



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

Chapter 4: Teaching a Thief a Lesson

WAS there ever such a chance to do the very thing he most longed to do offered a boy before? Sumner did not believe there ever had been, and with a quick glance at his mother's smiling face, in which he read her assent to the plan, he answered:

"I don't know how to thank you, sir, for making me such a splendid offer, and not only will I gladly accept it, but I promise to do everything in my power to make Worth have a good time, and see that no harm befalls him. But I wish you were going too. I hate to think of taking your place and depriving you of all the pleasure of the trip."

"My dear boy," replied Mr. Manton, "you must not look at it in that way, for, as I said before, you will be doing me a real favor in taking my place. I am more of a yachtsman than a canoeman anyway, and I look forward with fully as much pleasure to cruising down the Indian River from St. Augustine in the yacht that my brother proposes to charter, and meeting you at Cape Florida,—as I should to running up the reef in a canoe. There is one more thing, however. I must insist upon your sailing your own canoe, for I make it a rule never to lend my boats to any one, and you will have enough responsibility in looking after Worth, without having the added one of caring for another person's canoe. So, from this moment the Psyche, and all that she contains is yours."

"Oh, Mr. Manton!"

"That will do. Not another word," laughed the young man. "I am as obstinate as a mule when I have once made up my mind to a thing, and so there is nothing for you to do but take the canoe, and make the best use you can of her."

Sumner's protests against this generosity were but feeble ones, and were quickly disposed of by Mr. Manton, who simply refused to listen to them. He cut them short by saying,

"Now that this matter is settled, and everything is in readiness for a start, I propose that you get off in the morning, for I want to take tomorrow night's steamer for Tampa."

That night, after everybody had gone to bed and the house was still, Sumner lay wide awake, thinking over the good fortune that had befallen him. At length he could not resist the temptation of getting up, partly dressing himself, and slipping out for a look at his canoe, his very own! The most beautiful craft he had ever seen, and such a one as in his wildest dreams he had never hoped to possess.



The two canoes had been drawn up on the grass not far from the water's edge, and covered with some bits of old canvas. Although it was a moonlit night, the moon was occasionally obscured by drifting clouds, and when Sumner left the house everything was in shadow from this cause. He moved very quietly, for he did not wish any one to know of the weakness that led him to look at something with which he was already familiar, merely because it had acquired the new interest of possession.

To his amazement, when he reached the place where the canoes had been left, he could find but one of them. In vain did he lift the canvas that had covered them both, and look hurriedly about the little yard. One of them was certainly gone, and no trace of it remained. As the boy stood irresolute, wondering what he ought to do, he was startled by a slight splash in the water. At the same moment the cloud passed from the face of the moon, and by the light thus afforded Sumner saw the figure of a man seated in the missing canoe, and cautiously paddling from the shore.

Without an instant's hesitation he slid the remaining canoe over the grass and into the water, sprang into it, seized a paddle, and started in pursuit. Of course the paddler in the first canoe might be one of the Mantons, but Sumner did not believe it was either of them. He thought it more than likely that the stranger was some one who only desired to try the canoe, but it might be a thief. At any rate, the boy determined to discover who he was, and what he meant by his stealthy performance before they were many minutes older.

The stranger did not realize that he was pursued until Sumner had shoved off from shore, and was urging his own craft forward with vigorous strokes of his double-bladed paddle. When, by a glance over his shoulder, he discovered this, he redoubled his efforts to escape, and by his clumsy splashings proved himself a novice in the art of paddling. Still he made fair headway, and it was not until they were several hundred yards from shore that Sumner overtook him.

Here was anchored an immense mooring buoy, with a round, slightly conical top, having in its center a great iron ring. It did not rise more than a foot from the surface of the water, and in trying to watch Sumner, the occupant of the leading canoe did not notice it until his light craft struck it a glancing blow, and very nearly upset. The next instant an effort to recover his equilibrium had precipitated the fellow into the water, and as Sumner shot past him he was wildly clutching at the buoy, with desperate efforts to gain its upper surface.

Satisfied that he could not drown so long as he clung to the buoy, Sumner first picked up the drifting canoe. With it in tow he returned to the buoy on which the recent fugitive was now sitting, clinging tightly to the iron ring, and presenting a comical picture of misery.

"Don't leave me here, Sumner!" he cried, in an imploring tone, in which the boy at once recognized the voice of Rust Norris. "I didn't mean no harm. I only just wanted to try the trick, and I meant to put her back again where I found her. Honest I did!"

"Well, I don't know," replied Sumner, who could not help laughing at the other's plight, in spite of his anger at him for taking the canoe without leave, and his suspicion that it would not have been returned so promptly as Rust claimed it would. "You look quite as comfortable as you deserve to be; besides, you will have a nice quiet chance out here to learn the lesson that it is better to leave other people's property alone than to take it without permission. So, on the whole, I think I will leave you where you are for a while. I did think of having you arrested for stealing, but I guess this will do just as well."



Thus saying, the boy began to paddle towards shore, and at the same time Rust changed his pleading tone to one of bitter invective, uttering loud threats of what he would make Sumner suffer in the future.

Without paying any attention to these, the young canoeman continued on his way to the shore. From there he watched until he saw the dim form of a fishing boat come silently drifting down the harbor with the tide. As she neared the spot where he knew the buoy with its unwilling occupant to be, he heard shouts, saw the boat alter her course, and stop for a minute. As she again proceeded, and he was satisfied that his prisoner had been rescued, Sumner again went to bed, this time to sleep soundly until morning.

When he related this adventure at breakfast time, Mr. Manton said he had served the rascal right; but Mrs. Rankin was fearful lest some future mischief should come of it. At this Sumner laughed, and said he thought the lesson would teach Rust Norris to let his things alone in the future, also that he was not afraid of anything the young sponger could do anyhow.

The morning was spent in loading the canoes and in making final preparations for the start. By noon all was in readiness, and after a hasty lunch the two young canoemates stepped aboard their dainty craft. Then, amid a waving of handkerchiefs and a chorus of hearty goodbyes from the group of spectators assembled to see them off, they hoisted sail, and bore away on the first reach of what was to prove one of the most eventful and exciting cruises ever undertaken up the Florida Reef.

