, the tide which had just turned in helped to persuade her to continue up the river. For a mile she was good and then turned into a narrow fork on the south side of the river, where roots and snags threatened us each moment. Half a mile up this stream she towed us into a narrow gully and having given the line a turn around a snag, returned to the fork.

Thirty cents would now have purchased our interest in that manatee, but our hunter boy went overboard, cleared the line, got back in the skiff and I handed him the tub just as the last coils of line were running out of it. He disappeared in the darkness down the fork, while we spent a few minutes in backing the launch out of the gully and a good many in persuading the motor to mope. When the main stream was reached we turned up the river on a chance that proved friendly, soon overtook the skiff, shut off the motor and were again in the wake of the manatee. There was trouble to burn as the creature headed for the cut-off that leads from Broad to Rodgers River, and both boys jumped in the skiff and headed her off with splashing, thrusting, oars, for the cut-off consists of two miles of crookedness, filled with snags, roots and overhanging branches, and is quite unnavigable for manatee-towed launches.

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As we approached the bays at the head of Broad River a most welcome dawn rose, tinting the surroundings and the situation. Even the pessimism of the sailor boy, which had covered him like a mantle since first he heard in the night the waves of the Gulf, slid from him. The manatee became placid and even friendly, swimming slowly just in advance of us and coming up at regular intervals for long, slow breaths. Once, as she lifted her nose above the surface, the hunter boy dropped a noose of half-inch rope over her head and quickly drew it taut. A tremendous blow from the tail of the manatee nearly swamped the launch and knocked overboard the boy, who came to the surface with the line he had made fast to the sea cow twisted about his own neck. She slipped the noose over her head in less time than it took to unwind him. After that we threw the noose over the head of the creature many times, until she was almost halter-broken and so accustomed to the rope that she played with it and us. When it tightened about her, she slid her flippers under it and deftly pushed the noose over her nose. If we slid it back farther than her flippers could reach, a flirt of her tail freed her. Once it caught on her soft nose and held long enough for us to make a rope fast to her flipper.

The manatee now belonged to us and we got another line around her, after which we removed the iron, with some difficulty and more duckings, and attempted to tow her into shoal water. For a time the frightened animal tore up the water and towed

us backward, but in two or three hours we had her partly stranded in a tiny cove in a big bay at the head of Broad River. After she became quiet we got in the water with her and tied her with every string we could raise from launch and skiff. A cable fastened her tail to the yielding top of a sweet bay tree, half-inch ropes led from her flippers to branches of myrtle that swayed but held, and we lashed poles, several inches in diameter by fourteen feet long, to her body with hundreds of feet of harpoon line carried around it, hoping to keep her from freeing or harming herself until we could bring to her our cruising boat, with materials and tools for the building of a tank that would hold her.

The big boat was then thirty miles from us by the nearest navigable channels, down Broad and Rodgers Rivers to the Gulf and up Lossmans to its head. Seven miles of this course was through the open Gulf, which a storm from the southwest was then making turbulent. We decided to avoid this risk and save half the distance by hunting our way by night through the labyrinthic, grass-choked waterways lying between the rivers named and the Everglades of Florida, back to the bay where we had left our boat. It was late in the night when we found her, the gale was increasing and the barometer stood at its lowest for six months, but minutes were important to our captive and we lost none in starting. As we worked our way down the river we broke our two-days' fast with snatches of cold canned food. We got down the river in safety, and after twice drag-

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ging on oyster reefs at its mouth, were soon being tossed by the waves of the Gulf. We had seven miles to make down the coast against the gale, and it took nearly twice that many hours, while always one of us stood by the jib and another held the main-sheet in his hands.

It was late in the day when, under jib and jigger, the *Irene* swept past the tiny cove and a big burden of anxiety dropped visibly from each one of us as we saw between the mangroves the upraised head of the great manatee. Our nerves had been worn to frazzles by excitement, loss of rest and food, and all hands needed the tonic afforded by the sight once more of our capture. Jib and anchor were let go and we went ashore in the skiff and stood on the bank beside the sea cow, where I could feel the beating of my heart, for, quiet though she seemed, the manatee was substantially free.

