



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

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## Chapter 9: The Nocturnal Visitor

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FOR a full minute the boys sat motionless, listening intently for any sound that should betray the presence of the intruder who, Worth was positive, had visited their camp. Once they both heard a slight rustling in the bushes behind them; and Worth, putting his hand on Sumner's arm, whispered, breathlessly,

"There !—Hear that?"

"That's nothing," answered Sumner. "Probably that 'coon has come back to look for the rest of his supper."

"But a 'coon wouldn't pull at a gun," insisted Worth.

"Oh, you must have been dreaming," returned Sumner. "Your gun hasn't disappeared, has it?"

"No, but I am sure I felt it move. I threw my arm across it before I went to sleep, and its moving woke me. I felt it move once after I was awake, as though some one were trying to pull it away very gently. Then I sat up and called out, 'Who's there?' but there wasn't any answer, and I didn't hear a sound. But, Sumner, there's some one on this island besides ourselves, I know there is, and he'll kill us if he gets the chance. Can't we get away somehow — can't we? I shall die of fright if we have to stay here any longer!"

"Yes, of course we can," answered Sumner, soothingly, "and we'll set about it as soon as daylight comes. Until then we'll keep a sharp lookout, though I can't believe there is a human being on the key besides ourselves. We surely would have seen some traces of him."

As the boy finished speaking he went outside and threw some more wood on the fire. In another minute a bright blaze had driven back the shadows from a wide circle about the little hut, and rendered it impossible for any one to approach without discovery. Then the canoemates sat with their precious guns in their hands, and talked in low tones until the moon rose above the trees behind them, flooding the whole scene with a light almost as bright as that of day.

By this time Worth's conversation began to grow unintelligible; his head sank lower and lower, until at length he slipped down from his sitting position fast asleep. Then Sumner thought he might as well lie down, and in another minute he, too, was in the land of dreams. Worth was very restless, and occasionally talked in his sleep, which is probably the reason why the dark form still crouching in the shadows behind the camp did not again venture to approach it.



It was broad daylight, and the sun was an hour high, when the boys next awoke, wondering whether their fright of the night before had been a reality or only a dream. Under the fear dispelling influence of the sunlight even Worth was inclined to think it might have been the latter, while Sumner was sure of it.

After replenishing their fire, they went down to the beach in the hope of seeing a sail, and for their morning plunge in the clear water. There was nothing in sight; but while they were bathing, Sumner discovered a fine bunch of oysters. These, roasted in their shells, together with the birds saved from the evening before, made quite a satisfactory breakfast. After eating it, and carefully banking their fire with earth, they set forth to explore the island.

As they were most anxious to search for traces of the lost canoes, and had already penetrated the interior as far as the central pond of freshwater, they decided to follow the coastline as closely as possible. Accordingly, with their loaded guns over their shoulders, they set out along the water's edge. Their progress was slow, for in many places the mangroves were so thick that they found great difficulty in forcing a way through them. Then, too, they found a quantity of planks, many of which they hauled up, as well as they could, beyond the reach of the tide for future use. While thus engaged, the meridian sun and their appetites indicated the hour of noon before they reached a small grove of coconut trees on the north end of the island, beneath which they decided to rest.

Sumner climbed one of the tall, smooth trunks, and cutting off a great bunch of nuts, in all stages of ripeness, let it fall to the ground with a crash. As he was about to descend, his eye was arrested by something that instantly occupied his earnest attention. It was only the stem of another bunch of nuts; but it had been cut, and that so recently that drops of fresh sap were still oozing from it. From his elevated perch he could also see where other bunches had been cut from trees near by, and he slid to the ground in a very reflective frame of mind. He could not bear, however, to arouse Worth's fears by communicating his suspicions until he had reduced them to a certainty. The nuts might have been taken by some passing sponger, though he did not believe they had been.

So he said nothing of his discovery while they lunched off of coconuts, ripe and partially so, and took refreshing draughts of their milk. He did, however, keep a sharp lookout, and finally spied what resembled a dim trail leading through the bushes behind them towards the interior.

