



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

---

**Chapter 11: Sumner Drifts Away on a Raft**

---

THE display of layer upon layer of black plug tobacco such as Quorum had been accustomed to using for longer than he could remember caused the negro's eyes to glisten as though they saw SO many ingots of pure gold. For more than two weeks he had longed unavailingly for a fragment of the precious weed. Now to have an unlimited quantity of it placed before him so very mysteriously and unexpectedly seemed to him the climax of everything most desirable and best worth living for. He sniffed at it eagerly, inhaling its fragrance with long, deep breaths. Then, producing a stubby black pipe from some hidden recess of his tattered clothing, he asked, pleadingly, for "jes one lilly smoke."

"After supper," said Sumner. "Get supper ready first, and then you shall smoke as much as you want to." At this Quorum's countenance fell, and seating himself on the ground, he remarked, stubbornly:

"No, sah. Ole Quor'm do no cookin' wifout him hab a smoke fust. No smoke, no cookin', no cookin', no suppah. Why yo' no gib one plug ob terbakker fur dat 'possum, eh? Him monstrous fine 'possum, but I willin' to sell him fur jes one lilly plug oh terbakker. Yo' can't buy him so cheap nowhar else, specially on dis yer oncibilized Niggly Wity Key."

"But it is not my tobacco," laughed Sumner, greatly amused at the old man's attitude and arguments.

"Who he b'long to, den?" demanded Quorum, quickly.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the boy.

"Den he yourn. You fin' him. You keep him. Hit all de same like er wrack. Yo' catch him, nobody else want him, yo' keep him. Jes one lilly smoke, Marse Summer — jes one; den de ole man go to cookin' de berry bestes yo' ebber seen. Come, Marse Summer, jes one; dat's a honey bug."

There was no resisting this pleading appeal, and cutting off enough for a single pipeful from one of the plugs, Sumner handed it to the negro, saying: "Well, then, if you must have it, take that, and hurry up with supper the very minute you have finished your smoke. I never was so hungry in my life, while Worth begins to look dangerously like a cannibal. Come, Worth, we must fly round, and build another palmetto shanty before dark. At this rate we'll have a town here before long."

Two hours of hard work found a second hut, much more pretentious than the first, nicely roofed in. By this time the sun was setting, and what was of infinitely more importance to the young



canoemates, Quorum announced that supper was ready. And what a feast he had prepared! Had there ever been one half so good before? In the opinions of the boys, there certainly had not. Quorum had felt no scruples about helping himself to the provisions so liberally provided, and if the boys had noticed what he was doing, they had not possessed the moral courage to interfere. As a result, he had baked the 'possum stuffed with cracker-crumbs, bits of pork and onions cut up fine, and well seasoned with salt and pepper, in a Dutch oven. The oven had been set on a bed of coals, and a fire of lightwood knots built on its heavy iron lid. The 'possum had been surrounded with sweet potatoes, and both were done to a brown crisp. Then there was coffee, with sugar and condensed milk, toasted hardtack with butter, and bananas for dessert, "Talk about eating!" said Sumner.

"Or Delmonico's!" added Worth.

As Quorum sat and watched them, a broad grin of happiness overspread his features, while wreaths of blue smoke curled gently upward above his woolly head. His pipe was again full, and he now had possession of an entire plug of tobacco, for which he felt profoundly grateful to some unknown benefactor.

Among other things in the hut, which the boys now called the storehouse, they had discovered a bale of blankets. These they did not hesitate to appropriate to their own use, and as they lay stretched on them, under their new roof, blinking sleepily at the fire, their comfort and happiness seemed almost to have attained perfection.

"Except for our canoes," said Sumner. "If we only had them, I, for one, should be perfectly happy; and tomorrow I am going to make preparations for finding them."

"How?" asked Worth; and for an hour or so they talked over their plans for the future. The intervals between their remarks became longer and longer, until finally, when Worth asked, "Whom do you suppose all those provisions belong to, anyway, Sumner?" the latter answered: "Give it up. I'm too sleepy to guess any more riddles tonight."

