



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

Chapter 15: Worth and Quorum in Search of Sumner

ON the evening that Sumner left Worth and Quorum, and started on his adventurous voyage towards Indian Key, they watched him until distance and the approaching twilight hid him from their view. Quorum was the first to turn away and begin preparations for supper, while Worth still remained on the point straining his eyes towards the key, on which he fondly hoped that his friend was safely landed. At length it, too, disappeared in the gathering darkness, and he reluctantly turned his steps towards the camp. He was heavy-hearted, and had but little appetite for the bountiful supper that Quorum had so skillfully prepared. Noticing this, the old man tried to cheer him, saying:

“Don’t yo’ be so down in de mouf, Marse Worf. Dey hain’t no ’casion fur worriment. I know Marse Summer Rankin fur a long time, an’ I nebber know him in a fix yit what he don’t slip outen de same as er eel. I see him git in er plenty scrapes, but I don’t see him git stuck. Him all right, and yo’ no need to go er frettin’ an’ er mo’nin’. He be back termorrer bright an’ smilin’. Now eat your suppah, honey, ’kase if yo’ don’t, ole Quor’m t’ink he cookin’ no good.”

In spite of the negro’s consoling words, Worth’s sleep that night was broken, and he started at every sound. Towards morning a crash and a smothered cry from the edge of the forest behind the camp caused him to start to his feet in alarm, and wake his companion. Although no further sound was heard, the boy was not satisfied until Quorum, taking a torch, discovered a thieving ’coon, caught and killed by the deadfall that he had prepared for it. This was a simple figure 4 trap, set under a bit of board that was weighted with a heavy rock.

As soon as breakfast was over the next morning, Worth returned to his outlook station on the point, and remained there, with his eyes fixed on Indian Key, for several hours. It was nearly noon when he was startled by a shout from Quorum, who called out:

“Here him comin’, honey! Here him comin’ in er big schooner!”

Running back to the cove, which was not visible from where he had been sitting, Worth saw the schooner at which, Quorum was gazing so eagerly. She was not more than a mile from them, and was bearing rapidly down towards the island, though from a direction opposite to that in which Indian Key lay. Still that did not dispel their hope that Sumner might be on board and coming to their relief. They could see that the schooner’s deck was crowded with men, most of whom, as she approached



more closely, proved to be Negroes. Among them Worth's keen eyes distinguished, besides the whites composing her crew, one young white man who for a few minutes he was certain must be Sumner. As the schooner dropped anchor, and this person was sculled ashore in a small boat by one of the Negroes, they saw, to their great disappointment, that he was a stranger.

He seemed surprised at seeing them on the key, and still more so when a glance at their camp showed the use they had been making of the stores they had so unexpectedly found there two days before.

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Worth, as the stranger landed, "have you seen anything of Sumner Rankin? I mean of a boy on a raft?"

"No, I have not," was the answer. "But I see that some one, and I expect it is the boy before me, has been making a free use of my stores."

"Are they yours?" asked Worth, flushing. "We didn't know whose they were or who left them here, and as we were almost starving, we ventured to take what we needed; but I shall be glad to pay for whatever we have used." With this the boy produced a roll of bills, and looked inquiringly at the stranger.

"That's all right," laughed the other. "If you were starving, and had need of them, of course you acted rightly in taking them. I am only too glad that they were of use to you. I see, too, that you have sheltered them from the weather."

"Yes," replied Worth, "and it rained so hard night before last, that if they had not been under cover some of them would have been spoiled."

"Then we are quits," said the stranger; "and you have already more than paid for what you can have used in so short a time. I have bought this key, and intended to get here as soon as those things, which I sent up on the mail boat, but was unexpectedly delayed. My name is Haines, and yours is —"

"Worth Manton," answered the boy; "and I was cruising up the reef in a canoe with my friend Sumner Rankin. When we got here, some one stole our canoes, or they got lost in some way, and so we were obliged to stay. We found this old Negro Quorum here. Yesterday Sumner went over to Indian Key on a raft, to see if he could find the canoes, or get a vessel to take us off. We haven't seen anything of him since he left, and I am awfully afraid that something has happened to him."

