



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

Chapter 3: Sumner Receives a Second Offer

FOR a few minutes Sumner Rankin's peril was most imminent. He was almost within reach of the drifting canoe, which he had been watching too closely to take note of any other object, when he became conscious of the clumsy, wood-laden schooner rushing down on him before the squall. She was manned by a crew of two Negroes, and by the manner in which she yawed, heading one moment this way and the next another, he saw that they had but little control of her movements. In vain did he shout to them to look out. His voice was lost in the shriek of the wind, and they did not hear him. He tried to cross their bows, and might have succeeded in so doing, but at that moment their mainsail gybed over with a crash, and the heavy craft, looking as large as a man-of-war in comparison with his cockleshell, headed directly for him. With the next send of the sea the canvas canoe was crushed beneath the ponderous bows, and blotted from existence as though it had been a drifting leaf.

As Sumner saw the black mass towering above him, and before it could descend, he rose to his feet, and taking a straight header, dived deep into the angry waters. When he again came to the surface he was swimming in the foaming wake of the schooner, and drifting down towards him from the windward was the beautiful cedar canoe which was the cause of all the trouble, and which he had passed in his effort to save his own from destruction. A few strokes took him to her, and with a feeling of devout thankfulness he clutched her gunwale.

Worth Manton, or any other inexperienced canoeman, would have attempted to climb up over the bow or stern, and, sitting astride the slippery deck, to work his way into the cockpit. Such an attempt would have been almost certain to roll the light craft over and fill her with water, in which case she would become wholly unmanageable. But Sumner knew better than to do such a thing. He had practiced capsizing so often in his crank canvas canoe that to get into this comparatively broad-beamed and stable craft was the easiest kind of a performance. Seizing hold of the coaming directly amidship, he placed his left hand on the side of the cockpit nearest him, and reaching far over, grasped the other side with his right. Then kicking in the water behind him until his body lay nearly flat on its surface, and bearing as much weight as possible on his right hand, he drew himself squarely across the cockpit, and in another moment was seated in it, without having shipped a drop of water over the coaming.



There was no paddle in the canoe, and though she rode the waves like a cork, she was entirely at the mercy of the wind and tide. Although the squall was passing, the darkness of night was rapidly shutting out all familiar objects, and Sumner was on the point of resigning himself to a night of aimless drifting, with an interesting uncertainty as to when he should be picked up, when a distant shout, that sounded exceedingly like his own name, was borne to his ears. He sent back an answering cry, the shout was repeated, and a few minutes later the shadowy form of the Psyche, with Mr. Manton wielding a double-bladed paddle, shot out of the darkness.

“I never was so glad to find any one in my life!” exclaimed the newcomer. “We were afraid that clumsy schooner had run you down. I tell you what, boy, the last ten minutes have been the most anxious I ever passed, and I wouldn’t go through with them again for all the canoes in the world. But what has become of your own boat?”

“She has gone to the bottom, like many a good ship before her,” replied Sumner; “and it wasn’t the fault of those lubbers on the schooner that I didn’t go with her. Have you an extra paddle with you?”

“No; I neglected to bring one, and I shall have to take you in tow.”

They had already drifted down past the fort that commands the harbor from the southwest point of the island, and as they could not hope to make their way back against wind and tide, they were compelled to work in behind it, and make a landing on the south beach a mile or more from where they started. Here Mr. Manton remained in charge of the canoes, while Sumner ran home to announce his own safety, obtain a change of clothing and another paddle.

He found his mother and Worth in a terrible state of anxiety concerning him; but he made so light of his recent adventure that it was not until after the canoes were brought safely back, an hour later, that they learned the full extent of his recent peril.

This incident seemed to cement a firm friendship between Sumner and the Mantons, and while the former stubbornly refused to accept the recompense for his lost canoe that Mr. Manton tried to force upon him, declaring that it was only his own carelessness in not keeping a sharper lookout, the latter made up his mind that, in spite of his pride, the boy must and should be rewarded in some way for what he had done.

The following week was busily and happily spent in making new sails for the two canoes, re-rigging them, and in teaching Worth how to manage his. It struck Sumner as a little curious that, even after the new sails were made, Mr. Manton was always too busy to go out on these practice trips with his nephew, and invariably asked him to take the Psyche and act as instructor in his place. Of course he could not refuse to do this, nor did he have the slightest inclination to do so; for what boy who loved boats would not have jumped at the chance of sailing that dainty craft? How Sumner did appreciate her speed and seaworthy qualities! He raced with every sponger and fisherman in the harbor, and caused their eyes to open with amazement at the ease with which he beat them. How fond he became of the canoe that bore him to so many victories! How, with all his heart, he did wish he were going in her on the cruise up the reef, for which such extensive preparations were being made! Much as he wished this, however, he was very careful not to express the wish to any person except his mother, to whom he always confided all his hopes, fears, and plans. After his



refusal of Mr. Manton's offer to accompany them as guide, he would not for anything have let that gentleman know how eagerly he longed to have the offer repeated in such form that his pride would allow him to accept it. Still, as he had no canoe now, it would be impossible for him to go, and there was no use in thinking of it.

So he tried to make the most of his present opportunities, and gain all the pleasure that they held. Nor did he neglect Worth, but instructed him so thoroughly in the art of canoe handling, that at the end of a week the boy was as much at home in his canoe as he had ever been on a yacht.

One day, as the two beautiful craft, with their perfect setting lateen sails, were glancing in and out among the anchored sponge fleet on the north side of the island, like white-winged sea birds, a young sponger, named Rust Norris, called out from one of the boats,

"Say, Sumner, come here a minute, will yer?"

As the latter sailed alongside and asked what he wanted, the sponger answered:

"I want to try that fancy trick of yourn. Let me take her a few minutes, will yer?"

"No," replied Sumner; "I can't, because she isn't mine to lend. Besides, as you are not accustomed to this style of craft, you couldn't sail her, anyhow; and you'd upset before you had gone a length."

"Oh, I would, would I? Well, I'll bet I can sail anything you can, or any other landlubber that thinks he knows it all because his daddy belonged to the navy."

Then, as Sumner, with a flushed face, but disdaining any reply, sheered off and sailed away, he added,

"I'd jest naturally hate myself if I was as mean as you be, Sumner Rankin, and I won't forget your disobligingness in a hurry, neither!"

In the mean time Mr. Manton had studied Sumner's character carefully, and the more he did so the more he was pleased with the boy. He found him to be proud and high-tempered, but also manly, straightforward, and honest to a fault, as well as prompt to act in emergencies, self-reliant, and a thorough sailor. In the course of several conversations with the boy's mother he learned much of Sumner's past history and of his dreams for the future. To her he finally confided a plan, formed on the day that Sumner saved Worth's canoe at the expense of his own, and after some discussion won her assent to it.

It was nothing more nor less than that Sumner should take his place on the proposed cruise up the reef, and act the part of guide, companion, and friend to the younger canoeman.

"I shall not for a second time be guilty of the mistake of trying to hire you to take this cruise," said Mr. Manton, smiling, as he unfolded this plan to Sumner; "but I ask you to do it as a favor to both me and Worth. Indeed, it will be a great favor to me," he added, hastily, as he saw an expression of doubt on the lad's face; "for I really ought to be in New York at this very minute, attending to some important business, which I was only willing to neglect in case Worth could not take this trip without me. Now, however, I am confident that he will be safer with you than he would be with me alone, and if you will take my canoe and accompany him to Cape Florida, where I shall try to meet you about the first of April, you will place me under an obligation. Will you do it?"

