



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

Chapter 18: Off for the Everglades

BOTH Sumner and Worth were by this time quite used to being turned out of bed while it was still dark, and told that it was morning and time to make a start. So, when the familiar summons was heard, a few hours after their evening of fun, they obeyed them, though not without some sleepy grumblings and protests. The stars were still shining when they went on deck for a look at the weather, and they shivered with the chill of the damp night air.

There were faint evidences of daylight, however, and the welcome fragrance of coffee was issuing from the galley. They felt better after drinking a cup of it, but did not consider themselves fairly awake until the sails were hoisted, the anchor lifted, and the *Transit* began to move slowly out from under *Lignum Vitae*.

Just as they were getting fairly under way, a sleepy hail of "Goodbye, and good luck to you!" came from the edge of the forest on the key where the night shadows still lingered. Then, with answering shouts of "Goodbye, Mr. Haines Goodbye to *Lignum Vitae*!" they were off.

The reason for such an early start was that, with four boats in tow, even the *Transit* could not be expected to make very good speed, and Mr. Carey was anxious to cover the sixty-mile run to Cape Sable before dark.

For the first three hours Sumner was kept constantly at the helm, directing the course of the schooner through a multiplicity of tortuous channels, between coral reefs, oyster bars, and a score of low lying mangrove keys. All this time Lieutenant Carey stood beside him, keeping track of the courses steered and noting on his chart the position of the channels, together with the names of the keys, so far as Sumner was able to give them. The knowledge that the lad displayed of these uncharted waters, and the skill with which he handled the schooner, so excited the lieutenant's admiration that he finally said: "I declare, Sumner, I don't believe there is a better pilot in the whole Key West sponging fleet than you! How on earth do you remember it all?"

"I don't know," laughed Sumner, "I expect it comes natural, as the man said when asked what made him so lazy."

"Well," said the lieutenant, "I am mighty glad to have you along instead of that fellow Rust Norris, though he did intimate that your ignorance of the reef would get us into trouble. He was



greatly cut up when I told him that, as you were going with me, I should not require his services, and tried to say some mean things about you; but I shut him up very quickly. He doesn't seem to be a friend of yours, though."

"I don't know why he shouldn't be," replied Sumner, "I am sure I feel friendly enough towards him. I suppose it must be because I wouldn't let him try my canoe the other day, and left him on the buoy that night. I only meant that as a joke though, and was just about to start out for him, when I saw a fisherman pick him up."

Here Sumner related the incident referred to, and the lieutenant said, as Mr. Manton had, that the fellow was rightly served. Then the subject was dropped, and they thought of it no more.

As they were now in open water, with all traces of land rapidly fading in the distance behind them, Sumner laid a course for Sandy Key, the only one they would see before reaching Cape Sable, resigned the tiller, and invited Worth to try his hand at trolling. The Transit being well provided with fishing tackle they soon had two long trolling lines towing astern. Worth said he was going in for big fish, and so attached to the end of his line a bright leaden squid terminating in a heavy, finely-tempered hook.

Sumner, believing that there would be as much sport and more profit in trying for those that were smaller, but more plentiful, used a much lighter hook, baited with a bit of white rag. Worth would not believe that any fish could be so foolish as to bite at such a bait. His incredulity quickly vanished, however, as Sumner began to pull in, almost as fast as he could throw his line overboard, numbers of Crevallé, or "Jack," beautiful fellows tinted with amber, silver, and blue, and Spanish mackerel, one of the finest fish in southern waters. Seeing that Sumner was having all the fun, while he could not get a bite, Worth began to haul in his line with a view to putting on a smaller hook, and baiting it with a bit of rag. Suddenly there was a swish through the water, a bar of silver gleamed for an instant in the air, a hundred feet astern, and Worth's line began to whiz through his hands with lightning-like rapidity. With a howl of pain, he dropped it as though it had been a red-hot coal, and began dancing about the cockpit, wringing his hands and blowing his fingers.

"Snub him, Worth, quick! Or he'll have your line," cried Sumner, springing to his friend's assistance. "It's a barracuda, and a big one!" He got a turn around the rudder post just in time to save the line, and then began a fight that set the young fisherman's blood to tingling with excitement. In spite of his smarting fingers, Worth insisted upon pulling in his own fish while the barracuda seemed equally intent upon pulling his captor overboard. Such leaping and splashing, such vicious tugs and wild rushes ahead, astern, and off to one side, as that barracuda made, were far beyond anything in the way of fishing that Worth had ever experienced. For ten minutes the fight was maintained with equal vigor on both sides. Every inch of slack was carefully taken in. With the stout rudder post to aid him, Worth was slowly but surely gaining the victory, and the great, steely blue fish was drawn closer and closer to the schooner.

At length he was within fifty feet, and Worth's flushed face was lighting with triumph, when, all at once there came a rush of some vast, white object astern. A huge pair of open jaws, lined with glistening rows of teeth, closed with a vicious snap, and a moment later Worth, whose face was a picture of bewildered amazement, pulled in the head of his fish minus its body.



“Was it a whale, do you think?” he asked, soberly, turning to Sumner.

“No,” replied the other, laughing at his companion’s crestfallen appearance, “but it was the biggest kind of a shark, and he would have snapped you in two as easily as he did that barracuda, if you had been at that end of the line.”

By noon they had left Sandy Key astern, and before sunset they had passed the stately coconut groves on Cape Sable and Palm Point, and were rounding Northwest Cape. Just at dusk they headed into a creek, not more than twenty feet wide, and directly afterwards came to anchor in the deep, roomy basin to which it was the entrance. The basin was already occupied by a small sloop, and as Sumner’s knowledge of those waters did not extend beyond that point, Lieutenant Carey anticipated being able to gain some information from her crew. With this in view he anchored but a short distance from her, and after everything was made snug for the night, he hailed her with:

“Hello on board the sloop!”

“Hello yourself! What schooner is that?”

“The Government schooner Transit, and I should be very glad to see any of you on board.”

“Where are you bound?”

“Into the ’Glades. Will you come over after a while, or shall I go aboard the sloop? I want to have a talk with you.”

“I reckon we’ll come over.”

“Those fellows don’t seem inclined to be very sociable,” remarked the Lieutenant to Ensign Sloe, as they went down into the cabin to supper. At the same time Sumner was saying to Worth, “I wonder who that fellow is? His voice sounded very familiar.”

When they again came on deck after supper, the night was so dark that they could not see the sloop, though they supposed her to be lying close to them.

“Hello aboard the sloop!” again hailed Lieutenant Carey.

There was no answer, nor did several hails serve to bring a reply of any kind.

“Let’s take my canoe and go for a look at those fellows, Sumner,” said the Lieutenant. “They have quite excited my curiosity.”

In a few minutes the canoe was afloat, and its occupants were paddling in the direction of where the sloop was thought to lie. For half an hour they paddled back and forth, and in circles, being guided in their movements by the bright riding light of the Transit. Once they struck a floating oar that seemed to be attached to a cable; but they could discover no trace of the sloop, nor did their repeated hailings bring forth a single answer.

At length, greatly perplexed by such unaccountable behavior on the part of the sloop’s crew, and nearly devoured by the clouds of mosquitoes that swarmed above the lagoon, they returned to the schooner, and thankfully sought the shelter of her wire-screened cabin.