"Oh, I guess not!" said the newcomer; "but if you like you can go over there on this schooner and look for him. The captain is in a great hurry to go on up the reef, as he is already two days late; but I guess he will drop you at the key, and stop there for you on his way back to Key West, if you want him to. But what is it that smells so good?" Here the speaker sniffed at an appetizing odor that was wafted to them from the direction of the little camp.

"I expect it is Quorum's 'coon that he is roasting for dinner," replied Worth.

"'Coon? That is something I have never tasted; but I should be most happy to experiment with it if it is half as good as it smells. Don't you want to invite me to dine with you?"

"Of course I do," laughed Worth; "especially as most of the dinner will consist of your own provisions."

A few minutes later they sat down to dinner together, and Mr. Haines declared it to be the best he had eaten since coming to that part of the country. He also praised the construction of the hut in which they ate, and thanked Worth for having provided him with such comfortable quarters.



While they were occupied with the meal, the black passengers of the schooner landed. Among them Quorum discovered friends who confirmed Sumner's statement that he was no longer suspected of the death of the sponging captain.

After dinner several hours were spent in landing the lumber and other freight with which the schooner was loaded. During this time Mr. Haines learned all the details of Worth's experience in canoeing up the reef, to which he listened with the greatest interest. He advised the boy to remain patiently where he was until Sumner's return, or at least until some word should be received from him. He was also anxious to engage the services of such a capital cook as Quorum had proved himself by the preparation of the dinner they had just eaten.

But the boy was so heartsick with anxiety that he could not bear the thought of a further period of inaction, and Quorum declared he could not think of deserting the lad whom Sumner had left in his care.

So when the schooner was again ready to sail, they went on board, taking with them their guns and a supply of provisions with which Mr. Haines kindly provided them. He also insisted upon their taking a couple of blankets, which, he said, they could return whenever they had no further use for them, and he begged them to come back to the island in case they should be disappointed in their search. Thus they parted with an interchange of good wishes, and an hour later Worth and Quorum were set ashore on Indian Key. Although they had seen no sign of Sumner as they approached it, and the captain of the schooner had advised them to keep on with him up the reef, they could not make up their minds to do so until they had made a thorough examination of the key for traces of their lost comrade. Nor were they inclined to leave those parts so long as there was the faintest hope of hearing from him. So they were hurriedly set ashore, and the schooner continued on her way, the captain promising to stop there for them on his return trip.

Of course their search over the key was fruitless, and it was with heavy hearts that they made themselves comfortable for the night in one of its old buildings.

The next morning they wandered aimlessly over the narrow limits of the little island, or sat in the rickety porch of their house watching the column of smoke that, rising above *Lignum Vitae*, marked the beginning of the cocoa nut planter's operations. Turning from this, they would gaze longingly out to sea without knowing what they hoped to discover. Several schooners, bound both up and down the reef, passed during the morning, but none of them came within hailing distance of the key. At length Worth called out excitedly that he saw a canoe approaching from the direction of Alligator Light. At that distance the sail that he was watching certainly looked small enough to belong to a canoe; but as it came closer it grew larger, until it resolved itself into that of a goodsized catboat.

As it finally rounded to and came to anchor under the lee of the key, a man who was its sole occupant sculled ashore in a dingy containing several empty barrels. He was Assistant Keeper Albury, of Alligator Light, who had come to the key for a supply of water from its old cistern, the one belonging to the light having sprung a leak, and being nearly empty. He was surprised to find strangers on the key, and inquired at once what had become of their boat. After listening to their story and eager questions, he said:



“Well, if that doesn’t beat all! No, we haven’t seen anything out at the light of any young fellow floating on a raft: but we have got two canoes out there that answer pretty well the description of them you say you lost. What did you say their names were?”

“Cupid and Psyche,” replied Worth.

“Then they are yours, for them’s the very names. If you want to go out there with me after I fill my barrels, I’ve no doubt Mr. Spencer will give them up to you.”

This they decided to do. So, after helping the man fill his water barrels, they set sail with him for the lighthouse, which they reached late that afternoon, after some hours of tedious drifting in a calm.

