



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

Chapter 30: Quorum as an Ambassador

IT was Quorum, sure enough, not only alive and well, but seemingly in the best of spirits. Where had he been ? Where were the boats ? How did he get back? and where had he come from? These are only samples of the dozens of questions with which he was plied while shaking hands with his friends, including the Lieutenant, who was as heartily rejoiced as the boys at again seeing the faithful fellow.

At one of the questions thus asked him, Quorum's face fell, and he answered:

"Whar de boats is, honey, I don't know, fer I hain't seen no likeness ob dem sence las' night 'bout dis time. Whar I is bin, an' what I is 'sperienced, is er long story; but hit's got ter be tole right now, kase dat's what I hyar fer. What we do nex' depen' on de way you all take hit when I is done tellin'."

Then they sat down, and forgetful of their hunger, their recent disappointment with the raft, and even of their unhappy predicament, the others listened with absorbed interest to Quorum's story.

He described the way in which he had been carried off, and his reception in the Indian camp.

"They were Indians, then?" interrupted the Lieutenant.

"Yes, sah, shuah 'nough Injuns, an' a powerful sight ob dem — man, squaw, an' pickaninny, an' dey gib ole Quor' m one ob de fines' suppahs he ebber eat."

"I wish we had one like it here at this minute!" said Sumner, thus reminded of his hunger.

"Den we all smoke de peace pipe, so dey don't hab no fear oh me declarin' er war on em," continued Quorum.

"Them Injuns has got tobacco, then?" queried the sailor, whose smoking outfit had disappeared with the boats.

"Oh cose dey is, er plenty," answered Quorum. "An' den me an' de big chiefs sot down fer what yo' might call a considerashun oh de fac's. Dey say as what dey can't noways 'low dis hyer experdishun to pass troo de 'Glades, 'cep' on condishuns."

Told in more intelligible language than that used by Quorum, the substance of his talk with the Indians was as follows:

They had learned from a white man that the objects of Lieutenant Carey's expedition were to spy out their land, discover their numbers and the value of their property, and make preparations for their removal from that part of the country.



"I hope you told them differently, and explained our real objects," said the Lieutenant.

"Yes, sah; I done tell 'em to de full ob my knowingness oh yo' plans. But seein' as I hain't know nuffin' tall 'bout 'em, maybe I don't make hit berry cl'ar ter dem ignerant sabages; but I done hit as well as I know how."

The Indians had declared that they should resist any such attempt at an investigation of their resources and mode of life, and that the party must turn back from where it now was. If it would do so, its boats should be restored, and it would be allowed to depart in peace.

The difficulties in the way of accepting this proposition had at once been seen by Quorum. He had explained that as their small boats were not fitted to cruise in the open waters of the Gulf, and as their big boat was already on its way to the east coast, where they were to meet it, to turn back would be a great hardship.

The Indians had listened gravely to their interpreter's translation of all that he had to say on the subject, and assented to the force of his arguments. Then they proposed another plan. It was that if the whites would give up their arms and trust entirely to them, they would convey the party and their boats safely across the 'Glades to within a short distance of the east coast. There they should again receive their guns, and should be allowed to depart in peace, provided they would promise not to return.

"Seems to me that is quite a liberal proposition," said the Lieutenant, after Quorum had succeeded in making it clearly understood. "All we want is to cross the 'Glades and see the Indians. I would willingly have paid them to guide us, and Bow they offer to do so of their own accord. I can't conceive how you persuaded them to make such an offer, Quorum. You must be a born diplomat."

"Yes, sah," replied the negro, grinning from ear to ear, "I 'Specs I is." At the same time he had no more idea of what the Lieutenant meant than if he had talked in Greek.

"How does that plan Strike you, boys?" asked Lieutenant Carey, turning to Sumner and Worth.

"It strikes me as almost too good to be true," answered the former. "And I'm afraid there's Borne trick behind it all; but then I don't see what we can do except say yes to almost any offer they may choose to make."

"That is so," said the Lieutenant. "Without our boats, and with no means for making a raft, we are about as helpless as we well can be."

"It seems to me a splendid plan," said Worth, who saw visions of peaceful nights, and days pleasantly spent in hunting and in visiting Indian camps.

Although the sailor's opinion had not been asked, he could not help remarking: "I'm agin trusting an' Injin, sir. Injins and Malays and all them sort of niggers are notoriously deceitful."

"Hi! Wha' yo' say dere 'bout niggahs, yo' sailorman?" exclaimed Quorum, in high dudgeon. "Yo' call 'em notorious, eh?"

"Not black ones," answered the sailor, apologetically — "not black ones, Quorum; but them as is red and yellow."

"Dat's all right, sah, an' I 'cept yo' 'pology. At de same time I is bankin' on de squar'ness ob dem Injuns who I bin counsellin' wif."

"You believe it will be safe to trust them, then?" asked the Lieutenant.

"Yes, sah; yo' kin trus' 'em same like a black man."



“Very well,” said Lieutenant Carey; “as I don’t see how, in the present state of affairs, we can do anything else, I will take your word for their honesty, and accept their conditions; only I will not promise never to come into the ’Glades again. I will only promise not to turn directly back from the east coast after they have left us.”

“Dat’s wha’ dey mean, sah. I is berry ’tic’lar on dat pint ob de controbersy.”

“Then we will consider it us settled, and would like to leave here for a place where there is something to eat as quickly as possible. Where are your Indian friends?”

“Out dere, sah, in de cooners. Dey say when yo’ ready, den I holler like er squinch-owl, an’ brung down all yo’ uns’ guns an’ resolvers de fustes’ t’ing.”

“Very well, squinch away then, and here are my pistols. It is certainly humiliating to be disarmed to please a lot of Indians; but hunger and necessity are such powerful persuaders that it is best to Submit to them with as good grace as possible.”

So Quorum “squinched” in a manner that no self-respecting owl would have recognized; but which answered the purpose so well that an answer was immediately heard from the water, over which the evening shadows were now fast falling.

Directly afterwards a canoe, containing the Indian who had acted as interpreter during Quorum’s council with the chiefs, appeared at the opening in the bushes. Without stepping ashore, this Indian, whose name was Ul-we (the tall one), exchanged a few words with Quorum, whereby he learned that the Seminole conditions were accepted by the white men. He then bade the negro place the guns and pistols in the canoe and enter it himself. Then he shoved off, and another canoe, containing two Indians, made its appearance.

The Lieutenant bade Sumner and Worth step into it first; but the moment they had done so, it too was shoved off, and another canoe, also containing two Indians, appeared in its place. This received the Lieutenant and the sailor. By the time it was poled into the channel the foremost canoe had disappeared in the darkness, nor was it again seen.

During their journey both the Lieutenant and Sumner tried to enter into conversation with the Indians in their respective canoes, but after a few futile attempts they gave it up. To all their questions they received the same answer, which was “Un-cah” (Yes), and not another word could the Indians be persuaded to utter.

The Lieutenant consoled himself with the thought that he would be able to talk to the chiefs through the interpreter; while the boys looked forward with eager anticipations to seeing the Indian village that Quorum had described. As for the sailor, Indians and their villages were matters of indifference to him.

What he looked forward to was a good supper and a pipe of tobacco.

Thus, all of them awaited with impatience their journey’s end, and wished it were light enough for them to see whither they were being taken.