



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

— **Chapter 19: The Canoes Are Again Lost, and Again Found** —

IN that snug harbor there was so little chance of danger that no watch was kept, and all hands turning in, after a pleasant evening spent in smoking and discussing plans, slept soundly until morning. Although the sun had gone down in a blaze of ominous glory the evening before, and the breeze had died out in an absolute calm, no one was fully prepared for the wonderful change of scene disclosed by the morning. While their landlocked harbor was still as placid as a millpond where they were anchored, it was blackened and roughened by the gusts of fierce squalls but a short distance from them. The continuous roar of breakers outside denoted a furious sea, the cause of which was shown by the lashing treetops and the howlings of a gale overhead. The sky was hidden behind masses of whirling clouds, while after the tropical weather to which they had become accustomed, the air seemed very cold, though the mercury had not fallen below 50°. The gale was a typical Norther, that, sweeping down from Texas prairies, had gathered strength in its unchecked progress across the Gulf, and was now hurling itself with furious energy against the low Florida coast.

“Whew! What a day!” cried Sumner, as he emerged from the warm cabin and stood shivering in the cockpit. “I tell you what, old man, I’m glad we are in this snug haven, instead of outside.”

“So am I,” said Worth, who had followed Sumner, and to whom these remarks were addressed. “I’m afraid canoes would stand a pretty sorry chance out there just now.”

“Canoes! Well, I should say so! They’d be — Great Scott! Where are the canoes and the cruisers?”

Sumner had just taken his first glance astern, and as he uttered this exclamation he sprang to the little afterdeck, and stared about him. The three canoes and the two cruisers had been left for the night attached to a single stout line which was made fast to the *Transit*’s rudder post. Now they were gone, and not a sign of them was to be seen as far as the eye could reach.

“If that doesn’t beat anything I ever heard of!” exclaimed Sumner, in bewilderment. — “I should think a jew-fish big enough to take them all might just as well have taken the schooner, too,” said Worth.

“Yes, I expect she will be stolen from under us the next thing we know,” replied Sumner, “and I expect if we ever get our canoes again we’d better put them into a burglar-proof safe and hire a man



with a dog to watch them nights. I never heard of anybody losing canoes as easily as we do. Where do you suppose they can have gone to, sir?"

This question was addressed to Lieutenant Carey, who, together with Ensign Sloe, had been attracted to the deck by Sumner's first dismayed exclamation.

"I've no more idea than you have," replied the Lieutenant, gravely. "The jew-fish is not to blame this time, at any rate, for there was no anchor down that he could get hold of, and this rope has evidently been cut." Here the speaker displayed the end of the rope that had hung over the stern, and pointed to the clean cut by which it had been severed. "It is evident that some human agency has been at work," he continued, "and I am inclined to connect it with the strange behavior of the fellows on that sloop; though what their object in stealing our boats was, I can't imagine. It is a very serious matter to us, however, and one that calls for prompt investigation. As this wind must have sprung up early in the night, it is hardly probable that the boats can have been taken out to sea, and if they were not they must be somewhere in this lagoon, perhaps concealed in the mangroves, or in one of the sloughs that empty into it. It is lucky that we have the canvas boat left, for I should hate to try and navigate the *Transit* in these unknown waters with such a gale blowing."

The canvas boat, of which the Lieutenant spoke, was, a folding affair that was stowed under the cockpit floor, and was a part of the schooner's regular outfit. Although it was very light, it could easily accommodate three persons, and was a capital thing to fall back on in an emergency like the present.

Mr. Carey ordered it to be got out and put in shape at once. After breakfast he and Sumner, with one of the crew to row, stepped into it and started on their search. They skirted the shore as closely as possible, both to escape the force of the wind, and that they might the more carefully examine the dense mangrove thickets that, with occasional stretches of white beach, formed the coastline.

