



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

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## Chapter 20: The Psyche as a Life-Boat

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“JUST where does the sloop lie?” asked Sumner, as the bow of his canoe ran on to the beach where the man stood.

The latter explained the position of the stranded vessel so clearly that the boy, who was familiar with the locality, comprehended it in a moment.

“She’s about a mile from the mouth of the creek, and a quarter off shore,” said the man. “When the tide went down I partly swum and partly waded to the beach. I don’t know how I ever got ashore alive, but the thought of poor Rust out there kinder nerved me on, and so I made it at last. I wouldn’t do it again, though, for all the money in Key West. Now I’ve been here so long waiting for help, and the tide’s rising again so fast, that I’m afraid it’s all day with poor Rust. If he ain’t swept off the wrack by this time he soon will be, and I don’t know as there is anything can be done for him. It wouldn’t be possible for the schooner to get anywhere near the wrack, she’s dragged in so fur over the reefs, and the small boat isn’t built that could live in them seas.”

“Yes, she is,” said Sumner, quietly, but with a very pale face; “this boat that I am sitting in can live out there, and she’s got to do it, too.” So saying, he set his double-bladed paddle into the sand, and with a vigorous shove sent the light craft gliding backward into deep water.

The man stared at him in speechless amazement, while the Lieutenant called out: “Don’t try it, Sumner! You must be crazy to think of such a thing! You’ll only be throwing away your own life for nothing! Come back, and we’ll think of some other plan.”

“There isn’t time to think of another plan,” Sumner called back over his shoulder. “I must go, and I know I can do it. If you will have some of the men out there on the beach, ready to help us land, we’ll make it easy enough. Goodbye!”

Impelled by vigorous strokes of Sumner’s paddle, the Psyche was already gliding down the smooth waters of the sheltered creek, and it was too late to restrain the impetuous young canoeman from carrying out his project. Realizing this, and also that Sumner’s plan, hazardous as it seemed, was the only feasible one, Lieutenant Carey, with a heavy heart, set about doing his own share of the work in hand. He took the stranger off to the schooner, and after swallowing a cup of hot coffee, of which he stood greatly in need, the man declared himself ready to guide a party to the beach opposite the place where the sloop lay.



Dinner was ready and waiting on board the *Transit* but nobody thought of stopping to eat a mouthful after learning the news of what was taking place. The sole anxiety was to reach the beach as quickly as possible. The instant the stranger said he was ready, all hands, except those ordered to remain by the schooner, began to tumble into the available canoes, eager to be set ashore.

Poor Worth was sadly distressed when he heard of the terrible task undertaken by his friend, but he tried to cheer himself and the others by declaring that if any boat could live outside it was the canoe *Psyche*, and if any living sailor could carry her through the seas, whose angry roar filled the air, it was Sumner Rankin.

In the mean time the brave young fellow who was the object of all this anxiety had reached the mouth of the creek. There, in a sheltered spot, he paused for a few minutes to take breath and make his final preparations for a plunge into the roaring breakers outside.

He set taut the foot steering gear, took double reefs in both his sails, saw that the halyards were clear and ready for instant service, adjusted the rubber apron so that the least possible water should enter the cockpit, and then, with a firm grasp of his paddle, he shoved off.

In another minute he was breasting the huge, combing breakers of the outer bar, and working with desperate energy to force his frail craft through or over them. The roar of waters was deafening, while the fierce gusts rendered breathing difficult. At one moment the sharp bow of the canoe would point vaguely towards the sky, while the next would see it directed into a watery abyss, and plunging downward as though never to rise again. At such moments the rudder would be lifted from the water, and only the most skillful use of the paddle prevented the canoe from broaching to and being rolled over and over, to be finally dashed in fragments on the beach. Again and again the wave crests broke on her deck, sweeping her fore and aft with a blinding mass of hissing water.

Still the boy's strength held out, still his paddle was wielded with regular strokes, and finally he came off victorious in this first bout of his fierce, single-handed struggle. The line of breakers was passed, and riding over the comparatively regular seas beyond, he began working dead to windward for an offing.

Not until he was a good half-mile off shore, and very nearly exhausted by his tremendous efforts, did he push back the rubber apron, drop his centerboard, and then, steadying the canoe with his paddle, seize a favorable opportunity for hoisting the tiny after-sail that should keep her momentarily headed into the wind. Then, quickly unjointing his paddle and thrusting its parts into the cockpit, he grasped the halyard, and with a single pull set the double-reefed mainsail.

Now was a most critical moment, for as he pulled in on the mainsheet, and the sail began to feel the full force of the wind, the little craft heeled over gunwale under. Only by promptly scrambling to the weather deck, and sitting with his feet braced under the lee coaming, while his whole body was thrown out far over the side, did he prevent her from capsizing. Then she gathered headway and dashed forward. With one hand on the deck tiller, and holding the mainsheet in the other, the boy peered anxiously ahead.

Yes, there was the wreck! Oh, so far away! with clouds of white spray dashing high above it. Could he ever reach it through those tumultuous seas? Lifting him high in the air, where he was exposed to the full force of the wind at one moment, they towered above the deep trough into which



he sank at the next, and left his bits of sails shaking as if in a calm. With full confidence in himself and his boat, he believed he could reach it -- and he did.

He had no time to look at the anxious watchers on the beach, but they noted his every movement with painful eagerness. They almost held their breath as some huge wave tossed him high aloft, and again as he was completely hidden from them behind its foam-capped crest. At length they saw him reach a point abreast the wreck, round sharply to under its lee, and seize his paddle. In another minute he was on board, with the first half of his task accomplished.

He found Rust Norris crouching in the lee of the little deckhouse, nearly exhausted with pain, hours of cold drenching, and the terror of his position. The wreck was trembling so violently with each shock of the seas that it seemed as though she must break up beneath their feet.

Rust's left arm was supported in a rude sling made from a strip of his shirt knotted about his neck. He did not speak as the boy bent over him, but an expression of glad surprise and renewed hope lighted his haggard face.

"Come, Rust," shouted Sumner; "with one big effort you'll be all right. They are waiting for you on the beach, and the canoe will carry you that far easy enough, if you can only manage to get into her. You will have to sit low down and steer with your feet while you hold the sheet in your hand. All you'll have to do is to run her in dead before the wind, head on for the beach."

With infinite difficulty the wounded man was finally seated in the narrow cockpit of the frail craft. A moment later it was shoved off from the trembling wreck, and was racing with fearful speed towards the beach. It seemed to leap from the top of one huge wave to the next with out sinking into the intervening hollow. Not until it was dragged safely ashore by those who rushed into the breakers to meet the flying craft did Rust Norris realize that he was her sole occupant.

