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Our Three Days' Hunt

By William A. Bowen

BOYS sometimes have experiences which teach them lessons they never forget. There is one adventure of my boyhood days that memory always recalls like a nightmare.

It was among the soughing pines and blooming magnolias of eastern Texas in the days when Southern planters kept packs of hounds, and hunting was the regular sport of gentlemen. The height of every boy's ambition was to make a successful hunt.

My father's plantation was on the banks of the historic San Jacinto river, at the mouth of which Sam Houston and his seven hundred Texans routed the Mexican army of two thousand under Santa Anna, the "Napoleon of the West," and gained Texas' independence from Mexican tyranny.

The McCaleb plantation adjoined ours, and Zill McCaleb and I were bosom friends, and we often roamed about the bottoms and cane brakes on boyish hunting expeditions Saturdays and holidays. But our adventures had never yet gone further than an early start in the morning and a return by dark, and our bagging was squirrels, ducks, geese, quail, turkeys, and similar small game.

We varied this with occasional tramps through the woods at night with the negroes, hunting 'possums, coons, and wildcats with fire pans in which pitch pine (called "fat pine") was burned to "blind the eyes" or "shine" the game when the dogs treed it.

We soon, however, aspired to cover ourselves with glory by killing our first deer.

I well remember when we had accomplished this feat. We were out in the upper timber in the edge of the bottom one day when we heard the long drawn "Y-e-ow-oo! y-e-ow-oo!" by which we readily concluded that a pack of deer hounds were out on an independent hunt, which they often engaged in.

We knew they were chasing a deer, for they were too well trained to follow any other game. We knew from the absence of the mellow, winding notes of the huntsman's horn, that no one was with them.

My heart palpitated, and I could see Zill's hand tremble with excitement as we noted that the sounds were coming in our direction.

We got behind a clump of bushes and waited.

In a few minutes we saw a great buck, with wide spreading antlers tossing the brush aside, come bounding and leaping with the graceful motion of a deer in full chase, and we almost fell to the ground in fright.

"Shall I—must I—shall we shoot?" I asked in fear.

"Lordy! we've got to," said Zill; "or he'll cross our luck forever."

Zill and I had been reared on a plantation where the greatest delight of our lives was to spend an evening in the negro quarters listening to the superstitious stories of the darkies of the old days. We were at that age firm believers in all we had ever heard, especially in the stories of Uncle Gabe Crenshaw, a privileged old negro my father had brought with him from Louisiana.

"I'll count three, and then both of us fire at once," I said, fearing to take the responsibility upon myself.

"All right; but we must make sure work, or he'll get us certain as eatin'," returned Zill.

In a moment the buck had bounded

into a clear, sandy spot, where his whole side was in full view. I got the "buck ague" immediately, forgot the program, and, instead of counting "One, two, three," shouted, "Three!"

Pointing my gun and shutting my eyes, I pulled both triggers. It was well I did, for Zill's gun fired at the same instant.

We rushed through the smoke to where the deer had been, but he was gone. A broad stain of blood told us we had hit him; so hastily reloading, we followed the trail.

To our surprise and glee, we found him staggering around a few yards further on. Remembering the awful stories the negroes had told us of the bloodthirstiness of a wounded buck and his carnivorous propensities, we quickly raised our guns and fired again. The buck fell, and was soon dead—but it was from our first shot, the last not hitting him.

We bore him home in triumph, and thenceforth were the heroes of the neighborhood. Being only thirteen and fifteen years old respectively (Zill was my senior), we were praised on all sides.

This so elated us that we became puffed, and in a moment of reckless bravado we announced that we were going off into the woods by ourselves on a three days' hunt.

I guess no two boys ever repented of a foolhardy determination more than we did of that announcement. We had swaggered around and bragged so much about killing that deer, inventing tales regarding the long and arduous chase we had, and the struggle at the death, and our narrow escape in a hand to hand encounter with the wounded back, that we got to believing them ourselves, especially when we saw how we were envied by every other boy for miles around.