She had broken a harness of rope, fitted to hold the cable in place on her tail, shaken the cable free, and parted every string that bound her, excepting that attached to one of her flippers. There seemed small hope of saving her, but for the moment she was quiet, and we brought our big, four-foot-wide, skiff beside her and sunk it in the five feet of water where the creature lay. By pushing the submerged skiff, on which we stood, and hauling upon head, tail and flippers of the unresisting manatee, we got her in the skiff, the gunwales of which she overtopped by more than a foot, wound and tied ropes around boat and animal until confidence returned to me and I

took the first long breaths I had drawn for two days. They were few in number, however, for as we stood around the creature, in water nearly to our necks, the manatee, suddenly roaching her back until head and tail almost met, snapped the ropes that bound her. Then throwing upward her immense tail, deluging us with great volumes of water, she brought it down upon the stern of the skiff with a pile-driving blow that converted the craft into kindling wood. Crash followed crash and when her mighty struggles ended and we had all escaped from the maelstrom of her creation, it was relief enough that there were still four of us, all uninjured.

After breaking up our skiff, the manatee again became quiet and allowed us to carry heavy ropes around her and fasten them to trees until once more her escape seemed impossible. The animal was nearly thirteen feet long and her weight, by estimate, over two thousand pounds. When we provided material for a tank in which to transport a manatee, we had no such leviathan as this in contemplation. More lumber must be had, and more help was needed. Both might be found at Everglade, forty-five miles distant. Our hunter boy volunteered to be there by daylight if the launch motor would work. The Camera-man spent an hour over the engine, replacing parts that were weak or worn, guaranteed it for twenty-four hours, and the boy plunged into the darkness, through which for half an hour we heard his frequent stops to clear the grass and moss from the propeller blades.



He drags us into the mangroves.



View of back—looking forward.

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Little of my lost sleep was made up that night, with my thoughts of that boy driving up the coast, alone in that little craft, through the sea made by that southwest gale, now only half abated, and my nerves racked a hundred times by the thrashing of the monster tied within a hundred feet of me, while troubled dreams disturbed my slightest nap with demands that her bondage be made less cruel. From daylight I kept watch over her, piling wet grass upon her back as a falling tide exposed it to the burning sun. During the night we welcomed the chug-chug of the returning launch, bringing lumber, tackle and help. Working through darkness and light, it was yet noon before the big sarcophagus of a tank, thirteen feet long, four wide and four high, was built, calked, and ready for its occupant.

One end, which had been left open, was brought close to the animal and the box was lashed to trees preparatory to backing the creature in. I walked to the head of the manatee and laid my hand upon it as I had done a hundred times before. She was quiet now, but I knew she was all right. She had been struggling tremendously a few minutes before and was resting. I talked to her and told her that her troubles were over, no more ropes, just a few days in a nice box with fresh water and bunches of manatee grass, and then a big tank in a beautiful building, plenty to eat, and a million children to talk to her and pet her and hold out little hands for her to nuzzle with her soft nose. She was very quiet. I wondered if she found it hard to breathe—sometimes

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I did, too—but her lips would move when I laid my hand on them—No ?—

The others stopped work and gathered beside her. The eyes didn't open, the lips didn't move she wouldn't breathe—and when I turned away I couldn't speak.

That afternoon she was prepared for a museum instead of an aquarium, and we learned that if only we could have got her safely to New York, the stork would have called at the Aquarium in a few days.

It was a month before we were again in the manatee country. We had put a motor in the cruising boat to help her out of tight places and taken a little skiff with a tiny engine for the shallow waters. The big tank was still anchored where we had left it and we hoped to find an occupant for it. We saw and followed many manatees without trying to capture them. Sometimes they were only calves and sometimes so far from our cruising boat that we were shy of facing the transportation problem. We were resolved never to tie another manatee until we had a tank ready for him. One opportunity came as the sun was setting, but I couldn't ask the boys to face with me a night of mosquitoes in an open skiff. The creatures, instead of being driven from their homes by our noisy presence, actually grew tame and we saw them swimming quietly and unafraid along the bottom of a river directly under our whirling propeller. When we finally struck one from the skiff we captured him in an hour. I held the skiff near the

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manatee, while the boys tossed oars over his nose whenever his head came to the surface. The Camera-man, in the power skiff, circled around us, picked up the floating oars and tossed them back to our skiff. When the animal's breathing was largely in arrears and he was compelled to hold his head well above water for several seconds, I placed a Brobdingagian scoop-net over his head. We had made this net of quarter-inch rope, with a two-foot mesh about six feet long, held open by two steel rings four feet in diameter, and with a puckering string of half-inch manilla. We held him tangled in this net until we could slide over him another of twelve feet in length in which we towed our captive to and into the big tank which we lashed beside our cruising boat. This tank was so much too large for him that he spent his time in getting jammed, breaking joist, and scratching the skin off his nose in his struggles to turn around. We needed a tank about a third the size of the one we had, also a lighter in which to tow the creature to Miami. There was another night journey to Everglade, both of the boys going on this trip, while the Camera-man and I nursed the captive, held his flippers, braced ourselves against the box and pushed his nose out of jam with our bare feet when his head got caught. When the new tank was finished and the manatee transferred he proceeded to knock the top off of his new quarters piece by piece with the roach of his back and the slam of his tail, while we spiked on new planks and joist until he quieted down. We bored

