

CANOEING IN THE SURF

CHAPTER XX

CANOEING IN THE SURF

IT'S the hurricane month and I ain't takin' chances," said the captain after he had anchored the *Irene* with a big cable to a tree on the bank.

We were in Charlotte Harbor near Gasparilla Pass, separated by a strip of land a few yards wide from the beach on which the waves of the Gulf of Mexico beat with slow, pulsating roar. As the gale made fishing out of the question, the Camera-man and I walked across to the beach and sat on a palmetto log where the wind sprinkled us with fleecy foam from the crests of the breakers and occasional waves slapped our legs with playful impertinence.

That morning a tarpon had towed my canoe far out in the Gulf and we got back to the coast barely in time to escape the storm.

"How would you like to be out there now, in the *Baby*?" said the Camera-man, as he lifted his legs out of reach of an oncoming seventh wave.

"What's the matter with finding out?" I replied, and went to the cruising boat, returning with the captain, the cook and the canoe, which last we had christened *Baby*. The Camera-man, looking seaward, scented trouble in the air and hastily prepared his "first aid to the injured" apparatus.

The cook, who said he couldn't swim, kept in easy water but the captain went out in the breakers with me to hold the canoe until I could tumble aboard. The first breaker that we met rolled entirely over me, tore the canoe from my grasp, tossed it in the air and dropped it on the captain's head. His face was soon covered with blood and he insisted, at first, that his ear had been cut off. We poured the water out of the swamped canoe and again waded with it out into the surf. We practiced guiding it over the breakers, learned to hold it against the wind which tossed it in the air and were taught to let it go and to dive away when the solid water swept us from our feet and took our craft in charge.

After we had succeeded in steering it smoothly over a breaker the captain held the canoe on one side while I scrambled into it from the other and was at work with my paddle when the next breaker came toppling over me. It lifted the bow of the canoe till it seemed to me to be pointing to the zenith and the wind catching it compelled me to struggle mightily to hold my course. The whole rose on the wave until I appeared to be paddling in the air, then the bow dropped and the little craft glided down the declivity in smooth water under perfect control. While I met the next wave the canoe climbed easily up its frowning front, balanced a moment on the crest and slid smoothly down into the next valley. I paddled out beyond the foam-tipped breakers to the unbroken waves, over which my tiny craft floated like a bubble. Back and forth I played with the canoe, sometimes coming

Canoeing in the Surf

close to the beach in all the foam and fury of a breaking wave, then backing strongly with my paddle, the wave left me and I turned the canoe to meet with its bow the next oncoming wave.

Never was there another so joyous a sport nor so delightful a playfellow as Old Ocean. I sat alone in the pretty little canoe, facing the gale that tried to take away my breath, dipping my paddle first on one side and then on the other, holding the knife-like bow in the teeth of the wind, rejoicing when it cut into the mass of flying foam that streamed from the breaking top of each great wave as it sped toward me. When the wave tossed my canoe in the air, as it rolled under it, I got glimpses of rows of advancing breakers, of whitecaps behind them that extended to the horizon and reveled in a strange exaltation. I sported with the waves, backing away as one approached so that I rode slowly and smoothly over it, paddling furiously against another until in rough playfulness it lifted me almost out of the water and dropped me heavily in the valley behind it. Against others I held the canoe diagonally while balancing it with the paddle as with the easy gait of a rocking chair it rode over them. I felt I was master of the waves. But there was a weak link in the chain of my control. As I sat of necessity in the middle of the canoe I could turn it around but slowly and was sometimes short of time when I tried to go about between two waves. On these occasions I often escaped shipwreck by narrow margins and once found my canoe, despite my utmost exertions, exactly parallel with a big wave which

broke the instant before it struck me. It curled over my head and seemed to drop a mountain of water and foam into the canoe, smothering me and rolling canoe and cargo over and over. Yet the spirit of friendly fun continued to possess me and as the water engulfed me, turned me upside down, rolled me shoreward and thumped me on the sand, I just held my breath as I continued to play the game and counted my pommeling as a bit of rough play to be paid for in kind when I got the upper hand.

After I had scrambled to my feet in shoal water, recovered the canoe and dragged it ashore, I sat down by the Camera-man to recover the breath which had been beaten out of me. I thought he looked low in his mind and told him so, asking if he had been worried about me. He replied that perhaps it was disappointment that had affected him, since for a minute it had really looked as if something exciting, in his line, was about to happen. I couldn't rebuke him as he merited, for he knew of the happening of twenty years before, when at that same pass, within a stone's throw of where we then sat, a sloop was capsized and its owner left clinging to the wreckage, howling for help. On that occasion I chanced to be hunting with a harpoon in a skiff nearby and shouted to my boatman to hurry, while I paddled fiercely with my pole. He replied to my appeal:

"What's the hurry, we're sure to save him?"

"Save him!" I yelled, "I don't want to *save* him, I want to *photograph* him!"

Returning to my sport I became circumspect and



1



2



3

CANOEING THE BREAKERS

- (1) The first breaker rolled me over. (2) The turning was as dangerous as breaking a girth. (3) Choosing a big wave I paddled and rowed home on its crest.

