



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

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### Chapter 33: An Adventurous Deer-Hunt

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IN answer to Sumner's call, the others sprang up and hurried in the direction of his voice. As they got beyond the circle of firelight they saw that the day was breaking, though in the forest its light was dim and uncertain. It was much stronger ahead of them, and within a minute they stood at the water's edge, where objects near at hand were plainly discernible. Although they more than suspected that the 'Glades had been left behind, they were hardly prepared for the sight that greeted their eyes. Instead of a limitless expanse of grass and water dotted with islands, they saw a broad river flowing dark and silently towards the coming dawn through a dense growth of tall forest trees. But for the direction of its current, it was a counterpart of the one, now so far behind, by which they had entered the 'Glades from the Gulf.

Of more immediate importance even than the river were the objects to which Sumner triumphantly directed their attention. These were the long-unseen canoes and the cruiser, with masts, sails, and paddles in their places, and looking but little the worse for their journey than when their owners had stepped from them nearly a week before. Sumner had discovered them, snugly moored to the bank, a short distance below the landing place, and had towed them up to where the others now saw them. In the bottom of the Hu-la-lah lay their guns and pistols, carefully oiled and in perfect order. Everything was in place, and they could not find that a single article of their outfit was missing.

"I declare!" said the Lieutenant, "those Indians are decent fellows, after all, and though I am provoked with them for their obstinacy in not granting us a single interview, as well as for the way they compelled us to journey through their country, I can't help admiring the manner in which they have fulfilled their share of our contract. They have shown the utmost fairness and honesty in all their dealings with us, and I don't know that I blame them for the way in which they have acted. They have been treated so abominably by the Government ever since Florida came into our possession that they certainly have ample cause to be suspicious of all white men."

Quorum was sent down to watch the canoes and see that they did not again disappear, while the others ate the scanty breakfast that he had prepared. At it they drank the last of their coffee, and Quorum reported that there was nothing left of their provisions save some cornmeal and a few biscuit.



As they talked of this state of affairs, Sumner said that he had started up a deer when he went after the canoes, and Worth was confident that this must be a good place in which to find his favorite game — wild turkeys.

“It looks as though we would have to stop here long enough to do a little hunting before proceeding any farther,” said the Lieutenant.

To this proposition the boys, eager to use their recovered guns, readily agreed.

So, after making sure that their camp was no longer guarded, and that they were at liberty to go where they pleased, it was decided to devote the morning to hunting, with the hope of replenishing their larder. Quorum and the sailor were left to guard camp and the boats, while the others entered the piney woods, going directly back from the river. The Lieutenant carried a rifle and the boys their shotguns, while each had his pockets well filled with loaded shells.

The pine forest was filled with a dense undergrowth of saw palmetto, and the ground beneath these was covered with rough masses of broken coralline rock. It was also so slippery with a thick coating of brown pine needles. Under these circumstances, therefore, it was almost impossible to proceed silently, and whatever game they might have seen received ample warning of their approach in time to make good its escape.

When they at length came to a grassy savanna, on the opposite side of which was a small hammock of green, shrubby trees, the Lieutenant proposed that the boys remain concealed where they were while he made a long circuit around it. He would thus approach from its leeward side, and any game that he might scare up would be almost certain to come in their direction. After stationing them a few hundred feet apart, so that they could cover a greater territory, and warning them to keep perfectly quiet, he left them.

The sky was clouded, and a high wind soured mournfully through the tops of the pines. Every now and then the boys were startled by the crash of a falling branch, while the grating of the interlocking limbs above them sounded like distressed meanings. It was all so dismal and lonesome that finally Worth could stand it no longer, and made his way to where Sumner was sitting.

“Have you noticed how full the air is of smoke?” he said, as he approached his companion. “My eyes are smarting from it.”

“Yes,” replied Sumner, “it has given me a choking sensation for some time. I expect the woods are on fire somewhere.”

“Really!” said Worth, looking about him, apprehensively. “Then don’t you think we ought to be getting back towards the river?”

“No, not yet. The fire must be a long way off still, and it would never do for us to leave without Lieutenant Carey. He would think we were lost, and be terribly anxious. There he is now! Did you hear that?”

Yes, Worth heard the distant rifle shot that announced the Lieutenant’s whereabouts. Instantly his freshly aroused hunting instinct banished all thoughts of the fire, and he hurried back to his post. He had not more than reached it before there came a crashing among the palmettoes, and ere the startled boy realized its cause, two deer, bounding over the undergrowth with superb leaps, dashed past him and disappeared.

“Why didn’t you fire?” cried Sumner, hurrying up a moment later. “It was a splendid shot! I would give anything for such a chance &!”

“I never thought of it,” answered Worth, ruefully. “Besides, they went so quickly that I didn’t have time.”



“They ought to have stood still for a minute or two, that’s a fact,” said Sumner, who was rather inclined to laugh at his less experienced companion.

Just then there came another crashing of the palmettoes, and a third deer bounded into sight for an instant, only to disappear immediately as the others had done.

“Why didn’t you fire?” laughed Worth. “It was a splendid shot!”

“Because this is your station,” replied Sumner, anxious to conceal beneath this weak excuse the fact that he had been fully as startled and unnerved as his companion. “I do believe, though,” he added, “that this last fellow was wounded, and perhaps we may get him yet.”

The discovery of fresh blood on the palmetto leaves through which the flying animal had passed confirmed this belief, and without a thought of the possible consequences the boys set off in hot pursuit of the wounded deer.

They easily followed the trail of the blood smeared leaves, and in the ardor of their pursuit they might have gone a mile, or they might have gone ten for all they knew, when suddenly, without warning, they came face to face with the deer. He was a full grown buck, with branching antlers still in the velvet, and by his swaying from side to side he was evidently exhausted. The sight of his enemies seemed to infuse him with renewed strength, and the next instant he charged fiercely towards them.

Worth, attempting to run, tripped and fell in his path. Sumner, with better luck, sprang aside, and sent a charge of buckshot into the furious animal at such short range that the muzzle of his gun nearly touched it. It fell in a heap on top of Worth, gave one or two convulsive kicks, and was dead.

Its warm lifeblood spurted over the prostrate boy, and when Sumner dragged him from beneath the quivering carcass he was smeared with it from head to foot.

“Are you hurt, old man?” inquired Sumner, anxiously, as his companion leaned heavily on him, trembling from exhaustion and his recent fright.

“I don’t know that I am,” replied Worth, with a feeble attempt at a smile. “I expect I am only bruised and scratched. But, oh, Sumner, what an awfully ferocious thing a deer is! Seems to me they are as bad as panthers. What wouldn’t I give for a drink of water! I can hardly speak, I am so choked with smoke.”

With this, Sumner suddenly became aware that the smoke, which they had not noticed in the excitement of their chase, had so increased in density that breathing was becoming difficult. Thoroughly alarmed, he looked about him. In all directions the woods were full of it, and even at a short distance the trees showed indistinctly through its blue haze. Now, for the first time, the boys were conscious of a dull roar with which the air was filled. Their long chase must have led them directly towards the fire.

“We must get back to camp as quickly as possible!” exclaimed Sumner, realizing at once the danger of their situation. “Come on, Worth, we haven’t a moment to lose!”

“But what shall we do with our deer?” asked the blood-covered boy, who could not bear the thought of relinquishing their hard-won prize.

“Never mind the deer, but come along!” replied Sumner. “If I am not mistaken, we shall have our hands full taking care of ourselves. That fire is coming down on us faster than we can run, and we haven’t any too much start of it as it is.”