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holes in the lighter, sunk it under the tank, plugged the holes, bailed out the lighter and it was up to me, as the only one on board who had made the trip to Miami, to pilot a boat, with cabin so big that sea-dogs called it a house-boat, towing a square-ended lighter with a timid thousand-pound specimen sloshing around in a big tank, over a hundred and fifty miles of shallow bays which I had forgotten, and complicated channels which I never remembered, to that town. I am not a bit of a sailor-man, but I had to pretend a lot, give courses with confidence, and no one on board worked harder than I, as I cudgeled my memory, studied the charts and tried to look wise during that little voyage. Trouble began early, for it was rough on the Gulf and the sailor boy spoke sooth when he said:

“It’s the Devil to tow a lighter.”

Forty hours later we delivered to the Florida East Coast Railway at Miami, a manatee, mad through and through, because for some stormy hours, he had been stood upon his head and tail, alternately, as the lighter banged its way over waves that were unpleasantly big for a craft of her build.

The Transfer Company took five hours to load the manatee upon a car, but the officials held the train for an hour, and as it started for the North, bearing my manatee, tagged to the New York Aquarium, I could think, for the first time in twelve months without chagrin, of my telegraphic tender a year ago of a sea cow that belonged to herself instead of to me.



Head of manatee. Strange creatures, as shapely as a fattened pig.

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The manatee left us, measuring ten feet four inches in length. His voyage of one week so agreed with him, that when he arrived at the New York Aquarium his average length, as certified to by New York journalists, was eighteen feet.

Three weeks later, on our arrival at Miami from our trip across the Glades, a telegram told me of the death in the Aquarium of the manatee, and I rashly wired to Director Townsend the promise of another.

Natural obstacles and climatic *mañana* had disposed of ten days when, one afternoon, we found ourselves in the manatee country, with tank and lighter, free to find the manatee we had promised. In the first hour's cruising we saw three sea cows together, about half a mile from the tank we had just built for one of them. We kept on the trail of one until the Camera-man had put his tiny harpoon in the tail of the creature. I had mentally placed an Aquarium tag upon him, when an uplifted end of the parted line showed me where the propeller blade had cut it before the motor could be stopped. Fortune now deserted us and for days we vainly churned with our motor every manatee haunt we knew within a hundred square miles, until we feared the animals had fled the country. I was getting low in my mind over the contract to deliver one sea cow when, as we rounded a point in the bay one morning, we saw two manatee, apparently a cow and a calf. As we lost sight of the mother, we followed the child which led us a merry chase. The Camera-man and the captain in the power boat, and the hunter boy and I in the

skiff, chased him through channels and over flats for two hours. We could have harpooned him often enough, had it not been necessary to strike him in the tail, which was elusive. When this had been accomplished we soon got a net over his head and tied him in the skiff, from which we tore out the seats and half-filled it with water. When the creature floundered, the skiff capsized, so we held it beside the power skiff for the miles and hours that lay between us and our cruising boat. Before the trip was over he was half domesticated and always stopped throwing bucketfuls of water over us with his tail whenever we patted him gently on his head. The baby weighed about two hundred pounds and the tank we had provided called for an animal of five times that weight. We sawed the tank in two, hoisted one half on deck and fitted it up for the infant. We dispensed with the lighter and carried the tank on the stern of the cruising boat, where the man at the wheel could soothe the child when it was frightened.

It is a strain on one's nerves and sympathies to be with wild creatures during the early days of their captivity. I have often left my bed in the night to make more comfortable a just-captured alligator, crocodile, wildcat, or otter, but when a manatee beats about its tank, rolling over and over and making a funny little squeak like a mouse calling its mamma, I generally get up and hold his flipper and talk to him until he feels better.

