



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

Chapter 29: A Very Serious Predicament

THE four explorers left on the mound island were very far from spending so pleasant an evening as that enjoyed by Quorum in the Seminole village. They were full of anxiety both as to his fate and their own. In some respects their position was not so bad as if they had been cast away on a desert island in the ocean, while in others it was worse. In the latter case they might hope to sight and signal some passing vessel, but here there was no chance for anything of that kind. At the best, they would not see anything except Indian canoes, and, under the circumstances, they could have little hope of obtaining aid from these.

Their revolvers were still loaded, and they had between them half a dozen cartridges for their guns, but thus far they had discovered no traces of game on the island. They would not lack for fresh water, but with only a single bag of biscuit, the food question was likely to become a serious one within a short time. They had no knowledge of any white settlements within less than a hundred miles of where they were. These could only be reached by wading and swimming through the trackless 'Glades and bewildering cypress swamps. Undoubtedly some of the 'Glade islands were occupied by Indians, but they might explore as many of these as their strength would permit them to reach without finding one thus inhabited. Their situation was certainly a most perplexing one, and as they sat around a fire, eating a scanty supper of hardtack and discussing their prospects, these appeared gloomy in the extreme.

Still, the Lieutenant well knew that he must, if possible, keep up the spirits of his little party, and that the worst thing they could do was to take a hopeless view of the situation. So he said:

"Well, boys, though we seem to be in a nasty predicament, it might be a great deal worse, and we have still many things to be thankful for. I once drifted for a week in an open boat in the middle of the South Pacific. There were seven of us, and only one man of the party had the faith and courage to continue cheerful and hopeful through it all. On the very day that we swallowed our last drop of water, and while the rest of us were lying despairingly in the bottom torn of the boat, he sat up on watch, and finally discovered the trading schooner that picked us I up."

"I," said Sumner, "do not feel nearly so badly now as I did when drifting out to sea in the dark on that wretched raft a couple of weeks ago. I expected every minute to be washed off and be snapped up by sharks; but, after all, the loneliness was the worst part of it."



“Right you are, Mr. Sumner,” said the sailor. “A man can stand a heap of suffering along with others, that would throw him on his beam ends in no time if he was compelled to navigate by himself. I mind one time that I was lost in a fog, in a dory, on the Grand Banks. As we had grub and water in the boat, I didn’t worry much, till my dorymate fell overboard and got drowned. The weight of his ’ilers and rubber boots sunk him like a shot. After that I well nigh went crazy with the loneliness. I couldn’t seem to eat or drink; and though I was picked up the very next day, that one night of loneliness seemed like a year of torment. Oh yes, sir, men can save themselves in company, when they won’t lift a hand if left alone.”

“I don’t think I was ever in a worse fix than this one,” remarked Worth, dolefully.

“Probably not, my boy,” said the Lieutenant, cheerily. “You are young yet, and have just made a start on your career of adventure. All things must have a beginning, you know. The next time you find yourself in an unpleasant situation, you will take great satisfaction in looking back and describing this one as having been much worse. No adventure worth the telling can be had without a certain degree of mental or physical suffering, and the more of this that is endured the greater the satisfaction in looking back on it. Now that we can do nothing before daylight, I propose that we make ourselves as comfortable as possible, and sleep as soundly as possible. By so doing we shall be able to face our situation with renewed strength and courage in the morning. Tomorrow we will explore the island, discover its resources, and perhaps find traces of Quorum and the boats. Failing in this, I propose that we construct as good a raft as we can with the means at hand. With it to carry our guns, besides affording us some support, we will make our way back to the place where those cowboys were camped this morning. From there we can follow their trail until we overtake them, or reach some settlement.”

Cheered by having a definite plan of operations thus outlined, all hands set to work to gather such materials for bedding as they could find in the darkness, and an hour later the little camp was buried in profound slumber.

To their breakfast of hardtack the following morning Sumner added a hatful of cocoa plums that he had gathered while the others still slept. Soon after sunrise they divided into two parties — the Lieutenant and Worth forming one, and Sumner and the sailor the other — and set out in opposite directions to make their way around the island.

“I don’t want any one to fire a gun except in case of absolute necessity,” said Lieutenant Carey. “And if a shot is heard from either party, the others will at once hasten in that direction.”

“Can’t we even shoot my gobbler if we meet him?” queried Worth.

“No, I think not,” replied the Lieutenant, with a smile; “that is, unless he shows fight, for I expect your gobbler would turn out to be a turkey without feathers, and standing about six feet high. I mean,” he added, as Worth’s puzzled face showed that he did not understand, “that the call by which you were led away from Quorum was, in all likelihood, uttered by an Indian for that very purpose.”

So difficult was their progress through the luxuriant and densely-matted undergrowth of that Everglade isle that, though it was not more than a couple of miles in circumference, it was nearly noon before the two parties again met. They had discovered nothing except that the island was uninhabited, and they were its sole occupants. Nor had they seen anything that would give a clue to the fate that had overtaken poor Quorum.



“While I don’t for a moment suppose that the fellow has deserted,” said the Lieutenant, “I wish, with all my heart, that we knew what had become of him.”

“Indeed, he has not deserted,” replied Sumner, warmly. “I’ll answer for Quorum as I would for myself, Wherever he is he will come back to us if he gets half a chance.”

“Yes, I believe he will; and I only hope he may get the chance. Now let us go to the top of the mound for one more comprehensive look at our surroundings, and then we will begin our preparations for leaving the island.”

From the summit of the mound the same tranquil scene on which Lieutenant Carey and Sumner had gazed with such pleasure the evening before, only more widely extended, greeted their eyes. It was as devoid of human life now as then, and its present beauties failed to interest them.

“I said that we would probably spend today here,” remarked the Lieutenant. “But I must confess that my present interest in this mound lies in getting away from it as quickly as possible. I have no longer the least desire to investigate its mysteries, and so let us descend to our more important work.”

Returning to their landing place, and eating a most unsatisfactory lunch of hardtack, they began to search for materials from which to build their raft. These were hard to find, and still harder to prepare for the required purpose. There was plenty of timber, but it was green, and they had no weapons with which to attack it except their sheath knives. Neither had they any nails nor ropes, and their lashings must be made of vines.

After a whole afternoon of diligent labor, a nondescript affair of different lengths and jagged ends lay on the ground at the water’s edge ready for launching. With infinite difficulty and pains they got it into the water, only to have the mortification of seeing it immediately sink.

“Well, boys,” said the Lieutenant, in a voice that trembled in spite of his effort to make it sound cheerful, “that raft is a decided failure. Unless we can find some wood better suited to our purpose, I am afraid we must give up the idea altogether, and try to reach the cypress belt without any such aid.”

“If we only had a few sticks of the timber that is so plenty along the reef!” said Sumner, thinking of his own previous efforts in the raft line.

“We might as well wish for our canoes, and done with it,” said Worth, despondently.

Just then they thought they heard a faraway shout in the forest behind them. Instinctively grasping their guns, they stood in listening attitudes. It was repeated, this time more distinctly, and they looked at each other wonderingly.

At the third shout Sumner exclaimed, joyously: “It’s Quorum! I know it is!” He would have plunged into the forest to meet the newcomer, but the Lieutenant restrained him, saying: “Wait a minute. Let us be sure that this is not another trap.”

A few moments later there was no longer any mistaking the voice, and their answering shouts guided Quorum, his honest face beaming with joy and excitement, to the place where they were awaiting him.