The knowledge that the other boys were chafing under the galling thought of their littleness, and that their eyeballs were seared with the sight of Zill and me taking the pick of the prettiest girls to ride home with after church, spurred us on to make the reckless announcement.

We went behind the corn crib afterwards and bewailed our folly in bitterest repentance, for the negroes seemed all at once to think of the most bloodcurdling stories to tell us of hobgoblins and serpents, and of the human devouring propensities of animals we had always before regarded as absolutely harmless.

"Let's go back and not go," said I.

"I've a notion to," replied Zill; "but, how can we now that we've got Angelina and Melissa away from those stuck up fellows, Read Moran and Sonnie Sap? And after we've been telling all those tall yarns? Why, Abe, we've got to go, even if we have to fight a panther.

"I'm mighty sorry we killed that deer," he added.

"Oh, I'm almost sorry too," said I. "But then, it's worth a good deal to have the reputation we've got. Come to think of it, Zill, it was no slouch of a thing to kill that deer. Besides, you know, he might have killed us, because we forgot to spit in that horse wallow in the road."

"That's so," replied Zill. "And, good gracious, if I didn't walk in your tracks as we came along through the blood weeds near the new ground cotton patch!"

"You did!" I exclaimed, in horror. "Zill, if I'd known that I'd never shot at that deer. I don't see how we ever got back alive. Don't you do such a thing again. It's mighty lucky we are here, I can tell you."

"Well, we'll take some lucky stones and red corn with us this time. I have some lucky stones I got out'n the last gaspergou's head I caught in the big swimming hole last week, and some red corn Aunt Patsy took out'n Uncle Ike's big box."

So it was arranged that we must brave it out and go on that hunt.

We scorned to name any game we would kill smaller than turkeys. We preferred bears, deer, buffaloes and even spoke of panthers—but after mentioning this last, we both went out and walked three times around an elder bush, repeating "Panther, panther, no harm come nigh you, when you go to town pretty girl buy you."

This was warranted to keep the panthers away from us—though we had no idea of letting one get within hearing distance if we could help it.

We took with us a large piece of bacon, a long- handled frying pan, salt, pepper, a sack with meal in one end and flour in the other, some onions, a lot of ground coffee, and an old, black coffee pot. We scorned to take sugar or cups, as old hunters never used sugar, and always drank their coffee, right out of the pot while the coffee was boiling.

I have the scar in my mouth to this day where I tried to be an old hunter on that trip, and Zill had all the skin taken off his lips and tongue. We then threw away the coffee and made believe on our return that we drank it.

It was dark when we reached the place we had decided on for our first night's stop—about eighteen miles from home, in the edge of what was called the second bottom and the beginning of the great cane brake. We found a beautiful glen, with long, rich grass in abundance, and plenty of wood and a good place to sleep near a spring. After staking out our horses we built a huge fire, cooked and ate supper and lighted our cob pipes to revel in the luxuries of our first real hunt—like men.

I noticed that Zill, while appearing to talk easily and naturally, had a quaver in his voice, and kept casting furtive glances about. I knew just how he felt, for I felt that way myself, and heartily wished we had never seen that old buck.

Any one who has ever spent a night in a lonely wood can recall that as soon as darkness begins there are more noises of a bloodcurdling nature above, below, and around you than you ever heard of before.

I do not now remember who started it, but our conversation soon turned to the stories we had heard in the negro quarters; and, hard as we tried to avoid the subject, we soon began to tell tales of horror in connection with panthers, as we knew the cane brakes and bottoms to be infested with them.

The terrible stories we invented and related to each other regarding the cunning and bloodthirsty deeds committed by these animals were not calculated to make us feel sleepy, or to enjoy our hunt any the more. Each tried to outdo the other in this direction, so as to appear to the other as really brave and reckless.

