

Moment of Panic

There was a time when it was a dangerous thing to be a boy in Bluffton, S. C. Something terrible could happen to him any minute of the day or night. For example, he could fall out of a persimmon tree and break his leg, he could step on a rusty nail and get lockjaw, he could walk into a nest of yellow jackets and get all stung up, he could even find himself face to face with a tree full of cotton-mouth moccasins and have 10 years' growth scared out of him, as I did.

Nowadays in Bluffton a boy can live out his normal life with practically no risks. Wearing shoes all the time and using bottle after bottle of Vaseline hair tonic, he can't even stump his toe or get his hair mussed, which could be a pretty tragic thing, considering all the time he has to spend in front of a mirror with a pocket comb trying to get it back in place. Survival is just a matter of staying off the streets and highways and watching out for flying saucers and things like that.

But in the olden days, a boy had to watch out for all kinds of danger from sunup to sunup, no matter where he was or what he was doing. Even in Sunday school he wasn't safe, for any second he could be attacked from the rear under the slatted bench with a sharp pin or the point of a penknife. He never knew when or where or how danger was going to strike. Sometimes it seemed to sneak up on him when he was least expecting it. One minute he was as happy as a lark on the wing, the next minute danger was looking him right in the face, daring him to move one inch forward or backward. That's the way it was with me and those cotton-mouth moccasins.

That morning I woke up early to the tune of a mockingbird's song. He was in the wisteria vine outside my window, singing a happy melody with a lot of fancy stitching thrown in extra, and it was mighty inspiring. It got me to thinking how lucky I was.

It was the month of August and I didn't have a care in the world. I had laid in a two-day supply of kitchen wood; I didn't have to milk Daisy because she was expecting and had dried up like a peanut shell; the yard from the main street fence to the cove back of the house was raked and clean; and school was still three weeks off. In short, the whole bright beautiful day was ahead of me and every minute of it was mine.

I stretched out of bed and put on my shirt and pants. I got through with breakfast and things and then headed down the main street for the river. My Uncle Sam Graves had told me to use his boat and motor

any time I wanted to, and naturally, on a morning like that, I wanted to.

Uncle Sam kept his boat beached near the steamboat wharf. He never took his 16-horse Johnson off the transom, because it was too heavy to tote from the house to the river and vice versa every time he used it. Besides, nobody would dare touch Uncle Sam's motor without permission, because sooner or later Uncle Sam would confront him right in the post office or some other public place and tongue-lash the life out of him.

But I had permission. So I went straight down the hill to the boat and checked to see if there was plenty of gasoline in the five-gallon reserve can. Then I set the anchor in the bow and shoved off and cranked up and headed south and east for the Atlantic Ocean.

I hadn't bothered to bring along a fishing line. We had just had a whole week of heavy rains and the river was swollen with fresh water and you couldn't catch a dogfish, much less a croaker or a summer trout.

My destination was Hilton Head beach. With the woods everywhere ankle-deep in water, I figured the rattlesnakes would be hunting the hot sand in the dunes to dry off in. I had killed a big one over there one time with one of Uncle Sam's seven-foot oars. It had been more fun than catching a bluenose shark with a gallon jug for a float. Put a seven-foot oar between you and a fighting-mad rattlesnake and you can tease him and make him shake his rattles and strike at you until he wears himself out. Then if you know how, you can pin his head to the ground with the paddle end of the oar and hold him there until he's dead as a doormat.

It was eight miles to the mouth of May River and about seven more from there through Calibogue Sound to the ocean. The water that morning was calm and the outgoing tide was with me all the way, and it didn't take more than 35 minutes to reach the beach. I could have made it in 30 minutes, but Uncle Sam's motor was getting old and I didn't want to strain it too much.

I cut the motor off and let the bow slide up on the coarse sand. Then I sat there for a while watching a lonely old pelican riding the waves about a hundred yards offshore. In the distance beyond the bird, I could see a big oil tanker moving slowly past Tybee Island on its way from Savannah to England or somewhere. A school of playful porpoises began blowing and turning somersaults around the pelican and I kept wishing one of the porpoises would surface right under him and toss him high into the air. But the pelican wasn't worried about that. Even in the ocean, a creature has certain inalienable rights that other creatures respect.

