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On Barton's Reef

By GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

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A DEAD animal ain't generally worth more'n what his pelt will bring in the open market, minus the fees an' commissions of them rascally agents who come down here to swap trade with us an' get the lion's share, an' the jack-ass, too—me an' the rest of the hunters down here bein' mostly the jack-asses—but a live animal is an ornamental commodity that has what Captain Kennelly calls "possibilities." I'm meanin' by that that an old diamond back rattler's skin an' teeth an' rattles ain't worth much more'n a \$5 down here, but a live rattler shipped up north in a cage may bring \$25, an' again, it may be knocked down for an even hundred.

So Captain Kennelly ain't never been in the killin' business. An' I was brung up by Captain Kennelly! "Live an' let live," that's been our motto, an' we waxed fat—the captain weighs 200, an' I ain't far behind an' weighin' 'nuf millionaires exactly, but middlin' 'nuf millionaires, too, but there is room for a difference of opinion.

We'd been up the Calousahatchie one winter tryin' to bag snakes, birds, an' other creepin', crawlin' an' flyin' critters when we got wind of a mighty big, sassy mountain lion roamin' up near Wadin' Landin'. The captain decided at once that we'd bag the critter. Mountain lions was bringin' pretty handsome prices then—the Florida variety bein' a little underpriced for they ain't no bigger'n a good size dog.

The captain an' I sailed up the Calousahatchie an' went campin' on that big fellow's trail, an' before a fortnight we had him clip an' clean aboard the Marthy Ann, tied to an' sailin' an' a-roarin' in a box on deck as though he'd like to eat us alive. We was mighty tickled at our prize, an' we figured on a couple of hundred apiece when we landed him north.

The Marthy Ann warn't much of a sailboat, but she was a tubberin' old craft that did duty for us for well nigh a dozen years. When we set sail down the Calousahatchie the captain says:

"Steve, can't you take the Marthy Ann to Charlotte Harbor alone? You can hand the critter over to the railroad people there an' get a receipt for him. I want to get off at Fort Myers, an' run up a spell to see Cousin Obadiah. He's real sick, they say."

I warn't goin' to stand in the way of the captain's seein' his sick cousin, so I answered with afeatherin' an' said I'd run back to Fort Myers in a couple of days an' pick him up. The captain was mighty pleased, but when I landed him at Fort Myers he sort of suspiciously somethin' an' said:

"You think you can manage it alone all right, Steve?"

"Yi land this old patriarch in Charlotte Harbor before night or I'll drown him in the gulf tryin' it," I answered promptly.

I didn't know that I was makin' a pretty sure guess of what I'd be doin' before sundown. I just hove off from the dock an' turned the Marthy Ann's nose toward the gulf. I ain't much of a deep water sailor, but I know the coast up to Charlotte Harbor to'rably well an' I didn't have no misgivin's.

That lion was mighty quiet-like at first, but when we got away from the land an' he began to sniff the salt air of the gulf he sort of got uneasy. He was gettin' out of his element, an' he felt sort of homesick. Mebbe it was seasickness. I dunno which. Anyhow, he roared an' whined an' scratched to beat the band. He jest kept me company with his noise, an' I didn't have no time to get lonesome. Once or twice he got so scratchy that I took a look at his cage to see if 'twas all right.

Barton's reef is jest ten miles sou'-west of Charlotte Harbor—a nasty little, treacherous shoal that sticks out of the water at low tide an' keeps out an' sight at flood. "Tain't charred, an' sometimes a ship trips up on it an' jest natchurally rips herself to pieces tryin' to get off ag'in."

I don't know what made me forget Barton's reef, for I'd been round it a dozen times, an' come to think of it now, I'd been nigh wrecked on it once or twice. I ain't got no excuse to make except that lion must have made me forgetful by his sverlastin' roarin'.

First thing I knowed a puff of wind keeled the Marthy Ann over, an' before I could fetch her up ag'in we struck somethin'. It was only sand an' mud, but the keel struck there, an' the next wind slambanged the old lubberin' craft clean over on her side. I wasn't lookin' for the shock an' pitched head-foremost through the air an' landed 'bout twenty feet away.

When I went down into the water I expected to land bottom somewhere less than a mile or two, but the sudden way in which I stopped showed me that I was on Barton's reef. I was standin' on my head in 'bout a foot of water. There was some mud, an' that made sticky standin', but when I finally got my head out of it, the water cleaned out of udder an' mouth the Marthy Ann had drifted away in deep water.

I ran after her, but she was holdin' her own so tantalizin'-like that I couldn't gain an' inch. I swam round for some minutes, an' then to save my life I turned back to the reef. I could see the bare back of the reef just shinin' above the gulf, but more'n ten yards away. I ain't much of a swimmer, but I made double quick time to that reef.

I hadn't thought much 'bout that lion all this time, so excited was I over the loss of the Marthy Ann, but now I jest

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There was a crash an' disturbin' confusion of the gulf. I saw stars an' sharks an' numerous other unpleasant things. When I got a grip on the float in 'box ag'in I was half-drowned, an' that old lion was hangin' for dear life on the other side of it. He was 'bout as frightened as I was. His paws was within feet of my head, an' I could feel his breath fannin' my cheeks, but he warn't for fightin' any more.

We hadn't improved our positions much, for that wabbly old craft warn't built for two. Both of us couldn't keep our balance at once. When the lion was in 'box ag'in, an' when I bobbed up above the gulf his head went under. We went seawarin' like this for some time, neither one able to catch his breath.

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He struck the box ag'in with a bang, an' over we went once more, turnin' a clean somersault in the water. I went down pretty nigh to the bottom of the gulf an' then bumped up ag'in the box, so hard that I had a headache for a week after.

The lion was there ahead of me, an' he took a turn at fightin' me off. I saw he was gettin' on to the game. The box was a good boat for us, but too small for two. When my father had to keep ag'in, an' as possession is half the law the big yellow one was goin' to hold on to his advantage. I couldn't get a hold of the box without gettin' a swipe that ripped up a yard of human hide.

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