It must have been about ten o'clock when I finished a Munchausen tale about a panther smelling an emigrant party forty miles away, rushing over and waylaying them and devouring the entire company in its insatiable greed for human flesh. I made the number of people on this occasion thirteen, but recollecting that this was an unlucky number, and seeing Zill noticed it, and turned pale, I corrected it to sixteen, and gave old Uncle Gabe Crenshaw as my authority.

"If Uncle Gabe says so, it's so," said Zill in a whisper, this tale striking him absolutely speechless with fright.

"I tell you what, Abe," Zill presently said, in a whisper, "I think we did a fool thing coming out here without getting Uncle Gabe to give us a bag of sulphur, and bear and hawk claws, and nine locks of hair from a voodoo. That would have kept anything from us. And ——"

just then a low, crying moan came floating to our ears from across the river half a mile distant. We both stopped and listened, instinctively creeping closer together.

"If it screams and yells, and then cries like a lost child, Zill, it is a——"

The moan grew into a howl, then followed a loud scream, half shriek, half yell, ending in a cry like that of a child or woman in great distress. Then a silence fell on us It was so still that we could hear our hearts go “thum, thum, thum.” An owl lit on a tree over our heads and asked:

“Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo; hoo—a-r-e—yo-o-oo?”

Zill and I never answered, but dived under our blankets, covering up heads and ears, and shivered and listened.

In about five minutes of awful suspense, which seemed to us days, the cry was repeated, louder, shriller, more bloodcurdling; and as its ear splitting echoes reverberated through the woods, and came back to us from the hills, the very owls ceased their hoo-hoos, and the insects hushed their monotonous but friendly nocturnal discords.

Nestling closer together, Zill and I said nothing for several minutes. Then Zill whispered, in a voice which I never should have recognized as his,

“Wh—what—is—it—Abe?”

“Why, it’s a panther, of course; nothing else cries like that in the woods. I guess we had better get up and go home.”

“Huh! Who’s goin’ to get the hosses?” replied Zill, in a whisper of scorn. This broke up the notion of going home that night.

After waiting for what seemed to us hours, and not hearing the cry repeated, we grew bold enough to stick our heads from under the blankets the better to listen.

Silence reigning we got up. The owls were hooting again and the entomological concert was resumed. We comforted ourselves with the fact that the panther was across the river; though we soon learned that for a panther to swim a stream like the San Jacinto was no performance at all.

Heaping several logs of wood on the fire, we rearranged our beds, put our saddles under our heads for pillows, placed the sacks of provisions at our heads, loaded our guns heavily, placed them alongside of us, and retired for the night.

My dreams were filled with awful and bloody conflicts with lions, tigers, bears, wounded bucks, and panthers.

I was awakened about two o’clock in the morning, as I judged, by that feeling of dread that comes to people sometimes when danger is near though no noise or disturbance is heard. I found that I was perspiring and had that sense of fear shivering through me which some unknown sense conveys as a warning to us in our sleep at times when sight or sound cannot put us on our guard.

My body was covered with goose pimples, and for an instant I feared to breathe. Zill was playing a sonorous nasal solo.

As I heard nothing I imagined I must have been dreaming, and was quieting myself to sleep again, when, horrors, I heard a soft, velvet tread at my head.

An Arctic wave swept down my spinal column, and I felt the gentle but hot breath of some animal in my face. Instinctively I ducked my head under the cover. My moving caused the animal to jump back and I heard a low growl and the snapping of teeth.

To say that I was scared would be to use language so mild as to be an affront to expressive English. It was not fright. I was literally scared out of my senses, and each separate hair of my head undertook the responsibility of looking out for itself and arose in protest.

I intuitively knew that it was a panther, and that it would spring on us in a few seconds.

I could not help wondering which one it would begin on first. I loved Zill like a brother; we had been playmates since infancy; had gone to school together, had been companions in hunts and boyish pranks; had slept together—I thought of all these things and knew I could not love a brother more.

