



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

Chapter 2: Three Canoes, and the Fate of One

As Sumner's mother opened the door, she saw that the gentleman who, politely lifting his hat, asked if she were Mrs. Rankin, was too young to be the father of the boy by his side.

"May I introduce myself as Mr. Tracy Manton, of New York?" he said, when she had answered his question in the affirmative; "and my nephew, Master Worth Manton? We have called to see if we can engage rooms here for a week or so. We will take our meals at the hotel; but we have two canoes that we propose fitting out here for a cruise up the reef, and we want to find a place close to the water where we can keep them in safety, and at the same time be near them. Mr. Merrill advised us to come here, and it looks as though this were exactly the place of which we are in search. So if you can accommodate us we shall esteem it a great favor."

With the remembrance of Sumner's last words, Mrs. Rankin hesitated a moment before replying; whereupon Mr. Manton added

"I trust you are not going to refuse us, for I have set my heart on coming here, and will gladly pay full hotel rates for the accommodation."

"If my vacant rooms suit you I shall be pleased to let you have them at my regular rate, which is all they are worth," answered the widow, quietly, as she reflected on the poverty which would not allow even a mother's feelings to interfere with honorable breadwinning.

"Will you step in and look at them?"

"We are in luck, my boy, and our little expedition has begun most prosperously," said Mr. Tracy Manton an hour later, as he and his nephew sat in one of the two pretty backrooms that they had engaged, surrounded by their belongings, and looking out on the sparkling waters of the Gulf.

On the grass of the palm-shaded back yard, and in plain sight from the windows, lay the two canoes that had so excited Sumner's admiration and envy. They were indeed beauties as they lay there divested of their burlap wrappings, and that they were fresh from the builder's hands was shown by their unscratched varnish and gleaming metal fittings. They were fifteen feet long by thirty inches wide amidships, were provided with folding metal centerboards, metal drop rudders, foot- and hand-steering gear, watertight compartments fore and aft, and were decked, with the exception of their roomy cockpits. These were surrounded by stout oak coamings three inches high, sharp-pointed, and



flaring outward at the forward ends, but cut down so as to be flush with the deck aft. Beside them lay the confused mass of paddles, sails, spars, canoe tents, rubber aprons, cushions, and cordage, that completed their equipment. They were simply perfect in every detail, and the most beautiful things Sumner Rankin had ever set his eyes upon. At least he thought so, as, returning from a long tramp on which he had tried to walk off his unhappiness, he found them lying in the yard. In spite of his surprise at seeing them there, and a return of his unwelcome feeling of envy, he could not help stopping to admire them and study their details.

“Hello!” exclaimed Mr. Manton, again looking from his window. “There’s a chap down there staring his eyes out at our boats. I shouldn’t wonder if he were our landlady’s son—the one, you know, we were advised to engage as a guide. You wait here while I run down and find out.”

So Worth waited and watched from the window to note the result of his uncle’s negotiations.

At a first glance one would have said that Worth Manton was an effeminate boy, with a pale face, blue eyes, and fair hair. If, however, the observer looked long enough to note the square chin, the occasional compression of the thin lips, and flash of the eyes, he might form a different opinion. He was the son of Guy Manton, the great Wall Street operator who had made a fortune out of western railroads, and he had all his life been accustomed to lavish luxury. He was rather delicate, and it was largely on his account that his parents had decided to spend a winter at St. Augustine. The boy had taken but slight interest in the gaieties of the Ponce de Leon, nor had he gained any benefit from the chill rainstorms driven in from the ocean by the east winds of midwinter. The doctor had advised his going farther south; and when his uncle Tracy proposed that they make a canoe trip up the, great Florida Reef, which lies off the most southerly coast of the United States, Worth had eagerly seconded the proposition, and had finally won the reluctant consent of his parents. He knew nothing of canoeing, nor did his uncle know much more; but the latter was a good yachtsman, and Worth had had some experience of the same kind, so they felt confident they could manage. They intended to devote some time to studying their craft, and learning their possibilities in the waters about Key West; so two canoes, completely equipped, were ordered from the builder by telegraph. Worth’s father promised to charter a yacht, sail down the coast in it, and meet them at Cape Florida about the first of April, and the two would-be canoemen started for Key West full of pleasant anticipations.

Sumner Rankin started at being asked if that were his name, for he had not heard Mr. Manton’s step on the grass behind him, and answered rather curtly that it was.

