



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

Chapter 16: A Night in Alligator Light

WHILE taking Worth and Quorum out to the light, Assistant Keeper Albury told them how the canoes had been towed out to sea by a Jew-fish, and described the difficulty he had had in capturing them. Although Worth listened to all this with interest, his pleasure in having the mystery cleared up, and at the prospect of recovering the canoes, was sadly dampened by his increasing anxiety concerning Sumner's fate. What can have become of him? was the question that he asked over and over again, but to which neither of the men could give an answer.

They were cordially welcomed to the light by the keeper, who was always glad to have visitors to his lonely domain, and Worth easily proved his ownership of the canoes by describing their contents.

The lighthouse was a skeleton framework of iron, with its lower platform about twelve feet above water that surrounded it on all sides. On this platform lay the two canoes, side by side, looking as fresh and unharmed as when Worth had last seen them at anchor off Lignum Vitae. If Sumner had only been there, how he would have rejoiced over them! As it was, he gave them but a hurried examination to assure himself that they were all right, and then followed the keeper up the flight of iron steps leading to the house. The portion of this in which the men lived was a huge iron cylinder, surrounded by a balcony, and divided into several rooms. Above it rose a slender iron shaft, in which was a circular stairway leading to the lantern at its top. Worth ascended this with the keeper to witness the lighting of the great lamp, and the movements of the revolving machinery by which the red and white flashes were produced.

From this elevation a long line of keys was visible, while the one they had so recently left seemed quite close at hand. While gazing at it, Worth saw a schooner come down the channel from the direction of Lignum Vitae, and lower her sails, as if for the night, under its lee.

"Oh, Mr. Spencer!" he cried, "there's a schooner come to anchor close to Indian Key. Perhaps her people are looking for us, and perhaps they have brought news of Sumner. Can't we take the canoes now and sail over there?"

"Bless you, no, lad! I wouldn't for anything have it on my conscience that I'd let you go sailing around these waters at night in those cockleshells. There's no doubt but what she'll stay there till morning, and if the weather is good, you can make a start as soon after daylight as ever you like; but you'll have to content yourself here till then. I couldn't think of letting you go before."



To this decision Worth was forced to submit, and after the lamp was lighted he followed the keeper to the living rooms below. Here he found Quorum hard at work at his favorite occupation of cooking. He was preparing a most savory fish chowder, and when they sat down to supper both the keepers declared that in all their experience they had never tasted its equal. The second assistant keeper was then absent on the two-weeks' vacation, to which each of them was entitled after two months of service in the light. They only regretted that Quorum could not remain until his return, that he too might learn the possibilities of a fish chowder.

Worth was so charmed with his novel surroundings, and by the quaint bits of lighthouse experience related by the keepers, that until bedtime, he almost forgot his anxiety. When he had gone to bed in the scrupulously neat and clean guest chamber, after charging the keepers to waken him at the earliest dawn, it returned in full force, and for a long time drove sleep from his eyes. As he lay listening to the keeper on watch making his half-hourly trips up to the lantern, and to the lapping of the waves about the iron piling of the foundation, he imagined all sorts of dreadful things as having happened to Sumner, and even after he fell asleep his dreams were of the same character.

From this unhappy dreaming he was awakened while it was still quite dark, though the keeper, who was standing beside his bed, assured him that day was breaking. At this, and remembering his cause for haste, the boy sprang out of bed and quickly dressed himself. In the outer room he found Quorum already up and waiting for him, and he also found a steaming pot of coffee. Fortified by a cup of this and a biscuit, he declared himself ready for the voyage back to Indian Key.

As they stepped outside, the light was sufficiently strong for them to dimly discern the distant line of keys, and preparations were at once made to place the canoes in the water. Worth's was the first swung from the platform davits and lowered, while he, descending a rope ladder, one end of which touched the water, was ready to cast off the falls and step into her. Then Quorum was invited to do the same thing with the Psyche; but the old Negro drew back apprehensively, exclaiming:

"No, sah, gen'l'men. De ole niggah am a big fool, but him no sich fool dat him t'ink hese'f er monkey, an' go climbin' down er rope wha' don' lead nowhar, 'cep' to er tickly eggshell wha' done copsize de berry instink he tetch foot to um. No, sah, gen'l'men; ole Quor'm too smart fo' dat."

"Well, then, sit in the canoe where she is, and we'll lower you down in her."

To this plan the old man was finally induced to agree, and with great trepidation seated himself in the frail craft. The moment the men began to sway away on the falls, he would have jumped out if he could. As he was already swinging in mid-air, it was too late to do aught save remain where he was. Clutching the sides of the cockpit tightly with both hands, he closed up his eyes and resigned himself to his fate. His face assumed an ashen tinge, and his lips moved as though he were praying. He gave a convulsive start as the canoe dropped into the water, but he did not open his eyes nor relax his clutch of the coamings.

"Come, Quorum, get out your paddle. I'll show you how to use it," shouted Worth, after he had cast off the falls.

But he might as well have addressed the lighthouse for all the notice the old man took of him. Finally, realizing that Quorum was utterly helpless, and incapable of action, from fright, Worth took the Psyche in tow, and paddling out from the lighthouse, bade the friendly keepers a cheery goodbye, and started on his laborious trip to Indian Key.



Although the sea was perfectly smooth, paddling two deeply laden canoes proved heavy work for one person, and Worth would have doubtless become exhausted long before reaching his destination had not a light breeze sprung up at sunrise. Aided by this, he made such good progress that in less than an hour he was rounding the point of Indian Key, behind which the *Transit* lay at anchor.

Sumner, who had just turned out, was gazing wistfully back at *Lignum Vitae*, as though it still held the young comrade whose loss caused him to feel so depressed, when he started as though he had been shot, at the sound of his own name, uttered with a joyous shout but a short distance from him.

He could hardly credit his senses, or believe that he saw, sailing merrily towards him, the long-lost canoes, bearing the very friends on whose account he had been so anxious but a moment before. At the same time Worth was equally bewildered and overcome with joyful emotions.

“Hurrah! Glory hallelujah!” shouted Sumner, in the fulness of rejoicing.

At this sound Quorum started as though from a trance, and opened his eyes for the first time since leaving the light. Whether he tumbled out of the canoe accidentally or on purpose, no one, not even himself, ever found out; but the next instant he was in the water, puffing like a porpoise, and swimming towards the land. Fortunately the distance was short, so that in a few minutes he reached the rocks and pulled himself out on them. There, scrambling to his feet, and with the water pouring from him, he shook his fist at the craft he had so unceremoniously deserted, exclaiming:

“Dat’s de fustes an’ de lastes time ole Quor’m ebber go sailin’ in er baby cradle! Yes, sah, de fustes an, de lastes!”

