



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

Chapter 13: A Mystery of the Reef

As Mrs. Rankin came into the room, on hearing Sumner's exclamation, he read aloud the article in the Daily Equator that had so excited him, and which was as follows:

A MYSTERY OF THE REEF.

"By the steamship Comal, which arrived in this port today, we receive a curious bit of news from Keeper Spencer, of Alligator Light. On the evening of the 15th, as he was in the lantern of the tower preparing to light the lamp, he noticed two small craft of a most unusual description rapidly approaching from the direction of the keys. One appeared to be in tow of the other, but in neither could a human being be discovered. There were no signs of oars, sails, paddles, or steam, and yet the movement of the boats through the water was at the rate of about ten knots an hour. It was also very erratic, and though their general course was towards the reef, they approached it by a series of zigzags, now taking a sharp sheer to port, and directly another to starboard. As the keeper could not leave the tower at that moment, he directed Assistant Albury to take the lighthouse skiff, intercept the craft, if possible, and investigate their character.

"With great difficulty, and after an exciting chase, Mr. Albury succeeded in getting alongside the leading boat of the two, and in making fast to it. It proved to be a decked canoe, of exquisite workmanship and fittings, completely equipped for cruising, bearing the name Psyche in silver letters on either bow. The second canoe, which was a counterpart of the first, was named Cupid. Both were in tow of an immense Jew-fish, which had succeeded in entangling itself in the cable with which the Psyche had evidently been anchored. It is probable that one of the flukes of the anchor caught in the creature's gills, though just how it happened will never be known, as Mr. Albury, being unable to capture the monster, was obliged to cut the



cable and let him go. Nothing is known as to the fate of the owners of these canoes, and they are now at the lighthouse awaiting a claimant.

“Just as we go to press we learn that early this morning the Comal picked up a young man in the Gulf, not far from Alligator Light. We were unable to obtain his name in time for insertion in today’s paper, but will give it, with full particulars concerning him, in tomorrow’s issue. He may be able to throw some light on the mystery of the canoes.”

“I should rather think he could!” laughed Sumner, as he finished reading. “But did you ever hear of such a thing, mother? The idea of a rascally Jew-fish running off with our canoes! I never thought of such a thing as that happening. And how wonderfully it has all turned out! I should have looked everywhere for them rather than at Alligator Light. I should never have dared attempt to navigate the raft that far, either. To think, too, that I should have been picked up by the very steamer that brought the news! How dreadfully you would have felt on reading it, if I hadn’t got here first! Wouldn’t you, mother dear?”

“Indeed I should, my boy; and I shall never be able to express my gratitude for your wonderful preservation.”

“But poor Worth!” exclaimed Sumner. “How I wish he knew all about it, and how awfully anxious he must be! I only hope he won’t attempt to go to Indian Key to look for me before I can get back there. That’s something I must see about at once, and I must take the very first boat that goes up the reef. Just think how I should feel if anything were to happen to him, when Mr. Manton placed him in my care, too! If it wasn’t for the way things have turned out, I should feel guilty at having left him there. I wouldn’t have done it, though, if Quorum hadn’t been on hand to look after him. He surely will keep him out of harm’s way until I can get back.”

“I hate to think of your going back there again,” said Mrs. Rankin, with a sigh, “though of course it is your duty to do so. But you will be careful, and not run into any more such dreadful perils, won’t you, dear?”

“Yes, mother; I promise not to run into a single peril that I can help, and if I meet one, I will try my best to get out of its way,” laughed the boy, whose high spirits had quickly returned with the prospect of recovering his beloved canoe.

“Well,” sighed Mrs. Rankin, “so long as you must go, I shouldn’t be surprised if Lieutenant Carey would take you in the Transit. I believe he intends to leave tomorrow morning for a trip up the reef, and to make some kind of a survey in the Everglades. He has been staying here for a few days, and is up in his room now.”

“Oh, mother!” cried the boy, springing to his feet, “the Everglades! How I should love to go!”

“Now, Sumner—” began Mrs. Rankin, in a tone of expostulation; but the boy had already left the room, and was on his way upstairs.