Finally, on the pretext that he might get a shot at some doves, and asking Worth to remain where he was for a few minutes, Sumner entered the bushes, determined to discover the mystery, if that trail would lead him to it. He had not gone more than a hundred yards when his foot was caught by a low vine, and he plunged head first into a thick ti-ti bush. He fell with a great crash, and made such a noise in extricating him self from the thorny embrace that he did not hear a quick rush and a rustling of the undergrowth but a short distance from him. What he did hear, though, a minute after he regained his footing, was a startled cry, and the roar of Worth's gun. Then came a succession of yells, mingled with cries of murder, and such shouts for help, coupled with his own name, that for a moment he was paralyzed with bewilderment and a sickening fear. Then he bounded back down the dim trail, just in time to see Worth throw down his gun and rush towards the struggling figure of a Negro. The latter was rolling on the ground at the foot of a coconut tree, and uttering the most piercing yells.



As Worth became aware of Sumner's presence, he turned with a white, frightened face, exclaiming: "Oh, Sumner, what shall I do? I've killed him, and he is dying before my very eyes! Of course I didn't mean to, but he came on me so suddenly that I fired before I had time to think. The whole charge must have gone right through his body, judging from the agony he is in. What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

"Well, he isn't dead yet, at all events," said Sumner. "Perhaps, if he will keep still for a minute and stop his yelling, we can find out where he is hurt and do something for him."

With this he attempted to catch hold of the struggling figure at his feet; but the Negro rolled away from him, crying:

"Don't tech me, Marse Summer! Don't yo' tech me! I's shot full o' holes, an' I's gwine ter die. Oh Lordy! Oh Lordy! Sich pain as I's a-suff'rin'! An' I didn't kill nobody, nuther. I didn't nebber do no harm. An' now I's full ob holes. Oh Lordy! Oh Lordy!"

"Why, it's Quorum!" exclaimed Sumner, mentioning the name of one of the best cooks known to the Key West sponging fleet. Sumner had sailed with him, and knew him well. About a month before, the captain of the schooner on which he was employed had been found dead in his bunk. Quorum was accused of poisoning him for the sake of a sum of money that the captain was known to have had, but which could not now be found. The cook had been arrested, and an attempt was made to lynch him for the alleged crime. He had, however, succeeded in escaping, and had disappeared from the island. That no active search was made for him was because the money was found concealed in the captain's bunk, and it was proved that heart disease was the cause of his death.

At length the Negro, exhausted by his struggles, lay still, though groaning so heavily that Worth imagined him to be dying, and Sumner, bending over him, searched for the fatal wound. His face became more and more perplexed as the examination proceeded, until finally, in a vastly relieved tone, he exclaimed:

"You good-for-nothing old rascal! What do you mean by frightening us so? There isn't a scratch anywhere about you. Come, get up and explain yourself."

"Don't yz' trifle wif a ole man what's dyin', Marse Summer," said Quorum, interrupting his groans and sitting up.

"You are no more dying than I am," laughed Sumner, who was only too glad to be able to laugh after his recent anxiety. "I don't know what Worth, here, fired at, or what he hit; but it was certainly not you."

"Didn't I, really?" cried Worth. "Oh, I'm so glad! I don't know what possessed me to fire, anyhow; but when he came dashing out of the woods right towards me, my gun seemed to go off of its own accord."

"Yz' say I hain't hit nowheres, Marse Summer?" asked the Negro, doubtfully; "an' not eben hurted?"

"No," laughed Sumner, "not even 'hurted.' You know, Quorum, that I wouldn't hurt you for anything. I like your corn fritters and conch soup too much for that."

"Why for yo' a-huntin' de ole man, den?"

"Hunting you? We're not hunting you. What put such an idea into your head?"



“Kase ebberbody er huntin’ him, an’ er tryin’ ter kill him for de murder what he nebber done.”

“Of course you didn’t do it. Captain Rube died of heart disease. Everybody knows that now.”

“What yo’ say?” cried the Negro, springing to his feet, his face radiant with joy. “lie die ob he own sef, an’ ebberybody know hit, an’ dey hain’t er huntin’ ole Quorm any mo’? Glory be to de Lawd! Glory be to de Lawd! An’ bress yo’ honey face, Marse Summer, for de good news! De pore ole niggah been scare’ ’most’ to def ebber sence he skip up de reef in a ole, leaky skiff, what done got wrack on dis yer key. Now he free man, he hole he head up an’ go cookin’ agin. Bress de Lawd! Bress de Lawd!”

