



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

Chapter 34: Hemmed in by a Forest Fire

Which way were they to fly? The terrible roar of the burning forest seemed to come from all directions, and the smoke seemed hardly less dense on one side than on another. But there had been no fire where they came from, and they must retrace their steps along the bloodmarked trail that they had followed, of course. Although the body of the deer lay near the spot where it had ended, they were at first too bewildered to discover it, and lost several precious minutes in searching among the palmetto leaves for its crimson signs. At length they found them, and started back on a run.

It was exhausting work trying to run through the thick scrub, over its leglike roots, and among the rough rock masses strewn in the wildest confusion between them, and their speed was quickly reduced to a walk. Sumner went ahead, and, with arms uplifted to protect his face from the sawlike edges of the stout leaf stems, forced a way through them, with Worth close behind him.

They had not gone far when Sumner suddenly stopped and, with a despairing gesture, pointed ahead. The flames were in front of them, and could be distinctly seen licking the brown tree trunks, and stretching their writhing arms high aloft towards the green tops.

"We are going right into the fire!" the boy exclaimed, hoarsely. "The deer must have seen it, and been curving away from it when we overtook him!"

So they turned back, and rushed blindly, without trying to follow the trail, in the opposite direction. Before they had gone half a mile Worth's strength became exhausted, and he sank down on a palmetto root gasping for breath.

"I can't go any farther, Sumner! Oh, I can't!" he cried, piteously.

"But you must! You can't stay here to be burned to death! We are almost certain to find a slough with water in it, or a stream!" and grasping his comrade by the arm, Sumner pulled him again to his feet.

As he did so, the hammers of Worth's gun became caught in something, and the next instant both barrels were discharged with a startling explosion.

"That's a good idea!" exclaimed Sumner. "Let's fire all our cartridges as fast as we can. Perhaps they are out looking for us, and will hear the shots."

So saying, he fired both barrels of his own gun into the air, and quickly reloading, fired again. Worth followed suit; but just as Sumner was ready to fire for the third time he was startled by a sharp



crackling sound close beside him. He turned quickly. There was a bright blaze within ten feet of him. The first accidental discharge of Worth's gun, as it lay pointed directly into a mass of dry grass and dead palmetto leaves, had set this on fire. Worth instinctively sprang towards it with the intention of trying to stamp it out, but, with a joyful cry, Sumner restrained him.

"It's the very thing!" he shouted. "A back fire! Why didn't I think of it before? We must set a line of it as quick as we can!"

Worth did not understand, and hesitated; but seeing Sumner, with a bunch of lighted leaves in his hand, rush from one clump of palmetto to another, touching his blazing torch to their dry, tinderlike stalks, he realized that his companion knew what he was about, and began to follow his example.

Within five minutes a wall of flame a hundred yards in length was roaring and leaping in front of them, fanned into such fury by the high wind that they were obliged to retreat from its blistering breath. They could not retreat far, however, for during their delay the main fire had gained fearfully upon them, and its awful roar seemed one of rage that they should have attempted to escape from it. Mingled with this was the crash of falling trees and the screams of wild animals that now began to rush frantically past the boys. A herd of flying deer nearly trampled them underfoot; and directly afterwards they were confronted with the gleaming eyes of a panther. With an angry snarl he too dashed forward. Great snakes writhed and hissed along the ground, and Worth clutched Sumner's arm in terror.

Seizing his gun, the latter began shooting at the snakes; nor did he stop until his last cartridge was expended.

It was horrible to stand there helplessly awaiting the result of that life-and-death race between those mighty columns of flame; but they knew not what else to do. Now they could no longer see in which direction to fly. The swirling smoke clouds were closing in on them from all sides, and only by holding their faces close to the earth could they catch occasional breaths of fresh air.

Sumner's plan was to remain where they were until the last moment, and then rush out over the smoldering embers of the fire they had set. The main body of this was now rapidly retreating from them. At the same time a fringe of flame from it was working backward towards them. Though they made feeble efforts to beat this out, their strength was too nearly exhausted for them to make much headway against it. The heat was now so intense that their skin was blistering and their brains seemed almost ready to burst.

