



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

— **Chapter 10: Whose Are They? And Where Did They Come From?** —

“LOOK here,” said Sumner, sternly, to the Negro, after his excitement had somewhat subsided, “didn’t you try to steal one of our guns last night?”

“Yes, honey, I’s afeared I did,” confessed the black man, humbly. “But I didn’t know hit war you, Marse Summer, an’ I did want er gun so powerful bad.”

“I’m glad that mystery is cleared up, at any rate,” said Worth, with a relieved air. “And I’m glad to find out that I was right about some one being in the camp, too. Now I wonder if he doesn’t know something about our canoes?”

“Do you, Quorum, know anything about the canoes that we came here in?” asked Sumner.

“No, I don’t know nuffin’ ’bout no cooner. I’s bin wonderin’ what sort of er boat you’ll come in, an’ er lookin’ fer him, but I don’t see him nowhere.”

“I suppose you would have stolen it if you had found it?”

“Maybe so, maybe so. Ole Quorm not ’sponsible fer what him do when be bein’ hunted like er ’possum or er ’coon. Yo’ like ’possum when he roasted, Marse Summer?”

“Indeed I do when you roast him, Quorum. Why? Have you got one?”

“Yes sah, cotch him in er trap dis berry mawnin’. I jist settin’ hit agin when yo’ come er trompin’ troo de trees an’ scare de pore ole niggah ’mos’ to def. Now, if yo’ say so, we go roas’ him, and hab berry fine suppah.”

“Certainly I say so. You lead the way, and we’ll follow you. I tell you what, Worth, we’ve struck it rich in falling in with one of the best cooks on the reef.”

“I don’t know how I shall like ’possum,” replied Worth, “for I have never eaten any; but I am sure it will make fully as good a meal as raw coconut. I do wish, though, that we had some bread, or at least some crackers, and a little butter.”

And sugar and coffee and bacon, and a cooking outfit,” laughed Sumner. “I wouldn’t mind spending a few days here if we had all those things.”

“Wouldn’t it be fine?” replied the boy, who had all his life reveled in luxuries that he hardly cared for, but would now have appreciated so highly the commonest of what are generally regarded as necessities.



As they talked in this strain, they followed the negro through the narrow trail leading back from the coconut grove to his camp. It was but a short distance from the place where Sumner had taken his header into the ty-ti bush. Here Quorum had built himself a snug palmetto hut in a place capitally concealed from observation, and had managed to surround himself with a number of rude comforts. A fire was smoldering in a rough stone fireplace, and from an adjoining limb hung the 'possum that they were to have for supper.

"Well," exclaimed Sumner, looking about him, "I don't see but what you are living like an African King, Quorum. Have you had plenty to eat since you came here?"

"Yes, sah. Plenty such as hit is — 'possum, 'coon, turtle, fish, oyster, conch, coconut, banana, limes, lemons, an' paw-paw; but no terbakker. I tell yo', sah, dat a berry pore place what hab no terbakker."

"So you want tobacco to make you happy, and Worth wants bread and butter, and I want coffee. It seems that we all want something that we haven't got, and aren't likely to get in this world, doesn't it? But, Quorum, what on earth are you throwing all that iron into the fire for? It won't burn."

"No, him won't burn," answered the negro, chuckling at the idea, "but him good to bile do wattah." As neither of the boys had the least idea what he meant, they watched him curiously. The iron that he had thrown into the fire, which he now heaped with wood, consisted of a number of old bolts that he had obtained from some wreckage on the beach. While these were heating, he filled a small hollow place in the rocks with water, and when the bolts were red-hot he dropped them into it. In about two seconds the water was boiling. Throwing a few handfuls of ashes into the boiling water, he soused the 'possum in it and held him there several minutes. After this he scraped the animal with a bit of iron hoop, and to the surprise of the boys, its hair came off almost without an effort. In a minute it was as bare as a suckling pig, which it greatly resembled. Shortly afterwards it was cleaned, washed, and ready for roasting. Just here Sumner proposed that they return to their own camp, and do the roasting there, as from where they now were they had no chance of seeing any boats that might pass the island. As Quorum no longer felt the necessity for hiding, he readily agreed to this, and carrying with them the few articles belonging to him that were worth removing, they started through the woods towards what the boys already called home. The afternoon was nearly spent when they entered the clearing and came in sight of their own little lean-to. Sumner, who was some distance in the lead, was the first to reach it. The others saw him suddenly stop, gaze at the hut as though fascinated by something inside of it, and then, without a word, start on a run towards the beach. This curious action excited Worth's wonder; but when he reached the hut he did exactly the same thing. When Quorum, who came last, reached it, he gazed in open-eyed wonder, but did not move from the spot. A smile gradually overspread his face, and, with a long-drawn sigh of happy anticipation, he uttered the single word, "Terbakker."

"Do you see it?" asked Worth, breathlessly, as he joined Sumner on the beach.

"No; but perhaps it is behind the point. Let's go and take a look."

But when they reached the point there was no sign of the vessel that they fully expected to find there. More greatly puzzled than they had ever been before in all their lives, even at the mysterious disappearance of their canoes, the boys slowly retraced their steps towards the hut. It was completely filled with barrels, boxes, and various packages, most of which evidently contained provisions.



“There is a sack of coffee,” remarked Sumner. “And a box of crackers. And, yes, here is butter!” cried Worth, lifting the cover of a tin pail.

“Dat ar am sholy a box oh terbakker,” put in Quorum, pointing to the unmistakable box, from which his eyes had not wandered since they first lit upon it.

“It certainly is,” replied Sumner, in a voice expressive of the most unbounded amazement. “And there, if my eyes do not deceive me, are cases of milk, canned fruit, baked beans, and brown bread.”

“Hams and bacon,” added Worth.

“Kittles and pans,” said Quorum.

“In fact,” concluded Sumner, “there is a bountiful supply of provisions for several months, and a complete housekeeping outfit into the bargain. There is no doubt as to what these things are. The only unanswered questions are, Whom do they belong to, and how did they get here?”

“Perhaps whoever stole our canoes has left them here in part payment,” suggested Worth.

“You might just as well say that Elijah’s ravens had brought them,” laughed Sumner.

“Marse Summer, sah, ’scuse me, but do hit ’pear to yo’ like hit would be stealin’ to bang de kiver offen dat ar box, an’ let de ole man hab jes one smell oh dat terbakker?” asked Quorum, humbly.

“No, Quorum, under the circumstances I don’t believe it would,” replied the boy, who forthwith proceeded to attack the box in question with his hatchet.

