



by Kirk Munroe
Canoemates
A Story of the Florida Reef and Everglades

Chapter 1: In the Far South



“REALLY, mother, it doesn’t seem as though I could stand it any longer! Life in this place isn’t worth living, especially when it’s a life of poverty, and what people call ‘genteel poverty,’ as ours is. Our struggle is for bare existence, and there doesn’t seem to be any future to it. If you’d only let me go to New York, I’m sure I could do something there that was worth the doing, but I can’t do anything here, and I’d almost rather die than live here any longer!”

With this Sumner Rankin flung himself into a chair, and his flushed face was as heavily clouded as though life held nothing of hope or happiness for him.

“Why, my dear boy,” exclaimed his mother, standing beside him and smoothing his tumbled brown curls with her cool hands, “what is the matter? I never knew you to speak so bitterly before.”

Mrs. Rankin still looked so young and pretty that she might almost be taken for an elder sister of the handsome, seventeen-year-old boy over whom she now bent so tenderly. To the casual observer the Rankins’ home was a very pleasant one. It was a pretty, broad-verandaed cottage nestled in the shadows of a clump of towering coconut palms, on the far southern island of Key West. It stood on the outskirts of the town, and so close to the beach that the warm waters of the Mexican Gulf rippling on the coral rocks behind it made a ceaseless melody for its inmates. Jasmine vines clambered over it, glossy-leaved myrtles, a hedge of night-blooming cereus and other sweet-scented tropical shrubs perfumed the air about it.

Through these, looking out from the shaded coolness of the verandas, the eye caught fascinating glimpses of blue waters with white sails constantly passing, and stately men-of-war swinging idly at their moorings. It looked an ideal home; but even in this tropical Eden there was one very large serpent, besides several that were smaller though almost equally annoying. The big one was poverty, and it held the Rankins in its dread embrace as though with no intention of relaxing it. Mrs. Rankin was the widow of a naval officer who had been stationed at Key West a few years before. He had



sent his wife and only child north to escape a dreadful summer of yellow fever, while he had stayed and died at his post. Shortly before his death Commander Rankin, believing that Key West property was about to increase rapidly in value, had invested all that he had in the little jasmine-clad cottage, expecting to be able to sell it at a handsome profit when his term of service at that station should expire.

Thus it was all that remained to his family, and to this haven Mrs. Rankin, sad-eyed and well-nigh broken-hearted, had returned with her boy. The fever had caused real estate to become of so little value that there was no chance of selling the cottage; so they were forced to live in it, and the widow eked out her scanty pension by letting such rooms as she could spare to lodgers. During the pleasant winter season she rarely had difficulty in filling them, but through the long, hot summer months desirable lodgers were few and far between, and the poverty serpent enfolded them closely.

One of the lesser serpents against which the Rankins had to contend was the lack of congenial society; for, with the exception of a few government employees and those whose business compels them to live there, the population of Key West is composed of spongers and wreckers, Cuban and Negro cigar makers. Another was the lack of good schools, and the worst of all was the lack of suitable business openings for Sumner, or "Summer," as his Chinese nurse had called him when he was a baby, and as he had been called ever since on account of his bright face and sunny disposition. He would have loved dearly to go through the Naval Academy and follow the profession that had been his father's, but the Rankins had no political influence, and without that there was no chance. He could not go into a cigar factory, and though his boyish love of adventure had led him to take several trips on sponging vessels, it was not the business for a gentleman.

Born in China, the boy had, with his mother, followed his naval father to many of the principal ports of the world. Both his father and mother had devoted all their spare time to his education, and thus he was well informed in many branches of which the average boy knows little or nothing. He loved the sea and everything connected with it. From his babyhood he had played with and sailed boats; now there was no better sailor in Key West than he, nor one more at home among the reefs of those southern waters. He knew the secrets of boatbuilding from keel to truck, and from stem to stern, while his favorite employment was the whittling out of models, the drawing of sail plans, and the designing of yachts. But nobody wanted yachts in Key West, nor did its sailors care to have improved models for their fishing boats or sponge vessels.

So Sumner was considered a dreamer, and people said he ought to be doing something besides whittling and idling about home. The boy thought so himself, but what to do and how to set about it were problems the attempted solution of which caused him many an unhappy hour. On the perfect winter day that he had come home in such a despairing frame of mind, his own life had just been presented in vivid contrast to that of another boy who seemed to have the very things that Sumner most longed for. He had been down to the wharf to see the Olivette, the West Indian fast mail steamer from Tampa, come in. There he had been particularly attracted by a boy somewhat younger than himself, standing with a gentleman, whom Sumner supposed to be his father, on the afterdeck. As the steamer neared the wharf this boy amused himself by flinging silver coins into the water for the fun of seeing little Negroes dive after them.



“Only think, mother!” exclaimed Sumner in relating this incident, “he threw money away as I would so many pebbles, and didn’t seem to value it any more. Just imagine a boy having money to waste like that! And some of those little rascals who dived for it made more in a few minutes than I have to spend in months.”

“But, Sumner,” said Mrs. Rankin, gravely, “I hope your unhappiness does not arise from jealousy of another’s prosperity?”

“Yes, it does, mother,” replied the boy, honestly; “though it isn’t only because he could throw money away; it is because he has the very thing that I would rather have than anything else in the world – the prettiest, daintiest, cedar sailing canoe that ever was built. I never saw one before, but I’ve read of them, and studied their plans until I know all about them. She is as different from my old canvas thing as a scow is from a yacht.”

“But you thought your canvas canoe very nearly perfect when you built her.”

“I know I did, but I have learned better since then, and now it seems as though I should never care to look at it again.” Yet this same despised canvas canoe, which Sumner had built himself the year before without ever having seen one, had been considered both by himself and his friends a masterpiece of naval construction, and he had cruised in her ever since with great satisfaction.

“You have yet to learn, dear, that it is ever so much harder to be satisfied with the things we have than to obtain those for which we long, no matter how far beyond our reach they may seem,” said Mrs. Rankin, gently.

“I suppose it is, mother, and I know it is horrid to come to you with my miserable complainings; but I wish I had never seen those canoes – for there were two of them just alike – and I wish wealthy people wouldn’t come to Key West with such things. They don’t do us any good, and only make us feel our poverty the more keenly. Why, there they are now! Turning in here too! What can they want with us, I wonder? I won’t see them at any rate. I’ve no more use for wealthy snobs than they have for me.”

So saying, Sumner left the room by a rear door, and the steps of the approaching visitors sounded on the front veranda.