Yet, I must confess that I prayed harder right then than I ever did before or since, that a kind Providence would put it into that panther's mind to begin chewing and clawing on Zill first.

Alas, now that poor Zill is no more, I realize how selfish and unchristian this was. But I never thought of it then—and I doubt if any one else would.

Zill continued to snore, but I aroused him with a few pokes in the ribs. He was beginning to fuss about being waked when his ears caught the sound of those muttered growls and snapping teeth. He never finished his angry protest, but shot under those blankets like a ground hog into its hole.

As we lay shivering I repeated all I could recall of that simple prayer our pious mothers taught us all in infancy, "Now I lay me down to sleep," and Zill, in his fright, could only recall his good father' grace, and chattered out, "O, L-o-r-d, f-o-or wh-wh-a-t we are—ab-ou-out—to— re-re-ceive—at—t-h-y — hands — m-m-a-k-e —us—t-h-ank-ful!"

I finally found thought and voice to say,

"Sh-sh-o-o-o-t — the — p-p-an-ther, Zill, o-r-r—it—will—e-e-at us both u-u-u-p."

"Shoot him yourself, if you want him shot," replied Zill, pulling the blanket tighter around his head and repeating the grace again.

The suspense made me desperate. I felt a great weight choking me, and as the growls and gnashing of teeth grew more distinct I reached out and slowly grasped my gun.

Carefully turning on my stomach, I pointed the gun in the direction whence came the sounds, cocked both the barrels, and pulled both triggers. Before the report was fairly heard I was up and running for a tall tree I saw near by.

Never did youth climb so nimbly or more quickly up a tree than I did then, and the echoes of that gun, the noise of which had awed into silence every other sound in the woods, had not ceased to reverberate before I was well up among the branches, and had my bowie knife out ready for the varmint should it try to follow me.

But, alas! As I sat there I heard a terrible struggle going on below. I knew too well the horrible story this told.

My selfish fright had caused me to leave poor Zill to the mercy of the monster, and he was being torn limb from limb. My heart grew sick, but I knew that I could not now be of service to him, and would share his fate were I to descend. So I remained up the tree till morning began to glow with pink and yellow fringed amethyst in the east.

It seemed as if I had spent a week in that tree. Long ago had the conflict below ceased, and the stillness told me the monster had satiated its greed on my friend, and had thus been led to leave me alone.

Slowly and sorrowfully I descended from my lofty retreat, reflecting how best to break the awful news to Zill's family. Just as I reached the ground I noticed a form slowly coming down from a tree near the one I was leaving. I hastily rushed back to the tree and began to "shin" up again, thinking it was the panther, when 1 discovered it was Zill, not hurt at all.

In my joyful surprise I ran to him, and exclaimed,

"Where is the panther, Zill?"

He seemed equally surprised and overjoyed, and answered,

"Why, if that wasn't you he was eating, as I thought, all that noise must have been his dying. I guess your shot hit him. Let's look for him."

Slowly and cautiously we began the search, after securing our guns and reloading mine.

Sure enough, there lay the monster, not far from the head of our beds. We could see its great tawny hide exposed by the now rapidly

dawning day, with a crimson patch where my buckshot had torn a hole in it.

Zill rushed, and looked first at me, and then at the varmint. Then he said,

“Abe, those boys will be more stuck up than ever after this, and we can never take those girls to singing school nor parties any more.”

“Why?” I asked, walking over that way.

“Look at what we’ve done. We can’t keep them from finding this out.”

As I looked at the awful beast I saw that it was one of old man Moran's red, razor backed sows we had killed. She was devouring our provisions, which had waked me up.

We did kill some good game on the trip (that day—as we never spent another night in the woods) but it was many a week before we heard the last of that old sow we took for a panther. And we never ventured on another hunt by ourselves.