



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

Chapter 28: What Became of Quorum and the Canoes

WHEN Worth and Quorum were left alone they sat for some time discussing the mystery of the smoke, and whether or not they had better begin unloading the boats and preparing camp. Worth advised against this. He hoped the others would discover a better camping place than that. He also thought that perhaps they might return with news that would necessitate their leaving the island in a hurry. As he complained of being very hungry, Quorum got out the biscuit bag, and they each took a hardtack from it. It was while they were eating these that the sound of a loud “gobble, gobble, gobble,” came from the bushes, apparently but a few rods from where they sat.

Worth’s hunting instinct was at once aroused, and slipping a couple of shells into his gun, he whispered: “You sit still, Quorum, and I’ll have that fellow in a minute. My! But he must be a big one!”

Then he stepped noiselessly to the shore, and silently disappeared among the trees. Quorum sat with his back to the water, watching the spot where his young companion had entered the forest, and listening eagerly for the expected shot.

All at once a slight jar of the boat caused him to start; but before he could turn his head it was enveloped in a thick fold of cloth that effectually prevented his seeing or calling out. In a few seconds two active forms had bound his hands and feet, and slid him into the bottom of the boat, where he lay blinded, helpless, and nearly smothered. One of his captors picked up the biscuit bag from which the prisoner had just been eating, and tossed it ashore with a low laugh.

In the mean time two others had been unfastening the canoes, and dragging them cautiously backward through the opening cut in the bushes to the channel, where lay the craft in which they had come. It was a large and well-shaped cypress dugout, capable of holding a dozen men. In less than three minutes from the time of Quorum’s capture it was being poled rapidly but silently along through the twilight shadows, with the stolen boats in tow.

At a point about half a mile from the island these were skillfully concealed in a clump of tall grasses, and Quorum was bundled into the dugout. A choking sound from beneath the cloth that enveloped his head caused one of the strange canoemen to loosen it somewhat, so as to facilitate the prisoner’s breathing. Then, propelled by four pairs of lusty young arms, the dugout shot away up one of the watery lanes leading directly into the heart of the ’Glades.



An hour later it was run ashore on one of the numerous islands whose purple outlines had so charmed the observers from the top of the mound. Here it was greeted by the barking of dogs and the sound of many voices. The thongs that bound Quorum's legs were cut, he was lifted to his feet, and, led by two of his captors, he was made to walk for some distance. At length he was halted, his wrists were unbound, and the cloth that enveloped his head was snatched from it.

The bewildered negro was instantly confronted by such a glare of firelight that for a minute his eyes refused to perform their duty. As he stood clumsily rubbing them, he heard a titter of laughter and the subdued sound of talking. As his eyes gradually became accustomed to the light, he saw, first, a fire directly in front of him, then, several palmetto huts, and at length a dozen or more Indian men, besides women and children, grouped in front of the huts, and all staring at him.

Until that moment he had not known who had made him prisoner, nor why he had been carried off; and even now the second part of the question remained as great a mystery as ever. There was no doubt, however, that, for some purpose or other, he had been captured by a scouting party of Seminoles, and though Quorum had met individuals of this tribe while cruising on the reef, he had never visited one of their camps nor been in their power. He therefore gazed about him with considerable trepidation, and wondered what was going to be done with him.

As he did not recognize any of the dusky faces gathered in the firelight, he was amazed when one of the men, addressing him in broken English, said:

“How, Quor'm! How! Injun heap glad you come. You hongry? Eat sofkee. Good, plenty.”

At the same time the speaker pointed to a smoking kettle of something that a squaw had just lifted from the fire and set close to the negro. A great wooden spoon was thrust into it, and its odor was most appetizing. Having fasted since early morning, Quorum was very hungry. Not only this, but under the circumstances he would have eaten almost anything his entertainers chose to set before him rather than run the risk of offending them. Therefore, without waiting for a second invitation, he squatted beside the kettle of sofkee, and began sampling its contents with the huge spoon. To his surprise, he had never in his life tasted a more delicious stew. After the first mouthful, he had no hesitation in eating. Such a meal as made even the Indians, among whom a large eater is considered worthy of respect, regard him with envious admiration.

It is no wonder that Quorum found this Indian food palatable, for the Seminole squaws are notable cooks, and sofkee is the tribal dish. It is a stew of venison, turtle, or some other meat, potatoes, corn, beans, peppers, and almost anything else that is at hand. It is thickened with coontie starch, and a kettleful of it is always to be found over one of the village fires, at the disposal of every hungry comer. The one drawback to its perfect enjoyment, according to a white man's fastidious taste, is that, besides the sofkee, the wooden spoon with which it is eaten is equally at the disposal of all comers, and is in almost constant use. This fact was not known to Quorum at the time of his introduction to sofkee. If it had been, it would hardly have lessened his relish of the meal, for Quorum was too wise to be fastidious.

He was so refreshed by his supper, as well as emboldened by the fact that no one seemed inclined to harm him, that something of his natural aggressiveness returned. After laying the sofkee spoon down, he turned to the Indian who had already spoken to him, and said:

“Why fo' yo' call me Quor'm? I 'ain't hab no 'quaintance wif you.”



For answer the Indian only said, "Tobac, you got um, Quor'm?"

"Yes, sah. Tobac? I got er plenty ob him back yonder in de boat wha' yo' tuk me frum. Why fo' yo' treat a 'spectable colored gen'l'man dish yer way, anyhow? Wha' yo' mean by playin' sich tricks on him, an' on de white mans wha' trabblin' in he comp'ny?"

While speaking the negro had mechanically produced his black pipe, and instead of answering his questions, the Indian said: "Tobac. You no got urn. Me got um, plenty. You take um, smoke um, bimeby talk heap."

With this he handed a plug of tobacco to the negro, who understood the action, if he had not fully comprehended the words that accompanied it. As he cut off a pipeful and carefully crumbled it in his fingers, he began to think that his position was not such a very unpleasant one, after all. He only wished he could imagine his fellow explorers as being half so comfortable as he was at that moment. Realizing from the Indian's last remark that there would be no talk until after the smoke, he assumed as comfortable a position as possible, and gazed curiously about him.

The little village, or camp, of half a dozen huts, was nearly hidden in the black shadows of the forest trees that surrounded it on all sides. Its huts were built of poles, supporting roofs of palmetto thatch, and were open at the sides. Each was provided with a raised floor of split poles, thickly covered with skins, and every hut contained one or more cheesecloth sleeping canopies. Each hut had also several rifles and other hunting gear hanging in it, while canoe masts, sails, paddles, and push poles leaned against its walls.

The men, who lay smoking on the furs inside the huts, or stretched in comfortable attitudes on the ground outside, were tall, clean-limbed, athletic-looking fellows clad in turbans of bright colors, gay calico shirts, and moccasins of deerskin; the women wore immense necklaces of beads, calico jackets, and long skirts, but were barefooted and bareheaded; and the children were clad precisely like their elders, with the exception of the turbans, which are denied to the boys and young men until they reach the age of warriors. Besides the Indians, Quorum saw that the camp was occupied by numbers of fowls, dogs, and small black pigs, that roamed through it at will. Everybody and everything in it, animals as well as humans, looked contented and well fed.

At length Quorum's smoke was finished, and he knocked the ashes from his pipe. As if this were a signal, the Indian men laid aside their pipes, and it was evident that the time for talking had arrived.