The boys slept almost without moving until sunrise; but Quorum was frequently aroused to repel the invasions of certain coons that, but for his watchfulness, would have made free with the contents of the storehouse. He also had to protect the fire against a heavy shower that came on towards morning; and on each of these occasions he rewarded himself with a few whiffs of smoke from his black pipe.

The next morning the two boys, leaving Quorum to devise traps for the capture of the 'coons and prepare dinner, started out to collect some of the planks they had seen the day before. With these Sumner proposed to build a raft on which they could drift over to Indian Key with that afternoon's ebb tide. Once there, he anticipated no difficulty in hailing some passing craft that could be chartered to search for their canoes, and carry them back to Key West in case the search proved fruitless.

As the channel from Lignum Vitae, through which the strongest tide currents flowed, led directly past Indian Key and close to it, this plan seemed feasible. By noon the boys had towed around to the cove in front of their camp two heavy squared timbers and a number of boards. These they lashed together in the form of a rude raft. They had no nails, and but a limited supply of line for lashing, so that the raft was by no means so strong as they could wish. Neither was it very buoyant, the material of which it was built being yellow pine, already somewhat water-soaked and floating very low. To their dismay, when it was completed, the boys found that instead of supporting three persons, as they hoped it would, it was awash and unsafe with but two of them on board.



“There’s only one thing to be done,” said Sumner, when this state of affairs became evident, “and that is for me to go alone. When I get hold of a craft of some kind, I can bring her here after you two; and if I don’t find one, it will be an easy matter for me to come back on a flood tide.”

“But, Sumner, it seems awful for you to go ’way off there alone on such a crazy raft at this. Do you think it is absolutely necessary?”

“Yes,” answered the other, whose mind was now intent only upon recovering his beautiful canoe, “I do think it is necessary for one of us to go. We can’t stay here forever, living off of some unknown person’s provisions. Besides, supposing those canoes should be wrecked and discovered in that condition, and the report that we were lost should reach Key West, how do you think our mothers would feel? Yes, indeed, it is necessary that I should go, and I mean to start the minute the tide serves.”

Neither Worth nor Quorum could move Sumner from this determination, and it was with heavy hearts that they watched him, about four o’clock in the afternoon, step aboard the raft and shove out into the current, that had just begun to run ebb. He was provided with a long pole and a small box of provisions, the latter being placed in the middle of the raft.

Its movement was at first heavy and sluggish, but as soon as it felt the influence of the current, it was borne along with comparative speed. Thus a few minutes served to take the solitary voyager beyond earshot of his companions. For some time he could see them waving their hats, but at length their forms faded from his sight, and he realized that he was beyond reach of their assistance in case his undertaking should fail. Now that he could no longer note the speed with which he had left the island, his progress seemed irritatingly slow.

The channel was very crooked, and his clumsy craft frequently grounded on the projecting sandbars at its many turns. In each case valuable time was lost in pushing it off and getting it again started. From this cause his rate of progress was so slow that Indian Key was still some distance ahead when the sun sank from sight in the western waters. Now, for the first time, Sumner experienced a feeling of uneasiness, and a doubt as to the success of his venture. He strove to add to the speed of his raft by poling, but as the depth of water was generally too great for him to touch bottom, nothing could be accomplished in that way.

Now he began to notice the numbers of sea monsters that were going out with the tide and using his channel as their pathway to deeper waters. On all sides were to be seen the triangular fins of huge sharks rising above the surface so close to him that he could have touched them with his pole. He also saw hundreds of sawfish, stingarees, devil-fish with vampirelike wings, the vast bulks of ungainly jew-fish, porpoises, and other evil looking creatures of great size and phenomenal activity. He shuddered to think what would be his fate if a slip or a misstep should precipitate him into the water among them. At length their forms were hidden from him by the darkness, and only their splashings and the gleaming trails of their progress through the phosphorescent water denoted their swarming presence.

Suddenly, while his attention was fixed upon these, he became aware that he was abreast of Indian Key and passing it. There was a shoal on the opposite side, and plunging his pole into it, he made a mighty effort to direct his raft towards land. All at once, without the slightest warning, the brittle pole snapped, and only by a violent effort did he save himself from plunging into the cruel waters.