The mangrove, which here attains the size of oaks, is one of the most curious of trees, and in one particular closely resembles the banyan. Its small yellow blossom, which is eagerly sought by honey bees, forms a long brown seed about the size and shape of a cigar. This, falling off, readily takes root in mud flats, beneath shallow salt or brackish water, and shoots up a straight slender stem having numerous branches. Some of these branches bend downward to the water, sending their tips into the mud, where they in turn take root. At length the tree is thus surrounded by a circle of woody arches that soon become strong enough to support the weight of a man. As the tree increases in height, the upper branches send down long straight shoots that also take root and form independent trunks. Mangroves grow with marvelous rapidity, and quickly cover large areas, where their thickly interlaced, arching roots hold all manner of drift and seaweed, until finally a soil is formed in which the seeds of coarse grasses and other vegetation sprout and flourish. Thus, in the course of time, an island of dry land appears and is lifted above the water. In this way the coral reefs of the Florida coast are gradually transformed into verdant keys, the mangrove taking up and continuing the work of island building just below the surface of the water, where the coral insect leaves off. The mangrove is covered with a thick foliage of small glossy leaves, that is such a favorite haunt for mosquitoes, that wherever mangroves grow, mosquitoes are found in countless millions.

Skirting this wonderful mangrove forest, and occasionally penetrating shallow bayous in which herons, cranes, ibises, pelicans, and curlews swam and waded, the occupants of the canvas boat



searched for several hours in vain. Finally, as they were on the opposite side of the broad lagoon from their starting point, and exposed to the full force of the wind, Sumner called out that he saw something that looked like masts on the edge of a distant clump of mangroves. It was no easy task to navigate successfully through the heavy sea running at this point; but when they had accomplished it, they were rewarded by seeing the entire missing fleet piled up in the greatest confusion among the mangroves, which at this place extended far out into the water. Before they reached them both the Lieutenant and Sumner were obliged to jump overboard in water above their waists, to prevent the canvas boat from swamping in the breakers.

The picture presented by their stranded fleet looked like one of utter ruin. Sumner trembled for the fate of his precious canoe, and the Lieutenant wondered if his expedition had thus been brought to an untimely end. There was a small beach but a short distance away, to which the sailor took the canvas boat, and then returned to help them clear the wrecks. One by one the several craft, all of them full of water, were extricated from the tangled mass, and dragged to the beach for examination. The three canoes were found to be badly scratched, and damaged so far as looks went; but still sound and seaworthy. This was undoubtedly owing to their lightness, and the exceeding care with which canoes are built. In their construction the question of expense is not considered; consequently, being built of the best material, by the most skillful workmen, they are stronger than ordinary craft many times their size.

Their sails were muddied and torn, and some of their slender spars were broken; but as most of their cargoes had been transferred to the *Transit* before leaving *Lignum Vitae* this was the extent of their injury. Sumner was jubilant when a careful examination of every part of them revealed this fact; but Mr. Carey, who was devoting his attention to the cruisers, looked very grave. Both of them were badly stove, and it was evident that only extensive repairs could render them again fit for service.

“Who could have done this thing, and why was it done?” he repeated over and over again in deep perplexity; while Sumner, equally at fault, tried to recall whose voice it was that had seemed so familiar when they had exchanged hails with the sloop.

After emptying the canoes, and hauling the cruisers high up on the beach, where they were to be left for the present, the party set forth on their return trip. The Lieutenant went in his own canoe, Sumner in his, while the sailor in the canvas boat towed the *Cupid*.

As they neared the schooner they saw her people pointing eagerly towards a bit of beach near the head of the creek through which they had entered the lagoon the evening before. Looking in that direction, they saw a white man beckoning to them and shouting, though they could not distinguish his words.

Headily understanding that he was in distress of some kind, the Lieutenant and Sumner headed their canoes in his direction. As they neared him, they saw that he was hatless, and clad only in a shirt and trousers that were torn and watersoaked. The first words they could distinguish were:

“Our boat is going to pieces outside, and Rust Norris is in her with a broken arm.”

“Rust Norris!” That was the name Sumner had been racking his memory for, and his was the voice that had come to them from the sloop on the preceding evening.

