



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

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## Chapter 7: Mysterious Disappearance of the Canoes

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"THE canoes are gone!" cried Worth.

"It looks like it," replied Sumner, in an equally dismayed tone.

"Are you sure this is where we left them?"

"Yes; sure. There is the stern line that we made fast to the Cupid or what is left of it."

Sure enough, there was a portion of the light line still fast to the tree, and as Sumner pulled it in, both boys bent over to examine it. It had been broken, and not cut. From its length it must also have been broken close to the canoe.

"Oh, Sumner, what shall we do?" asked Worth, in a tone of such despair that the former at once realized the necessity of some immediate action to divert his comrade's thoughts.

"Do?" he cried. "There's plenty to do. First, we'll go down to that point and take a look to seaward; for, as the tide is running out, they are more likely to have gone in that direction than any other. It would be a comfort even to catch a glimpse of them. Then, perhaps, they have only drifted away, and are stranded on some bar near by. Besides looking for the canoes, we must build some kind of a shelter for the night, cook supper, and discuss our plans for the future. Oh yes, we've plenty to do!" While he spoke, the boys were making their way to the point in question, and when they reached it, they eagerly scanned every foot of water in sight. Diagonally to the right from where they stood stretched the long reach of Lower Metacumba, desolate and uninhabited as they knew. Almost directly in front, but several miles away, rose the palm-crowned rocks of Indian Key, with its two or three old shedlike buildings in plain view. These had been used and abandoned years before by the builders of Alligator Light, the slender tower of which they could see rising from the distant waters above the outer reef. Diagonally on the left was the tiny green form of Tea Table Key, and dimly beyond it they could make out the coast of Upper Metacumba, which Sumner said was inhabited. In all this far-reaching view, however, there were no signs of the missing canoes.

"I'm glad of it!" said Sumner, after his long searching gaze had failed to reveal them. "It would be rough to have them in sight but out of reach."

Already the sun was sinking behind the treetops of Lower Metacumba, fish were leaping in the placid waters, and a few pelican were soaring with steady poise above them. Every now and then these



would swoop swiftly down, with a heavy splash that generally sealed the fate of one or more mullet off which the great birds were making their evening meal. A flock of black cormorants, uttering harsh cries, flew overhead with a rushing sound, returning from a day's fishing to their roosts in the distant Everglades. With these exceptions, and the faint boom of the surf on the outer reef, all was silence and desertion. Besides the lighthouse tower there was no sign of human life, not even the distant glimmer of a sail. While the boys still looked longingly for some trace of their canoes, the sun set, and a red flash, followed at short intervals by two white ones, shot out from the vanishing form of Alligator Light.

"Come!" cried Sumner, heedful of this warning. "Night is almost here, and we have too much to do in every precious minute of twilight to be standing idle. I'll take the bucket and run to the pond for water, while you cut all the palmetto leaves you possibly can, and carry them to the place where we landed."

"The bucket?" repeated Worth, looming about him inquiringly. "Where are you going to find it?" Without answering, Sumner sprang down the rocks to the water's edge, where he had noticed a stranded bamboo, and quickly cut out a short section of it with the hatchet that he had thrust into his belt before leaving the canoes. As he made the cuts just below two of the joints, his section was a hollow cylinder, open at one end, but having a tight bottom and capable of holding several quarts of water. With this he plunged into the forest in the direction of the pond, handing Worth the hatchet as he passed, and bidding him be spry with his palmetto leaves.

A few minutes later, as Sumner emerged from the trees, carrying his full water bucket, and breathless with his haste, he indistinctly saw the form of some animal at the very place where they had left their guns and birds. As the boy dashed forward, uttering a loud cry, the alarmed animal scuttled off into the bushes.

"Oh, you villain!" gasped Sumner as he reached the place, "I'll settle with you tomorrow, see if I don't."

Four of the doves had disappeared, and the head was torn from one of the ducks.

"What is it?" cried Worth, in alarm, as he entered the clearing from the opposite side, staggering beneath an immense load of cabbage palm leaves.