As we neared the end of our three days' voyage to Miami, the infant manatee became fretful, re-

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jected my overtures and petulantly thrust out the bits of manatee grass and other good things that I placed in his mouth. But he sucked my fingers until I fancied he was a nursling and my first purchase in Miami was a nursing-bottle outfit and a supply of milk appropriate to a six-foot baby. The wife of the druggist kindly explained to me the proper method of applying the nursery machinery to my baby, until I asked her what I ought to do if my baby, as was his custom, just staid under water and wouldn't come out to be fed. I was considering the construction of an apparatus proportioned to the size of the creature, from a five-gallon demijohn and a section of hose pipe, when I detected the infant privately eating chunks of raw cabbage and wisps of manatee grass as fast as he could flop them into his mouth with his flippers. I then offered him a plantain and he sat up in his tank to eat it.

An hour later, when his train was about to start, I bade him good-bye and held out my hand, to which he responded by superciliously extending to me one of his flippers while he gently rubbed his stomach with the other. For twenty months this manatee lived in his tank in the New York Aquarium and finally died of intestinal disorder, after having doubled in weight and established a record for length of life in confinement of a member of his species.

The Camera-man was low in his mind. Even the successful shipment of "Baby," as the Aquarium christened him, failed to cheer him. He complained

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that his department had been ignored and instead of posing for him the captured manatees had chiefly been used to knock him overboard. He had sat up nights with the creatures, been eaten by mosquitoes, dragged all over creation, and whenever he got out his camera had been ordered to pull on a rope, or asked to hold a net.

We soothed him with promises of a manatee chase of his very own, with no net to bother him. The captain and I agreed to go overboard with the first sea cow we got a line around, or before, if necessary, and we started forthwith for the manatee country.

On the first day of the hunt the manatee won out. We found three, tackled one and went home early to patch up a broken skiff. I had a steel ring, four feet in diameter, fastened on the end of a harpoon pole, and at right angles to it. This held open the loop of a lasso and sometimes I was able to place it over or before the head of the manatee when he came up to breathe. More often, however, I went overboard when I tried it and sometimes the skiff was capsized. For when the creature's head was within reach of the pole, the skiff was within striking distance of his tail and he always struck. That was our trouble the first day. On the second day we hunted from daylight till dark without finding a trace of the animals.

By noon of the third day we were feeling depressed. Since daylight we had hunted over fifty miles of the best sea cow pasturage that we knew. We had followed trails of floating manatee grass in vain; rising



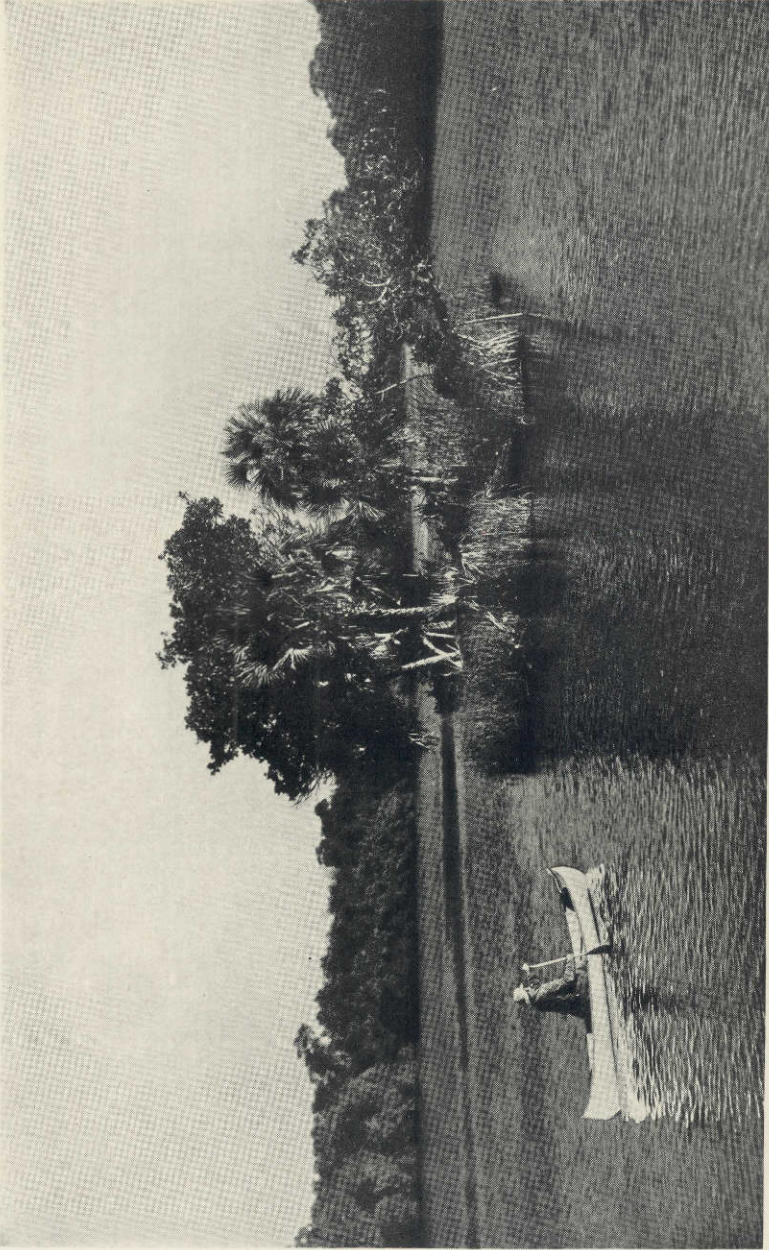
The flippers are of use to gather grass within reach of the mouth.

