



by Kirk Munroe
Canoe mates
A Story of the Florida Reef and Everglades

Chapter 21: Sumner's Self-Sacrifice

IF Rust Norris had not been rendered so nearly helpless by his broken arm, Sumner would have endeavored to make the Psyche bear them both safely to land, if not by carrying them, at least by supporting them while they swam alongside. On his way to the wrecked sloop he had thought that perhaps this might be done, but as soon as he discovered Rust's real condition he knew that he might as well leave him there to drown as to attempt to burden the light craft with their double weight. At that moment the lad made up his mind that Rust should have the canoe to himself, and that he would take whatever chance of escape still remained. Thus he had resolutely shoved the canoe off, with its single occupant, while he stayed behind, clinging to the leeward mast stay, and watching with eager eyes the perilous passage to the beach of the man for whom he had risked so much. The act was a bit of that coolly-planned self-sacrificing heroism that stamps true bravery, and distinguishes it from recklessness.

In his exhausted and partially dazed condition, Rust did not realize the sacrifice made by his young deliverer until the canoe had been snatched from the breakers by a dozen willing hands, and drawn high on the beach beyond their cruel grasp. Then, on looking for the boy and seeing that he had remained behind, he uttered a great cry, and sank down limp and helpless on the wet sand.

Those on shore had seen from the first that only one was coming in the canoe, while one was left behind, but they had not known which was approaching them until the Psyche was dragged from the breakers.

Worth was in an agony of despair at his friend's peril. "Let me go to him!" he cried. "I would rather drown than stand here without trying to save him!"

"No; let me go! Let me go!" cried the others; and they made frantic attempts to again launch the canoe through the breakers; but they might as well have tried to launch it through a stone wall. Again and again was it hurled back, while those who strove to launch it were torn from their footing and flung upon the beach.

Then there was a shout of "Here he comes! He is in the water!" and then they strained their eyes in vain for another glimpse of their well-loved young comrade.

Sumner had indeed taken the plunge, but not voluntarily. He had determined to remain by the sloop until she broke up and he was compelled to swim, or until the falling tide should render the



passage of that seething maelstrom less terrible. Thus thinking, he was about to seek the poor shelter in which he had found Rust, when a great wave, rushing over the wreck, swept him from it, and buried him beneath tons of its mighty volume.

As he came gasping to the surface he was again almost immediately overwhelmed and borne under. Still, he had drawn a breath of air, and had noted the direction of the beach. He knew that, sooner or later, alive or dead, the waves would cast him ashore. So, without trying to swim forward, he devoted all his energies to reaching the surface, and breathing as often as possible. It seemed as though he were merely rising and sinking, without moving forward an inch, and it required all his self-control to keep from exhausting himself by violent struggles to make a perceptible headway. He retained his presence of mind, however, and after a half-hour of battle the very waves seemed to acknowledge his victory, and tossed him up within sight of the watchers, who had given up all hope except that of finding his lifeless body.

They uttered a glad shout; but it was checked as he was again buried from their sight. Again he appeared, and this time much nearer. Then Lieutenant Carey rushed into the water. Behind him Worth, Quorum, and the others formed a line, tightly grasping each other's hands, and at length the swimmer was within their reach.

With cries of exultant joy, they bore him up the beach and laid him on the sand; but their rejoicing was quickly succeeded by consternation. He lay with closed eyes, cold, and apparently lifeless.

"Hurry to the schooner, Worth, and tell them to have hot water, hot blankets, and a roaring fire ready by the time we get there," demanded the Lieutenant. "We will bring him as quickly as possible."

For hours they worked over the senseless form of the brave lad. So nearly had the sea accomplished its cruel purpose that, but for the lessons learned by the workers years before at Annapolis, Sumner Rankin's life would have been given in exchange for that of Rust Norris. At length a faint color tinged his cheeks, a faint breath came from between his lips, and they knew that their efforts had not been in vain. An hour later he was sleeping quietly, and it was certain that Nature would complete the work of restoration. Then the same skill that had snatched life from apparent death was directed to the setting and proper bandaging of Rust's broken arm.

The Norther continued to blow all that night and the following day, and during this period of enforced idleness Sumner was not allowed to leave his berth. His every want was anticipated, and those who surrounded him vied with each other in their tender care of the lad who had so well won their regard and admiration. As for Rust Norris, his whole nature seemed to have undergone such a change that his former intimates would hardly have recognized him. He sat and watched constantly beside the boy to whom he owed so much, and could hardly be persuaded to leave him for the briefest intervals.

During that second day of storm he made a full confession of how and why he had attempted to thwart the objects of Lieutenant Carey's expedition. His enmity had been particularly directed towards Sumner, and when the latter instead of himself had been chosen to pilot the Transit up the reef, he had formed a plan of revenge that he immediately proceeded to carry out. This was to visit the Everglade Indians, and inform them that the expedition was for the purpose of spying out their lands



and preparing for their removal to a faraway country of cold and snow, where they would certainly die. To accomplish this he had joined a Bahama smuggler, and with a cask of rum as a cargo, they had sailed in the small sloop owned by the latter for Cape Sable. Here they met a party of Indians who had come down from the 'Glades on a deer hunt, and after plying them with rum, roused them to anger by their lying tale concerning the coming expedition. The Indians had departed to spread the report to the rest of their band, and to devise plans for frustrating the supposed purpose of the expedition. Their departure had taken place on the day of the Transit's arrival on the coast, and but for the signs of the approaching Norther, Rust Norris and his companion would have left the lagoon in which they were so snugly anchored that afternoon. Noting these signs they decided to remain where they were until it should blow over. They had no idea when the Transit would reach the cape, nor did they suppose that Sumner was aware of the passage into the lagoon. It was therefore with surprise and consternation that they found those whom they had attempted to injure anchored close beside them. They at once determined to take advantage of the darkness to run out of the lagoon before the storm broke, and seek another shelter among the mangrove keys a short distance farther inland.

They slipped their cable, not daring to lift the anchor for fear the sound might be heard on board the schooner, and drifted down to the mouth of the creek with the last of the ebb tide. Here, while waiting for a breeze, Rust conceived the idea of effectually crippling the expedition by stealing their boats, and went back up the creek for that purpose. He cut them loose from the schooner and attempted to tow them silently down to where the sloop lay, but as the tide had turned and was flooding strongly up the creek, he found it impossible to do so. So he turned them adrift in the belief that they would be driven to the farther side of the lagoon, and dashed to pieces by the storm that was about to break. At any rate, the expedition would be so long delayed in recovering their boats that the news of their coming would be spread over the length and breadth of the Everglades before they could enter them.

So much time had thus been wasted that before the sloop could be taken to the proposed place of safety the storm burst in all its fury. They were forced to seek refuge in another place that was partially exposed, but where with two anchors they could probably have ridden out the gale. With but one, they were dragged from their moorings soon after daylight, and driven on the reef where the sloop now lay. Rust's arm had been broken by the gybing of the main boom, and, left alone, exposed to the fury of those raging seas, he had given up all hope long before Sumner came to his rescue.

"And to think," said Rust, in conclusion, "that the fellow to whom I was doing all this meanness should have come after me and offered to throw away his own life to save mine! I tell you, gentlemen, it makes me feel meaner 'n a toad-fish!"