Worth had flung away his gun, just after loading it, when he began to set the back fires, and now the sound of a double report from that direction showed that the flames had found it. The noise of these reports was followed by a loud cry, and out of the smoke clouds a strange, wild figure came leaping. It was a human figure. As the boys recognized it, they echoed its cry. Then by their frantic shouts they guided it to where they were crouching and making ready for their desperate rush into the hot ashes and still blazing remains of the back fire.

The figure that sprang to their side, and, seizing Worth's arm, uttered the single word "Come!" was that of Ul-we, the young Seminole, though the boys, having never seen him, did not, of course, recognize him.

With thankful hearts and implicit faith they followed him as he dashed back into the thickest of the smoke clouds that still hung low over the newly burnt space before them. They choked and gasped, and their feet became blistered with the heat that penetrated through the soles of their boots. Worth would have fallen but for the strong hand that upheld him, and dragged him resistlessly



forward. The ordeal of fire lasted but a minute, when they emerged in a grassy glade at one end of the burnt space, and ran to a clump of water-loving shrubs that marked a slough beyond it.

The vanguard of the main fire raced close after them, flashing through the brittle grass as though it were gunpowder; and as they dashed into the bushes, and their feet sank into the mud and water of the slough, its hot breath was mingled with theirs.

In the very centre of the thicket Ul-we threw himself down in water that just covered his body, and held his head a little above its surface. The boys followed his example, and experienced an instant relief from the cool water. In this position they could breathe easily, for the smoke clouds seemed unable to touch the surface of the water, but rolled two or three inches above it.

Here they lay for what seemed an eternity while the fire fiends raged and roared on all sides of them, and in the air above. The heat waves scorched and withered the green thicket, the water of the little slough grew warm and almost hot, the air that they breathed was stifling, and for a time it almost seemed as though they had escaped a roasting only to be boiled alive like lobsters.

After a while, that appeared to the poor boys a long, weary time, the fiercest of the flames swept by, and their roar no longer filled the surrounding space. There were rifts in the smoke clouds, and perceptible intervals of fresh air between them. Finally the boys could sit up, and at length stand, but not until then were they certain that the danger had passed.

Then Sumner grasped the young Indian's right hand in both of his, and tears stood in the boy's eyes as he said: "I don't know as you can understand me; I don't know who you are, and I don't care. I only know that you have saved us from a horrible death, and that from this moment I am your friend for life."

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As for poor Worth, the tears fairly streamed down his smoke-begrimed, blood-stained cheeks, as, in faltering words, he also tried to express his gratitude.

The Indian seemed to understand, for he smiled and said: "Me Ul-we. Quor'm know um. You Summer. You Worf. Me heap glad find um. 'Fraid not. Hunt um; hunt um long time, no find um. Bimeby hear gun, plenty. Hunt um, no find um. Bimeby hear one gun, bang! bang! quick. Then come, find um. Hindleste. If me no find um, fire catch um pretty quick, burn up, go big sleep. Holewagus! Ul-we feel bad, Quor'm feel bad, all body feel bad. Now all body heap hap, dance, sing, eat 'leap, feel plenty glad."

All of which may be translated thus: "I am very glad to have found you, for I was afraid I shouldn't. I hunted and hunted a long time, but couldn't find you. At last I heard guns fired many



times, and hunted in that direction, still without finding you. Finally I heard both barrels of a gun fired at once, not far from where I was, and then I found you. It is good. If I had not found you just when I did, the fire would have caught you and burned you to death, which would have been terrible. I should have felt very badly. So would Quorum and all your friends. Now everybody will rejoice.”

Ul-we had been ordered to watch the camp of the white men by the river until they left it, but to remain unseen by them. He had noted the departure of the hunting party, and had also been aware of the approach of the forest fire while it was still at a great distance. When, some hours later, the Lieutenant came back full of anxiety concerning the boys, and immediately started off again to hunt for them, Ul-we also started in another direction, with the happy result already described.

They remained in the slough two hours longer, before the surrounding country was sufficiently cooled off for them to travel over it. Then they set out under Ul-we’s guidance, though where he would take them to the boys had not the faintest idea.

