



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

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**Chapter 14: Worth and Quorum are Missing**

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As Sumner was anxious to reach Lignum Vitae by the shortest possible route, the *Transit* was headed in through the channel between Lower Metacumba and Long keys. Both tide and wind being with her, the nimble-footed sharpie seemed to fly past the low reefs and sandspits on either side. Now she skimmed by the feeding grounds of flocks of gray pelicans, whose wise expressions and bald heads gave them the appearance of groups of old men, and then passed an old sponge crawl, or the worm eaten hull of some ancient wreck, both of which were covered with countless numbers of cormorants, gannets, and gulls. Waiting, with outstretched necks and pinions half spread, until the schooner was within a stone's throw, these would fly with discordant cries of anger, wheel in great circles, and return to the places from which they had been driven the moment the threatened danger had passed.

Even after the sharpie was well inside the bay, and the island they sought was in sight, they could not lay a direct course towards it on account of a reef several miles in length that presented an effectual barrier to anything larger than a canoe. But one narrow channel cut through it, and this was away to the northward, close under a tiny mangrove key. Towards this then they steered, with Sumner at the tiller, for he was the only one on board familiar with the intricate navigation of those waters.

"You are certain that you are right, Sumner?" inquired Lieutenant Carey, anxiously, as they seemed about to drive headlong on the bar, and an ominous wake of muddy water showed that they were dragging bottom.

"Certain," answered the boy, quietly.

"All right, then; I've nothing to say."

Inch by inch the great centerboard rose in its trunk, and the slack of its pennant was taken in, as the water rapidly shoaled. Now she dragged so heavily that it seemed as though she were about to stop. Again the lieutenant looked at Sumner, and then cast a significant glance at the man stationed by the foresheet. But the boy never hesitated nor betrayed the least nervousness. An instant later the tiller was jammed hard over, there was a sharp order of "Trim in!" and, flying almost into the teeth of the wind, the light vessel shot through an Opening so narrow that she scraped bottom on both sides, and in another moment was dashing through deep water on the opposite side of the bar.



From here the run to Lignum Vitae was a long and short leg beat, with numerous shoals to be avoided. In spite of being kept busy with these, Sumner found time to note and wonder at a great column of smoke that rose from the island. What could Worth and Quorum be about? It looked as though they had managed to set the forest on fire. Filled with an uneasy apprehension, he jumped into a boat the moment the *Transit's* anchor was dropped in the well-remembered cove, and sculled himself ashore. To his amazement he heard the sound of many voices, and discovered a dozen or so of men hard at work apparently cutting down the forest and burning it.

As he stepped ashore, and looked in vain for the familiar figures of his friends, a pleasant-faced young man advanced from where the laborers were at work to meet him.

“Can you tell me, sir, what has become of a boy named Worth Manton and an old colored man whom I left here the day before yesterday?” Sumner inquired, anxiously.

“If you mean the two whom I found camped here, and helping themselves to my provisions, I think I can,” answered the young man, with a smile. “They went over to Indian Key last evening on the boat that brought me here yesterday. They were very anxious concerning the fate of a friend who left them the evening before, and went over there on a raft, I believe they said. Can it be that you are the person they are seeking?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Then you are Sumner Rankin, and I am very happy to meet you. My name is Haines. I have bought this key, and am clearing it, preparatory to having it planted with coconuts. The provisions and camp outfit that appeared here so mysteriously to you and your companions belong to me, and were left here by the mail schooner on her way up the reef. I expected to arrive, with my men, about the same time, but was detained. I am very glad, however, that they came in time to relieve your distress. I am also much obliged to you for affording them a shelter from the rain, without which some of the things would have been injured. Now will you pardon my curiosity if I ask how you happen to arrive here in a schooner from that direction when your friends said you had gone the other way, and were confident of finding you on Indian Key?”

When Sumner had given a brief outline of his recent adventure, Mr. Haines said: “You certainly have had a most remarkable experience, and I am glad your friends did not know of it, for young Manton was worried enough about you as it was. However, you will soon rejoin them, and when you have recovered your canoes, if you feel so inclined, I should be pleased to have you return here as my guests for as long as you choose to stay.”

Sumner thanked him, and said he should be happy to stop there on his return from the mainland. Then, begging to be excused, as he was impatient to go in search of his comrades, he jumped into his boat and returned to the *Transit*.

Lieutenant Carey was perfectly willing to proceed at once to Indian Key, but the tide was still running flood, and the breeze, which was each moment becoming lighter, was dead ahead for a run out through the channel. Under the circumstances, it would be useless to lift the anchor, and the impatient boy was forced to wait for the tide to turn. When it finally began to run ebb, the breeze had died out so entirely that there was not even the faintest ripple on the water, and another season of waiting was unavoidable.



By the lieutenant's invitation Mr. Haines came off and dined with them. He proved a most charming companion, and laughed heartily at Sumner's description of the amazement with which he, Worth, and Quorum had discovered the mysterious godsend of provisions. Mr. Haines declared that it was one of the best jokes he had ever known; though he was in doubt as to whether it was on him or on them. He appreciated Sumner's impatience to be off, and when, late in the afternoon, a fair breeze sprang up, he made haste to take his leave that their departure might not be delayed.

It was nearly sunset when the *Transit* approached Indian Key so closely that objects the size of a man could be distinguished on it. Sumner was again at the helm, and he tried not to neglect his steering; but he could not keep his eyes from scanning anxiously every discernible foot of its surface. To his great disappointment not a soul appeared.

"They may be on the other side, keeping a lookout for passing vessels," suggested Lieutenant Carey.

Hoping that this might be the case, but still heavy-hearted and anxious, Sumner went ashore, accompanied by the lieutenant. For an hour they searched over every foot of the key, and through its deserted buildings, shouting as they went, but their search was in vain. Nothing was seen of the lost ones, nor had they left a trace to show that they had ever been on the island.

"It's no use," said Sumner at length; "they evidently are not here, and must have gone on in the boat that brought them when they failed to find me. Now, I don't know of anything to do but to go out to the lighthouse after the canoes, and then come back here and wait. If Worth has gone on up the reef, he must pass here on his way back, while if he has gone the other way, he will hear of me at Key West and come back here again. I'm awfully sorry that I can't go with you to the mainland, but I don't see how I possibly can under the circumstances."

Although the boy tried to speak cheerfully, and to take the brightest possible view of the disappearance of his young comrade, he was filled with anxiety, and it was with a heavy heart that he turned into his berth on board the schooner *Transit* that night.