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bubbles proved to come from alligators; streaks of roiled water led only to frightened sting-rays; and the black heads that had appeared for an instant above the surface had all belonged to otters or porpoises. Tiny cat's-paws on the water had misled us and once we followed the ripple of our own wake, as it broke on a distant shore, halfway around a bay, like a pussy-cat chasing its tail. Just as we had satisfied ourselves that the bay didn't contain a specimen of the creatures we sought, a big manatee, frightened by the noisy churning of the approaching motor boat, leaped half out of water, just ahead of us. A moment later a series of swirls rising to the surface showed the line of the creature's flight. These were repeated several times and thereafter a faint trail of mud in the water guided us. Then, as all signs ceased, we stopped the motor and studied the smooth surface of the bay in all directions. Five minutes had passed when our hunter-boy saw a black nose appear for an instant two hundred yards behind us. Again we were on the trail, which we kept so closely for an hour that the quarry became flurried and out of breath. He swam back and forth, coming up to breathe every minute, and sometimes so near that we could have touched him with an oar. I was tempted to try lassoing him from the power boat but refrained, knowing the chances were even that he would sink the boat and at least ruin the camera outfit. The captain and I got into the skiff while the hunter-boy took the wheel and the Camera-man made ready his machinery. The manatee came

up beside me quite unexpectedly and when I hurriedly tried to put the ring over his head it landed on his back and I received a deluge of water in my face while the skiff barely escaped a blow from his tail that would have put it past repair. The power boat kept close upon the trail and after bailing out our skiff we took short cuts that kept us near the animal, which often rose for a second within arm's length, but it was another hour before we got the line around him, where it held for a time, which was fortunate, since the steel ring had been torn free in the struggle and had gone to the bottom. The Camera-man lost the first of the affray, his motor not being lively enough to compete with the sea cow. Its chug-chug frightened the creature until he dragged us under mangrove bushes that overhung a deep channel that ran beside the river bank, sending me to the bottom of the skiff and nearly dragging the captain overboard. Often he towed us at a speed that took us out of range of the Camera-man, then turning would swim directly under the skiff, playfully tossing a few barrels of water over us as he passed. He swam for long distances near the bottom of deep channels, only coming to the surface at long intervals for breath, then carried us across banks where the water was only five feet deep and we could see his every motion. In my desire to make the manatee pose for the Camera-man I sometimes approached too closely, only to have the skiff lifted half out of water by a blow of the creature's tail. Then the Camera-man shouted:

“Bully for you; do so some more!”



Tussock Key. A haunt of the manatee on Harney's River.

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And we did so some more, till we were drenched and the skiff had been almost swamped many times.

But the insatiable Camera-man, whose plates were running low, called out:

“More action! Why don’t you go overboard as you promised?”

“Here goes,” said the captain, as he landed astride of the manatee, which just then came up beside the skiff to breathe. He was promptly bucked off by a roach of the creature’s back and a slap of his tail, but caught him by one flipper, while I tumbled overboard and grabbed the other, just as the line slipped over the nose of the manatee. Thereafter we swam around together in a friendly way while the Camera-man circled about us in the power boat changing slides in his camera like mad. When at last he exclaimed with a sigh, “Plates all gone,” we measured the sea cow with an oar, finding his length eight feet and his weight, by estimate, five hundred pounds. Then loosing my hold of his flipper I swam beside him for a few yards until the quickening stroke of his big propeller left me behind, and as I turned and struck out for the skiff that drifted a hundred yards away, I overheard a soliloquy of the Camera-man:

“Guess I’ve got a monopoly of that subject.”