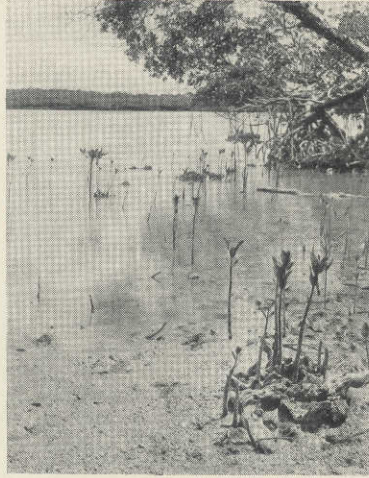
Canoeing in the Surf

thereafter either paddled beyond the breakers before turning toward the shore, or backed the canoe up to the beach without turning. It was strenuous play and after another half-hour I was glad to help the captain mount the canoe to take his turn with the breakers, while I rested upon the beach. He may have taken fewer chances than I, at least he wasn't dismounted, although he sometimes had to paddle desperately to turn the canoe in time to meet, bow on, the approaching breakers. As the skill of the captain increased and the chance of disaster decreased, I saw the expectant look fade from the face of the Camera-man and he apparently lost interest in the game, but when the captain brought back the canoe and told the cook that it was now his turn, he picked up his camera and the light of anticipation beamed again in his eye only to die out once more when the cook, despite all persuasion, peremptorily refused to enjoy himself in that way. After futile efforts to persuade the cook to change his mind the Camera-man laid aside the tools of his trade and climbed into the canoe while the captain and I held it for him among the breakers. He met with no such mishap as I had suffered, owing doubtless to the advantage he possessed in not being under fire of a camera as he wielded his paddle. The difficulty of controlling the canoe from amidships and the impossibility of a single occupant staying in one end of it as long as it took him to get there in that rough water, induced us to try the canoe in the surf with a double load. The captain and the cook held the canoe while the

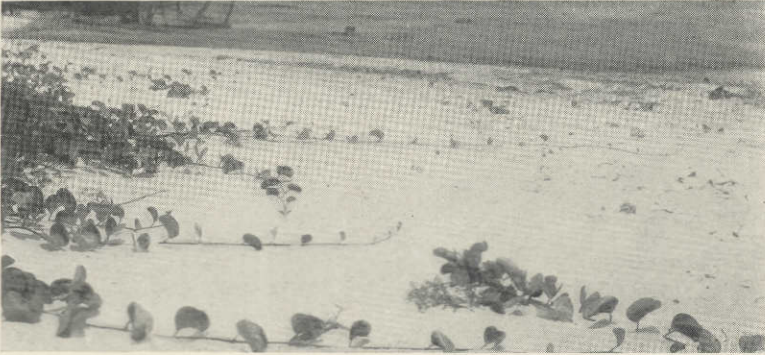
Camera-man and I tried to mount it. We made many attempts but never succeeded in getting aboard contemporaneously. There were too many of us, the big waves tangled us up, bumped us against one another and whacked us with the canoe, so we sent the cook back to the beach. Then the Camera-man and the captain hung on to the canoe until a breaker had passed when I climbed hastily aboard and grabbed my paddle. The captain now held the canoe against wind and wave, helped with the paddle, and the Camera-man tumbled aboard just as a breaker swept over us, knocking everything endwise. After a substantial repetition of the performance and a few variations by way of response to the encores of the cook, we changed our tactics and the Camera-man and I carried the canoe across the strip of beach to the smooth water of Charlotte Harbor where we embarked. We paddled under the lee of the land until we reached Gasparilla Pass, then, facing the storm, struck out for the Gulf by way of the deep channel of the pass over waves which, though big, were not breaking badly. We were kneeling in the narrow bow and stern of the cranky craft, our center of gravity was dangerously high for the rough water and the high wind, and as we climbed the heavy waves the canoe seemed to have lost its lightness and its life, while a lack of coördination developed in the paddles upon which our safety depended. The double load narrowed the margin between the gunwale and the water until each white-capped wave spilled some of its crest into the canoe. It is one thing



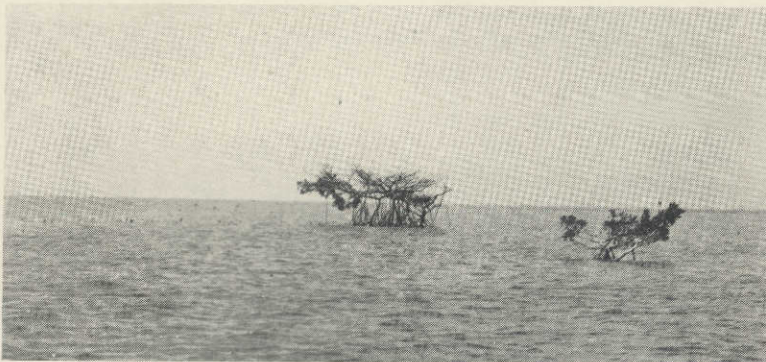
1



2



3



4

HOW THE MANGROVE WORKS

- (1) A case where the sea tried to destroy an island—everything but the firmly rooted tree washed away. (2) The indomitable march out to sea. (3) The railroad vine which co-operates with the mangrove in making islands. (4) The way an island is started.

Canoeing in the Surf

to play with breakers on the coast and quite another to risk being swamped in a swift tidal current sweeping through a deep pass. The water became more turbulent, the waves bigger and more broken as we advanced, and when one of them broke and spilled a bucketful of solid water over the side of the craft we turned about and paddled with all convenient speed for the harbor. We carried the canoe back to the outer beach, I resumed my play with the waves and continued to furnish material for the Camera-man until his plate box was empty.

Then for the last time I crossed the moving hills and valleys till I reached the outer line of breakers, and choosing a big wave, paddled and rode upon its crest, landing upon the beach with all the enthusiasm with which a cowboy strikes town after a round-up.



How the mangrove forms a jungle.