“Well,” said the young man, plunging into business at once, as was his habit, “I have been told that you are a first-class sailor, as well as a good reef pilot. My nephew and I are going to cruise up the reef, and I should like to engage your services as boatman and guide. I am willing to pay—”

“It makes no difference what you are willing to pay,” interrupted Sumner, with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes.

“My services as boatman are not for hire at any price.”

With this assertion of his pride, or, as he imagined, of his independence, the boy turned and walked into the house.

“Whew!” whistled Mr. Manton, gazing after the retreating form in amazement. “There’s a bit of dynamite for you! Pride and poverty mixed in equal parts do make a most powerful explosive.



However, I haven't forgotten my own days of poverty, and can fully appreciate the boy's feelings. I'll try him on a different tack as soon as this little squall has blown over. He and his mother must be different from the majority of the people down here, for they are the first we have met who don't seem to want to make money out of us."

Mr. Tracy Manton had no idea of giving up his purpose of engaging Sumner to accompany them on their trip, for he was the kind of a man who wins his way by sticking to whatever plan he has decided upon, in which respect his nephew Worth strongly resembled him. So the next time he met the lad, which was in the afternoon of the following day, he held out his hand and said:

"I beg your pardon for my unintentional rudeness of yesterday, and my forgetfulness of the fact that a gentleman is such, no matter where he is found. Now, I want you to forgive me, forget my offense, and do me a favor. I can't make head or tail of our sails, and they don't seem to me right somehow. If you will come and look at them I shall be greatly obliged."

By this time Sumner was so heartily ashamed of his conduct of the day before that he was only too glad to accept this overture of friendship, and a few minutes later the two were busily discussing the sails of the *Cupid and Psyche*, as the Mantons' canoes were named. The spars were much heavier than they need be, while the sails were of the ill-shaped, unserviceable pattern generally furnished by canoe builders, and these defects were quickly detected by Sumner's experienced eye. When he pointed them out to Mr. Manton, the latter readily comprehended them, but was at a loss how to make the improvements that were evidently demanded.

In order to explain more thoroughly the idea that he wished to convey, Sumner dragged out his own canvas canoe, stepped her masts, and hoisted her sails. They were of a most ingenious and effective lateen pattern, such as Mr. Manton had never before seen.

"Where did you get hold of that idea?" he asked, after studying them carefully a few moments. "It is a capital one."

"I got it partly from an Arab dhow that I once saw off Madagascar, and partly from the feluccas at Civita Vecchia."

"Madagascar and the Mediterranean!" repeated Mr. Manton, in astonishment. "If you have visited both of those places you must have traveled extensively."

"Yes," answered Sumner, quietly, but with a twinkle of amusement in his eye. "The son of a naval officer who attempts to follow his father about the world is apt to see a good bit of it before he gets through."

Mr. Manton, who had known nothing of Sumner's history, no longer wondered that he had been offended at being taken for a boatman whose services could be hired. He was, however, too wise to make further mention of the subject, and merely said,

"Then you have had a splendid chance to study sails." And again turning to the subject under consideration, he asked, "Would you be willing to help us cut out some for our canoes after your models?"

Sumner answered that he would not only be willing but glad to lend every aid in his power towards properly equipping the two canoes for their trip.



In the mean time the sun had set, and the sky was black with an approaching squall that caused them to watch with some uneasiness for Worth's return. He had gone out in one of the canoes, an hour before, for a paddle, and had not since been seen. Just as the storm broke he appeared around a point and headed towards the little landing place near which they were standing. As his course lay directly in the teeth of the wind, his struggle was long and hard. They watched him anxiously, and more than once Sumner offered to go to the boy's assistance; but his uncle said he wished Worth to learn self-reliance more than anything else, and this was too good a lesson to be spoiled. Finally the young paddler conquered, and, reaching the landing place in safety, sprang ashore. He was either too exhausted or too careless to properly secure his canoe, and as he stepped from it a spiteful gust of wind struck it full on the side. In another moment it was beyond reach and drifting rapidly out to sea.

Both the Mantons were confused by the suddenness of the mishap. Before they could form any plan for the recovery of the runaway, Sumner had shoved his own canvas canoe into the water, jumped aboard, and was dashing away in pursuit of the truant. He was almost within reach of his prize, and his tiny sail was almost indistinguishable amid the blackness of the squall, when the watchers on shore were horrified to see another and much larger sail come rushing down, dead before the wind, directly towards it. Then the tiny canoe sail disappeared; and as the larger one seemed to sweep over the spot where it had been, the Mantons gazed at each other with faces that betokened the dread they dared not put into words.