Lieutenant Carey was an old friend, who had served under Commander Rankin, and had known Sumner ever since the boy was twelve years old. He had heard of his unexpected return, and only waited until the first interview between the young canoeman and his mother should be ended



before going down to greet him. Now he listened to Sumner's story with the deepest interest, and when it was ended, he said:

"Of course I will take you up the reef as far as Alligator, my boy, and shall be glad of your company. I only wish you would go with us as far as the mainland, and act as pilot through the Keys. They are not charted, you know, and as I have never been through them, I was on the point of engaging a fellow named Rust Norris as pilot, but I'd much rather have you. What do you say? Can't I enlist you in Uncle Sam's service for a week or so?"

"I should like nothing better," answered Sumner, "only, you see, I am bound just now to look after Worth Manton, and take him up the reef to Cape Florida, where we are due by the first of April."

"Perhaps we can persuade him to go along too. It won't be much out of your way, and you've lots of time to finish your trip between now and the first of April. I'll risk it anyhow, for I don't like the looks of that fellow Norris, and am only too glad of an excuse for not engaging him."

"Then there is Quorum, the cook," added Sumner, reflectively. "I wonder what will become of him?"

"A cook, do you say? What sort of a cook? A good one?"

"One of the best on the reef," replied Sumner. "Then he is just the man I want to get hold of for our trip. I am only waiting now for a cook, and should start this evening if I had found one to suit me. If you will guarantee him, we'll get away at once, and make the old Transit hum up the reef in the hope of capturing him before he makes any other engagement."

"There is not much chance for him to make an engagement where he is now," laughed Sumner. "And, at any rate, I'm sure he wouldn't leave Worth until I get back. I shall be only too glad to start tonight though, for poor Worth must be terribly anxious, and the sooner I get to him the better."

Thus it was settled, and as soon as supper was over, after a loving, lingering farewell from his mother, who repeated over and over again her charges that he should shun all perilous adventures, the boy found himself once more afloat. Mrs. Rankin had promised to write a long letter to the Mantons that very evening, assuring them of Worth's safety up to the date of the day before, and being thus relieved from this duty, Sumner set forth, with a light heart on his second cruise up the reef.

The Transit was a comfortable, schooner rigged sharpie, about sixty feet long, built by the Government for the use of the Coast Survey in shallow southern waters. She had great breadth of beam, and was a stanch sea boat, though she drew but eighteen inches of water, and Lieutenant Carey had no hesitation in putting her outside for a night run up the Hawk Channel.

The especial duty now to be undertaken was an exploration of the Everglades to ascertain their value as a permanent reservation for the Florida Seminoles. These Indians, hemmed in on all sides by white settlers, were being gradually driven from one field and hunting ground after another. In consequence they were becoming restive, and the necessity of doing something in the way of assuring them a permanent location had for some time been apparent. Thus a survey of the 'Glades was finally ordered, and Lieutenant Carey had been detailed for the duty, with permission to make up such a party to accompany him as he saw fit.



His present command on the *Transit* consisted of Ensign Sloe, and six men forward. It was intended that three of these should be taken into the 'Glades, while Mr. Sloe, with the other three, was to take the sharpie, from the point where the exploring party left her, around to Cape Florida, and there await their arrival.

On the deck of the schooner and towing behind her were three novel craft, in which Lieutenant Carey intended to conduct his explorations of the swamps and grassy waterways of the interior. One of these was an open basswood canoe built in Canada, shaped very much like a birch bark, and capable of carrying four men. The others were the odd-looking boats, with bottoms shaped like tablespoons, that are so popular as ducking-boats on the New Jersey coast, and are known as Barnegat cruisers. One of these was named Terrapin and the other Gopher, while the open canoe bore the Seminole name of Hul-la-lah (the wind).

Before a brisk southerly breeze, in spite of the boats dragging behind her, the *Transit* made rapid progress. Ere it was time to turn in, Key West Light was low in the water astern, while that on American Shoal shone steady and bright off the starboard bow. The wind held fresh all night, so that by morning both American Shoal and Sombrero had been passed, and the sharpie was off the western end of Lower Metacumba, with Alligator Light flashing out its last gleam in the light of the rising sun.