While watching those fun-loving porpoises, a sudden thought came into my head and made me change my plan. I don't know what suggested it, unless it was the danger that lonely old pelican seemed to be in. Anyway, I got to asking myself a few questions. "What on earth are you doing out here at the ocean," I said, "when you ought to be about 20 miles in the other direction? Don't you know that after all that rain last week every cotton-mouth moccasin in New River will be sunning himself in a tree? What's one old lazy rattlesnake compared to a thousand tree-climbing moccasins?"

It had been about two years since I had laid eyes on a cotton-mouth moccasin, and I didn't waste any more time. I filled the gasoline tank, shoved off from that beach, cranked up and struck out across the Sound toward the Haig's Point lighthouse. I followed the Daufuskie Island shoreline until I could see the top of the Savannah Bank and Trust Company far far away, then crossed over to the big marsh and headed through a creek for the mouth of New River.

Going from a big straight salt water river into a narrow winding shadowy fresh water stream is like turning from a long wide street into a dark crooked alley. You expect the unexpected. Snakes, alligators, otters, minks, black bears and panthers might be lurking along the banks, or swimming around in the coffee-colored water. I could almost smell excitement and danger.

New River was running wild that morning. Swamps and rice fields had been inundated by the heavy rains and freshets were pouring in from every direction. In some places they were cascading down the banks and over log jams like mountain waterfalls. To get rid of the excess water before it crested above the bank level, the swift-running current was rushing it toward the river's mouth and out into a myriad of creeks in the vast mud flats stretching beyond to the Cooper River.

Skill and a sharp eye were required to keep the boat moving safely over and around snags, while dodging swirling debris of sticks and leaves, and now and then a hurtling log that had pulled loose from a jam and gone crazy. I had intended to keep a count of the moccasins in the trees as I went along, but that was impossible. I hardly had time to look at them, much less count them. I caught a glimpse of one or two otters and a few alligators, and I guess I could have seen a lot more if I could have been looking for them instead of watching that cluttered current.

I throttled the motor down as low as I could and still keep the boat maneuverable, and when it suddenly sputtered a couple of times and cut off, I thought I had throttled it too low.

Instantly the boat stopped and was swept backward, turning this way and that and slamming against logs and snags. I jerked the crank-cord a half-dozen times before I realized that the gasoline tank was empty. I got up to the bow as fast as I could and dropped the anchor. It caught and held and the boat straightened out with a sudden jerk that almost threw me overboard.

I payed out a little more rope to be sure there was enough length to keep the anchor from lifting. I saw a frayed place right where the rope touched the water. I took a closer look and saw that the rope was cut almost in half, and that it was beginning to give way under the terrific strain.

That didn't frighten me very much. I had faith in my ability to handle an oar and keep the boat on a safe course back to the river's mouth. But when I looked around to see how the boat was swinging, I gasped with horror and prayed for help.

The stern was within three feet of a big tree leaning out over the current and touching the water. Everywhere I looked in the tree, I could see a huge cotton-mouth moccasin stretched out in the branches, with his beady eyes fixed on me. The moment the rope snapped, the boat would fall back right into the tree and I would get all tangled up with those slimy killers. I was terrified.

"Oh Lord, help me, help me!" I groaned.

There was only one thing to do, and in a flash I knew what it was, and did it. Call it instinct. Call it anything you like. But I call it the answer to a desperate boy's prayer for help.

Holding fast to the rope in my hands, I jumped overboard. The rope broke loose from the anchor and the boat rushed backward with the current, towing me along under the water. I could feel sharp snags ripping my shirt and pants to threads and tearing gashes in my face, arms and legs. But I clung to the rope and kept my body submerged, until I was certain that tree full of cotton-mouth moccasins was far behind me. Then I pulled myself back up into the bow and grabbed an oar and got the boat straightened out again.

When I finally cleared the mouth of the river, I guided the boat into a mud flat. I was hot and exhausted and had to rest a while before I could lift the gasoline can and fill the tank.

I was so happy, I had to cry. I was half naked and blood and sweat and tears were all dripping together on the floor. But I was still alive. Thank God, I was still alive.!