



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

Chapter 12: Picked up in the Gulf Stream

THE snapping of that pole marked the bitterest moment of Sumner Rankin's life. With it went his only hope of navigating his rude craft to the friendly shore of the key, past which he now seemed to be drifting with terrible rapidity. He could make out the dim forms of its trees, and of the deserted buildings, in one of which he had proposed to spend the night. He could even hear the rustle of its palm leaves in the light evening breeze, and the gentle splash of waters on its rocky coast. It was so near that he could easily have swum to it. He thought of making the attempt, but a single glance at the phosphorescent flashes beneath him convinced him of its hopelessness. No, it was safer to remain where he was, even though he should be carried out to sea through one of the numerous channels in the outer reef. Supposing his raft should strand on the reef, what chance was there of its holding together until daylight, or even for a few minutes? He knew that if a sea should arise there was none

Now Indian Key was lost to sight behind him, and he was alone, with only his own unhappy thoughts for company. He knew that those waters were seldom traversed by vessels of any description in the night time, most of the reef sailors preferring to come to anchor at sunset. Above him shone the stars, and far ahead gleamed the white and red flashes of Alligator Light. All else was darkness and utter desolation.

The poor lad sat on the box containing his slender store of provisions, and buried his face in his hands. How thankful he was that his mother could not see him now! She was at least spared that sorrow. He wondered what she was doing. Then his thoughts turned to those whom he had left but a few hours before. Why had he not been content to stay with them, and await patiently the relief that must come to them sooner or later? Perhaps even now the mysterious owner of those goods had arrived, and Worth was sitting with a merry party beside the fire, while old Quorum was preparing supper. No, they must have already eaten supper, and now Quorum was blissfully smoking his pipe, while Worth was comfortably stretched out on his bed of blankets. Oh, what a fool he had been to let a false pride in his own strength and ability get the better of his prudence! He might have known that there were a hundred chances of being swept past the little rocky key to one of successfully landing on it. He had known it, but his obstinate pride in his own superior skill had not allowed him to acknowledge it, and now it was too late.



At length, feeling faint from hunger, the poor boy roused himself, and ate a few mouthfuls of food from his provision chest. As he contrasted this meal and its surroundings with the merry supper of the evening before, the wretchedness of his situation was forced upon him more strongly than ever. By this time a breeze that caused little waves to break upon and occasionally wash completely over the raft had sprung up in the southwest, and by the changing position of Alligator Light, Sumner became aware that he was drifting up the reef. The steadily increasing roar of its breakers informed him at the same time that he was approaching closer to it with each moment.

Finally he was abreast of the light, and a mile or so from it, while the sound of the breakers was all about him. He was on the line of the reef. In a few minutes more he would either have passed into the open sea beyond it, or his ill-built raft would strand and be broken to pieces on its cruel rocks. During the succeeding five minutes he almost held his breath. The strain of the suspense was awful, and the boy hardly knew which fate he dreaded the most. At the end of that time it was decided. The sound of the breakers certainly came from behind him. He had passed out through some channel, and was now on the open sea. At the same time the waves that washed over his raft were larger, so that before long he was thoroughly drenched by them, and sat shivering in the chill night wind. Now the strong current of the Gulf Stream aided the wind to bear him up the reef, and after a few hours the brightness of Alligator Light was so sensibly diminished that he knew he must be several miles from it.

Once during the night he saw the light of a steamship passing at no great distance from him; but his frantic cries for help were either unheard or unheeded, for no attention was paid to them. Then he began to pray for the daylight that seemed as though it would never come. How wearily the hours dragged and how cold he was! He was wet through, and chilled to the bone.

When at length the welcome dawn began to tinge the eastern sky, it found the lad half-lying on the raft, clinging to the lashings of the little provision chest, and lost to consciousness in the sleep of utter exhaustion. In this condition he was discovered by the keen-eyed lookout of a westbound steamer that was hugging the reef to escape as much as might be the force of the Gulf Stream. With reversed engines and slackening speed, the great ship passed within a hundred yards of him, but he knew nothing of it.

Nor did he awake until he heard a gruff, but pitying voice close beside him, saying, "Poor fellow, he must be dead!" The next moment two pairs of powerful arms had dragged him into the boat that had been lowered for him, and as he sat up in its bottom rubbing his eyes, he seemed to have just awakened from a hideous nightmare. A few minutes later the boat with its crew had been hoisted to the deck, the steamer was again pursuing her way towards Key West, and Sumner, wrapped in hot blankets, was occupying a berth in a vacant stateroom, surrounded by the sympathizing faces of those who were anxious to anticipate his every want.

He was sound asleep when, half an hour from that time, the steamer neared Alligator Light, and a small boat was seen pulling off from it so as to intercept her. At the sight of this boat the first officer immediately began to collect such late papers and magazines as the passengers were willing to contribute, and tying them into a package. This he lashed to a bit of wood, which he intended to toss overboard for the lightkeeper to pick up. In this way the reef lights are kept supplied with New



York papers only three or four days old. The same papers, passing through the mails, do not reach the scattered dwellers on the keys for ten days or two weeks from the date of their publication.

As the steamer neared the boat from Alligator Light its occupant was seen to hold up a small package wrapped in canvas, which was at once understood to contain dispatches that he wished to send to Key West. So the end of a light line was flung to him, he skillfully made the package fast to it without delaying the ship a moment, and it was hauled aboard. Among the letters that it contained was one directed to the editor of the only daily paper in Key West, and this was delivered promptly on the steamer's arrival at that port.

Late that afternoon, when Mrs. Rankin was slowly regaining her composure after the shock of Sumner's sudden and unlooked-for appearance at home, and was listening with breathless interest to an account of his recent adventures, a copy of the evening paper was left at the house. Sumner was too busy assuring his mother that he was not suffering the slightest ill effect from his exposure of the night before, to look at it then. When, an hour later, he found time to do so, the leading item on the first page at once attracted his attention. It was headed, "A Mystery of the Reef," and after glancing hastily through it, the boy sprang to his feet, shouting:

"Hurrah, mother! The disappearance of the canoes is explained at last, and they are safe and sound, after all."