"A rascally thieving 'coon," answered Sumner, "and he has got away with the best part of our provisions, too; but I'll get even with him yet. Now give me the hatchet, and then pick up all the driftwood you can find, while I build a house."

Worth would gladly have helped erect the house, as Sumner called it, for he was very curious as to what sort of a structure could be built of leaves, but he realized the necessity of doing as he was bidden, and at once set to work gathering wood. Sumner, after carefully propping his water bucket between two rocks, so as to insure the safety of its contents, began cutting a number of slender saplings, and turning them into poles. The stoutest of these he bound with withes to two trees that stood about six feet apart. He fastened it to their trunks as high as he could reach. Then he bound one end of the longer poles to it, allowing them to slant to the ground behind. Crosswise of these, and about a foot apart, he tied a number of still more slender poles, and over these laid the broad leaves. He would have tied these securely in place if he had had time. As he had not, for it was quite dark before he finished even this rude shelter, he was forced to leave them so, and hope that a wind would not arise during the night. For himself alone he would not have built any shelter, but would have found a comfortable resting place under a tree. Knowing, however, that Worth had never in his life slept without a roof of some kind above him, he



thought it best to provide one, and thereby relieve their situation of a portion of the terror with which the city-bred boy was inclined to regard it.

It was curious and interesting to note how a sense of responsibility, and the care of one younger and much more helpless than himself, was developing Sumner's character. Already the selfishness to which he was inclined had very nearly disappeared, while almost every thought was for the comfort and happiness of his companion. Worth, accustomed to being cared for and having every wish gratified, hardly appreciated this as yet; but the emergencies of their situation were teaching him valuable lessons of prompt obedience and self reliance that he could have gained in no other way.

As Sumner finished his rude lean-to, and placed the guns within its shelter for protection from the heavy night dews, Worth Came up from the beach with his last load of driftwood. It was now completely dark, and the notes of chuckwills-widows were mingling with the "whoo, whoo, whoo ah-h!" of a great hoot owl in the forest behind them.

"Now for a fire and some supper," cried Sumner, cheerily. "You've got some matches, haven't you?"

"I don't believe I have," replied Worth, anxiously feeling in his pockets. I thought you must have some."

"No, I haven't a sign of one!" exclaimed Sumner, and an accent of hopelessness was for the first time allowed to enter his voice. "They are all aboard the canoes, and without a fire we are in a pretty pickle sure enough. I wonder how hungry we'll get before we make up our minds to eat raw duck This is worse than losing the canoes. I declare I don't know what to do."

"Couldn't we somehow make a fire with a gun? Seems to me I have read of something of that kind," suggested Worth.

"Of course we can!" shouted Sumner, springing to his feet. "What a gump I was not to think of it! If we collect a lot of dry stuff and shoot into it, there is bound to be a spark or two that we can capture and coax into a flame."

So, with infinite pains, they felt around in the dark until they had collected a considerable pile of dry leaves, sticks, and other rubbish that they imagined would easily take fire. Then, throwing a loaded shell into a barrel of his gun, and placing the muzzle close to the collected kindlings, Sumner pulled the trigger. There was a blinding flash, a loud report that rolled far and wide through the heavy night air, and the heap of rubbish was blown into space. Not a leaf remained to show where it had been, and not the faintest spark relieved the darkness that instantly shut in more dense than ever.

"One cartridge spent in buying experience," remarked Sumner, as soon as he discovered the attempt to be a failure. "Now we'll try another. If you will kindly collect another pile of kindling, I'll prepare some fireworks on a different plan."

Thus saying, he spread his handkerchief on the ground, cut off the crimping of another shell with his pocket knife, carefully extracted the shot and half the powder, and confined the remainder in the bottom of the shell with one of the wads. Then he moistened the powder that he had taken out, and rubbed it thoroughly into the handkerchief, which he placed in the second pile of sticks and leaves that Worth had by this time gathered. A shot taken at this with the lightly charged blank cartridge produced the desired effect. Five minutes later the cheerful blaze of a crackling fire illumined the scene, and banished a cloud of anxiety from the minds of the young castaways.

